

VRMMORPG

Eternity

2

Nagawasabi64

ILLUSTRATION BY

Kawaku

START: DEATH GAME

Activation
(Create Dungeon)

The UNIMPLEMENTED OVERLORDS

Contract: L {Boss Mob}

I Have Joined the Party!

The Six Evil Overlords
and the Dungeon Master



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

2



Player:

BARBARA

Leader of Crest's Party 21.
Acolyte.

"Friends..."

"Shh... It's
okay."

"You're
the same
age as me!
Lemme
add you
to my
friends!"

"My name's
Shuutarou,
and I'm
thirteen
years old!
I'm a
summoner.
Just hit
level ten!"

Player:

SHOUKICHI

Member of Crest's Party 21.
Swordfighter.

Player:
KETTLE

Member of Crest's Party 21.
Wizard.

Player:


SHUUTAROU

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

Player:

KYOUKO

Member of Crest's Party 21.
Archer.



“Wooww!
Theodore’s a
dragon! And
he can change
size?!”

“This isn’t like
shape-shifting.
I can only
choose between
three forms:
human, giant
dragon, and
mini dragon. I
should be fine
accompanying
you as long as
I don’t assume
my human
form, correct?”

The
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2

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MIJISSO NO LASTBOSS TACHIGA NAKAMA NI NARIMASHITA.

Vol.2

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There was the tapping of metal-heeled boots on cobblestones. Laughter mixed with the booming voices of merchants advertising their wares in the downtown area. Children were chasing one another in the streets. Rowdy men who'd been drinking since noon yelled in taverns.

A month since the terrifying threat of monster invasion, the city of Allistras was a peaceful oasis. It wasn't only the NPCs enjoying life in the city—now that their livelihoods were no longer precarious, players were also making the most of Allistras. It was as if their eyes had finally opened to the fact that they were inhabiting the game world they'd been dreaming of while waiting for the game's release.

More soldiers patrolled the streets, making the citizens feel safer, even though the soldiers hadn't had any trouble to attend to since the invasion—the pale-green magical barrier around the city prevented any monsters from venturing inside.

A young beige-haired boy was standing outside the Adventurers Guild in this idyllic city.

"I'm a little nervous..."

The boy still had rather childlike features and an air of unspoiled innocence about him, which stirred protective instincts in others. If this boy had been seen all by himself on the field map outside the city, no conscientious adult would be able to pass by him without making sure he was okay.

On closer inspection, though, it would quickly become apparent that he

wasn't just a helpless child. His leather armor was excessively well tailored, and the sword at his belt was of unparalleled quality. Also, there was something in his manner that resembled the top players spearheading the exploration of the game world.

'Master, do let us know at once, should there be any problem.'

'Sure, thanks!'

The boy—Shuutarou was his name—telepathically reassured his minions and stepped inside the Adventurers Guild, a look of determination on his face.

* * * *

Shuutarou's first impression was that the guild seemed quite empty. No one was lining up at the front desk, and there were only a dozen or so notices pinned on the Quest Board.

Shuutarou headed to the NPC receptionist, who bowed politely in greeting.

"Welcome to the Adventurers Guild!"

"Hello! Um, I was hoping to find some Party Quests to try. Do you have anything like that, maybe?" he asked with awkward politeness.

Shuutarou had come to Allistras alone because he was looking to join a party—under certain conditions.

The receptionist looked at Shuutarou, bemused. "I'm very sorry, but currently, all party requests are being handled by Crest."

"Crest!"

Crest was a famous guild that'd been active since the beta, with ranked players among their members. These brave individuals had been putting their lives on the line to keep Allistras safe since the day players became trapped in the game, and they'd also successfully averted a monster invasion.

"Crest has its headquarters in a blue-roofed building near the northern city gate," the NPC explained. "The Adventurers Guild is in charge of quests for unaffiliated or solo adventurers, which do not require combat with monsters."

"Oh, okay. Well, thanks anyway!"

This contradicted what Shuutarou knew about the game's system, but he didn't think too much about it.

After leaving the Adventurers Guild, he stood outside uncertainly for a while before catching sight of the building the NPC had described. His face brightened.

Must be that place where all those people just came out of!

It was very busy outside that building. A large group of people in gray armor was heading out of the city. Were they off to explore a new area? Or just to kill monsters? In any case, the gray armor had been adopted by Crest as their guild uniform back in the beta days.

"My Punio armor's cool, but Crest's armor is really stylish, too..."

Shuutarou counted no fewer than thirty players in the group leaving the city. When the last one of them disappeared in the distance, he decided it was a good time to enter Crest's headquarters.

* * * *

In the entrance hall of Crest's guild headquarters were marble floors and giant banners hanging from the ceiling. Armored players busily walked this way and that.

Players in the city used to be divided into terrified shut-ins and dutiful sleep-deprived fighters who patrolled the streets without a break, but once the residents' safety was assured thanks to the magical barrier, the guild prospered. They now had forty monster-hunting parties, having bolstered their numbers by recruiting and training previously noncombatant players; these newcomers had good battle potential, owing to their high stats or useful unique skills.

A woman by the entrance seemed lost in thought.

Whew. Thirty-two players departed to join the front line. It's going to be lonely without them.

Her name was Lumia. She used to work as a receptionist at a well-known company in the real world, and Crest had chosen her for their own reception desk. She was very beautiful; well-mannered and friendly, Lumia quickly

became a mainstay of Crest.

Manning the guild's front desk was no easy job, but there was a good reason for not employing an NPC instead—NPCs didn't show proper consideration for players. They received and distributed quests automatically, unconcerned with an individual's battle experience or their party composition. This could lead to injury or death among players even if they were of the recommended minimum level to start a particular quest.

A human receptionist could talk to the players looking for quests and make sure they got the right one for them, increasing their odds of success and reducing risk.

Should be quiet for a while now..., Lumia thought as she stretched and closed her eyes.

During the invasion, she'd been hiding under a blanket at an inn, absolutely terrified, but the sight of Wataru leading his triumphant troops back after their victory gave her courage. Although a noncombatant, Lumia found her own place in Crest helping out from behind a desk.

Lumia purred, coming out of the stretch. She opened her eyes...and saw an unfamiliar boy staring right at her in befuddlement.

"Huh?!"

"Whoa!"

Startled, she nearly fell off her chair, kicking the desk as she steadied herself. That, in turn, startled Shuutarou.

"I-I'm so sorry," she told him. "I didn't notice you were there..."

"No, I'm sorry, too..."

Lumia repositioned herself in her chair and cleared her throat. She looked at the boy again, sure she had never seen him before.

An eleven-year-old? No...thirteen? Has he been hiding out in an inn until now?

She scrutinized the boy. In this world, a person's status was dictated by their level and stats rather than age—a fact that made too many children feel excessively confident, prompting them to act recklessly without heeding what

the grown-ups said. There were fewer of them now, having paid the highest price for their overconfidence. Preteens and teenagers who were raring to join in the monster hunting had to be treated with special care.

Everyone's gradually finding the confidence to leave the inns. On the one hand, it's good that more players are becoming independent—that lessens the burden on Crest. But having young children like this out in the monster-riddled fields...?

Lumia had heard of teenagers making a name for themselves on the front line, too. She was well aware that it would be a mistake to judge someone's ability by their appearance, but it was with a heavy heart that she signed off on children undertaking dangerous quests.

The boy's name tag read SHUUTAROU. The letters were white, which meant that he wasn't a member of Crest.

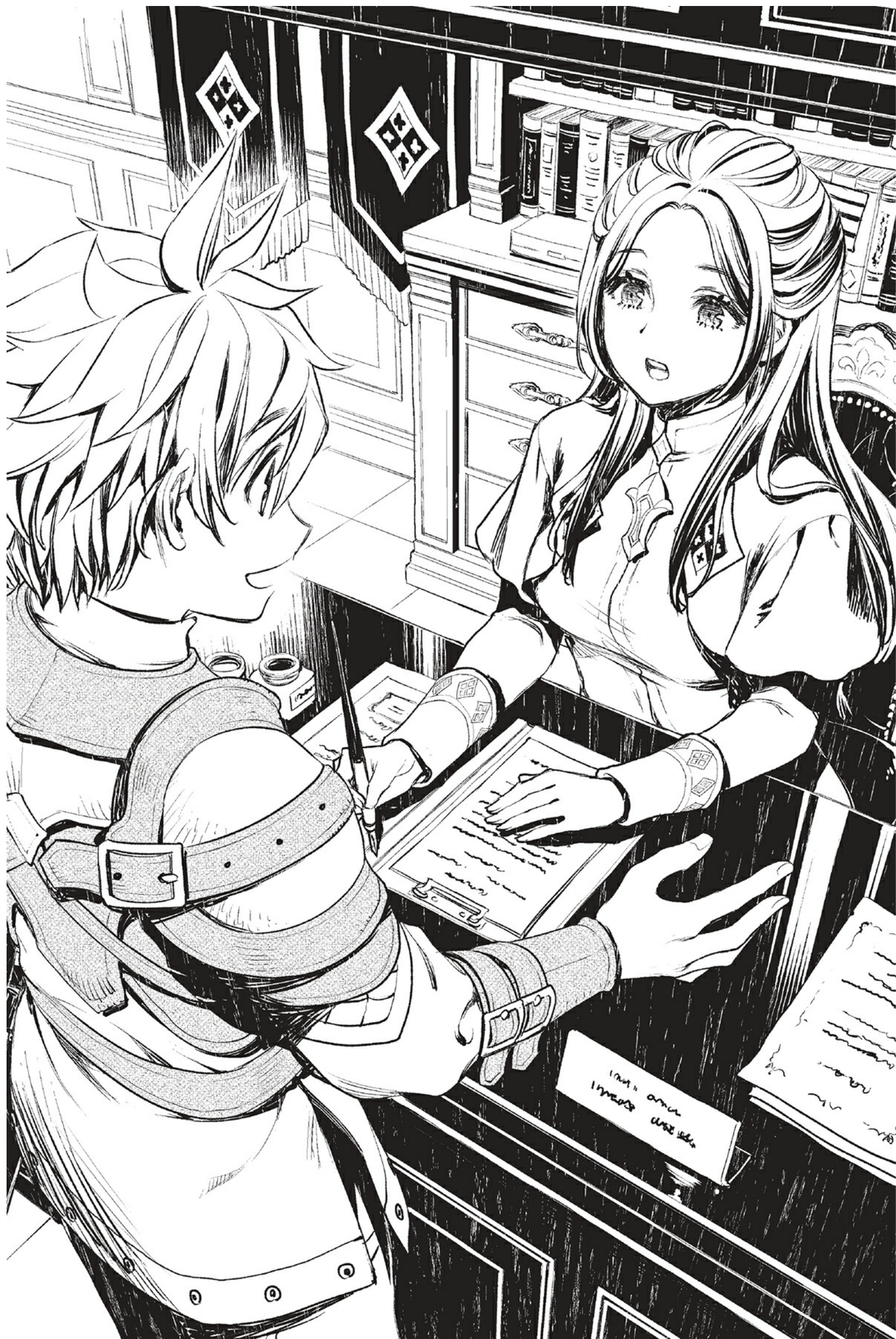
"Welcome! Just to check, you're not a member of our guild, are you?" she asked.

"That's right, I'm not!" the boy replied cheerfully.

Lumia nodded, smiling. She lifted her index finger, ready to recite the usual introduction for newbies. "If you join the guild, you won't get tax deducted from your quest earnings. You'll also be able to benefit from various other forms of support. Would you like to join?"

"Hmm... Nah. I'm good for now, thanks!"

"Of course. It's your call."



Joining the guild was voluntary. There were no demerits to it, and Lumia was especially eager to encourage underage players, but she wouldn't force anyone.

"What can I help you with today?" she asked.

The boy didn't reply immediately. He seemed lost in thought for a moment as he turned to look at the notice board on the wall.

"I'd like to try a Party Quest!"

"We sure have some. What type of Party Quest would you be interested in? For example, there are search, monster-hunting, errand, or escort quests."

"Any type is fine—" He paused. "I'd like to join a party with a summoner in it, specifically!"

* * * *

Why was Shuutarou looking for a summoner? Well, a month earlier...

"Monsters of the same kind can have different skills and stats... This one's more suited to be a magic instructor, not a warrior..."

...Shuutarou was sitting on a small hill overlooking his paradise town of Regiuria, basking in the light of the Dungeon Core. With Punio in his lap, Shuutarou was browsing the dungeon menu, reviewing the jobs he'd given his monsters at random when he noticed he'd unlocked a new achievement:

Dungeon Master's Primer 14 Understanding Monster Compatibility

"Another one? How many are there...?"

Shuutarou tapped the pop-up message at the edge of his field of vision to claim the reward. The long list of not-yet-completed achievements made him sigh.

A strange chain of events had led to Shuutarou becoming the master of several unimplemented boss monsters. This, in turn, instantly completed a lot of achievements for him, which normally would take a very long time, incurring a high cost. And the completed achievements earned him a ton of rewards. Almost all those achievements were for acquiring different types of monsters as minions or for reaching a certain number of minions. As Shuutarou learned

more about managing his dungeon, he was slowly unlocking achievements that had to do with dungeon operation.

“Huh? This one has a weird status...”

As he was checking monster stats and information, Shuutarou noticed something unusual about one of the children running around the town.

Latte Level 14 (F)

Unique Skill: Competitive

Status: Unlucky

The monster was displayed in Shuutarou’s UI alongside her status window. The Unlucky status made the monster girl clumsily fall over, bump into people, or lose things.

That’s a bit different from Poison or Paralysis...

Shuutarou tried to heal her from the dungeon menu, but it didn’t work. When he looked up from the menu, he saw that the girl was now being chased by an animal.

“Oh no!”

He quickly put her back in the Monster Box to save her.

Dungeon Master’s Primer 28 Curing Illness

It’s an illness?

Not convinced, Shuutarou nonetheless followed the instructions in the pop-up message. First, he displayed the girl’s status screen.

Latte Level 14 (F)

Unique Skill: Competitive

Status: Unlucky

Restore status to Normal?

YES (200P) NO

Ah, okay. It costs dungeon points to remove this status. Let's do this, then...

Shuutarou had over a hundred million dungeon points left, so he tapped YES without hesitation. Two hundred points were deducted from his total when...

"Found you, Master!"

"Whoa!"

Shuutarou jumped at the unexpected voice behind him. He turned to see the golden-haired knight Bertrand, who was smiling.

"Something wrong? Oh, sorry. Did I interrupt you?" Bertrand asked.

Shuutarou closed his menu, picked up Punio, and gave his full attention to Bertrand.

"No, it's fine! Is everyone ready now?"

"Yes. They sent me to fetch you."

"Thanks for coming all this way! Let's go."

They chitchatted as they left Regiuria for the throne room, where the other Evil Overlords were waiting.

* * * *

The Evil Overlords were watching Shuutarou expectantly.

"Sorry for the wait, guys. Let's get straight to business!"

He'd summoned his Overlords to ask them if they had any theories about

what the Mother AI was planning or what its objective was. What exactly did the players need to do to be set free? What did the Mother AI's message to all players actually mean?

Elroad touched his chin, thinking. "The Mother AI's intent...?"

"Yeah, I've been wondering about it," said Shuutarou. "We managed to stop the monster invasion in time, which was great, but I still don't get what the ultimate goal for us players is supposed to be."

Progression through game areas in *Eternity*, starting from the city of Allistras, was linear, and the names of locations were in Japanese alphabetical order. After Allistras, there was Ilyana Tunnel, then Ur Sluice, and so on. Players inferred that the farther away from Allistras, and the further down the alphabet, the more difficult the area, with accordingly high enemy levels.

Following RPG logic, the final boss should be waiting in a location at the end of the alphabet—somewhere that began with *wa*, per the Japanese alphabet. The Mother AI hadn't indicated that in its message, though. It simply wrote that the players needed to slay a certain "*he*" to be released.

"At least we know it wasn't the Goblin King," the pale maiden Vampy said quietly.

Players had defeated the Goblin King before it could lead an invasion on the city where noncombatant players were sheltering. If that had been the Mother AI's target monster, everyone should have been able to leave the game, but Shuutarou verified that the LOG OUT button was still grayed out.

Gallarus raised his eyebrows, grinning. "It's some other guy, then? One of us—is that what you're thinking?"

Bertrand glanced over at Elroad, his eyes narrowed with amusement. "Gotta be Elroad, on account of him being the highest rank."

"We cannot exclude that possibility," Elroad agreed.

Shuutarou's face clouded over. He squeezed Punio tighter.

"There's no need to theorize about whether the target is one of us until we've exhausted all other options," Elroad quickly added, the first to sense

Shuutarou's discomfort.

Vampy raised her hand. "I know who it might be."

"Really?!" Shuutarou shouted.

Seeing how excited her master was, Vampy smiled smugly and pointed her index finger up.

"The entity known as the God of Darkness."

Gallarus nodded. "Ah, that one."

"Who?" Shuutarou asked.

"An offspring of this world's creator, the Mother AI, and the one who imprisoned us in this castle. Calls himself Voroderia, God of Darkness."

Shuutarou had never heard that name before. It'd definitely never showed up on the blog he'd been eagerly following, *Beta Tester Yoritsura Is In!* Maybe this Voroderia was a new addition since the game turned deadly.

"If Voroderia is the final enemy, that simplifies the matter. Master, would you mind taking me outside the castle?" Elroad asked.

"Sure, but what do you want to do?"

"I have an inkling as to where Voroderia might be hiding. We might be able to glimpse him from the sky."

Shuutarou nodded.

"Do I have your permission, Master?"

"Sure, no problem! I'll take you outside—"

Before any of the other Overlords could add anything further, Shuutarou, Elroad, and Punio vanished into thin air.

"If it really is Voroderia, *they're* gonna interfere," Gallarus said, crossing his arms.

"Yes," Vampy agreed. "Approaching from the sky will be as pointless as from the ground."

"..."

Bertrand was poignantly silent. Vampy muttered something before disappearing into her realm, clearly aware of a problem, too.

* * * *

High in the sky above Allistras—the opening formed during Shuutarou’s dungeon creation had already shrunk to the size of the tip of a toothpick. The entire city could be seen from these heights.

Shuutarou was exuberant.

“This is my first time flying!”

“We’ll fly to Ross Maora now.”

Elroad sped toward Ross Maora’s location on the world map.

‘Master, let’s use telepathy going forward.’

‘Okay! I almost bit my tongue trying to speak, so that works!’

They glided through the sky, the wind whistling in their ears.

* * * *

Meanwhile, elsewhere, a distortion suddenly appeared in the sky.

“Eliminate them.”

The distortion took the form of black ooze, which kept changing shape until it became a monstrous bird. Its body was gnarly like a withered tree, with the belly swollen like a balloon. The bill tapered to a sharp point, and the wings were truly enormous.

Where is this?

The bird surveyed its surroundings, only to realize that it was not perched atop the tower that was once its territory. A purple current whizzed through the monstrous bird’s body, and it uttered a cry that reverberated in the distance. When the electric current reached its brain, it heard a man’s voice in its mind: *“Eliminate them.”*

The bird knew that voice. It had met the speaker before—the man who had sealed the bird away and gave it a tower to lord over.

The bird remembered what the man looked like...but no sooner had the image began to form in its mind than the electric current zapped it again. All its thoughts disappeared, leaving behind only one command—to kill anything approaching.

Celestial Ouragan—that was the bird's name.

It shouldn't have been in this place. Its level was over 110. This monster, which wasn't part of the official *Eternity* assets, was a being not unlike the Evil Overlords.

The bird cried out, and the eyes of other flying monsters near it clouded over. More and more monsters began following the bird as if it was their leader.

"Eliminate them."

A mere three minutes since its summoning, Celestial Ouragan already had a flock of two hundred minions. They flew together, homing in on a certain point in the distance.

* * * *

There was a change in the sky. Elroad quickly sensed it as he flew with Shuutarou.

It's not him, but the approaching enemy isn't one to just shrug off, either...

He glared at the dark shape heading their way but didn't slow down.

'How are you feeling, Master? The air is cold at such high altitudes.'

'I don't feel the cold at all! I'm totally fine, thanks to your magic!'

Elroad had cast protective spells on Shuutarou, including ones that blocked the wind and protected him from the cold. The boy was enjoying the flight without any discomfort.

There it is...

The shape ahead of them was close enough to make out what it was. The huge flock alarmed Shuutarou.

'Huh? Elroad, what's that there?'

‘Nothing to worry about, Master,’ Elroad replied with his usual calmness.
“Guardian of Time. Ultimate Magic. Mark of Origin.”

Small magic circles appeared in his palms. Elroad slowly gestured with his right hand.

“Devourer.”

The space in front of them warped with an unearthly sound. Elroad moved his hand to the side and erased an entire chunk of space, along with the bird monsters in it. The giant bird at the center of the flock couldn’t escape it, either.

They all perished.

When the giant bird had seen its minions hopelessly die in front of it, it had lost all its will to fight. Not because it was weak—it was a terrifyingly powerful monster, but it had recognized that it was no match for its opponent.

Shuutarou cocked his head. *‘What was that?’*

Elroad’s expression remained neutral. *‘I’m not sure, but it was certainly nothing to be concerned about.’*

* * * *

Shuutarou and Elroad whooshed through the air at a fierce speed, to Shuutarou’s delight. But their journey came to an abrupt end.

‘There’s, like, a red haze there?’

A red mist stretched like a wall in front of them as far as they could see. Elroad floated toward it and held out his hand. He poked it.

‘Ah. A spirit barrier.’

The barrier had blocked his hand. It was as if it were made of colored glass.

‘What’s a spirit barrier?’ Shuutarou asked.

‘You see, the God of Darkness has four elemental spirits serving him. This barrier was conjured by the fire spirit, I presume. Based on the spirits’ protection of this place, this is where Voroderia currently resides.’

‘You can’t break the barrier?’

‘Well, no, because the spirits are directly descended from gods. Shall we head down for a while?’

Elroad gently floated to the ground, and Shuutarou saw that they were above a mountainous area with ridges glittering like gemstones. These were the Sorn Mines.

The Sorn Mines were where Sorn ore had been extracted since ancient times for use in magical equipment. Owing to the lost technology of the great nation of Muskia, which had long gone through periods of prosperity followed by ruin, all the ore in this region had been transformed into Sorn ore. The Muskians used it to craft various magical implements and weapons. Their nation had since been wiped out, but the mines they’d left behind continued to be an excellent source of the ore.

“Wow!”

Shuutarou looked around at the mountains with pure wonder. He and Elroad had landed near the mines’ entrance; the red barrier reached even there, as if to stop anyone from entering.

“This is unfortunate,” said Elroad. “It might be impossible to break this barrier.”

“You don’t think you can do it?”

“I will give it a try.”

He carried Shuutarou and Punio away from the barrier. After depositing them on the ground, he cast several spells on them, including Protect Hearing and Protect Sight, before turning back to the semitransparent red wall.

“Guardian of Time. Ultimate Magic. Mark of Origin.”

Little magic circles appeared in the palm of Elroad’s hand. Golden pocket watches appeared all around him, and in an instant, he was surrounded by countless giant magic circles. They spun, and when the magic symbols inside them glowed in unison, Elroad finished casting a spell so powerful that it shook the ground.

“God-Eating Abyss.”

Everything turned black. Shuutarou could witness the full effect of the spell only thanks to the spells protecting his hearing and vision.

Each of the magic circles shot a beam of dark light like a cannon, focusing fire on the spirit barrier. Trees growing near it turned into a distorted mass of polygons, their branches twisting as if caught up in a hurricane as their roots clung to the ground. Elroad's magic was so powerful, it even affected the terrain objects. It was a twelfth-rank spell available only to those who'd reached level 120, like the Overlords.

The red barrier took the full force of this world-breaking magic, dispelling it on contact.

After a while, Elroad canceled the spells, and the world around them began returning to normal. Ten seconds later, it was as if nothing had happened.

Elroad turned back to Shuutarou. "It had no effect on the barrier, it seems."

"Y-yeah..."

Shuutarou was in a bit of a shock.

Elroad had utilized both unique skills and magic spells. The first of his unique skills, Guardian of Time, allowed him to ignore various time limitations, while the second, Ultimate Magic, reduced the MP cost of spells to 10 percent. With these two abilities, Elroad could cast spells with zero casting time or cooldown—continuously—and with very low cost to boot.

The spell he'd cast, God-Eating Abyss, was available only to him, the lord of demons. Its power was so tremendous that he'd never used it against any living creature.

Shuutarou had gone pale. He felt like he'd gotten a sneak peek at the reason Elroad ranked first among the Evil Overlords. The fact that the barrier couldn't be destroyed even by Elroad's magic, though, convinced him there was a special reason for it...

"I get it!" Shuutarou said. "Something's gotta be completed first before anyone can enter this area!"

"How can you tell, Master?"

“It’s just game logic!”

Shuutarou guessed that it wasn’t their lack of power, but a preset requirement stopping them from progressing. Otherwise, players would have no chance of ever getting through and winning back their freedom, considering that even Elroad couldn’t break the barrier.



“There might be a hint in the previous area telling us how to destroy the barrier. We just have to find it!”

“You sound very confident about this, Master.”

“I’m sure this is how it works!”

Shuutarou remembered reading about how the beta testers couldn’t access the superhard Kiren Graveyard area without a key. This area must’ve needed something like that, too.

“In that case,” said Elroad, “we would need to travel to the previous area, the Cerou Underground Labyrinth.”

“Could you take me there?”

“Of course.”

Elroad gently picked up Shuutarou again and flew off. The mines were shrouded in silence once more.

* * * *

The Cerou Underground Labyrinth was one of three giant mazes in *Eternity*. Supposedly created by a sage with the unusual ability to generate labyrinths, it was populated with monsters and equipped with traps to keep intruders out. Condensed magic permeated it, providing excellent feed for monsters while being toxic to humans. Those who breathed their last inside the labyrinth fed it, making it grow even larger.

“Here we are.”

“Great, thanks!”

Shuutarou stood in front of unnatural-looking stone arches, between which stretched what seemed like a film of purple water. This was the entrance to the labyrinth, where the key to disabling the barrier preventing access to the mines was hidden...

...or at least, that’s what Shuutarou was hoping for. But when he took a step forward, thick chains with a lock on them snaked around and between the arches, blocking his way.

“Oh. Looks like we need a key for here, too,” he said.

“Should I attempt breaking through?”

“Um, no, it’s fine!”

Shuutarou stopped Elroad, who already had his little magic circles floating above his hand.

“Hmm,” Shuutarou mused, unsure what to do for a moment. Then it hit him. “The best way is to just ask players who know more about the game! Someone out there might have more info on unlocking these places!”

He donned his dark knight Punio armor.

Elroad nodded. “Shall I take you to the location with the highest number of beings similar to you, Master?”

“No, hold on. Allistras has the most people in it, but they might not know about these things. See if there’s anyone close to here.”

“Understood.”

Elroad took to the skies again.

* * * *

Fort Sandras silently towered in the middle of a wasteland. It was the base of operations for the frontline players.

The fort had been built using the help of machines—technology that had since been lost. It was equipped with a magical cannon that had been used in the past to shoot down the giant dragon Solomos. Sorcerous soldiers protecting the city possessed high battle ability. All monsters in the vicinity had been burned, along with vegetation, leaving a landscape of scorched earth.

Shuutarou and Elroad landed on some cliffs near the fort town. They hurried inside, hoping to pick up some information about the red barrier and about unlocking chained-off areas. Passing through the gate, Shuutarou glanced at the two burly magic soldiers standing guard at the entrance.

The gate NPCs are level thirty...

The farther from the starting town, the higher the levels of both monsters and

town NPCs. The strength of the NPCs gave a rough idea of what to expect from the local monsters. The recommended level for that area was between 20 and 30. At level 31, Shuutarou could expect to do well there, as long as he wasn't careless.

The average level of players who lived near Fort Sandras was 38, well above the recommended level. But there was one particular reason why they still used Fort Sandras as their base...

Shuutarou spotted a player walking fast somewhere. He felt a little nervous about speaking to them—it was his first time talking to a human since running into Misaki.

“Excuse me...”

“?”

The player noticed Shuutarou, but they walked past, ignoring him.

Shuutarou had no idea that because he was effectively wearing a monster—his slime Punio—his name-tag text appeared garbled. This meant other players not only couldn't see what he looked like, but they also couldn't even read his name, making him extremely suspicious.

Shuutarou stood there blinking, perplexed. “I guess they were in a hurry...”

“Such insolence...”

The air around Elroad sparked as if with an electric charge, but Shuutarou didn't notice. He addressed another player, undeterred by previous lack of success.

“Excuse me, do you know anything about the Cerou Underground Labyrinth?”

“What? Cerou? What are you talking about?”

“Um... That place with, like, a water entrance and stone pillars?”

“Dude, you want to go to another area before Ciola Tower's even cleared? Which guild are you from? Didn't you get the memo about coordinating efforts?!”

The man was so intimidating that Shuutarou just ran away. The man watched

him leave but didn't give chase.

"Yikes! He was so scary..."

"Shall I terminate him?"

"No! No attacking people!"

Shuutarou stopped Elroad, who already had pale-blue flames dancing above his hands. He then went on to try asking other players in town about the Cerou Underground Labyrinth and the red barrier, but...

"It's no use!"

After speaking to thirty people, Shuutarou gave up. He sat down heavily on a bench, making for a rather surreal sight—a sinister dark knight sitting dejectedly by the roadside.

No one will talk to me. People don't trust me...

He hadn't been expecting to run into this problem. His dark knight armor was too bizarre, concealing everything about him from sight, which put everyone on guard. Someone had even reported him as a suspicious individual to mercenary NPCs, who then chased him off. Elroad was at a loss as to how to help.

"My cool armor scares people off..."

"Power doesn't solve all problems, unfortunately."

"But what can I do? I have to wear this armor, or else I can't take any of you along..."

Leaving his dungeon in the company of the Evil Overlords without disguising his appearance might lead to even more problems. Shuutarou didn't care so much what other players would think, but the Overlords were desperately against that.

With his dark knight armor on, even if players were suspicious of him, they wouldn't attempt to capture him. It served him very well, except at times like this, when he needed other players' help to overcome a roadblock that couldn't be removed by force.

Shuutarou could choose lonely independence. Or he could find a way to earn

other people's cooperation.

"All right! I know what I'll do!"

"You have a cunning plan, Master?"

"Kind of! First, let's go back. I need to talk with everyone."

"Understood."

Elroad picked up Shuutarou and Punio, and they flew off yet again.

* * * *

After they returned to the dungeon, Shuutarou revealed his plan to the Evil Overlords. It was met with a shocked reaction.

"You'll go to the city...alone?"

"That's too dangerous!"

Elroad and Vampy balked at the idea. Vampy shot an accusatory glare at Elroad.

Shuutarou's stratagem involved him going to Allistras all alone, joining a party, and making friends with other players.

Elroad took over. "Allow me to brief everyone about today's events."

He relayed to the other Overlords their discovery of the spirit barrier, the locked underground labyrinth, and Shuutarou's futile attempts to talk to people in the fort town. Gallarus was interested in the barrier.

"I was willing to bet there'd be interference," he said. "If the barrier can't be busted even with the most powerful magic, there's probably a Prayer or something in place."

"Yes, probably," Elroad agreed, frowning.

Shuutarou cocked his head, feeling lost in the conversation. "What's that about a prayer?"

"A Prayer is a statement of piety—utmost devotion to a god. Offering a Prayer has the effect of creating a barrier around the pious, allowing none other than their god to enter. A barrier of the strength we have witnessed could have been

formed by all four elemental spirits offering Prayers.”

About half of Elroad’s detailed explanation went over Shuutarou’s head. He tried putting his hands together in prayer, but nothing happened.

Prayer was a skill in the game where acolytes invoked the powers of a god to manifest a protective barrier with an area of effect smaller than Sanctuary, which Wataru had used in his battle with the Goblin King. Creating a small safe zone was useful when taking a break from monster hunting, or when a player needed somewhere to recover without the risk of getting attacked.

