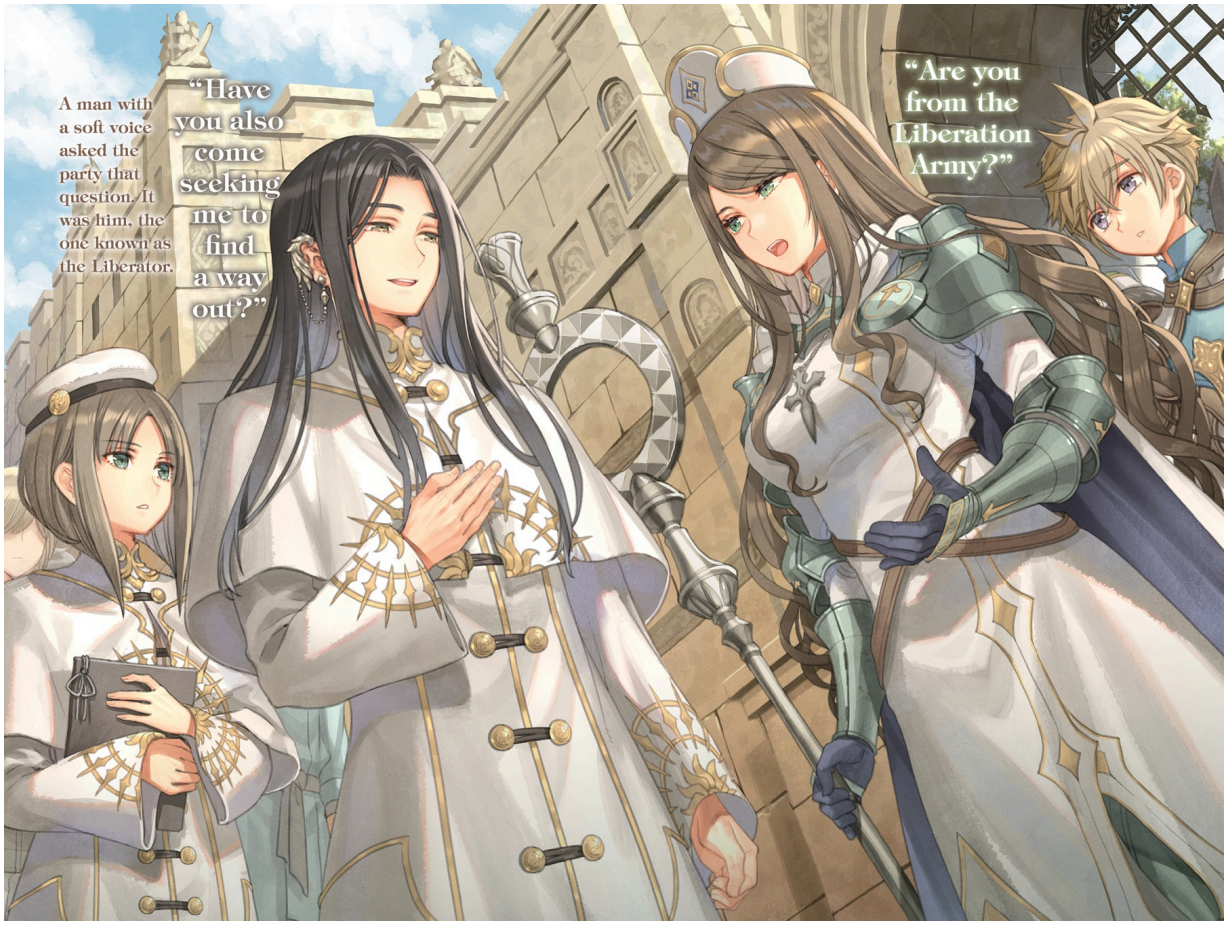

VRMMORPG Eternity
Activation
{ Create Dungeon }
4
Nagawasabi64
ILLUSTRATION BY
Kawaku
START: DEATH GAME
The
UNIMPLEMENTED
OVERLORDS
Have Joined the Party!
Contract: { Boss Mob }
The Six Evil Overlords
and the Dungeon Master


The
UNIMPLEMENTED
OVERLORDS
Have Joined the Party!


4


A man with a soft voice asked the party that question. It was him, the one known as the Liberator.
"Have you also come seeking me to find a way out?"
"Are you from the Liberation Army?"


"Oh yeah? If someone's got a different opinion from you, they're just being stupid, huh?!"
"Stop making a scene! This is embarrassing."
"You think I'm being unreasonable? *You're* the one being unreasonable!"
Player:
HIIIIIVE
Yamata's guild master.
One of the top-eight players.
Player:
ALAN
Yamata's sub-master



The Unimplemented Overlords Have Joined the Party!

4

Nagawasabi64

Illustration by Kawaku

YEN ON
NEW YORK



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MIJISSO NO LASTBOSS TACHIGA NAKAMA NI NARIMASHITA.
Vol.4

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Shuutarou's first summoned dungeon monster
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Crest Guild Members



Player:

Wataru

Crest's guild master.



Player:

Alba

Crest's sub-master.



Player:

Flamme

The brains of Crest.



Player:

Misaki

Crest member who was once saved by Shuutarou.

Crest Party 7 Characters



Player:

Barbara

Party leader. Acolyte.



Player:

Shoukichi

Crest member. Swordfighter.



Player:

Kettle

Crest member. Wizard.



Player:

Kyouko

Crest member. Archer.



Player:

Rao

Former Twilight Adventurers



Player:

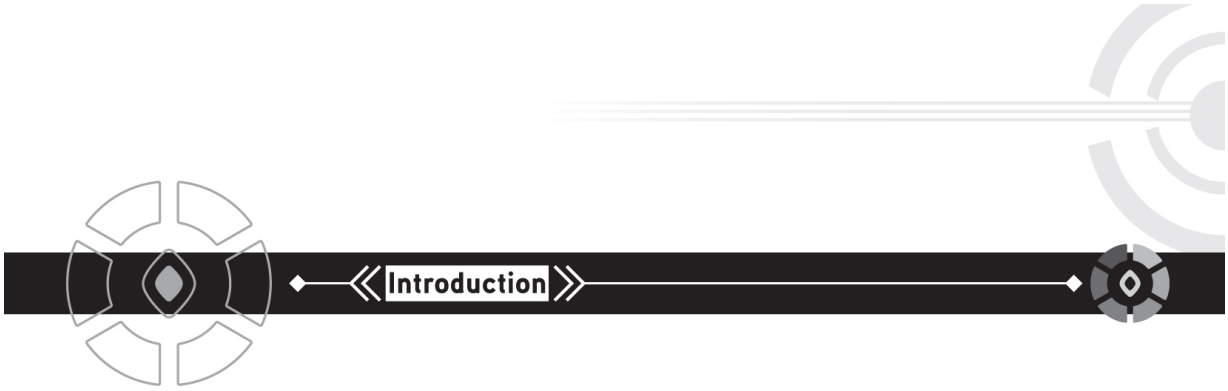
Reilan

Former Twilight Adventurers



member and top player.

member and top player.



It was nighttime. A woman was running through the paths of Olsrott Monastery. Similarly to towns, churches and monasteries were areas where monsters didn't spawn. They weren't quite like towns, though.

The woman was panting, out of breath. She was a player. The terrified look on her face and her half-empty life points bar indicated that she was in danger.

Monsters didn't spawn in Olsrott. But that was the only feature it had in common with town maps.

"Hey! Stop running!"

"She's not that stupid."

The woman was being chased by two men who were laughing. They were fellow players.

A throwing knife grazed the woman's shoulder, and she shuddered as if from an electric shock. Then she collapsed on the ground.

"Why…? I'm a…player…," she managed to say, her eyes desperate and pleading.

She didn't understand why she was being attacked by other players. Her chasers smirked in response.

"Yeah? So what?"

One of the men pinned the woman down with his foot while the two men gathered around.

"It's just an experiment. Need to know for a fact if it's for real—can't just trust some announcement, you know?" the first man said mockingly.

His comrade guffawed. "How many times do you need to test it to know it's real?"

That's when the woman understood what these men were doing. She was wheezing, barely able to breathe, shaking from fear. Tears were streaming down her face.

The man holding her down unsheathed his sword.

"Don't worry—I get right down to business without playing around."

He raised the sword to strike her, and the woman felt the last shreds of hope evaporate from her heart. For a second, everything was shrouded in darkness.

"Aaaaaargh!"

"Gwuh…"

Screams of agony echoed off the walls.

The woman looked up. The man who'd nearly killed her had slumped to the ground, his face contorted with pain. His body was disappearing from the game world.

"How…? There are…no monsters here…"

The other man was looking around, petrified. The woman saw a blade flash in the darkness. It pierced the man's chest, and his body shattered like glass. He was dead.

A person stepped out from the shadows.

"Blergh…"

The woman's savior made a retching sound and collapsed.

"Why did they do that?! Why did they attack another human?!" the player wailed, their voice rife with grief and pain.

For a short time, the woman didn't know how to react, her mind drawing a blank. But when she was able to process what had happened, she was overwhelmed by guilt—this stranger had saved

her by taking the lives of others, which, based on their reaction, they had never done before.

"Thank you so much for saving my life," she said with intense sincerity to the person, who was sitting on the ground motionless. "Please… Please allow me to pay you back. I swear on my life to help you in any way I can. If you let me…"

The sun appeared on the horizon, bringing an end to the darkness of the night.

That was how it began for those two players.

A new life in the VRMMORPG *Eternity*; a game turned into a death trap.



After successfully completing his job-change quest, Shuutarou headed to the agreed meeting place. Shoukichi impatiently rushed toward him as soon as he saw him.

"What's the deal with this master of monsters job, Shuutarou?! It's special, am I right?!"

Shoukichi was so overexcited, he sputtered as he spoke. He must have noticed Shuutarou's new job name in the party menu.

After completing the EX quest, Shuutarou had changed from summoner to master of monsters, which was the top-tier job in the summoner class. The quest to unlock it was insanely hard, and accordingly, the job was insanely powerful. Shuutarou was likely the strongest player in the game. His party members had no way of knowing that, though, since they weren't able to see any info about his job besides the name.

Kettle slinked out in front of Shoukichi.

"I heard some higher-tier jobs have to be unlocked through a quest. Is yours one of those…?" she asked with burning curiosity.

When the job-change NPC told Shuutarou he'd have to do a quest, he let his party know he'd be doing something on his own for a while and would rejoin them later. Kettle figured out what Shuutarou had been up to.





Shuutarou forced a smile, scratching his chin nervously. "Um, well…"

I can't really tell them the truth…

Nobody would believe him. He'd have to keep it simple and only report that he had completed a job-change quest and gotten his new job.

"I knew someone on the front lines with a higher-tier summoner job… Had powerful summons. But their job name was something else," Rao mused.

Reilan smiled. "Beta testers found that the available higher-tier jobs for summoners change depending on which summons they had, and unique skills can also affect what's on offer. I'm not at all surprised Shuutarou got some unusual job advancement, considering his summons."

Barbara clapped, eager to steer the topic away from Shuutarou's peculiarities. "Your inquisitiveness is making the poor boy flustered! He's been a strong player to begin with, and the job promotion made him even stronger—which is what you'd expect from a promotion."

"Yeah, I guess so…," Shoukichi muttered, suddenly looking deflated.

Kyouko shot him a glance and giggled. "Feeling like you're stuck in the slow lane while Shuutarou speeds ahead?"

"Wh-what?! No! Where'd you get that idea?!"

"From your secret training to finally beat Shuutarou?" Rao teased.

"Don't tell him that!!! Argh! You're so mean!"

Shoukichi pouted and looked away. His friends laughed.

While Shuutarou was away on his quest, Rao and Reilan had been helping Shoukichi and Kettle practice their battle skills. Shoukichi's goal for his training was to get at least as good as Shuutarou.

Reilan gently stroked Shoukichi's hair. "You got stronger, both you and Kettle. And you'll only keep getting better—that's my expert

opinion."

Shoukichi rubbed his nose, embarrassed by being petted, but his spirits were lifted.

"Well, team!" said Barbara. "The front line's waiting. Shall we cram in as many quests as we can this afternoon?"

"Okay!"

Everyone was raring to go.

A little smile of relief appeared on Shuutarou's face. He was glad he didn't have to lie to explain away his new job, and the welcoming atmosphere in Party 7 made him happy.

* * * *

"Those are all lies! Open your eyes!"

Shuutarou and his friends were on the way back to Crest's Calloah office when they noticed a gathering near the town gates.

"What's going on there?" Shoukichi asked Barbara.

"Don't know," she replied, shrugging.

Two people were standing at the center of the crowd.

"A guild recruitment drive, maybe?" Barbara added.

"They're getting a lot of attention for being some small unknown guild. Maybe they have very strict joining requirements?" wondered Kyouko.

"Like only level forty or higher?" said Rao.

"That's rough, having just two reps doing the recruitment," Kettle said impassively.

Reilan nodded.

Meanwhile, Shuutarou was racking his brain.

Where have I heard that voice before…?

He looked at one of the men talking to the crowd, but in the end, he drew a blank and lost interest. He and his friends passed by the gathering and into the town.

"Oh, look! It's Shuutarou!"

Shuutarou turned when someone called his name. Party 7 stopped and turned to look, too. Two players, a man and a woman, walked up to Shuutarou, who beamed at them.

"Kiichi and Yoshino!"

Shuutarou had met them when he was briefly in Party 38. They'd parted ways after reaching Emaro Town.

"How long has it been? How are you doing, Shuutarou?" said Yoshino.

"I'm doing great, as you can see!"

Shuutarou had joined a Crest party to learn about summoners, as part of his plan to make it possible for his Evil Overlords to accompany him without raising other players' suspicions. That's how he met the unlucky summon Iron and its heartless master, Rivir. Party 38 disbanded when Rivir lost control of Iron and died at its hand.

Shuutarou explained that Kiichi and Yoshino were the friends he'd been looking for in Emaro when they were passing through that town earlier.

Barbara smiled and introduced herself.

"Hello. I'm Barbara, leader of Crest's Party 7. We're questing together with Shuutarou."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kiichi, and this is Yoshino. I'm an archer, and she's an acolyte. We're guildless."

Kiichi was understandably surprised to hear the party name. Crest's parties were numbered from the strongest to the weakest. Not everyone knew that, but Kiichi and Yoshino were former members of Crest, in Party 38, which had been threatened with demotion at the time.

"So you've teamed up with a single-digit Crest party! You're surely doing well for yourself, Shuutarou!" said Yoshino.

Shuutarou talked with Kiichi and Yoshino for a while, telling them about his reclassing to summoner, getting his first summons—Sylvia and Theodore—and about how disappointed he'd been when he couldn't find Kiichi, Yoshino, and Taneda in the previous town. Kiichi and Yoshino were pleased to hear about Shuutarou's adventures.

The rest of Party 7 were looking on, smiling. They were happy for Shuutarou, who had finally found two of the people he'd been searching for earlier, and it was heartwarming to see the boy excitedly relate what he'd been doing to the two grown-ups.

"Gosh, I feel bad now thinking we'd have saved you the trouble of looking for us if we'd only registered as friends," Kiichi told Shuutarou.

"Then I'll add you guys to my friends list now!"

"Yes, please do," said Yoshino.

They completed the registration. Shuutarou was glad to see Kiichi and Yoshino's names appear on his friends list.

"You've been based in Emaro for a while, then?" Rao asked the pair. "Did you know a player called Haru Kanata, a crafter also based in Emaro?"

Kiichi and Yoshino exchanged looks.

"Ah, yes. The owner of that workshop. We got our weapons serviced at her place before leaving the town," said Kiichi.

Nobody noticed the shadow that passed over Yoshino's face.

"She was our friend. One day, she was gone, just like that," Rao said with an uncomfortable laugh.

Shuutarou remembered the empty equipment shop in Emaro, where Rao and Reilan had stopped by to offer a prayer.

"Ah. We last saw her when she was leaving with a party headed to Calloah. Did you lose contact with her?" Kiichi asked.

Reilan and Rao sighed. Rao explained in a strained voice that their friend had died. They supposed she must have gotten killed when traveling to Calloah.

Kiichi and Yoshino exchanged looks again.

"That party was going to meet up with the Liberator. We've also joined a party to come here and meet him," said Yoshino.

Rao scratched her head, looking distraught. "Why didn't she ask us to escort her to this Liberator guy…? Maybe she'd still be alive…"

Reilan also seemed to be battling with her inner anguish.

Yoshino looked from one girl to the other with concern. "Why do you assume she's dead? She probably just logged out after meeting with the Liberator."

Logging out—a common term used by gamers but not by *Eternity* players.

Rao fell silent, not understanding what Yoshino was trying to say. Her first thought was that Yoshino was mocking her, and a fearsome rage welled up inside her, but she stifled it so as not to cause a scene in front of Shuutarou.

"Yeah, right," she said with a sour smile and a wave of her hand.

Yoshino's face remained serious.

"It is possible, you know," Yoshino insisted.

She paused, then added, "The player called the Liberator has logged out before, then came back. He found a way to log out, and I heard he's helped many players do the same."

Shuutarou and his friends looked at her in shock.

The possibility of logging out was something everyone stuck in the prison of *Eternity* was dreaming of.

* * * *

At Crest's Calloah headquarters, a tall beauty pushed open the wooden double doors, immediately causing a stir.

"It's Party 7, guys…"

"Rao's too cool!"

"I heard that girl's a super tank!"

"How'd they get so many pretty girls in one party?"

Three more beautiful ladies followed the tall one. They didn't resemble one another, but each one of them was gorgeous. It was rare for Japanese people to look good in Western armor, but Party 7 could pull it off, earning them a nickname based on the female warrior deities from Norse mythology—the Valkyries.

Three children and two little critters came in after the women. Kettle frowned and moved closer to the four women.

"How come we don't command the same level of respect…?" she grumbled.

"Hello. Here to pick up a new quest?" asked K, the receptionist and chief of Crest's Calloah branch. He quickly noticed how uncomfortable the party looked. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"We heard something odd today…," Barbara began.

She relayed what Kiichi and Yoshino had told them about the Liberator. As she spoke, K's face became clouded with worry.

"He's making it into the headlines now, huh…?" He sighed deeply before sharing what he knew. "This Liberator, as they've taken to calling him, is the leader of a recently established small guild. A few days ago, he suddenly started telling people he found a way to log out."

"So that's where the nickname comes from," Shoukichi said to himself.

"And is this method of his credible at all?" asked Reilan.

K was silent for a moment. Then he shook his head. "I looked into it, but all I can say is, I have no idea."

Rao's temper flared, and she slammed her hands on the reception desk. "Are you friggin' serious?!"

"Please calm down."

"How can I be calm?! People may be dying out there this very moment!"

Everyone in the party had been thinking it, but they didn't want to say it. When they heard about the Liberator, their first thought

had been that this person was a con man, killing players in some way and passing it off as setting them free from the game world.

"He's done a demonstration of himself logging out," K added hurriedly after being pressured by Rao. "It definitely looks like he can really do it."

"So he's proven it?"

"I have a video recording. See for yourself."

He sent her a video file.

"And don't forget," he continued, "that if this person really was killing players, he wouldn't be able to enter towns, but he does come to preach at the town plaza."

Player killers became criminals in the world of the game, and NPCs guarding towns and cities killed them when they tried to enter. It was a mechanic that had remained unchanged since the beta days. The Liberator's public appearances in town were proof that he didn't have blood on his hands.

"Every day, there are more people seeking his help to log out. At least thirty or so players have left *Eternity*, as far as I could verify, and there might be more," K said with a troubled look on his face.

Until then, players believed that the only way out of the nightmarish deadly game was through clearing it. They either headed out to explore the front lines, risking their lives doing so, or waited back in the starting town, hoping that others would get to the end of the game and set everyone free.

Could what they'd taken for granted have been wrong? While it would be terrific if there really was another way out, it sounded too good to be true.

Everyone was silent for a while, occupied with their own thoughts, until Barbara spoke again.

"As far as I can tell, there is no solid proof that the people this person is claiming to help have really logged out. Could you not use your authority here to stop players from contacting this Liberator until such proof is acquired?"

"I'm only the boss of Crest's Calloah branch. It doesn't give me authority over the town. There's nothing I can do to stop people from coming or going."

There was silence again.

"It boggles the mind that another person is playing with fire like that after the returnee massacre…," Reilan muttered bitterly, her voice colored with anger.

"What massacre?" Kettle asked. She looked ready to burst into tears.

Reilan told them about the tragedy that had happened in that very town, Calloah, a few days after everyone became trapped in the game.

That early on, there were still many who refused to believe that in-game death meant real death. They called it all a scare, a hoax. They believed the log-out function was broken, and that if you got killed, you'd just wake up back in the real world. There was no way to prove it, though, and pain felt real. Fear felt real. Gradually, more and more players were growing convinced that dropping to zero LP meant their bodies were actually dying.

Then one guy started telling everyone that he'd died on a field map once, and that returned him to the real world. That he'd come back to the game to tell everyone about it.

Of course, that kindled hope—hope that led some desperate players to take their own lives then and there. But some were wary…

"I'll believe it when you die in front of our eyes and respawn!"

Nobody else had respawned since the game locked everyone in. It was quite obvious that the guy was lying about having come back. Reilan was there in the crowd, and she saw the guy's face twist in terror, confirming her suspicion.

"At that point, it was too late…," she said.

The guy tried to talk his way out of it, but he was surrounded by a crowd of players driven crazy with the desire to get out of the game. It took only a moment for them to slaughter him. And he didn't respawn.

The players who had a hand in killing the self-proclaimed returnee became flagged as criminals in the game's system, and the town guard NPCs ruthlessly executed every one of them. That was the returnee massacre.

"Maybe he lied just to give people hope, without understanding what the consequences might be. It is a fact that players who die don't respawn. If the Liberator is doing the same, it's irresponsible to let him carry on," said Reilan.

Barbara nodded in agreement.

Kyouko didn't seem to be listening, though.

"What if it's true this time…?" she whispered to herself.

She had been putting on a brave face, but she was mentally at her limits. Shoukichi and Kettle were also looking unsure, unable to completely discard the hope that there was another way to return to the real world.

"Excuse me, we're looking to hire an escort for traveling back to Allistras."

Just then, a group of six players pushed past Party 7 to speak to the receptionist.

"Let's get out of the way," Barbara told her party.

K turned to his new customers. Party 7 overheard their conversation from off to the side.

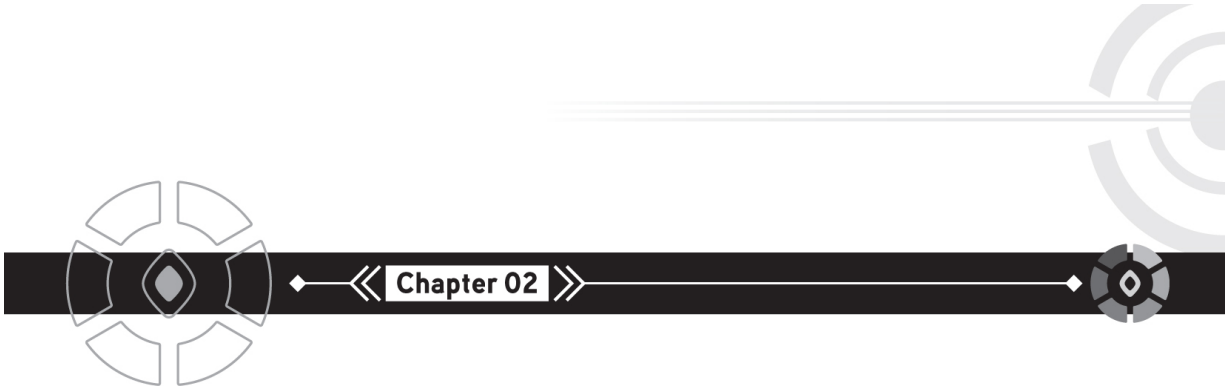
"Escort, got it," said K. "Well, it looks like Party 6 has nothing to do at the moment, and we wanted to send them to the big HQ anyway with a message…"

"You're joking! We'll have Galbo's party for escort? We'll be as safe as can be!"

Barbara faced away from the reception desk. She measured the most unsettled members of her party with a serious look.

“What people say is not always accurate. It won’t do us much good to speculate without first seeing this Liberator for ourselves.”

They decided to go to where the man had been speaking to the crowd earlier. K watched them walk out the main door, a hint of worry in his eyes.



Party 7 walked back to where a crowd had gathered. The people there seemed to be about to relocate.

"Have you also come seeking me to find a way out?"

A man with a soft voice asked the party that question. He had long black hair and was smiling benevolently. It was him, the one known as the Liberator.

He wasn't decked out in anything special. The equipment he was wearing didn't even come close to the specs of Shoukichi's and Kettle's gear, but it was sufficient to battle monsters in the nearby areas. He wore a white cloak over his armor. A woman following him, maybe his aide, was also sporting a white cloak, so that was presumably their guild uniform.

"Are you from the Liberation Army?" Barbara asked him warily.

The man hurried to give a reassuring reply. "There is no need for alarm. What I do may be hard to believe; I am aware of that. I've become accustomed to meeting with doubt and mistrust."

The Liberator looked curiously from one member of Party 7 to another.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

Barbara went straight to the point, not caring if she came across as rude.

"If possible, we'd like to see the process of logging out."

"Ah. In that case, you're welcome to accompany us to the monastery, where I will help some people log out today," the Liberator replied politely.

He and his aide turned away and walked out the town gates. Party 7 tensely followed.

* * * *

The Liberator led a group of people to Olsrott Monastery, a sacred place with white brick walls, a blue tiled roof, and a bell tower with a crucifix on top. The building was clearly erected to practice some faith, but there were presently no priest or monk NPCs living there. Instead, it served only as a shelter for players.

Inside, there were pews and an altar with a cross behind it. Largely unused, the building had a rather gloomy atmosphere, not helped by the lack of windows. Candles were the only source of scarce light.

This was where the Liberator was going to work his miracle. He walked up to the altar and turned.

"Thank you for coming," he said to the anxious crowd.

Before he could continue, Rao stepped forward. "Sorry to butt in, but I have some questions for you, and I'd like you to hold off on trying to log anyone out until you answer them."

That riled up the crowd of log-out hopefuls.

"You have no right to interfere!" someone shouted, but the Liberator raised his hand to command silence.

"Of course, ask what you will. I am sure there are more among us who have not yet shed their doubts. Logging out does not need to happen within any specific time for it to work. It is quite simple, I assure you. I will be happy to dispel any uncertainties you might have."

That calmed the crowd. Rao began her questioning.

"Why has nobody you've helped before come back to help anyone else? This, to me, is the biggest red flag."

Rao was thinking about Haru Kanata. Her friend had a pressing reason to return to the real world as soon as possible: She didn't have much time left to live. It was inconceivable to Rao that Haru Kanata would have logged out without even saying good-bye to her friends and never contacted them again.

"I was told you got at least thirty people outta here," Rao continued heatedly, "but none of them was ever seen here again. And we haven't been contacted by anyone who's not trapped here, either. Correct me if I'm wrong."

She was sure she wasn't wrong, though. There had been no news of any of the "rescued" players coming back or of new players spawning in Allistras. The world of *Eternity* seemed to be perfectly disconnected from the real world.

The crowd eyed the Liberator with concern, but he gave a measured answer.

"I have asked those who left to help, of course, but I wouldn't hope for them to be able to do anything for us from their end."

"Why not?" Rao asked.

The Liberator raised his hand and pointed upward. "I assume you know about the speedup feature of this game?"

He was referring to in-game time being sped up in relation to real time. Most players were aware of this from doing quests, for example. The audience nodded.

"Excellent," the Liberator continued. "Now, think about the first day. We had so many deaths then. The whole first week was marked by a horrifying number of player deaths. At first, they were at the hand of monsters…"

A few players began sobbing, the trauma coming back to them.

"If so many players were dying, do you think no action would be taken in the real world? Action more immediate than trying to decipher what had gone wrong with the code. Physical action."

The Liberator paused for effect.

"Imagine…how an older person who's not good with technology would try to fix a broken device. Would they call a technician? Ask a

tech-savvy family member for help? Wait and see if things get better on their own?"

Very slowly, he shook his head.

"No, they would want to do something right then and there. Hitting the contraption might seem like a good idea. Or better yet…"

He touched his index fingers together, and then pulled them away from each other.

"…they would pull the plug."

The players shuddered at the thought. What would happen to their consciousness if they got forcefully disconnected from the game? What effect would it have on their bodies? There was a chance they would be fine, but what if not? Wouldn't that be a death even crueler than dying in battle with monsters?

"We are probably in a comatose state in the real world. I reckon it wouldn't take more than a couple days from when we became locked-in that we'd start seeing players die for reasons unknown in the game if concerned friends and relatives outside were turning the power off on us."

People in the real world would soon get concerned if their child, boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse was "playing" the game nonstop for days. One full day could be written off as getting overboard with gaming, but two, three days? That would no longer seem normal. Especially given how many players died on the first day the game became a death trap. There'd be corpses out there, still wearing the virtual reality headsets. Something like that wouldn't go unnoticed. Sure, some players lived alone, so their death might not be discovered for a while, but many had family. And once the deaths began getting reported, would the families of players who were still alive patiently wait for the government to issue instructions as to what to do?

"Yet nothing of the sort happened," the Liberator said, raising his voice.

Players had been dying for a variety of reasons, but there was no epidemic of unexplained deaths.

"This mystery can easily be explained by the speedup functionality."

The Liberator unsheathed a sword and a dagger.

"The flow of time in the game and outside is different. For example, if a year here was only a second in real time, by the time anyone in the real world noticed what was happening and tried to help us, we'd have been trapped here for many years. This theory explains why nobody from the outside has tried to save us yet."

He put the weapons away and continued, "It is only a theory, but it explains everything, including our physiological needs."

This time, he showed the crowd a piece of jerky.

"We can eat game food for comfort, but we don't suffer from hunger, and neither do we need to use the bathroom. We do, however, require sleep. And why would that be?"

He put the jerky away and surveyed the onlookers.

"Time is sped up here, but while hardly any time passes for our bodies, our brains are active throughout all of it. Only our brains are living this life here, in *Eternity*. And brains need a break, too. They need sleep. That's why this one basic need remains for us here."

There were some "aah"s from the crowd. Everyone had wondered at some point about not needing to eat or use the bathroom, and the answer offered by the Liberator made sense.

"We've been here for several months, without eating or needing the bathroom. This would confirm my theory that a year here might be only a second in real time…or perhaps a real-time second is ten years here."

If the difference in the flow of time was that drastic, it was hopeless to expect help from the outside. Having convinced the crowd of this, the Liberator went on to explain his own experience.

"As for why I'm still here, after realizing how to log out, I couldn't wait to be free. But at the same time, I couldn't bear to leave my friends behind. I was on the log-out confirmation screen, but I canceled it and came back. Which means that, to be precise, I have never fully logged out myself yet."

