

## Prologue - Slyker Dynasty Falls

Blood flowed from the zenith of Mt. Furi. A pile of corpses was stacked almost as high as the mountain itself. And at the top of it was...

Swirling flame.

Dancing ice.

Chromatic hailstorm.

If seen in any other situation, one would probably identify the being atop the mountain as a beautiful dancer. This interpretation was not entirely incorrect - it was a dance of death.

\*Bang bang bang bang\* . . .

At tens, hundreds, no... thousands of times per second, the sounds of gunshots dissipated into the open sky as the woman spun around firing a myriad of weapons. Every gunshot was an explosion, and with every round, multiple corpses joined the ever-growing pile. Despite her best efforts, the pursuers never faltered. The number of people after her was endless.

However...

"I..."

\*Bang bang bang\* . . .

"WILL..."

\*Bang bang bang\* . . .

"NEVER..."

\*Bang bang bang\* . . .

"FALL!"

As soon as she spoke these words, a giant arc of flame erupted from the peak of the mountain as if it were a dormant volcano rising from its slumber. This was her final move, one that would wipe out everything around her in an unprecedented radius.

Nothing survived except for Mt. Furi itself.

It was as if the corpses and blood from earlier were just an illusion. In the center of the blast radius, the woman stumbled and fell, her stamina drained.

"Did... I finally get rid of everyone..."

As these lines left her mouth, she knew that she possibly raised a flag. So she gathered her willpower and remaining stamina to struggle back on her feet.

Mt. Furi was vast. Even the peak was a kilometron in diameter. However, despite its large size, there was not a single life form remaining. All that remained was the Gun Swap Goddess herself.

Ordinarily, her ultimate ability was extremely reliable. But in this situation, the coast was anything but clear.

The freezing gale howled through the desolate expanse at the peak of the mountain, adding to the unnerving atmosphere. Despite her best efforts, she couldn't detect anybody nearby. However, she knew this was impossible. Because...

\*!!!\*

A dagger landed squarely in her back, and the woman toppled over in a manner unbefitting of her title.

"Fae Sol... no. The Gun Swap Goddess. What a pathetic title."

A male voice spoke behind her.

This being had snuck up on her. Undetectable. This meant it was a counter-class being, most likely an assassin-type, on par with herself. There weren't many that could match this criterion, and deep down, she expected something like this to happen.

The countless people sent after her were merely throwaways. Against the Gun Swap Goddess, or any other Tier 9 player, this number was necessary in order to drain her stamina. And now, a real threat had arrived.

It was another Tier 9 player... but who?

"What... do you want?"

Fae Sol attempted to rise off the ground, but despite her best efforts, only her fingers twitched. It was a fast-acting poison that could even quickly paralyze Tier 9 players. This was one of the highest-level assassins in existence using one of the highest-grade poisons. Unfortunately, this information was not enough to identify the killer.

"Of course... I won't give it to you... no matter how much you plead..."

"The Slykers have fallen."

"...!"

\*What?\*

For the first time in a long time, dread ran through Fae Sol - no, Jisha Slyker. Her eyes widened. Did she hear that correctly?

"What... do you exactly mean by that?"

"I meant what I said. The Slyker Dynasty has fallen. You have been eliminated."

"What...!"

\*Shk...\*

Another dagger implanted itself in her back, and with double the poison in her bloodstream, she became unable to speak. She wanted to yell, send a message to anybody about her situation, but the poison locked her body in place.

A set of ominous footsteps approached her from behind. However, she was not afraid. After all, if she died, she would only be afflicted with a minor penalty. There were more important issues at hand.

\*Our country has been eliminated? What does that even mean? Does Father know?\*

The collapse of a country and the rise of a new one wasn't unordinary during the war. However, the Slykers were currently in a favorable position. For them to suddenly collapse was...

\*Impossible!\*

But this man's voice carried absolute confidence.

Thoughts of who to contact swirled around her head, but one sentence cut them short.

"The Emperor is dead."

\*...huh?\*

A sentence so strange that the First Princess of Slyker couldn't process what she just heard. Of course, her face remained expressionless due to paralysis.

"... Ah... I forgot you're paralyzed. It's a shame I couldn't see your face twist in despair."