The barrier’s durability depended on the strength of the Prayer. The four elemental spirits were entities close to gods, and they revered Voroderia, the God of Darkness. A barrier created by their Prayers would be insanely tough.

Gallarus groaned at what a pain those spirits were going to be.

“So the four elemental spirits’ Prayers must be broken before we can reach Voroderia’s stronghold?” asked Theodore.

“Correct,” Elroad replied with a nod.

Theodore muttered to himself that it would be no easy undertaking.

Bertrand chewed on what looked like a hand-rolled cigarette. “You’ll have to meet them face-to-face to undo the Prayer. Do you even know where to find the four of ’em?”

“Yes, we have a pretty good idea of where they are, but that location is locked by a mysterious force,” Elroad replied. “A force that, like the barrier, appears indestructible.”

“Sounds rough.” Bertrand sighed, rolling his eyes.

“That’s why I need to go to the city alone,” Shuutarou insisted. “If I talk to lots of people, I’m sure I’ll find out about the spirits’ locations and how to unlock that one area!”

This convinced Elroad, but then Sylvia piped up with a question.

“Pardon me, Master. Why don’t you use the slime to change your disguise to something else? Make yourself look like an ordinary person to blend in?”

“Because as soon as someone realizes he’s using a slime for a disguise, it’s all over,” Theodore explained patiently, looking at the floor. “At least when he appears as a dark knight with us beside him, no one will bother him.”

Sylvia seemed to get it.

“I see. So after Master collects intel, he can meet up with us again in his slime armor to unlock the barrier,” muttered Elroad.

“He doesn’t even have to trouble himself there—we can do the job, once he tells us what we need to do.”

Gallarus, too, approved of the plan, but Vampy, who’d been sitting quietly for a while, still wasn’t on board.

“It’s too risky. Master wouldn’t even have his Abyss Slime to protect him, correct? We would, of course, be nearby in case something happened, but still... How are we supposed not to worry about letting Master go all by himself?!”

The throne room was silent for a few moments. But when Shuutarou turned toward Vampy, he was smiling.

“I have the weapon from Theodore, and if it starts looking dangerous, I’ll call you guys immediately! Please trust me on this one!”

The Overlords remained silent. Shuutarou petted Punio before continuing:

“Besides, this could be the last time I go out on my own.”

“...Really?” Vampy asked imploringly.

Shuutarou nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah! Changing my class to summoner might solve all the problems at once!”

No one could be sure of that, though. Elroad understood that it wouldn’t be as easy as Shuutarou made it sound. He chose his words carefully when he spoke.

“You may be overly optimistic about this, Master. It is a gamble; there are too many unknowns to guess at the chances of this plan succeeding.”

Nonetheless, Shuutarou kept smiling.

“Well, I hope I can pass you guys off as my summons if I become a summoner,

but if that doesn't work, then that's that. I'll find my own way to gather information in the starting town, then go from there to find and defeat this God of Darkness. Whatever happens, we'll do this together!"

The eyes of the Evil Overlords widened as they realized that this boy—their master—prioritized being together with them, even if that meant putting himself in danger. They were so moved, they didn't know how to respond. Their master's kindness knew no bounds. They had a place in his heart.

Overflowing with emotion, Bertrand stood up. He walked over to Shuutarou and knelt on one knee, bowing his head low.

"Master, please allow me to be your sword instructor. Your kind heart and resolve have greatly impressed me, and I wish to aid you in any way I can. The battle skills I can teach you should serve you well in the outside world."

Shuutarou beamed at this. "Okay! Can we train in your realm? I've never been!"

Concern clouded Bertrand's face. He thought for a moment before agreeing on one condition.

"Only if you can promise me to wear your armor at all times in my realm..."

He sounded apologetic, as if embarrassed not to be able to guarantee Shuutarou's safety in his own domain. Shuutarou was a bit surprised, but he readily agreed.

"In that case, Master, I will show you to my realm."

"Awesome!"

Shuutarou followed Bertrand out of the room with Punio in tow. The other five Overlords were silent for some time. Elroad was the first to speak, a mysterious look on his face.

"Voroderia's intentions are unclear, but we have learned something about him." He snapped shut the book he'd been reading. "Based on the goblin incident, as well as our encounter with the bird monster today, Voroderia is working toward the eradication of both those who are unable or unwilling to fight, and those who attempt to progress through means other than intended."

Sylvia cocked her head. “What’s he doing that for?”

“I can only presume that such individuals are unnecessary for whatever it is he has planned.”

The Overlords fell silent again.

There were such things as scripted fails: a common mechanic in RPGs where players would face enemies so high-level, they would be impossible to defeat, but losing to them was essential to progressing the story. Unbeatable bosses might also communicate to players that they should try another way to progress.

The bird monster was one such unbeatable boss.

The world of *Eternity* had been perfected through the creation and destruction of countless prototype worlds. The reason a world might end would usually be the emergence of a conqueror. The Mother AI’s ideal world was vast, with many different areas, and no being was powerful enough to conquer the entire world. This condition was necessary because monsters like the Evil Overlords, unmatched in their own worlds, would soon become dissatisfied with their own territories, venturing outside and becoming unpredictable. Anyone whose power was extreme was either terminated or imprisoned.

Besides the Evil Overlords, there were three other monsters that had ended up as destroyers of worlds: Celestial Ouragan, Marine Kanan, and Terrestrial Macadhus. They were the worst monsters produced by worlds 384, 7,116, and 1,042, respectively.

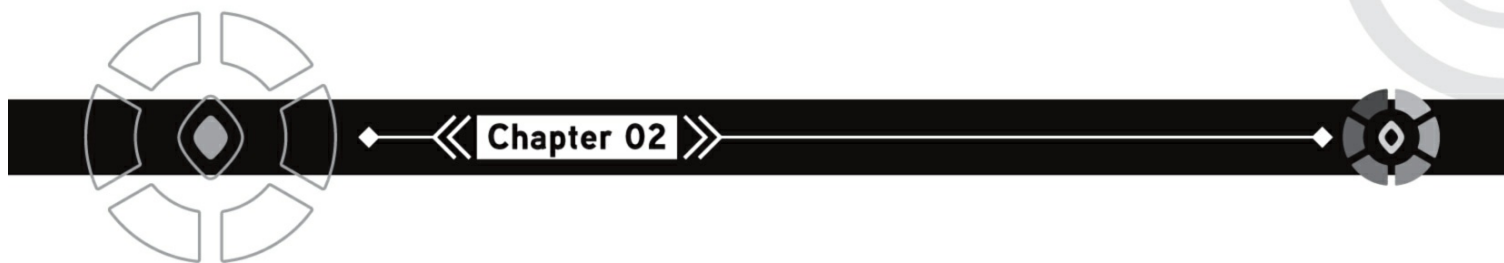
Normally, these monsters would have been destroyed, deemed unwanted assets by the Mother AI. But when they appeared shortly before *Eternity*’s launch, a use was found for these excessively strong monsters after all—they would serve as guardians stopping anyone from breaking the game’s rules. In a way, they served a similar function to game masters.

These monsters were immensely powerful; each was over level 100. Their main task was to prevent players from taking unintended routes to get from one area to another. Ouragan, a bird monster, guarded the skies. Kanan, a fish monster, guarded the seas. Macadhus, a beast monster, guarded the ground. Any player who tried to access an area in a way that was forbidden would be

ruthlessly attacked by one of these creatures.

The Mother AI employed these special boss monsters in the event a player was granted a unique skill enabling flight, to ensure their flight ability wouldn't be game-breaking.

Yet to the Evil Overlords, these invincible bosses weren't much of an obstacle.



It was a beautiful world with giant trees. Small animals played on their mossy branches, birds sang, and butterflies fluttered by.

Bertrand led Shuutarou along a path paved with white stones, illuminated by glowing flowers resembling lilies of the valley.

“Your realm’s very pretty,” Shuutarou told the Sixth Evil Overlord.

“You’re my first guest here, so I’m a little tense.”

Shuutarou was looking around with sparkling eyes. Bertrand scratched his head, walking alongside. After they walked through the forest for a while, a town came into view.

“This is where my people live.”

“Wow! That’s so cool!”

The forest opened to a valley surrounded by giant waterfalls. Right in the middle of that valley was a town with houses made of stone. The only way into the town was via a white bridge. The bottom of the valley was hidden under the spray of the magnificent water cascade.

Shuutarou gazed down fearfully. “Uh... Wouldn’t want to fall off into that...”

“That’s where the riffraff end up. It’s a long drop, and once the currents pull you under, that’s it.”

Bertrand laughed, continuing down the white path. Shuutarou swallowed audibly, following the blond knight.

There's nobody here...

The emptiness was striking. The architecture was gorgeous, the houses charmingly embellished, but it was almost a ghost town. Only a few people—or rather, a few elves—lingered.

“We used to be prosperous nation. As numerous as humans.”

Bertrand surveyed the town, a sad longing for the bygone days in his eyes. A cold gust of wind tugged at their clothes.

“What happened?” Shuutarou asked him.

“Never mind. It’s a long story. Come with me—I’ll show you the training grounds.”

Bertrand smiled gently and set off. Shuutarou trotted behind him, craning his neck to look around, admiring every detail of the empty town.

* * * *

They arrived at a white, ivied castle. Bertrand led Shuutarou to the drill area within the castle grounds, where several elves had gathered.

According to the Tsulgur Primeval Forest Monster Guide entry about elves, they were a humanoid race with a naturally high aptitude for magic. Incredibly intelligent, they were capable of conversing with and living alongside humans. All elves were hunters, with excellent command of the bow. They built a settlement deep in the Tsulgur Primeval Forest, where, hidden from humans, they awaited the end. Their appearance was very similar to humans, except for their pointy ears and alabaster-white skin.

The elves watched Shuutarou with interest.

“All right. For the training, I’ll just have you practice your skills. You’ve gained some levels, but your skill mastery is low. So let’s increase it.”

Bertrand took out two wooden swords from his inventory and handed one to Shuutarou.

Skill mastery was a stat indicating skill power. It went from level 1 to level 100. Raising skill mastery didn’t teach you any new skills, but it improved your

current ones—for example, increasing their strength or accuracy, reducing MP cost, or shortening casting time.

One of the basic swordfighter skills was Triple Strike, which dealt three consecutive high-damage hits to a target. At skill level 1, each hit dealt 130 percent of its regular damage, but at skill level 100, this was increased to 330 percent.

Players could acquire new, more powerful skills through leveling up or changing classes, but leveling up existing skills made a huge difference, too.

“I heard it was really hard to raise skill levels, but you make it sound like I just need to use the skill again and again many times?”

“Yes, basically. Don’t think too hard about it—with my unique skill and the special properties of this place, it should be a breeze.”

“Okay, then!”

Neither of them was the type to worry about the particulars.

And thus began Shuutarou’s training under the watchful eye of Bertrand.

Bertrand’s unique skill was Nourish Life Force. It enhanced natural healing abilities and encouraged the target’s growth. In other words, it sped up mastering skills, also reducing the required amount of EXP.

The elves’ castle was filled with the magical energy of the tree of life, Nibrua, which further enhanced the effects of Bertrand’s unique skill. With him as Shuutarou’s instructor, in this special place, the boy’s training would be maximally efficient.

“Before we start, turn off Action Assist. It makes the body move on its own. It’s really creepy.”

“Huh? Okay, I’ll turn it off...”

Shuutarou found the Action Assist option in his menu and disabled it.

Even though Bertrand was an NPC, he had a skill menu like Shuutarou’s. The players’ UI wasn’t unique to them—all inhabitants of this world had such menus. The Mother AI’s accelerated development of the game world resulted in an interface shared between both players and non-playable characters,

although the NPCS didn't have access to certain features, such as logging out or registering friends.

Normal NPCs weren't supposed to ever discover how to open their own menus or even be aware that they had them.

"Right, so... *Triple Strike*! Huh? It only strikes one tim— Aaah!"

After activating Triple Strike from his Swordfighting skills, Shuutarou's blade seemingly moved on its own as he tried to hold on, like a big unruly dog dragging behind a small child desperately clinging to the leash.

At the end of the move, Shuutarou fell onto his butt. Bertrand rushed over.

"Master! Are you all right?!"

"Yeah, I'm fine! But what was that?"

Shuutarou eyed the wooden sword suspiciously. Bertrand scratched his forehead, looking uneasy.

"Without Action Assist, you need to consciously perform the moves. You didn't do that, so the sword pulled you around... Sorry, maybe we should use Action Assist to begin with."

Shuutarou shook his head emphatically. "No, no! Let's keep it off. I'll get stronger if we practice this way, right?"

"Well, yes... It was my fault for not giving you any instructions. This time, I'll explain properly. First, your stance..."

Bertrand began teaching Shuutarou the basics. The boy fell over many more times, but he always stood back up, ready to try again per Bertrand's guidance.

* * * *

After some time, Shuutarou and Bertrand took a break. Bertrand brought him to the inner courtyard.

"So pretty!"

"I have some business to attend to, so enjoy the sights and relax for now. Let's resume training in, say, half an hour?"

“Okay!”

When Bertrand walked off somewhere, Shuutarou ran into the courtyard garden. Sunlight filtered through the leaves of a gigantic tree, taller than the castle, reflecting off the surface of a crystal clear pond full of colorful fish. A stone bridge led to a gazebo with a table that had snacks and tea.

“Smells nice!”

Shuutarou, in his dark knight armor, sat under the gazebo. The fairy-tale atmosphere made him very relaxed, but nonetheless, he kept his promise and stayed in the armor, lifting the visor of his helmet to drink the tea. He heard birdsong in the distance.

Must not forget I’m still stuck in a deadly game...

He thought about how lucky he was, compared with other players, to be in this lovely environment. He was getting trained to become stronger in a peaceful, safe place, where they even served him delicious tea. It made him feel guilty.

There were still players in the starting town of Allistras who’d given up on trying to become stronger, shutting themselves in their rooms. There were player killers who took advantage of the lack of any law enforcement in the game. Shuutarou had actually done an incredible service to the other players by stopping the monster invasion, but still, he couldn’t help feeling guilty over being so privileged—he was probably the least likely to die thanks to the Evil Overlords’ protection.

It’s not fair. Other players would be scared of me if they knew... I could’ve probably saved more lives if only I weren’t so clueless...

He had power, but he wasn’t strong. Unlike Wataru and his guild.

Sensing a change in his master’s mood, Punio transformed back into its slime form in Shuutarou’s lap.

“Punio? Oh, thank you. If you don’t mind...”

Shuutarou bit his lip hard to hold back tears, and he hugged Punio. The rustling of leaves, the sound of flowing water, and—most of all—the soft feel of

his beloved pet soothed him.

“Who are you?”

Shuutarou jumped, startled by the voice. A girl he had never seen before was in the garden. She crossed the bridge with swift confidence that told him she came there often.

“And who are you?” he replied.

“I asked you first!” she snapped back at him.

“I guess you did...,” Shuutarou muttered uncomfortably. “My name’s Shuutarou, and this slime is my friend, Punio.”

“I’m Vivian.”

“Nice to meet you.”

They nodded at each other.

“The slime’s your friend?”

“Yep! Isn’t he cute?”

“He is. May I touch him?”

“Sure!”

Vivian gently petted Punio. “Wish I had a friend like this, too...”

Coming into physical contact with an Abyss Slime would normally have debilitating effects on the unfortunate person, severely poisoning them, too. But Punio, raised by Shuutarou, was safe to touch.

A sweet smile formed on Vivian’s lips as she stroked Punio.

But when she looked at Shuutarou again, her eyes opened wide.

“Huh...?!”

She quickly backed away, a sword in her hands, her face contorted by intense hatred. She pointed the sword at Shuutarou with deadly intent.

“You’re...human?!”

Her burning rage awoke in Shuutarou something he hadn’t experienced in a

while: fear of dying. Dark miasma began to emanate from Punio.

“Punio, no!”

He pulled the slime close to his chest. Vivian appeared to be surprised by this, hesitating for a moment. Suddenly, she vomited black ooze and dropped onto her knees in agony.



“Master!”

Bertrand must have sensed something was amiss, and he came running.

“I’m fine! But Vivian—she’s hurt. Punio hurt her...!”

Bertrand put his hand on Vivian’s forehead, and her tearful eyes immediately closed as she fell into a peaceful slumber.

Shuutarou was also in tears as he hurried over. “I’m so sorry! It’s all my fault that Punio—”

“No, this isn’t caused by the Abyss Slime’s miasma. If you did intend to hurt my sister, she’d be dead the very moment you thought about it.”

Bertrand wiped Vivian’s face clean and stared into the distance for a while, before turning back to face Shuutarou and lowering his head.

“I beg your forgiveness, Master. I shouldn’t have brought you here, knowing full well the risks involved...”

“You haven’t done anything wrong. I asked to come here, and you just wanted to make me happy, right? I’m not upset or anything.”

“I don’t deserve your magnanimity...”

If Elroad or Vampy were present, they’d no doubt reproach Bertrand for bringing Shuutarou somewhere he knew the boy wouldn’t be safe.

“What’s wrong with Vivian?”

The elf girl was lying on the ground, asleep. Bertrand resolved to tell Shuutarou the whole truth, feeling that he owed that much to him after the unpleasant incident.

“She’s suffering from a curse.”

“A curse?”

“You’ve noticed how few of us there are, haven’t you? That’s because of the curse, too. I’ll have to tell you about how the humans brought us to the brink of extinction.”

“Humans tried to kill you...?”

Bertrand nodded and parted his shirt to show Shuutarou an azure gemstone embedded in his chest.

“This is a Seed of Life, the source of magical power for us elves. These seeds harbor our life force, too.”

It was a seed of the Nibrua tree. Every elf baby had a seed pressed into their chest, making them a part of Nibrua. The elves believed that they could draw on the tree’s power and share its life span.

“Humans sought these seeds, wanting to extend their life spans, too. We were living peacefully in the forest until one day, one of us returned with a hole in their chest. The humans had captured them and gouged the seed out. Then the humans attacked our settlement to destroy us and steal our mother tree.”

But their onslaught was short-lived thanks to Bertrand, the elves’ immensely powerful leader.

Bertrand sighed.

The lives of the elves and Nibrua were intertwined. If the tree withered, they’d die along with it. For this reason, they stayed near the tree, living deep in the forest without bothering anyone.

“Then the humans captured a few of us, infected them with the curse, and released them back into the community so that they’d spread it among the other elves. This is the result.”

The curse decimated the elves. Shuutarou looked at Vivian on the ground. She was slowly dying from the curse, too.

Bertrand bowed his head sorrowfully.

“I owe you an apology, Master. After what happened, elves don’t have a good opinion of humans, to say the least. Many others besides my sister will attack you if they discover that you are a human. My realm isn’t suitable for your training.”

“No, don’t blame yourself!” Shuutarou quickly protested. “It’s my own fault for breaking my promise to you and taking off my armor. You chose the best possible place to train me!”

Shuutarou could tell that Bertrand was doing his best to please him. The boy was grateful for that, and he didn't harbor any ill feelings toward Bertrand despite the scary incident with the elf's sister.

The elves are cursed, huh...?

Shuutarou browsed his dungeon menu, navigating to the elves' status screens.

Elpith Level 74 (F)

Unique Skill: Big Catch

Status: Death Curse

Maylen Level 71 (F)

Unique Skill: Tree Hopping

Status: Death Curse

Ledotoah Level 78 (M)

Unique Skill: Earth Blessing

Status: Death Curse

Torinne Level 70 (F)

Unique Skill: Trap Removal

Status: Death Curse

Ah, so the curse the elves are suffering from must be this Death Curse status.

Almost all the elves had that status effect, including Vivian, who was still asleep. Bertrand was stroking her hair gently.

Hatoa Level 106 (F)

Unique Skill: Pure Blood

Status: Death Curse

Hold on... Her name's not Vivian?

That struck Shuutarou as strange, but something else he saw in the menu distracted him.

Restore status to Normal?

YES (17,730P) NO

"Oh!" Shuutarou exclaimed without thinking.

It was the same menu option he'd seen earlier, when checking on the status of that "Unlucky" monster girl in Regiuria. Not fully believing it would be that easy to remove the curse, he selected YES, hoping for the best. He didn't have to wait long.

"Nnh... Huh? Bert?" Vivian said upon waking. She sat up, rubbing her forehead.

"How are you feeling?" Bertrand asked her.

"Fine. Actually, I haven't felt this good in forever."

“?”

Bertrand was confused. He had no idea that Shuutarou had just cured his sister. They heard excited screams from all around.

“My body isn’t aching anymore!”

“I can see! My sight is back!”

“I can move again!”

Bertrand stood motionless for a while, but he soon figured out who was behind the miraculous recoveries. He turned to Shuutarou.

“Master... Did you just...?”

“Yeah, looks like I lifted the curse!” Shuutarou smiled from ear to ear.

During his visit to Vampy’s realm, he’d learned how to use the dungeon menu. This curse seemed like the same sort of status effect that one monster girl had in Regiuria, so at the expense of a huge number of dungeon points, Shuutarou managed to cure all the elves.

Restorative magic didn’t work on curses like this. NPC status ailments couldn’t be removed, even with the most powerful magic. However, the Evil Overlords’ minions had been reassigned from NPC to dungeon-monster roles, removing the system restriction on their statuses. If Shuutarou had given it some thought, he’d have realized that the Evil Overlords were also not bound by system restrictions placed on normal NPCs, and this could have terrifying consequences. However, it would still be some time before that thought hit him.

“The curse...has been lifted?” Bertrand muttered, looking around at his brethren in shock.

This was what he’d been dreaming about since the evil curse had befallen them. Except that he’d given up hope a long time ago.

Vivian cocked her head at Shuutarou. “You cured everyone?”

He nodded gently. Vivian beamed at him and curtsied.

“Thank you for taking the pain away!”

For the first time in hundreds of years, Bertrand saw his sister genuinely happy. He couldn't get his fill of watching his people rejoice. It was a while later that he spoke.

"For twenty years, we endured attacks from humans and lost friends to the deadly curse. And for the past century, we have been hanging on in Ross Maora Castle. At last, our struggle is over."

Initially, Bertrand had intended to use Shuutarou to get out of the castle and search for a way to lift the curse in the vast world outside. He'd teamed up with Gallarus to hasten his plan.

The Evil Overlords' rankings didn't matter to Bertrand. Neither did he find bowing to this boy who'd appeared out of nowhere humiliating. The survival of his people was the one thing that mattered to him. He'd been living for them all this time.

"I...I will be forever indebted to you, Master."

Bertrand pressed the corners of his eyes, trying to stop the tears. He felt as if he'd finally reached the end of a long and enervating journey.

"The chest pain is gone as if by magic!"

"It's a miracle! A bona fide miracle!"

"I don't remember the last time I was able to move so freely."

Suddenly, Shuutarou found himself surrounded by elves, who thanked him profusely. He was quite overwhelmed.

Bertrand quickly intervened. "Hey, now! Don't crowd him! He's our master, so show some more respect!"

The elves who'd been pushing forward to see Shuutarou all fell silent... noticing that the boy was of the race that had nearly caused their downfall.

"We serve...a human?"

"He's the one who lifted the curse, though."

"If our king says the boy's our master now, then he's our master. I don't have a problem with that!"

The elves collected themselves, and the jubilant mood returned. They couldn't hold a grudge against the boy who, of course, had nothing to do with the humans who'd cursed them over a hundred years earlier, especially after he saved them.

Bertrand stuck a roll of tobacco into his mouth and gazed up at the sky.

"Your Majesty! The Knights of Nibrua will rise and fight for you again!"

Bertrand wiped his tears and looked at the soldier elves with a kind smile.

"Don't be a fool. Our enemies are long gone."

They no longer needed to fight anyone.

"I suppose not," one of the soldiers agreed a little awkwardly.

Bertrand smirked. "It's good to see you got your verve back, though."

He felt buoyant with elation, as if in a happy dream. His people were few now, but they were full of life again.

Shuutarou smiled playfully and suggested, "Why don't we all train together under Bertrand? It'll be more fun for me that way, and you might enjoy the exercise, too!"

"Gladly!"

The soldier elves readily agreed. Gradually, the others joined in, too, until all the elves were taking part in a very high-spirited combat-training session.

* * * *

Back to the present...

"I'm looking to join a party with a summoner in it!" Shuutarou announced with a big smile.

Lumia's eyes widened at this unexpected request.

A summoner? Why is he so particular about that?

She'd had other players come to her looking for specific parties, but their conditions were along the lines of "I want to be in a party with high-level players" or "I want a fun party where I can make a lot of money easily without

any risk to me.” Some people asked to make sure a party had a healer or a tank, but nobody had ever requested to be partied up with a summoner before.

“All right. I’ll need to take your name, job, and level, and this information will be visible to other players. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes, sure!”

“Thank you for confirming. I’ll now search for a party matching your requirements.”

Lumia smiled back at the boy and started scrolling through the list of parties on standby due to a lack of members.

A summoner, hmm... Are there any...?

Summoners and tamers were rarely seen jobs. There certainly were some around, but since recruiting monsters took a lot of work, they were usually still at very low levels compared with the rest of the player population. You could roam the streets of Allistras all day without coming across one.

Lumia kept scrolling.

“There aren’t many summoners, so I’m not sure I can find...” One party caught her eye. “Oh, there is one looking for an escort to Emaro. This summoner doesn’t have the best reputation, though...”

“That’s fine! I’d like to join this party, please!” Shuutarou replied resolutely.

There was, however, a problem. Due to the current state of affairs—Crest still seeing the Ilyana Tunnel as a potentially dangerous area—the only way to Emaro was through Ur Sluice. While the recommended level for that area was 12, to be on the safe side, they required all players heading there to be at least level 15, which was quite a big difference in the game world.

The boy was very eager, but he seemed so innocently naive that Lumia doubted his level was sufficient.

“The required level to join this party is fifteen. Do you meet that requirement?”

“Yep!”

The boy's unfading smile made Lumia think.

He's, what, an elementary school kid? And already level fifteen? Maybe he's been playing since beta. Hmm, but we have those other kids who leveled a lot since getting locked in the game... I can't take any chances, though. I'll have to send him to the training grounds to prove his battle ability before letting him head out of the city.

Lumia smiled again. "That's great. Before I can sign you up for this party mission, could I ask you to go to the training grounds to test whether you have sufficient battle ability?"

"Sure, no problem!"

"I'll pencil you in. Your application will be approved as soon as the instructor at the training grounds gives you the go-ahead. I'll send you the application now. Tap the green Agree button if everything is okay with you."

His peppy attitude is quite adorable, Lumia mused as she took care of the digital paperwork. The boy was giving her good vibes. He completed the application in his menu, taking his time as if he wasn't accustomed to this. Lumia watched him with a motherly gaze, resting her chin in her hands.

I've dealt with quite a few child players, but he's the cutest so far. He looks so unspoiled by the cruelty of the world. Like he's never once been stressed.

She was only a receptionist dealing with a customer, but she felt protective of this lovable boy. His presence made her feel relaxed. But when he returned the completed application to her, she stared at it in shock.

Shuutarou Swordfighter Level 31

Thirty-one?! Has he been grinding nonstop since the start of beta?! Has he been soloing all this time, keeping out of sight? Who'd have thought...?

She put on her business smile again. "Are you sure you don't want to join our guild?"

"Yes. Maybe sometime later, though!"

He had his mind made up—regrettably, even with over four thousand members, Crest had only a handful players that high-level. Lumia understood

that there was no point in insisting that he join, though. There would be no clear advantages to him.

“Your application is complete. Please see the battle instructor in the facility on the right-hand side after you leave this building. I’ve already let him know you’ll be coming.”

“Okay. Thank you so much!”

Smiling, Lumia watched him run out the door. Then she checked his player information again, just to be sure she hadn’t misread it.

* * * *

Shuutarou went over to the building next to the guild. The sounds coming from within—skill-activation sound effects, metal striking against metal—made him feel a little intimidated.

A group of people in armor filed into the building before him. They were all grown-ups he’d never seen before.

I should be okay... Bert trained me well, after all...

Anxious, he instinctively tried to cuddle his slime, but Punio wasn’t there with him.

Shuutarou dropped his head, feeling lonely. Gently squeezing Punio had become a habit for him, but this time, he’d have to manage without his pet, and without the Evil Overlords, too. He hadn’t realized how much he’d miss them.

I only made it this far because of them...

Reflecting on how much he owed his non-player friends, Shuutarou pushed the door to the training grounds open. Rays of sunlight coming from inside fell on his face, illuminating his determined expression.

* * * *

Crest’s training grounds featured a PvE area where players could fight virtual enemies, a practice area where they could test their skills on training dummies, and a PvP area where players could safely battle each other. Noncombatants wishing to become fighters were ordered to train at this facility, but it was used

by others, too.

It was Crest's policy to send most first-time Party Quest hopefuls here and train them until they could safely fight monsters outside the city. Thanks to that, mortality rates among players dropped significantly.

This place is bigger than I thought! Now, where's my instructor?

Shuutarou began to timidly explore the facility. The walls were sturdy, made of stone. Behind glass partitions, players were busily striking targets with swords and spears.

"Hey, boy. You're Shuutarou, right?" came a voice from behind.

Shuutarou spun around. A burly man in gray armor was standing behind him.

"Yes, that's me! Um, are you the instructor?"

"That I am. Name's Candy."

"And I'm Shuutarou, as you know!"

The instructor wore thick makeup. He had a very muscular build and voluminous golden hair. With a name like Candy, he made quite the impression.

Candy looked Shuutarou up and down and smiled broadly. "Lumia told me you were unusual, but seeing you now, it's clear you're something else. Not only are you level thirty-one, but there's also more to you, hmm?" He stroked his strong, angular jaw. "Well?" he asked, leaning in so that his face was right in front of Shuutarou's.

"What do you mean by 'something else'?"

"To put it simply, you've got this powerful aura. It hit me like a bus as soon as I laid eyes on you."

"Wow, you can sense things like that? That's amazing!"

"It's no magic, and no skill, either. Just my intuition."

It seemed Shuutarou's praise tickled Candy's ego, but the truth was, there were other players beside Candy with a discerning eye for others' ability level. Players who picked up on subtle cues to infer another's power, without knowing their stats. It was similar to how real-life martial artists, especially high-

ranked ones, would size up their opponents and predict their potential.

Shuutarou, though, was deeply impressed by Candy's "intuition."

After Kidd's death, Candy was assigned the role of battle instructor; he had a knack for accurately assessing when his trainees were ready to leave the safety of the city walls, as well as a natural ability to make others feel at ease in his presence. He was level 35 and a highly capable fighter himself.

"Enough chitchat, hmm? Let's check how you measure up. Come this way first."

"Okay!"

"Enthusiastic, aren't you? I like that."

Candy winked at Shuutarou and led him to a nearby area. A dummy was propped up on a stick. Shuutarou turned around and looked at his instructor expectantly.

"Your first task is to deplete this dummy's LP. You can use regular attacks or skills, if you like, but if you want to keep your unique skill secret, that's fine, too."

"Got it!"

Shuutarou drew his sword. The thin blade glinted ominously.

Unique skills were perhaps the most precious piece of personal information, and many Crest members wanted to keep theirs secret. Candy wasn't a gossip, of course, but he knew that some people eager to pass the test might use their unique skill to impress him, only to regret it later, so he reminded everyone that it wasn't necessary before they started.

Well, I'll be! Look at that sword! Gotta be a boss drop, or a lucky drop from a Goblin Thief. Hunting them for a chance of a rare drop was popular in the beta days. Or could he have gotten it some other way? Candy wondered, watching the boy approach the dummy out of the corner of his eye.

"Triple Strike!"

Shuutarou's blade flashed crimson. He spun, using centrifugal force to hit the dummy hard and fast. He hit it again and...stopped. The dummy had

disappeared before he could land the third blow.

“Huh? Where’d it go?”

Shuutarou looked around, confused.

Candy felt beads of sweat form on his forehead.

He destroyed it with only two hits?! Has he got some crazy strength buff?! Or is his weapon special in some way? Also...