Time still flowed at the in-game speed on the log-out confirmation screen, he supposed, concluding his explanation.

Barbara was the next to speak to him.

"While your theory does neatly explain some of our doubts, it is only a theory. I'd like to see someone return from the log-out confirmation screen. Not you or any of your guildmates, but a complete stranger. I would like them to add me to their friends list before attempting that, too."

There was whispering in the crowd. The Liberator's talk was reassuring to them, but when it came time to volunteer for a demonstration, suddenly, nobody was too keen to put themselves forward. Except one person.

"I'll do it."

It was Kiichi.

* * * *

A little way from the monastery, Shuutarou was sitting in the shade of a tree, waiting for his friends.

I could probably enter if Sylvia and Theodore were regular summons and not boss monsters…

He watched the monastery with worry.

Monsters were denied entry to the monastery. Even summons weren't exempt from this rule, but summoners could go in after despawning their monsters. Shuutarou, however, didn't know about it. When he tried to walk in with Party 7, an invisible wall repelled him. Not wanting to pile on another worry on his friends, who were already on edge, he quietly left to wait outside.

"Sylvia, that weird smell you told me about at the graveyard… By any chance, was it the smell of this guy, the Liberator?"

Sylvia shook her head. *'No, it was a different smell.'*

"Ah, okay. That's a relief, I guess."

Shuutarou had a feeling there was something fishy about the Liberator, and he trusted Sylvia's instinct. If she'd told him the guy

smelled odd, he'd assume K was right, and they should all watch out. But it seemed his own gut feeling had been wrong.

"They're coming out!"

Party 7 appeared outside the monastery door. Shuutarou checked if everyone was there. To his relief, nobody was missing.

"Welcome back!"

"Huh? You were outside?" Shoukichi asked, surprised.

Did he not notice his absence?

Reilan, a pained look on her face, tried to approach Shuutarou, but Barbara put her hand on her shoulder to stop her.

"Let's find somewhere more comfortable to talk. Shuutarou, we'll tell you everything that happened inside. Everything…"

Shuutarou cocked his head to the side, wondering why Barbara sounded so ominous. Everyone was eerily quiet.

* * * *

The party went to the restaurant at Crest's Calloah guild office. They chose a table at the back.

"Oh, I have an idea!"

Shuutarou started doing something on his personal display.

"Tell us," said Kyouko.

Shuutarou smiled as he opened his friends list. "I'm going to invite Kiichi and Yoshino to join us, if that's okay. I'm sure you'll like them! There's so much I want to ask them, too."

Reilan gently caught his hand. Shuutarou looked at her, not understanding. Everyone was staring at him in a very odd way.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Barbara mustered the strength to tell him.

"Kiichi and Yoshino…aren't here anymore."

Shuutarou was stunned. He waited for an explanation, but Barbara's lips were pursed.

"What do you mean? Where are they?"

He scrolled to their names on his friends list and froze.

Kiichi	**Offline**
Yoshino	**Offline**

* * * *

A little earlier, when Kiichi stepped out in front of the Liberator, volunteering to be a guinea pig, Barbara and her party were taken aback, recognizing him. He was the young man whom Shuutarou had spoken to with such warmth earlier that day.

"What is your name?" the Liberator asked.

"Kiichi."

The Liberator opened his arms, smiling calmly. "Kiichi, is there anyone you wish to contact before we begin?"

"No… There's someone who's not here, but I'd rather he didn't know. He might shake my resolve."

Kiichi smiled. He was thinking of a brave little boy who had once saved him. Yoshino was in the crowd, watching him.

"We shall begin with a demonstration," the Liberator announced in a louder voice. "Kiichi will go to the log-out confirmation screen, and he shall come back. You will witness him disappearing, and the lady here will be able to see his status changing to 'offline' on her friends list. He will then return, and his status will change back to 'online.' Does anyone have any objections?"

There was silence. Everyone was keen to see proof that this worked.

Kiichi walked over to Barbara, who looked nervous, to request that she add him to her friends list. After they registered each other as friends, Kiichi shyly asked Barbara to pass a message from him to Shuutarou later. Then he went back to the Liberator, who smiled at him, satisfied.

"First, go over to the cross and kneel as if in prayer. That is basically it. The log-out process will start automatically after a while."

Kiichi knelt in front of the cross as told. Nothing was happening.

"For a long time, I wondered what purpose churches and monasteries might serve. Uninhabitable buildings without monsters, not connected to any events. Why would there be so many of them, both inside and in between towns? I sensed they had a more important function than simply being safe areas to take a break," the Liberator said, standing beside Kiichi. "They do not work as save points or spawn points, but they are still in the game in its current state. Why? Why would something without any particular function be kept?"

The facilities did appear to serve no purpose, even though they were dotted around the world. It was odd indeed that these distinct buildings would be only intended as rest spots.

"I prayed to be let out of here. To be released from this game. And my prayers were heard. I was logged out."

Just as the Liberator finished talking, Kiichi vanished.

"?!"

Barbara had her friends list open. She immediately checked Kiichi's status. It was OFFLINE.

"No… Impossible…"

She was lost for words, but it wasn't long before she recovered from the shock. She looked at the Liberator sharply. Then her gaze shifted to the floor next to him.

He might be a player killer with some elaborate method using a special ability. If Kiichi doesn't come back—

But just as she thought it, Kiichi appeared again.

"Huh? What did I…? I'm back?"

Kiichi opened and closed his fists, watching them move. A cheer rose from the crowd. Barbara was the only one who sank down to the floor.

Kiichi Online

While Barbara was dumbfounded after checking Kiichi's status on her friends list, Reilan made her request to the Liberator.

"I want to try it myself!"

Rao tried to stop her. "What? Reilan, don't!"

"I have to experience it firsthand, or I won't believe it."

Reilan shook off Rao and went to kneel in front of the cross, just as Kiichi had done. She pressed her hands together. The Liberator didn't seem thrown by this, watching her in silence.

* * * *

Back at the restaurant…

After hearing that part of the story, Shuutarou turned to Reilan with concern painted on his face.

"Are you okay, Reilan? Feeling any different?"

Reilan shook her head. "Honestly, I think anyone who tried it would be convinced. I regret a little that I didn't select 'Yes' back then. I could be back in the real world…"

Just like Kiichi, Reilan had temporarily vanished, and her status was OFFLINE while she wasn't there. Like Kiichi, she came back online quickly. The Liberator hadn't lied.

"I wasn't suspecting Kiichi of collaborating with the Liberator to trick the crowd, but I still wanted to test it for myself. And it worked. The Liberator's theory makes sense, and I find myself believing him…"

Reilan hung her head, and Barbara took over.

"Shuutarou, I have a message for you from Kiichi and Yoshino. They told me their real names and addresses. The message is 'Let's meet outside.'"

"Thanks," Shuutarou replied quietly.

After Reilan returned from the log-out confirmation screen, Party 7 was without any more arguments against the Liberator, and the gathered crowd proceeded to log out. There were a dozen or so people who'd come in just to watch, but everyone else offered their prayers at the cross and vanished.

"If it's possible to get out, I want to get out," Kyouko said after a long silence.

Her friends all turned to look at her. Tears were spilling from her eyes.

"I will never regret meeting so many wonderful people here, but I've grown up really sheltered, and I simply can't cope with the brutality of this world. When I saw those people logging out, I wished I was one of them," she said, sobbing, covering her face with her hands.

Death was lurking behind every corner in *Eternity*. It was a cruel world to be stuck in. One mistake on a monster-infested field map, and you were dead. If all it took to escape from that hell was offering a prayer in a church, it was a no-brainer.

Kyouko wiped her tears. "But…I couldn't do it if it meant leaving Shoukichi, Kettle, and Shuutarou behind. If you're staying, I'm staying, too. But if you decide to trust the Liberator and log out, I'll log out with you."

Kyouko couldn't wait to be let out of the game, but she cared too much for her friends from Party 7 to leave without them.

"I would like everyone to share their thoughts on this," said Barbara.

Shoukichi and Kettle were looking down darkly at the table, unable to make up their minds. Reilan was in no mood to speak again. Only Rao was gazing straight ahead, holding her head high.

"If the man wasn't lying, it's possible to log out at any time just by praying in any church. I won't believe him until I check that out," said Rao.

Barbara nodded in agreement.

"I'm also wary of believing him just yet."

She turned to Shuutarou and gently stroked his hair.

"We have no way of making sure that Kiichi and Yoshino safely returned to the real world, but they didn't make that decision rashly."

Shuutarou nodded. He closed his friends list and looked up. "I don't think we should all try it, as long as there's no proof it's actually safe. Until then, it's better to carry on as before."

Shoukichi stood. "What he said! It'd really kill me, you know, to go back knowing I won't be able to help anyone still in the game. I'd be thinking about you all the time, worried sick, unable to swallow a bite of food!"

His show of emotion shook Kettle from her hesitation. Encouraged by the boys' determination, Reilan and Kyouko also raised their heads.

"For the time being, let's hold off on logging out," Barbara suggested, and everyone agreed.

They hoped, of course, that the players who did log off were fine, but they would stick to another strategy, at least temporarily. They moved on to discussing that.

* * * *

The battle arena in the paradise city Regiuria would normally be bustling with action, but that day, it was closed off to the public. Only seven people and one beast could be seen there.

"Thank you all for coming! I could use a little bit of help from you…"

Vampy was eager to please.

"Ask anything of me, Master!"

Shuutarou had gathered all his Evil Overlords.

“Might this be in relation to your newly acquired powers, Master?” asked Elroad.

“Bingo! Yeah.”

Elroad bowed his head. “I shall offer you any assistance you require.”

When Shuutarou completed his job-change quest and became a master of monsters, he’d unlocked a whole range of new skills.

Master of Monsters

An extraordinary summoner who can command all types of monsters, making excellent use of their abilities and bringing out their true potential. Perhaps one day, they will lead their army of monsters to conquer the entire world.

Promotion Requirements: Reach 10,000 max-loyalty minions and defeat the mystic summoner and all his summons

Skills Learned: Additional Summon Slots, Master of Monsters' Rally Call, Life Share, Peak Growth, Max Summon, Magical Contract

Skill Info
Additional Summon Slots: Maximum summon slots +2
Master of Monsters' Rally Call: Minions' stats +150% (Effect range: 15m)
Life Share: Share LP pool with up to two chosen minions
Peak Growth: Minions' EXP gain +500%

With Additional Summon Slots, Shuutarou could have all his Evil Overlords in his party at once. While near him, his minions benefited from Master of Monsters' Rally Call and Peak Growth boosts, although that last one wouldn't do anything for the Evil Overlords, since they were already at max level.

Even with just Sylvia and Theodore in his party, Shuutarou would become invincible as long as either of them lived thanks to Life Share.

And he had two more amazing new skills.

Max Summon: Overcome a summon's limitations, increasing their maximum level and evolution tier. (Only usable on maxed-out minions.)
Magical Contract: Gain access to your minions' physical, magical, and unique skills. Effectiveness increases with loyalty.

Shuutarou explained his skills to the Overlords.

"I tried casting Max Summon on you guys, but I get an error message saying the conditions are not met, so it looks like I can't use it yet. I'd like to test out Magical Contract, though, which is why I invited you all here."

What Shuutarou said about Max Summon caught Theodore's attention.

The skill is supposed to work on maxed-out minions, but it won't work on any of us? Wouldn't that mean we haven't reached our full potential yet?

"Did the error message specify the conditions that aren't met?" Theodore asked Shuutarou.

"No, it didn't give any details, sorry."

"Hmph."

"But," Shuutarou added, his eyes lighting up with anticipation, "once that skill becomes available, I'll make all of you way stronger! I'm so excited I'll finally be able to do something for you, instead of only having you help me all the time."

The Evil Overlords were stunned; it was as if they'd been struck by lightning. What was their master saying? They were the ones who had benefited so much from having him as their master, not the other way around.

"You need not do anything more for us, Master—you have already given us more than we could've ever hoped for," said Theodore. "We could not have a better, wiser master than you. You care for us and rule with kindness. I am proud to serve you."

He was not trying to ingratiate himself—he spoke with utmost sincerity. The other Overlords agreed with him.

Each of the Overlords had dominated their world, and having no equal to serve as a mirror to their self, they'd pursued what they believed in without concern for anyone. Meeting Shuutarou, who didn't use his power to get his way and who came to the aid of those weaker than him, profoundly impressed them.

"Master…"

"Aaaah… Maaaster!"

"We'll do anything for you!"

Vampy and Gallarus got emotional, while Sylvia flashed a little smile. Only Elroad appeared somewhat uncomfortable.

"Master," he said, "three of us possess abilities that do not need to be learned, and one of us has an ability that I would advise against learning."

"Really?"

Shuutarou wasn't sure what to make of it. Elroad proceeded to explain.

"Bertrand's abilities rely on manipulating life force. They basically activate automatically, without the need to think about them."

Bertrand scratched his cheek, looking uneasy.

"Now, Theodore's skills are not capped. Should this carry over to you, simply working on your own abilities will develop them beyond what is normally possible."

Theodore nodded in understanding. His unique skill, Sky's the Limit, removed stat caps. For example, swordfighters naturally had excellent STR growth, but they didn't get many MAG points as they leveled up. Theodore's unique skill disabled that limitation so that training increased all stats. With that, even a summoner like Shuutarou could become an ace magic knight, although his job restricted which equipment he could use.

"Gallarus's special ability is countering damage automatically," Elroad explained. "It requires no practice, activating on its own."

Gallarus looked like Elroad had taken the wind out of his sails. His skill was immensely powerful, but as Elroad said, it wasn't something he would need to teach Shuutarou.

Elroad turned toward Vampy.

"Her skill is rather obviously a poor candidate for learning. It took her thousands of years to learn to control her area-of-effect instant-death skill. I daresay it would be safer for you not to acquire it, Master."

Vampy glared at Elroad as if she wanted to talk back, but his reasoning was sound. Even she had thought her ability was a curse, having led to her inadvertently killing countless innocent people.

"…"

Shuutarou didn't know what to say. Things were silent for a few moments until Elroad spoke again.

"My skills and Sylvia's can be leveled up through practice. An Abyss Slime's skills might also prove useful in certain situations."

Sylvia stepped closer to Shuutarou, while Punio bounced toward him.

Shuutarou nodded, a determined look in his eyes.

"Let's do this!"

* * * *

Shuutarou was a quick learner. Once he memorized the correct order of Elroad's skills—Guardian of Time to remove time restrictions, followed by Ultimate Magic to reduce MP cost, and Mark of Origin for casting spells—it was smooth sailing. He had to learn about the effects and limitations of each spell, too, but that was more pleasure than chore for a boy who was heavily into fantasy, had a good memory, and was excited to be learning about magic.

Elroad watched him, wide-eyed.

"Well, this is a surprise… He has already mastered my spells."

Bertrand, next to him, smirked. "My ability's playing a part in that, you know."

"Even considering that, he must have an uncanny aptitude."

They watched as Sylvia instructed Shuutarou on the use of light swords.

"By the way," Bertrand began, sounding concerned. "You have your ways of investigating the world outside. Have you noticed something sinister in the air?"

"Yes," Elroad said curtly.

"Do you know what it is?"

"At this point, I can only guess."

"And what is your guess?"

Elroad sighed. "I still stand by the theory that the spirit's Prayer is to prevent Master from entering a certain area of the world. But suppose the prayer isn't a protective wall, but a prison?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if it's not intended to keep out outsiders but to stop something inside from getting out, is what I mean."

"Hmm…" Bertrand considered it, but after a while, he shook his head. "Interesting, but it's a guess as good as any."

"You're the one who asked."

Elroad narrowed his eyes in silent irritation.

Meanwhile, Shuutarou perfected summoning and desummoning the light swords, making yet another Evil Overlord skill his own.

* * * *

Almost everyone had left the battle arena. Only a deathly-white young girl remained.

"Why have I been cursed with this power…?"

She saw her power as nothing more than a burden. It had altered her appearance so that she couldn't accompany her master to the world outside the castle, and it wasn't worth passing on. Unlike the other Overlords, she couldn't contribute anything to help her master, which made her despise herself.

"Vampy?"

"…!"

Startled, she turned around. Shuutarou was right behind her.

"Are you sad because of your skill?" he asked, noticing the gloomy look on her face.

Vampy shook her head, but it was clear she was feeling down.

Shuutarou had promised to make them all stronger, but she had nothing to provide him in return. Even Punio had skills to give his master. She was the only one with nothing to offer.

"Check this out!"

Shuutarou activated a skill.

"Death Lord's Shield!"

White light surrounded Shuutarou. It was, without doubt, Vampy's protective magic.

"With this, I also get to share some of your stats. I'm still really weak, so this is a huge help!"

Disconsolate, Vampy managed a sad little smile, thinking that the boy was being so nice.

"It's the same as the shield skills of the other Overlords…"

"But only yours glows with this pretty white light!"

"I…suppose so…"

Pretty white light? She'd never thought about it that way.

"I can have two more summons with me now, and I'm sure I'll need your help at some point." He smiled at her. "I can't use your unique skill myself, so you'll just have to come with me!"

"!"

"With you at my side, I'll have nothing to fear."

Having told her what he'd come to say, Shuutarou left the battle arena, smiling contentedly.

For some time, Vampy just stared into space. Then she fell to her knees.

"Why do you…?"

Why did he always tell her what she wanted to hear? If she wanted to see him, would he respond to her wish and appear beside her?

Shuutarou was always exceptionally kind, and he didn't single anyone out. Vampy wouldn't want to be singled out anyway—it felt better to bask in Shuutarou's wholesomeness.

"Max Summon…," she whispered.



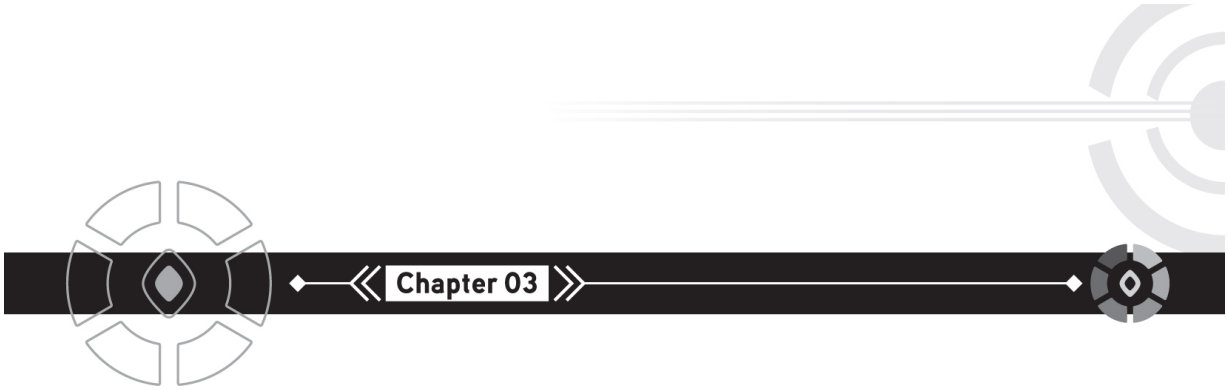


"I tried casting Max Summon on you guys, but I get an error message saying the conditions are not met, so it looks like I can't use it yet."

Her master could see that he had a new skill, but he couldn't activate it. If what he was lacking was strength or minion loyalty, she should help him raise those stats before any of the other Overlords, making it her grand achievement.

"Tee-hee… Hee-hee-hee!"

Her laughter echoed throughout the arena. The monsters that lived nearby shuddered at the eerie sound, and that was how the urban myth of battle-arena ghosts was born: to scare children who wanted to stay up at night into obediently going to bed.



Once Shuutarou finished practicing his new job skills, he went back to Calloah. He was to meet his friends near the Crest guild office, but as he drew near, he saw something unusual.

There's a crowd outside the little guild office?

"Hey, what's up, Shuutarou?" said Shoukichi.

"Hello, Shuutarou," said Kettle.

"Hi, guys. What's going on there? Do you know?"

"Nope," Kettle replied. "Maybe Wataru's visiting or something?"

Shoukichi and Kettle found him, and they started walking together to the meeting spot. Seeing that Barbara and the others were already there, the children ran to join them.

"Is something wrong?" Shuutarou asked, noticing that Barbara was unusually glum.

"Everyone's here now—good. Thank you for coming. I need to tell you something." She paused for a breath. "You see, a party has been wiped out at Kiren Graveyard."

Wiped out. A whole party of real people had died.

"It was a party we've met before, when they were struggling in a battle against the Dogkeeper."

"They *died*?!"

Shoukichi was stunned. Shuutarou and Kettle stood speechless.

"K found out when he received a system notification about a quest failing because the party was killed," Kyouko added weakly.

Shuutarou remembered the blond man from that party, scratching his head awkwardly.

"Who knew the Dogkeeper would spawn on us right after another tiring battle? It's our unlucky day."

"Reilan, Rao, and I will join other Crest parties to go to the graveyard and retrieve the defeated party's mementos," said Barbara. "I'd like to ask the three of you to wait with Kyouko until our return."

Shoukichi bristled at that. "Why do we have to wait?! Let us come with you!"

"No, there is too much danger involved. I wanted to see you to let you know in person what had happened to that party, but I have no intention of taking you along," Barbara said sharply, silencing Shoukichi's objections. Her necklace swayed with her quickened breathing. "At present, the cause of that party's death is unknown. It's possible they might've fallen prey to a player killer."

Kettle looked at her uneasily. "Then why are you going there if it's so dangerous? I don't understand."

"To retrieve the mementos," Reilan said patiently. "You're right to question whether we should be potentially taking such a risk to pick up a few items, but those items are all that's left behind by those unfortunate people for others to remember them by."

Her gaze shifted to a group of sobbing mourners—friends and maybe romantic partners of the deceased players.

"A few items are all that's left of a person…"

Reilan reached to stroke the cross-sword strapped to her back. The sword was engraved with the name of her friend who had passed.

"They live on in our memories," Rao said. "And we can still see their names in our friends list, marked as offline. Items left behind by them won't disappear as long as somebody claims them, and

that's something tangible that we can remember them by in a world where the dead don't get graves."

To be on the safe side, the retrieval squad numbered no less than sixty players. With that many, they should be able to deal with whatever it was that killed the others.

The children and Kyouko watched the squad set off for the graveyard. Left behind, they would have to show patience and stay put.

"Let's go get something to eat to take your mind off things," Kyouko said, taking Kettle by the hand.

"But I can't stop thinking about it—the whole thing is just too weird," protested Kettle.

"What's weird?" Shuutarou asked her.

"Remember what the blond dude from that party said after we saved them?"

"Advice taken to heart. I regret selling that gear now. I feel now like we've taken the baton from that player, and it's on us to carry it to the goal."

"When Reilan told them off, it looked like she got through to them, and they understood they were underleveled for the graveyard. So why would they go there again so soon? You don't think that's really weird?"

She made a good point, and Shuutarou had to agree with her. He started getting a little anxious.

What if whatever killed those players is so strong, even that huge retrieval squad won't be able to fight it off…?

Safety was never guaranteed in *Eternity*, but Shuutarou was overwhelmingly powerful. Or at least, he was sure he was strong enough to protect a squad of sixty players.

"I'm going after them. Just to see how they get on. I'll have Sylvia and Theodore with me, so you don't need to worry." He paused and looked up at Kyouko. "Is that okay with you, Kyouko?"

Kyouko, Shoukichi, and Kettle knew how strong Shuutarou was. He was no ordinary middle schooler—once, he'd even nipped an

invasion in the bud without breaking a sweat.

"…Okay, you may go."

Shoukichi and Kettle looked at Kyouko wide-eyed, surprised she gave Shuutarou permission.

"But you, Shoukichi, are not going anywhere," Kyouko quickly added.

"Why not?!"

"I don't even want Shuutarou to go, to be honest. I don't want to send him there, but I also don't want Barbara, Reilan, and Rao to die…"

Kyouko was visibly conflicted. As far as battle ability was concerned, she was sure Shuutarou was the strongest of them all. Sending him to help the others would raise their chances of survival.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry, Shuutarou…" She burst into tears. "I'm sorry to put this on you…"

She was internally torn about allowing a thirteen-year-old to go somewhere he quite possibly might not return from.

"I'll be back before long!"

Shuutarou flashed her a reassuring smile and gave her a hug. He looked at Shoukichi.

"Take care of them until we get back!"

Shoukichi nodded firmly in response.

* * * *

Galbo's Party 6 had safely escorted a rookie team to Allistras, and they were on their way back. They had already passed through Emaro, and their next stop would be Calloah Castle Town.

"Candy's like the only player who gives you a good run for your money in a one-on-one," Gagamaru said to Galbo.

Gagamaru had sent his tamed demi-wolf ahead to look out for danger for them and was trudging behind, looking bored. The player he mentioned, Candy, worked as Crest's battle instructor. He was the first to notice Shuutarou's exceptional battle prowess.

“Tell me, what’s a guy like that doing in the starting town?” Gagamaru asked.

Galbo and Candy would sometimes duel Crest elites like Alba and Wataru for practice. When the party’s business took them to Allistras, Galbo took the opportunity to have a match with Candy.

“That chillin’ move he’s got—it always throws me off,” Galbo said with a shudder.

“Yeah, he likes to spring that one on people.”

“Makes for a good duel—keeps you on your toes.”

“Nothing’s scarier than that sparkle in Candy’s eyes.”

Party 6 laughed out loud.

“Speaking of a good duel, though,” said Gagamaru, “that boy did a number on you the other day.”

“Don’t remind me…” Galbo thought about the young boy he’d challenged to battle. “In a way, he’s similar to Wataru. Every move is pure art. Refined to perfection.”

He had a high opinion of Shuutarou, and his party members agreed it was a fair assessment.

“I thought I was dreaming when you lost the match. Cheating didn’t help you, either.”

“No one was more surprised than me, pal. I like to advertise myself as ‘death at first sight.’”

“Your secret skill usually does the trick.”

Very few players could anticipate Galbo’s unique skill.

“The only Crest players who’re on a level that makes them fun for me to duel are…,” he said thoughtfully, “Wataru, Alba, K, possibly Rao and Reilan…and maybe Artemis.”

Gagamaru chuckled at that. “Artemis? Oh, come on. She’s basically the guild mascot. The leaders sure like her, but she’s just a lucky gal who randomly got a strong skill, which doesn’t make her a good player.”

The way Gagamaru saw it, Misaki—dubbed Artemis—was only useful as a radar.

Galbo gazed into the distance. “You can’t see her for who she is, huh…?”

“Hmm?”

They kept chatting as they walked. They entered the next area and were approaching the Olsrott Monastery, when Gagamaru’s demi-wolf started growling.

“What’s there, Pooch?”

Gagamaru looked around, glad that there might finally be some action. His wolf started to howl…but the sound was cut short as the beast’s body dissolved into nothingness. The party was immediately on high alert.

One of them spotted something.

“The hell’s that?”

A player approached them, dressed in a black outfit that resembled a *qipao*. They had black hair, a pretty, androgynous face with large, gray eyes, and a well-defined nose. The player had something in English tattooed on their right cheek.

“You’re from Crest, which means you’re trying to clear the game, right?” the player said quietly.

Suddenly, there was a sound like something splitting open, and one of the Party 6 members burst into pieces.

“What the…?”

Gagamaru quickly checked his party menu. The player who’d been hit by something had zero LP. He was dead. Instantly.

The party shuddered, realizing what they were dealing with.

“Ruuuuun!” Galbo yelled.

He swung down his greatsword, but the player killer swiftly drew their own sword to block it.

“Bettei! Report the player killer! Talk to whoever you see, e-mail others—just tell everyone to stay in towns where it’s safe!” Gagamaru shouted, casting some spell with a special gesture.

“What? I can’t leave you guys here!”

“Sacrifices are necessary sometimes to save more lives. Now go!”

Gagamaru had no illusions about their chances of defeating the player killer. Through countless battles, he'd learned to smell risk, and that attacker reeked of death.

Bettei exchanged looks with another party member, and they broke into a run. One headed to Calloah Castle Town, and the other to Emaro. That way, at least one messenger should be able to make it and notify other players of the danger if Galbo and Gagamaru got killed.

Watching his two friends speed away in different directions, Gagamaru activated his unique skill.

"I summon you, Dogma Bear!"

On his command, the roaming boss of Ken-Ron Cavern, Dogma Bear, spawned in front of him.

Dogma Bear: The savage ruler of an unforgiving world of ice, dwelling in the depths of Ken-Ron Cavern. Armored with shards of ore stuck into its body, it repels most attacks. The Harutana tribe venerates it as a divine messenger and is said to be able to summon it by blowing into a horn.

The giant gray bear fixed its gaze on its prey, and Galbo nodded, reassured. His friend Gagamaru had a unique skill called Minion Pact, which was compatible with high-tier tamer class skills. Its success rate was quite low, but it enabled the player to befriend even high-tier monsters, such as bosses. It was a very rare type of unique skill, optimized for a specific class—Rao's unique skill was like that, too.

The player killer measured the bear with an amused look, all the while blocking Galbo's most impressive attacks as if it was child's play.

"That pet looks like fun."

Galbo didn't say anything. Just as the Dogma Bear rushed at the black-robed player, Galbo activated his own unique skill,

Doppelgänger, to attack from two directions simultaneously. There was a booming noise like an explosion, and a cloud of dust flew up into the air. Even a seasoned tank would likely be insta-killed by this much damage at once.

Did we get them?

Gagamaru stared at the dust cloud, trying to see what was in it.

Then there was a sound like a single clap, and things started falling from the sky over Gagamaru. He saw it was a multitude of items, among them a giant sword stuck in the middle of the pile in front of him—the sword he was so used to seeing at the back of a player he greatly respected.

In a panic, Gagamaru quickly opened his party window. Galbo's name was in black.

He was dead.

Gagamaru's eyes overflowed with tears, and he collapsed to his knees. Meanwhile, the Dogma Bear broke into a million glowing pieces and vanished.

"Good-bye."

That was the last word Gagamaru heard in his life.

* * * *

The road to the town seemed longer than ever before.

I've got to run faster! I've got to make it!

Bettei of Party 6 was sprinting at top speed, without ever looking behind. He didn't get to write a message to anyone, too scared the player killer would catch him if he stopped even just for a moment. If luck wasn't on his side, he'd die, but at least then his friend would make it to Emaro. If everything went well, they might both reach the towns alive. They might survive, having run from the battle their party leader and their sub-master were likely to die in.

Don't be stupid—they're not going to die. Galbo and Gagamaru with his bear could defeat even Crest's sub-master for sure.

He shook his head, forcing himself not to think. Soon, he could see the town gates.

"You're the last one," came a demonic whisper.

There was no escape.

Realizing this was the end, Bettei swallowed back tears, drawing his sword.

"What the hell do you want?!" he bellowed.