\*...what? Father is dead?\*

The assassin kicked her back and slowly twisted the dagger in her wound. Due to the paralysis poison, she couldn't feel any pain, but she knew she was being humiliated. However, such a feeling wasn't strong. Her thoughts were consumed by confusion.

\*How can Father die? He's lying.\*

As if the assassin could read her mind, he responded emotionlessly.

"You obviously don't believe me, but it's true. I did it myself."

Jisha's brain short-circuited. She couldn't form a single thought besides...

\*How? He's lying. He's lying. It's impossible. There's no way.\*

"Do you want to see how?"

\*...\*

"Ah.. where is it..."

The man quickly scanned his inventory. When he found what he was looking for, he spoke up again.

"Here."

A black gloved hand placed a screen in front of her eyes that was playing some footage. If she wasn't paralyzed, Fae's eyes would have gone wide. Because the footage was of the Slyker Royal Palace ablaze.

"Your father is indeed dead. Very dead."

The assassin was no longer able to keep an emotionless tone as he burst out into laughter. He merrily continued as if his emotionlessness from earlier was merely an act.

"And do you want to know something even better? Your father isn't the only one."

\*...no...\*

"Your mother, your sister, everyone there! They're gone. Ah, who else? Eia, perhaps?"

\*...no...\*

"You know, it was surprisingly easy to do this. You would think royalty would scrutinize their allies' true incentives..."

\*...\*

As the man rambled on, his words gradually meshed into gibberish. How could she pay attention to that when this footage was playing in front of her eyes?

\*Wait... How am I still alive?\*

The body of Jisha Slyker should have been inside the royal palace. Even though she was deep underground, there was no way the assassin was careless enough to let her get away.

"Of course, I saved the best for last."

\*...!\*

When the man spoke these words, adrenaline kicked through Fae's body as her fight or flight response was triggered. However, the result of such a response was lackluster. Because... Everything went dark.

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Jisha Slyker's consciousness returned to one of the many underground rooms of the Slyker Royal Palace. Immediately, she was on guard. However, enclosed in the virtual gaming cabin, there wasn't much to detect.

\*Force logout?\*

There were only a few methods of a force logout. One was if the body was experiencing extreme hunger or thirst. Another was if the body was experiencing extreme pain. And the last one was...

\*The cabin was disabled.\*

Jisha's latest model of virtual gaming cabin was forcibly shut down.

Her body was lying backside down in a pool of high-quality sensory deprivation material, so it was impossible to tell what was happening outside. After a moment of nervous hesitation, Jisha cracked the cabin lid open.

The top slid off and she sat upright. Though the room was dark, it was still brighter than the complete lack of light inside the cabin, so it took a moment for her eyes to adjust. Despite the footage she had witnessed, her current room was unscathed. However, she couldn't let her guard down.

The cabin's power source was in a reactor room not too far away. This connection had likely been severed.

Jisha scanned her room. Information about her surroundings flooded into her mind. However, nothing nearby was amiss.

She climbed out of the cabin, put on her nightclothes, picked up a nearby laser pistol, and crept towards the exit of the room.

With her back against the door, she scanned the hallway for signs of life.

There were none.

Jisha opened the automatic sliding door. She had intended to peek outside. But before she could, her heart stopped. Three charred corpses were lying on the ground. Though they were badly burnt, Jisha recognized them at a glance. They were...

"Father? Mother? Sister?"

Jisha collapsed to her knees as her world spun. She thought it was impossible, yet the evidence was right in front of her eyes. Once again, the same thought ran through her mind.

\*How?\*

She wanted to scream. She wanted to run. She wanted to cry. However, she was unable to do any of those things. Instead, she pathetically fell to the ground. Perhaps it was because of the shock. Or perhaps it was because of...

\*Shk.\*

A cold dagger laced with poison. In a ridiculous series of events, she died the same way twice. She couldn't even laugh.

\*...Am I really going to die like this? How could our family fall so fast?\*

Though her willpower was never-ending, it could not prevent the poison from spreading throughout her body, nor could it prevent the blood draining from the wound of the enchanted ice<sup>7</sup> dagger.

\*I... can't... die... here...\*

Jisha's brain fired signals to her muscles telling them to move. However, these signals never reached their destination.