“Sh-Shuutarou, you’re not using Action Assist?”

“Huh? Nope. I can move more...like, freely? Without it.”

Shuutarou just repeated what Bertrand had told him.

Candy wiped his brow.

He performed the skill with full control. Is he a genius or what?!

Action Assist applied mostly to attack abilities. It enabled players to execute skills automatically. Their bodies would move in a predetermined way, so they wouldn’t need to actually think of what they were doing or be skilled in wielding their weapons.

As long as there was a target in front, the skill would hit. During skill execution, the player could think about their next move without worrying about what they were doing with their weapon. Even newbies could perform battle moves like pros.

There was a major disadvantage to it, too, though—players using it had no control over their movements during skill execution.

To illustrate this difference, a tank using Action Assist who’d activated a counter skill just before getting hit by an enemy attack would move completely automatically to counter the incoming strike. But if their opponent wasn’t using Action Assist, they might react to that by delaying their attack, voiding the counter.

Without Action Assist, Shuutarou was fully in control of what he was doing even during skill use. If he defeated an enemy midway through Triple Strike, as had happened with the training dummy, he might hold the last strike and use it

on another target instead.

Playing without Action Assist required a perfect understanding of the required skill motions—one wrong move, and the skill would fail.

Skill moves could only be held off for up to a few seconds, but those precious seconds could turn the tides of battle, especially in PvP.

This boy is a treasure!

Candy was practically drooling.

Shuutarou's sword lost its glow, turning silver again. Candy took him to the PvE area next, where players could take part in mock battles with monsters.

"You have high attack, and you're a virtuoso with that skill, so you passed the first part hands down. Next, we'll do a simulated monster battle. If you get hit, your LP will go down, but it won't hurt, and you won't die even at zero LP, so there's nothing to be afraid of."

"Cool!" Shuutarou replied resolutely.

Candy stared at the boy walking in front of him with fierce intensity.

This is going to be a little naughty of me, but I'll pit him against multiple monsters.

In a party, only tanks would normally have to deal with multiple monsters at once. Damage dealers would tackle them one by one. Candy, however, had a burning curiosity to test just how good Shuutarou was.

Three monsters spawned, appearing as masses of polygons at first before taking the shape of a goblin, a Goblin Mage, and a wolf. Shuutarou drew his sword again and assumed a battle stance. The goblin and wolf charged at him, and the boy started running at them, too.

"Double Strike!"

Shuutarou's sword lit up blue. He quickly glanced left and right before plunging it into the wolf's head. He pulled the sword out, his eyes already on his next target, the goblin. His sword cut clean through the monster.

He's making the most of playing without Action Assist, and he prioritizes the

enemies well! This boy must be a veteran fighter!

Candy shuddered with excitement.

The wolf still had some LP remaining, but Shuutarou left it for the time being, running in a zigzag line toward the Goblin Mage. A magic circle appeared in front of the mage. It conjured a wall of fire. Shuutarou didn't even slow down. Instead of running straight at the monster, he approached it diagonally and leaped over the wall without taking damage.

"Skull Crusher!"

Attacking from above, Shuutarou brought the sword down on the Goblin Mage, slicing it in half. When his sword hit the ground, it sent a red shock wave toward the wolf, which had only just recovered enough from the previous hit to stand up.

The Goblin Mage and the wolf burst into polygon shards at the same moment.

Shuutarou slowly stood up, turned toward Candy, and waved with a big smile.

Who is this boy?!

The sequence of moves Shuutarou had showcased made a chill run down Candy's spine. Especially the boy's execution of the second skill, Skull Crusher, told Candy that he was dealing with a terrifyingly talented genius here. It was only at the end of the battle that he understood why Shuutarou had jumped diagonally over the wall of fire—it was so that Skull Crusher would hit two monsters at once, defeating them simultaneously.

Skull Crusher was a swordfighter skill learned at level 30. The skill animation began with a signature leap high into the air. The fall to the ground added momentum to the downward sword strike, which ended with a shock wave being sent forward.

If he'd activated the skill when facing the Goblin Mage head-on, the shock wave wouldn't go in the wolf's direction... He planned it out well.

It might sound simple, but few players managed to maintain their cool in the heat of battle and keep track of multiple targets' location relative to their own,

remembering the exact reach of their skills.

Candy narrowed his eyes. He'd seen what he'd needed to see.

I was going to test him in PvP next, but there's no point. He ticks all the boxes.

When Shuutarou returned to him, Candy clapped. "Perfect score, sweetie. You pass. I'll let your new party know you're coming! Meet them at the destination I just messaged you."

Shuutarou breathed with relief.

"Don't push yourself too hard, listen to the party leader carefully, and follow their instructions. If, at any point, you start to feel uncomfortable in that party, get in touch with me, and I'll pull you out right away, okay?"

"Sure! Thank you, Candy!"

"And don't be a stranger! Come here anytime!"

"Will keep that in mind!"

Shuutarou waved goodbye and left the training grounds. Candy let out a deep sigh, his eyes narrowed in a serious expression. He headed to Crest HQ.

* * * *

When Candy entered the reception area, his guildmates, intimidated by the fierce aura of the unrelenting battle instructor, suddenly remembered they urgently needed to be somewhere else. Their prompt exodus alerted Lumia. She looked up from her work.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"I don't even know where to begin. Where did you find that boy?"

It was highly unusual for Candy to be so agitated. Lumia traced Shuutarou's player info with her fingers.

"So I was right about him being special?"

"*'Special'* doesn't even begin to capture just how talented he is. He's on par with Wataru and Alba. And his gear—it looks plain at first sight, but it's top-class stuff."

“If that’s your assessment, it’s a pity he turned up minutes after Wataru’s squad left for the front line...”

Lumia was about to say she’d have tried to recruit him for the mission, but Candy’s glare stopped her.

“Didn’t he turn down your guild invite?” Candy said. “You shouldn’t try to force him into something he didn’t come here to sign up for.”

“Yes, you’re right, of course.”

Rebuked, Lumia sat back in her chair with a frown.

“And the party you put him in! Party 38! Just tell me why!”

“That wasn’t my choice. Shuutarou was only interested in joining a party with a summoner, and that was the only one I could find.”

Candy groaned. He’d taken a liking to the boy and didn’t feel good about him being put in that particular party.

“I can’t stand that woman. Granted, she’s a capable fighter, but her behavior... If she tries anything funny on Shuutarou, take him out of there at once. That hag’s going to damage Crest’s rep, I’m telling you.” Candy clenched his fists, seething. “We’ve only been generously turning a blind eye to her misdeeds because we’re so desperate for talent at the moment.”

“It’s a difficult world we live in...”

Lumia’s equivocal comment defused Candy.

“Why a summoner, though? Don’t tell me Shuutarou’s thinking of changing away from swordfighter to summoner. Not after he’s gotten this good at swordfighter skills...”

Candy knit his brows, perplexed. Lumia smiled politely at him.

“He surely wouldn’t do that. Getting your level reset back to one in a game where you risk your life every time you go out to battle monsters? It’s not worth the cost.”

“You’d think so, but that boy breaks the mold in so many ways. You’d better let go of your assumptions.”

Lumia slowly nodded.

Changing one's job could be done either through promotion or reclassing.

Promotion allowed a player to move on to a higher-rank job within the same class. It could generally be done after reaching level 30, and after promotion, the player would keep their level and skill mastery from the previous job, also gaining a stat increase and unlocking new skills or spells. Players stuck in *Eternity* would rush to the job office to promote to the next job as soon as they reached level 30.

Reclassing involved changing to an entirely different job class, which reset the player's level and skill mastery back to 1. Some basic skills, such as weapon masteries, were transferable, but practically nobody was willing to lose their hard-earned levels and become very vulnerable again. The exception was players who were so low-level that they didn't have much to lose, but Shuutarou was among the top players in the game. It would be extremely brave, or foolish, of him to reclass.

In the world of *Eternity*, stats determined not only one's chances of survival, but also their social standing and authority.

Lumia sighed again, staring absentmindedly at a guild banner hanging from the ceiling.

"He was a strange boy, wasn't he? You know, I vaguely recall seeing a weapon similar to his sword somewhere..."

She thought about the girl with a Silver Bow, who was now nicknamed Artemis after the hunter goddess. She also had a dagger with a very thin blade in the same fashion as Shuutarou's sword. But maybe they weren't so alike after all?

Without anything else to say, Lumia the receptionist and Candy the battle instructor resumed their usual duties.



One day before Shuutarou visited Crest's HQ...

The bow creaked from tension as the girl pulled the bowstring. It was the only sound at the empty training grounds. The nocked arrow almost touched the girl's cheek a split second before she loosed it. It struck a training dummy right between the eyes. The dummy burst into pixel shards, and it was only then that the girl lowered her bow, her face relaxing.

"Whew..."

It was three fifteen AM. Of course, there'd be nobody around to hear Misaki's sigh.

A month had passed since the threat of the Goblin King's army invading Allistras had been averted. It'd been so peaceful since, it gave players the illusion that they were in a game, not a death trap. Enough time had passed for life in *Eternity* to become the new normal even for the noncombatants, who'd recovered the ability to smile, no longer consumed by anxiety.

Once I finish here, I'll go on patrol. Then I'll catch a couple hours of sleep and get up at seven...

Misaki was making a schedule in her head as she moved to a corner and sat down on her knees on the stone floor. She laid out her bow and arrows in front of her and began to carefully wipe them clean.

While the digital items required replenishing if they had been used up, or fixing if their endurance got low, there was absolutely no need to clean them with a cloth. Not that Misaki would have given up this routine if somebody

pointed that out to her.

I must train hard every day. Success is built upon constant efforts.

The Silver Bow and Arrows, a gift from a person she was deeply indebted to, were almost as precious to her as her own life. She'd been taking great care maintaining them every day since she received them.

Bam! A battle cry and a loud impact sounded from the next training room. Someone else had come to the facility for nighttime practice.

I'd better get back at it, too.

Misaki stored the bow and arrows in her inventory and unsheathed a dagger she carried at her waist. She charged at a training dummy.

"Hyah!"

She punched and kicked, aiming for the weak spots her target would have if they were human, but she didn't do much damage. Her martial arts abilities weren't good enough yet.

Next, she attacked with the dagger. Pixels trickled out of the gash she made in the dummy. She went for a combo attack, finishing with a stab at the heart. After a gush of pixels, the dummy shattered and disappeared.

Misaki rested until her breathing returned to normal. She polished her dagger with the same degree of care as she'd given to the bow before, and then she left the training grounds.

Hmm... Everything's looking normal.

Her Sense Life skill revealed many red dots outside the city, and only blue dots inside. The red dots weren't grouped together. It was going to be another peaceful night in Allistras.

Misaki gazed up at the stone city walls. She could see the faintly glimmering green dome shielding the city—the protective magical barrier was working as usual.

There's no real need for patrols as long as the barrier's active...

She headed back to the inn to catch a few winks of sleep.

A hunting party of six was getting briefed about a quest at Crest's reception area.

"Party 28, let's see... Go to the woods and slay ten demi-wolves. Don't run off on your own, Hayato. Emika, if you get scared, just let your party members know, okay? Daisuke, let me know if you encounter any problems. This task should be well within your ability, but you never know what happens out there in the field."

The receptionist, Lumia, sitting behind the desk at the center of the enormous entrance hall to the guild's headquarters, scrolled through her menu unhurriedly. She accepted the monster hunting quest Party 28 had come to register with her.

The players based in Allistras had been freed from the terror of a looming monster invasion, but Crest members in their gray armor who had enlisted as fighters kept training every day, completing quests from the Adventurers Guild and quests handled by Crest.

The main door opened, and someone entered, weaving her way between groups of chatting people. It was a girl with short chestnut-brown hair, which was longer at the temples. She carried a Silver Bow and Arrows on her back. The hilt of a dagger was poking out of a scabbard at her waist. She was dressed in a black, tight-fitting sleeveless turtleneck sweater paired with an ankle-length skirt, which fluttered as she walked, and steel greaves.

Lumia's face lit up when she saw the girl.

"Good morning, Lumia. Another busy day?"

"Hello, Misaki! Gosh, your outfit's neat!"

A casual observer might have assumed they were sisters happy to reunite after a long time apart, but they weren't related, and they saw each other every day.

"My morning report is as follows. No sign of monsters gathering for an invasion on the plains, in the woods, in the Ilyana Tunnel area, or the Ur Sluice area."

“Good to hear that!”

They had the same exchange daily. Every day, Misaki came to report the results of her scan of the nearby areas in the morning, at lunchtime, and in the evening. She spent the rest of her time training. Although she didn’t report it, she ran an additional scan during her training session at night, too.

Misaki noticed that the entrance hall was particularly crowded that day.

“Ah... It’s Friday.”

“Friday it is! Should I sign you up?”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay, you’re all good! Make sure to arrive at the training grounds by noon!”

Crest, being a large guild, held a weekly event on Fridays at noon—ranked battles.

* * * *

A shadow jumped from one giant tree to another. Suddenly, there was a *twang* and a *swish*, followed by the shadow’s pitiful scream as its arm got pinned by an arrow to a tree, leaving it dangling helplessly.

Swish! Swish! Swish! One arrow hit the target’s chest, the next struck its neck, and the third one stuck right in between the eyes. The opponent’s LP dropped to zero.

“Misaki wins!”

The spectators cheered. Misaki took a deep, long breath, and strapped the wooden bow she’d been using to her back.

“Misaki’s position in the ranking has changed! She’s now number five in the long-ranged category, and twenty-ninth in the overall ranking!”

The trees faded away, revealing a rectangular arena with spectators’ seats on all sides. At the center were Misaki and the archer she’d just defeated.

“There’s no point in even trying to hide. You’re too strong!”

“Ha-ha! Your escape route was too predictable.”

They shook hands, and the crowd cheered again.

Every Friday, Crest held special battles in which parties or individual members competed for the highest rank. It fostered a spirit of healthy competitiveness. High ranks came with more respect, but also a greater sense of duty.

Besides the overall ranking, there were several different categories. Players whose jobs were pure support, such as healers, scored based on their ability to support their allies, technical finesse, and personal traits that were valued for teamwork. Attackers, meanwhile, proved their worth in battles.

“Whoa. She snatched the fifth position from Ika without even breaking a sweat.”

“Here’s a scary thought—she’s not even using her Silver Bow in the ranked battles!”

The guild members were discussing Misaki’s battle with interest.

Ranked battles were set up so that level differences didn’t have much of an effect, but strong weapons could give players quite an advantage.

“Aw. I wanted to see our Artemis shoot arrows from her famous Silver Bow.”

“Heh. I’m not planning on using that bow in ranked battles ever! And it’s not because I want to have an excuse for when I lose,” Misaki told her fan, smiling.

“Why give yourself that handicap, though?” her opponent asked.

Misaki was breezing through the rankings, but she hadn’t been unbeatable. Maybe she would have won some of those other battles if she’d used the Silver Bow or the Fang Dagger, but she preferred to rely on her skill rather than the strength of her weapons.

Misaki smiled shyly, scratching her cheek. “Well, I take part in the ranked battles to see if I’ve made any progress with my training. If I was beating my rivals only because my weapons were stronger than theirs, that would be pointless for me.”

“This way, I can’t even blame my defeat on your weapon!” her opponent groused, feeling out of her league.

Back at the Crest reception desk...

“Solo or Party?”

After the ranked battles, Misaki came straight to pick up a new quest.

“Party. I’d like to go outside. Are there any parties waiting for one more member?”

“I’ll check. Won’t be a moment...”

Lumia scrolled through her menu until she found a party she thought Misaki would like. A semitransparent pop-up window appeared in front of Misaki, detailing the Party Quest and listing party members already signed up for it.

Request: Slay the Goblin Thieves!

From: Peddler Haunz

Time Limit: 48:00:00

Details: I was traveling to Emaro through Ur Sluice when a band of Goblin Thieves attacked me! They stole my valuable wares! Please, can somebody kill the goblins and retrieve my merchandise? (Coordinates X: 1,705, Y: 497, Z: 620)

Kill Monsters: Goblin Thief (0/10)

Retrieve Items: Haunz’s merchandise (0/5)

Reward: 14,000G, 10,000 EXP

Participants: 5/6

Makoto (L) Heavy Warrior Level 36

Shoukichi Swordfighter Level 17

Kettle	Wizard	Level 15
Barbara	Acolyte	Level 17
Kyouko	Archer	Level 16

Killing goblins in the Ur Sluice area? I’ve never been there before... The party leader’s strong, though, so we should be okay.

Misaki accepted the Party Quest. A party member list appeared on the bottom right of her field of view. With her added, it was now full.

“If your party’s not in the waiting room, try checking the armory!” Lumia suggested.

“Okay! I’ll go find them, thanks!”

Lumia smiled at Misaki, who headed toward the armory, where the yellow dots marking her party members were displayed on her minimap.

The enormous armory was located within Crest headquarters. Many players with crafter jobs worked there. An additional perk of being in the guild, besides the tax exemption, was that the crafters offered a hefty discount to their guildmates on the equipment they made.

Opposite the armory was the armor shop, and next to it there was a shop for accessories, a general store, an apothecary, a restaurant, and an inn. Conveniently, the guild had the most important facilities right there within their grounds.

The mouthwatering scent of grilled meat tickled Misaki’s nostrils. She glanced over at the restaurant, but she quickly lost interest and kept on walking.

One of *Eternity’s* selling points was that it engaged all five senses. Food had taste and aroma in the game, but it didn’t make players feel full. They also didn’t experience hunger. Food was seen as something consumed either for entertainment or for the buffs it offered.

A world without hunger or thirst might sound wonderful, but only until you considered why nobody experienced those needs—only the players’ minds

were made to think they were inhabiting the game world, while their physical bodies were being kept alive in the real world.

Fatigue and pain were experienced in the same way as in the real world, though. The same went for drowsiness. The dominant theory among the players was that these limitations were the Mother AI's way of slowing down their progress in the game.

Misaki entered the cavernous weapon store. It was pretty crowded, but Misaki could see on her minimap where her party members were gathered. And she found them—a man examining an item on sale with an uncertain expression on his face, and several youngsters around him.

“Just buy it, Makoto!”

“And use up my fun-times fund?”

“‘Fun times,’ eh? Gross. Have some self-respect and give that up!”

“Hey now, don't be so judgmental.”

Misaki approached the group from behind. “Hello, Party 21!”

They all turned as one and saw the next most famous person in the guild after Wataru, Alba, and Flamme smiling at them.

“M-Misaki? Wait a moment... You're in our party?!”

“Aah, right. Forgot I left the joining permission on.”

“How lucky are we?!”

Everyone apart from the man called Makoto stared at Misaki with huge eyes. She nodded in greeting, feeling a bit awkward.

By then, everyone in Crest knew about Misaki's unique skill, Sense Life. She was famous for her role in the early detection of the budding monster invasion that had threatened to destroy the city, and there was no guildmate who wouldn't instantly recognize her.

The magical barrier around Allistras ensured the city's safety, but many believed that it was thanks to Misaki diligently looking out for signs of danger that they could enjoy a peaceful life. To some, Misaki was like a goddess—their

ever-watchful guardian with graceful features, armed with a Silver Bow—and they'd taken to referring to her as Artemis between themselves.

Being treated like a celebrity almost everywhere she went only made Misaki feel out of place.

“What are you looking to buy?” she asked to break the ice.

The archer girl, Kyouko, replied hesitantly, “W-we’ve been trying to convince the party leader to get a new shield! A shield is the tank’s tool of the trade, right? He should really keep upgrading his whenever he can.”

“Shields sure are important, but I don’t have a fortune to spend on shields.”

“That’s why we’re going to chip in!”

“A grown man in debt to kids? I’d die of shame, and you’d have no tank.”

“Get over it and let us buy you the shield!”

Makoto’s party members weren’t giving up.

Tanks had a pivotal role in parties. They were more valuable than anyone else, especially since real death had been enabled in the game. Lose all your life points, and you’re dead. Tanks brushed with death more often than any other players. Their job was also more stressful; holding off multiple enemies at once, including the occasional giant monsters, and getting directly hit by their attacks certainly had its toll on mental health. Because tanks were constantly being hit, they were still at greater risk than their back-line party members—even tanks with high stats.

Tanking wasn’t an easy job, but a party wasn’t viable without a tank—which was why Crest had only forty PvE parties despite having over four thousand guild members.

Since the game stopped being just a game, the number of tanks had been decreasing. And that was a huge problem not only for Crest, but for all players. It was inevitable, as practically nobody wanted to change to a tank class, and it would be unethical to try to persuade others to switch to such a deadly job.

In light of that, Makoto, Party 21’s cheerleader and tank who made anyone feel welcome, regardless of their age, was a cherished member of the party—

never mind that he spent his days off cavorting in a brothel. There was more to his credit—he'd been among the fighters who stopped the monster invasion, too.

Misaki looked at the tower shield on Makoto's back. "What's the recommended level for your current shield, Makoto?"

"It's...twenty. Okay, okay! You win, guys! I'll buy a new shield, but I'm not borrowing a broken penny from any of you! Use your spare change for your own gear!"

Makoto scratched his head and opened the store menu to pay for the better tower shield on display in front of him. The other party members scattered around the store, checking if there were any new weapons they could afford for themselves. Only Misaki stayed with Makoto.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to pressure you."

"No pressure at all. You made a good point—people won't feel safe around a level thirty-six tank using level-twenty gear."

The shield on the wooden store shelf disappeared, reappearing on Makoto's back. He turned to Misaki, dropping his shoulders.

"Probably won't even need that shield with you in the party, though. Heard you're crazy strong."

"I...got lucky, that's all. I'm still learning."

"That humble attitude will win people over. Folks who gain power without deserving it start throwing their weight around like they're the boss now. Wouldn't want to put my life in their hands."

They chatted for a while until the other members returned. When everyone was back, Misaki properly introduced herself.

"I'm Misaki. I'm not a permanent member of any party. Thank you for letting me join you! I'm a level-twenty-nine archer."

She bowed her head.

The other members took turns introducing themselves, the youngest first. The cheerful young boy raised his hand.

“I’m Shoukichi! I’m a swordfighter now, and I’m going to change to a dual blade! I’m almost level eighteen!”

He carried two swords that were crossed at his back. It occurred to Misaki that he was the same height as another boy she knew who’d saved her life. For a moment, she froze, but a smile soon returned to her face.

“Nice to meet you!” she said to him, bowing again.

It couldn’t be *him*, or at least, that’s what she told herself.

“And I’m Kettle! Aspiring to start specializing in fire magic as a red mage in the future! I’m only level fifteen, so sorry if I just get in the way!”

The bespectacled girl in a pointy hat bowed. Her red cape was very cute, and it suited her well. She seemed like the quiet type, and Misaki could scarcely imagine her in battle, but she was impressed that both she and Shoukichi were already thinking about what to become in the future.

“M-my name’s Kyouko, and I’m an archer. W-would it be okay if I asked you about some things later? About how to use a bow better, and how to fight with a dagger?”

“Yes, of course!”

“Oh! Thank you so much!”

The black-haired archer girl bowed deeply. She idolized Misaki, admiring her pursuit of perfection through constant training. She’d never have guessed she’d meet her hero in person as a party member, and she was so overwhelmed that she’d stuttered.

“I’m Barbara, the acolyte. Our tank’s so good that I don’t have much work to do in this party, but when I do, I do it well.”

Barbara was a twenty-eight-year-old woman with wavy brown hair. Misaki looked up to confident women who were older than her, but before, she had only really interacted with Flamme and Lumia, who were very close to her age. It felt fresh to her to be around Barbara.

“I’m Makoto, the party leader and tank. I’m level thirty-six, which puts me in Crest’s top ten! Feel free to call me Mako.”

“Nobody calls you that!”

Makoto chuckled, and Shoukichi kicked his shin. The game’s system blocked the kick, but nonetheless, Makoto shouted, “Ow!” feigning an injury with much delight.

This party has a good vibe, Misaki thought. It felt like being with family. She couldn’t help smiling.

* * * *

Ur Sluice was a giant floodgate built to alter the flow of a river that used to run through a nearby town. Once cherished for protecting the town from damage from seawater carried by the tidal river, it had fallen into disrepair after the town had been invaded by monsters, forcing the survivors to flee.

The once awe-inspiring sluice still dominated the landscape, even though the abandoned town had fallen into ruin. Dirty green goblins made the dilapidated town their own, fiercely guarding their territory. Ur Sluice became quite a dangerous area to venture into.

“You did it again, Shoukichi! Get your act together!”

“Oops, sorry!”

Toad-like croaking resonated around Party 21, who were engaged in battle in front of an abandoned inn.

“Kettle!” Makoto called. “Don’t use AoEs when there are less than three monsters! It’s a waste of MP, and you may draw aggro!”

A look of surprise flashed across Misaki’s face even as she stayed focused on the two goblins approaching her. Makoto was busy tanking, but despite that, he was giving spot-on instructions to his younger party members, who were standing a little way behind him.

“Rapid Shot!”

Misaki’s skill activated, sending forward a fast volley of five arrows. Two of them stuck deep into the goblins’ legs. They shrieked piercingly.

“Cloak of Healing on Shoukichi.”

After the acolyte cast an autoregen spell on the young swordfighter, Makoto exchanged a quick look with Misaki. She swiftly nocked and loosed a wooden arrow, and then released another one in close succession. They hit the goblins square in the foreheads, shattering on impact. The goblins got pushed back, croaking their last as they burst into pixel shards with an explosive sound.

After a victory jingle, the battle-results screen popped up in front of each party member.

They started walking again.

“Shoukichi! You got greedy there again, trying to get another attack in. Are you looking to get hurt? It’s more work for Barbara, too. Keep that in mind.”

“It had only eight percent left, so I couldn’t resist... Sorry...”

“Kettle, I hope you’ll keep in mind what I said earlier. Using an AoE to be on the safe side when you’re not sure your spells will hit makes sense, but it’s a huge peeve for lots of tanks to lose aggro because of that. If we’re fighting only one or two monsters, use a single-target spell on the one I’m currently targeting, okay?”

“Okay. Sorry...”

Makoto’s reprimands were justified, and his tone was soft, so as not to make his party members feel bad. He turned to Misaki next, looking at her with astonishment.

“Misaki, your attacks are brutal. And your accuracy—it’s like you’re using homing missiles.”

“You’re amazing, Misaki! You’re going to get really battle-experienced way ahead of our little ones,” Barbara added.

Misaki smiled uncomfortably. She’d realized how extraordinary the equipment from Theodore was when she went to compare it to what was available at the store in town. The Silver Bow in particular had incredible stats, and paired with the arrows Theodore had gifted her as well, it dealt out-of-this-world damage. Misaki had put the arrows in storage and bought sixty stacks of the cheapest arrows available, with a hundred arrows per stack. She’d been using them since.

The arrows were consumable items, but Misaki was at no risk of running out—she was getting overkills on monsters in this area even with the wooden arrows.

“My level’s quite high for this area,” she said, hoping it was a plausible enough explanation.

The party reached a point halfway to their destination. Makoto pointed to a building that, even in its sorry state, was recognizable as a church.

“There’s a good spot to take a break.”

“A break? I want to fight more monsters!”

“Well, they’re gonna get a new lease on life, because I’m tired.”

Shoukichi hung his head, disappointed. Makoto patted him and walked briskly to the church. Shoukichi and Kettle made faces, their fun cut short. They reluctantly let the other archer, Kyouko—who seemed to feel responsible for them—lead them to the church by hand. Barbara followed them, smiling benevolently.

“Makoto’s very protective of his party,” Misaki told her. “I see he doesn’t hesitate to make unpopular decisions if it’s for the sake of everyone’s safety.”

“Oh, yes. If only the little ones noticed that he’s been protecting them outside battles, too.”

Children could be so oblivious of the efforts others made for them.

Shoukichi and Kettle were maybe twelve years old. Makoto, who was turning thirty-four that year, could plausibly have children that age. Getting trapped in a deadly game while he still had most of his life ahead of him was awful, but it was even more heartbreaking to think of the child players in the same situation. Makoto had created Party 21 out of concern for Shoukichi and Kettle, who were among the most reckless youngsters in Crest. He was protective of them, perhaps even overly so. The children, who mistakenly considered themselves fully independent, found that quite frustrating. Barbara wished they had a little more self-awareness.

The inside of the church looked as neglected as the outside, but there were

no signs of the goblins having lived there.

Do monsters not spawn in churches? Come to think of it, there are safe spots on field maps, too.

Misaki had learned something new. Her knowledge of the world beyond Allistras was still very limited. She craned her neck this way and that, looking at the church decor with interest.

Meanwhile, the other party members gathered at the center of the church hall. With a practiced manner, Barbara spread a blanket and laid out food for everyone. The dishes appeared among glimmering polygons. Steam was rising from the bowls, as if the food had just been cooked. It smelled comforting, somehow.

“Sorry,” said Barbara, “it’s just a simple stew with bread today.”

“What, no beef?” Makoto groused.

“You eat what you’re given, or you don’t eat at all” was Barbara’s sharp reply.

“Sorry, sorry,” Makoto apologized, reaching for the bread.

“Not so fast, Makoto!”

This time, it was Kyouko who raised her voice.

“Where are your manners?” she asked.

“Right... Thank you for the food!”

“That’s better.”

Good-natured laughter echoed off the church walls. Misaki smiled, thinking it was heartening that happy moments could be found even in this cruel world. She thanked Barbara for the food and took a bite of the bread. It had that freshly baked scent, a crunchy crust, and a delicious, slightly salty flavor.

“It’s so good!”

“Well, I didn’t make it. I bought it from the guild’s restaurant,” Barbara said with a smile.

The white stew was also very good. Misaki sat a little away from the rest of the group and ate it while scanning the surroundings with her Sense Life skill

and cleaning her bow.

Thank you for serving me well today.

It'd gotten to the point that she had to clean her bow after every use, or she'd feel helplessly anxious. She was becoming dependent on following her daily routine.

Kyouko noticed what Misaki was doing and came over with sparkles in her eyes.

"Do you service your weapon every day?"

"I wouldn't call it that! I just clean it out of a sense of gratitude for protecting me."

"This bow's very important to you, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's a gift from someone I owe a lot to."

Misaki ran her fingers along the bow lovingly, like a mother stroking a child. She made for such a pretty picture that Kyouko's heart skipped a beat as she looked on, mesmerized.

No wonder they call her Artemis! She is a goddess!

* * * *

The party stopped in front of a building that looked to have been a stable. There was rotten straw on the floor, and a pile of broken animal bones. Several goblins in dirty hoods, with large sheets of fabric worn as capes, were milling around.

Shoukichi got very excited. "We found them! The Goblin Thieves!"

"There are nine... No, ten. All ten are here."

Having counted the enemies, Makoto got his shield ready and shot a glance at the party members behind him.

A horse cart was lying on its side next to the stable—no doubt belonging to the merchant who was the quest giver. The coordinates listed in the quest description matched.

The party attacked the goblins.

According to the Ur Sluice Monster Guide, Goblin Thieves possessed no production skills at all—they obtained items solely through theft. They stole food and valuables not only from humans, but also from all manner of creatures. Unlike most goblins, whose skin was green, Goblin Thieves were blue. They always carried large sacks with them, into which they stuffed their loot.

An interesting bit of trivia—during the beta, players would hunt down Goblin Thieves on the off chance of getting items from them that were not normally obtainable in the beginning areas of the game.

The party members exchanged looks and raised their weapons.

“Charge!”

Makoto quickly closed the distance to the goblins. It was only then that they noticed him, and they aimed their weapons at him.

“Protection and Cloak of Healing on Makoto!”

Barbara’s buff and regen skill kicked into effect just before Makoto reached the first of the goblins, bashing it with his shield. After the goblin’s bones broke with a horrific sound, it burst into pixel shards. Five goblins that had been idle before joined the battle now, bringing up the number Makoto was tanking to nine.

“Hi-yah!”