His opponent didn't reply. Out of the corner of his eye, Bettei saw his party list, and more tears flowed down his cheeks. Everyone else was already dead. The killer had gotten Galbo, Gagamaru, and the other messenger who had run in the opposite direction. The friends whom Bettei had been chatting and joking with only a short time ago were all dead. Memories of the time they'd spent together flashed back in Bettei's head. The happiness they'd found in one another's company was over just like that, without notice.

"How'd you get here so fast? How did you catch both Kaguchi and me?" Bettei asked, beginning to zone out from resignation.

The player killer's face was expressionless.

"It's a secret."

Clap!

* * * *

Shuutarou was about halfway through the graveyard area when he met the returning retrieval squad. Barbara ran over when she spotted him.

"Sh-Shuutarou?! What are you doing here?!"

He ignored the suspicious looks from the other players and told Barbara why he didn't listen and came after them. When he finished, Rao crossed her arms.

"Yeah, it really is weird. We've actually been talking about it, too. The items dropped by those players prove something bizarre is going on here."

"Oh, you found their mementos!"

"Yeah. Players' drops take quite a while to disappear. Anyhow, guess where we found them? In the boss room. Now, get this—the

gear they dropped was the exact same stuff they were wearing when we last saw them."

Which meant…

"That unaffiliated party went to fight the boss wearing the same equipment as when we met them." Reilan let that sink in.

It must have bugged her the most, since she was the one to admonish the party for attempting to clear the area without sufficient prep.

"They did a stupid thing because they'd been pressured by their leader, but they weren't stupid people. Even their leader finally saw reason after Reilan talked to him, I thought. I just can't imagine why they'd go back to the graveyard without at least getting better gear," Rao said before walking off ahead.

Shuutarou could feel the other players' suspicious stares on his back, and it certainly wasn't pleasant.

"The leading assumption is that it's the work of a player killer, covered up to make it look like an accident," Barbara whispered to him. "A solo player turning up at the graveyard out of the blue seems like a prime suspect."

Shuutarou gazed down at the ground, blushing from embarrassment. He hadn't thought of that. He'd impulsively come to guard his friends, knowing he'd be fine on his own, not realizing that it'd appear suspicious and his friends might get mistaken as his accomplices.

He felt a hand fall on his head. It was Rao, whom he thought had been walking out at the front.

"Chin up, kid! With you here, we're invincible! If a player killer comes out to try to attack us now, we'll deal with them easily!"

He didn't say anything, but he was grateful for her words.

* * * *

The retrieval squad made a safe return to Calloah, where they passed the items to the family and friends of the deceased. After some paperwork, all members of Party 7 were free to meet up

again, and they reconvened at the local Crest office. Barbara was talking to the receptionist, K, when she heard Kettle mutter to herself, "Those guys died. They didn't try to log out. Something killed them, and they're dead."

Barbara and the others worried about Kettle's mental state.

"When I heard they died in the boss room, I thought, it figures. Their leader was stubborn as an ox and overconfident. Just having him around was a risk factor," said K, reading some files.

Reilan crossed her arms. "But he had his party members to set him straight."

"Yes, they were more reasonable than him and very loyal. They were the kind of party that stuck together through thick and thin. They were good people—I wish they'd joined our guild."

The sadness in his eyes gave way to a steely look.

"They might've been lured out," he conceded.

Rao and Reilan nodded, but Kettle seemed puzzled.

"What do you mean, 'lured out'?"

"A player with an illusion-type unique skill might've lured them out there to kill them under some pretense like trading gear," K explained to her.

He walked out from behind his desk, his showy cape fluttering as he moved.

"Since we might have a player killer in the area, I'm going to place restrictions on people leaving the town. People may not like it, but I do have some authority as the local Crest chief. I'll post members at every gate. What are you guys planning on doing?"

"I'll fight if needed!" Shoukichi shouted, keyed up. "I'm not scared of sickos killing weaker players for fun!"

The older members of his party were quiet, but they also weren't the types to turn a blind eye to player killing. They had to consider how to keep Shoukichi, Kettle, and Shuutarou safe, too, though.

Rao put her hand on Shoukichi's shoulder, making him jump.

"I think we can help by having a look around for suspects in town, like beta-era player killers. Reilan and I remember their faces. As for fighting…that's the last resort."

She flashed her white teeth at K, giving Shoukichi's shoulder a squeeze. The boy was almost imperceptibly trembling.

"Yes, please—that'll be amazing," said K.

Just then, the door slammed open, and an agitated Crest member stepped inside.

"Chief! Can you come out for a minute?!"

K shot Barbara's party a look. Everyone went out to see what was going on.

Right outside the guild office, a scared party stood surrounded by Crest members. One frightened man was being held by his arms and had a sword pointed at him.

K approached them.

"What's this?"

"Chief, see his weapon?" said the Crest member who was restraining the man. "It's Crest gear, given to the elite squad! These guys aren't even in a guild. Walking around with our guild's top kit at the belt—that's practically admitting to murder!"

"We didn't kill no one! We found it lyin' in the dirt!" the captive man pleaded.

K glared at his guildmates. "So, soldier, have you asked him to show you footage from when he found the sword?"

"Footage? Er… N-no, not yet…"

"Also, remember that player killers are system-banned from entering towns?"

"Oh…"

"Next time, think a bit more before you point fingers. You do understand the consequences of accusing someone of being a player killer, don't you?"

The Crest member cowered under K's angry gaze. K turned to the captured man.

"Where did you say you found this sword?"

"Between 'ere and Emaro, sir. Near the monastery. We were just passin' through there not long ago. Please, sir, I swear it's the truth! It was lyin' in the dirt, and I picked it up, saw the stats, and kept it, 'cause it was better than anything I've ever seen!"

The man was choking on tears.

The sword at his hip bore the Crest emblem. K stared at it, thinking, *An elite fighter active near Calloah, using a sword of this type… Bettei from Party 6 is the only one who comes to mind.*

Beads of cold sweat appeared on his brow as he opened a menu and scrolled.

"This can't be right…," he mumbled.

Galbo	**Offline**
Gagamaru	**Offline**

Galbo	**Offline**
Denbou	**Offline**

Galbo	**Offline**
Bettei	**Offline**

Galbo	**Offline**
Kaguchi	**Offline**

"Party 6 is dead?!" Barbara and Kyouko cried at the same time.

There were more screams all around. Rao and Reilan looked on grimly.

"Everyone, listen! This is an emergency! Party 6 has been killed. They were on an escort mission to Allistras. It's impossible that they'd die to monsters spawning on the way or an area boss. They died near the monastery, which is monster-free, and that includes invasion bosses, too. Which leaves only one possibility."

Party 6 was the strongest in Calloah. They had met their ends at the hands of another player, or multiple players, who either outnumbered or outleveled them. This player killer, or killers, was a force to be reckoned with.

Players started gathering by the Crest guild office.

"I—I come with a report…" A messenger ran up to K. "It's about the suspected player-killing incident at the graveyard. There's been… a witness…"

He fell silent, as if conflicted about something.

"Go on," K prompted him.

"The witness…saw the killer. They were wearing the Crest uniform! I can't believe it myself…"

The crowd erupted with noise as players gave in to panic, broke down into tears, or reacted with anger.

"You've got to keep calm at times like this!" Kettle shouted in vain.

Kyouko put her arms around the young wizard.

"What could this gathering be for? Has something happened?"

The crowd fell silent, all eyes on the Liberator, who'd just walked up.

The messenger played video footage so that everyone could watch. The developments that unfolded on the display were hard to believe, especially for Crest members. Players were running, shrieking in fear, and the footage was shaky, which conveyed the panic of the person recording the scene. The players were being chased by a Crest member, who killed them one by one.

"Who did you get this from?" K asked the messenger sharply.

"I… Um… I-it's from…"

Looking panicked, the messenger motioned to stop the video, but the Liberator broke the silence of the crowd, commanding him, "Play it to the end! The people deserve to see it!"

The guildless players shouted out in agreement.

This rabble-rouser's the last person we needed right now, K thought, scowling at the footage. When it ran to the end, the plaza was momentarily shrouded in silence.

"This is fake!" shouted Shoukichi. "A Crest member wouldn't do this!"

The guildless players weren't going to listen to him, though.

"Keeping solidarity with your murderous guildie, huh? You can't downplay what we've seen!" someone shouted back.

"You can only see their armor, and anyone could wear it!" Shoukichi argued. "Someone's trying to frame Crest!"

"You got any proof to support that claim, boy? No? Then you can stuff your theory where the sun doesn't shine!"

More and more players were turning hostile, and Shoukichi had no way to convince them not to trust what they'd seen in the video. They were too worked up to listen to him anyway. Even the most rational arguments would fall on deaf ears.

K stared at the Liberator. "This is exactly what he wanted…"

The Liberator started walking toward the center of the crowd.

"It has begun!" His voice silenced all others. "The purge of the guildless at the hands of the avaricious Crest has begun! When we

were trapped in this nightmare, who was it who first made themselves the center of attention, seizing control of towns and bringing people under their command? Who sought to extend their authoritarian rule past Allistras, past Calloah, to all the land? Well, they have finally begun to exterminate the players who refused to be their pawns! Crest knows no mercy!"

The hearts of the Crest players sank deeper and deeper as the Liberator continued his impassioned oration.

* * * *

The sky went through all the hues of dusk and turned pitch-black as the Liberator, trembling with indignation, spoke to the crowd.

"The players who were recently murdered at Kiren Graveyard were also unaffiliated with any guild, if you remember. Just like the poor people we saw in the footage. I ask you now to think about the rules imposed by Crest on this town."

He paused to give the players a moment to think.

"He's like a preacher at a witch trial," Barbara remarked venomously.

"Anyone belonging to Crest is forbidden from leaving the town to enter the monster-spawning areas without Crest's permission," said the Liberator. "In other words, Crest controls the movements and leveling opportunities of their members. Players who are not their members, however, are not subject to this restriction…"

"A thorn in Crest's side, eh?" someone ventured.

The Liberator nodded. "I've heard that recently, Crest began training the noncombatant residents of Allistras to fight, with the intention to eventually send them to the front lines. Let me ask you, does it make sense to you to let Crest decide everyone's fate? To force everyone to become their fighter, while another way of salvation has already been found?"

The crowd clamored. Rao was incensed; Reilan watched quietly in frustration.

The Liberator's gaze shifted to the party who had found a sword previously owned by a Crest member from the guild's elite squad.

"Look at this guildless party, falsely accused of murder. Who cast that groundless accusation? Crest members, of course."

Mutterings of agreement could be heard from all around. The man who had picked up Bettei's sword nodded exaggeratedly.

K had sniffed a trap right away when the Liberator had turned up, but because of the shocking murder footage played to the public, he'd been powerless to stop him.

It can all be explained by him or an accomplice having an illusion-type unique skill… A nonattack skill of some type, thought K. *But if I asked him to display his unique skill, he might use it to trick the crowd, and then we'll lose whatever shreds of trust we still have.*

K ground his teeth, his hands tied. While it was possible to refute all the Liberator's claims with fact and logic, the players gathered at the plaza weren't in a state of mind for careful deliberation.

The Liberator continued in a confident, relaxed tone, "The time has come. I must no longer delay my plan. Tonight, the Liberation Army shall leave this town."

People looked at him in shock. For many, he'd become the only person they trusted.

"With Crest committing crimes in broad daylight, nobody can be considered safe in a town they control. My activism has certainly already put me on their watch list, and today, I have made myself even more of a persona non grata to them."

The Liberator smiled at the crowd to show them he was fearless in the face of danger.

"Every town where Crest has established a branch is dangerous for me to be in, Allistras most of all. However, it is Allistras where I will be heading with my Liberation Army to spread word of the safe way to log out to as many players as possible, in a race of time against the killer guild Crest."

A shudder went through the crowd. After seeing the footage of the murder, they were compelled to believe that Crest posed an imminent threat.

"A neat story… Suspiciously neat," someone said.

There were some players who questioned the Liberator's self-professed heroism, smelling something fishy about him. Those who readily believed in his spiel about simply logging out had already tried it, following his instructions, so the players who were left in Calloah had to be the ones who didn't trust him in the first place. The Liberator appeared completely unruffled by their wary comments, though.

"Many of you don't trust me yet; I am aware of that. It is regrettable, but understandable," he said humbly.

He started walking toward the town gates, but he turned one more time before leaving.

"To those who don't trust me but don't trust Crest as well, I have this advice—either wait in an inn until someone clears the game, or leave for the front line at the first opportunity. You only need to make it through the cavern to reach a place where you will find other guilds. Seek their protection. I give you this advice with your best interest in mind."

As he walked briskly to the gate, the players gathered at the plaza looked from the Crest members to the Liberator and his followers, then back again. Many broke into a run and followed the Liberator in the end.

* * * *

"No, wait! Don't believe his lies!"

"Shut it, kid! I don't trust anyone anymore."

Shoukichi had tried in vain to stop another player from setting off with his party to Ken-Ron Cavern.

"We can't follow after them, even in disguise," Barbara said with a sigh, looking up at the guild name displayed over her head, above her player name.

Crest members were also easily recognizable because of their guild uniform.

The Liberator left without giving Crest members the chance to speak in their defense. They couldn't chase after the guildless players who'd left the town, either, as they'd likely assume Crest was out to kill them.

Rao angrily kicked a wooden box. "We can't go after anyone because they'll think we're player killers, and they might attack us in self-defense… That bastard thought of everything."

Crest was essentially paralyzed. Only a handful of paranoid guildless players remained in town.

K sighed deeply. "The way I see it, the Liberator had his hands in creating this mess, but I've got no solid evidence to prove it at the moment, and it's too late to start an investigation now."

He gazed up at the sky, sighing again. Then he looked at the guild members around him.

"Still, we can't just sit back and watch. I've got a really bad feeling about Ken-Ron Cavern, where he encouraged people to go."

He motioned for everyone to come closer and displayed a map for them to see.

"The north gate leads to Ken-Ron Cavern. The south gate goes to Olsrott Monastery, from which the path continues toward Allistras. The players who the Liberator convinced to trust him will be heading either north or south."

Barbara and her party members nodded, waiting for him to continue. The look in K's eyes hardened.

"When he reaches Allistras, I can easily see him getting most of the noncombatants to try his log-out method. I've messaged our headquarters there and our people on the front lines, so they know what to expect and can act accordingly. I'd like to send our squads out to follow the leavers, but…"

"We'd be playing into the Liberator's hands, assuming his plan is to get Crest members killed," said Reilan.

"Precisely."

Rao crossed her arms. "This feels like a conspiracy. Player killers selecting those guildless folk as their victims…"

"My thinking exactly. Not necessarily saying the Liberator orchestrated it all, but it definitely was no coincidence," K said, a shadow falling on his face. "The Liberator's miraculous way out might be a trick—we simply can't prove or disprove it works. Meanwhile, something or someone killed Party 6, combat veterans who were the strongest party in this town. If it could kill them, it'd likely be able to kill us, too."

"This is a very important point," said Barbara. "We're pressed for time, but everyone must remember that it's extremely reckless to leave the town when we don't even know what we're up against."

Still, K was torn about not sending anyone after the players who had left already after the Liberator's speech.

"So what, a stalemate?!" Shoukichi shouted, scratching his head in vexation. "What *can* we do?!"

No one seemed to have an answer.

Kyouko looked around the room. "Huh? Where's Shuutarou?"

All the members of Party 7 started searching for him, but the boy and his cute little summons were nowhere to be seen.

* * * *

The Liberator was walking to Olsrott Monastery with a large group of players in tow. Someone was watching him from a distance.

"He's totally relaxed. Makes sense he wouldn't be worried about a player killer ambushing him," said Shuutarou.

Next to him were Sylvia in her wolf-pup form and Theodore in his minidragon form, looking ready for battle.

"The monastery is holy ground, so I can't take you along. I probably can't bring in Punio with me, either," Shuutarou told them. "You'll have to wait for me back in the castle."

'M-Master?! Please don't send us away! You've gotten stronger, but we can't leave you unprotected!' Sylvia pleaded, panicking.

Theodore was quiet, guessing his master had a plan. Shuutarou showed them a screen that he'd opened in his UI.

Magical Contract: Gain access to your minions' physical, magical, and unique skills. Effectiveness increases with loyalty.

"Watch this."

He opened the Magical Contract menu, which listed a huge number of skills he could use. He began selecting and activating them.

"Demon Lord's Shield, Death Lord's Shield, Giant Lord's Shield, Beast Lord's Shield, Dragon Lord's Shield, Elf Lord's Shield, Life Share, Resist All, Adamantine Body, Dragon Lord's Scales, Wild Instinct…"

A rainbow aura appeared around Shuutarou. He was absorbing the light into his body.

"Protect Hearing, Protect Sight, Calm Mind."

He was casting defense spells to protect himself from attacks affecting the senses and the mind. Next, he extended his right arm in front of him.

"Guardian of Time, Ultimate Magic, Mark of Origin…"

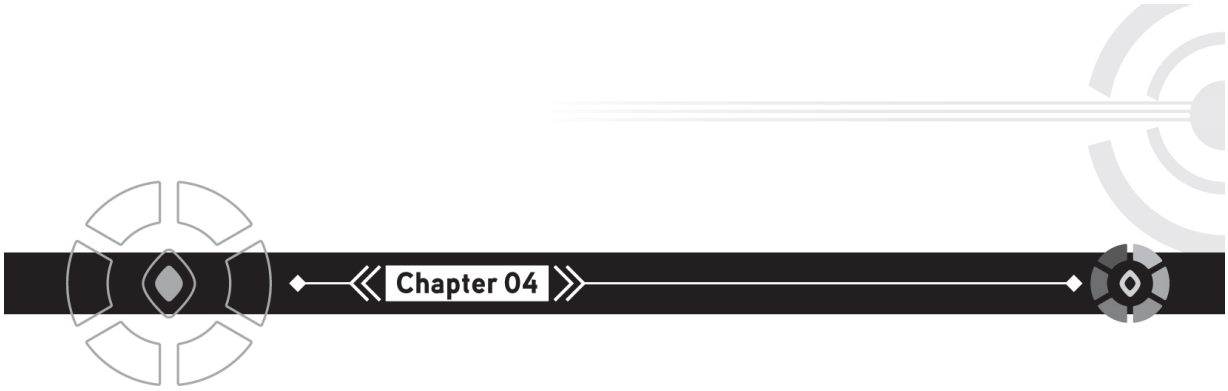
A little magic circle appeared in his palm, and a ticking gold pocket watch around him. After the clock effect burst, the magic circle grew and began to spin, with a magic sign glowing at its center.

"Delta Space!"

A massive blue dome stretched over the monastery. Once it was in place, Shuutarou turned back to his two Overlords.

"I'll call you when it's over."

He petted them both. The wolf and the dragon lowered their heads, acknowledging their master's decision.



Little light penetrated Olsrott Monastery even at high noon, and at night, it was so dark inside, it made the building quite spooky. Players crowded on top of a sigil on the floor, kneeling in prayer. The Liberator was also praying, as was his aide.

It's about time, he thought, opening one eye just a crack. His gaze met the eyes of a youngster in the crowd.

The Liberator smiled for the briefest of moments. The people he had gathered at the monastery hadn't believed in logging out until that day. They'd trained, raising their levels to become stronger. And there were about seventy of them.

Killing them all would be worth it, even though he'd be branded a criminal by the game's system.

They will yield me so much experience, so many items…

He stifled back a laugh. He had only a few more seconds to wait…

"Excuse me."

A boy's voice echoed in the monastery. He spoke quietly, but with everyone concentrated in prayer, they all heard him very well. People stirred. Many stopped praying.

Cursed interruption, thought the Liberator. *But it doesn't matter…*

He signaled with his eyes to his aide. Killing only those who hadn't stopped praying would be good enough. The Liberator located this boy and spoke to him, still in prayer.

"Ah, you must be a member of Crest. Have you come to kill us?"

People stirred anxiously. Those praying continued to do so more fervently, scared they might be killed before logging out. But the boy —Shuutarou—only smiled.

"What? I'm not in Crest," he said.

The Liberator snorted. He'd seen the boy before, talked to his party. This boy was a summoner from Crest, although he didn't have his summons with him, perhaps because they were forbidden entry to the monastery.

The Liberator opened his eyes fully, thinking the boy was stupid to make such an obvious lie.

"Wait… You're not—?"

For the first time, he looked at the boy's name tag above his head and saw that there was no guild name displayed above it.

Was he tagging along with a Crest party despite not being their guildmate? Annoying fence-sitter…

He raised his hand and exchanged looks with his aide. The boy had to be dealt with ahead of the rest.

"I apologize for my mistake. How can I help you?" He smiled at the boy in his usual way, and the boy smiled back guilelessly.

"I'd like to see a person log out!"

The Liberator inwardly chortled. He'd give the boy what he wanted.

Very well. This crowd's been half doubting me. They could all use a demonstration.

The Liberator stood up. “As you wish. I’m sure there are others here today who are not quite convinced yet. Let us have a demonstration.”

He scanned the crowd for someone to pick for the show. Shuutarou looked at him with disappointment.

“You’re not going to show us how you log out and return?”

He’d guessed the Liberator was going to demonstrate his trick on someone else.

What’s this boy thinking? Anyway, it doesn’t matter if I use someone else or not; the result is the same.

Even though he was filled with anticipation for the feast of experience points that was soon to follow, the Liberator wasn’t going to get carried away and make mistakes.

“Oh, I can do that if you prefer.”

* * * *

Dozens watched as the Liberator prepared to demonstrate logging out.

“We will need witnesses… Your name’s Shuutarou, isn’t it? Choose two other players who, like you, will add me to their friends list. That way, you will be able to check my status changing between online and offline.”

He watched the boy, who selected two random players from the crowd. They all registered the Liberator as a friend.

“Can I talk to you for a moment?” Shuutarou asked the two other witnesses.

When he finished speaking to them, they gave him weird looks, although the Liberator didn’t notice.

“As you can see, my player name is Abyss Lord, but please call me the Liberator as before,” he said with embarrassment.

Abyss Lord Online

"…"

Kiichi	**Offline**
Yoshino	**Offline**

"…"

Shuutarou traced his friends list with his fingers.

"I shall now begin," the Liberator announced.

He knelt on the floor where the sigil was. Everyone was watching in silence. The Liberator's aide watched the boy, wary that he might try to do something, but Shuutarou was just standing still, observing.

The Liberator's body began to fade. The crowd stirred when he disappeared. The two witnesses chosen by Shuutarou immediately checked that the Liberator's status had changed to OFFLINE. Rattled, they walked around the room, showing their friends list screen to others who reacted with shock.

"Allow me to explain what is happening," the Liberator's aide began. "The Liberator is now on the log-out confirmation screen. Selecting 'Yes' on this screen would take him back out of the game, and he'd wake up back in the real world. Selecting 'No' will return him back here."

As this was only a demonstration, the Liberator would be choosing NO. His aide, having finished explaining, waited with her eyes cast down. The atmosphere in the room was tense as the

crowd waited with bated breath for the Liberator to reappear…with one exception.

"That's a lie."

Shuutarou's voice was as cold as ice. The Liberator's aide shot him a hostile look.

"What makes you say—?"

"He's right there. I can see him."

Ignoring the woman, who was making her way toward him, Shuutarou pointed at the sigil on the floor. A murmur swept through the crowd. The woman approached closer, glaring.

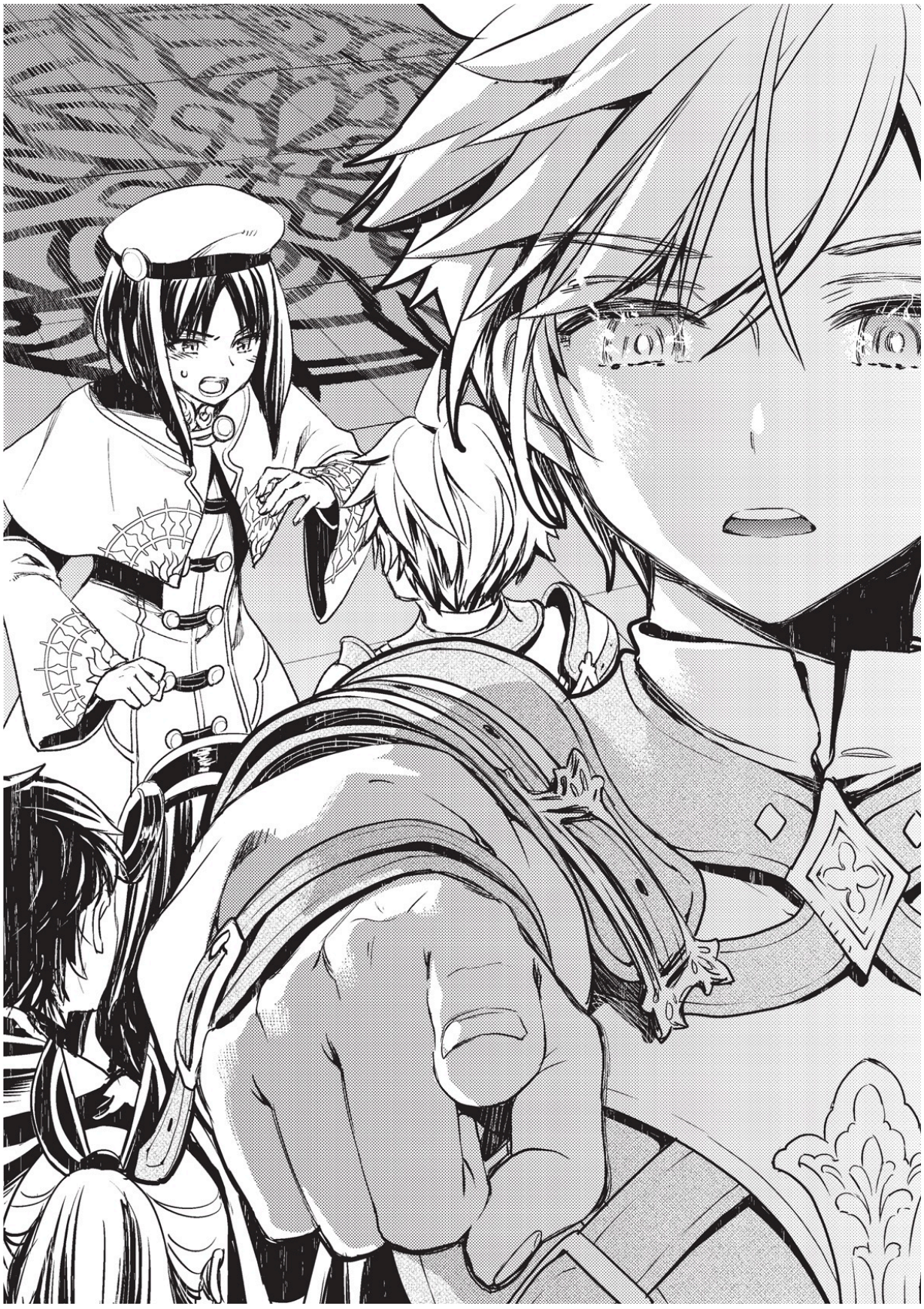
"N-nonsense! There's nobody there!"

Her voice was dark and threatening.

Shuutarou's gaze was fixed on one particular spot.

"!"

The woman stopped in surprise, seeing that the boy's eyes were glowing like blue embers. This time, he pointed to a young man in the crowd.





“You’re their accomplice. You weren’t with them in town, but I saw you join them on the way here. I don’t know how you’re doing this, but you’re the killer. You can somehow kill people who stay motionless on top of that sign on the floor?”

The young man was speechless. Not a muscle moved on Shuutarou’s face as he turned to the Liberator’s aide. He pointed at her.

“You have an illusion-type skill that alters the data displayed to players. You’re showing them fake data.”

The aide was also unable to find her tongue. Normally, she’d be quick to deny any accusations, but what the boy said was spot-on, and she was deeply rattled.

The crowd was rippling with agitation by then. Sensing their act was almost up, the young man attempted to save the situation.

“What on earth are you talking about, kid? You’re the liar, unless you can prove otherwise!”

The man had recovered his composure and was watching Shuutarou with emotionless, dead eyes.

“I can prove it,” Shuutarou replied.

He cast a spell. It wasn’t an attack spell or defense magic. He used Light Beacon to conjure a large light orb that shone brightly on every corner of the dark monastery. People instinctively raised their hands to shield their eyes…and then they saw something nobody expected.

“Arrrgh!”

The Liberator appeared as if repelled by some force from the floor. The two witnesses whom Shuutarou had talked to before the demonstration began remembered what he’d asked them to do, and they quickly checked their friends list.

Abyss Lord	**Offline**

They watched their displays, and soon enough, there was a change.

Abyss Lord	**Online**

"Oh!"
"No way…"

The two witnesses gasped in unison. The Liberator showed as offline for a while, then reappeared and changed to look online; it all definitely seemed like a timed performance, a trick.

Shuutarou's request to the witnesses had been as follows:

"When I use a spell to light up the room, please watch the Liberator's status on your friends list. You should see something unusual."

In this way, Shuutarou proved that the Liberator's aide really was using a data-display-manipulation unique skill.

"The Liberator's unique skill lets him hide in shadows. He can hide other people in shadows, too. He needs a dark place to use that skill, though, which is why he was bringing people here to kill them."

Shuutarou stared at the Liberator with cold, disdainful eyes.

"You'd disappear in a shadow or have your victim disappear, and your helper would manipulate the friends list display to make it look like you or your victim were offline, then online again when you reappeared. You'd convince people that logging out was real and have them kneel on that sign on the floor, where they'd get killed so you could take their items," Shuutarou said, explaining the Liberator's modus operandi.

He'd solved the mystery thanks to the skills enhancing his vision and hearing, paired with Sylvia's Wild Instinct, which sharpened all

his senses.

"Kiichi, Yoshino, Haru Kanata… Do these names ring a bell? They were among the people you murdered. But you've killed countless people by now…"

The Liberator knew his game was up. The people who had followed him to the monastery were now wise to him, and they saw him and his accomplices for who they really were—serial killers.

"It's the reckoning…," whispered the aide.

She was the pitiful, helpless woman whom the Liberator—or rather, the Grim Reaper—had once saved. Her name was Kanmuri.

* * * *

Soon after the game trapped its players, violence and plunder were rife. While it was unclear what led to the abrupt, steep rise in crime, it was chaos until Crest managed to restore order. During that turbulent period, a certain woman was attacked. She'd have been killed if it wasn't for another player's intervention.

"Please let me pay you back. I swear on my life to support you in any way I can. Please let me do something for you…," she begged her savior, tears streaming down her face.

Next to her, the man was sitting on the ground limply, moaning from internal anguish.

The woman's name was Kanmuri. His was Abyss Lord. He'd killed the three players who had assaulted the woman, saving her, but the fact that he'd taken the lives of those people weighed so heavily on him, he'd slumped to the ground, unable to move.

I owe it to him to support him, Kanmuri thought, prepared to devote herself to her savior for the rest of her life. She felt guilty, having been the reason this man had committed murder.

Abyss Lord curled up on the ground, thinking, *The EXP from these guys is unreal…!*

He'd been grinding levels since the beta. It was a shock for him that the amount of experience points he received from just one

killed player rivaled what he could get from the boss monster from that area.

How lucky that he was playing as the thief class and his unique skill granted him invisibility at night. With Vital Strike, he had a pretty good chance of insta-killing another player without ever being noticed. It was easy to target a person's weak point—killing another player was less work than battling dangerous monsters.

I didn't even get many bad karma points for that. Maybe killing for a good cause doesn't count as a serious crime?

Having accidentally found out about that quirk of the karma points system, Abyss Lord inwardly chuckled. A horrific plan had hatched in his head.

"I…killed…them…," he groaned, pretending to be deeply traumatized.

He sobbed, putting on an act to make the woman he'd saved feel guilty. It worked. After a while, he stood up shakily as the woman kept apologizing. His lips stretched into a trembling, broken smile.

"As long as you're unharmed, that's all that matters," he said, like a hero.

He wanted to stoke the woman's guilt even more.

"What's done is done—I have become a killer. The best I can do with my life now is to contribute toward restoring peace by killing other violent players."

Oh, poor him—a purehearted savior doomed by his act of courage. His karma points hadn't gone into the red, but he was acting like he'd been doomed.

He waited for Kanmuri to say something, and when she did, it was exactly what he'd been hoping to hear.

"Please tell me what I can do to help you, and I'll do anything…!"

Deep down, Abyss Lord was laughing. He had a plan, and he needed that woman for it. He saw determination in her eyes, which reassured him he could use her. He then assigned her a role.

"Don't come any closer…!"

Kanmuri was being chased by an aggressive player. She ran into a corner she knew there'd be no escaping from. Then her attacker got stabbed in the back.

Abyss Lord pulled his dagger out of the corpse and grinned.

"Another evil man, dead."

Kanmuri felt a knot in her chest. Was Abyss Lord meting out justice? Or not…?

By saving her, that man had become a killer. She had to atone for causing that by doing what he asked of her…

It's better not to think too much…

She forced herself not to analyze the morality of what they were doing as she and Abyss Lord worked together to kill other players during the lawless days up until Crest imposed order.

"It just feels wrong," Abyss Lord said gloomily.

He and Kanmuri were in a restaurant. Various dishes were laid out in front of them.

"But we're not doing anything wrong! If we were, we wouldn't be allowed inside towns!" Kanmuri said to make him feel better, or maybe to make herself feel better, too.

To Kanmuri's shock, the town guards didn't attack Abyss Lord. At first, she didn't understand why that might be, but after some thinking, she took it as a sign that what they had been doing was justified. It was easier to think that way, because for her, there was no going back anymore.

Abyss Lord tried some of the food. He could taste it and smell it, and it felt satisfying to eat, but the food wasn't real and offered no nourishment for the body. Yet despite that, he never felt hunger.

Crest has effectively put an end to our lucrative hustle, he thought. *Now people know they can survive as long as they have a safe space to sleep.*

Food and water were unnecessary for survival in the game. All you needed was a room where you could sleep without risk of getting attacked. The word had spread that guard NPCs would catch and kill criminals coming to towns, which made it extremely unappealing to rob or assault other players. Abyss Lord and Kanmuri would have to give up on inciting aggressive players to attack in order to kill them "in defense."

Abyss Lord wished he could come up with a way to kill the players fighting on the front lines—they'd yield massive EXP and the best item drops. In this straightforward world where strength was everything, he'd become stronger than anyone and live like a king. But so far, he hadn't come up with a plan.

My gains already put me above most players. Maybe it's time to move on…

He looked at the woman sitting in front of him, wondering what to do with her. She was a valuable resource, since she obeyed him like a slave. He was sure he could keep using her to his benefit. But in order to do that, he should learn more about what she was good for.

"I didn't know about the party system until now," Kanmuri said brightly. "We can see each other's names and even levels in the party menu!"

She, too, was curious about her partner in crime and was trying to get him to talk about himself some more. Luckily, it worked.

"Yes, you can see all sorts of information about your party members. I used to party up with friends during the beta to kill bosses together."

"I'd like to meet your friends someday."

"Ha-ha… Maybe we'll all meet in the afterlife. If there is such a thing."

Kanmuri cursed herself for touching that topic. She kept inadvertently saying things that hurt her friend, which was making her hate herself more and more.

The truth was, Abyss Lord's friends weren't dead. He'd never had any to begin with. He'd been feeding the woman nothing but lies about himself.

"I'm only level one, but I want to be able to assist you in any way I can. I'm a mage, and I chose a magic rod as my weapon."

Abyss Lord listened with interest as Kanmuri spoke.

"I haven't leveled up any of my skills yet—"

"And what's your unique skill?" he interrupted.

"Sorry?"

"Your unique skill. The one-of-a-kind skill you were assigned at random when creating your character."

To reveal one's unique skill was to sign one's own death warrant. Kanmuri didn't know that, though. Perhaps she'd tell him about her skill even if she knew the danger.

Unique Skill: Illusory Image
Makes the target see an image created by the user. The image must be assigned to the skill in advance and cannot be superimposed on trade screens. It appears only in the selected location and cannot be moved. (Effect range: 2m)

Kanmuri hung her head, embarrassed.

"I don't think it has any use outside pranks…"

Abyss Lord, on the other hand, was already coming up with a new plan utilizing the woman's skill.

Against monsters, it's useless…

But if the illusion could be used to distract the attention of players, it had plenty of value.

I'll have to test it first, but this could be a foolproof strategy. I'll need a pawn to sacrifice, though…

He had devised a brand new plan, in which he'd present himself as the Liberator.

* * * *

People were screaming, howling, giving in to panic as they thought of their friends who had "logged out"—whom they now knew for certain had been slaughtered.

The Liberator was quick to drop his act. He and his accomplices drew weapons.

"Nobody but us is leaving here alive."

They were very high-level, and the Liberator was quite confident that he could kill all his targets if they saw through the trickery. Unfazed, he cast an area-of-effect spell on the panicking crowd. He knew the spell was strong enough to kill everyone in one go.

"Liars."

Shuutarou muttered this as a tornado tugged at his clothes and hair.

The Liberator's magic failed to deal damage to anyone in the room, dissipating ineffectually. His aides attacked Shuutarou, but they couldn't connect—something repelled their attacks before they touched him.

Delta Space was one of Elroad's spells. It was an area-of-effect skill designed to quell fighting. Within its blue dome, all attacks were disabled. It wasn't a barrier like Prayer, which protected an area from encroachment—it created an area where fighting was forbidden.

Smoke filled the room, and the Liberator and his two aides vanished.

"Don't panic! Stand still!" Shuutarou shouted.

When the smoke cleared, the players started searching for the Liberator.

"I'll kill those bastards! I'll kill them!"

"I'm so sorry, Itsuki. I never thought they'd killed you…"

"Even if we clear the game and I get out, what is there to live for now…?"

Each and every player who'd followed the Liberator to the monastery had lost someone to him.

Shuutarou was the only one who kept a cool head.

"Ultimate Magic, Dispel, Mark of Origin."

A little magic circle appeared in his palm.

"Calm Mind."

He closed his fist on the magic circle, which sent out waves throughout the room. They sank into the bodies of the players around him, quelling their panic.

Shuutarou saved the footage of what he'd witnessed as a video file, then sent it to Barbara's party and other Crest members.

"First, let me escort you to Calloah, where you'll be safe. I promise you, those three criminals will be punished. They killed my friends, too, so I know how you feel. You've all seen how they'd been deceiving people, and I saved video evidence. I know you want revenge, but for now, please prioritize your own safety."

Everyone was listening to the boy respectfully. He'd saved them from certain death.

"But…but what if they've gone to Allistras?!"

"I will catch them, but I need you to be safe first. I can't go after them until then."

No one objected—they could see the cold rage in Shuutarou's eyes.

* * * *

"Shuutarou!"

When Shuutarou came out of the monastery, Barbara was already there. Behind her stood Kyouko, along with Shoukichi and

Kettle, all of whom were in tears. When Barbara saw that Shuutarou was safe, she also burst into tears and swept him up into an embrace.

"I'm sorry I left without telling you, Barbara…," said Shuutarou.

"You should be sorry! How could you?! How could you?!" she cried, her voice breaking.

Shuutarou gently patted her back. When she met his gaze, he saw that her pretty face was a mess from crying.

"Thank goodness you're alive!"

While Kettle and Kyouko were sobbing openly, Shoukichi was rubbing his nose, trying to play it cool.

A group of Crest and unaffiliated players had come along with Barbara. Shuutarou told them what had happened inside the monastery, and many of them dropped to their knees, grieving their killed friends.

Suddenly, Shuutarou's vision became blurry, and he felt something warm in the corners of his eyes.

"Huh…? What…?"

His eyes filled with tears, which began to spill over. Was it being safely reunited with his friends that triggered it? Or was it because the effect of Calm Mind had ended? Either way, Shuutarou's suppressed emotions were finding their way out. He couldn't help crying loudly.

"Kiichi… Yoshino… I'm so sorry… I'm so sorry I didn't figure it out earlier… I failed to save you…"

The guilt and regret were too much.

Someone wrapped their arms around him—it was Shoukichi, who had tears streaming down his face by then, too.

"Many people fell victim to that con man, but look at all those other people here who you've saved," he said emphatically. "Be proud of that! You're a hero!"

Players who'd been standing nearby and had heard him came over to thank Shuutarou. As their gratitude soothed his heart,

Shuutarou's thoughts drifted to the next steps to take. And then he noticed two people were missing.

"Wait, where are Rao and Reilan?!" he cried.

Barbara's face clouded over. "They went to Ken-Ron Cavern to stop the Liberator from reaching the front lines."

"! Why there…?"

"They assumed that's a higher-probability destination for him than Allistras, which would be a dead end when you think about it. He'd have better chances of escaping detection by the front lines."

Barbara looked down at the ground, feeling bad about not having gone together with Rao and Reilan.

Shuutarou wiped his tears and stood up. "Leave the Liberator and his accomplices to me. Please lead everyone safely back to Calloah and wait for me there."

Sylvia appeared beside him, but not in her puppy form—she was a majestic wolf, taller than the players. When Shuutarou hopped on her back, the crowd looked at him as if he were a god descended to the earth.

"Why does it have to be you…?" Kyouko said through tears, a mixture of sorrow and anger in her voice. "You're only thirteen. You're a child; you should be playing, learning, exploring the world. You have so much growing up left to do. It shouldn't be on you to take the lives of other players just because you're high-level, with high stats!"

She said what everyone had been thinking. Straddling his giant wolf, Shuutarou smiled at Kyouko.

"No matter what happens, or if what happens changes who I am…I can't let Rao and Reilan die. Sorry, Kyouko…"

He rode past the crowd of players and took off, swift as wind.

"Ohhh… Ohhhh…!" Kyouko pursed her lips, swallowing back tears.

Barbara put her arms around her. "I hate this harsh reality, too. I hate it…"

Power carried responsibility, and in *Eternity*, power was based on level. Shuutarou might only be a young boy, but he was powerful, and he had a duty to put his strength to use.

To defeat a player was to kill them, but if Shuutarou stayed put, Rao and Reilan got killed, and the player killers stayed on the loose, there would be no shortage of callous people blaming the boy for not having lifted a finger to help.

Going after the player killers, or not going—those were two equally bad choices. Shuutarou chose the former, because he couldn't stand the thought that his friends might die. He had to prevent that, even if it meant he'd become a killer himself.

* * * *

The Liberator was chuckling inwardly, but the young man who was his accomplice was freaking out.

"What are we going to do now?! What's…what's going to happen to us?"

"Pull yourself together. Did you think I'd never thought of this? That I'd never made a contingency plan?"

"Oh, you have a plan? That's…reassuring."

The Liberator shot a sideways glance at his aide. The blue-haired man was called Arma. The log-out killings were all carried out with his unique skill, Death Sigil. It painted a magical sigil on the floor, and any targets who remained motionless on top of the sigil for thirty seconds had their LP reduced to zero.

Normally, this skill would be next to worthless for two reasons—the sigil was quite conspicuous, and staying motionless for that long was nearly impossible. It was too tricky to use. Even casters wouldn't stay perfectly still for as long as thirty seconds during battle.

Kanmuri's unique skill is too valuable to let go of her yet…but Arma can easily be replaced. His unique skill lent itself well to my last tactic, but it's outlived its usefulness.

The Liberation Army wouldn't have been created if it wasn't for a chance meeting between Abyss Lord and Arma, who'd been painstakingly hunting demi-rats near Allistras by inflicting Paralysis and Sleep on them and then killing them with the sigil. Arma thought himself incredibly lucky to be recruited by Abyss Lord, who, in turn, was pleased to gain a useful pawn.

Fortunately, it's not common knowledge that only the players who carry out the act of killing are recognized by the system as criminals. My contribution to the deaths was indirect, and so the NPCs won't be hunting me down.

Abyss Lord, having renamed himself the Liberator, was only pulling the strings instead of getting his own hands dirty. He could enter towns safely. Meanwhile, Arma had directly caused the death of a staggering number of players, racking up far more bad karma points than any other known player killer. Karma points reflected the gravity of one's crimes in the game.

"Wait, someone's there!"

Kanmuri pointed at three silhouettes in the distance. It looked as if someone had been waiting for them.

"What's up, Liberator? In a hurry to get somewhere?"

K, in the middle of the trio, rested his sword on his shoulder. He was clad in Crest's gray armor, smiling softly as per usual.

"My," said the Liberator, "what a surprise to meet Crest's local chief out here—"

"Save yourself the effort. We've seen footage of what you guys did back at the monastery. We're here instead of the boy to finish you off."

K pointed his sword at the Liberator. He was flanked by Rao and Reilan, who both had a personal grudge against the Liberator for killing their close friend. The two women readied their weapons.

The Liberator's superficial smile vanished, replaced by cold indifference. His two aides could see that it was impossible to talk their way out at that point:

"You leave us no choice but to kill you."

"Good riddance!"

"If it has to be done…"

The Liberator drew a sinister-looking black sword, the blue-haired man two daggers, and Kanmuri her magic rod.

Kanmuri and Arma attacked simultaneously, quickly closing the distance to their three opponents. Kanmuri cast a magic spell, while Arma unleashed a consecutive attack with his Paralysis-and Sleep-inflicting daggers. Reilan blocked the spell, and K dodged the daggers. They kicked the Liberator's aides away to keep them at a distance again.

The Liberator inwardly growled.

They were strong, maybe on the same level as top players in the game.

Rao saw right through him.

"You don't get it, do you?"

The Liberator glared back at her, saying nothing.

"This is the end for you. Time to pay for your crimes."

The icy Ken-Ron Cavern was to be the setting of a deadly PvP battle.

* * * *

K watched the young man with blue hair, who was clearly afraid.

"I-I'm just a victim. He threatened me…"

That was what Arma had been telling himself to silence his conscience.

K scratched his head impatiently, scrutinizing the man's gear. Two daggers inflicting status ailments and the best armor that money could buy in Calloah.

K ground his teeth. "Look at you, playing innocent while wearing armor looted from people you killed, your inventory stuffed with

items you got from your victims."

He quickly began to approach Arma. A little smile appeared in the corner of the blue-haired man's lips. A victorious smile.

"!"

K felt something like an electric shock, and **Paralysis** was displayed above him. Arma's chuckle echoed through the cave.

"Feeling stupid now, huh? I can't believe you fell for that obvious provocation. How'd you land the job of the local guild chief?"

Out of the corner of his eye, K could see a trap on the floor. Arma leaped at him and stabbed him several times with his right dagger to extend the Paralysis effect.

"See the mark on the floor? That's my unique skill. That's what I used to kill all those people. I'll keep you paralyzed here until my skill's effect kicks in and kills you. Hey, are you listening?"

K closed his eyes…and activated his own unique skill: Greedy Gourmand, which allowed him to stack up to four food effects for thirty seconds.

The four items he consumed were:

Yellow Cure-Berry: Cures Paralysis
Blue Cure-Berry: Cures Sleep
Elderdragon Steak: STR +80%
Elderdragon Steak: STR +80%

K recovered from Paralysis. His enhanced muscle power enabled him to strike with his sword at mind-boggling speed.

Swoosh!

"Huh?"

Arma's head was flung into the air. It spun around, and before he turned into pixel dust, he saw his own headless body.

A huge pile of items fell onto the floor.

"Instant death's cruel, huh? Serves you right."

K watched the shiny pixels disappear, thinking about all the people he'd known who had been slaughtered by the blue-haired man.

* * * *

Meanwhile, Reilan was fighting Kanmuri.

Kanmuri didn't quite seem to be present, staring vacantly. Reilan grew impatient and said angrily to the woman, "What you've done cannot be forgiven."

Tears were rolling down Kanmuri's cheeks, but a faint, resigned smile appeared on her face.

"I wonder what hell is like…"

Reilan didn't reply, her gaze fixed on the woman.

"I sold my soul to the devil. I knew I wouldn't get away with it."

"I'm not interested in chatting with you."

"Ah… Well…"

Kanmuri smiled sadly again. She strengthened her grip on her magic rod and waved it slowly.

"I'm past the point of no return."

An identical copy of her appeared next to her.

Reilan held her cross-sword in front of her and vanished.

"What?"

It was only then that Kanmuri remembered whom it was she was fighting—the famous front-line player nicknamed the Phantom.

Kanmuri saw a blood-spray effect around her. A sword was sticking out of her torso. Her face twisted from pain the likes of which she'd never experienced before. Next to her, Reilan appeared out of thin air.

Reilan possessed the unique skill Invisibility, which did exactly what it said on the tin—it rendered her temporarily invisible. It enabled her to move silently, too, making her undetectable.

"Aaaargh! Aaaaaaaaargh!"

Kanmuri fell on the floor and attempted to crawl away as if she could still escape from the pain and terror. Reilan stared down at her

coldly. She pointed her sword at the woman's neck.

"It hurts, doesn't it? And now you feel genuine remorse. The people you killed didn't even have the time to feel pain or realize what was happening."

Her face contorted, dripping with tears, Kanmuri sat on the floor, tucking her legs under her. She closed her eyes.

"Send me to hell, then, and I'll do my penitence."

Reilan's sword struck swiftly.

She thought about her first guild—a bunch of girlfriends playing together. Had things turned out a little differently, maybe Kanmuri would've ended up with them instead of the Liberator.

Before Kanmuri was released from her agony once and for all, she thought about Abyss Lord, wondering if he'd been plotting to use her for his cruel schemes from the moment he saved her. It struck her how pitiful she was, filling her last moments with thoughts about him.

Items poured out onto the floor like blood gushing from a wound. When Kanmuri's body dissolved into nothingness, Reilan returned her cross-sword into its sheath on her back.

"Her life shouldn't have gone to waste like this…"

She turned toward the sounds of a fierce battle. Rao's fight with the Liberator was heating up.

* * * *

Rao narrowly blocked the Liberator's sword. He kept pressing her, attacking again and again.

"Remarkable stamina," he said. "But then again, you are a tank."

The Liberator waved his sword at her in a taunt as his body seemed to absorb darkness, turning all black. Rao didn't know what skill he was using or what it did.

"Nightmare!"

He released the darkness from his body so that it shrouded Rao. Then he began to fade.

“How’s this? Pairs up well with my unique skill, don’t you think? I promoted from thief to assassin to get this skill specifically.”

Rao’s eyes were darting left and right. She could hear him but not see him in the darkness.

“You got a rad unique skill. What’s wrong with you to use it against people?!”

The Liberator chuckled, thinking it foolish that she was stalling for time.

“Tell me, do you even remember the first person you killed?” Rao asked him, trying to stop her hands from shaking with rage. “And the next one after that? What did they ever do to you?”

The man smiled to himself.

“Oh, I do remember my first kills,” he said quietly.

The men who had attacked Kanmuri were his first victims. He reflected on how saving the woman and becoming a player killer had set him on a path there was no returning from. Back then, he’d chosen to play a tragic hero. He pretended in front of Kanmuri that the killings had traumatized him, that the guilt he felt was unbearable. He sobbed and wailed inconsolably. All that to make Kanmuri blame herself for everything.

“The Mother AI didn’t punish me for killing those players. After figuring out how the karma system worked, I killed freely, without consequences, reaping the benefits!” he bragged.

Rao ground her teeth, her eyes glowing with rage. “Why’d you go out of your way to kill players instead of monsters…?”

The Liberator sighed as if it was the dumbest question he’d heard. When he replied, Rao could tell from his voice that he was smiling.

“Because it’s more efficient.”

He took position immediately above Rao, gripped his black sword with both hands, and leaped down at her, aiming for her neck.

“You bastard!”

Rao swung back her ax and took in a deep breath. A split second before the Liberator’s sword touched her neck, she sensed

him.

"Raaaaaargh!" she roared at him, her voice so powerful, the walls of the cave began to crack.

Rao's roar repelled the Liberator, pushing him up the cave shaft. He watched her, far down below, calmly analyzing the situation.

What skill did she use on me…? Was it her unique skill? But it didn't reduce my LP. It must be a tank skill of some sort.

He let himself free-fall back down to the cave floor, knowing that his unique skill and the thief skill Cat's Landing would keep him safe. But, somehow, he had a very unsettling sensation in his body.

Faint status?!

It dawned on him that the skill Rao had used on him was Intimidate, a tank skill with knockback and a low chance of inflicting Faint on a target who was midattack.

Rao's Intimidate was powerful enough to knock back even the roaming boss of Kiren Graveyard, Mannbaldr.

As she watched the Liberator fall, she swung back her war ax again, charging an attack.

"Level makes no difference to fall damage, you know."

The Liberator crashed onto the floor, his LP dropping to one. Rao immediately brought her ax down on him.

"Power Strike!"

"Aaaaaaaaagh!"

The attack power of the ax warrior skill Power Strike increased for every second it was charged. As a tank, Rao generally had less powerful skills than damage-dealer classes, but the Liberator was lower level than her. Even with his high defense, Rao's strike was overkill.

The Liberator's LP fell to zero, and his body began to crack just like the cave walls earlier.

"Hyeh… Ha-ha… It's over for you and your friends. You're player killers now. You can't enter any town…," he said to her before disappearing.

Rao observed his death with disdain. When he was gone, she turned on her heel and walked back to K and Reilan.

* * * *

Shuutarou jumped down from Sylvia's back when he saw his friends.

"You're okay! I couldn't be happier to see you!"

"Hey, we couldn't let you be the only hero in town—leave some for us!" joked K.

Feeling Rao and Reilan's intense gaze, K stopped laughing and made a serious face.

"Rao… Reilan… I was so scared… I don't want to ever lose another friend…," Shuutarou said through tears.





Rao and Reilan exchanged looks and came closer to him. They stroked his hair gently until he calmed down.

"And what about me?" asked K. "Weren't you scared of losing me, too?"

"Um, I somehow assumed you'd be fine."

"Kind of sounds like you just didn't care!" K complained, pouting.

Rao and Reilan giggled.

The mastermind behind a plot that led to the murders of hundreds of players was dead. So were his accomplices. That was the end of the Liberation Army.

* * * *

The party was welcomed like heroes upon their return to Calloah. A crowd of players clapped and cheered. The players who'd seen the Liberator exposed as a con and killer at the monastery had told everyone else in town about him.

"Huh? How come the NPCs let you in?" Shoukichi asked, looking around for any sight of NPCs rushing to attack Rao, Reilan, and K.

Rao put an arm around his neck and lifted him off the ground. "Why? Did you want to see them attack us?"

She squeezed him in mock anger.

Kettle looked from the struggling boy to the other members of the party.

"No, but seriously, why?" she asked.

"It would seem that the AI governing the game decided we had no ill intent," said Reilan, walking next to Kettle.

"Like justified self-defense?"

"Something like that, yes. My karma points did change, though. Our reputation hasn't gone unscathed."

Taking out a murderous player was actually considered praiseworthy by the NPCs. Arma had the blood of countless players on his hands as the designated killer in the Liberator's party. As such, K who had finished him off, saw his fame greatly increase. The players slain by Rao and Reilan weren't directly involved in the

murders, so the two women got bad karma points, but not enough to trigger the NPC's hostility.

Kettle groaned, frustrated. "Wait, so as long as there's no ill intent, you can get away with killing people?"

If Reilan's understanding of the karma system was correct, that was definitely a possibility, shocking as it was.

Reilan smiled uncomfortably. "The Liberator and the woman aiding him surely had ill intent, even though they weren't the ones to carry out the deed. That should still affect their karma points, in my opinion."

In the real world, murderers' accomplices would be punished, too, but in *Eternity*, they would've gotten away with their crimes if it wasn't for other players taking matters into their own hands. The Mother AI judged rights and wrongs based on criteria the players had no idea of.

"Granted, it's pretty messed up to claim that someone can kill so many people without having any ill intent," Reilan added.

They arrived at Crest's Calloah branch. Reilan pushed the door open, and the party was greeted with an explosion of cheering. The building was packed full. Looking around, Reilan saw that everyone was in Crest—there were lots of newcomers.

"Welcome back! It cheers me to see you all in one piece!"

Candy, the feminine battle instructor, was manning the desk. He'd come from Allistras as soon as K notified him of an emergency.

"I was heartbroken to hear about Galbo and his party. And the mass murders—shocking!"

Candy clenched his hands into fists. A shadow passed over K's face.

"We've avenged them," he said.

"You've done well. May the souls of all the poor people those scoundrels cheated and murdered rest in peace."

Candy looked around the room, where all faces were turned toward him.

“Shuutarou, my boy, you’ve shown great courage and saved many players. Everyone who’s escaped death in the monastery earlier today asked to join Crest, pledging their loyalty. I speak for everyone when I say, thank you!”

The guild office shook from cheers, and Shuutarou had to look down, embarrassed to be the center of attention. K bowed his head to the boy.

“All credit goes to you, Shuutarou. Without you, we wouldn’t even have been able to expose that con. I know full well you could’ve defeated him and his aides all by yourself, too, but I hope you won’t take offense when I say it was a task for grown-ups.”

Shuutarou smiled and nodded. People were still clapping for him, and he felt such enormous relief that the case was over, tears spilled from his eyes.

Warning: Invaders are approaching the dungeon.

The sound of the clapping suddenly became very distant as Shuutarou’s heartbeat thudded in his ears. He broke out in a cold sweat.

“What…?”

He’d never seen that system alert before, and his brain just froze, until Elroad contacted him telepathically.

‘Master, it appears that an intruder has arrived at Ross Maora.’

“!”

Shuutarou’s head finally kicked into gear. He turned to his friends.

“Sorry, I’ve gotta run!”

“Huh? Wait, Shuutarou! Where are you going?!” Shoukichi called after him.

But Shuutarou was already out the door.



Loud cheers filled Ciola Tower. The members of Twilight Adventurers seemed the most triumphant, having defeated their nemesis. All players received hefty rewards and a ton of experience points for defeating the boss. Considering they had put their lives on the line, even those rewards didn't do them justice, but they had moved closer toward clearing the game, and that offered plenty of encouragement.

"We couldn't have done it without the alliance…"

"At long last… At long last!"

"Thank you for making it possible!"

Players from Crest and Twilight Adventurers were thanking one another, exchanging hugs, and sharing in the elation that the victory brought them.

Flamme walked over to Wataru.

"Glad it went without a hitch," she said.

She thought she saw a brief flash of sorrow in Wataru's eyes.

"I don't deserve their gratitude…," he said under his breath.

"Sorry, what was that?"

"Never mind… Let's head back to the town."

Wataru turned on his heel and started leading the players back out through the dungeon.

"…?"

Only Misaki noticed the tears in his eyes. She thought that maybe he felt emotional because his guild was finally making progress toward clearing the game, his longtime efforts coming to fruition. It would be some time later that she'd learn the truth behind Wataru's tears.

* * * *

Upon the group's return to Fort Sandras, members from Twilight Adventurers and Crest who didn't participate in the Ciola Tower expedition joined them in celebration. They'd all been stressing over the other progression guilds having moved on to other areas, and they were eager to catch up, but those who'd returned from Ciola were tired and needed sleep.

"Thank you for your hard work, everyone," Wataru told the alliance members.

Misaki, a keen observer, immediately noticed the sadness lurking in Wataru's eyes.

"I have something to report," Wataru continued.

Hearing a change in his voice, the players around him fell silent. When Wataru spoke again, his voice seemed to fill the plaza.

"There has been a player-killer incident in Calloah Castle Town."

Someone cried out in alarm. People started talking over one another, but Wataru continued despite the noise.

"The killings are over, it seems. I've been told that the matter has been resolved."

His audience sighed with relief.

"Unfortunately…" Wataru had more bad news to share. "The player killers' victims are in the dozens. The player-killer group deceived their victims with the false promise of showing them how

to log out of the game, killing them stealthily. I must confess I had been suspecting that something of the sort had been going on."

The crowd clamored.

"You'd been suspecting it? What?"

"You mean, you didn't tell the rest of the guild that people had been dying en masse?"

"Why would you hide that?"

People gave voice to their anxiety, suspicions, and agitation. Only one player asked the question that mattered the most:

"…Have the player killers been caught?"

Wataru looked down at the ground. "Yes… The ones who killed the most people have been slain by Calloah branch chief K, and Rao and Reilan from Party 7."

Byakuren opened her eyes wide. Makoto and Misaki also reacted to the mention of Party 7.

Wataru bowed his head. Alba and Flamme followed suit.

"I apologize for not having told you about this earlier," said Wataru. "I received the report during the Ciola boss battle. The incident was already under control by then, but still, I should've asked you to stop the battle so that we could head back to Calloah and investigate."

He received a mix of reactions, as not everyone agreed with his assessment of priorities. Some players weren't sure what the right decision would have been, but they were dismayed that other players were being murdered while they'd been occupied elsewhere.

"You said the case was already closed when you got the report, so there'd be nothing to gain from us leaving the battle. What could we do besides giving condolences to the bereaved?" someone said, and many nodded in agreement.

But there were more than a few others with a different take.

"If there's room for investigation, it means you're not sure all the player killers have been caught, am I right? Then going back to track them down and make sure the players we've left behind in earlier towns were safe was more important than clearing Ciola."

"Can you hear yourself?! Retreating would've been crazy dangerous! And think of the supplies we'd have used for nothing! Going back wasn't an option!"

Players began quarreling, emotions running high.

That boss battle had a pivotal role in establishing close ties between the two guilds. Deviating from their plans and retreating in the middle would've put players at risk. Not to mention that this particular boss battle had a very deep meaning to Twilight Adventurers, and retreating might've permanently killed motivation in the less strong-willed players.

Keeping quiet about the reported murders and continuing with the battle had been agony for Wataru, but at the same time, he knew the consequences of relaying the incident then and there would've been worse.

"Tomorrow morning, we'll travel to Calloah, taking every precaution. Should we encounter any player killers who've escaped punishment…we'll see to it that justice is done."