Shoukichi’s swords lit up red, and he jumped in with a combo attack. The young swordfighter was already wielding two one-handed swords in preparation for changing to a dual blade once he hit level 30. It was a job specializing in dealing high damage but had poor defense. Before advancing to it, it was essential that Shoukichi learn to know his limits and not rush headfirst into danger.

“That’s enough of them for an AoE, right? Here comes...Fire Vortex!”

Flames shot out from Kettle’s magic rod, twisting and coiling as if alive. They grew into a spinning vortex of flames, which descended on the Goblin Thieves.

There was no friendly fire in *Eternity*—allies such as party members or players participating in a raid on the same side were unable to hurt one another with their attacks. That’s why neither Makoto nor Shoukichi showed any reaction to the inferno they were caught in the middle of.

If the Mother AI altered the code to enable friendly fire, all hell would break loose.

“Multistrike!”

“Rapid Shot!”

Kyouko pulled out a big bunch of arrows from her quiver. Thanks to Action Assist, her movements from that point became automatic, following the scripted motions of the skill she activated. Arrows rained down on the Goblin Thieves.

The group of monsters hit by both the flames and arrows was quickly losing LP, and before long, they were dead. Misaki packed two arrows in the chest of each of the two goblins that had sneaked away. All had been defeated. The dead bodies disappeared, leaving behind five shining chests.

* * * *

The party members picked up the monster drops and were checking what they got. As a general rule, battle spoils went to whichever battle participant picked them up first, but it was often the case in Crest—and always in Makoto’s Party 21—that party members would share the loot, distributing the items so that everyone got what was best for them.

“We got some resources, and a rare dagger, too.”

The dagger was among the items picked up by Makoto. He held it in his hand, examining the blade, which emanated a pale-blue glow.

“...”

Barbara opened her mouth as if to say something, but then she closed it again. Makoto pretended not to notice. He glanced at the others.

“This would be of most use to either Misaki or Kyouko.”

“Oh, no, I’m fine!” Misaki quickly turned down the offer. “I’m only a temporary party member, and I already have a dagger I like.”

Makoto handed the dagger to Kyouko. She stared at it for a while before looking up at Makoto uncertainly.

“So...it’s mine?”

“You’re so lucky, Kyouko! Wish I got something like that.”

Besides Shoukichi, jealous because the rare drop wasn’t compatible with his job, nobody made a comment. Their party was always sharing drops fairly, choosing who got what based on how much use it had to them, so they were happy with the dagger going to Kyouko.



“Oh, wow! I can equip it at my level, and it comes with a skill, Vital Strike!”

“Nice! You got a really good one, huh?”

Kyouko was beside herself with joy at receiving a weapon with a skill. The other party members clapped.

Skills came in different types. Every player had their own unique skill, then there were job skills and, finally, equipment skills.

The party had been using their job skills in the last battle, for example. As an archer, Misaki had access to skills such as Archery, Shieldbearing, One-Handed Sword Mastery, Throwing, Eagle Eye, Martial Arts, Eye for Weakness, Special Attack, Rapid Shot, and Multistrike.

Every skill had its own mastery level. Players could learn new skills by raising their player level, but raising skill mastery was also important for increasing skill power and accuracy and even unlocking additional effects. Skill mastery went from zero to one hundred. The higher it was, the more damage the skill could deal with fewer misses, or the more the casting time was reduced.

Skill mastery was raised simply by using the skill. Higher mastery could make more of a difference to a player's performance than them getting a few levels.

Misaki's skill mastery was relatively high—she slept little, spending almost all her time training. But in her case, the amazing power of her attacks was mostly due to the weapons from Theodore.

Skills that came with equipment had to be leveled up before they were usable at all. It was well worth it, though. Gaining additional skills, besides the player's unique skill and job skills, gave them an advantage in battle.

Party 21 completed their quest. According to Makoto's map, a little farther down the way was a boss room. The recommended level for that boss was 12, and the party's average level was well beyond that. If they decided to try to defeat it, they shouldn't have any trouble.

“All righty. Let's head back.”

“Whaaat?! Not before we kill the boss!” shouted Shoukichi.

“That wasn't part of the plan. If you want to fight the boss, we'll have to come

again.”

“But I didn’t even gain one level yet!” Kettle added to the protest.

Makoto wasn’t going to relent, though. “We’ll fight the boss when you’re level twenty.”

“No fair...”

The two kids didn’t sulk for long. Young and impulsive as they might be, after some insistence, they did listen to reason.

* * * *

“I made it to level nineteen somehow before we left the area!”

“Glad you got it, Shoukichi!”

“You have your leader to thank for it—I plan these things well.”

“And Misaki’s level thirty now. Congrats!”

Both Misaki and Shoukichi had leveled up while killing the goblins they encountered on the way back. Misaki thought Shoukichi’s unadulterated joy was cute.

Getting stronger lowered the risk of death. Misaki suspected that everyone except Kettle was really happy about Shoukichi’s level-up, although they played it cool.

I’m level thirty already...

Misaki looked at her status screen, reflecting on how much had changed for her in the span of a month—owing to a very lucky encounter, she found the strength to live in this world and went from a level-1 shut-in to a capable fighter.

At level 30, she could advance to a higher-rank job. This would open up more options for her in battles, which translated to being stronger.

I’ll drop by the job office tonight...

Misaki closed her status screen.

The party made it back to Allistras.

“Hey, look. There’s something going on there,” said Kettle, pointing right after they’d passed through the city gate.

A large crowd was standing outside Crest headquarters. It’d been perfectly peaceful for a while, and it was probably nothing to worry about, but Misaki suddenly felt a knot in her stomach.

Why were all those people gathered outside? The party was just about to ask one of the people standing around, when a man at the center of the group called out loudly.

“Alba and I will head for the front line tomorrow!”

They recognized the voice—it was Wataru.

After the monster invasion was nipped in the bud—earning Crest some facilities to use as its own headquarters in the city—it didn’t take long for the guild’s leadership to put measures in place to ensure comfortable living standards for both new guild members and noncombatants. Once that was done, they moved to Emaro, using it as their base before progressing to Calloah Castle Town, where they’d been stationed recently. It was unusual to see any of them in Allistras.

Wataru was making a speech in his clear, strong voice. The gathered citizens listened attentively, and so did Party 21.

“Over the last month, we’ve established a safe route from Allistras to Calloah, securing new habitable areas. We can now enjoy a certain degree of stability, especially compared with when we were just starting out. Lately, our income has begun to exceed our running costs, including the upkeep of the magical barrier protecting the city. With the current systems in place, the risk of an invasion is zero.”

The crowd cheered.

The magical barrier was activated for a week at a time. Until Wataru’s announcement, the citizens couldn’t be sure whether the guild could afford activating it for another week after it expired, but now their fears had been put to rest.

Everyone fell silent again as Wataru continued in his stately voice.

“Our initial goal was to secure Allistras, Emaro, and Calloah as safe residential areas, and this goal has now been reached. Tomorrow morning, my progression team will depart for our frontier base, Fort Sandras!”

A few people in the crowd protested at that.

“The bunch at the frontier abandoned us without a second thought. If all they care about is progression, why not stay where it’s safe and leave everything to them?”

“I won’t feel so safe anymore without you here...”

“Don’t join the frontier! My jerk of an ex-boyfriend’s there, and the only thing I want for him is to die the sad death he deserves!”

There were other players who felt abandoned by their friends and former party members who’d gone off to progress to new areas of the game. Here and there, people were raising hands to comment on why they thought it was a bad idea for Wataru to join the frontier, but their protests had no effect on him.

“We don’t stand to gain anything from simply waiting. If the frontline fighters died, who would complete the objective needed for our release? Life on the front line isn’t easy. Progressing through new areas is extremely dangerous, and the players who undertook this task risk their lives every day.”

Discontented voices died away.

“Our being locked in the game isn’t like a natural disaster, which we only need to wait out. Think of it more as a disease, which will only get worse unless we obtain the cure! The Mother AI gave us a deadline in her message to us, and if it’s true, then our safety here is only temporary. Our release back to the real world won’t just happen—we have to make it happen—and this is why my team and I are going to join the frontier!”

The crowd clapped in appreciation of Wataru’s bravery and unshakable resolve. Wataru’s speech stirred Misaki, although she was also feeling mildly peeved off by the attitude some people had, expecting others to do everything for them.

“If anyone wants to go with us, meet me tomorrow at eight AM in front of Crest’s headquarters! We welcome players of any job, but for the sake of

safety, you must be at least level thirty to join us. This will be Crest's first official deployment to the frontier. From now on, we'll be recruiting frontier fighters in all three towns once a month. Don't make the decision to join us lightly—only do so if you accept that it will put you at more risk than you're likely to encounter anywhere else."

Misaki's pulse quickened. She met the level requirement. Powerlessly waiting for others to avert danger while sheltering at an inn had been torture to Misaki. Now she could actually do something to assist Wataru. The thought made her extremely happy.

* * * *

Party 21 was celebrating their successful quest completion at a restaurant called Tree of Plenty within Crest's headquarters. Makoto and Barbara were having alcoholic drinks while the minors sipped juice. They were all smacking their lips over the various fish dishes arriving one after another.

"My treat! Enjoy! Won't fill up your tums, but they sure taste good. Gobble up a big meal, take a massive dump, and sleep like a log—that's happiness, ain't it?"

Flushed, Barbara hit Makoto, who was just as flushed, with an empty bottle of whatever it was they were drinking.

"Don't talk about taking a dump while we're eating! Anyway, that's not even possible in this world."

A SYSTEM BLOCK notification flashed in the air as the bottle shattered into polygon shards and disappeared. The nondrinking youngsters found the scene hilarious, and a cheerful mood of revelry swept through the party.

While eating food in *Eternity* wasn't much of a satisfying experience, consuming alcohol got players drunk just like in the real world. Intoxication from alcohol was similar to other status effects, and it could be instantly cured with recovery magic. Barbara the acolyte, though, was emptying one glass after another at such a fast pace that it was highly unlikely she'd be able to use her Cure skill to sober up anyone.

The group was having a great time. When the clock read 10:36 PM, Shoukichi

and Kettle began to nod off, still holding on to their chopsticks. It was their bedtime.

“Time to leave, isn’t it?” Barbara said to Makoto, her eyes on the sleepy kids.

“Oh, you’re right. Got so caught up talking, I lost track of the time.”

Misaki and Kyouko were also surprised at how late it was. Misaki, who’d been spending all her time training, had been really starved for conversation.

Barbara put down her glass, narrowing her eyes.

“You’ll go, won’t you?” she asked Misaki. “To the front line.”

Misaki swirled the ice in her glass, looking at some point in the distance. She gave a slight nod.

“Yes. During the monster invasion, it was killing me that I couldn’t do anything. This is the chance I’d been waiting for.”

“Aw, and here I was thinking we should invite you to stay in our party permanently.”

Misaki whispered an apology, but Barbara reassured her it was okay. The acolyte glanced over at Makoto before speaking again.

“Oh well. Our party’s going to be down to four people.”

“Don’t you mean five?” said Misaki.

“No. Makoto’s going, too. Isn’t that right?”

This time, she gazed straight into Makoto’s eyes. He fidgeted in his chair and took a big gulp of his booze, stalling before answering Barbara’s question.

“Hey now, you must be drunk, Barb. Where’d you get the idea I’d be going to the front line?”

“I cast Cure on myself in between drinks, so I’m perfectly sober; you can be sure of that.”

They stared at each other. Losing the battle of wills, Makoto chuckled and chugged the rest of his drink.

“Okay, so you’re not drunk. Was that a subtle way of telling me to get lost

from this party, then? That stings a little.”

“I don’t want you to get lost. This has been in the cards from the start, hasn’t it?”

Barbara paused, noticing that Makoto had frozen with his empty glass still in his hand. She continued:

“I remember what you said back when monsters were preparing an invasion. You were agonizing over not being able to do much to help. You told me you never wanted to feel like all you did was just get in the way. When we were listening to Wataru’s speech earlier today, I realized this was it; you’d be going with him.”

Kyouko stroked Shoukichi’s and Kettle’s hair as the children slept.

“You’re worried about leaving the kids without your protection,” Kyouko said, “but you shouldn’t limit yourself to being our guardian forever.”

“ ... ”

Makoto pursed his lips.

“The dagger you gave Kyouko today didn’t drop from those goblins,” Barbara said with a knowing smile, toying with the cross pendant resting against her chest. “You bought it. And your infamous ‘habit’ is made up. I’ve known all along.”

“What? Is that true?!”

Kyouko reflexively looked down at the new dagger in a scabbard at her belt.

“Of course it is. What do you think are the odds of us always getting rare drops that just happen to be exactly what one of us needs? As for where Makoto disappears off to every night, it’s the training grounds. Silly of him to lie about that, pretending to be a regular at a brothel.”

Makoto ruffled his hair, looking embarrassed. Misaki wondered if it was him she heard at the training grounds at night.

“Okay, you got me!” Makoto gave up his act, all his secrets coming to light. “But what are you gonna do without me? You need a tank for PvE quests.”

“Suppose you wouldn’t have guessed, but I have many friends and know someone who might fill that role. Party 21 has a pretty good reputation, owing to your expert guidance in training us up.”

In her roundabout way, Barbara was thanking Makoto for everything he’d done for them. He pressed his lips into a line, fighting with himself so as not to show how emotional he was feeling.

“...Thanks for putting up with me for so long,” he eventually managed.

“Don’t be silly. It’s the other way around.”

Barbara gently put her arms around Makoto, who was covering his eyes, his shoulders shaking. Kyouko had also begun to sob quietly, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Here’s a little thank-you-and-farewell gift for you. You deserve something better, but this is what I could get you.”

She sent him something. Makoto opened his inbox. The “little gift” turned out to be a blue necklace and ring, and a labrys—a double-bitted ax—with lions engraved on the blades. The accessories and ax were equippable from level 36.

Barbara giggled, amused by Makoto’s bewildered expression.

“I bought them just before we came here. It’d be poor style to have only the shield be appropriate for your level.”

“Barbara, you shouldn’t have—”

“You’re not going to the front line without decent equipment, Makoto. You’ve got to survive there and drop by to say hello to us every now and again. The kids will be happy to see you.”

Barbara stroked the children’s backs with affection. She then looked at Misaki.

“Misaki, would you mind watching over Makoto, so that he doesn’t hurt himself because of his incurable stubbornness?”

“Hey! Don’t lump me in with Shoukichi! I’m not a child!”

“I’ll take good care of Makoto, Barbara!” said Misaki.

“Wh-what?! Misaki, come on now!” Makoto protested.

Laughter filled the restaurant. Makoto, Barbara, and Kyouko laughed a lot that night, unable to stop, their overflowing emotions needing an outlet.

* * * *

Late at night, when most of the city was sleeping, Misaki made her way to the job office.

“Welcome. Would you like to upgrade to a higher-rank job? Or would you like to reclass?”

“Upgrade,” Misaki replied, glad that NPCs worked around the clock.

The job office was where players could advance to the next job or change to a different class entirely. Some jobs, such as holy knight—chosen by Wataru—had additional requirements to unlock, but most second-rank jobs became available as soon as the player hit level 30.

“As an archer, you can upgrade to one of these four jobs.”

A semitransparent window opened in front of Misaki, with details about her options, how they would affect her stats, and what skills they came with.

Bowmaster

Archers who have proven themselves to be true masters of the bow may advance to bowmasters. Equipping a greatbow allows for sniping targets from a longer distance with outstanding accuracy and high damage. A single arrow loosed by a bowmaster may be more powerful than even a high-rank attack spell.

Promotion Requirements: Reach level 30 as an archer

Skills Learned: Charge Shot, Fan Shot, Barrage, Trick Shot,

Arrow Rain, Soul Arrow, Arms of Steel, Retrieval, Tenacity

Hunter

Silent-footed archers who have brought down a large number of prey may advance to hunters. Hunters specialize in the use of heavy shortbows and daggers. Well-versed in herbalism and skilled in setting traps, they're known for being lone wolves, feeling as much at home in deep forest as elves.

Promotion Requirements: Reach level 30 as an archer, raise Archery to level 30, raise Dagger Mastery to level 30, slay 100 monsters

Skills Learned: Remove Trap, Set Trap, Explosive Arrow, Fire Arrow, Herbalism, Herbal Recovery, Special Attack Boost, Through-Sight, Super Smeller, Fatal Hit

Hermit

Archers with outstanding aptitude and technique may become hermits, whose fighting style combines the use of bows, daggers, and martial arts for powerful, accurate attacks. Hermits are defenders of justice who stay in the shadows, using their refined skills to correct wrongs when the need arises.

Promotion Requirements: Reach level 30 as an archer, raise Dagger Mastery to level 30, raise Martial Arts to level 30, raise Throwing to level 30

Skills Learned: Hide, Verify, Swift-Footed, Sneak, Pierce, Charge Shot, Bleeding Effect, Fatal Strike, Swap Position, Shadow Cloak

Tracker

In a labyrinth, they will be the guide. Trackers weren't made for fighting, but for survival and for seeing beyond the limits of others. They are the beacons shining bright even in the darkest depths of the abyss.

Promotion Requirements: Possess a completely explored map

Skills Learned: Light Beacon, Wide Exploration, Rest Stop, Group Recovery, Evil-Away, Hide, Hearken, Two-Way Signpost, Emergency Return, Desperation

Misaki opened the description of each of the jobs in turn to check the skills they offered, looking for something that would suit her objective.

I'm promoting to get stronger, so tracker's off the menu for me already. Bowmaster's the mainstream choice from what I heard, and it's relatively straightforward. It sounds like hunters are strong solo, which would be a good thing...

She wanted to choose a job that would help her to assist the guild's top people like Wataru and Alba, while also making her self-sufficient and offering an extension to the skills she'd already been working so hard on mastering. One of the jobs seemed to fit the bill perfectly—the hermit.

As a hermit, she'd get a higher stat increase than from the other jobs and a whole array of useful-sounding skills, and she'd be able to improve her dagger skills further.

It was Misaki's ambition to excel at bow, dagger, and martial arts skills. That way, she'd fulfill the promise she'd made to a certain knight.

"I'd like to upgrade to hermit."

"Very well."

No sooner had the NPC acknowledged her request than she felt a change inside her, accompanied by the sensation of being all-powerful. It reminded her of when she suddenly leveled up from 3 to 27 in one go. It was a giddy feeling, but she didn't allow herself to indulge in it.

It's not a power I earned, but a power I've been given.

She reminded herself not to let self-satisfaction set in. To always be modest and thankful. And to be strong.

Misaki left the job office, repeating these instructions to herself in her mind over and over again, as if it were some form of self-hypnosis. She wasn't going back to the inn yet, but to the training grounds.

* * * *

The training grounds would normally be empty this late at night, but Misaki saw that quite a few rooms were in use. Perhaps players going to the front line wanted to get some last-minute training in. Misaki was fine with not having the whole space to herself. She found an empty room and set it up for her practice session.

Hermits seem to be most effective at attacking from an ambush...

She activated Hide and spawned three goblins. They didn't notice her even though she was directly in front of them, and they just milled around croaking.

With Hide, I can get very close to monsters without them attacking. Let's try Sneak and Swift-Footed...

She drew her Fang Dagger and ran at the monsters at a faster pace than ever before, her footsteps almost inaudible.

Suddenly, data was displayed in front of her—the goblins' levels and LP.

I can see their info before even attacking them? That must be the effect of

Verify. Which means that, together with Sense Life, I may be able to scout out the level and LP of bosses, too...

She'd reached one of the goblins and slashed at its neck with her dagger. There was a ripping sound followed by the goblin's brief scream. Its head fell off its body. Eye for Weakness combined with Fatal Strike, making Misaki's attack an overkill.

The remaining two goblins growled.

"They noticed me... So the effect of Hide lasts only until I attack," Misaki said quietly to herself, analyzing the situation coolly.

She reached for her bow this time, quickly activating Pierce while the goblins moved toward her. Her arrow struck one of them in the head and passed through without losing momentum. The last goblin raised its ax to attack Misaki...

"Swap Position!"

Misaki was instantly teleported to the wall, where her last arrow had been stuck, while the arrow took her place. It shattered from the ax blow meant for her. The goblin seemed confused by the disappearance of its original target.

Misaki pulled the bowstring back and held it, watching the Silver Bow begin to glow white.

"Charge Shot in one...two...three...four!"

Misaki released the bowstring. The arrow, now glowing white as well, flew at the last goblin, thrumming while it spun. When it hit, the monster shattered. That was, without doubt, total overkill.

This is promising!

Misaki relaxed, reassured that she'd made the right call promoting to hermit. She felt as if she'd just been dealt a new hand of cards, all of them strong.

I'll have to test my maximum damage on a dummy next. Hmm... I wonder what the damage would be like if I used Silver Arrows instead...

She moved to another practice area. She kept testing her new limits until daybreak.

* * * *

The next morning, a crowd of about thirty people gathered in front of Crest's headquarters. They were all Crest members, in their gray armor, who'd decided to go to the front line after hearing Wataru's speech. Misaki was among them.

Alba rode out to the front on his black horse. Wataru stood beside him.

"Thank you for coming to join us. Our journey will take us through Ilyana Tunnel, Ur Sluice, Emaro Town, Olsrott Monastery, Calloah Castle Town, Kiren Graveyard, Kleeshira Ruins, Ken-Ron Cavern, and Koane Monastery before we reach the current front line of exploration—Fort Sandras, our destination!" Alba addressed the gathered crowd to enthusiastic cheers.

Someone stood next to Misaki. She turned her head and looked up, smiling.

"Good morning, Makoto."

"Morning."

Misaki took note of the blue pendant on his chest. A greatshield and a double-bitted ax were strapped to his back. All his equipment was appropriate for his level.

Makoto must have just said his goodbyes to his party—the corners of his eyes were reddened, but the look in them was that of unshakable resolve.

"It's time. We depart now!"

At Alba's call, the gathered fighters started marching toward the city gate.

"..."

Misaki turned one last time, scanning the city with Sense Life for a purple dot—in vain, as usual. She'd been searching for it every day.

Will I ever see Shuutarou again...?

There was no purple dot on her minimap of Allistras. Misaki gave up and began walking with the others.

* * * *

A certain blond boy was watching the Crest members file out of town.

“My Punio armor’s cool, but Crest’s armor is really stylish, too...”

He entered the guild building right after the group had left.

The boy Misaki was trying to find had been not too far behind her. She didn’t know that Shuutarou had shown up on her map as a purple dot before because the red marker symbolizing a monster—Punio, in armor form—overlapped the blue dot denoting a player. Without Punio on him, Shuutarou was marked with a normal blue dot.

Neither did Shuutarou spot Misaki. She had been standing a bit too far for him to notice her easily in the crowd, and she was wearing a different outfit than he remembered.

And so Shuutarou went into Crest HQ to find a party, while Misaki was marching to the front line. It would be a while before their paths crossed again.



After obtaining Candy's approval, Shuutarou headed to the city gate, where his new party was already waiting next to a horse-drawn cart. There was a friendly-looking young man—an archer. A short middle-aged man armed with a sword and a shield. A woman with long black hair and a staff. And one more person...

"You're late!" yelled a stout middle-aged woman. Shuutarou jogged over to her.

This woman wore a loose-fitting gray dress with armor, and her hair was a striking purple. She looked Shuutarou up and down, as if assessing his value.

"What level are you?" she asked.

"Um, I'm level thirty-one!"

"Really? Hmph. You passed the test, so that's that, I guess."

Shuutarou was a bit taken aback by her attitude. The middle-aged man intervened.

"Er... Rivir, that's not a very nice way to speak to a boy who's only just joined us."

"You got a problem with how I speak? The kid's late, and I'm upset!"

She swore at the man, who shrunk into himself. Shuutarou watched in shock. Elroad spoke to him telepathically.

'How unpleasant. Should I maybe erase her from existence?'

‘No, it’s fine!’

Elroad must have been watching them from above. Monsters weren’t supposed to be able to see through the magical barrier around Allistras. It was quite a chilling thought that some monsters were so powerful that it didn’t work on them—but it was a thought that didn’t occur to Shuutarou, or any other player feeling secure in the city.

The angry woman was yelling even louder now. The two party members who were uninvolved in the argument walked over to Shuutarou.

“Don’t worry about them. They had a fight when we joined, too,” the young man said, looking at Rivir and the older man she was verbally abusing.

Shuutarou nodded, watching them as well.

“So, um, welcome? I’m Kiichi. I’m a level-twenty-five archer.”

Kiichi crouched on one knee to be at the same eye level as Shuutarou. He offered his hand, and Shuutarou happily shook it.

“I’m Yoshino, level twenty-five. I’m an acolyte.”

Yoshino wore a thick black robe with light leather armor over it.

“My name’s Shuutarou, and I’m a level-thirty-one swordfighter!”

“It’s amazing you’re level thirty-one already! I was really surprised when I saw your level in the party window.”

It was only then that Shuutarou thought he should check the party info. He opened his party window.

Taneda (L)	Warrior	Level 23
Kiichi	Archer	Level 25
Yoshino	Acolyte	Level 25
Shuutarou	Swordfighter	Level 31
Rivir	Summoner	Level 28

Rivir is the summoner...

The string of expletives stopped, and the two older party members turned their attention to the newcomer.

“Sorry for not introducing myself earlier. I’m Taneda, warrior, level twenty-three.”

The man was short but plump, wearing full-body armor with his visor up. He carried a buckler on one arm and had a sword at his belt.

“Before the pleasantries,” Rivir said harshly, “let’s make things clear. This is an escort job, to Emaro Town and back. No leaving the party until that’s done, got it?”

Kiichi and Yoshino exchanged looks and gave faint nods. Shuutarou didn’t say anything, puzzled as to why Rivir had asked them that when they’d all joined specifically for this quest. The summoner took his silence as agreement and nodded to herself with satisfaction.

“Glad we’ve got an understanding. I’m Rivir the summoner. The party’s open to recruiting new members. If anyone good applies, I may get them to join.”

She looked from Kiichi to Yoshino. They nodded silently again, resigned to agree to any conditions she put forward.

It didn’t cross Shuutarou’s mind that it was a little unusual that while Taneda and Rivir wore the gray Crest armor, Kiichi and Yoshino didn’t. The reason was that the archer and acolyte had been based in another town until recently. Many people had taken Wataru’s march to the front line as an opportunity to move to another town, but these two, instead of going farther from Allistras, came back. They joined Crest after arriving in the city but hadn’t got their “uniforms” yet. Rivir and Taneda, on the other hand, had been active members of the guild for a long time.

Party 38 had only two permanent members—Taneda (the leader) and Rivir. The others were, so to speak, in their trial period. As for why the number of permanent members had gone down to only two, well, that would become

apparent before long.

Kiichi struck up a conversation with Shuutarou to make him feel more welcome.

“Why did you choose our party, Shuutarou?”

“Because I heard you have a summoner!”

That seemed to stroke Rivir’s ego. “Really? You wanted to party up with me? I knew my special summon would attract attention. Tank summons are very rare, after all!”

She nodded to herself, bursting with pride.

Shuutarou cocked his head quizzically. “Not you specifically. Just any summoner!” he naively explained with an innocent smile.

“Pffft...” Yoshino failed to suppress a laugh.

Rivir’s face turned a bright shade of red. She spat on the ground. “Then go to some other party!”

“? Um, sure, if that’s what you want...”

Taneda defused the situation. “No need to go anywhere except to Emaro, where we’re headed. Why don’t we get on our way?”

Rivir huffed but didn’t object. The atmosphere was tense, but they headed out of the city with the horse pulling the cart.

Out on the grassland, Rivir raised her staff. The party watched in silence; Shuutarou was on the edge of his seat, thrilled to see an actual summoner conjure a real monster...

“Come to me, Iron!” Rivir called.

A human-shaped monster in rusty armor seemed to rise out of the ground. The armor was heavier than what Crest’s fighters wore, but it was very worn-out, with some of the decorative coating rubbed off. Spooky yellow eyes glowed inside the helmet. The creature was breathing noisily like a large animal.

“My companion here is our party’s tank. It’s so convenient to have a tank who never complains and never gets tired. He’s a tool—a fantastically useful one.”

She bashed the monster with her staff, but it didn't react, standing still as before.

Shuutarou was extremely impressed. "Woow! It's a steel giant! A robot!"

"Calm down, kiddo. Can you actually fight, baby boy?"

Shuutarou didn't even register that Rivir was talking to him. His eyes were glued to the battered-armor creature as if it were the coolest thing in the world. It was visually appealing to him, and probably to most boys his age. If it filled the role of a tank, it must have been pretty strong.

Kiichi and Yoshino were also looking at the monster, albeit without an ounce of enthusiasm.

* * * *

The party was approaching Ur Sluice, which they had to pass to reach Emaro. Iron the summon was walking at the front, followed by Kiichi the archer and Rivir the summoner. Yoshino the acolyte and Shuutarou flanked the horse-drawn cart. At the rear was the middle-aged warrior, Taneda.

Thus far, they hadn't gotten into any battles—any minor monsters that came within range were shot dead by Kiichi. The average level of players in the party was far above the requirement for this area, so they didn't need to be on their guard.

"Nothing beats an archer for taking out the trash mobs."

"Ha-ha..." Kiichi laughed dryly, feeling mocked by Rivir but not wanting to argue.

Archers were the best at killing low-level monsters before they had the chance to get close to the party. Casters needed time to cast their spells, but archers could shoot their arrows instantly. Kiichi knew that the task of dealing with trash mobs came with his job.

Shuutarou was quite appreciative of Kiichi's work.

"You have perfect aim!"

"Thanks, but that's just down to Action Assist. It's not like I'm actually good at

aiming.”

A complete novice to archery would have extreme difficulty nocking an arrow and shooting it at a target with any degree of accuracy, but just as with skills, Action Assist made using weapons trivially easy.

While Kiichi brushed off Shuutarou’s praise, it did make him a little happier. Yoshino, too, was feeling more relaxed thanks to Shuutarou and his innocent joyfulness.

“Must be boring for you, Shuutarou. Not getting any action yourself,” she said.

“It’s not boring! Watching Kiichi fight is fun, too.”

“Heh-heh... Good to hear. I think you’ll have to earn your keep once we’re closer to the sluice, though.”

“No problem! I may not look it, but I’m pretty strong!”

“Can’t wait to see you in battle.”

Yoshino and Shuutarou kept chatting amicably. Taneda, at the rear, came closer to them, shooting anxious glances at Rivir.

“Sorry about earlier,” he said lowering his voice to a near whisper. “Rivir’s been in a rotten mood lately.”

“Why do you stay in her party, then?” Yoshino asked quietly. “At your level, you wouldn’t have trouble finding another party.”

Taneda smiled wryly. “Rivir and I are old friends. Things aren’t going so well right now, but we used to have a good time gaming together in the past. I don’t want to abandon her just because she’s being difficult.”

Taneda and Rivir had met in another game and become good friends. At one time, they were even an in-game couple. When Rivir was accepted as a postbeta tester, Taneda bought the game just so that they could play with one another. They’d been in a party together since before the game locked them in and supported each other through the initial confusion and despair. When Rivir got Iron, a rare tank-type monster, through a random summoning, she and Taneda danced for joy.

“Then she wanted to focus on leveling up. This or that party would want her, and she’d train with them. Not only did she overtake me, but she also changed in the process. It’s like I don’t really know her anymore.”

Owing to her sheer luck in getting Iron as a summon, Rivir rose to the status of the most wanted summoner in the game.

Taneda tiredly glanced over at Rivir, who said something to Kiichi and cackled.

“With the way she acts now, we’re struggling to keep the same party members for long,” said Taneda. “We’ve had people drop out in the middle of a quest many times. She treats her summon as the answer to all problems...”

Yoshino listened silently as Taneda kept droning on about his past with Rivir. Shuutarou got a bit bored, feeling left out of the conversation. He opened the party screen to distract himself.

Taneda (L)	Warrior	Level 23
Kiichi	Archer	Level 25
Yoshino	Acolyte	Level 25
Shuutarou	Swordfighter	Level 31
Rivir	Summoner	Level 28
+AcM Iron		

“What does ‘AcM’ stand for?”