The announcement was met both with tense stares and sighs of frustration. Crest had invested a lot of time and resources into turning three towns into safe havens for players. It hadn't been easy to establish the alliance with Twilight Adventurers, which was one of the major progression guilds. When the alliance cleared Ciola Tower, it seemed they were finally picking up pace, but no sooner had they celebrated their victory than something else had happened to hold them back again. Many players were severely exasperated by this.

After a brief pause, Wataru continued, "Speak with the king of Fort Sandras to receive your quest rewards. If anyone decides they no longer wish to fight on the front lines, I will relieve them of their duties without ill feelings. I'm sorry that we have to put progression on pause for the time being."

Wataru bowed his head again.

The alliance members were veteran players, not unfamiliar with unexpected setbacks. They didn't angrily protest at Crest's decision. If anything, most players quietly accepted it, sad rather than angry

that things had turned out that way. The enthusiasm they'd worked up after beating the Ciola Tower boss, though, was gone.

As for Twilight Adventurers, they weren't yet sure what to think. Should they feel proud of their founding members, Rao and Reilan, for slaying the player killers? But Rao and Reilan were no longer in their guild—they were in Crest—so their pride was muted by the sense of loss.

"We will assemble here at seven o'clock and depart shortly thereafter. And what will you do?" Wataru asked Byakuren.

"Twilight Adventurers will be coming with you, of course."

Wataru nodded, clearly relieved. All decided, he told his guild members he had nothing more to announce, and people started dispersing. Wataru turned into a dark alley, alone.

"Wataru!"

When Wataru turned around to face Misaki, she was taken aback by how exhausted he looked, although he was quick to hide it behind his usual friendly smile.

"Can I help you with something, Misaki?"

"Have you…lost someone you were close with?"

After Wataru told everyone about the killings, she remembered glimpsing tears in his eyes in the tower, and she was pretty sure he had lost someone who mattered to him a lot. She wouldn't admit to him that she'd seen him cry, though.

"It's that obvious, huh?"

"It is."

"I suppose I should tell you…"

He looked up at the sky.

"Many of the victims were from our guild. Among them were players I'd known since before I started this game. You're right; we were close."

He smiled sadly, remembering them.

"They wanted to fight on the front lines, but I told them to stay in Calloah and guard the town."

"!"

It was a personal decision that Wataru had made. He was worried that rookie players were still dying in Calloah quite often. Posting a group of players he knew he could rely on there seemed like a good call, but in the end, it led to them being murdered.

"Do you mind if I…take a little trip down memory lane?"

Wataru was surprised at how naturally the words came out. He wasn't sure why he felt the need to confide in Misaki.

"No, please do," she said, looking into his eyes earnestly.

She wanted to support him in any way she could, and if he needed someone to talk to, she'd listen.

Wataru hung his head and began telling her about himself.

* * * *

His name was Wataru Kido. He led an ordinary life and wasn't gifted in any way, whether athletically or intellectually, but people seemed to gravitate to him. It was probably his hardworking attitude and strong sense of moral obligation that attracted certain types of people.

One day, he was at the scene of a car crash.

"Whoa, that looks bad."

"Holy…! There's smoke coming out!"

It was a serious head-on collision.

Someone's still inside!

Wataru noticed a child was still strapped in inside the car, which looked like it might burst into flames any second. Without thinking, Wataru jumped into action.

"Grab my hand!"

He reached inside the car and managed to pull the kid out. He turned around, holding the kid in his arms when the car suddenly exploded.

"I'm very sorry to tell you this, but you won't be able to walk again," the doctor said to Wataru at the hospital.

Wataru took the diagnosis calmly. At least he was still alive, but that was where the good news ended. He had suffered burns all over his body, and the impact of the explosion had broken his spine, leaving him paralyzed from the head down. Not only would he never walk again—but he'd also never move, and he was terribly deformed. He'd be confined to a bed for the rest of his life for that one act of courage.

The child's parents came to visit him in the hospital, and they were in tears as they thanked him. The doctors and nurses were very good to him, making time to talk to him every day.

"I wish I'd died then…"

Putting his life on the line to save a child was a heroic act worth more than any badge of merit, but sometimes, when he was alone, Wataru couldn't help imagining what his life could've been if he hadn't rushed to the rescue, and tears flowed down his cheeks freely.

What saved his sanity were his friends. Not friends he'd had before the incident, but ones he met online.

His doctor brought him something to cheer him up.

"This is a virtual reality device."

Wataru had never used one before. The scenery in the virtual world looked so real, and it was filled with so many sounds. There, Wataru could move and even eat his favorite foods again. All he needed to interact in that world, to sense it, was his brain. The fact that he was paralyzed didn't matter. The VR device let him leave the hospital bed and enter a different world. On his first day, he spent most of his time awake there, meeting many people and having adventures together.

He met a man who'd started playing a VR game to spend time with his grandkids, who lived too far for him to see them in real life often.

"Excuse me, could you show me how to open this…menu thing?"

Another time, he met a bespectacled student who'd bought the game in secret since her parents were strict and disapproved of gaming.

"Hey, are you already in a party? Because I'm looking for someone to quest with!"

He also met a tall, muscular man who perfectly fit the image of an undefeatable warrior.

"How about we team up?"

Wataru's real-life friends grew distant from him, not knowing how to talk to him after he became a tragic hero. Making friends in the virtual world with people who didn't know about his situation felt refreshing. They only knew him as another player called Wataru.

And so Wataru made the VR world his own, living his life there unimpeded by his physical disabilities. When *Eternity* was announced, Wataru was one of the lucky few chosen to playtest the game during the closed beta, as were some of the players he'd met in other games. They created a guild, and everything was going well until the official release day.

While most players were terrified when they couldn't log out, Wataru actually felt happy at the thought of staying in the game forever. He wasn't too keen on the idea of trying to clear the game to set everyone free, since he could imagine that virtual reality games might be banned after an incident on that scale.

"But I can't prioritize my happiness over the well-being of everyone else."

All around him, he could see people panicking and giving in to despair. And that was when a new sense of calling came to him, born out of a sense of obligation toward the in-game friends who had made him feel joy again. He decided to be a beacon of hope for everyone.

* * * *

Misaki was in tears from the shock of learning what had happened to Wataru. Would returning to the real world, where he lay in bed

paralyzed, be better for him than being confined inside a game where he brushed with death daily? If it wasn't for his sense of duty, he might've been living a quiet, safe life in one of the game's towns. If it wasn't for his moral fortitude, he might've become a player killer, stopping others from clearing the game. But it wasn't in Wataru's nature to put himself before others.

Not only does he have the most precise moral compass in the world but also the superhuman resolve to follow it…!

What Wataru told her cast a new light on the founding of Crest with his friends—friends who had been his lifeline. And he'd lost one of them to the player killers.

"I didn't know you were close with Galbo," said Misaki. "I'm so sorry…"

Wataru still couldn't believe that one of his guild's founding members was dead, or that he'd revealed his private background to someone. He clenched his hands into fists.

"I can't accept it as just an accident that someone died because of where I'd assigned them to. I can't simply move on. I don't think it'd be right anyway to become desensitized to such things. I'll never forget the last time I spoke to Galbo."

Wataru bit his lip hard, his grief not going away.

Seeing the leader of the biggest guild like this made a deep impression on Misaki. He was the hero who'd ended the chaos at the start of the deadly game, and the savior who'd prevented a monster invasion from crushing Allistras, but just like anyone else, he grieved after those he lost, regretted his decisions, and wasn't invulnerable. As the guild master, he was the decision-maker, carrying on his shoulders the responsibility for the consequences of his choices, whatever they might be.

In a way, Misaki was also a victim of Wataru's choices. When he asked her to use her unique skill to look out for danger, he'd started a chain reaction that saw Misaki unable to return to a low-profile, ordinary in-game life. Since that monster invasion, Misaki had been permanently sleep-deprived, obsessively training.

Wataru, who had changed Misaki's future, turned away from her. His back used to look so strong and big to her before, but that day, it seemed somehow shrunken, hurt.

"I…I will fight on!"

She thought that trying to express sympathy or console Wataru wouldn't work. The way to get through to him was to show him her support for the direction he'd taken and her willingness to stand by him no matter what. She wanted to convey to him, as directly as possible, that she was there because she believed in him.

"I appreciate that, Misaki. I really do…," he said quietly before walking away, his cape fluttering.

Misaki watched him sadly until she could see him no more.

* * * *

The throne room of Fort Sandras was filled with the whistling of steam escaping from moving pistons and the grinding of turning cogwheels. A red carpet stretched from the door all the way to the throne at the far end, where the king sat.

After the Kingdom of Sandras was nearly destroyed by the angels (although that wasn't quite true; the angels had only partially destroyed one tower in the kingdom), the king sought to restore forgotten technology to fight back. The fortress was one huge mechanical contraption, and all its guards were machines. It wasn't the angels, though, that the Kingdom of Sandras utilized this technology against—it was the neighboring countries that fell victim to it, and all that was left of them was desolate wasteland.

Tyrone, the king of Sandras, who commanded power the likes of which seemingly nobody could oppose, grinned smugly when the adventurers entered his room.

"Let me see your faces, brave adventurers! I have heard of your merit!"

The three kneeling players who'd come to see him raised their heads.





From Tyrone's point of view, they were outstanding fighters who'd slain Thunderbird Fendalr, a most pestilent monster that had taken over Ciola Tower. He couldn't simply let them leave his kingdom.

The players—Misaki, Byakuren, and Makoto—looked up at the king. The Ciola Tower quest wasn't finished for them yet. They had to get their reward from the king for it to complete.

"I will open my coffers for you! No one shall call me a miserly king!"

"Pompous old man," Byakuren whispered.

Misaki looked at her in shock. "Shhh! What if he hears you?"

"Oh, so sorry. I'll be sure to insult him more quietly."

"Can you just not do it while we're here…?"

Byakuren had a very low opinion of Tyrone, who'd built that cursed tower and left it infested with monsters as if it was none of his concern. So many of her guild members had died there. Not that an NPC could be held responsible for anything.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Makoto said politely, smiling.

Tyrone stood up with the help of a mechanical cane. His face bulged grotesquely with fat, but something about the look in his eyes testified to his past as a legendary warrior. Since he came to rely on the power of machines, Tyrone had not only stopped participating in battles, but he also rarely even rose from his throne.

The king showed the players a shining key.

"I have a favor to ask you, fearless adventurers."

The key vanished from the king's hand, reappearing in the three players' inventory and their shared guild storage.

Key Item: Cerou Underground Labyrinth Key

That was the reward for this type of quest.

"You must be aware of the sprawling maze under the tower, yes? To my vexation, it is absolutely infested with monsters. I have had the entrance sealed, of course, but should those pests break through some day, it would be most inconvenient. You travel the

land seeking adventure, and I have just the adventure for you—do away with the underground-labyrinth monsters for me."

Having stated his request, the king sat down heavily in his throne again. Taking it as a cue that there was nothing more for them to do there, Misaki stood up and left the room first. Byakuren followed her unhurriedly, grumbling to Makoto.

"Tell me, what's his machine army for? Why does he keep dumping jobs on random visitors?"

"That's what I was thinking! We made the right call coming for the reward first thing, though. All of us leveled up!"

The quest reward was generous indeed. Misaki and Makoto got 2 levels from it, and Byakuren 1. The quest was designed so that players around level 30 would gain three levels total, combining the EXP from the tower boss Fendalr with the reward from the king. Then there was the gold, which would pay for new equipment.

The three friends walked in silence for a while after leaving the castle. Once they were back on the town streets, they stopped.

"Have you decided what you want to do next?" asked Byakuren.

The pivotal Ciola Tower quest was over, but their guilds weren't going to work on clearing the next area as long as the player-killer threat remained.

"I'm going to Calloah tomorrow morning, of course," replied Misaki.

Byakuren and Makoto told her they would also be heading there. The day was still young, though. Misaki asked if the others wanted to do something together.

"Sorry." Makoto smiled awkwardly. "Got plans."

"Ah," Byakuren said as if she guessed what he was talking about. "I think I'm also done for the day."

Both Makoto and Byakuren seemed exhausted. Although she was disappointed, Misaki would feel bad to hold them up any longer.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then!"

"See you tomorrow, Misaki!" said Byakuren.

Makoto just nodded, and he and Byakuren walked away. Misaki stared at the ground for a while, but eventually, she walked off, too.

* * * *

The players from Crest and Twilight Adventurers who cleared Ciola Tower found themselves with unexpected free time on their hands. Some headed to the taverns to drown their sorrows, some cried in their lodgings, and some decided to leave the front lines. The Liberator and his gang had killed a staggering number of players—among them, many had been friends of the frontline squad. Having lost those they'd sworn to protect, the shattered fighters could no longer find the motivation to risk their own lives to progress through the game.

One of the off-duty players was in his room, drinking. It was Makoto. Another empty bottle slammed against the table. He opened his friends list and selected the CALL option. The dial tone started playing.

There were three empty bottles on the table. It took that much booze for Makoto to work up the courage to make that call.

I was a fool…trying to be cool, swearing not to come back until I'd made a name for myself… Meanwhile, they found an invasion boss and killed it…and then faced a player-killer group…

He'd been so oblivious to it all. He and Barbara messaged each other every now and again, but she'd never mentioned the trials and tribulations her party had been through. Makoto was angry at himself; not once had he suspected more was going on in the lives of his friends than the casual correspondence with Barbara revealed.

"Hello. What's going on, Makoto?"

When he heard Barbara's warm voice, he felt as if all strength had drained out of his body.

"The front lines…here on the front lines… Er… We cleared the next dungeon and… Argh, this isn't what I wanted to talk about!"

Everything he'd had to say was trying to come out of his mouth at the same time. It was the fault of the three empty bottles in front of him that his tongue was getting twisted. Or was it the effect of finally hearing Barbara's voice again?

She giggled.

"Makoto… Are you drunk?"

"Whuh? Would I be drinking so early in the day?"

"I suppose not! You're not just our babysitter after all, but an elite frontline fighter."

She giggled again. Makoto instantly sobered up.

"…We've cleared Ciola Tower."

"Amazing! Congratulations! The equipment we sent you helped, didn't it?"

Hearing her sincere happiness only made Makoto feel more pathetic. His lips began to quiver, and he had to press his fingers to the inner corners of his eyes to stop tears.

"I'm sorry…I'm sorry, Barbara… I had no idea you got attacked by an invasion boss…and player killers… When I found out, I couldn't call you right away…"

The dam on his emotions burst open, and a flood of words spilled out of his mouth.

"Why couldn't you call?" Barbara asked carefully.

"I think it's because…because I wanted to…I wanted to play a part in clearing the front lines at Ciola Tower…to have some achievement of my own to report next time we spoke. As if it was an excuse for having left you to deal with everything on your own…"

Makoto knew full well how terrifying invasion monsters were—he'd fought in a battle against one and its army of minions. It was absolutely killing him that he hadn't been there with Barbara's party when they had faced one all by themselves.

Barbara trilled with laughter again.

"Don't worry about us, Makoto. I assure you we're doing well. We got lucky that time with the invasion boss, and in fact, we survived the encounter because you weren't there."

If it wasn't for Shuutarou and Sylvia temporarily filling the gap in her party after Makoto left, they almost certainly wouldn't have escaped with their lives.

Makoto went silent, so Barbara continued, *"I'm sorry for not telling you about it. I asked the others not to tell you, either. You can understand why, can't you? If something was to happen to us, you'd go crazy with worry. And then how would you fight on the front lines? Where you're at now, you can't afford to have any distractions."*

Her thinking wasn't that different from Wataru's. She, too, had pangs of conscience over keeping the truth from her friend, but when he called her, clearly drunk and guilt-ridden, he vindicated her decision.

"I did think ahead, you know, when you told me you were leaving. I took it into account that we might run into unforeseeable difficulties, and we'd have to tackle them on our own. That we might have to dial down our ambitions to play it safe, or that we might discover it too frightening to keep advancing. But we still encouraged you to stick with what you wanted to do, remember? Because we care about you. Can you see that now?"

She was speaking to him softly, melting him into an emotional puddle. Unable to speak, he quietly listened to her every word.

"I think that, maybe, of all of us, you were the least prepared for your departure to the front lines."

She heard his muffled sobbing on the line and smiled awkwardly.

"I hope you're somewhere private."

Makoto nodded, despite the fact that Barbara couldn't see him.

Barbara laughed, a bit embarrassed, and added in a lower voice, *"Nobody else gets to see your tears, you hear?"*

She stayed on the line, listening—even though Makoto had stopped talking and was openly crying, alone in a timeworn inn room, sitting in front of empty liquor bottles.

* * * *

It had been long since the heyday of Twilight Adventurers, when they'd rushed through the game as if the devil were chasing them, spending their time off on daily PvP matches to compete in player rankings. Their guild headquarters was now drearily empty but for hired NPCs, who stood around without anything to do.

"Home sweet home," Byakuren muttered forlornly, casting a wistful glance across the headquarters.

Her guild had been almost completely destroyed because of the tragedy at that cursed tower. And she was to blame for that. The guilt, and memories of the friends she'd lost, would accompany her to her grave.

Byakuren went from one room to another. The final room she visited, far at the back, was studded with grave markers that had pieces of equipment hanging from them. It was the memorial room for the guild members who'd lost their lives in Ciola Tower.

"…"

Byakuren approached each of the grave markers in turn, touching them with her fingers. And then she called a friend who was terribly dear to her but whom she'd thought she'd never speak to again.

"…Hey, what's up? Everything okay?"

It was a voice that Byakuren hadn't heard in a long time. That this friend's first words were those of concern made Byakuren's heart tighten with emotion.

"I heard you fought player killers. Are you all right?"

"Aah, that. It was fine," said Rao.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm good. I knew what I was getting into."

Byakuren had carefully prepared everything she wanted to say to her friend, but when it came to it, the script flew out the window. She was greatly relieved that her friend was okay, though, and wanted to tell her about the recent events on her side.

"We've cleared it. Ciola Tower."

There were so many other things she wanted to talk about, such as the alliance between Crest and Twilight Adventurers, her guild's comeback, the party she was in, the new friends she'd made. She opened her mouth many times only to close it again, swallowing what she was going to say.

I've forgotten how to talk to her…

She consoled herself that simply hearing her friend's voice was good enough.

"I'll be going back to Calloah tomorrow, with the Crest people. To make sure there are no more player killers at large."

"Cool. I think we got them all, though."

"Hopefully…"

Byakuren was about to end the call, when Rao said something that made her freeze with her fingers over the menu.

"We're heading toward the front lines, by the way. Come over here, Reilan. Say something to her, too!"

"L-let go! I've been in contact with Byakuren, unlike you."

There was noise on the line. When it cleared, Reilan's voice came through as clear as Rao's.

"You may not believe it, but Rao's been bending my ear telling me she can't wait to see you. You should see her grinning now…"

"Shut up! That's not why I got you on the call!"

"Only yesterday, she was going on and on about what she'll do after joining you on the front lines."

"Take my revenge against the game for forcing me to turn back earlier! What's weird about making plans anyway?"

"Oh, that wasn't the main part you were talking about yesterday…"

Listening to Reilan teasing Rao, Byakuren felt reassured by them acting just as they used to. While they bantered, she gazed at the grave markers of Haru Kanata and Telia.

After a while, Reilan spoke to her in a serious tone.

"Byakuren… So you've avenged us?"

"Yes," she replied without conviction.

Byakuren didn't feel that she deserved any credit for clearing the tower. It was the Crest guild and the remaining members of Twilight Adventurers, who stayed loyal to her despite everything, who had made it happen.

"I'm sorry. It must have been so difficult for you," Reilan said after a pause.

Byakuren pressed her lips into a line, trying to hold in the tears that were threatening to spill. She had flashbacks to the tower, to the row she'd had with her friends, ending with them leaving, to all the other fights they'd had over differences in opinions, to the day when the game became a death trap…

Rao took over from Reilan.

"I want to tell you everything that's happened since we split up, and what I was thinking of doing from now on, if that's okay?"

"Yes… It's okay…," Byakuren replied, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Rao did have a lot to say. She talked about joining Barbara's party, Shoukichi and Kettle being hard work, and a young boy called Shuutarou who was a genius fighter. She sounded really happy.

After she was finished, Byakuren finally told her everything she'd meant to share when she decided to call.

Despite the long period when they refused to speak with each other, their friendship, which started long before the game trapped them, was easily rekindled.

Reilan was there throughout the call, happy that her friends had reconnected at last.

"The time together with these guys has, like, healed me, you know? I feel ready to get out there and fight on again."

"Same," Byakuren replied quietly.

Misaki and Makoto had done the same for her. She knew exactly how Rao felt.

"So you know…we'll be heading out soon, and it'd be awesome to team up with you again. And have PvP all-nighters like back in the good old days!"

That made Byakuren nostalgic. She laughed and wiped her tears, looking forward to resurrecting their old custom.

"I've also had enough of staying put. It's going to be me pushing the boundaries of the front lines farther and farther. Hurry up to join me, because I'm not going to sit and wait!"

"Now, that's the Byakuren I know!"

The Liberator incident in Calloah Castle Town affected the lives of a great many players. Not all these effects were necessarily negative.







Misaki went to the training grounds as usual. The facility had countless square battle areas, but they were hardly utilized that day, with only a handful of players there. As far as Misaki could see, none of them were from Crest or Twilight Adventurers—after the events that day, training was the last thing on their mind. But not for Misaki. She trained every day, no matter what. She was driven by the fear of being powerless and of her last moments being filled with regrets.

Many of the monsters in Cerou are Fire-attribute. I'll practice on level-thirty Soul Candles.

She inputted her selections on the control panel, and the area around her changed to mimic the underground labyrinth, spawning three blue-flamed candles.

Soul Candles were vengeful spirits of the people murdered in Dullahan's manor; they appeared around Kiren Graveyard in the form of candles. The damage they dealt varied from one to another —the stronger their wrath, the hotter their flames.

In each of the flickering blue flames was a face contorted in agony. The sight alone was so chilling, many players would flee upon seeing these candles.

Misaki unleashed a three-arrow volley as soon as the monsters spawned, hitting the ghostly faces in between the eyes. They

exploded and vanished.

…Too easy. I need to increase the difficulty.

She raised the monster level to 35 and set it so that five would spawn at once. She readied her bow and waited for them to appear. No sooner had they materialized than they flickered out of existence again. Misaki selected different monsters for the next round. She had to practice every one of her skills, learn how the different map would affect them.

How can I streamline it? I'll need Shadow Cloak and Hide. Then Sneak and Swap Position to confuse the target, and I'll finish them off with Fatal Strike. Yeah, that's a solid solo strategy.

For enemies spotted at a distance, she'd use her bow, but when fighting in cramped spaces, maybe with multiple enemies around, her weapon of choice would be a dagger.

Her class, hermit, was as good in a party as it was solo, using bows, daggers, and martial arts skills to take out enemies at any range. The dark, narrow tunnels of the underground labyrinth were the perfect environment for hermits to put their skills to best use.

Misaki finished a dozen practice battles, and then a dozen more, and more yet. She repeated dagger stabs and kicks over and over to build muscle memory, her thoughts on something else entirely.

I wonder if Shuutarou had anything to do with it…

While she had plenty of respect for Barbara's party and K, killing an invasion boss and a gang of player killers were feats she'd ascribe to Shuutarou, if anyone. In her mind, he'd become a sort of hero figure, appearing when people needed help the most.

"Whoa, that was neato!"

Misaki turned in the air, landing so that she could see who had approached her. Two men had been watching her last fight, it seemed. One with unruly black hair and red eyes. The other, a

swarthy buff dude with tattoos. They were the leaders of Yamata, but Misaki didn't know that.

"Do you want to use this room?" she asked them; she was pretty much done for the day.

The black-haired man, Hiiiiive, waved dismissively. His companion, Alan, yawned.

"Nah, you keep it," said Hiiiiive. "No shortage of rooms today—it's like a ghost town. Watch the tumbleweed roll by."

They walked away, dragging their feet.

"I'll do a bit more, then…"

Misaki turned back to the control panel to set up her next practice battle. She could hear snippets of the pair's conversation.

"…All they wanted was her Clairvoyance…"

"…Selling out… Pathetic…"

"Not like she's got anything else going for her…"

"Such BS, man…"

"Clairvoyance"? "Selling out"?

Misaki froze with her hand above the screen. She tried to tune in on what the men were saying, and she didn't want the beeping of the panel as she tapped it to distract her.

"Funny how a useless shut-in can rake it in. What a cushy life. Wish I had it as easy as Twilight's guild master."

Without thinking, Misaki turned on her heel, and a moment later, she was standing in front of the two men.

"Were you talking about Byakuren just now?"

"Huh? What's that to you?"

Alan grinned at her nastily, trying to wind her up. Hiiiiive slapped his head.

"Told you," he said to Alan, rolling his eyes.

"I'll have you know that Byakuren fights valiantly and has never asked anyone to pay her for using her skill. I can vouch for that," Misaki told them. "You'd better take back what you said."

Normally, Misaki wouldn't stick her nose in where it didn't belong, but she knew firsthand what Byakuren had been through

and was proud of her finding the courage to lead her guild again. She couldn't stand some dude spreading false, denigrating rumors about Byakuren.

"Oh yeah?" Alan cracked his neck. "To make me change my mind, you gotta beat me. In this world, the strongest win. Battles, arguments, everything."

What Alan said about *Eternity* was true. Real-world ideas such as equity or authority didn't apply in this deadly game, where power was everything.

"Wait, so if someone's stronger than you, you'll accept anything they say even if it's wrong?"

"Sure, why not?"

The air between them sizzled with animosity. For a moment, it looked like they might actually go at each other, but Alan suddenly backed off. He scratched his head.

"Easy, girl. I'm not in your league. I don't waste my time PvPing little midges."

He tried to wave her off, but Misaki wasn't going to just walk away.

"So if someone's not all powerful, they don't even get to have an opinion and be listened to? The way you see the world is sad and contrived."

When Alan stopped smiling, some primal reflex made Misaki's back tense with fear.

"Then tell me, what good ever came of listening to the weak, like Crest does? What a pathetic guild. You guys are trekking back to an earlier town tomorrow, no? You don't have the skill and drive of Aegis and Yamata, and that's the truth of it."

"And rushing with exploration is supposed to be worth more than protecting human lives?"

Alan stared at her darkly, saying nothing. Misaki was passionate about what she believed in and wouldn't let him intimidate her into agreeing with him. She put her hand on her chest and carried on arguing.

"I'm weak, ignorant, and naive. But I won't idly listen to anyone bad-mouthing Crest for helping those who can't fight!"

Alan's lips stretched in a snarky smile. "Then don't idly listen—fight me! Beat me, and I'll take back what I said about Crest. And if I beat you…what will you do?"

Hiiiiive sighed loudly, getting exasperated just listening to them.

"Nothing!" Misaki replied, staring Alan directly in the eyes.

That threw him off.

"What? What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"If I'm weaker, that puts me at a disadvantage right from the start. And you're asking me to concede something to you if you defeat me? That's not a fair way to settle anything; that's just abuse, and it's stupid!"

From her point of view, what she said was perfectly obvious and logical. But Alan started to shake with rage, while Hiiiiive was getting the giggles.

"Oh yeah? If someone's got a different opinion from you, they're just being stupid, huh?!" Alan shouted.

"You think I'm being unreasonable? *You're* the one being unreasonable!" Misaki yelled back.

They were almost at each other's throats.

"Stop making a scene! This is embarrassing," said Hiiiiive.

"*She's* the one making a scene, not me! It's like talking to a toddler, I swear."

"If I'm a toddler, you're a baby! Fine, let's fight it out!"

"What, now you want to settle it by fighting?!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

While the two were fuming, Hiiiiive thought they were hilarious together. Their kindergarten-level shouting match went on for a while, and they were getting all the more heated, until Alan finally settled into a menacing calmness.

"There won't be one unbroken bone in your body when I'm finished with you," he said in a rolling growl. "And you don't owe me

anything when you lose. But I'm going to break you, and believe me, you won't feel like yapping at me ever again."

His murderous rage was palpable, but Misaki didn't back down. She'd never tried PvP before, always practicing on monster opponents, but she stuck with positive thinking, seeing it as a valuable learning opportunity, regardless of the outcome. Even when sparring in PvP, it was rare for the participants to be complete strangers who knew nothing about each other's abilities.

Misaki wasn't as thin-skinned as she looked.

She took out her silver bow and nodded.

"Let's duel."

* * * *

Misaki didn't know much about PvP, but she suspected that the match rules that Hiiiiive suggested were meant to make it easier for her. To bag a win, they needed to land either one hit to the head or heart, or two fatal hits to any other part of the body. Alan's level was adjusted to 32, which was Misaki's level. All skill masteries were set to 30, which must have been quite a downgrade for Alan.

Alan didn't seem to be carrying any weapons, which led Misaki to guess he was some sort of a martial artist.

The choice of map was left to Misaki. When the scenery changed, Alan looked around in surprise.

"Seriously, you're going with Cerou?"

He must've been expecting her to choose a wide, open map, where her bow would give her an advantage over him, a close-combat fighter.

Misaki finished prepping.

"It's the next area we'll be exploring," she explained matter-of-factly.

"Brave," commented Hiiiiive.

He couldn’t see any hints of nervousness in Misaki’s eyes.

She’s happy to do this duel for practice, even if she can’t win? Maybe she’s not just an overearnest gal totally lacking self-awareness…

It intrigued him that winning seemed entirely irrelevant to Misaki.

I must be grateful for this chance to learn firsthand how martial artists fight, Misaki told herself, taking deep, measured breaths to clear her mind and focus.

The player-killer incident in Calloah made her keenly aware that the dangers of Cerou Underground Labyrinth weren’t limited to monsters—you could never know if hostile players weren’t lurking there, too. Learning how to fight with close-combat types in narrow tunnels would be important for survival.

Alan bumped his fists together, and metal gauntlets began to form over his hands, starting from his fingers and growing longer and longer until they shielded part of his forearms, too.

Misaki checked the tension on her bowstring and looked up at her opponent expectantly.

“We never start duels with some sort of signal,” said Hiiiiive. “Read your opponent to figure out when to strike.”

He walked back to lean against the wall and watched in amusement.

Misaki waited with her eyes firmly on Alan, a green arrow nocked on her bow. Alan didn’t even look particularly wary of her. He crouched down low and smirked at her.

“Ready or not!”

He sprinted at her with such speed, the cave floor rumbled, cracking. She didn’t have much time to react.

“Quick Shot!”

Misaki used the swiftest archer skill, paired with the fastest arrow type—a wind arrow. Just as it was about to hit Alan square in the head, he performed a lightning-quick dodge, but all of a sudden, he couldn’t see Misaki anywhere.

Where'd she go…?

She was right behind him.

Misaki had used Swap Position to switch with the arrow to get behind her opponent. She was holding her Fang Dagger, ready to stab Alan in the back.

Attacking with the bow to take advantage of her range had only been a trick to get right next to her close-range opponent and switch to a short-range weapon. It was a daring plan.

Bewildered, Alan kicked the ground with a loud *thud* and leaped away from Misaki. He dug his gauntlets into the cave floor, using them both as brakes and to help him do a one-eighty to turn back toward Misaki. In a single swift move, he knocked the dagger out of her hand just as she tried to stab him.

"Adamantine Fists!" Alan shouted, activating a skill on top of his already-quickened gauntlet attack.

Misaki was without her weapon, wide-open for attack…but she was in the air. She'd swapped position with her dagger this time, and she had her silver bow at the ready.

"Rapid Shot!"

Five arrows flew at Alan. He flicked three of them away with his gauntlets, but one hit his foot, and other stuck in his chest where his heart was.

"She had me knock her dagger away to do this?!"

Alan was shocked by the level of Misaki's cunning.

She landed gracefully and smiled at him. When she'd swapped position and quickly reequipped the bow to fire at Alan, she noticed that he'd sensed what was coming, like a wild animal sensing danger, and she was certain he could have defended himself against all her arrows. But he hadn't. She watched him, not understanding, as he slowly removed his gauntlets.

"Okay, you won," said Alan.

Hiiiiive shot him a puzzled look. "You done?"

Alan responded with a little nod.

Somebody pinch me, Hiiiiive thought, exiting the match on the control panel.

Misaki stood there, looking from one to the other uncertainly.

"It's over?" she asked.

"Yeah, you heard the man. He says he's done."

"…"

Dissatisfied, Misaki glanced over at Alan…and it occurred to her then that he had a different air about him. Earlier, when he was trying to intimidate her in battle, she felt like she had a good chance against him, but now he seemed…invincible. She understood that he'd gone easy on her and let her win on a whim, and it bugged her terribly. She hadn't won the PvP match—Alan had simply decided that he didn't feel like playing anymore.

* * * *

Many of the players walking in stopped in astonishment when they noticed a very unusual trio sitting together in a corner.

"What're you staring at?!" Alan shouted, glaring at the onlookers, who awkwardly made themselves scarce. He clicked his tongue in annoyance, then turned to Misaki. "Don't you have weapon experts at your guild?"

"We do," she replied, busily polishing her weapons.

She cleaned her dagger, Silver Bow, Silver Arrows, and her armor, which was emblazoned with the Crest emblem. Equipment had a durability stat, but it didn't affect its appearance. A weapon with so little durability left that it might break on the next attack wouldn't have visible chips or blood smears all over it—it would look no different from freshly serviced weapons. Only crafters with equipment-maintenance skills could restore durability, so what Misaki was doing didn't serve any obvious purpose. But she had her reasons.

"I think it's because it's no longer just a game… Gifts from other players feel very special to me, and I want to take good care of

them. And also, they're my trusty battle companions. I'm grateful toward them for protecting me."

Misaki gently stroked the limbs of her bow. Her Silver Arrows were lined up neatly next to it. She only had about half of them now. Arrows were consumable items; while she could retrieve them from her targets sometimes, if they flew a certain distance away from her, they'd disappear after hitting their target. Misaki made sure to save the Silver Arrows for special battles, but since they'd reached the front lines, she couldn't be stingy with them. The lives of the people in the raid parties might depend on her.

The weapons that Theodore had given her, which he had crafted himself, were outstandingly powerful, even on the front lines. The Silver Arrows in particular had allowed Misaki to make significant contributions in the last boss battle.

When I run out of these arrows, I'll find out what's my own strength, and what was just the equipment.

The leaders of Yamata sat next to her, observing as she cleaned one weapon after another. It was only when she was finished that she sat facing them.

"Thank you for waiting. Can you tell me now why you gave up the match?"

"Argh, you really are relentless…"

"I just want to understand. You were so keen on that duel."

"Well," Hiiiiive replied instead of his guildmate, "you put in good effort and convinced him you weren't just talk. You should wear that as a badge of honor."

"It was just a 'good effort' from me… That's how you saw it?"

Alan said nothing.

"Look, he's on a whole different plane of existence on account of your level difference. We used the level-adjustment setting, but still."

Alan took out a piece of beef jerky and bit into it, glancing sideways at Hiiiiive.

"It'd be overkill if I didn't get nerfed."

“What is your actual level, if you don’t mind telling me?” Misaki asked.

“Forty-five.”

“F-forty-five?!” Misaki was shocked. “If you fought me without a handicap, I wouldn’t have any hope of winning…”

Misaki’s confidence plummeted. She looked absolutely flabbergasted.

Alan chuckled. “I told you, but you were too stubborn to listen, even though I’m pretty damn sure you could sense the difference in strength between us.”

One could say that players evolved with each level-up, owing to the stat increases that came with them. As they gained experience points and, consequently, levels, they became ever more powerful beings. At some point, they would develop a sixth sense for assessing the strength of other players—although there were some exceptions.

Alan was convinced that Misaki already possessed this sixth sense, and him admitting it was a mark of respect worth more than vague assurances that he appreciated her efforts in PvP.

“I just couldn’t walk away after what you said about my guild…,” Misaki grumbled.

“Can’t tell if you’re brutally honest or just pigheaded!” Alan burst into laughter again.

“It’s not funny,” Misaki said sulkily.

Alan was laughing so much, there were tears in the corners of his eyes. He wiped them and looked over at Hiiiiive.

“I like her,” said Alan. “I thought they didn’t make them like that anymore, but here she is, a rare exception.”

“What’s gotten into you?”

“She kinda reminds me of my sister.”

“Aah, makes sense now.” Hiiiiive laughed.

Misaki wasn’t following their conversation.

“You have a sister?” she asked, visibly curious.

"He might not look it," said Hiiiiive, "but he's totally obsessed with her and her kid. He joined the progression team because he can't wait to be out and see them again."

"You just have to make it your mission to destroy my rep, huh?!"

Aran Shidou was twenty years old. His nineteen-year-old sister, who'd just had a baby, was the center of his world and his motivation for fighting on the front lines to get out of the game.

He looked somewhat grumpy after Hiiiiive revealed that about him. Misaki blinked, astonished.

"I'm not going to criticize his rationale," Hiiiiive added, scratching his head wildly like he was uncomfortable with his own thoughts. "I also have a need to get out of here ASAP. That's why it's easier for me to find common ground with others who take matters into their own hands, and cowards who wait for us to do all the dirty work make me want to puke. Sorry for trash-talking Byakuren and your guild, though."

It was Alan, really, who'd bad-mouthed her friends, but Misaki accepted Hiiiiive's apology nonetheless.

I feel bad now for thinking they were jerks…

At a glance, Alan and Hiiiiive seemed like thugs, and Misaki didn't like them looking down on the noncombatants. But they were truly dedicated to clearing the game, sparing no effort to reach that goal. They might make powerful allies, but they'd probably be unlikely to extend a helping hand if they saw no benefit to it.

Their guild, Yamata, was infamous for their crazy adherence to the custom of PvP death matches even after in-game death became real death. In most cases, the death matches would end when one of the participants surrendered, but it was only too easy for a tiny misjudgment to end in someone's death.

From the point of view of the majority of players, risking your life when fighting monsters outside towns was bad enough. Voluntarily putting your life on the line in PvP was the height of insanity. To them, Yamata members were all, without exception, dangerous madmen.

The reason Yamata stood by their strange custom was their—or rather, Hiiiiive's—conviction that it was necessary for the selection of the finest fighters. He wanted his guild to have only the most elite players he could trust to have his back when exploring the uncharted areas of the game.

While many of the main guilds still had their founding members, Hiiiiive was the only one of the eight original Yamata members still in the group. The top Yamata players—Alan was one of them—were unbeaten champions of death match PvP. Through fearlessness and dogged determination, they'd honed their skills until they became some of the most accomplished players in the game.

"It's not enough to be strong," said Hiiiiive. "You've got to have something driving you to persist, no matter what. For him, it's his sister and his baby niece."

He looked at Alan.

"Something driving you…," Misaki repeated quietly to herself, hanging her head.

"Frankly, I don't give a rat's ass about the wimps staying in their inns. Screw them," said Alan. "When those losers hold back players who can fight, though, from putting themselves to use here—that's what makes me so frigging mad. They're delaying us all from getting out. That's my issue with Crest."

Misaki didn't want to respond to that.

"Anyway, we won't trash-talk them anymore, like Hiiiiive said," Alan added quietly.

Misaki put her hand behind her ear, leaning toward him. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"We won't trash-talk them!"

"You're good at winding him up," Hiiiiive commented, smirking. He got to his feet. "Well, it was nice talking to you, but our break time's over."

"Huh? Time flies…"

Alan stood up as well and dusted off his butt.

Misaki looked up at them. "Where are you off to?"

"The Cerou boss," Hiiiiive replied with a brief half smile.

A shadow of worry fell on Misaki's face, but she smiled resolutely at the men.

"I hope everything goes well," she told them.

"Don't worry about us. We've done our homework," said Hiiiiive. "The next boss is an open book for us. The big boss at the end might be a tough nut to crack, though."

It sounded like Yamata was already almost finished with the Cerou Underground Labyrinth. But they weren't going it alone as they'd used to.

"If we'd known Crest and Twilight were dropping out, we wouldn't have had to team up with those guys…," Alan said with a sigh.

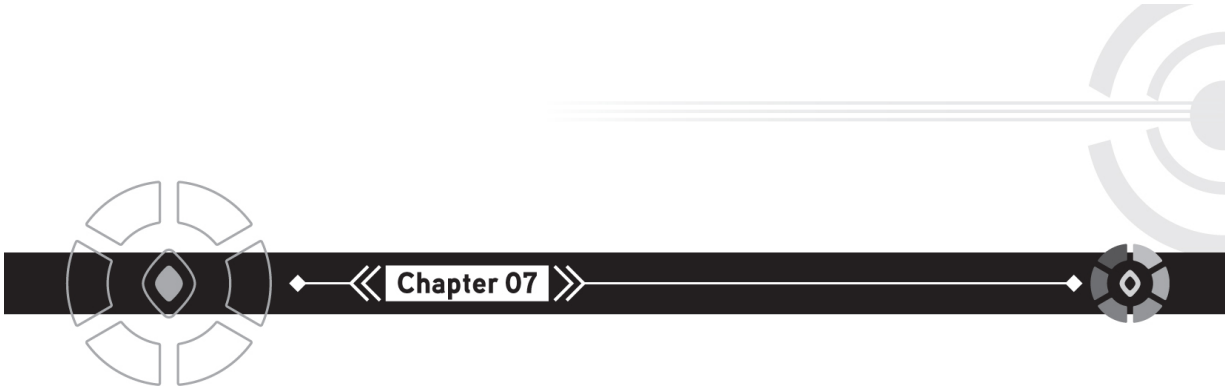
"It's only for Cerou," Hiiiiive snapped at him. "Do you not want the money they're paying us? We'll clear the maze and move on, leaving Aegis to struggle on their own again."

That was how Misaki learned that Yamata had allied with Aegis to clear Cerou.

"Maybe you could team up with Crest next time?" she suggested.

When Wataru offered to ally with Yamata, Hiiiiive had shot him down right away, but this time, he grinned.

"It'll cost you."



Back in Ross Maora, Shuutarou opened the dungeon-invasion warning to view detailed info, panic rising in his throat.

> **Dungeon Defense—Getting Started**
> **Sooner or later, every dungeon must face intruders and get bigger and stronger. Successfully defend your dungeon to gain EXP and items. If you lose, you'll have to start from scratch again. Be prepared and repel those pesky invaders!**

The lighthearted tone of the tutorial prompt was at odds with the terror threatening to overwhelm the boy. If this were still just a game, dungeon defense might be a fun event, but there was nothing fun about the prospect of Shuutarou and all his minions dying if someone smashed the Dungeon Core shining above Regiuria.

No sooner had he dealt with one threat than another danger appeared.

"Is everyone okay?!"

That was the first thing Shuutarou wanted to know when he got back, and he used the Command option from his dungeon menu to speak to all his minions at once. He got many responses from the citizens of Regiuria.

‘Ooh! I can hear Master’s voice!’

‘Has something happened?’

‘Master is speaking to me… Thank you, thank you for the honor!’

‘I heard someone is invading our castle.’

‘Grampa, Grampa, what’s ‘in-va-ding’ mean?’

‘It means bad people are trying to get into our castle.’

To Shuutarou’s relief, judging from the responses, Regiuria hadn’t yet been attacked.

‘Master, I can brief you on this situation,’ Elroad told Shuutarou telepathically. *‘I haven’t yet been able to get a visual on the invaders, but they appear to be a group of about sixty individuals. Half of them are human, and the rest are monsters. Their numbers would be of no particular concern if it wasn’t for the fact that…’*

Elroad paused for a tense moment.

‘…all of them are over level one hundred.’

* * * *

The adventurer Holivay had been assigned the task of investigating a suspicious tunnel at the periphery of his kingdom. Although the tunnel didn’t seem to pose any danger—with no reports of monsters ever emerging from it or of any human casualties related to it, and surveying it had been, for that reason, put on the back burner—it had to be done eventually, just to be on the safe side.

Holivay wasn’t going in there alone, of course—he was in a squad of thirty people. A herd of tame monsters was following them.

“Do we really need this many for a simple dungeon reconnaissance?” Holivay grumbled under his breath, scowling at the monsters.

He wasn’t making the call, though. The raid leader was Kellton, also known as the Master of a Thousand Beasts.

Kellton was an S-rank adventurer blessed with a phenomenal unique skill—Beast Army Commander—that allowed him to control as many as a thousand monsters, although walking around with that

great of a number was highly impractical, and he usually had no more than a hundred.

Besides Kellton, there were eight other S-rank adventurers in the raid squad. Holivay had recently been awarded the S rank when he reached level 120. This would be his first mission since the promotion.

It was a proper expedition to the outreaches of their realm, but still, Holivay thought it was very odd to dispatch this many top adventurers to take a look at some minor new dungeon. Not that he'd actually raise any objections. Some strange power was compelling him to go with the others.

"I'll have a few of my beasts accompany the scouts," Kellton announced as the squad began the descent into the tunnel.

They had three scouts, all A-rank.

Some of the NPCs in *Eternity* were able to participate in combat just like players. They had distinct roles assigned to them, such as city guards, who protected the players' safe havens. Should a town or city be threatened by monster invasion, those NPCs would rally to repel the monsters.

Then there were the adventurers. Unlike the guards, they were active mostly outside inhabited areas. They might join players and help them in quests sometimes, but for the most part, they acted independently, taking on quests and going about their own business. They were the type of NPCs players might randomly encounter when exploring.

The adventurers were ranked from F to S, and while their merits and ability played a part in earning them promotions, level was the most important criterion. F-rank adventurers were level 1 to 19, E-rank 20 to 39, D-rank 40 to 59, and so on, up to A rank from level 100 to 119, and S rank was awarded to adventurers at level 120.

Kellton waved his magic rod, and three obsidian-black catlike monsters appeared before him. They were as big as medium-sized dogs, with sharp claws and curved fangs.

These monsters were excellent at tracking down prey, and they were so smart, they could use Dark and Wind magic. Not only that but their fangs also possessed instant-death venom.

These beasts were called Midnight Luffas and White Night Lucias, and they were native to the Ross Maora region. They moved noiselessly and didn't leave behind a scent, making them the ultimate predators. There was no antidote for their venom.

"The rest of my monsters will keep advancing behind, unless the scouts signal danger," said Kellton. "They'll create a distraction while we focus on destroying the Dungeon Core."

Kellton's squad members nodded, acknowledging his orders. Each of the scouts took one cat with them, and they slid down the steep tunnel.

* * * *

The scouts and cats silently descended the impossibly long, strange tunnel.

"What's that…?"

What they saw at the end of the tunnel gave them shivers. The tunnel opened into an area filled with cold darkness, darker even than a moonless night. The scouts sensed that this darkness was teeming with powerful entities. A myriad of them.

The scouts felt hopelessly out of their depth, realizing they'd been completely oblivious to the danger until it was right under their noses. Every single opponent they could sense now was stronger than anything they'd ever defeated in the past.

"Lao Fan…"

"We have to go in. This is what we're meant to do."

The scout in charge went on ahead and jumped down. It was a long drop after exiting the tunnel. When he felt ground under his feet again, he was standing in front of a castle. He heard the others land behind him.

"We cannot ignore any threat to the safety of our kingdom," he stated decisively, looking around.

To NPCs, dungeons weren't anything unusual. The sudden appearance of a dungeon was a natural calamity similar to a monster invasion, although less dangerous since they were defensive structures.

The scouts noted with surprise that this dungeon didn't follow the usual ant-nest layout. Instead, it took the form of a massive castle. And a castle would, presumably, have a master.

Lao Fan smirked.

"I don't see any traps near the entrance," another scout said cautiously.

Lao Fan thought about what that could mean and inferred that the master of the castle saw traps as primitive and not worthy of their realm. It was a trend he'd seen elsewhere. The prouder the dungeon master, the more confident in their own or their minions' battle prowess, the fewer traps.

"Who'd have thought we'd find some king residing at the bottom of that hole in the ground."

The Midnight Luffas seemed scared, their hackles raised. As for the scouts, they too were shaking with fear; a rational analysis of the situation confirmed that it wasn't unfounded, but they couldn't resist their programming and turn back.

Lao Fan led them into the castle, but as soon as they went through the door, they froze up again. The castle was perfectly maintained, without a speck of dust in sight. A red carpet embroidered with some symbols covered the floor. Holivay, a well-read man, recognized those symbols as the word for *king* in a foreign tongue. He sighed deeply.

"No traps inside, either…?"

That was highly unusual. But even with no traps to watch out for, there would certainly be someone guarding the castle. Fighting, though, wasn't the scouts' specialty. Their job was to disarm traps, find out where the enemies were, and plot the best route to the objective. Lao Fan was expecting his team to focus on searching for the Dungeon Core while Kellton's monsters caused chaos inside the

dungeon to attract the enemy forces to them. He decided it was time to call the rest of the squad in, sending a signal to Kellton to proceed. Just then, he saw something far in the castle's hallway.

"Don't tell me…the king himself has come out to greet us?"

Lao Fan unsheathed his dagger, his eyes fixated on a spot in the distance. A monster was approaching them, accompanied by the clinking and clattering of metal. The monster, its gender unknown, was very tall and clad in an impressive suit of shiny armor, which might well have been made of gold from the look of it. The monster wielded a golden sword and a golden shield, too. Perhaps it was a distinguished knight.

The knight's face was obscured by its helmet. A single blue eye glimmered ominously inside it. Lao Fan wondered if the monster had lost their other eye in battle. He could sense that this opponent was a confident veteran of countless fights, conveying a deadly threat with its mere presence.

Lao Fan was shaking uncontrollably. He was convinced this was the master of the dungeon. He heard something falling behind him—thankfully, it was only the ally monsters dropping down from the tunnel. Taking half a step back, Lao Fan smiled despite the debilitating terror he was feeling.

"The dungeon has nobody but its master to defend it, it seems."

A dungeon could be conquered by destroying its core. But there was another way, too—defeating its master.

* * * *

The battle had started in the dungeon. Holivay peered inside the tunnel, waiting for Kellton to order him and the rest of the adventurers to go in.

Kellton furrowed his brow. "This is odd…"

He'd sent in the monsters after the scouts let him know of the enemy knight, but for some reason, the scouts were fighting, too. That wasn't the strategy they'd agreed on, which could mean only one thing—that knight was the master of the dungeon.

"Change of plans. Our new target is that knight. Defeat it, and the dungeon will be erased from existence!"

"Understood. That makes it simpler."

Everyone seemed happy with the new orders. Everyone except Holivay, who was keeping a close eye on the battle progress and noticed it wasn't going as expected.

We've sent in so many monsters…but they're losing?

The knight was sweeping the monsters away with its sword as easily as if they were dust bunnies. Both the scouts and the ally monsters had been pushed back to the entrance in no time. They were regrouping to try again. At least none of the monsters had been killed, apart from the one that had suffered an unlucky drop into a dark chasm. This meant the enemy knight wasn't that strong, although the attackers couldn't get past it, either.

"We're going in."

The S-rank adventurers drew their weapons and went to join the fray. Holivay followed after the others, pulling his twin swords out of their scabbards.

He saw the knight with his own eyes. The enemy wasn't a towering giant, but it was much taller than Holivay. He'd never seen the likes of the armor the opponent was wearing before. Its weapon was a heavy longsword.

The enemy's poise, appearance, and deftness of skill told Holivay that this knight far outranked any that his home country boasted about.

"Piercing Icicle!"

"Ensnaring Hands!"

Magic users cast their spells. A mass of spectral hands reached for the knight as a giant icicle struck its chest. On cue, the archers shot volleys of arrows at the monster, which wouldn't stop attacking.

"Right on target!" someone called.

Meanwhile, Holivay gripped his swords tight and sprinted at the monster. At the front, ten others were about to engage the enemy, the clerics casting buffs on them.

"Indomitable Spirit! Steel Body!" the clerics shouted, buffing the tanks.

"Sharpen Blade! Hard Hitter!" They buffed the damage dealers.

Buzzing with power, the adventurers struck the knight, sending sparks flying. But the knight didn't budge.

Only Holivay seemed to have the presence of mind to note something was wrong.

Our attacks aren't working.

They'd hit the knight with the most powerful attacks they had, to no visible effect. The most terrifying thing about that knight was its endurance. Nothing the adventurers had tried was working. The physical attacks, magic, Poison, Curse—the knight seemed immune to it all. In its armor, it was like an impenetrable wall.

Ally Mob: Beorite	**Level 120**

Holivay smiled in despair. This Beorite seemed truly invincible, and it hadn't even raised its shield yet. Its armor repelled all attacks. It was terrifying to imagine what this monster would be like with the shield in use.

The other adventurers had lost their confidence, thrown by the battle taking longer than expected. The knight's attacks hadn't killed anyone thus far, though. The squad was perfectly safe, as long as nobody forgot to heal up after sustaining damage…or so Holivay thought until he saw his companions suddenly collapsing all around him.

Did the knight use some new attack…? No, that was something else…

Holivay reflexively dodged as something bounced at him. It hit the person behind him instead. Holivay turned around and saw that the "thing" was a black blob, sticking to the other adventurer, who was frantically trying to get it off.

No…!

The moment Holivay realized what the thing was, the attacked adventurer was dead. The man's armor melted where the blob had touched it, and the poor adventurer's body was evaporating through it.

"There's another enemy! An Abyss Slime!" shrieked Holivay.

As they all knew, Abyss Slimes were the deadliest slimes in the world. They didn't have physical-attack skills, but they were highly resistant to all manner of attacks and could inflict a range of horrific status ailments on their victims. Defeating these foul creatures was nearly a Sisyphean task, with no less than four clerics needed to handle just one.

The squad was faced with a knight they couldn't defeat no matter what they tried, and an Abyss Slime opportunistically taking out the fighters while their attention was elsewhere. If players were doing that battle instead of NPCs, they'd have surely chosen to retreat.

* * * *

Shortly before the adventurers ventured into the castle, Shuutarou was frantically looking through his dungeon menu.

"What should I do about this invasion…?"

He'd never placed any traps in his dungeon. The Evil Overlords were insanely overpowered, the yin-yang dragons patrolled the skies above the castle, and the residents of Regiuria were all well-trained, but was that good enough to ensure everyone's safety? He simply had no clue how dungeon defense worked.

At least, he was relieved to hear the intruders were over level 100, because that meant they weren't players. If they were NPCs, he wouldn't have to feel bad about wiping them out.

"Please allow me to take care of this," offered Vampy, the Second Evil Overlord.

But Shuutarou shot her a worried look.

“These foes are the same level as the riffraff I squashed during your job-change ritual, Master. You can trust me with this,” she added confidently.

In the light of how Vampy, Elroad, and Gallarus had exterminated enemies of a similar level to the intruders during his job-change quest, this invasion wasn’t as scary as Shuutarou had first thought. Vampy seemed best suited to this task on account of her instant-death area-of-effect skill. But before he agreed to unleash her on the intruders, Sylvia came up to him.

“I’m sorry to interrupt—”

“How dare you! I was talking to Master. Wait your turn!”

Vampy started throwing a tantrum, but Sylvia was paying her no attention. She looked at Shuutarou and Bertrand.

“Iron has returned.”

Shuutarou’s and Bertrand’s faces lit up. Gallarus made a small grunt of excitement.

“He’s back?!” Shuutarou cried.

“Yes, Master, he has only just returned from my realm. Why not send him to deal with the intruders? As a test of his strength, ability, and loyalty.”

Shuutarou nodded several times, happy tears welling up in his eyes. Iron was back!

Neither Vampy nor the other Overlords objected. Knowing Iron’s past, they had to admit he deserved to be chosen for this job.

…Except Bertrand.

“Sorry to be the difficult one, Sylvia. Putting Iron to yet another test is fine, but this attack on our castle puts our master’s life at risk. I wouldn’t say it’s wise to leave this matter entirely in Iron’s hands when he’s only just returned.”

Sylvia looked at him, then turned away again, sighing. “You’re being overprotective. What makes this test better than any other is precisely that Master’s life is at stake. Besides, when did I say it would be entirely left to Iron? Should the intruders make it past him, we’ll be there to deal with them. We’re also going to guard Master, no?”

Sylvia, Queen of the Beasts, wasn’t a primitive creature who’d leave her charges to fend for themselves to see which ones made it. She insisted on sending Iron to battle because she was confident that Iron would succeed.

While both Bertrand and Sylvia might be accused of demanding the impossible of Iron, they were motivated by a strong desire to bring out its true potential, which they had no doubt it had.

Bertrand wasn’t saying anything back, so Sylvia turned to Shuutarou again.

“Should I call him?” she asked.

Shuutarou nodded gingerly.

Sylvia extended her arm in front of her, conjuring a circle of dark mist. They heard footsteps.

“Welcome back…!”

Shuutarou’s voice was quivering. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Iron no longer looked like old, rusted armor. The eye it had gouged out to allow its passage into Sylvia’s realm had been restored. The extent of change it had undergone was more than just enhancement—Iron had evolved. Thousands of battles that tested it to the limits had made it stronger and bigger.

Iron knelt before Shuutarou, ready to take orders. The Overlords had earlier criticized Iron for displaying a hint of unreliability and potential for erratic behavior, but that was no longer the case. The harsh, extreme environment that Iron had survived had reforged it into a powerful, dependable warrior.

Boss Mob: Iron	**Level 120**

"Bert, you don't mind, right?" Shuutarou asked the King of the Elves, wiping his tears.

Bertrand's eyes narrowed in a smile, and he shook his head.

"Iron," said Shuutarou, "as promised, from this day on, you'll be the tank in my party."

Still on one knee, Iron slowly nodded, savoring Shuutarou's words.

"This is a gift from me."

Theodore gave Iron some equipment he'd crafted specially for it. Iron accepted the items humbly and equipped everything.

Theodore smiled at it. "Now you're a full-fledged knight."

The gift was a set of shiny armor with exquisite decorative details. Iron's blue eye glowed inside the helmet, which featured dragon-like horns. In addition to the armor, Theodore had given Iron a sword, which rested in a scabbard on Iron's hip. In its left hand was a shield engraved with an ornate crest.

Shuutarou was beside himself with joy.

"Now we should think of a new name for him!"

Shuutarou believed that names given by parents—or the summon's master, Rivir, in this case—were special and deserved to be respected, but if he was going to take Iron along with him outside the castle, he'd need a new name for the monster, just to be extra cautious. Iron would have to make its comeback as a brand-new monster with a new name.

Iron nodded. It understood why it was necessary to be renamed, and it was eager to receive a name, so as to sever its old ties to the memory of Rivir and cement its allegiance to Shuutarou.

"So, Bert. Do you have any suggestions?" Shuutarou asked.

"Pardon? You'd like me to come up with a name?"

Shuutarou laughed at Bertrand's stunned face. "You care about him the most, and I'm sure he knows that."

Iron slowly nodded.

"Let's not exaggerate…," Bertrand mumbled, although he did appear to be contemplating a name.

The King of the Elves walked over to stand behind Iron. He put his hand on the monster's back.

"You owe your life to Master Shuutarou. Your old life is no more—you have been born anew. You are now to be our master's shield. Do not ever be defeated, and do not ever fail, as that would endanger Master. Do not forget this for a moment. Be as strong as the hardest metal in the world, Beorite. That is now your name, brother."





Bertrand grinned, announcing Iron's new name. His charge nodded firmly, acknowledging it.

And so Iron, the tragic summon that had killed its master, was history. In its place now stood Beorite, a formidable, proud knight.

Invaders have entered the dungeon.
Deploy traps and minions to defeat them!

A new system message popped up in Shuutarou's UI. The enemy was nowhere to be seen yet, but they had apparently gotten inside.

"Can you protect this castle?" Shuutarou asked Beorite, who nodded.

Shuutarou made a new party and added Beorite to it.

"Punio, please assist Beorite! I'm counting on you."

They were the two monsters Shuutarou deployed to deal with the invaders. As Beorite was a defense-oriented monster, the boy figured the tank should be paired up with a damage dealer.

A few minutes later, Beorite and Punio clashed with the intruders.

* * * *

Their numbers were dropping fast…

Even as Lao Fan had his hands full fighting, he registered that his allies were being decimated.

How many have we got left? Forty or so between the humans and monsters? No, even fewer than that…

Was it the knight that got them? Or did they drop off into the abyss? Lao Fan thought it must've been one or the other. He focused his attention on the knight again.

The monster's attacks were by no means weak, but the damage was easily healed by the clerics, so Lao Fan felt that they should have everything under control. It vexed him, though, that even when they had sixty squad members attacking at once, they didn't manage to make any headway.

He may be impossible for us to defeat…

The change of plan to defeating the dungeon master instead of destroying the core had turned out to be a big mistake. The defensive ability of the knight made a mockery of the invaders, who weren't prepared for a drawn-out battle. Dungeon raids were meant to be swift and as efficient as possible.

They'd have to abort the plan to defeat the dungeon master, then find the core after all, as per their original strategy. But the scouts couldn't go on ahead with the knight blocking the way. They had the lowest stamina, and one of them had gotten killed by the knight's first counterattack. As the battle went on, Lao Fan suddenly noticed he was the last remaining scout. The Midnight Luffas were nowhere to be seen, either. Kellton's minions couldn't run away from battle, which meant they'd been killed. If the fiendishly strong monsters from Ross Maora, the Den of Demons, had been killed, it seemed to spell defeat for all of them.

Kellton waved his magic rod, muttering something. Lao Fan strained his ears.

"I never wanted it to come to this…but it must be done if any of us are to survive."

Lao Fan felt beads of cold sweat roll down his back as a four-meter-wide magic circle appeared around Kellton. The monsters and adventurers within it were raised off the ground by some force and stayed suspended in the air.

"Ungh…!"

"Wh-what's happening?!"

"I can't… I can't move!"

They were helplessly trapped.

I'm going to die at the hand of an ally…?

Lao Fan was among the floating adventurers. He could sense imminent death.