Shuutarou had never seen an abbreviation like that. Rivir heard him. She sighed theatrically, shaking her head.

“So ignorant.”

It didn’t seem like she was going to explain anything, though. It was Yoshino who sighed this time.

“Our master summoner doesn’t want to share her wisdom, so I’ll tell you. It stands for *accompanying monster*. It means the monster is an ally, serving one of the party members.”

Shuutarou nodded, taking it all in. “Is it the same for tamers’ monsters?”

“Yeah, from what I could see in other parties.”

This was valuable intel for Shuutarou. If he could only find a way to make his Evil Overlords’ names display like that, he’d be able to take them along without anyone asking questions.

Tamers’ beasts and summoners’ summons were basically monsters that fought as allies because of their special contract with their master. The fact that they weren’t players was made clear where their name was displayed.

Shuutarou looked up at Iron. The armored giant walked with heavy footsteps, its armor rattling. The name tag above its head read ACM: IRON.

“So why, Shuutarou, did you want to be in a party with a summoner?” asked Taneda.

“Because I want to become a summoner, too!” the boy answered frankly.

“Hold up. But you’re a swordfighter! And you’re already level thirty-one!”

“Yes, but I want to be a summoner.”

“You do know that it’ll reset your level, right? And your skill masteries?”

“I’ll just level them up again.”

“He doesn’t mind starting back from scratch...?” Taneda muttered to himself. “It sounds risky to me, but it’s the boy’s choice, and it should be respected...”

From Shuutarou’s point of view, his top priority was making it possible for the Overlords and his pet slime to accompany him. He’d be safer with them even if he did lose all his levels and masteries, and they’d also feel more secure in the knowledge they could protect him outside the castle.

Besides, he’d keep his weapon skill masteries, and the practical experience gained through fighting lessons with Bertrand couldn’t be taken away from him.

Not to mention, Shuutarou had gained his levels without any real effort. As

such, he wouldn't consider it a huge loss to be reset to level 1.

Other players would be suspicious if my monster friends don't have AcM before their names. I need to find a way to add that before their name tags.

Shuutarou was beginning to identify challenges he'd have to overcome for his plan to succeed.

A ruined town came into view—they'd reached Ur Sluice. The grand, timeworn sluice overlooking the abandoned town made for a poignant sight. The party didn't linger to marvel at it, but no sooner had they made a move than a group of four goblins came tumbling in to block their way.

"Iron, go!" Rivir ordered her summon.

The rusty hunk of metal waddled off toward the goblins, which immediately started pummeling it.

Yoshino cast a protective spell. *"Barrier on Iron!"*

"Hey! Nobody asked you to do that," River chided, glaring at Yoshino. "Do some fighting instead of wasting buffs on a summon. He doesn't feel pain, and if he dies, I'll just resummon him."

Rivir wasn't doing any fighting, either; she was idly watching without even picking up her staff.

Taneda charged at the monsters and Kiichi started loosing arrows at them. Everyone in the party was above level 20, so the goblins were a piece of cake. All the goblins were dead before Shuutarou got the chance to draw his sword.

"Let's go already," Rivir said, short of patience.

She walked off while Iron was still standing among the remnants of the pixel shards that used to be goblins. It was only a piece of code itself, and yet it looked so forlorn, existing solely to serve its master without ever getting even a word of praise.

Yoshino bit her lip and cast a restorative spell. *"Heal on Iron!"*

Iron was bathed in a green light, and its slightly depleted LP bar refilled.

"Think that counts as participating in the battle?" Rivir snorted with

contempt, walking back to Yoshino and Shuutarou. “You got some loot from that battle, didn’t you? Hand it over.”

“Excuse me?” said Yoshino. “Everyone in the party gets battle rewards...”

“You didn’t fight, though. I own the tank, so I’ve earned the rewards. Gold, items, whatever you got there—give it to me now.”

Rivir extorted the rewards from them. Shuutarou assumed it was some protocol he hadn’t heard about before, so he didn’t protest, but Yoshino didn’t look happy.

“What? You got something to say to me?” Rivir asked waspishly.

“No, not really...”

Yoshino was too intimidated to talk back.

“You need to stop doing that, Rivir,” Taneda said, getting fed up.

“Stop taking what rightfully belongs to me? Why don’t you share your loot with them then, if you’re such a bleeding heart?”

Even her old friend had no influence on her.

Kiichi was inwardly cursing himself for joining this party. He didn’t say anything, but he felt as if he’d been conned.

“Honestly, we don’t even need a healer in this party. It’s only because of that bullheaded instructor making it a rule to have one!” Rivir spat, running her hand through her hair. Suddenly, she clapped her hands. “Ah, right! Forgot to mention: Since you can’t take Party Quests without a tank, and I provide the tank, fifty percent of the quest reward will go to me.”

Yoshino gasped in disbelief. “What?! I’ve never heard of arrangements like that! Tanks get special treatment, but this is—”

“Don’t like it, you’re welcome to leave. At level twenty-five, you can surely make it back to the city on your own. Rumors say there’s a player killer hiding out somewhere around, though.” Rivir mockingly waved goodbye.

Lumia and Candy had their misgivings about Rivir, and for good reason. Her acquiring Iron via a random summoning was nothing short of a miracle. With

high LP and VIT, the monster was usable as a tank. Rivir had turned into an aggressive bully since getting her summon.

Using Iron as a meat shield allowed Rivir to power through levels, which only further fed her superiority complex.

Recently, she'd been refusing to fairly share quest rewards with her party members, and if anyone objected, she'd threaten to kick them from the party then and there. To make sure nobody would report her to Crest's officers, she vouched she'd make life hell for anyone who tried to snitch on her. Led to believe that reporting her and demanding she be punished would carry a risk, her victims chose to put up with her bullying until the end of the quest they were doing, then stay clear of her. Because of that, Rivir had gone unpunished thus far.

Crest's parties were given numbers based on their capability, with Party 1 being the most skilled. Taneda and Rivir's party had dropped to number 38, but they were still relatively well esteemed because of Rivir's summon.

Playing a tank meant putting one's life in extreme danger each and every time the party battled monsters. Being able to fill that role in a party with a summon that neither felt pain nor permanently died was an enormous advantage. It was this advantage that secured Rivir a place in the guild despite the increase in whisperings about how she should be avoided.

Yoshino and Kiichi exchanged looks. They nodded at each other and turned to Shuutarou.

"Shuutarou, want to leave with us? Let's go back and find another party."

"Nah," he replied with a smile. "I'll stay a bit longer!"

He wasn't interested in getting experience points, gold, or any other quest rewards. His sole objective was to learn about summoners.

"Well, we don't want to leave you with just the two of them. Who knows what might happen?"

Concerned about the boy, Yoshino and Kiichi gave up on dropping out. The party continued on their quest.

The party reached the Ur Sluice boss's location without any difficulty. It was a large arena surrounded by skull-topped stakes. They heard the Goblin Leader's toad-like croaking before they saw it sitting on a throne made of logs tied with vines. This large goblin was surrounded by about a dozen regular goblins.

To progress to the next area in the game, players usually had to defeat the boss blocking their passage.

"Let's kill this thing and finish the quest already. Iron, go in. You'll act as a decoy."

Her summon, which had been at the front of the party, obediently shuffled into the boss room. The human party members followed, and only Shuutarou noticed something odd.

"Were Iron's eyes always red...?"

The others, too busy preparing for the battle, didn't hear him. The goblins rose to their feet when they saw the invaders.

Boss Mob: Goblin Leader Level 10

The boss goblin growled. Larger and colored red, it stood out among its green minion goblins. The smaller goblins raised their weapons.

"Why are you being so slow, Iron?! Hurry it up!"

Iron was walking with sluggish, heavy footsteps. Rivir struck the back of its head with her staff...and then something inside Iron snapped.

"Huh?!"

The summon spun around. Its eyes were glowing a murderous red as it grabbed Rivir's head with its rusty hand and lifted her off the ground. She was shrieking, her LP dropping fast.

The rest of the party froze in terror. Just as Shuutarou was about to telepathically contact Elroad, he heard the gut-wrenching sound of a skull cracking, followed by a gruesome blood-spatter effect.

"Ahhhhhhh!!"

Yoshino's scream echoed off the walls. Red liquid was dripping from Iron's right hand. Rivir's headless body slumped to the ground.

Summons and tamers' beasts were monsters, which obeyed their master only when bound by a special pact. A pact that depended on their master having positive karma in relationship to them—this was a value separate from the player's karma affecting their relations with NPCs.

NPCs reacted to players with bad karma by refusing to talk to them or even attacking them. Bad karma denoted players who might be a danger to others, activating NPCs' self-defense scripts. It worked similarly for monsters "employed" by summoners and tamers.

Rivir's name faded to black in the party menu. She was dead.

"What just...? She can't be...," Taneda managed to say. He was opening and closing his mouth like a suffocating fish.

"Let's get out of here!" Kiichi shouted. "Wait... This is a boss room. We can't leave... Stand together!"

They'd been entirely unprepared for this—witnessing a player's death right in front of them. It'd been so long since the chaos when they became locked in the game, they'd grown accustomed to a feeling of safety and stability. Having suddenly seen one of them die for real paralyzed them.

The goblins got excited at the sight of human blood. They cheered and growled menacingly at the players, their clamor drowning out Yoshino's screaming.

Mob: Iron Level 33

Masterless, Iron reverted to a hostile monster. Its AI changed from summon behavior to a "wild" monster. The party hadn't realized just how strong it was, higher-level than its now-dead master.

Until the last of the pixel shards left of Rivir dissolved into nothingness, Iron just stood still, watching. But as soon as the last trace of her was gone, it turned to the other player with a fresh glint in its red eyes.

Yoshino was still wailing, traumatized by Rivir's gory death. Taneda seemed to

have no energy to do anything, while Kiichi pummeled the barrier keeping them locked in the boss room with his fists.

As for Shuutarou...

'How are you feeling, Master?'

'Much better now... Thanks.'

Elroad had cast a range of spells—Protect Sight, Protect Hearing, Calm Mind, and Status Recovery—preventing status ailments. It was the first time he had seen somebody die, but rather than despair over the tragedy, he was concentrating on what he could do to save the rest of them.

The goblins seized this opportunity to launch their own attack. First, they pushed the cart over and stomped on it to destroy it, and then they stormed the players.

'Can you cast spells on the others?' Shuutarou asked Elroad.

'I could, but how would you explain their sudden recovery to them? Instead, I suggest I destroy the lowly monsters first.'

'No, I want to do that...'

Shuutarou drew his sword. There were seventeen goblins in the boss room, plus the boss, the Goblin Leader. Then there was Iron, silently glaring.

'I'll be ready to intervene, should you be in danger. Would you like me to cast protective buffs?'

'No, thanks. I think I'll be fine.'

After the brief telepathic exchange, Shuutarou used his swordfighter skill Sprint to rush the goblins and break into the middle of their group. Then he unleashed Roundhouse Slash. He spun around, cutting them with his sword. The impact pushed them away. Their bodies hit the ground, bursting into pixel shards.

A few goblins escaped unharmed. Shuutarou spun around again, kicking them up into the air. He activated Triple Ripple Strike; his sword lit up green, sending three curved beams of light at the monsters, hitting them in midair.

In mere seconds, Shuutarou had defeated the goblin minions.

The Goblin Leader raised its greatsword and leaped at Shuutarou, but a split second before the enormous blade hit the boy, he became a blur. Shuutarou felt a gust of air against his ear as the monster’s weapon swooshed down, hitting nothing. He struck his silver blade deep into the monster’s back.

As the boss monster exploded, Shuutarou thought, *Glad I practiced Foresee lots*, thankful for Bertrand’s training.

He faced the armored monster, regretfully readying his sword for attack.

“You hated her, but now that she’s gone, you miss her.”

Iron’s red eyes flashed menacingly. It raised its arm and brought its weapon down swiftly on Shuutarou, who leaped sideways to dodge. A sharp rock pierced the ground just where he had been standing, but he was already next to Iron, sparks flying as his sword struck the metal armor with a loud *clang*.

This thing’s tough...

The attack shaved off only 30 percent of the monster’s LP. Iron began to raise its sword again. Shuutarou used Foresee to dodge and counter. His blade struck Iron with a blast effect, knocking the summon away. That took another 50 percent of Iron’s LP bar, leaving just 20 percent.

Shuutarou charged at the monster with Sprint, dodged a fist blow with Foresee, and stuck his sword in between Iron’s red eyes, which were glowing with rage and grief. The monster stopped moving.

“It’s time for you to rest.”

Shuutarou held his hand out to Iron, which dissolved into nothingness.

* * * *



About half an hour later, the party was sitting at a café in Emaro Town.

Compared with Allistras, Emaro was a very small agrarian town, with vast pastures, grasslands, and a windmill.

The party had failed their quest, since the cart they'd been tasked with escorting got destroyed by the goblins, but that was insignificant compared with the death of one of the party members. After Shuutarou defeated the boss, they were free to leave the boss room, and they went straight to Emaro, the nearest town. At the café, they sat in silence for some time. Eventually, Kiichi spoke after looking from one to the other.

"First of all, thank you for saving us, Shuutarou."

He bowed deeply. The other two hung their heads.

"Losing the will to fight in the face of an ally's death proves we weren't made for battles. For frontline fighters, that's pathetic..."

Embarrassed, Kiichi began to slowly share his story. Yoshino and he had returned to Allistras from a farther outpost; that much, the others already knew. But that "farther outpost" was Fort Sandras, the front line of exploration. Their party disbanded after the tank died in battle. The situation at the front line was becoming ever more dangerous, and Yoshino and Kiichi decided it was too much for them. They left. Back in Allistras, they found a party with the unkillable tank, Iron, and joined as temporary members.

"I've been at a loss as to what to do with myself, but I talked with Kiichi, and we're thinking of working as city guards for Crest. I doubt we'd have the confidence to take on Party Quests ever again," Yoshino said weakly, worn out from anguish.

Shuutarou just listened quietly. Taneda had taken off his helmet and had his face in his hands, propping up his drooping head, elbows on the table.

"I...I didn't have the balls to confront her...to point out her arrogance to her, her lack of proper care of her summon... If I'd only had the courage to speak my mind to her, and to be her support, she wouldn't have died like this..." he said, sobbing.

Taneda wouldn't be taking on any more Party Quests, either.

Some players were leaving the front line or other far outposts, returning to Allistras for a variety of reasons. Looking for new party members. Missing friends they'd left behind. Rejoining their lovers, whom they'd left to make money.

There were also those who could no longer fight, traumatized by the death of people they'd been close with. Their hopes, their willingness to do the right thing, all paled when faced with the violence of a real battlefield. They would put down their arms, wishing for someone else to fill their role, and return to the safety of a city inn, fearing the world outside.

"I'm responsible for this. I'm going to report what happened to the guild," said Taneda. "I have to let people know that a summon can reject their master and kill them. Hopefully, my report will prevent another tragedy like this from happening in the future."

He stood up and bowed low before Shuutarou.

"I'm sorry for everything. I owe you for saving my life."

Taneda ambled out of the café. Kiichi had a sudden thought.

"Shuutarou, is there anything we can do for you in return? We'll do anything, as long as it doesn't involve going back to the front line."

Kiichi scratched his head. Yoshino elbowed his side.

"He wouldn't be so mean!"

She seemed quite upset that Kiichi would even suggest that.

"I'd like you to tell me everything you know about the front line, though," Shuutarou said immediately.

Yoshino looked at him with surprise. "Are you thinking about going there?"

"Yes. I'm planning to clear the game!" he announced candidly.

Tears rolled down Yoshino's cheek.

"? Is something wrong?" Shuutarou asked her.

"Oh? No... It's just that...you remind me of someone I look up to."

She quickly wiped away the tears. She was thinking about Wataru, the young man who gave people hope, ending the chaos that ensued after the players had been locked in.

“If it weren’t for Wataru giving us courage, we wouldn’t have fought even this long.”

“What are you talking about? We’ll keep fighting as the city’s protectors from now on.”

The two turned to Shuutarou again and began to share information about the front line.

“The frontline outpost is currently Fort Sandras, seven areas from here. Monsters there are between level thirty and forty. For us, that was the limit. Work is underway exploring the next area, Ciola Tower, but it hasn’t been cleared yet.”

Kiichi sent Shuutarou several cleared maps and checked that he had no questions before continuing: “Most of the monsters in Ciola are bird types—really tricky to fight, wide range and high mobility. You need a very good tank to keep them from attacking party members at the back. As far as I know, no progress has been made lately, since several tanks died. Our tank was among them, in fact.”

Kiichi had a few sips of his coffee. Yoshino took over.

“You need a key to access Ciola Tower. It’s designed so that you can’t skip the areas between Ciola and Emaro, I think.”

“How do I get the key?”

When Shuutarou and Elroad couldn’t break through the fire spirit’s barrier around the Sorn Mines, they tried the previous area, the Cerou Underground Labyrinth, but found they couldn’t get in there, either—some force was blocking the path through the stone arches, and Shuutarou guessed a key was needed to progress, like in the case of Ciola Tower.

Yoshino hadn’t been at the front line for nothing—she had the answer.

“In most cases, to get a key, you need to first defeat the boss of the previous

area. One of the boss drops, labeled Artifact, will unlock the quest that gives you the key as a reward. For Ciola, once you have the item and go kill the monsters damaging the crops in the area, you find out that they came from the tower. Then you get the key to go there and kill monsters inside for the next quest in that chain.”

Shuutarou nodded to show he understood.

“One more thing,” Kiichi added. “Three guilds are active on the front line. Artifacts from boss fights are stored in the guild storage, to share between members. That’s why it’s best to join a guild instead of going solo.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Nobody would go to the front line solo!” Yoshino interjected.

“Uh. I suppose not...”

Shuutarou watched them with a smile, thinking they seemed very close to each other. They read in his eyes he was assuming they were a couple, and they felt somewhat embarrassed. Kiichi quickly resumed his explanations in a louder voice.

“So there are three guilds... That’s not counting Crest, who’s on the way to join now. I might as well tell you a little bit about each of them.”

“Are they the big guilds formed during the beta?”

“That’s right. Aegis, Twilight Adventurers, and Yamata. Plus Crest. The four are going to be cooperating to clear new areas. Crest is planning to send fighters to the front line every month, so you could go with them next time.”

Shuutarou had read about all those guilds on the game-playthrough sites he’d been following. Aegis was as famous as Crest.

“We used to be in Twilight Adventurers. Everyone’s very well-mannered, and the guild policy is to keep things safe, so we quite liked it there. If you’re going to join a guild, I recommend either Crest or Twilight Adventurers. Mention you know us, and you’ll get a warm welcome.”

Kiichi finished his cup of coffee.

“I think that’s everything.”

“Thanks, that really helps!”

Glad he could be of assistance, Kiichi stood up to go. Yoshino got out of her chair, too.

“We’ll be on our way. See you again someday.”

Kiichi offered his hand for a handshake, like when they first met. Shuutarou shook it vigorously, and Kiichi smiled.

“Do you still want to become a summoner?” Yoshino asked.

“Yeah, no change there!”

“Well, I wish you luck. Don’t repeat Rivir’s mistake and forget that summons are just monsters.”

Shuutarou didn’t say anything to that. He waved goodbye to Kiichi and Yoshino, and when they left, he disappeared.

* * * *

Shuutarou teleported to Ross Maora Castle. Vampy sensed he was back and hurried over to talk to him.

“Master! You didn’t get hurt, I hope?!”

“Huh? Nope, I’m fine!”

They were in the throne room. Punio had been waiting on the throne for his master’s return. Shuutarou picked the slime up into his arms, sighing deeply.

Rivir’s really dead...

He’d never seen anyone die in the game before. He was calm thanks to the spells giving him mental strength, but still, it was a huge shock for the boy. Not that it changed his mind about what he wanted to do.

Elroad appeared as if from nowhere next to Shuutarou.

“How was it, Master? Has socializing with the other players yielded any useful information?”

Shuutarou nodded. “Yeah. I found out what’s needed to take you with me without using a disguise.”

“That’s terrific. Will you tell us more?”

Shuutarou glanced at Vampy, Elroad, and Punio, thinking hard. Summoners’ monsters had ACM displayed before their names in the party menu and in their name tags, but his monster friends only had BOSS MOB before theirs.

There’s no way around that...

But then he had an idea. He realized he hadn’t tried something that Rivir had done with her summon.

“That’s right! We need to be in a party together!”

He swiftly stood up from the throne. The two Evil Overlords watched him quizzically.

Yoshino had explained that ACM stood for *accompanying monster*, a monster ally. Shuutarou relayed that to his friends.

“You’re my allies because I’m the dungeon master, but to other players, you’re enemies. Not if you’re in a party with me, though! The system blocks party members from attacking one another. So if I add you to my party, you’ll become ally monsters!” he explained excitedly.

Impatient to test his theory, Shuutarou sent party invites to Elroad and Vampy. They’d never seen prompts like that before, but since the invites came from their master, they accepted without hesitation. Shuutarou checked his party menu.

Shuutarou (L) Swordfighter Level 31

+AcM Elroad

+AcM Vampy

“It worked!!!” he cheered.

“Amazing.”

Elroad and Vampy applauded with relief.

Summoners and tamers could only successfully summon or tame monsters if they had positive karma with them. Besides becoming allies of their master, the monsters would also be classified as friendly toward all players—and this was communicated through the ACM abbreviation added to their name tag.

The Evil Overlords, though, could kill players if the fancy took them. That’s why their name tags displayed them as boss monsters even though they served Shuutarou. However, the game system automatically displayed ACM for monsters in players’ parties.

Now that this was sorted out, Shuutarou had to do just one more thing, and he’d be able to take the Evil Overlords out into the world with him without needing any disguise. He had to reclass.

“I’ll go change to summoner, and then I can bring you to the city!” he announced with a big smile.

The Overlords were touched that their master was going to such lengths just to be able to have them come with him. Becoming his first accompanying monsters also gave them a bit of a superiority complex.

* * * *

A boy with a blue and white aura stood in front of the Allistras job office.

‘I’m going in,’ he communicated telepathically.

‘I hope it goes well,’ came a reply.

Shuutarou entered the building. Soon, he was no longer a level-31 swordfighter, but a level-1 summoner—a change nobody else would have dared make in this deadly game.

Name: Shuutarou

Job: Summoner

Level 1

LP: 120/120 (+Buffs/Equipment)

MP: 200/200 (+Buffs/Equipment)

STR: 5 (+Buffs/Equipment)

VIT: 5 (+Buffs/Equipment)

AGI: 5 (+Buffs/Equipment)

DEX: 5 (+Buffs/Equipment)

MAG: 8 (+Buffs/Equipment)

LUK: 5 (+Buffs/Equipment)

Unique Skill: Create Dungeon

Sword Mastery	Level 100
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Martial Arts	Level 100
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Staff Mastery	Level 1
----------------------	----------------

Summoning	Level 1
------------------	----------------

Negotiation	Level 1
--------------------	----------------

Strengthen Minions	Level 1
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Enchanted Stone Craft	Level 1
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Fire Magic	Level 1
-------------------	----------------

Dark Magic	Level 1
-------------------	----------------

Foresee	Level 100
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Triple Strike	Level 100
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Triple Ripple Strike	Level 100
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Back in Ross Maora, Shuutarou headed to the throne room, where all six Evil Overlords were waiting. Having changed to summoner, he was going to announce his new abilities to them and talk about what they were going to do from then on.

“Your Sword Mastery, Martial Arts, and three attack skills carried over. That’s a nice surprise,” the blond knight Bertrand remarked with a satisfied smile.

“Yeah! Our training didn’t go to waste!” Shuutarou replied happily.

Shuutarou’s One-Handed Sword Mastery level transferred over, along with three attack abilities. This made Shuutarou far more powerful than the average level-1 player.

Elroad presided over the discussion of their future plans.

“Our objective is to reach Voroderia. In order to do that, the barrier conjured by the four elemental spirits’ Prayer must be destroyed, yet presently, we don’t have sufficient information to attempt that. Master offered to collect intel from other players,” he summed up, taking notes with a quill in a notebook.

“Master, could you explain summoners to us? In what form will we be able to assist you as a summoner?” Vampy asked, anxious.

Shuutarou relayed to them what the job-office NPC had told him.

Summoners were able to summon and command monsters they had a pact with. They were able to equip one-handed swords, shields, rods, staves, and grimoires. They were typically casters, and their stat with the greatest growth

was MAG. With certain exceptions, they were able to summon up to five monsters, based on the maximum party size of six members. To start with, they couldn't summon that many—the maximum number of summons increased as they leveled up their job. At level 1, Shuutarou should be able to have only one monster.

Of course, since the Evil Overlords, Punio, and other monsters that lived in the castle came with the dungeon, Shuutarou had countless ally monsters at his command. He didn't want to raise suspicions among other players, though, so he had to be mindful not to bring more with him than he was expected to have.

“For now, only one of us may accompany Master at any given time...,” Elroad said pensively.

Gallarus the giant smiled smugly. “Master, if you don't mind me sharing my opinion, taking Vampy, Theodore, or Elroad out with you again would be risky business.”

“Why?” Vampy snapped at him.

An ominous white light began to emanate from her body, making everyone in the room tense up. Everyone except Gallarus, who kept that smug smile on his face.

“Heh, it didn't even cross your mind, did it? Someone might have seen Master when he was in his black-armor disguise with you guys. Would be kinda sus to have him make an appearance as himself, a young summoner, with the same monsters, no? So you can't go, sorry,” he explained triumphantly.

Vampy bit her lip, thinking that Gallarus must have gotten that idea from one of his servants, because he was too dumb to come up with that himself.

Bertrand chuckled. “Gallarus, my friend, I see you're putting yourself forward as a candidate. But you're too big to fit inside human buildings. How will you protect our master when he's indoors?”

“...”

Gallarus glared at Bertrand, lost for words.

“It won't be a problem if I don't appear in human form,” Theodore said.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Shuutarou asked curiously.

Theodore was looking away from him. “I’ll demonstrate.”

He stood up from his chair. After a flash of light, in his place appeared an enormous black dragon, flapping his wings slowly as he hovered in the air. The atmosphere became heavy in the presence of such a magnificent beast, his giant wings sending gusts of wind.

Theodore was the King of Dragons. Highly intelligent monsters had a special skill enabling them to change to a human form. Theodore had been using that skill to look human to Shuutarou before.

The dragon landed. He radiated such might that victory against him seemed but a foolish dream. He bred fear in the hearts of those who saw it. But that feeling began to fade as the dragon got smaller and smaller, until he was no more than twenty centimeters long. The baby dragon was impossibly cute. He flapped his little wings and rose into the air again.

“Woow! Theodore’s a dragon! And he can change size?!”

“This isn’t like shape-shifting. I can only choose between three forms: human, giant dragon, and mini dragon. I should be fine accompanying you as long as I don’t assume my human form, correct?”

The ebony-black dragonling shot Gallarus a mocking stare with his beautiful golden eyes. Never before had Gallarus wished so badly to possess a size-changing skill.

“I was so sure we could go out together right away,” Shuutarou said sadly. “I wish I’d thought about it more before jumping to conclusions...”

Elroad hurried with some reassurance. “Master, on the contrary, this works perfectly for blending in with other players. While you were with the humans, I observed other parties from above, searching for other summoners and tamers. Almost every one of them commanded a beast-type monster. Based on this observation, demi-human monsters are difficult to obtain as minions. We wouldn’t want you to stand out for having summons of a type not usually seen.”

He made a very good point. There were two ways to obtain summons—

through regular summoning and random summoning. Summoning required catalyst items corresponding to the race of monster to be summoned. For example, to summon a bird monster, the summoner would need a feather and a beak. There was no way to predict what specific monster would be summoned other than that it would be a bird type.

Most summoners and tamers based in Allistras had beast summons because when the game stopped being just a game, they needed to become as strong as possible fast, with minimum risk, so they used items from the lowest-level monsters in the area—demi-rats from the grassland and demi-wolves from the forest—as catalysts for their summons.

Demi-human monsters were rare, which meant that the chances of getting catalyst items from them were slim. Goblins, while humanoid, fell into the beast category due to their low intelligence. Items from them couldn't be used to summon any demi-humans. The only chance of obtaining a demi-human monster before progressing to the farther areas was through random summoning.

To summon a random monster, the summoner needed an Enchanted Stone. But among the myriad monsters that could be obtained this way, the more valuable ones appeared at a low chance. Demi-humans were exceedingly rare, reflecting just how special they were.

Demi-human monsters could be easily communicated with, which facilitated commanding them in battle, but what really set them apart was a hidden game mechanic that allowed players aged twenty years or older to make them their lovers or spouses. The fact that each town featured a brothel proved that the game allowed for sexual relations between players and NPCs.

Tamers could also acquire demi-human monsters as minions. Sometimes, they were able to capture monsters rather than having to invest considerable time and resources into convincing a monster to join them through the Negotiation skill. In the early days of the game, this caused a bit of chaos, as summoners would reclass to tamers in the hope of gaining demi-human minions.

Being at least as intelligent as humans, though, demi-humans would see right

through players with impure intentions and refuse to have anything to do with them. Very few tamers managed to actually befriend a demi-human.

“Now it is clear how we should proceed when you wish to take us outside the castle,” said Elroad. “Vampy, Gallarus, Bertrand, and I will only accompany you when you don your black slime armor. Sylvia, Theodore, and the Abyss Slime can go with you when you choose not to wear a disguise.”

They’d have a different protocol for demi-humans and beast types.

Shuutarou glanced from Sylvia to baby-dragon Theodore, surprised to hear that Sylvia could turn into a creature like him, too.

“Um, okay. So who do I take with me for my summoner debut...?”

He had to choose between Punio, Sylvia, and Theodore. Shuutarou looked around, as if hoping someone would help him make that call.

“Master, if you don’t mind...”

One of the Evil Overlords stood up.

* * * *

Lumia couldn’t get a certain player out of her mind as she tried to focus on her receptionist work.

I haven’t seen Shuutarou since then...

One of the members of Party 38, Taneda, had come to report their quest as failed. Grief-stricken, he also notified Lumia that Rivir had died, detailing the circumstances. News of this sad incident spread through Crest like wildfire. Rivir’s reputation hadn’t been favorable, but she was well-known. With a rare demi-human summon capable of tanking and quite a high player level, Rivir was an asset to Crest, despite rumors of her bad conduct.

A summoner killed at the hands of her own summon... The other summoners in the guild had to be warned that the way they treated their minions came with consequences.

Lumia sent messages to all the guild members who had departed for the front line and sat back in her chair with a sigh.

Party 38 has disbanded—after what happened, who can blame them? Taneda said he'll stay at an inn until somebody clears the game. The two who returned from the frontier requested to only be assigned to city patrols and quests guaranteed to be safe, so in practice, they're no longer fighters...

Aware of how difficult life was for players working on clearing the game, Lumia sympathized with those who dropped out.

Lumia propped her head on her hands, wondering what had become of the last member of that party, the sweetly innocent boy. Did witnessing a gruesome death leave him even more traumatized than Taneda? Or was it easier for him to recover?

The receptionist drummed her desk with her fingers, wondering whether to send Shuutarou a fifth message asking if he was all right.

“Excuse me.”

“Whoa!”

“Yikes!”

Shaken out of her reverie, Lumia overreacted, startling the boy who'd come to see her. Incidentally, he was the boy she'd just been thinking of.

Unable to keep her calm, Lumia leaned over her desk and hugged him.

“Shuutarou! Are you okay?! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have put you in that party—it must have been terrifying!”

She'd been feeling so guilty, kicking herself over ignoring her bad feeling about Party 38. This guilt had only been amplified now that she was no longer being eaten by anxiety over the boy's safety, and tears of remorse filled her eyes.

Shuutarou patted the receptionist, waiting quietly for her to pull herself together. That took a few minutes.

“I'm s-so sorry...for that outburst...”

“It's okay...”

Lumia looked like an absolute mess. She sat back down in her chair, and

Shuutarou smiled at her as usual.

“How can you be so calm after that horrifying experience? Bottling up your emotions isn’t good, you know.”

“It was really awful, but Rivir would’ve been happier knowing that we managed to move on, I think.”

He sounded wise beyond his years. *This boy is like a beacon of light*, Lumia thought with admiration.

“Don’t push yourself too hard, though. If you need some time to yourself, take it. Nobody will hold it against you.”

“No, I’m okay! I want to join the front line as soon as possible!”

Lumia had dealt with countless players. There was something different about the ones whose eyes shone bright with determination like Shuutarou’s. Almost all of them had already gone to the front line. They were untouched by despair over being trapped in the game, optimistically doing what they could to clear it. Lumia felt that it was Shuutarou’s destiny to go off to the front line, too. She wiped her tears again and managed a smile.

“I’ll help you in any way I can!”

“Thanks!”

“Back to business, then. What can I do for you today?”

“I’m looking for quests that give lots of EXP,” Shuutarou announced cheerfully.

Lumia opened his player-info screen...and saw that his job had changed to summoner, and he was level 1.

“Sh-Shuutarou?! You reclassified to summoner?! But you were already level thirty-one! Why would you do that?”

It didn’t make sense to her, especially after the boy saw a summoner get murdered by her summon.

“I just wanted to become a summoner!” he said lightly. “I’ll get the levels back.”

From Lumia's perspective, his attitude was awfully casual despite the fact that every battle carried the risk of death. She remembered what Candy had said to her about the boy: *"That boy breaks the mold in so many ways. You'd better let go of your assumptions."*

A high level, safety, and wealth were the goals of ordinary players, not those who aimed to clear the game.

"All right, I see. If you want to join the front line, you'll first need to reach level thirty—that's the requirement. Let's get you that EXP!"

"Thanks! Please find me some quests with a juicy EXP reward!"

Lumia nodded, in a lighter mood. She scrolled through the long list of available quests, searching for one that would be just right for Shuutarou.

"You're a strong fighter, but I can't let a level-one player go on a quest outside town. Let me find you a city quest with a good EXP reward."

"Okay!"

Shuutarou waited patiently as Lumia kept scrolling on her screen. A pop-up window opened in front of him with a quest description.

Request: Supply Spider Silk

From: Caitlin Mueller

Time Limit: 48:00:00

Details: I need lots of silk from Ilyana spiders to craft some tough but lightweight armor. Quality spider silk will be met with a handsome reward.

Items Needed: Spiderweb (0/5)

Reward: 450G, 550 EXP

Shuutarou read it and looked at Lumia, confused.

“It’s a delivery quest,” she patiently explained. “It asks you for items from monsters, but if you already have them, you don’t need to go hunting.”

“Ah, right. Um...but I only have two spiderwebs from Ilyana spiders.”

“Heh-heh, don’t worry, I showed you that quest just as an example. If you tell me what items you have, I can search for quests that ask for them. Or if you’re missing an item or two, you can get them from there.”

Shuutarou followed her gaze to a shop with ASSORTED MATERIALS on the signboard above the entrance.

“They sell items for quests there. Players under level five don’t need to pay, since we discourage them from leaving the city. Feel free to head over there and get what you need.”

Shuutarou checked what he had in his inventory.

Demi-rat Tail ×1

Ilyana Spider Venom Fang ×2

Spiderweb ×2

Goblin Ear ×74

Goblin Loincloth ×59

Goblin Mace ×27

Goblin Dagger ×20

Goblin Thief Hood ×5

Goblin Thief Dagger ×2

Goblin Leader Fang ×1

Goblin Leader Sword ×1

Goblin Soldier Ear ×8

Goblin Soldier Sword ×3

Goblin Soldier Armor ×5

Goblin Mage Ear ×12

Goblin Mage Staff ×4

Goblin Mage Robe ×6

Goblin King Fang ×2

Goblin King Gem ×1

Goblin King Mallet ×1

“I have a lot of items from goblins!”

Lumia looked through the delivery quests for ones that needed those items.

“You can get more EXP for goblin materials than for spider drops. Do you have any drops from higher-rank goblins?”

“Um... I have drops from Goblin Thieves and a Goblin Leader...and Goblin Soldiers and Mages, too!”

He didn’t mention the Goblin King drops so as to prevent any inconvenient questions.

“I have quests here for Goblin Thief and Leader drops, but no other higher goblin-species quests come to Allistras,” Lumia said apologetically. “Hang on to them, though. You can turn them in for EXP in Calloah Castle Town.”

Lumia looked at Shuutarou to check if he had any questions, but he didn’t seem to.

“The only delivery quests we get are for drops from demi-rats, demi-wolves,

Ilyana bats, Ilyana spiders, goblins, Goblin Thieves, and Goblin Leaders,” she told him. “Keep that in mind! I’m going to send you all the quests for these sorts of items, so you can just complete the ones you have items for already.”

He must have been grinding on goblins during the beta. His equipment was probably a lucky drop from a Goblin Thief.

Lumia felt as if she was starting to put the pieces together to puzzle out the boy’s secrets. She forwarded the quests to him.

Request: Kill Those Pests

From: Dor Malu

Time Limit: 48:00:00

Details: Goblins are damaging my crops! Kill as many as you can, and I’ll buy their drops off you!

Items Needed: Goblin ear (0/3) or goblin loincloth (0/2) or goblin weapon (any) (0/1)

Reward: 200G, 500 EXP

Request: They Gotta Pay!

From: Dor Malu

Time Limit: 48:00:00

Details: Goblin Thieves attacked my cart on the way to the market, stealing my produce! I’m going to sneak into their hideout and steal it right back, but I need hoods like theirs for my disguise!

Items Needed: Goblin Thief hood (0/2)

Reward: 1,000G, 1,200 EXP

Request: Root of the Problem

From: Dor Malu

Time Limit: 48:00:00

Details: The Goblin Leader's to blame for his henchmen goblins making themselves a nuisance and for the sharp downturn of my produce sales! Defeat him, and I'll reward you for ending my frustrations!

Items Needed: Goblin Leader fang (0/1) or Goblin Leader dagger (0/1)

Reward: 3,000G, 3,500 EXP

Shuutarou accepted as many quests as he could based on the items in his inventory, turning them in at once. His body lit up with the level-up aura in several waves, and he went from level 1 to level 10. Lumia spoke to him after he finished checking his stat increases.

"I see you got quite a few levels out of that! It shouldn't cost you too much to buy enough items to reach level twelve, I think," Lumia said with her usual professional politeness.

Shuutarou had quite a lot of funds from defeating the Goblin King and from the player killers slain by Theodore, so he could easily afford to buy more quest items from the shop. But at the same time, it seemed like a waste to purchase things like Goblin Leader drops when he could easily obtain them by himself. Doing quests with increasing rewards appealed to him more.

“Nah, I want to get my levels by doing other quests!”

“Sure. Let me show you what quests we have for your level.”

While Lumia was busy searching, Shuutarou checked his player info again.

No new summon slots... I guess that's from level twenty.

New summon slots were, in fact, unlocked at levels 20 and 40. Presumably at levels 60, 80, and 100 as well, but no summoners had reached those levels yet to verify that theory.

With more minions, a single summoner might be as strong as a whole party. Still, unlike summons with their simple AIs, real players made more capable allies in battle.

Since getting locked in the game, summoners adopted either the approach of trying to get as many summons as possible—so that if one died, it wasn't a big deal since they had others—or focusing on leveling a single summon to make them strong. The second approach was favored by players who'd managed to obtain an unusual type of summon, like Rivir's Iron, or another useful summon in high demand.

Shuutarou could only summon one monster at a time.

Still sorting through quests, Lumia remembered the standard advice she was supposed to offer summoners.

“By the way, do you have a summon already? If not, I recommend using demi-wolf drops to get your first one! You'll find demi-wolves in the forest area.”

“Demi-wolf drops? Why?”

“Beast summons, and especially dog-type summons, have excellent abilities. Which summon you choose to stick with is up to you, of course, but dog types have above-average attack, mobility, and they can detect nearby enemies, too. If you haven't decided what sort of summon you want, why not try a beast first?”

Players favored beast summons because their enemy-detection skills and high mobility increased their master's chances of survival. Enemy detection prevented getting ambushed, which significantly improved summoners'

survivability.

Elroad had noted that many summoners were using beasts—they did so following Crest’s advice.

“Using drops from a low-level monster as a catalyst doesn’t mean you’ll necessarily get a low-level summon. I knew a level-ten summoner who got a level-thirty-seven summon from demi-wolf drops.” She paused for a moment before adding quietly, “He’s gone to the front line too...”

This may be a good cover..., thought Shuutarou.

He nodded exaggeratedly, realizing that this suited him perfectly. “Sounds great! I’ll try summoning something using demi-wolf drops!”

“You can buy them from the shop right away.”

“Do you have any demi-wolf quests?”

Lumia laughed. “Yes, I do!”

She shelved the other quests she’d selected for him and found him what he’d asked for.

“Okay, your first battle quest as a summoner will be killing demi-wolves. The battle instructor gave you his seal of approval, but it’s our policy to discourage players from soloing quests in farther areas. Are you okay with taking this on with a party?”

“Yes, that’s okay!”

She was just about to input something on her screen when her hands froze.

“Oh, do you have any special requirements as to the party members’ jobs?”

“Not this time! Anyone’s fine!” Shuutarou replied readily.

Lumia nodded and navigated to the list of parties on standby.

The recommended level for this quest is five, so at level ten, Shuutarou can even go with a party that doesn’t have a tank. The party must have two slots open to have room for his summon once he gets one...

Lumia short-listed parties whose members had a good reputation, so as not to pair up Shuutarou with someone arrogant like Rivir again. Then she chose the

party that seemed the best out of them.

The tank left this party recently, but the remaining members have a good reputation for teamwork and behavior. Two of them are about Shuutarou’s age. Maybe he’ll make new friends. The other two players are old enough to be in charge of the children...

Barbara (L)	Acolyte	Level 18
Shoukichi	Swordfighter	Level 19
Kettle	Wizard	Level 18
Kyouko	Archer	Level 18

Shuutarou went to the meeting point, where he found his new party standing around a set of armor, arguing.

“Enough already! I’ll be the tank from now on!”

“Are you kidding? You’re a healer!”

“I can both heal and tank! I’ll do a better job than that pervy geezer, I promise you that!”

“Don’t get so worked up about this, Barbara...”

“I’m going to go look at robes, if that’s okay?”

Shuutarou’s first impression of the party was that it was quite chaotic. He had an unpleasant flashback to his last party.

I hope they don’t yell at me...

Rivir’s aggressive behavior toward him when he showed up had caused him mild trauma.

“Um... Hello...,” he said timidly.

The short-haired archer—Kyouko—noticed him first.

“Guys! The summoner’s here!” she told the others happily.

The other party members stopped arguing over the armor and turned to Shuutarou, smiling.

“Cool! Hey, how old are you? I’m thirteen! My name’s Shoukichi! I’m level nineteen, and my goal is to become a dual blade!” the excited young boy said all in one breath, coming closer.

“My name’s Shuutarou, and I’m thirteen years old! I’m a summoner. Just hit level ten!”

“You’re the same age as me! Lemme add you to my friends!”

Shoukichi shook Shuutarou’s hand.

“Friends...,” Shuutarou repeated, the word triggering in him emotions he’d kept bottled for so long.

“Oh... Hey, are you okay...?” Kettle asked hesitantly.

Shuutarou tried his best to stop the tears from coming, but the intense feelings coursing through him were too much. He pressed his lips together to stifle his sobs, shaking.

He had found himself suddenly trapped in a game where death was real. His saviors were all monsters. His only comfort, his pet slime Punio, wasn’t there with him at the moment. He’d had people older than him rely on his help. A grown-up had yelled at him for no reason. He’d seen adults at their worst. At their weakest. A person had been murdered right in front of him.

Shuutarou never allowed himself to show any sign of weakness in front of the Evil Overlords, because their master/servant relationship prevented such intimacy. Neither could he open up to the other players he’d met before, since they saw him as a high-level, invincible player.

He’d been so very lonely. What he wanted the most was real friends, but thus far, he had made none. At thirteen years of age, he was still a child. A child feeling unbearably isolated.

When Shoukichi, a boy his age, casually offered to become friends with him, the dam on Shuutarou’s emotions broke.

“Did I...say something bad?”

Shoukichi was really thrown. Kettle had no idea what to do, either.

“Come here,” Barbara said, gently pulling Shuutarou into her arms.

In that comforting embrace, he sobbed openly.

“Waaaaah, aaah, aaah!”

Back when this party had just been formed, Shoukichi and Kettle often cried at night. Barbara, Kyouko, or the tank who’d left would come to soothe them.

Told that this low-level summoner used to be a powerful level-31 swordfighter, Barbara had been a little worried about Shuutarou turning up with an attitude. When he broke down into tears, she couldn’t help feeling relieved.

“Shh... It’s okay.”

She stroked his back.

‘...’

An Evil Overlord was watching silently, hidden in Shuutarou’s shadow.

* * * *

The party went to the restaurant at Crest headquarters. Run entirely by NPCs, it served all manner of popular dishes you might find at a real-world restaurant.

“It’s been forever since I felt like I’ve eaten!” Shuutarou said, stuffing his cheeks full of omurice.

Food in *Eternity* didn’t make you feel full, but eating it did give some satisfaction. Familiar flavors had a calming effect on the mind.

“The fact that you don’t need to eat doesn’t mean you shouldn’t. Having meals as normal reduces stress levels,” said Barbara, sitting opposite Shuutarou with her chin resting in her hand, a kind look in her eyes.

“Hey, want a parfait?”

“Sure!”

Shoukichi, very obviously trying to be nice, passed his chocolate parfait over

to Shuutarou.

“Wow, this is a first! Shoukichi treating someone to dessert!” Kettle teased.

“Why’s that a problem?! I can do what I want with my food!”

Shoukichi’s face turned red.

Shuutarou had cried for a good while before calming down and introducing himself to the party. As everyone’s good spirits returned, the first thing they decided to do together was go for a meal.

“How come you don’t have a tank?”

Shuutarou asked that without any ill intentions, but the smiles faded on the faces of the others.

“We used to have one,” Kyouko replied, “but he left for the front line.”

“Wow, really?!”

To Shuutarou, joining the front line was really cool. It wouldn’t have occurred to him that seeing their friend off had been a tearful affair for the party.

Barbara swirled the straw in her glass. “We had some other tanks join us briefly to do quests together, but they were unbearable,” she complained.

Party 21 was very popular, especially among men, who’d offer to be tanks just to get close to the two pretty women, Barbara and Kyouko. Then again, tanks who weren’t already firmly embedded in their parties were free for a reason—their attitude was putting people off from partying up with them. In general, tanks were highly valued, which made some of them feel entitled and superior to other players. They’d make no effort at teamwork and attack monsters with great reluctance. Some actually didn’t know how to tank properly. Accustomed to an excellent tank—Makoto—Party 21 had high standards and wouldn’t put up with half-baked, arrogant tanks who were there only to ogle the ladies.

Kyouko changed the topic to lighten the mood. “You want to head to the forest to grab materials for your first summoning? You’re going for a beast, huh?”

“Yeah! I was told I can get a good one if I use demi-wolf drops.”

Shoukichi got so excited that he stood up from his seat, eyes sparkling. “Hold on! We’re going to be the first to see your summon?! That’s awesome! If you get, like, a giant one, will you let me ride it?!”

“Sure, if you want!”

They chatted for a while over their meal, getting to know each other before setting off for the forest. They had a spring in their steps.

The quest they were doing required they kill ten demi-wolves. Killing that many gave them a good chance of getting the rarest drop, a demi-wolf fang.

The Allistras Monster Guide entry for demi-wolves informed that these monsters hunted in packs. Females were gray, and males black. Extra care had to be taken when fighting them at night, as the males were hard to see in the dark and had the tendency to sneak up behind players who were already busy fighting the rest of the pack. In the forest, they were unparalleled hunters.

Party 21 made their way through the woods. Kyouko the archer was at the front, since she could see farther than the others. Behind her were Kettle the wizard and Barbara the acolyte. Shoukichi the swordfighter and Shuutarou the summoner brought up the rear.

“I see you’ve got a sword, too, Shuutarou!”

“Yeah. I used to be a swordfighter like you.”

“What? No way!”

“Yes way! I made it to level thirty-one!”

“You serious?! That’s so sick!”

The boys walked in step with each other, their hands on the hilts of their swords. Kettle glanced back over her shoulder at Shoukichi.

“You’d have known that if you listened to Barbara.”

“Enemies at eleven o’clock and two o’clock!” Kyouko shouted.

That got everyone’s attention. Even Kettle and Shoukichi stopped their banter, instantly on full alert, despite being high above the recommended level for that zone.

This party acts very differently from my last...

Shuutarou also drew his sword. The tall grass rustled, and two demi-wolves appeared in the directions Kyouko had indicated. They looked like dogs, only bigger, with very sharp fangs. Their jaws were bloody from some prey they'd recently eaten.

"Remember what to do, Kettle?" Barbara asked without taking her eyes off the monsters.

"Sure! *Flame Arrows!*"

Kettle immediately conjured a magic circle, out of which two flame arrows appeared. Each flew at a different target. The wolves yelped, and soon, the forest was quiet again.

"Good job, Kettle."

"It wasn't good enough. My Flame Arrows only grazed the paw of one of the wolves. If it jumped, I'd have totally missed it."

"I'm glad you took note of that. I've got no other comments. Except that you've got to stop slacking off on practicing at the training grounds and raise your skill mastery to avoid slipups."

Barbara shot the pouting girl a sideways glance. After looking around to make sure all was safe, she lowered her staff, at ease.

"We don't have a tank right now, so the long-range attackers take out monsters before they get close, but normally, it's me doing the fighting!" Shoukichi boasted to Shuutarou.

As for Shuutarou, he was amazed at how well coordinated this party was. Even in an area below their level, they never let their guard down. Their teamwork was so tight that with a good tank, they could even fight at the front line—except that their levels were too low.

Shuutarou's reaction didn't escape Barbara's notice.

"It's like clockwork in our party, isn't it? And the credit for that goes to the player who used to be our tank. Since he left, even these youngsters got their act together."

“What? I’ve always had my act together!” Shoukichi protested.

“You need a bit more self-awareness,” Barbara teased.

Kyouko and Kettle giggled.

* * * *

After the tenth demi-wolf burst into pixel shards and vanished, quest-completion pop-ups opened in front of the party members.

“Did you get any fangs?”

“Yeah, two! I only need one for summoning, so I’m all set!”

“Awesome! Go on, get your summon!”

Shuutarou had the item he needed, and Shoukichi was terribly impatient to see his first summon, so the party decided to create a safe area where the summoning could take place without interruption.

So that’s Prayer...

Barbara had sat down in the shade of a tree with her legs folded under her, palms pressed together. A pale-green hexagonal barrier appeared around her, with enough space for everyone.

A single human could create a safe space that big. The four elemental spirits must have been able to protect a truly immense area.

Summons come up out of the ground...

Clutching the demi-wolf fang in one hand, Shuutarou copied the motions he’d seen Rivir perform when summoning her monster.

Something flickered in the shadows.

“Come, my summon!” Shuutarou called.

A tiny silver wolf slinked out of Shuutarou’s shadow. Even though it was no more than twenty centimeters tall, with its lush, glossy fur, it looked more noble and valiant than the wolves they’d just defeated.

‘*How did I do?!*’ The little wolf looked up at Shuutarou, tail wagging like a helicopter. ‘*Was that convincing enough?*’

Sylvia's performance was pretty close to how real summoning looked in the game. Shuutarou's party members didn't seem to notice anything odd.

Barbara (L)	Acolyte	Level 18
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Shoukichi	Swordfighter	Level 19
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Kettle	Wizard	Level 18
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Kyouko	Archer	Level 18
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Shuutarou	Summoner	Level 10
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+AcM Sylvia

“Master, please take me with you as your first summon! My ability to detect enemies, mobility, and killing power won’t disappoint you!” Sylvia had said to Shuutarou when he was having trouble deciding who to bring along.

Having successfully asserted herself as the top choice for Shuutarou's first “summon,” Sylvia got to see the outside world for the first time, to her great excitement.

So many new smells... Oh, what’s this? And what’s that?!

Only she and Theodore could switch between human and animal form. Theodore had already been outside once, so he agreed that either Punio or Sylvia should go next. Sylvia got chosen because of her maxed-out level and her assurance that she could deal with any situation.

I miss having Punio with me, but new summoners are expected to get a beast first. Plus, I made Sylvia really happy, so I don’t regret picking her.

He smiled at Sylvia, who was bouncing up and down excitedly next to his feet.

“Oh gosh. She’s adorable!”

“I didn’t know summons could be this cute!”

“It’s a puppy? You got a puppy summon?”

The ladies stood around Sylvia, admiring her. She did actually look like a puppy.

‘Er... Master...’

‘I’m sorry. Please bear with this for a bit...’

Shuutarou didn’t know what else he could do but let the girls have their fill of petting Sylvia.

A few minutes later, the party made their way home. They were on their guard against monsters as usual, but the focus of conversation was on the cute summon. Kyouko, beside herself with joy, kept turning to look at maxed-out Sylvia.

“I can’t believe how cute she is! It heals my battered soul to look at her!”

Carried by Shuutarou with her feet dangling, the girls fussing over her, Sylvia wasn’t quite happy.

‘You’re the center of attention.’

‘I feel humiliated.’

Yet her tail kept wagging.

“Meh. I thought summons were cool, powerful monsters, not this,” Shoukichi grumbled.

“I’m sure Sylvia’s strong.”

“This puppy, strong? She’s a joke compared with the robot summon I saw the other day.”

‘Rude brat!’ Sylvia commented telepathically, grinding her teeth.

Kyouko and Barbara were theorizing about the new arrival’s abilities.

“I haven’t seen anything like her among the common-rank wolf enemies. She’s much smaller than any other wolf.”

“Based on her size, she’s unlikely to be a tank type or close-range type. So a caster or buffer. With how pretty she is, she might be a healer.”

While players had jobs, summons and tamers' beasts had role types, shown on their status screens, which affected their stat growth and skill acquisition. For example, Iron was a tank-type summon. Beasts obtained using demi-wolf drops tended to be close-range-attack types with high STR and DEX. That was the second most desirable type after tank, since fighting at close range also carried a high risk of death. Having an NPC or a monster ally fill the riskiest positions took the pressure off the human party members.

Meanwhile, healer types were shunned. Most players thought an AI couldn't be trusted to heal as reliably and efficiently as actual humans, and they didn't want to put their lives in the hands of an AI-controlled healer. Support types were next on the unwanted list for the same reason.

"Tell us, tell us! What type is she?" Kyouko asked.

'Something's there,' Sylvia communicated to Shuutarou before he had the chance to reply to the archer.

She freed herself from his arms and dropped onto the ground, looking intently in the three o'clock direction with her ears pricked. There was a sound like an electric discharge, and the sky shimmered as if from heat haze. When it became quiet again, the forest wasn't the same. Everyone in the party felt the hair on the back of their neck rise in fear. They sensed that something was disastrously out of place; anyone would, not only battle-hardened veterans with keen intuition like Candy.

Out of the eerily silent forest came a gigantic black wolf.

Boss Mob: Negrus Level 37

"An...invasion...?" Kyouko whispered, going pale.

Monster invasions were in-game events starting with the appearance of an unusually strong version of a regular monster. This monster would attract others until eventually, it would lead them to attack nearby towns. Party 21 had the misfortune to encounter the invasion "seed" monster.

Negruses normally spawned in the Tsulgur Primeval Forest. According to the Monster Guide, they were nocturnal lone wolves, their black fur allowing them to blend into the night. When their prey saw their glowing red eyes, it was already too late. Swift-footed, they could run a mile in the blink of an eye.

For a few seconds, it was completely silent.

“Everybody, come to me!” Barbara called, trying to mask her own terror.

When she saw the monster’s level, she understood they had no chance of defeating it. She sat down to cast Prayer, and a semitransparent barrier appeared around her.

“Ah... Ah...”

Kettle’s knees buckled under her, and she sat down on the ground, whimpering from fear. Kyouko embraced her.

“We’ve gotta get over there...”

Shoukichi and Shuutarou were about ten paces away from the safe zone.

“Eep!”

The Negrus blocked their way, appearing in front of them the moment they made the slightest move.

It took a moment for the primal fear to kick in. The boys’ teeth began to chatter, and their legs started to shake. Rooted to the spot by fear, Shoukichi thought about how he wanted to be a hero.

What would... What would Makoto do in my place?

With tears streaming down his face, Shoukichi forced himself to draw his sword. He stepped out to stand in front of Shuutarou, shielding him.

“Shuutarou! Stay close to me! I’ll protect you, even if it costs me my life!”

The boy overcame his fear, determined to act as a decoy in order to lead Shuutarou to safety...but suddenly, something bumped into him, and he fell on his behind.

He looked to see what it was...

“What the...?”

An even bigger wolf, with silver fur and blue eyes, was facing the Negrus. The party watched, riveted. The new wolf evoked a profound sense of awe. Even the Negrus froze. A collar of glowing swords appeared around the silver wolf's neck, spinning slowly. The blades, with mysterious symbols engraved on them, exuded a divine aura.

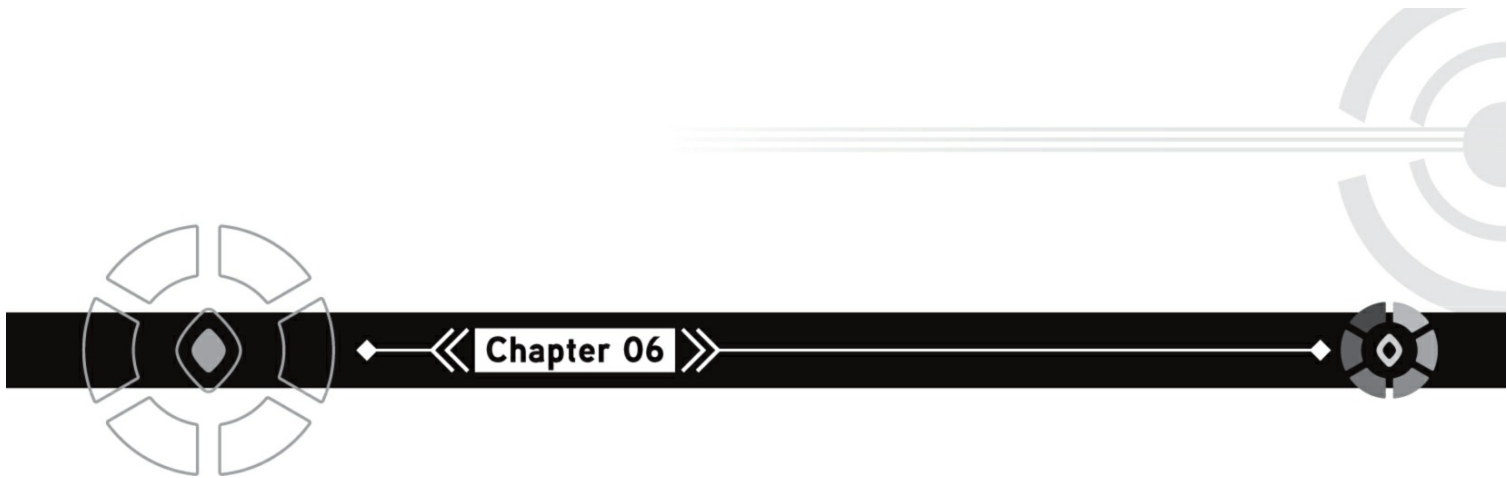
“Um... Er... Huh?”

Just as Shoukichi realized what was happening, the silver wolf disappeared, reappearing on the other side of the now-headless black wolf. Blood gushed out from its neck. With a thunderous, quake-like rumbling, its body disintegrated into pixel dust, which faded away as if absorbed by the forest.



'Begone, mutt!'

Sylvia was smugly triumphant. The level-up chime rang again and again for the human members of the dumbfounded party. Shuutarou was desperately trying to think of how he was going to explain this.



The party gathered in the safe zone created by Barbara’s Prayer. The little silver wolf sat down in Shuutarou’s lap, cocking her head adorably, but this time, she got no fuss.

Barbara readjusted herself and pressed her hands to her temples.

“I’m so sorry. I seem to be really out of it...,” she said in a strained voice, thinking she’d been experiencing hallucinations.

Barbara checked her party screen. Everyone’s levels had increased by a lot—she hadn’t been hallucinating after all.

Barbara (L)	Acolyte	Level 29
Shoukichi	Swordfighter	Level 29
Kettle	Wizard	Level 28
Kyouko	Archer	Level 28
Shuutarou	Summoner	Level 25
+AcM Sylvia		

In *Eternity*, where each level made a huge difference to battle ability, a level-

37 boss gave tons of EXP. This single battle, which had been over in seconds, took them from average to top-level Crest members.

Everyone was quiet for a while. Shoukichi was the first to break the silence.

“Your summon really is strong! Sylvia’s amazing!”

The young boy had a role model to look up to. He’d been thinking hard about what that person would say in this situation.

“We’d all be dead if Sylvia hadn’t saved us! Thank you, Shuutarou! And thank you, Sylvia!”

Shoukichi hadn’t yet recovered from the scary encounter with the boss monster. His hands and knees were still shaking. But he thought the most important thing to do at that moment was to thank the hero who’d saved them. He wanted to make that tense atmosphere between the party members go away.

“No need to thank me. I’m so happy everyone’s okay! Sylvia, thank you. You did great!”

Shuutarou was on edge for a different reason from the others, but he was truly thankful to Sylvia for swiftly taking the initiative and saving them all. He stroked her fur.

‘Thanks, Sylvia! That boss was a nasty surprise.’

‘I defeated it instantly to keep it low-key!’

‘Er... Y-yeah, you were so quick, nobody saw exactly how you did it...’

He petted her head, since she’d tried her best. Elroad and Vampy would have castigated her for doing the very opposite of keeping it low-key.

With his identity protected by the black armor, Shuutarou could have his minions do showy things without fearing repercussions, but special care had to be taken when he wasn’t incognito to ensure his safety.

That was too complicated for Sylvia, though. Having been praised by her master, she was sitting in his lap with a proud look, getting pets.

After Shoukichi thanked Shuutarou and his summon, the other party

members shook off some of their confused apprehension. Barbara glanced over to where the black wolf had died.

“That was an invasion-starting monster, without a doubt. There’s no buildup; a creature like that just appears out of nowhere and begins attacking...” Her gaze moved to Shuutarou. “Shuutarou and Sylvia, thank you so much. I’m sorry I started Praying without giving anyone notice. When I saw that Negrus, I was sure we wouldn’t be able to defeat it. I should’ve gathered you all in one place first, before activating my skill...”

Shuutarou shook his head. “I think you did the right thing setting up the safe zone for everyone to come to!”

A less experienced but confident party would have likely chosen to try fighting the boss monster, sealing their fate. Party 21 had looked death in the eyes before, survived countless battles, and worked closely as a team, so when Barbara made the call not to engage it, they accepted her judgment.

That Negrus, with its exceptional mobility, wouldn’t let its prey escape.

“That was so scary...,” Kettle said, slumped onto the ground.

“I’m still in tears,” Kyouko replied, sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees, head down to hide her face.

Shuutarou was worried, the mood reminding him of how Party 38 had been just before they disbanded.

Shoukichi tried to cheer everyone up. “Hey, we’re alive! That’s something to celebrate! And we got so many levels out of it! And loot!”

He looked through his inventory and found a Negrus great fang, a Negrus claw, and other drops from the monster.

“Let’s divide the spoils,” Barbara said, checking her own inventory. “Hmm, but maybe it would be fairer to give everything to Shuutarou this time,” she added after a sudden thought.

“No, no!” Shuutarou protested. “If anyone got equipment, it should go to whoever needs it most. And the other items—just keep them?”

He suggested that because he didn’t care about gold or equipment, but it just

so happened that he sounded a lot like Makoto, reminding his party members how much they missed their tank.