The next moment, sharp blades pierced him and the others from within, cutting their stomachs open. As they writhed in agony, a grotesque creature began to rise up from underground. It was a demon with twin heads. Its disproportional body was bulging with muscle. It had four arms and was holding a sword in each hand.

Mob: Mutant Samunokan	**Level 115**

This monster spawned in the Hellvas Underground Prison area, where a group of heretics committed countless murders as they sought the secret of immortality. The grudge of the dead caused two monsters to fuse together into one cursed entity. Feeding on death, the monster could be summoned through live sacrifice.

This twisted creature, the personification of despair, lacked intelligence but had a strong drive to kill and destroy. It had neither eyes nor a nose, instead relying on its acute hearing to find prey. Any sound that didn't come from Kellton triggered the monster to attack.

The remaining adventurers and their ally monsters were thus attacked from behind by Samunokan, cut clean in half by its swords or pushed off into the abyss. Next, it rushed at the knight with the fury of a hurricane.

Destroy that knight, thought Holivay, who had hidden from the summoned monster. The dungeon had to be destroyed so that his companions' deaths would not be in vain.

Samunokan brought down its four swords on the knight's shoulders, as if to crush the opponent into the ground. The clang of metal on metal was deafening, but the knight held on tight to its sword, shifting to a different stance. A yellow aura appeared around

it, gradually increasing in intensity. Suddenly, the aura burst, and the Mutant Samunokan turned to dust.

"No, impossible… The knight's an acolyte?!"

Kellton was flabbergasted.

Beorite didn't only boast insanely high defense. A lot of his stat points were invested in physical and magic defense, as well as holy magic. While he was in Sylvia's unforgiving realm of trials, as Iron, he couldn't stop blaming himself for having killed his original summoner. He yearned for the strength to protect others. For the power to heal them.

It'd taken Kellton that long to understand Beorite was instantly healing the damage that his squad of adventurers had been dealing. When it finally sank in that Beorite was a cleric-type monster and that nothing Kellton could throw at him would have any effect, he was aghast to realize defeat was certain.

"A—a monstrosity like that shouldn't exist…!"

Kellton saw an Abyss Slime approaching him, but he couldn't find the will to try to dodge. His body began to turn to vapor, and soon, all that was left of him was a stain on the floor.

"Damn…," Holivay spat.

He dropped to his knees and waited for death.

* * * *

All invaders have been defeated!
The defeated invaders dropped items!
You received experience points.
Dungeon monsters received experience points.

Shuutarou exhaled with relief as the system messages appeared one after the other, signifying the end of the attack on his castle.

Good job, Beorite and Punio!

He had the first dungeon invasion under his belt, and the rewards he got from it were seriously overkill.

Shuutarou	**Master of Monsters**	**Level 94**

His level had increased beyond what should've been possible. It looked like a glitch. He'd have to think of a really good excuse before rejoining his friends, but first, he wanted to finish checking the invasion reports.

An enemy has been taken captive.

What?

Shuutarou traced the strange message with his finger. He heard a knock, and the door to his room opened.

"Welcome back!" he said.

He smiled at Beorite and Punio and gave them both a hug. Even Elroad smiled at the monsters.

"Splendid work," Elroad told them. "You didn't allow the intruders to enter the castle proper, steadily reducing their numbers while easily holding them back. In the end, they effectively caused their own demise. You've even taken a captive!"

"You got them all!"

"Leaving nothing for us to do," Bertrand added, puffing out circles of smoke.

He was putting on his usual disaffected look, but deep inside, he was triumphant with joy and pride.

"What do we do now?" asked Theodore.

Shuutarou guessed he was referring to the captive.

A middle-aged NPC in armor was standing next to Beorite. He wasn't in chains, but he looked terrified. It was Holivay, the last of

the adventurers, who had been certain he wouldn't make it out alive.

"So you brought back a prisoner, but what use is one measly prisoner?" asked Gallarus. He stared down at the NPC.

"Better than killing them all," said Vampy.

"Pfft! Should've brought at least three if we're gonna interrogate them."

"Enough." Bertrand interrupted their bickering. "Don't talk about that now."

Shuutarou didn't understand why Gallarus would want more captives, but Bertrand did. The giant's interrogation methods were, to put it bluntly, torture.

The way out of Ross Maora Castle led either to the location near Allistras where Shuutarou had used his Create Dungeon skill or to somewhere near him, but the invaders were clearly from a zone far beyond what Shuutarou had ever visited. So where did they come from? How did they get in? Why were they trying to get into the castle? Were there more of them waiting somewhere outside?

Gallarus wanted multiple captives to ask all these questions so that he could compare their answers as he tortured them, but before he could explain that, Bertrand shut him up, out of concern for Shuutarou.

The captive stood quietly, shuddering, listening to the conversation around him.

Where is this? Hell?

He was close to passing out from fear. He'd been brought to a room with several monstrosities far worse than even the slime and the knight who had mercilessly crushed his squad. Should a monster like any of those present appear in Holivay's homeland, none would survive, slaughtered in the blink of an eye. The dungeon hadn't been discovered that long ago, and the force sent in to destroy it was presumed to be many times stronger than required. How wrong they had all been…

"Mr. Captive."

"Yes?" Holivay replied to the boy who'd spoken to him.

Shuutarou was checking out detailed info about the captive in his dungeon menu and asked, "Where does this dungeon connect to outside?"

Shuutarou thought that the dungeon was only connected to Allistras, and he was worried about players randomly falling in, but the NPCs had evidently come from somewhere else. Discovering where that was would be tremendously useful.

"R-Ross Maora, sir," Holivay answered shakily.

So the castle could be entered from Ross Maora, and it exited to Allistras or the location where Shuutarou was. The boy was a little puzzled by how that worked.

Maybe I can let him go and ask him to tell others not to ever come here, he thought, reading the help prompt about captives.

A captured invader can be freed by their allies. They will also regain freedom if the dungeon is destroyed. The dungeon master has control of their captives and can kill them, release them, or forcefully expel them from the castle.

Shuutarou didn't want to risk any more invasions, not only because of the danger to himself but also to the residents of his city, Regiuria. If it was possible, he'd rather send Holivay away back to Ross Maora and have him tell all the other NPCs to keep clear of his castle. But could Holivay do that? He was just an NPC. His programming was very different from the Evil Overlords'.

"What's past the Gates of Death?" Shuutarou asked Holivay.

"I do not know."

"Where is the God of Darkness?"

"I do not know."

"Why did you attack the dungeon?"

"I cannot remember."

Not only was the NPC unable to provide any information related to the endgame, but he also didn't even know why he and his comrades were invading Shuutarou's dungeon. Eventually, Shuutarou ran out of questions.

Why can't I answer anything he's asking me?! Holivay was screaming to himself, confused and frustrated. Nobody realized what he was going through on the inside.

Vampy sighed heavily. "Let's just kill him now."

"?!"

"No, Vampy," said Shuutarou. "He's too valuable."

"Ah, I see…"

From their exchange, Holivay finally figured out who had the most authority there.

The boy is the master of the dungeon…

The least threatening of this horrifying assembly was the master of them all. Holivay reckoned the boy was no stronger than an A-rank adventurer, yet it was him who decided who lived and who died. Determined to survive, Holivay resolved to obey the boy.

"Mr. Captive," said Shuutarou.

"Y-yes, M-Master?"

"I won't kill you for no reason. But please don't ever forget what happened when you tried to attack my castle." Shuutarou spoke quietly, but with detectable anger.

Tears in his eyes, Holivay could only manage to reply, "Yes, sir."

* * * *

"This is awesome!" Shuutarou exclaimed happily.

He was in a workshop, trying on some new gear—a set of armor that was lightweight but very strong, a hooded cape, and a beautiful sword.

"It's good to upgrade your equipment whenever you can," said Theodore. "You should find this sword useful, I imagine. It enhances magic attacks, too."

The blade was engraved with complex symbols that boosted magic stats. It was Shuutarou's very first magic sword.

Since Shuutarou's level shot up past 90, he was able to equip a wide range of new items. With the armor that Theodore had diligently crafted for him, Shuutarou's stats were so high, even the top-level players wouldn't be able to land a scratch on him. But as impressed as Shuutarou was with the new armor, he seemed sad.

"I guess…we'll have to go the rest of the way alone," he said.

He had no reason to reclass and reset his level, and he wouldn't be able to hide it from his friends. He was too high-level to continue his friendly rivalry with Shoukichi, too.

"Master," Theodore began softly, "you have never drawn attention to your power, and that is not about to change, is it? You have grown yet more powerful, but if it has not changed your manner, then I see no reason why your friends should approach you any differently, either."

Shuutarou looked at Theodore, avidly listening.

"I'm afraid I cannot suggest an excuse to explain your level increase to your friends, but I'm sure they will understand that you have your reasons and will not ask you probing questions. We Overlords know that socializing with other players fulfills a need for you that we cannot satisfy. You shouldn't give it up if the circumstances don't force you to."

Theodore had mingled with Shoukichi and other friends of Shuutarou for only a short period of time, but he was a good reader of character, and he was certain that Shuutarou wouldn't be rejected by the group when he turned up with an inexplicably high level.

Tears were rolling down Shuutarou's cheeks.

"So it's okay for me to…be with them a bit longer?"

"If anyone should challenge you, no matter who they are, I will defeat them. Do as you please, Master, and don't worry about

anything.”

Theodore grinned. Heartened, Shuutarou smiled back at him.

* * * *

In one of the cells of the castle’s prison, Holivay shuddered when he heard approaching footsteps.

“I have questions for you.”

It was the eerie, handsome young man with blue hair, dressed like a butler. He eyed Holivay with chilling hostility.

“I—I will answer what I can,” Holivay stammered.

“Tell me everything about your town and the area where it is located. And tell me about the Prayer.”

Holivay reacted to the word *Prayer*, but he himself wasn’t sure what he would be able to tell the blue-haired man about it.

“What do you wish to know about the Prayer, sir?”

“Anything. No matter how trivial it might seem.”

Holivay knew that south from the Rehn Kingdom, which was at the farthest reaches of inhabited land, and somewhere between the Rindoh Woodlands and the Ru B Desert, there was an area protected by a green magical barrier. According to legend, the barrier was conjured by the spirit’s Prayer. The barrier was an invisible wall that had appeared when the world had changed. Monsters were reacting strangely to it…

“The Prayer has created a prison.”

Holivay was surprised by how smoothly the words were rolling off his tongue.

“A prison, you say…”

“Monsters are attracted to it, trying to get to the other side, but the Prayer cannot be broken. The Rehn Kingdom has given up on fighting off the monsters passing through on their way toward the Prayer’s barrier.”

When Holivay finished talking, the butler was already walking away.



Past Ciola Tower lay a vast network of tunnels known as the Cerou Underground Labyrinth. It was one of three giant mazes in *Eternity*. Attributed to a sage with the unusual ability to magically create mazes, Cerou was riddled with traps and brimming with monsters so as to keep any intruders at bay. Magical energy was thick in the air in the entire area around the maze, feeding the monsters and poisoning the humans. The maze itself was said to devour the fallen, deriving nourishment from them to grow.

"I'm going to die of boredom."

"What did you expect? We've got it all mapped out to the fourth sector."

A group of a few dozen players was making its way through the tunnels. They had defeated the third area boss and were now going to the final one. The zone they were in was like a shrine without a ceiling. The walls were made of yellowish stone with intricate decorations, and on them were magical torches with bright but cold flames.

"Did you hear Crest has withdrawn?" said Shirokado, clearly pleased.

He was the guild master of Aegis, the biggest progression guild. When he heard about Crest and Twilight Adventurers forming an alliance, he'd been quick to take action, lest his guild be outpaced by

his rivals with their clairvoyant. He'd also heard rumors about Crest possessing a member with Sense Life. The two unique skills put together would allow the Crest-Twilight alliance to chart new areas faster than anyone else and speed through the game, stealing prestige away from his guild. Shirokado wasn't going to allow that.

"I like it here… My Dual Magic truly shines in dungeons like this."

Shirokado stroked his staff.

Hiiiiive and his people were behind him, lacking in the enthusiasm department.

Why do I get this funny feeling…? Hiiiiive wondered.

It wasn't Shirokado's pompous attitude that bothered Hiiiiive—Yamata's guild master could sense something odd in the air, something he couldn't describe, and it was making him uneasy. A vague feeling like something was out of place wasn't worth stopping for, though.

"And who do you get your dungeon information from? Don't tell me you've found another clairvoyant," said Shirokado.

"No, not a clairvoyant. Just someone who's, uh, good at sniffing things out," Hiiiiive replied reluctantly.

The group fought a few more battles as they made their way through the dungeon, and finally, they arrived at the last boss room.

"The hell…?"

Alan was taken aback. The room was a magnificent shrine, like something straight out of a legend of ancient gods. Everyone's eyes were drawn to an object at the very center of the pristine shrine—a burning cage where a shining, goddess-like figure sat with her palms folded in front of her chest. That must have been the final boss of the dungeon.

"Take positions!"

At Shirokado's command, his guild members arranged themselves in formation. Aegis followed a strict system in battle, with a very clear division of roles. First, they'd send in the tanks to learn the boss's attack patterns. Next, casters and archers would take turns attacking to see what was the most effective. Only then

would the support members fully buff everyone up, and the guild would attempt to defeat the boss.

Their collective defense was so strong, even Wataru would be no match for them. They didn't call themselves Aegis—the ultimate shield—for nothing.

"Is it okay if I do it my way?"

"Sure. We do our own thing, as usual."

"Better to follow your gut instinct than some stuffy strategy."

The Yamata players leisurely prepared for the boss battle. There were only six of them, but they were the big guns from Yamata's elite eight. Each of them was a superb fighter, but they weren't team players. They all relied on their own judgment or sometimes a mere whim. The fact that they had gotten as far as the other top progression guild despite their lack of coherent tactics was proof of just how strong they were individually.

For this dungeon, though, Yamata teamed up with Aegis, the two guilds sharing the data they had on what to expect inside.

The Aegis tanks crept toward the burning cage. The boss wasn't moving.

'Strangers, I beg you—'

They all heard the voice in their heads. The tanks crouched down, covering their ears.

"Idiots! You're opening yourselves to attack!" Shirokado yelled.

The tanks stood up at once, but the voice spoke again.

'I beg you… Don't—'

They were only two meters away from the boss now, but she still wasn't moving. All this boss seemed to do was talk.

"Looks like a counter-type boss. We can position ourselves all around for a simultaneous attack from every direction," said Shirokado.

Counter-type bosses started fighting only after the players attacked. Shirokado changed his guild's tactic accordingly.

"Tanks, form a single line around the boss! Back row, begin attacking all at once in ten minutes!"

Time went by quickly. It was only fifty seconds until the planned start of the battle. Everyone was finishing their prep, buffs were flying around, and players were chugging or chewing consumable items that raised their stats.

"Going all out on this pitiful boss that's just sitting there feels kinda bad," complained Hiiiiive.

"If you can't be bothered, don't ask for rewards later," his guildmate teased.

"Pfft."

Hiiiiive begrudgingly called for his companion:

"Gem Dragon Kleinod!"

A large magic circle appeared behind Hiiiiive, and out of it crawled a beautiful dragon, gleaming like a purple gemstone. It was an extremely rare high-level summon, few of which had ever been seen in the game, even in the beta version.

The dragon served as Hiiiiive's symbol of power, as the crown that made him the king of Yamata.

Aegis members gasped in awe when they saw the dragon.

"So I'm, like, on standby, yeah?"

"What? You've got long-range moves, too."

"Doesn't being in the back row mean we hold off until later?"

Alan and Hiiiiive were chatting at the rear, passing the time. There were ten more seconds to go.

"Hit it with everything you've got!"

At Shirokado's signal, attacks of all sorts were unleashed on the burning cage. Their force was sufficient to bring down an ordinary boss of the same level as the players, but the last bosses of each area were always stronger.

When the dust settled after the first round of strikes, Shirokado doubted his eyes.

"What…?"

'I beg you… Don't—'

The boss's LP was down, but she still wasn't fighting back. She was sitting in her cage, in the same position as when they first saw her.

"What's going on…?"

This was highly unusual. Hiiiiive froze, suddenly wary.

The boss room was silent for a long minute—unthinkable in midbattle.

"We're lucky!" Shirokado's lips stretched into a wide smile. "You get bosses like this in some games, don't you?! They do nothing in their first phase, sometimes even in their second phase, and only start attacking once their LP has been sufficiently depleted. This is what we're dealing with here!"

To most of the players there, it made sense. They resumed attacking and couldn't hear the boss saying anything anymore. She was perfectly still.

"This is boring," Alan complained as he put on his gauntlets.

Hiiiiive ordered his dragon to hold off with attacking. He was thinking about what the boss had been saying.

What was she asking us to not do?

He and his guild had, of course, taken on the main story quest for this area, but there was nothing in it about a goddess in a cage. If she was part of some other event, the few words she'd said were the only clues to it.

"Aya, note down the boss's telepathic messages, okay?"

"Sure."

The boss's LP was steadily going down. Her LP bar was massive, as expected of the final dungeon boss, but she was just an immobile, defenseless target. It took a mere five minutes to get her LP down to 10 percent.

Does she have a second form? Hmm…

Hiiiiive didn't buy Shirokado's explanation. He stood back, observing the boss, trying to come up with his own solution for this mystery.

The boss's LP dropped to 5 percent.

'Strangers, please don't—'

It was the same fragmented message as earlier, missing the vital part.

"Time for a finishing blow!" Shirokado announced.

He activated his unique skill, Dual Magic, summoning two giant magic circles. Bolts of lightning flew out of them and hit the burning cage with a thunderous blast!

'Please don't—'

That message, again.

'Don't destroy me.'

The cage shattered with the sound of breaking glass, and the goddess-like boss took on a human form. Her LP dropped to zero.

"Is this it?" someone asked.

Shortly after, the players saw two figures descend from above.

"A-angels…?"

The creatures did resemble angels. Their bodies were humanlike, but they were four meters tall, with three sets of wings growing out of their lower backs, and smooth, featureless faces. Giant golden rings spun slowly at their backs. In their hands were plain longswords.

The two angels descended in front of the players.

'Children of promise, we offer you our thanks.'

The players heard the angels' voices in their heads. They sounded strangely mechanical.

The angels flanked the boss, who had slumped onto the floor. Then they pierced her body with their swords. The boss shrieked, her cry of agony filling everyone with foreboding.

The fire spirit has been defeated.
You have gained six levels from the angels' blessing.

Everyone was speechless. Gaining six levels for defeating an area boss was unprecedented.

'You may use our facilities.'

'Children of promise, we shall assist you henceforth.'

The angels disappeared. There was no ceiling above the shrine, so the players could see the night sky and its stars glimmering prettily.

"Oh yeeeeaaaah!"

Delayed excited reactions were heard all around. Leveling up was a grueling process in *Eternity*, with the one exception being the EXP awarded for clearing an area for the first time. And the reward they got for the Cerou Underground Labyrinth's boss was more than anyone would have dreamed of.

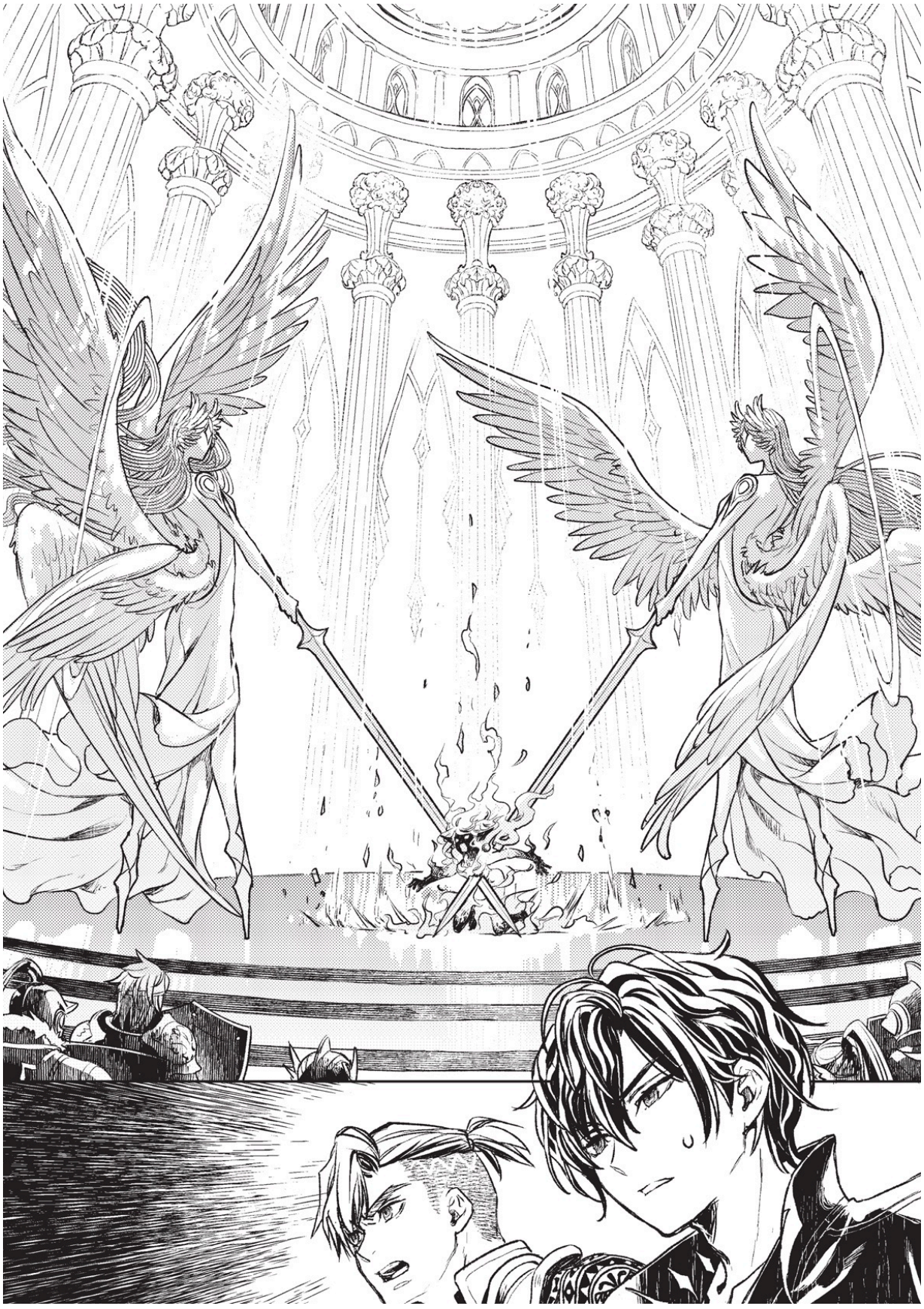
"…You didn't need us in the end," muttered Hiiiiive.

Shirokado was engrossed in checking his stats after the level-ups, but he heard Hiiiiive.

"True," Shirokado said, "but we'll still give you the agreed reward."

"You'd better," Hiiiiive replied absentmindedly.

Shirokado frowned. "What's wrong? Are you not happy with the insane level increase?"





"The whole thing was creepy." Hiiiiive turned away. "Come on, folks. Let's get outta here."

"Huh? I haven't even checked my stats yet…"

"You can do that later. We're going. Move it."

The Yamata players hurried out of the dungeon, leaving Aegis behind.

* * * *

A group of thirty or so players, including Crest's Party 7, were headed to Olsrott Monastery.

A monastery was a place where monks and nuns lived, practicing their faith, holding various ceremonies, and offering daily prayers to their object of worship, but the monasteries in the game had been empty of NPCs thus far. The same went for churches. Players took the abandoned places of worship as a sign that in the cruel world of *Eternity*, there was no god, no salvation.

Barbara turned around. "You really don't need to trouble yourselves," she said to Kyouko, Shoukichi, and Kettle.

"I keep thinking, if only I noticed sooner what was going on, we could've saved more people. I want to at least help collect their mementos to feel a bit less guilty," Shoukichi explained.

He was doing his best to keep up a cheerful front, but there was a hint of sorrow in his smile.

Kettle nodded, as if to say her reason was the same as Shoukichi's. She was gloomily staring at the monastery, which was visible in the distance.

The squad of players might seem excessively big, considering they were only going to retrieve the mementos of the Liberator's victims from the monastery, where monsters didn't spawn. However, they were taking every precaution in case there were more player killers at large.

"By the way, have you spoken with Makoto yet?" asked Barbara.

Kyouko and Kettle said yes. Shoukichi looked away, embarrassed.

"Shoukichi cried like a baby when Makoto called," Kettle teased.

"H-hey! His voice just made me tear up, is all…"

Barbara giggled.

"? What's so funny?" Shoukichi asked her.

"Oh, I wasn't laughing at you."

I can't tell them that Makoto burst into tears when he called…, thought Barbara.

Kyouko peered curiously at Barbara but couldn't figure out what had her so tickled.

"What do we do with the Liberator's item drops?" asked Rao.

"Good question. Personally, I wouldn't be comfortable selling them…," replied Reilan.

K, who was walking in front of them, looked over his shoulder. "We've already sorted through the drops, so the Liberator's aren't mixed up with his victims'. You can do what you want with anything you pick up."

When they defeated the Liberator and his accomplices, they'd sifted through the dropped items. Anything with an identifiable owner was delivered to the friends of the deceased. The rest were put in the guild storage. The Liberator's gang left behind a lot of items that had belonged to them, though, and those posed a problem. The guild storage wasn't unlimited, but nobody wanted to claim the killers' belongings and take them for themselves.

"We're using their weapons as grave markers, but we don't want to leave the armor on their graves…"

A memorial for the Liberator's victims had been set up within Crest's Calloah grounds. The killers got their own graves, too, but away from their victims, in a dark corner. The problem with leaving their armor on the graves was that there was a perfectly good chance they had been looted from unidentified victims, and should a friend of such a victim recognize the armor on a killer's grave, they might be confused and think their friend had been a killer.

"You wouldn't want someone who didn't know where those items came from taking them out of the guild storage and wearing

them around town. They'll have to be sold or used for delivery quests," said Rao.

Some of the delivery quests required players to turn in items. Hopefully, they'd find NPCs asking for those specific pieces of equipment at some point. Then they could exchange them for EXP or other equipment. As a last resort, they could sell them to NPCs.

"Hmm? I wonder what's up…"

The others followed K's gaze to a scout running toward them.

"Enemies…?"

Reilan reflexively reached for her sword. Everyone in the party tensed up.

"You won't believe it!" the scout shouted as they approached. They pointed to the monastery, needing a moment to catch their breath. "It's full of NPCs!"

* * * *

The Crest players were rubbing their eyes in disbelief. Lights were on at the monastery, and even from quite a distance away, they could hear monks and nuns singing hymns. The monastery had turned into a hive of activity.

"I never thought I'd see NPCs here…"

K looked around with astonishment.

For a long time, players wondered why the world map was dotted with churches and monasteries. Monsters didn't spawn inside them, but there were no NPCs to interact with, either. Nobody knew what purpose they served. Even the most curious of players—who scoured any in-game literature they could get their hands on for clues, talked to any NPCs they could find, and took on any available quests—didn't discover anything, not even what entity these places of worship were dedicated to.

"Greetings," a nun standing by the door said to the players.

She was dressed in a habit with a black-and-white veiled headpiece. Her appearance seemed to be based on real-world nuns, although she wasn't wearing a crucifix.

"My name is Una. I am the prioress of Olsrott Monastery."

She bowed, and the astonished players bowed back to her.

K asked her the question on everyone's mind. "Pardon me, Una, but could you tell me when you and your order moved in here?"

The nun kept smiling, but she seemed mystified by his question.

"Whatever do you mean? We have always been here, as our vocation demands."

The players knew that wasn't true. The abandoned monastery had been the scene of mass murder, with no nuns in sight. Nobody was going to argue with the nun, though. NPCs would appear out of thin air, then disappear again. That mechanic was part of many quests. Questioning an NPC about why they'd suddenly popped into existence was pointless. They could only say what they were scripted to.

"Have you come here to receive a divine blessing?"

Una's question immediately got Barbara's attention.

"Can you tell me more about this blessing?"

"Certainly. Visitors to the monastery who offer prayers together with us will be blessed by the angels." Una placed a hand on her chest. "I would encourage you to always come to receive the blessing before you head into battle."

"Before battle? Sounds like a stat buff," guessed Rao.

"It might be worth getting, but…" Reilan trailed off.

She looked around the monastery with mixed emotions. It was almost like a completely different place, with no less than twenty nuns busily walking this way and that. There were no piles of player drops on the floor. Even if the items were still somewhere around, it would be difficult to search for them with so many NPCs going on about their business.

"Right. I, for one, am definitely not going to do any praying in here," Kettle said bluntly.

Una's eyebrow appeared to twitch imperceptibly.

Barbara was going to caution Kettle not to needlessly egg on the NPCs, but a sudden flashback to the Liberator's "demonstration"

changed her mind. The Liberator had his victims kneel in prayer so that he could kill them in plain sight. Barbara and the others had helplessly witnessed people getting murdered. They sympathized with Kettle's reaction.

"Well, anyway, let's do what we'd come here for first," said K.

The players spread out through the monastery to look for item drops, but no matter how much they searched, they couldn't find anything. Perhaps they had timed out and disappeared by then.

"Would you like to receive a divine blessing?" Una asked again.

Everyone was traumatized by the Liberator incident, so they weren't keen on the idea of offering a prayer…but there was one exception.

"I'll give it a go."

"Are you serious, Shoukichi?!"

"It's not the same thing as with the Liberator."

Kettle tried to stop him, but he brushed her hand off his shoulder and stepped forward to talk to Una.

"I'll offer up a prayer to God."

Una smiled as she corrected him: "We worship angels, not God."

Either way, it didn't make a difference to Shoukichi. He let Una lead him farther inside the monastery. Barbara exchanged looks with the rest of the party, and they all followed him.

"Huh?" Shoukichi watched a group of praying nuns with bafflement. "Why are they praying to an empty chair?"

The nuns were kneeling around a fancy chair, a throne perhaps. Nobody was sitting in it, but the nuns were worshipping the chair earnestly. It looked really bizarre.

Una gazed at the chair solemnly and explained, "God does not visit the world of mortals. When they have a message for us, they send an angel to deliver it. Angels are God's proxies; they are the executors of divine orders. This seat is reserved for such a divine messenger, should they grace us with their presence."

Una joined the other nuns in prayer.

"Hmm, okay," Shoukichi mumbled.

He gathered up his courage and started praying to that big, empty chair.

Please give the players who died here a peaceful rest in the afterlife.

Suddenly, he was bathed in a golden glow.

"Is this…the blessing…?"

Shoukichi could actually feel it working, and when he checked his stats, he saw they had increased. He turned to his party, all excited.

"I got stat boosts!"

He reckoned his stats had gone up by about 10 percent. A new icon had appeared in his user interface. When he looked directly at it, an info prompt unfolded.

Angel's Blessing

The God of Light created angels, and these angels look after humans. The angels punish sinners and reward those who show promise with their blessings. Pray dutifully, and the blessing you receive may become even more potent.

Blessing Level 1: EXP +25%, Stats +10%, Recovery +10%, MP Cost -10%

Effect expires in: 23:59:55

It was a massive buff.

When Shoukichi told his friends what the buff did, they dismissed their apprehensions and came forward to receive it, too.

"This buff's incredible…but what unlocked it, I wonder?" mused Barbara.

"Us killing the player killers? Nah, probably not…," said K.

Now everyone was getting the buff, thrilled at the effects. Shoukichi was totally stoked.

"It lasts twenty-four hours!" he said. "We can keep it up just by praying once a day! This is going to make leveling up and raiding dungeons so much easier!"

The return of NPCs to churches and monasteries turned out to be hugely advantageous to players.

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The false Liberator's crimes had come to an end with his death. Players who had lost their friends to the killer's gang would have to live on with painful memories, but they wanted to go on living and continued to strive to find a way out of the game.

Shuutarou experienced his first dungeon invasion, which was successfully squashed thanks to Punio and Beorite, the latter of whom had triumphantly returned from his trials. Having unexpectedly grown yet more powerful, Shuutarou swore to use his newfound strength to protect his friends.

News of the player-killer incident sent a shock wave through the fighters on the front lines. Wataru agonized over the decisions he'd had to make. Makoto regretted having left his friends behind. Byakuren saw her priorities with clarity again. As for Misaki, every day she nocked countless arrows on her bow, her eyes firmly on her targets.

A squad of some of the strongest players in the game cleared the Cerou Underground Labyrinth. They defeated a boss monster unlike any they'd dealt with before—something called an elemental spirit. But were the angels allies, or foes?


Extra Chapter King of the Dragons



The demon lord collapsed to his knees.

"It's over," said a swordsman in gray armor.

He held the demon lord in his steadfast gaze as he raised his sword…

* * * *

The whole kingdom seemed to shake from the thunderous applause that the victorious heroes received upon their return.

"They've slain the demon lord!"

Monsters were no longer a threat. That day would be remembered as the beginning of an epoch belonging to humans.

The valiant heroes waved at the crowds from atop their horses. There was the charismatic Hyrune the champion, famed for excelling even the royal guards' captain in swordsmanship. Next to him was Enerith the sage, a genius magician commanding magic of all elements. The third of the heroes was the beautiful Meloia; a saint blessed by the king of spirits, she could cure any injury with her healing magic.

"…"

A certain man was watching the celebrations from a distance. The crowds did not know his name, and yet he was the one who had killed the demon lord. He was the fourth hero, the strongest man in the world. His name was Theodore.

* * * *

A year had passed since the start of world peace. Monsters were becoming a rare sight, the kingdom so safe that children were allowed to play outside the city walls unsupervised.

The four heroes were in the far eastern reaches of their country, in front of a giant door to a tower.

"Are you sure you want to go inside, Theo?"

Hyrone put his hand on the swordsman's shoulder, urging him to reconsider. There was nobody there besides the four heroes.

The swordsman gazed up at the tower, his stiff black hair swaying in the wind.

"I wish to find out what lies at the top of this tower, this monument created by God when the world was. I wish to find out why those who enter never come out."

His dark eyes were fixed on the tower.

He'd never had any interest in wealth or status. He didn't even want to be recognized as one of the kingdom's heroes. What drove him was a desire for self-improvement.

Theodore looked down at his hands, his face entirely dispassionate. He slowly closed his hands into fists.

"I have this need to climb this tower, and I hope that what I find at the top will give me some sense of fulfillment at last."

Theodore had never known his limits. He kept fighting, searching for something he couldn't define, something that would make him feel fulfilled. That was why he'd joined the heroes on their quest to defeat the demon lord, but even when he'd done the deed with his own hands, Theodore didn't feel like he'd achieved what he'd wanted. His companions were aware of that.

"How can we keep protecting the world if we might lose you, Theo? It was you who released the kingdom from the clutches of the demon lord and his minions!" Meloia pleaded with him tearfully.

She knew it was hopeless to try to change his mind, though. None of them could say anything that would stop him.

"I can climb this tower without regrets because I know I'm leaving the kingdom in your hands. Besides, I told you before that this would be my next objective after the demon lord."

The tower stood so tall, its summit disappeared among the clouds. There was nothing stopping people from entering, but those who did go in never came back. Nobody knew what was inside.

"Thanks for everything," Theodore said to his companions, his hand already on the door.

The door was heavy, and it creaked when Theodore pushed it, but it opened easily, as if welcoming him. All Theodore could see

from the entrance was darkness.

"Wait, Theo! Listen! Meloia is in—"

"Enerith, stop. Say no more," Meloia quickly interrupted the sage.

Her greatest act of kindness toward Theodore was her hiding her feelings for him, so as not to interfere with his calling.

Theodore stepped into the tower, turned, and smiled one last time at the three heroes.

"See you later."

In the second year of the kingdom's history, the elusive fourth hero, the swordsman Theodore, slayer of the demon lord, entered an ancient structure made not by human hands but by God's own hands—the Celestial Tower.

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What Theodore saw next was a vast grassland. He was inside the tower, and yet to his astonishment, there was a blue sky above him, dotted with slowly drifting clouds. A warm breeze was blowing.

Theodore looked around and saw a large village not too far away. He started walking.

As soon as he reached the village, its residents came out to greet him, a new arrival. There were about three hundred people of all ages.

"It's been a long time since someone has dared to enter the tower."

"I've lived more than a hundred years. I can tell you it's been half a century since the last arrival."

Theodore asked the villagers about the tower. They told him that to reach the top, he'd have to make his way up countless floors,

each with a hidden stairway to the next level, guarded by a holy beast. While inside the tower, people didn't age or die. They simply kept on living, exactly the same as the day they had entered.

"If you keep heading north, you will find a large city. Its inhabitants are all people who'd wanted to reach the top of the tower, but their spirit was broken in the end, and they gave up. Be vigilant against them."

The villagers convinced Theodore to take off his heavy armor and helm, since he didn't need them in the tower, where he was immortal. They gave him worn-out traveler's clothes to wear instead. Theodore didn't care too much about that, but he insisted on keeping his sword. He left the village and headed north.

* * * *

Before long, Theodore reached the city where, as the villagers had warned him, the residents had been mentally broken. He saw people lying on the roadside, unmoving, as if they were dead. He saw people attacking others for no reason, completely frenzied, and victims of such abuse taking it all without doing anything to protect themselves. There were also people drawing mysterious symbols on the ground, paying no attention to anything around them. They might have been living like that for hundreds or even thousands of years.

Theodore was filled with apprehension at the possibility that he might end up like those people, too.

"I want to go back to a world where I can die."

A beautiful girl whom Theodore met in the city told him that. Her eyes were already lifeless—she was one of the broken. Her existence was a vicious circle of being held captive and used for others'

amusement until they got bored of her. Every time she escaped, someone else would enslave her.

"You need to become stronger," Theodore told her.

He taught her how to use a sword.

The sun never set in the tower world. Even without eating or drinking, people didn't die. They couldn't die. They had endless time on their hands.

"The sword can solve your problems. Master it, and you will become the master of your life."

They trained together, day after day, year after year, tirelessly. Sometimes, they sparred together. Theodore had nothing else to teach the girl.

With unlimited time to refine his skills and no need to worry about becoming too worn out from continuous training, Theodore thought he couldn't have asked for a better world to have found himself in.

One day, for the first time in half a century, the girl smiled.

"There's a village south of here. If you ever grow tired of our training sessions, you could go live there instead of the city," Theodore said to her as they were practicing.

"No—that's the village of liars. And you fell for their lies, too, letting them take your armor."

She laughed, and Theodore swore to himself he'd never leave his sword, no matter what anyone said to him.

It took about five years of training for the girl to become so strong, she could overpower anyone who'd attack her in the city. The broken learned to leave her alone.

"It's time for me to go," Theodore said to her, gazing upward.

The beautiful girl didn't tell him to stay. After those five years, she knew him well enough not to.

"If you keep going that way, you'll find a gate guarded by a holy beast. You must defeat it for the gate to open—at least, that's what I heard, but nobody here has managed to defeat the beast, so it could well be a lie."

Theodore found a large, heavy gate with a lion in front of it. The girl had secretly wished for him to fail so that she'd see him again, but she knew how powerful Theodore was. He won, and the gate opened. Theodore found a stairway behind it and climbed to the floor above.

From then on, Theodore kept traveling higher and higher up the tower, defeating holy beasts to earn his passage. He went through a world with nothing but water, and a world of ice and fire. One of the holy beasts he fought was in human form. The Night Serpent stuck in his memory as a particularly tough opponent. When he had slain the Great Ice Wolf, he absorbed the beast into his body, its power becoming his own. He kept climbing higher and higher, becoming stronger as he went. He had to reach the top to finally become satisfied with himself.

"This one's strange…"

After climbing the tower for what seemed like eternity, Theodore still hadn't reached the top, but he found a floor unlike any other. It was completely empty. It wasn't a self-contained world like the other floors; it was just an empty space with a massive hole on one side. It seemed to open to the world outside the tower.

"Did something fall out of the tower into my world?"

Since he didn't find a holy beast on that floor, Theodore could only assume that the beast had broken a hole in the tower's wall and jumped out of it. He stuck his head through the hole and looked up, but he still couldn't see the top of the tower.

Theodore had never given up halfway on any task he'd taken on, but if the holy beast had escaped the tower, the kingdom he'd left to his hero friends to protect might be in danger.

Without second thoughts, he leaped through the hole in the wall, back into the world where time flowed and people died. But

Theodore wasn't really thinking ahead.

A few years passed.

Since his return from the tower, Theodore hadn't aged one day. He didn't feel hunger or thirst, but he was unusually sleepy. In fact, he was spending more time asleep than awake.

* * * *

In Dragonglory Year 105, something dropped from the sky near a certain small village, flattening a long swath of woodland as it tumbled down until it stuck deep into the ground. A villager went to investigate and discovered that the "thing" was a human. To the villagers' amazement, the human stood up as if they were perfectly fine.

"Ah, good to see a fellow human," the man from the sky said.

He was holding a sword and was completely naked. His fall had laid waste to the nearby land, but eerily, the man didn't have as much as a scratch on him.

"You can speak? Where did you fall from?"

"The tower."

"You must be a god, then," the villager said, assuming the man must have been confused, having suffered a concussion after falling from a tree, perhaps.

In the span of the one thousand and four hundred years since the heroes defeated the demon lord, their kingdom had been through wars, but it'd been thriving nonetheless. Monsters had been culled until near extinction, and humans spread through the land, building new towns and cities and founding new countries.

A hundred and five years before Theodore jumped out of the tower, the name of the era was changed to *Dragonglory* to signify

the dominance over the land going from the hands of humans to the claws of dragons.

"Dragons appeared all over the kingdom a hundred years ago, and they are now the rulers?"

"Yes. The high-caste dragons can assume human form, but to them, we are food. They leave us alone for the most part, as long as we provide them offerings—sacrificial humans for them to devour. If we fail to do so, they burn down our towns."

Humans were living in fear again, just like they had when the demon lord roamed the land. Theodore surmised that the dragons must have come from the tower. He reflected that the demon lord had also appeared out of the blue. Perhaps he, too, was one of the holy beasts from the tower?

"Can't have you walking around stark naked. Take this."

The villager gave Theodore a brown robe and traveler's clothes. Theodore put them on and started walking toward the kingdom's capital.

"I will slay the dragons," he announced.

The villager panicked. "Careful what you say, or you'll be branded a traitor and sacrificed to the dragons! Even speaking of opposing them is a crime!"

Theodore turned to the man. "I will slay the dragons. Humans deserve to live in dignity."

The decisiveness in his voice made the villager swallow back words of protest. The villager dared to imagine a world without dragons—a world where humans thrived.

"Let me tell you this, then. It's impossible to kill all the dragons—they are far too numerous. If you truly wish to fight them, go after their kings. There are five of them, and they breed all the lesser dragons. Even a single dragon king has the power to destroy an entire country with the flap of its wings… I really cannot imagine how a human might rival them."

"Do not worry." Theodore rested his sword against his shoulder and smiled at the man. "As long as I live, I will fight for what I

believe in.”

* * * *

In just one day, Theodore freed three towns from the dragons. Each town was ruled by one dragon. Theodore would casually walk up to it and slice it clean in half with one strike of his sword. The people didn’t thank him, though. Far from it—they threw stones at him and cursed him, as they feared retribution from other dragons.

Theodore kept going from one place to another, determined to restore the world that had been so dear to his hero friends.

Less than a month later, half of the thousand towns in the kingdom were dragon-free. Even as the people were scared the dragons would retaliate and get their revenge, they began to secretly hope that this mysterious swordsman might bring an end to the dragons’ rule. They began to call him the Dragon Hunter.

“Are you the Dragon Hunter?”

An enormous black dragon blocked Theodore’s way on a steep mountainside. It watched him with yellow eyes gleaming like gemstones.

“You are strong, but you are lacking,” the black dragon said to him.

Theodore sensed that the dragon was stronger than the demon lord he’d defeated, stronger than any of the dragons he’d killed, stronger than any of the holy beasts he’d triumphed over in the tower. But he drew his sword nonetheless, as he’d always done when encountering an opponent, as he’d always do.

“Are you prepared to sacrifice yourself for your objective?”

Theodore nodded firmly.

The dragon bared its teeth in a smile. “Very well.”

For three days and three nights, they were locked in battle, until they both collapsed. Theodore, covered in wounds all over. The dragon, with Theodore's sword buried in its chest.

"I am one of the five kings," the dragon said as its life slowly drained away.

It told Theodore that it knew dragons didn't belong in that world. It told him it never felt the dragons had any right to destroy the cultures they encountered in the world that wasn't theirs, or to make themselves the rulers thereof. The dragon was very fond of humans, in fact, and had even fallen in love with a woman, but a world where dragons and humans peacefully coexisted was not meant to be. The reason for that was the other four royal dragons.

"I couldn't protect her, her family, or her town. So many years have passed since they all died. All this time, I have been waiting. I have been waiting for someone who could kill dragons."

Theodore listened quietly. He had no energy left, not even enough to move a finger.

"I shall give you my power, but be aware that I can only do so by fusing with you. And then you will no longer be able to live as a human, but neither will you live as a dragon."

Theodore mustered the rest of his strength to reply, "If that's what it takes for me to save my homeland, I will accept your power."

Theodore had slain the demon lord to prove something to himself. He'd climbed the tower for the same reason. But now, for the first time, he sought power not for his self-realization, but to protect humans and the land his friends had loved so much.

Reassured by Theodore's answer, the dragon closed its eyes. Its body began to glow faintly. Theodore's body had been losing heat as his life trickled out of him, but suddenly, he was so hot, he was burning. Then he felt pain, as if he was being torn to pieces.

* * * *

When Theodore reached the next town, about a hundred dragons gathered around him. One of them laughed mockingly.

“Filthy human! How dare you kill our kind. We are superior to you, who cannot even fly. You humans are pathetic creatures who deserve the worst.”

The group of dragons spread their wings and took to the sky. Theodore sensed they had left nobody alive in the town. He fixed his gaze on the soaring dragons.

“Though you may burn to death, at least your body will be consumed. Your end won’t be for nothing,” a dragon said with a laugh.

Theodore stuck his sword into the ground. The next moment, the dragons breathed fire, turning the town into a sea of flames. But something was moving among the flames, accompanied by a thunderous noise as if the earth was splitting open. Enormous wings stretched above the flames, flapped, and put the fire out. Gemlike yellow eyes locked on the dragons, fire growing hotter and hotter in the throat of their supposed victim. When the flames shot out, they burned the dragons helplessly like moths, melting their fire-resistant scales.

A swordsman walked through the town, which had turned to ash. His name was Theodore, the Dragon Hunter. But he was no longer human.

* * * *

The capital was still in the dragons’ clutches. The throne room in the palace had no ceiling. There were five thrones, but one of them was empty. The others were occupied by dragons, which snarled when a man nonchalantly walked in, carrying a sword on his shoulder.

“You’ve finally come for us, Dragon Hunter?”

The half-human, half-dragon swordsman watched them with his yellow eyes.

"So how does life here compare to the tower?" he asked them quietly.

The dragons roared with laughter.

"This is paradise! We were never meant to be kept in a tiny cage. Here, food is plentiful, and nobody can kill us."

They laughed, convinced that even Theodore couldn't hurt them.

"Well, you're wrong. I will kill you all."

Theodore held out his sword, but the dragon kings kept laughing.

"Has killing Daemondor given you delusions of grandeur? That fool was the weakest of us, obsessed with humans, wanting to coexist with them."

Golden light began to emanate from Theodore's body.

"Well, you may be in for a surprise…"

* * * *

"It worked," Theodore said, gazing over the wasteland around him. "My strength and the power of your yearning for peace together were stronger than them."

Next to him lay four dead dragons. As Theodore had seen in the tower, the death of holy beasts also killed all their minions. When he slew the dragon kings, all other dragons in the human world began to spontaneously die.

Theodore had saved the world once again, and this time, people knew whom to be grateful to. He didn't want fame and glory when he killed the demon lord, but he decided not to hide the fact that it was him who had killed the dragons.

He thought that knowing the dragon-slaying hero was among them would reassure the people they were safe.

I must make sure nobody tries to destroy this world again.

Theodore gave up on trying to reach the top of the tower. He went to visit the graves of the three heroes who'd been his closest friends, glad they never got to see the kingdom taken over by the dragons.

Whether it was the effect of his long stay in the tower or the dragon's power, he couldn't say, but he wasn't aging at all. Since fusing with the dragon and defeating the rest of its kind, he was no longer the same man fixated only on discovering the limits to his strength.

Ten years went by, then a hundred. Theodore watched as human towns, cities, and nations grew and prospered.

* * * *

When Voroderia, God of Darkness, appeared before Theodore, the swordsman didn't reach for his weapon.

"What do you want from me?" he asked simply.





Voroderia was quite surprised. “The others attacked me on first sight… Interesting.”

“I have a world to protect.”

Voroderia laughed, amused. “And you get straight to the point. Makes my job easier.”

Voroderia started walking, and Theodore followed him in silence. The God of Darkness looked around at the human towns.

“Your people trust you. You’re a good king to them.”

“I try to be.”

People who passed them by greeted Theodore. Human culture was thriving as if the dragons’ rule of terror had never wreaked havoc on the land. Voroderia was observing everything with interest.

“Let’s talk business, then. I’m thinking of isolating this world.”

“What?”

“Let’s just say I have something in mind.”

Theodore didn’t protest. He seemed to acquiesce to Voroderia’s demands.

“I’m going to remove you from here along with this world,” said Voroderia. “You will keep it, and nobody will get hurt. I’ll just make it look as if this place has been destroyed, and I’ll go away. How does that sound?”

“Why can’t you leave it as it is?”

“Destroying worlds is my job.”

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

The God of Darkness laughed. “Okay. I’ll tell you this. It’s to lay the groundwork for a certain other world.”

“I see,” Theodore said briefly, falling silent again.

He understood that Voroderia wasn’t going to give him any detailed answers, so he gave up on asking more questions.

“In the place I’m going to send you to, you will meet others like you. There’s no pressure for you to get along; feel free to fight if that suits you. And don’t worry—a time will come when you’ll be able to get out.”

Voroderia proceeded to excise Theodore's world from the space it occupied. He gave Theodore the power to enter and exit his world as he pleased, then sent him to a castle from which Theodore couldn't leave.

* * * *

When he first met Shuutarou, Theodore felt a certain disquiet. Out of the blue, he had a master, a weak, timid boy despairing over being trapped in a world he couldn't leave from. Theodore had no illusions about what the other Overlords thought of this.

But even as the Overlords treated the boy without due respect, Shuutarou was equally nice to all of them. Theodore thought it would only encourage the others to take even more liberties, but he said nothing.

Then one day, he got a glimpse of his master's power. The boy used a taboo ability to fuse monsters held in the castle with his pet. The boy could fuse any of his minions, the Evil Overlords included, turning them into another creature, if that was what he felt like doing at the moment.

Having learned of this terrifying possibility, Theodore interpreted his master's intentions in his own way—that Shuutarou was concealing the true extent of his power to see how the Overlords would behave and find out if they were worthy to be his minions.

Those braggarts show off their power at every opportunity; perhaps he wanted to teach them a lesson…

All Shuutarou needed to make the Overlords obey him was to reveal that he was more powerful than them, but he wasn't one to blow his own trumpet. Even after the Overlords learned how strong he was, his attitude didn't change. He didn't want to force them into submission or order them to do what he wanted, even though they were his minions.

Instead, Shuutarou used his power to restore a ruined world and to create order in it.

"Now I understand…"

The boy reminded Theodore of the friends he'd grown up with, who, like him, wanted to be strong and learned to fight. When they became celebrated heroes of the kingdom, Theodore had noticed the others didn't battle as much, and he'd taken it as a sign that they'd lost their ambition. It'd taken him this long to realize he'd been wrong.

You knew what truly mattered, more than the quest for power…

His friends had fought not to become stronger, but to protect others. They didn't refuse to go inside the tower with him because they weren't curious or lacked confidence—they stayed in order to protect the kingdom and its people.

"Someone's got to look after the kingdom while you're away," one of his friends had said to him, laughing.

At the time, Theodore didn't understand why his friends wouldn't come with him. They'd defeated the demon lord, and everything was well in the kingdom. It was much later, when Theodore defeated the dragons, that he reflected on what it took to be a real hero—not only helping people in danger, but preventing that danger in the first place, giving the people the environment they needed to thrive.

This boy understands that…

It'd taken Theodore hundreds of years to understand something that seemed intrinsic to Shuutarou. He thought the boy was born to be a king. Ashamed that he'd been too self-centered to see what his friends had been striving for, Theodore swore to loyally serve the boy who reminded him of them so much.

* * * *

"What are you crafting?" asked Shuutarou.

Theodore had made a silver bow, arrows, and a dagger.

"I've used the materials left over after crafting new equipment for you to make a weapon set for Misaki."

"Oh, it's for Misaki!"

The gear that Theodore had previously given Misaki could be equipped by players at level 1. Surely, Misaki had been training diligently and would be able to equip higher-level weapons.

"I dunno if I'll see her again, though…," said Shuutarou.

"I have no doubt you will."

Theodore resumed hammering away at yet another creation in his workshop.


Character Designs



Player:

MISAKI

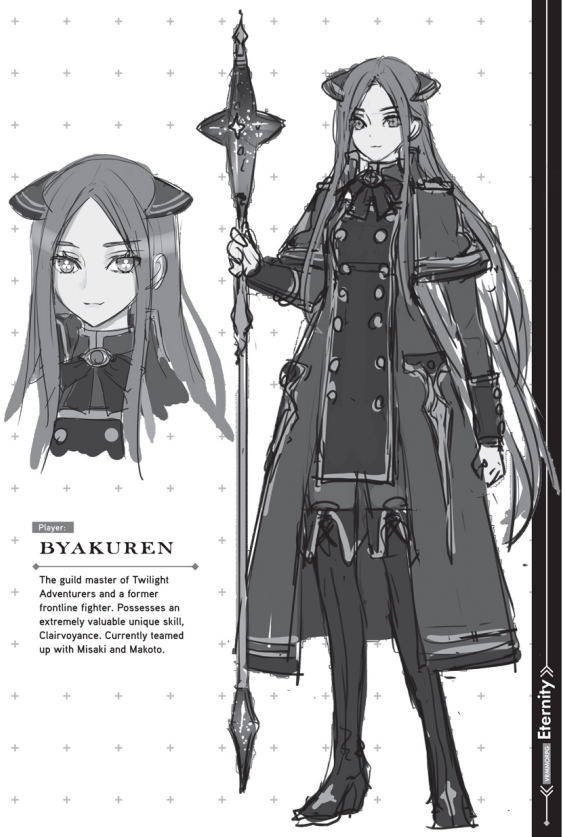
A sincere and principled seventeen-year-old. Although she was new to gaming at the start, she worked hard to earn the nickname Artemis, goddess of the silver bow. She hopes to meet her savior Shuutarou again.

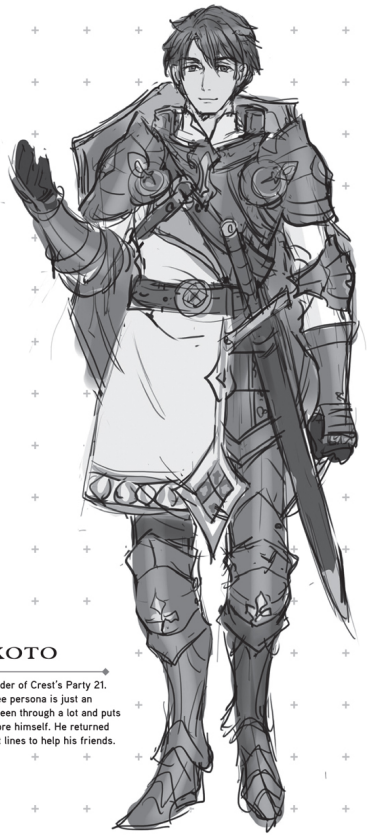


Player:

BYAKUREN

The guild master of Twilight Adventurers and a former frontline fighter. Possesses an extremely valuable unique skill, Clairvoyance. Currently teamed up with Misaki and Makoto.

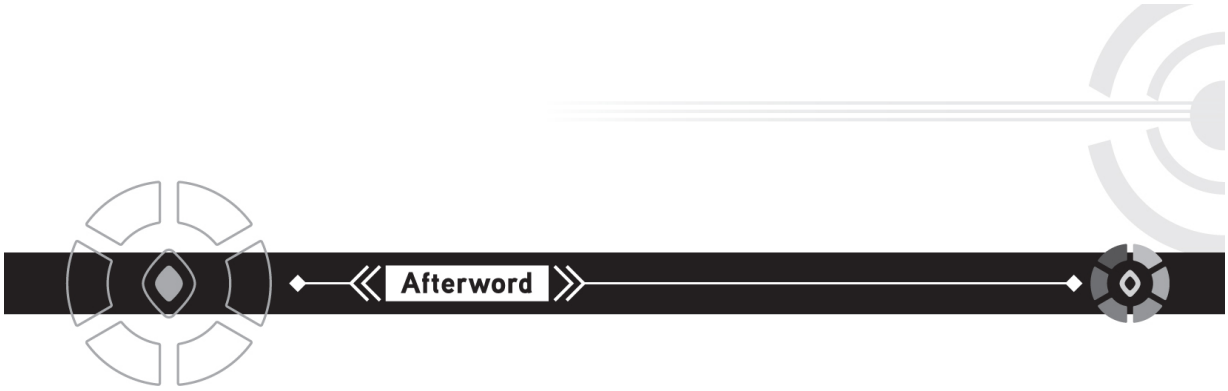




Player:

MAKOTO

Former leader of Crest's Party 21. His carefree persona is just an act—he's been through a lot and puts others before himself. He returned to the front lines to help his friends.



Hello, it's Nagawasabi64 here. Thank you for buying *The Unimplemented Overlords Have Joined the Party!*, Vol. 4!

It didn't take us very long to get this far, hmm? Reaching the fourth volume is an important milestone for us light novel writers. Once you make it there, you know that your series is well established and likely to survive. Thank you so much for buying this book!

It's my dream to witness someone purchasing a volume of *Unimplemented Overlords* with my own eyes someday. If you see someone suspicious intently watching the *Unimplemented Overlords* shelf area at a bookstore, do not be alarmed—it might just be me!

Isn't it awesome that Romi Park narrated the ad for *Unimplemented Overlords* that appeared during the *In the Land of Leadale* anime broadcast?

In other news, the first volume of the manga adaptation by Tomo Hirokawa is out! I really feel like I'm on a roll lately. It's kind of scary to suddenly find yourself so successful! And be earning a good amount of money! Well, I hope it lasts!

In this volume, we see a lot of character development in Shuutarou. While the incident with the Liberator leaves scars on the

Party 7 members, it also brings them closer. Shuutarou encounters a problem unique to his situation—dungeon invasion—which helps him grow more mentally resilient and also much, much stronger as a player.

While Shuutarou is very responsible for his age, he's still a child. I didn't want to put him in scenarios that were too disturbing before he became a little more mature, but now I feel he's ready to take on more challenges.

With this volume, I have finished laying the groundwork for the grand adventures to come. You might think I'm really slow to need this many volumes to set the scene, but I promise you many dramatic developments and a breakneck pace of adventure from Volume 5 onward! I'm also planning to give more space to the Overlords in the next volume and properly flesh them out, adding to their backstories at the end of each volume. I hope every reader will pick their favorite Overlord!

This time, I wrote about Theodore's past. I really had to brace myself for it, since it seemed like it'd be the hardest story to write. (Theodore's the most ordinary-looking Overlord.)

Initially, I was going to have Theodore as a middle-aged knight, but then I thought it'd be interesting for the serious-minded Theodore and the laid-back Bertrand to have a sort of brotherly dynamic, so I made him younger. I gave up on them calling each other "Theo" and "Bert" from the beginning, though, instead having the relations between the Overlords be tense at first. Shuutarou's addition to the mix gradually leads to the Overlords loosening up… although you might not see much of that yet!

"King of the Dragons" is a remake of a story I wrote a long time ago for the Shousetsuka Ni Narou campaign. As far as I can remember, it was based around the concept of using the trope of the protagonist being the strongest in the world, but in an engaging way.

I know that stories about characters who seek to become strong, only to find out what's really important after the final battle

are cheesy, but I'm a sucker for them. Also, it serves to justify Theodore's respect for Shuutarou, who's known all along what matters the most. What further convinces Theodore that Shuutarou deserves to be their master is the fact that his treatment of the Overlords remains consistent even after they begin to fear him, having seen him fuse other monsters with Punio to enhance the slime. Now that you have some insight into Theodore's reasoning, you can see why he was the first of the Overlords to assume a respectful attitude toward Shuutarou.

The following volume will end with Gallarus's backstory. His circumstances are quite different from the other Overlords'… You'll see why I chose to focus on him when you read the next volume! I recommend you start by reading the main story, then Gallarus's backstory, and then the main story once again. Gallarus fans, stay tuned for Volume 5—the big guy will take center stage!

The first two volumes of the remake of another of my series, *Frontier World Online: Working as a Summoner*, are out there for anyone interested! It's also a VRMMORPG story, but it features the laid-back adventures of a group of kids. It might be nice for a change from the drama-filled *Unimplemented Overlords*.

If you'd like to send me a letter or a gift, please mail them to the Famitsu Bunko editorial department. (I love getting fan art!) I also love reading your feedback about my stories on Twitter and Shousetsuka Ni Narou. Feel free to share your thoughts with me!

Take care! See you in Volume 5!



WATARU ON A BREAK.

I DREW THIS ILLUSTRATION HOPING THAT HE'D GET SOME DOWNTIME LIKE THIS.

Kawaku



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