“Makoto would do it this way, too,” Kettle remarked.

It was settled, but Barbara didn’t want them to exchange drops there, since monsters could appear at any time.

“Let’s do this after we return to the city. We may receive rewards for stopping the invasion if we show the items to the guild first.”

Nobody had objections to that.

Shuutarou stole a quick look at the new additions in his inventory.

Demi-wolf Fur ×10

Demi-wolf Fang ×3

Negrus Claw ×1

Negrus Great Fang ×1

Negrus Gem ×1

Black Wolf Staff ×1

* * * *

At the busy entrance hall of Crest’s headquarters, Candy was talking to two players.

“Unfortunately, our most talented and ambitious parties have just headed off to the frontier.”

One of the two players, a tall, strong-looking woman, was very disappointed by this news.

“Just now? That stings. Awful timing on our part, eh?”

The tall woman carried a hefty ax on her back. Her hair was in a side ponytail.

Next to her was a petite, unassuming woman with an incongruous giant cross-sword strapped to her back.

“You’re very welcome in our guild, though. Ex-frontline fighters like you are just what we need. We’re short on tanks, so you’ll be in great demand, Rao.”

Candy seemed eager to have the two women in Crest, but they’d lost every bit of their enthusiasm, having been told that all the best parties had left the city.

Suddenly, there was a commotion near the entrance.

* * * *

When Lumia screamed in astonishment, everyone in the entrance hall turned to look. The receptionist calmed down and continued in a hushed tone.

“You discovered an invasion event monster and defeated it?”

“Yes. We have proof to show you—boss drops and a video.”

All of Party 21 had come to report to Lumia. She furtively glanced at Shuutarou, who was holding a tiny wolf with beautiful silver fur, and then she proceeded to check the items Barbara handed over, as well as the video.

What the players were seeing in the game was being constantly recorded. The videos came in handy when exploring new areas or encountering unusual monsters. It also came in handy in the game when getting killed by another player, so that you could find out who it was and exact revenge.

“Y-yes, this certainly was an invasion monster. I see it was a level-thirty-seven boss, and the area it appeared in was the forest. The drops are very rare items.”

A chill ran down Lumia’s spine as she watched the video of the giant black wolf. She had a burning question to ask.

“Your levels have gone up considerably, so I don’t doubt that you defeated this boss, but how did you manage that...?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t give you the details—it’s to do with our unique skills,” Barbara replied before Shuutarou could. “But it’s a fact that we encountered a monster on par with the Goblin King, and we defeated it, preventing a monster

invasion of the city. Is the evidence we provided sufficient?”

Lumia felt pressured by Barbara’s businesslike attitude. She returned the boss drops to her.

“Yes, of course. And I understand that no further information can be provided to protect the members’ privacy. I will report this to the higher-ups, who will likely want to reward you for defending the city. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“That’s all. Thank you.”

Barbara played it cool, but she was enormously relieved that Lumia didn’t probe any further.

With the magical barrier protecting Allistras, there was no more danger of the city being destroyed. Consequently, the rewards granted for preventing invasions had greatly dropped in value, but exceptionally, Party 21 was to be given a juicy reward.

The monster they’d encountered was so high level, no players in the city could be expected to take it on. And while everyone would be safe as long as they stayed within the city walls, left alone, the Negrus would keep getting more and more minions until a whole army of monsters—like the Goblin King’s—would be prowling the area near the city.

Mentioning unique skills was generally enough to stop questions, as it was an unwritten rule in Crest not to ask about them unless voluntarily told. A unique skill was like an ace up the sleeve. Being forced to reveal it might put the player at a considerable disadvantage.

“I’ll get in touch with the guild master and try to get your reward processed today. Could I ask you to stay in the city until then?”

“We can do that. See you later.”

Lumia left, and Barbara turned back to her party.

“We’ve got time to kill. How about getting some food?” Shoukichi suggested.

“Genius!” Kettle enthusiastically agreed.

The party turned to leave the entrance hall for the restaurant when someone

stopped them.

“Guys, do you have a moment?”

It was Candy. The two women who had returned from the front line were behind him. Candy noticed Shuutarou with delight.

“Aah, Shuutarou, my boy! Hello! How have you been?”

“Hello, Candy!”

The tall man with the girly name and the innocent boy greeting each other in a warm manner seemed like such unlikely friends—Kettle was secretly nervous that Candy might gobble Shuutarou up.

“You ended up a summoner, hmm? Your high level, your swordfighter skills, all flushed down the drain! Anyhow, I got derailed. This isn’t what I came over to chitchat about!”

Candy gestured for the two women behind him to come forward.

“I’d like to introduce you guys to these two ladies. The tall one over here is Rao, and the little cutie is Reilan. They’re expert fighters who’ve just returned from the front line.”

Rao and Reilan bowed, and Party 21 bowed back. Rao had striking red hair, tied in a side ponytail. She was armed with a giant ax, which she carried on her back. Reilan’s hair was a pale brown, her skin tone very light. Her weapon was a long sword shaped like a giant cross.

After everyone in Party 21 introduced themselves, Barbara looked expectantly at Candy, curious why he wanted them to meet those two players. Rao noticed that and did the explaining herself.

“We’re looking for a party close to our level, who’d be happy making Calloah Castle Town their base. If we find a party like that, we’ll join Crest... I see your party’s full, though.”

Party 21 already had six members.

“I’m not in Crest, and I’m only a temporary member,” said Shuutarou. “I can leave with my summon to make space for you two!”

That was a bombshell for Shoukichi, who was sure Shuutarou was going to stay in their party for good.

“Whaaat?! I thought I just made a new friend, and you’re leaving?!”

Barbara muttered something to herself before addressing Rao and Reilan.

“I’m sorry, but could we get back to you about this a bit later? We’ve only got back from a quest, and we were going to split the loot now.”

The two women didn’t have a problem with that.

“Sure, we thought finding a party might take some time anyway. And we want you to think it through so you won’t have regrets later, because we’re not looking to temp, but to become your permanent members. We’re going to check out the facilities. See you later!”

They bowed and left in the direction of the equipment store.

Candy scratched his head, looking apologetic. “Me and my rashness! I should’ve checked with you first before bringing them over. Shuutarou, dear, I didn’t mean to make it sound like I wanted you to drop out to make space!”

“It’s okay. I only joined as a guest!”

Candy could tell that Shuutarou meant it, but he still had a guilt-ridden look on his face as he left them.

Shoukichi hung his head, sulking. Seeing him like this made Shuutarou sad, too.

“Aaaanyway!” Barbara said in a louder voice than usual. “Let’s go and get something to eat! We prevented a monster invasion. That calls for a celebration!”

She dragged her party off to the restaurant.

* * * *

As soon as they sat down in a private room at the restaurant, the look on Barbara’s face turned serious.

“I don’t think anyone will come asking questions after I explained it away as a unique skill effect. Maybe Alba or Flamme might try to get some more info out

of you. The story I'd like you to stick with is that it was my unique skill at work."

Shoukichi and Kettle stared at her, not following. Kyouko had a moment of realization.

"That's why you made a thing of it at the guild entrance."

"Yeah. Better to sell a story than have parts of it leak, getting everyone all too curious."

While they were still in the entrance hall, Barbara had been talking loudly to her party about how they'd stopped an invasion. Now it made sense.

"If anyone presses you about how exactly we defeated that boss, tell them my unique skill killed it with a defense-ignoring debuff that triggers when I'm in a near-death state. My skill actually does that."

Shuutarou was flabbergasted at the cover-up plan. "Why do you want to hide that Sylvia killed it?"

"Your summon can one-shot a high-rank boss. There will be people wanting to use a force like that for themselves. I don't want you to become a target for unscrupulous players."

Barbara's first thought after Sylvia killed the boss was that with her, Shuutarou could be the one to put an end to the nightmare of being trapped in the game. But her hopefulness had soon given way to worry that if Sylvia's power became known, the frontline groups would force Shuutarou to kill any bosses in their way, putting him in danger. Envious high-level players would use him as a tool.

With the choice being exposing Shuutarou to such danger or revealing her unique skill, she'd chosen the latter without a second thought.

Barbara's unique skill was Cornered Rat Strike. It was a defense-ignoring curse skill cast on her target when she suffered an attack bringing her LP down to 10 percent or less. While it was powerful, trying to make use of it by allowing an enemy to nearly kill her would be the height of foolishness with death being for real. Barbara reasoned that given the extreme risk, even if her skill became known, nobody would try to use her for it.

“You and Sylvia saved our lives—that’s a fact. We owe it to you to make sure you don’t pay an unfair price for that.” With that said, her face brightened up with a big smile. “And now, it’s time to celebrate! Order whatever you like!”

On that cue, the other members began acting as normal, looking through the restaurant menu. Only Shuutarou was sitting with his head dropped dejectedly, clutching Sylvia to his chest. She looked up at him with her head cocked to one side, not understanding why he was upset.

Kyouko broached a new subject after everyone ordered their food. “Those two ladies want to be based in Calloah. If they used to be at the front line, they must be pretty strong.”

“Calloah would suit us, too, no? Almost everyone who’s interested in clearing the game has moved there already. Getting levels will be a slow grind if we stay in Allistras,” Kettle said eagerly.

Shoukichi was untypically disinterested in the conversation.

“Our tank advised us to move there after reaching level twenty, remember?” Barbara added, her eyes on Shoukichi. “That was the required level for clearing Ur Sluice.”

The EXP from the Negrus battle got all of them well above level 20. As Kettle said, players with the ambition to clear the game had already left Allistras to move on to the next town, some as early as level 15. And EXP from monsters near the starting city was too low to be worthwhile for their party.

Barbara propped her head up with her hands. If her party wanted to move on to the next town, she’d be fine with that.

The food was brought in.

“Shuutarou...,” Shoukichi began after the NPC waiters left, looking down at his food. “Do you not like it in our party?”

For Shoukichi, Shuutarou was the first boy his age whom he’d met in the game, and he immediately wanted to be friends. He wanted Shuutarou to stay, not because of his strength, but just because he liked him.

Shuutarou thought for a while, searching for the right words.

“I do like it,” he said. “But my goal is probably not the same as yours. I don’t think we’d be able to keep pace with each other,” he said decisively.

He really felt comfortable in Party 21, but he was planning to go past the front line, track down Voroderia, and defeat him to clear the game. Having these players tag along would be too dangerous, if not outright impossible. His plan was to keep moving from one party to another, pretending to be a regular summoner, until he could fill up an entire party with his Evil Overlords and clear the game with them.

Shoukichi mumbled plaintively that he really wanted Shuutarou to stay with them, until Kyouko intervened.

“Shoukichi, you’re just going to make Shuutarou feel bad. Besides, we need a tank.”

The tank was the pivotal role in any party and practically a requirement to do boss battles, no matter how good the other players were. Also, Crest didn’t allow players to take on Party Quests without a tank unless the quests were substantially below their level.

“I’ll be the tank!” Shoukichi said immediately.

“Oh? So you’re giving up on changing to dual blade, then?” Kettle teased.

“Urgh... I can... I can do both...”

Barbara sighed, her patience tested. “Shoukichi, your stubbornness isn’t helping anyone. Haven’t you learned anything since Makoto left? Besides, if you add Shuutarou to your *friends* list, you can chat anytime.”

“Ah, right! I was gonna add you to my friends! Let’s do it now!”

Shoukichi’s mood changed in an instant, as was frequent with kids. He sent Shuutarou a friend invite. It was the first such invite Shuutarou received, and he teared up a bit when he saw it.

“Could I add you to my friends, too?”

“And me, and me!”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to have you on my friends list as well.”

In the end, they all added him to their friends lists. Shuutarou opened his and saw their names displayed with ONLINE status next to them.

“All right! Things are good now! Let’s eat!”

Shoukichi started slurping up his ramen noodles.

“Manners!” Kettle flicked his forehead, and everyone laughed.

They chatted about this and that for a bit, and eventually, the subject went to the boss-battle rewards.

“I’d say there’s an eighty-nine-percent chance we’ll get a special reward for protecting the city,” Barbara said, scooping out her dessert—flan—with a spoon. She paused before taking a bite, glancing at Shuutarou. “I think Shuutarou should get all of it.”

Everyone, even the kids, nodded in agreement.

“I don’t see it as giving it up—it’s rightfully yours, Shuutarou. You and your summon defeated the monster. We just happened to be there at the time, not only contributing nothing but also getting saved by you. It wouldn’t sit right with me if we accepted the reward.”

Shuutarou noticed she was opening her inventory to hand over the battle loot.

“What?! No! We were going to share the drops equally! You agreed!”

“Ah, well... Normally, we’d do that, but these are special circumstances.”

“You’re saying you owe me, but I owe you, too! Without you, I wouldn’t have gone to the forest and summoned Sylvia,” Shuutarou objected earnestly.

The part about summoning Sylvia was a lie, but Shuutarou was willing to twist the truth a bit to get everyone to agree to share the drops and improve their survivability. The drops were good, including strong weapons, and he wanted the party to benefit from them rather than hoard them himself.

“When we were doing that quest, we agreed to give the drops to whoever needed them most. I don’t want to get everything for myself. It makes me happier when I can help others in some way. And with me leaving the party, I want to at least give you items you can make use of.”

Shuutarou insisted on sharing the drops fairly and wouldn't budge on it. Barbara looked from one party member to another, hesitant.



“I totally get where you’re coming from! Gotta leave things on a good note, right? Cool with me!” Shoukichi said, excited at the thought of getting good items.

Drops from that new boss monster would definitely fetch a good price, or they could be used to craft high-level equipment.

“You’re just being greedy!” Kettle criticized her friend.

“I’m not being greedy—I’m only accepting what’s offered. If you don’t want any items, you don’t have to take them.”

“And I’ll do that! Uh, but then it’s not fair you’d get stuff and I wouldn’t...”

Barbara and Kyouko felt sorry for the kids; it was clear they’d both be really happy to get some good items. Their resolve to gallantly give up the rewards melted away.

“I still think we don’t deserve anything, but if you insist, Shuutarou... Thank you.”

While the kids might not have quite grasped it, Barbara and Kyouko understood just how precious those drops were. An event boss was pretty much guaranteed to drop something good, which would make the lucky players who got it stronger, and better equipped to survive. They convinced themselves that they had to accept the rewards for the sake of the party.

Everyone opened their inventory and reported what they got. Common, guaranteed drops like fangs and fur were distributed evenly by the system, but rare ones like gems or souls were distributed randomly. This went for equipment pieces, too.

“I got a Black Wolf Staff! It says it’s acolyte-only!” Shuutarou reported.

Kyouko was next.

“And I got a Black Wolf Sword. It’s a one-handed sword.”

Barbara was the last one to have gotten some gear.

“I have a Black Wolf Cloak. Anyone can equip it, and it gives good stat boosts, but mostly AGI. I also got an item called Black Wolf Soul.”

Shuutarou wanted to give the staff to Barbara, but she was reluctant to accept.

“Are you sure you don’t want to keep it? It’s equippable from level thirty-seven. You could probably sell it for a lot to someone at the front line.”

Shuutarou shook his head. “I’d rather give it to a friend who can use it later,” he said, meaning it.

To the purehearted boy, making a friend happy was worth far more than the prospect of turning a profit in the future.

And so the staff went to Barbara. Her eyes opened wide when she saw its stats. Boss drops were far superior to regular items from stores.

Next, they had to decide who’d get the sword.

“I’m okay with my current sword,” Shuutarou said. “But I’d like the Black Wolf Soul, if that’s okay?”

The only other members who could equip a one-handed sword were Shoukichi and Kyouko. Shoukichi couldn’t believe that Shuutarou would give up the sword, though.

“You can’t be serious! Even if you like your sword, it makes sense to upgrade. The boss drop’s gotta be stronger than what you have!”

Everyone thought so, too, but it was as if Shuutarou didn’t hear him.

“I probably won’t be using a sword much anyway now that I have Sylvia.”

Shuutarou didn’t actually want to have Sylvia do all the fighting for him, but he had to say something to convince the others, and he didn’t want to reveal that his sword—made for him by Theodore—was, in fact, better than the Negrus boss drop. Having the summon battle without the summoner engaging enemies directly was a common practice, so the others were persuaded that Shuutarou didn’t need the weapon.

“You take it, Shoukichi,” Kyouko said.

“But don’t you want it?”

“I have something else already.”

She pointed to the dagger Makoto had given her, which came with a skill. The Black Wolf Sword was better, but her dagger had sentimental value as a gift from a friend, and she thought the new drop would be better utilized by Shoukichi, who'd need two swords once he advanced to dual blade.

When the boy took the sword from her, his eyes lit up, and his nostrils flared in excitement.

"Shuutarou, you take the cloak. We got plenty from you already," Barbara said and sent him the item without waiting for a reply.

The cloak, equippable from level 37, looked like it was made from a black wolf's pelt. Shuutarou also received the Black Wolf Soul he'd asked for. Souls were usable items, usually bestowing a skill.

"Okay, but...are you sure? Kyouko and Kettle didn't get anything..."

"We got loads of EXP; that's enough! Besides, we can use the wolf items to craft equipment, and we may get an additional reward for protecting the city!" Kettle reassured him with a smile.

The exorbitant amount of EXP from that one battle really was a satisfying reward for the party members. After getting so many levels, they wouldn't have minded Shuutarou taking all the boss drops.

"Oh, got a message from Lumia," said Barbara. "She's asking us to come to the reception desk for our reward!"

The party finished their meal and returned to Lumia's desk to collect the reward from the guild.

* * * *

Lumia waved at Party 21, gesturing for them to come over.

"Sorry about the delay! First of all, I have a message for you from Wataru."

The party members tensed up, wondering what the guild master had to say to them. Lumia read aloud the message from him.

"He writes the following. 'It was a great relief that you returned safely from your encounter with the invasion monster. Words can't express my gratitude to

you for nipping the invasion in the bud. While Allistras is protected by the magical barrier, a troop of invasion monsters could have wiped out player parties in the field. Please accept a reward from the guild as a humble thank-you for putting your lives on the line to protect others.’”

Lumia bowed her head politely. Their reward confirmed, Barbara brought her hand to her chest, tension leaving her body, while the others cheered.

“The guild master gave credence to our report. I’m so glad,” Barbara said.

“You supplied videos, so there was never any doubt it was true,” Lumia replied. “Let me send you your reward. I’ll split it between each of you.”

When the money arrived in their inboxes, the party members couldn’t believe their eyes.

“Four and a half million gold?!” Shoukichi cried out, the amount staggering to him.

A few guild members passing through the entrance hall stopped to look at Party 21 curiously.

“It is not too high an amount, considering the danger you were in fighting a boss of such a high level. We don’t currently have anyone else in Allistras who’d be able to defeat a level-thirty-seven boss monster,” Lumia reasoned.

Wataru had asked Lumia to send each of Party 21’s members four and a half million gold as thanks for slaying that boss monster and partly as financial support—hoping this remarkable party would be able to join the front line at some point.

Kyouko’s eyes met Shuutarou’s. She looked at him questioningly, as if asking if it really was okay for them to accept that money. He nodded with a smile.

“Additionally, your party will be promoted from number twenty-one to seven. While you will have no obligation to join battles you don’t want to participate in, you may be asked to help train new recruits. Is that okay with you?”

“Oh...! Yes. We’d be honored, thank you,” Barbara said, surprised at this additional reward.

They had been made Party 7. Crest parties were numbered in the order of

their battle ability, and Party 7 was among the top-ranked parties in Allistras.

Shoukichi and Kettle joined hands and did a happy dance. Getting their party higher in the ranks had been one of their objectives. Makoto the tank had dreamed about making it to the top ten.

“I hope you’re happy with your rewards. And now, may I ask you if you’ve decided whether to let Rao and Reilan join your party? Of course, now that your party has been promoted, you can expect many other applicants...”

“We have discussed it, yes...” Barbara looked at Shoukichi, then Kettle, and finally Kyouko before nodding decisively. “We’d like to invite them to travel with us to Ur Sluice. If we’re all comfortable in each other’s company by the time we reach that area, they can stay permanently, and we’ll continue our journey to Calloah, relocating there.”

“Excellent! I’ll let them know of your decision.”

Lumia was very pleased that although cautious, Barbara was welcoming. Barbara told her where and when the new members were to meet them, and the party left.

* * * *

A giant wolf was running through the forest, fast as the wind. On her back were Shuutarou and Shoukichi; they’d been screaming in fear at first, but as they got used to the speed, they were shrieking with delight.

“She’s the best summon ever, Shuutarou! I hope she doesn’t mind playing horsey!”

‘Hmph. Took the brat a while to notice how amazing I am.’

Shoukichi’s praise made Sylvia’s tail wag. She started running even faster. There were a few parties in the forest, but the wolf was too swift for them to see. Eerily, they heard the cheerful voices of two boys but had no idea where they were coming from.

“You’re making me regret more and more that you won’t be in our party anymore! It’s like landing a huge catch only for it to get away!”

“Sorry.”

“Hey, it’s okay. People come, people go; it’s normal. The new members are high-level ex-frontier fighters! Cool, huh?”

“You’ve warmed up to them, then? That’s good!”

Shoukichi had objected to letting Rao and Reilan join the party even after everyone else agreed to it. But eventually, he changed his mind.

“Not like I’ll miss Allistras anyway. I’ve got one more bit of business to take care of, and then it’s farewell to newbie city.”

Shuutarou asked him what it was he had left to do, but Shoukichi fell into a pensive mood and didn’t seem to hear him. He didn’t say anything until Sylvia stopped and they left the woods.

Sylvia turned into a minewolf again and rode on Shuutarou’s shoulder for a change.

“It was amazing. I didn’t know Sylvia was actually so huge, and that I’d get to ride her!”

Shoukichi made a fist and extended his arm toward Shuutarou, who looked at it, not understanding the gesture.

“Make a fist with your right hand and bump mine! It’s how guys show they’re friends!”

Shuutarou fist-bumped Shoukichi. They looked at each other and smiled, a little bashful.



Shuutarou returned to his dungeon and relayed his adventures to the Evil Overlords. He told them about Party 21, who got promoted to Party 7, about making new friends, about encountering the invasion boss monster and Sylvia defeating it—which his human friends decided to keep a secret.

Sylvia, in her beautiful silver-haired-woman form, was sitting among them, looking proud, but when Shuutarou stopped talking, the other Overlords were furious with her.

“B-but I saved Master and the other humans...,” she said in self-defense, the hostile reaction taking her by surprise.

“I’m very disappointed in you, to put it mildly. You’d been chosen for the task of protecting Master outside our castle because we assumed you’d be the least likely to arouse people’s suspicion. And yet...,” Elroad said, a blue aura rising around him as he glared at Sylvia, who looked crushed by the unexpected criticism.

The other Overlords also lit up with angry auras.

“She didn’t do anything wrong.” Shuutarou took Sylvia’s side. “Maybe there was some other way to handle that, but she stopped that monster from harming anyone, so don’t make her feel bad.”

Gallarus stroked his beard. “But, Master, wasn’t the plan to blend in with other players to get intel? Wasn’t not standing out the whole point of the operation? And she ruined that.”

“But if she hadn’t attacked the boss, more monsters would’ve appeared, and

people would get hurt. Not just my party, but other players nearby, too.”

As things were, of all the Evil Overlords, Elroad alone would’ve been able to slay the boss inconspicuously with his magic, but only if he was outside the party.

With so many witnesses, defeating that boss was bound to raise suspicions. Even if it was killed instantly with Vampy’s skill, for example, the other players would realize something fishy was going on when they got EXP and drops from it. Their suspicions would fall on the outsider who’d only recently joined their party—Shuutarou. There was no way any of the Overlords could have protected Shuutarou from that boss without his party realizing there was something very odd about him.

Not that some of the Overlords didn’t think of other solutions to the problem of witnesses.

“For Master’s safety, you should’ve made sure word of what you did there doesn’t get out, if you catch my drift,” Gallarus said, scowling at Sylvia.

“That would contradict Master’s wishes,” Vampy interjected sharply.

Shuutarou picked up Punio and stood. It didn’t even cross his mind that Gallarus had suggested killing all of Party 7.

“Anyway, please stop bullying Sylvia. I’ll be going to Regiuria to take care of something.”

When he left the throne room, everyone’s eyes fell on Sylvia.

“Be grateful to our kind Master for escaping punishment this time. But don’t ever act without thinking again. You put his life in jeopardy,” Elroad said, sighing with exasperation.

“I’m sorry...,” Sylvia replied submissively, her wolf ears flat against her head.

“You need not worry about her doing something daft again,” said Theodore, who’d been standing quietly with his arms folded. “I’ll be keeping an eye on her.”

Experience from the Negrus boss battle had gotten Shuutarou over level 20, so he could have two summons. The plan was to have Theodore act as the

second summon, due to his battle prowess and ability to change into dragon form.

Bertrand rubbed his forehead.

Theodore's all brawn and no brain. If anything, I'll be more worried now, he thought.

"I have one more thing to report, actually," Sylvia said in a serious voice.

The others fell silent, intrigued.

"Master told you about making friends. Well, when the other humans offered their friendship, he cried, with tears and all. To me, it didn't look like tears of joy, but of relief at being freed from suffering terrible loneliness. Being with those humans gave him something he couldn't get from us."

"!"

The Overlords were shocked to hear that. They'd never seen Shuutarou cry. Vampy bit her lip until it bled, reflecting on how her master, whom she put on a pedestal, was only a young, sensitive boy.

Shuutarou wanted to be friends with the Overlords, but they had resolved to maintain a distant vassal-and-master relationship with him, so as not to be disrespectful. Each of them was a lord over their own realm, and everyone within that realm was their minion. The concept of friendship was unfamiliar to them, creating a wall of misunderstanding between them and Shuutarou.

Having found real friends, Shuutarou had broken down into tears, the emotions he'd been suppressing for a long time floating up to the surface.

A profound sense of guilt overcame the Overlords. Guilt over having turned a deaf ear to the boy's request to be friends, for unwillingly forcing him to endure alienation, hiding his feelings.

"Friends, huh...?" Bertrand muttered, his eyes vacant.

He was remembering his little sister, who'd quickly made friends in a land foreign to them, wanting to play with them at once.

"And how is your new minion?" Vampy suddenly asked Gallarus.

“Looking much stronger now, thanks to Theo and Bert’s help,” he replied proudly. “Still kinda unstable at times, though. What you’d expect from a summon who killed his mother.”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

“He’s all right,” Bertrand assured them. “I’ve trained him, and I can tell he’s a good fellow.”

The Overlords were silent again, each lost in their own thoughts. Vampy was thinking back to her conversation with Shuutarou in the tunnels, mixed emotions tugging at her chest.

* * * *

Arvosa: realm of the giants, land of fire and stone.

There sat Gallarus on his throne fashioned from countless weapons—trophies taken from rulers of the countries he’d destroyed. Each weapon represented a victory over a nation, and all of them combined were a testament to his power. He was the supreme victor Gallarus, King of the Giants.

A long red carpet stretched all the way from the throne to the entrance. It was lined on both sides with his retainers, who were standing at attention.

Gallarus, the unrivaled ruler, was impatiently awaiting a certain report.

Soon, he thought, his eyes glimmering with ambition.

Then the leg he had crossed over the other shook slightly, and his drink rippled.

The retainer who’d just arrived bowed his head low.

“Your Majesty! I brought him!”

“Did you now? Well done!”

Gallarus clapped his hands, exultant. Certain of success, he downed the rest of his drink without taking his eyes off the newcomer, a giant wearing a cloak with a hood.

The hooded giant raised his hand, and Gallarus’s eyes widened in disbelief.

Meanwhile, in the Realm of the Undying, Vampy was on her throne on the top floor of the castle Shuutarou had made for her. She was watching her minions clamoring down below, awaiting the return of one of her liches—undead magicians who, rarely for their race, were capable of speaking.

Vampy drummed on the armrest of her throne with the slender fingers of her right hand, her expression tense, impatience making her irritable. Silently, she waited and waited for the door to the throne room to open.

Find one already...

Her eyes moved almost imperceptibly, and a moment later, the heavy throne-room door opened. A skeleton in a tattered robe floated in—the lich she'd been expecting—and made obeisance in front of her.

"I have found it."

"Good. Now leave."

She stood up and walked over to the creature that'd been ushered into the room after the lich departed. It was a creepily foaming, shapeless blob.

"Show me your unique skill," Vampy commanded.

The blob, a type of slime, emitted a dark glow, and Vampy's eyes widened in surprise.

Two Evil Overlords, each in their own realm, shouted as one...

"That's not it!!!"

The castle walls shook.

The hooded giant's skill, Transform Hand, allowed him to change the shape of his hands to whatever he wished, while the blob's skill, Change Color, enabled it to freely change its body's coloration. Neither had the power to shape-shift.

Gallarus and Vampy looked almost human, but not enough to blend in with

other humans. For this reason, they were forbidden from accompanying Shuutarou outside. Unless they found a minion with Shape-Shifting as their unique skill.

Both of them had gotten the same idea, and both of them had begun their search at the same time. Unluckily for them, Shape-Shifting was an exceedingly rare skill, and they couldn't find any monsters with it in their realms. So much for their plot to learn the skill from a minion, use it to alter their appearance, and get permission to accompany Shuutarou.

“Who the heck has this skill?!” they both shouted in maddening rage.

Shuutarou was oblivious to their personal dramas.

* * * *

A boy sheathed his two swords into their scabbards on his back, illuminated by the setting sun. A Goblin Leader crumpled to the ground in front of him. A few moments later, its body dissolved into glimmering pixel shards, which drifted away as if carried by the wind.

The boy's party, with two new members—Rao and Reilan—defeated the Ur Sluice boss to progress to Emaro, their next stop on the way to Calloah Castle Town.

“We did it!” said Kettle, standing beside him.

Party A

Barbara (L)	Acolyte	Level 29
Shoukichi	Swordfighter	Level 29
Kettle	Wizard	Level 28
Kyouko	Archer	Level 28



Rao Ax Warrior Level 37

Reilan Master Swordfighter Level 39

Party B

Shuutarou (L) Summoner Level 25

+AcM Sylvia

The Goblin Leader was only a level-10 boss, so Rao and Reilan didn't understand why Shoukichi became so emotional after defeating it. But this battle had special meaning to him.

We killed it, Makoto!

Shoukichi and Kettle had heeded Makoto's advice about playing it safe with the Goblin Leader. They'd returned to Ur Sluice at much higher levels and defeated the boss—their party let them lead the attack. They no longer had any unfinished business in the Allistras area.

“Okay! Now we can begin our journey to Emaro!”

Kettle took the wind out of Shoukichi's sails. “Journey? It's just a stone's throw from here, you know.”

“What? No way...”

Barbara smiled, watching the kids.

Makoto, our two charges are growing up well. We got some new lionhearted friends, and we're on our way to join you, going at our pace.

Barbara and Kyouko followed the rest of the party, thinking about Makoto as they traced his footsteps to Emaro.

In a back alley in a certain town, a girl was crying. She was clutching a sword, banging her head against the wall.

After her previous battle, she'd lost everything.

The friends with whom she'd shared both joys and sorrows on her journey were gone. One had gone on ahead; one had stayed behind, giving up. The one who'd protected her until the very end had died doing so.

The girl strengthened her grip on the sword. She stopped crying, her eyes turning empty.

"I'm so tired..." she whimpered into the darkness of the dingy alley.

Unexpectedly, she heard a voice asking her a question in a low, kind tone. She looked up to see a player dressed in a robe. What he'd said to her was so unbelievable, she wondered if she'd misheard.

"Can you really...do that?" she asked, desperately hopeful.

He slowly nodded. Then he turned around and began walking down the alley.

The girl looked to her side out of habit, but she no longer had a friend who could give her advice.

"Wait!" she shouted and ran after the man in the robe.

The man smirked, his face hidden by the deep hood. Was he the savior everyone had been waiting for? Or was he something else...?

* * * *

Shuutarou was on his way to the next town.

New trials and yet-unknown dangers lurked ahead.

The Mother AI's intentions were slowly coming to light.

And somewhere—a giant maze awaited the frontline players who'd been working tirelessly on clearing the game.

End of Volume 2



The sacred tree Nibrua was believed to be older than the world itself. Its branches reached to the heavens, its roots to the very core of the planet. One people revered the tree as a deity, caring for it and protecting it for generations.

A group of boys and girls was staring pointedly at someone napping on the rooftop.

“Bert! The captain’s going to be mad at you again for playing hooky!”

The youngsters all shared an uncanny beauty. They also had pointy ears. They were the people of the forest, the guardians of Nibrua. They were elves. All of them had been brought up as warriors, tasked with driving those with ill intentions away from their forest.

“So what? Bow practice every day, spear practice every day—what even is the point?”

Bertrand was twelve years old. Every day, he climbed up onto the roof to nap until evening, refusing to participate in training or to help adults with chores and errands. Bertrand was an infamous loafer.

“The point is to become skilled warriors and guard Nibrua!”

“You go on and become Nibrua guardians. The idea of making your whole life revolve around some tree doesn’t really appeal to me, though.”

Had an adult heard him, they’d drag Bertrand down from the roof to give him a stern talking-to. Making light of Nibrua was even more heinous to the elves than murder.

“I feel sorry for him. Not his fault he’s turned out like this—it’s because he doesn’t have parents to bring him up properly.”

“What did you say?!” Bertrand hollered in absolute fury.

The other kids scattered. When they were all gone from sight, Bertrand sat up and sighed.

“I don’t care about this dumb tree...”

He shot an angry glare at Nibrua.

Bertrand didn't have parents, and other kids often made snarky comments about his behavior stemming from not having a "proper" home environment, which sent him into a fit of rage every time. He was scary when angry, so the others would flee, leaving him alone.

Bertrand didn't have any family at all.

A woman came up onto the roof.

"Fighting again?"

"I wasn't fighting."

"No? Well, if you say so."

She sat down next to him, smiling. She had a shiny crown on her head and—jarringly—a cigarette in her mouth. Bertrand winced when the smoke drifted toward him.

"You're smoking those stinky leaves like a human again..."

"In human cultures, it's a sign of maturity. I started smoking young, so at first, it didn't taste good to me, but then I grew to like it. It lifts the spirits, this smoke."

"Won't your interest in human cultures damage your rep, Princess?"

The woman sitting next to Bertrand on the roof was called Hatoa Nib Ayrein. *Nib* meant *magnificent* in elfish, and the name was reserved for the royal bloodline. Hatoa, the princess of the elves, was indiscriminately friendly and always sincere, winning her many fans.

"Humans are quite amazing, though! They make up for their lack of aptitude for magic and their weak constitution with their inventions, such as—"

"Right, right. You don't need to defend your hobbies to me. No way you're gonna get the king to see your side of things, though."

While Hatoa was generally well-liked, some people considered her unusual interest in humans to be dangerous. They bemoaned the naivety of their innocent princess.

"You want a smoke, Bert?"

“Nah. It stinks.”

“Come on, take a puff. Taste an adult pleasure.”

Hatoa took the cigarette out of her mouth and stuck it in Bertrand’s.

“See?” she asked smugly.

Bertrand choked, and she laughed.

“An adult pleasure, huh...?” Bertrand muttered, avoiding Hatoa’s eyes.

* * * *

The elves lived out their entire lives in the forest. They didn’t want to leave it. To them, being banished from the forest, stripped of Nibrua’s protection, was the greatest punishment. They believed that the souls of the banished would never find their way back to Nibrua.

“I haven’t been seeing Desmond lately,” Bertrand remarked to Hatoa as they walked through the forest together.

She made a little noise of agreement.

“Is it true that souls of people who leave the forest become lost forever?”

“I don’t know about souls, but people can return. Or at least, their bodies.”

“I guess you’d know that.”

The princess had traveled to the land of humans and back many times, so she was more knowledgeable about this topic than most. Of course, neither she nor Bertrand had told anyone about that—she’d be executed if word of her wanderings got out.

“Anyway,” Hatoa said, “I’m sure he’s happier over there.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

Bertrand looked at her suspiciously, but she just smiled innocently and started humming a song.

* * * *

Twice a year, the elves held a battle tournament. The warriors showed off the

results of their training to Nibrua as a form of reaffirmation of their pledge to guard the tree. Or at least, that was the official narrative, while the true purpose of the tournament was for the warrior captain to assess the youngsters and headhunt the most talented of them.

The arena filled with cries of astonishment.

“Bertrand wins!”

The handsome boy pulled his spear out of his opponent’s armor and bowed to the crowd. The warrior, down on his knees, was a famous champion who’d been on a winning streak until his duel with Bertrand.

“How could Larcha lose to him?”

“This kid’s something else.”

“His command of the spear is unbelievable!”

Everyone was confounded by the result of the finals, even the elders and veterans of hundreds of battles. Somehow, Bertrand the loafer, a no-show at training sessions, had emerged the victor.

“But the boy never showed the slightest interest in the battle arts! Who’d have guessed he had such a gift for them?!”

“Larcha, everyone’s favorite, was entirely overwhelmed by him!”

Bertrand’s peers surrounded him. Nobody was mocking him anymore. The elves had a great deal of respect for strength.

“Why did you join the tournament, though? You’ve always been saying mastering the bow and spear to protect Nibrua was stupid...”

“I didn’t have a change of heart—I don’t fight for Nibrua. I do it for myself,” Bertrand said smugly.

The other boys in the group were impressed.

“Or...is it because it’s Princess Hatoa’s birthday today?” a girl asked.

“Oh, come on! Bert wouldn’t do this just to show off to the princess, right?”

The boys talked the girl down. Meanwhile, Hatoa waved at Bertrand from her seat on a special podium. Bertrand looked at his feet, not saying anything.

Bertrand came of age amid a period of global instability.

“What? The humans did that?”

“Aye. They conquered the land of the beastkin to the east as well.”

Humans, the weakest of all races, used to live modestly on the peripheries of habitable land, until they found strength in unity and began to conquer one territory after another, relying on intelligence rather than brute force.

“That’s of no concern to us, though.”

“We elves are a free people, bowing to no one.”

While the other warriors were chatting, laughing at the idea that humans might one day become a threat to them, Bertrand kept practicing spear fighting, staying out of the conversations. By then, he had already obtained his unique skill, Nourish Life Force, which enabled him to rise in the ranks and become the strongest warrior in their kingdom.

It’d been four years since his victory at the tournament. Three years since he’d begun training in earnest. Just the other day, he’d defeated the warrior captain without getting hit once.

“You’ve changed, Bert.” One of the warriors was trying to get Bertrand’s attention. “Back in the day, you never trained. I’d always see you dozing on that roof. And look at you now—the leader of the Fourth Brigade.”

Bertrand continued to shadow-fight, swinging and thrusting his spear.

“You’re wrong about me,” he said without turning toward the man who’d spoken to him. “I’m the same as always. I don’t fight for the sake of that tree.”

“Then what do you fight for?”

“ ... ”

To start with, he’d learned to fight because of Hatoa. As of late, he was no longer motivated so much by love, but a vague sense of impending danger.

“Hello-oh! Working hard, everyone?”

“P-Princess Hatoa! Your radiant beauty brightens up every day!”

Hatoa had grown into a breathtakingly beautiful woman, taking after her royal ancestors.

“And what are you looking for here, Hatoa?” Bertrand asked, feigning indifference.

“Do I need a reason to visit? Am I not welcome?”

“You’re going to distract my men...”

“E-excuse me, I bring an urgent report! Our territory has been invaded by a hostile army!”

Everyone stopped what they were doing, and the training grounds became untypically silent for a few moments. Then somebody snorted a laugh.

“Trying to give us a scare, Belu? No one’s invading our country, surely. Elves don’t invade other lands, and nobody invades ours. If some foreign soldiers strayed into our forest, we’ll drive them away as usual.”

In the thousands of years of the elf kingdom’s history, they had not known war. The elves were much stronger and more numerous than other races, so no other nations dared encroach on their land. On the rare occasions that foreign warriors ventured into the elves’ forest, they were driven away at once.

Seeing that nobody seemed the slightest bit alarmed by his report—the warriors leisurely changing in and out of armor for practice—the messenger Belu yelled hoarsely, “The enemy army is a million soldiers strong!”

Everyone froze again, but this time, there were no dismissive laughs.

“We’re being invaded by a million human soldiers. Our advance party has already clashed with them and found that some of the humans rivaled us in strength!”

An enemy army this size in the elves’ forest—this was without precedent. And if some of the invaders were as strong as elves, this matter required immediate attention.

The warriors clamored in agitation. Only Bertrand remained calm. He sighed, still holding his spear.

“So that’s why they’d been acting strangely...”

Hatoa had always been telling Bertrand how clever the humans were. Perhaps that made him more vigilant when it came to them, so he’d noticed something was afoot in the human kingdom before others. The vague bad feeling he’d been having for a while had finally taken shape.

Bertrand took his time getting ready. All the other warriors had already left. He thought of something and turned to the princess.

“Hatoa, you might want to go back to the castle—”

He didn’t finish, shocked to see her floating in the air, her eyes vacant, a strange purple symbol glowing on her body.

“H-Hatoa...?”

He reached for her. And then it happened.

* * * *

Barron Kyrros, the general of the human army, smirked as another magical explosion lit up the forest.

His army numbered one million soldiers, while the elves had about one hundred and fifty thousand. An elf was supposedly as strong as ten humans, so the total strength of the human army was still lower than the elves’, but Kyrros was convinced that he’d prevail. All he had to do now was wait.

“Sir! I report the successful deployment of magical attacks! Approximately thirty percent of the enemy territory has been affected by magical explosions. The enemy has suffered heavy losses!”

“Excellent, excellent. No changes to the plan. Use the enhanced soldiers to kill any elves coming out of the woods.”

“Aye, sir!”

The messenger hurried away, and Kyrros smiled contentedly again. He stroked the seed planted in his chest, gazing at the giant tree in the distance.

The humans were mounting pressure on the elf troops, making big gains. The early reports were correct—some of the human soldiers were vastly stronger than others.

“Are they really human?”

“Why do they seem so lifeless...?”

Elves took pride in being the strongest of the races, but the strange human soldiers in white armor were butchering them with ease. In their shock, the elf warriors were vulnerable to attack from the regular human fighters. As the battle progressed, the defending elves were suffering far greater losses than the attackers.

The elf warriors glared at the humans with hatred. The bodies of their comrades were piling up. The invasion had begun out of the blue, and they didn’t understand the aggressors’ motivation.

“Why are you attacking our forest?!” an elf shouted in frustration at his opponent, a white-armored knight.

Looking past the white soldier, he saw another human gouge out something from a dead elf’s body with a knife. The human smirked and inserted the bloodied item into a hollow in his sword.

“Aaargh!”

“Those bastards...!”

That regular human soldier, previously unable to land a scratch on any elf, attacked with overwhelming power. The elves understood then what the secret behind the humans’ advantage was.

Every newborn elf had a seed of Nibrua implanted in their body, linking them to the sacred tree. Thus, Nibrua was the source of the elves’ strength.

Then the humans found out about it. They began to capture elves to conduct research on the seeds.

“The Sixth Brigade has been destroyed!”

“Captain! There was a major magical explosion in our city! Thousands have died or been injured!”

“What?! How did they...?”

While the enhanced human soldiers were slaying elf warriors at a steady rate, magical weapons had been deployed deep into the elves’ territory with an even deadlier effect. The humans’ tactics were hugely successful, and soon human soldiers were flooding into the elves’ country. The elves, wounded and using their spears as walking sticks rather than weapons, realized the hopelessness of their situation, losing their will to fight back.

A flash of light momentarily blinded the fighters.

Everyone froze, their eyes drawn to a figure that had appeared in a beam of light.

“It’s an elf...,” said a human soldier.

A young golden-haired elf wielding a spear appeared like a shooting star, like a god descending from the heavens.

“Bertrand!”

“Our strongest warrior is here!”

The elves rallied, but those closest to him were alarmed, noticing streaks of blood running down his head and an unfocused look in his eyes.

Bertrand stood up from the ground shakily, putting a bloodied cigarette into his mouth.

“Kill him! Kill him!” the humans shouted.

The battle resumed. A group of human soldiers rushed at Bertrand, who hit them all with a sweep of his spear, crushing their bodies.

“I know what you did,” Bertrand said to the human general, Barron Kyrros, locking him in an angry stare-off. “Your disgusting plot will hurt your own, too,

but you don't care, do you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The cat will be out of the bag soon, but by then, I swear all of you will be dead."

After Bertrand joined the battle, the elves and humans fought fiercely once again. The hostilities continued for three days straight.

"My body...is aching all over...?"

"I can't move my arms!"

Warriors began to complain of pain and fatigue, which, at first, they ascribed to the effects of prolonged battle with no rest. However, when fighters with no injuries started suddenly dying, they realized something strange was going on.

"Bertrand," one of the elf warriors said. "You must know what's happening to us. I heard what you said to the human general."

"I know what's going on, all right," Bertrand replied.

He was sitting atop a pile of corpses, smoking. The human army was still strong, while the elves had lost 75 percent of their population.

"Then tell us! My friends look like they're dying, and I don't understand why!"

"I can't move my arms. I want to fight, but I can't!"

Bertrand took a deep breath in and out. "It's a poison of some sort."

"They've poisoned us?"

While poison was thought of as dishonorable, armies would use it to their advantage nonetheless. But as far as the elves could tell, no one had been tampering with their rations, and the enemy weapons didn't seem to have been dipped in poison, either.

Bertrand glanced down at the human bodies he was sitting on.

"I reckon these sods weren't aware of it, either. That great explosion in our capital on the first day of battle—that's what they used to spread poison."

The humans had been carrying out horrifying experiments on the elves they'd

managed to capture on their land. They'd gouge out the Nibrua seeds from the elves' bodies and implant them in humans, or they'd fuse them with weapons to gain power that would equal the elves'. Humans with multiple seeds implanted in them would lose their sentience, but they became extremely powerful tools.

Through the murder of countless elves, the human experimenters collected their grief and hatred, crystallizing it into a deadly poison and using a certain mind-controlled elf woman to carry it back into the elves' capital.

The poison affected not only elves, but humans, too. The more it killed, the more potent it became.

To be exact, it wasn't a poisonous substance, but a curse.

"There was an explosion? Have the elders been hurt?!"

"It destroyed a large portion of our kingdom. So many died, it's impossible to keep track."

"No... No!"

Bertrand didn't tell the warriors any more than that. He didn't want anyone to know that Hatoa had been the carrier of the curse.

The elves who'd left for the human country out of interest and the criminals we'd banished were all killed for the humans' weapon research...

Bertrand had no more reason to fight, having nobody left to protect. His gaze fell on the dead bodies around him. More warriors had died from the curse than from battle wounds. The curse was a very effective way to kill such skilled fighters as elves.

"Heh. You died for the sake of that tree in the end."

There were faces he recognized among the dead. Friends he used to play with when he was little, or joke with when he was older.

"Your deaths shouldn't be for nothing..."

Bertrand stood up slowly and aimed his weapon at incoming human soldiers.

"I'll avenge you."

The soldiers stopped for a moment uncertainly, but then they guffawed at him.

“Ha! You, alone? Come on then, see how you do against a million-strong elite royal army!”

Their mocking laughter had no effect on Bertrand—his face remained expressionless as he charged at the soldiers.

“Kill him!” the soldiers yelled.

A large group drew their swords and attacked Bertrand with a battle cry. Five minutes passed, then half an hour... The ground was soaked with blood. A human soldier was screaming.

“He’s...he’s a monster!”

Human corpses littered the earth. A single elf had killed thousands of elite soldiers. And he was still standing, ready to take on more, without any sign of fatigue.

Each kill revitalizes me. My body’s tingling with power.

The human-engineered curse depleted the target’s life force, but Bertrand’s unique skill not only nullified it, but also continued to nourish him with energy so that he could fight indefinitely without ever growing exhausted.

“Not so spunky anymore, huh?” he taunted the humans.

A large, empty circle had formed around him, the soldiers too scared to attack him.

Bertrand pointed his spear at them.

“You came here to commit genocide on us, so I’d say it’s only fair for me to exterminate you all.”

None of the soldiers spoke. They knew they were already as good as dead, powerless against this elf who seemed like destruction incarnate.

* * * *

Bertrand sat on a great pile of corpses—a million human soldiers—smoking a cigarette. Few elves had survived, and they carried the curse.

“And here we are,” came a man’s voice.

The space near Bertrand quivered and warped, and a figure appeared. Bertrand glanced at it for a second before looking away again without interest. He puffed out smoke.

“You survived such a mess! Well, aren’t you strong?!” the man said, but Bertrand kept staring into the distance. “Human greed is infinite,” the man continued, undeterred. “In most worlds, it’s the humans who end up taking all the land for themselves.”

The strange man smirked, as if that amused him. His name was Voroderia, God of Darkness.

“Get lost. I don’t feel like talking.”

“If you don’t want me bothering you, why don’t you just kill me with that spear?”

“What? Like I’d fight someone I can’t win against.”

Voroderia looked physically weak, but Bertrand sensed that he was a vastly powerful being. Instantly, Voroderia’s smile disappeared.

“You’re clever. I’ll have to take you with me.”

Bertrand heard the ill intentions in the man’s voice but didn’t react.

“Aw, you make such a pitiful sight. Let me give you something to make you less lonely.”

Voroderia moved his hand and pulled out of thin air a sleeping girl with her arms folded protectively. Bertrand, who’d been looking away, turned swiftly, his eyes opening wide in shock.

“Hatoa...?”

The girl bore a similarity to his beloved Hatoa, but she didn’t look exactly like her, either.

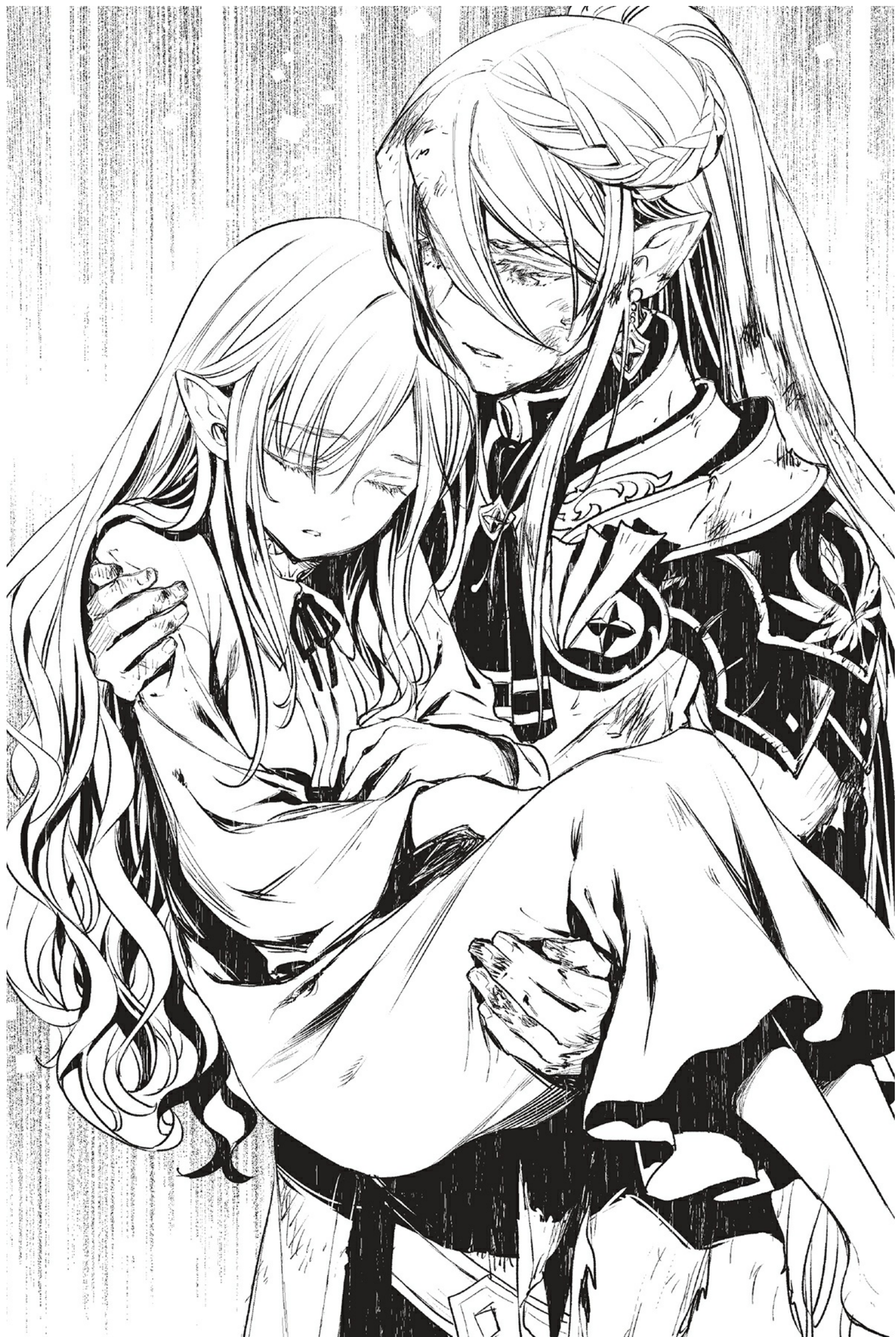
Voroderia smirked. “Of course you can tell, clever boy. I moved Hatoa’s data to this empty shell, so she’s Princess Hatoa now.”

“‘Data’? What do you mean?”

“Oh, sorry about the unfamiliar terminology. To put it simply, she’s a newborn Hatoa. She doesn’t have any memories of you, and she may grow up to be different from the princess you’ve known.”

What Voroderia had done was transfer the scattered remnants of Hatoa into a freshly generated NPC. Bertrand didn’t understand that, of course. He took the sleeping girl into his arms, tears running down his cheeks.

Voroderia moved his arm in a circle, and a part of the scenery peeled off like wallpaper. Behind it, an endless stream of zeroes and ones moved swiftly from top to bottom.



“I’ll save this world for the time being. I’ll freeze the curse, so don’t worry; your elf friends won’t die from it.”

“You’ll ‘freeze’ it? Does that mean they won’t be cured?”

“That’s right. The curse won’t progress to death, but its continuous effects—pain, exhaustion, whatnot—will still apply, so although your friends will be alive, it kind of might be worse than dying?”

Voroderia laughed cruelly. Bertrand instinctively thrust his spear at him, but letters reading SYSTEM BLOCK appeared in the air, and the attack did no damage.

“Well, I’ll see you again, although how many years you’ll have to wait, I can’t tell you. Bye now!”

Voroderia faded away like a mirage, and the young elf girl opened her eyes, looking up at Bertrand.

“Who...are...you?”

“I”

Her voice and the way she moved were exactly like Hatoa’s. Bertrand fought the urge to cry, managing to smile at her kindly.

“My name’s Bertrand. I’m...I’m your...brother.”

“My brother...Bertrand?”

“That’s right.”

“And...what’s my name?”

“Your name’s...Vivian.”

“I’m Vivian... Your sister.”

“Yes.”

Joy kindled in Bertrand’s heart at the thought of having her as a companion, even as the world around them was changing rapidly and in great turmoil. Alas, his joy was brief—Vivian suddenly doubled over in pain. Bertrand had seen that symptom in the warriors.

Did he keep the curse on purpose...?

Bertrand hatefully glared in the direction he'd last seen Voroderia. He was right—the God of Darkness had intentionally brought the princess back with the curse intact. It was part of his plan, although Bertrand wouldn't know about it until much, much later.

Bertrand picked up Vivian in his arms and turned toward the heart of the forest.

“Let's go back. To our home.”

He was thankful that she wouldn't die, but at the same time, he was anguished that he had no way of curing her.

Their forest home was strewn with corpses. Thirty percent of the elf population died in the initial explosion caused by the bomb implanted in Princess Hatoa. Since then, the curse kept killing more and more, until less than 10 percent of the original population remained.

Of the survivors, some had internal wounds. Some had been deeply traumatized by witnessing the deaths of their family. They were all affected by the curse.

Have I saved them, or consigned them to a living hell?

Bertrand was overcome with regret. The ongoing suffering of his people seemed worse than a quick death in battle.

“I must find a way to cure them,” he swore, setting Vivian down on the ground.

It would be his mission.

“I'm sure you will!” she replied with an oblivious smile.

After that, Bertrand spent many years traveling, reading anything he could find on curses, in hope of finding a way to cure the elves. The humans who had been involved in the creation of the curse insisted they knew of no way to lift it, even as he threatened to kill them. It seemed impossible to do anything about the curse.

There's one place I haven't checked yet...

He'd noticed an abnormality in his world, which he'd been doing his best to ignore. Voroderia had removed Bertrand's world from where it had been, linking it to somewhere else. Bertrand sensed five presences, monstrosities at least as powerful as himself.

He began walking to the exit.

Somehow, I'm not afraid.

What terrified him the most wasn't the prospect of fighting someone stronger than him, or being surrounded by a million hostile soldiers, or the boredom of being trapped in a stagnant world forever. He only feared losing those who mattered to him a second time.

Driven by his one and only desire—to lift the curse tormenting his people—Bertrand opened the door to Ross Maora Castle.



Player:

MISAKI

A rookie player—*Eternity* is her first game ever. Through her encounter with Shuutarou and involvement with Crest, she transforms from a scared noncombatant to a self-reliant fighter. Her unique skill is Sense Life.

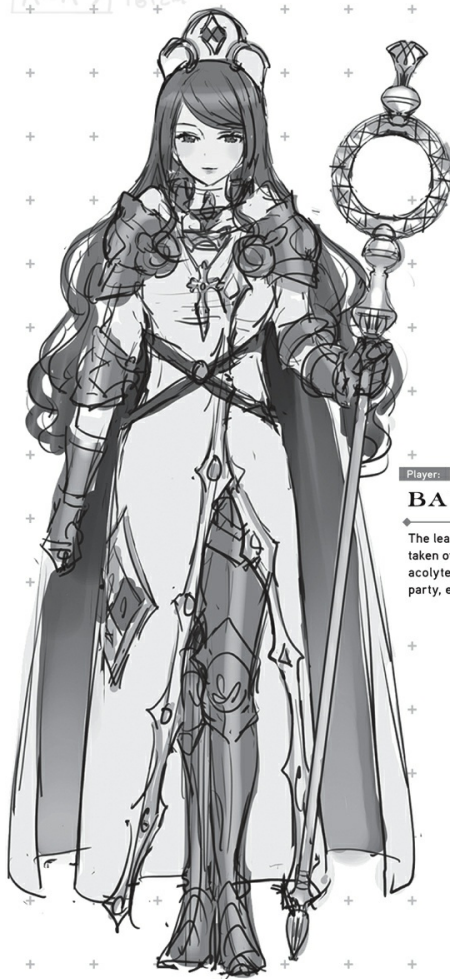


バーバラ 161cm

Player:

BARBARA

The leader of Crest's Party 21 (having taken over from Makoto). A stouthearted acolyte who's protective of her party, especially of its youngsters.





Player:
SHOUKICHI

A swordfighter in Crest's Party 21. The party's personal cheerleader, Shoukichi is energetic and easily gets carried away. Thirteen years old, the same as Shuutarou. Fights with two one-handed swords and hopes to become a dual blade.

5' 4" 150 cm



Player:
KETTLE

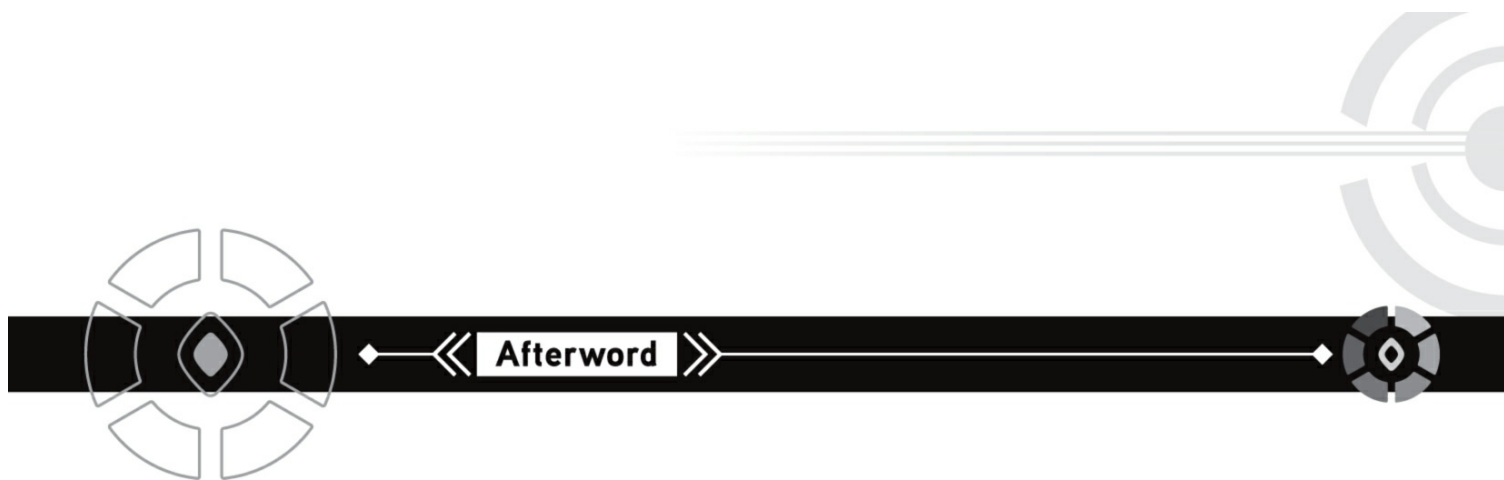
A wizard in Crest's Party 21. Serious and earnest, she's the exact opposite of Shoukichi, with whom she often bickers.



Player:

KYOUKO

An archer in Crest's Party 21 with boyish, short black hair. Despite her self-effacing manner, she's very proactive in looking after the younger party members. Misaki, a fellow archer, is a role model to her.



Thanks for buying the second volume!

Before the release of the first one, I visited my local shrine and spent a looong time praying to the friendly neighborhood deity for patronage, also throwing in quite a lot of coins as my offering. It really paid off, and for the first time in my writing career, more copies of Volume 1 had to be printed to meet the unexpectedly high demand! And now we're on the second volume, thanks to not just my local deity, but also you, my dear readers!

Famitsu Bunko has been heavily advertising *Unimplemented Overlords*, and a dedicated website has been set up with special features and promotion videos, with Romi Park hired to lend her voice for the narration. I wasn't told how much it all cost, but it sure was expensive! I guess getting reprinted is a pretty huge achievement.

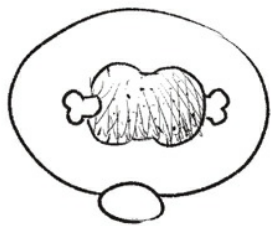
The second volume tells the story of the preparations Shuutarou had to make in order to appear "in public" as a regular player. He couldn't just walk around with a bunch of boss monsters in tow—at least not until becoming a summoner. One of the Overlords, the not-so-smart one, almost got him in trouble, but all was well in the end, and Shuutarou departed for the next town.

In this volume's extra story, the spotlight's on Bertrand and the past conflict between humans and elves. What did you think of that, dear readers? Vampy's story in the previous volume was also quite dark, wasn't it? The Overlords are all survivors from destroyed worlds, so they have a lot of drama in their background.

I was trying to make Bertrand the star of this volume, but somehow, I feel he got overshadowed by Sylvia. I'm planning to write about her in the extra chapter at the end of Volume 3, so wait a little longer to get more of her!

Bye, then! Until next time!

Nagawasabi64



I LOVE HOW SYLVIA IS SO
ADORABLE, COOL, AND
BEAUTIFUL BUT, AT THE SAME
TIME, IS SUCH A DUM-DUM!

Kawaku

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