As her consciousness fizzled into nothing, she heard a voice whose gender could not be specified. The voice carried both warmth and chill.

"I'm sorry to do this to you, sweetheart."

As those final words entered her ears, Jisha Slyker passed away.

## **1 - Born Again?**

Her eyes flew open. A cold sweat flowed down her back. Her heart thumped against her chest as she gasped for air.

\*Ugh...\*

Jisha put a hand to her forehead. Her vision faltered - she'd sat up too fast.

After a few seconds, she glanced around the room. And when she recognized the contents within it, her shock was replaced by confusion.

\*Where am I?\*

It was not because the room was unfamiliar, but rather because it was *\*too\** familiar.

This was her bedroom for the majority of her life.

\*Perhaps this is the spirit realm.\*

The events that had just transpired were fresh in her mind. It would be strange if one forgot the sight of three scorched family members while literally getting stabbed in the back. So, she was probably dead, and it wasn't possible to go back in time to change history.

There was no other logical explanation - it had to be the spirit realm. Plenty of spirit realm accounts and testimonials had been recorded, and some had reported that you would occasionally be shown your past and sometimes even your happiest memories.

As Jisha rationalized her situation, her breathing calmed down. But she couldn't help biting her lip.

As a spirit, there was almost nothing she could do to impact the physical world. She could witness it or communicate with mediums, but that was about it.

Though she was sad, there was nothing she could accomplish by sulking. Even though it was the spirit realm, there had to be something to do, right?

The first thing Jisha noticed was that her body was significantly weaker than what she was used to. Before wars raged across the world, she'd been a shut-in with little physical training. On top of this, her mental clarity was incredibly fuzzy.

The extra effort she had to spend to just move her arms and legs was extremely apparent. She wasn't moving limbs, but rather slabs of lead...

\*This is awful. I wonder if I can do anything about this soon.\*

As she was looking down, the date her smartwatch displayed jumped out at her.

\*23:48 3-7-50...?\*

23 hours and 48 minutes on the third day of the seventh month of the 18050th calendar year on planet Etmos. In other words, this was...

\*11 years before my death?\*

Today wasn't an ordinary day. It was a day she remembered like yesterday. This was the day she had stayed up until midnight in order to try the newest VRMMORPG that was released, Synergy.

Though full-dive VR games had existed in the past, Synergy's technical feat was far superior to its counterparts.

For the first time ever, a virtual world would be nearly indistinguishable from real life.

No marketing was done for this game, so not many people knew of its existence yet. And of the few people that knew, most were skeptical. However, the hopefuls were adamant that this claim was genuine.

The only way to find out was to try it when it launched. And today was that day. For everyone except Jisha, it would be their first time truly experiencing another world.

On the side of her bed was one of the most primitive full-dive helmet models in existence.

Upon seeing this, paired with the fact that her body felt like a vegetable, she couldn't help but want to jump straight into the game.

If she were in the spirit realm, she would be doing everything in her power to witness the aftermath of their family's fall. Spirits were able to travel freely, yet Jisha was bound to her young body. Because of this, she couldn't help but masochistically look forward to this game again.

\*... This is what I used to use?\*

Jisha fumbled with the antiquated tech, unsure of how to maneuver it.

The Vbian-02. Its quality was so poor that she would ordinarily glance over it as if it were a piece of trash on the ground. However, 11 years ago, it was a fairly decent model.



As she struggled with her helmet, she glanced at her watch again. There were less than ten minutes remaining before the world of Synergy opened to the public.

When she finally figured out what she was doing, she hesitated to boot it up.

\*This is ironic, isn't it?\*

Synergy was supposed to be a “game”.

Yet, this "game" brought many to ruin. This "game" toppled major powers of the world and gave rise to equally as many new ones. This “game” even extended one’s lifespan with its time dilation technology.

Rather than a “game”, the world acknowledged Synergy as a “second reality” - one that was as real as their own.

Jisha had a hunch. Was she really in the spirit world? She considered one possibility that should be impossible. And if it were true...

\*There's no choice but to play.\*

As she navigated through the Vbian’s old menus, she thanked her younger self for pre-installing all of the necessary files.

\*Wow, even my old model is here.\*

Synergy allowed 3D models of avatars to be imported. At age 13, Jisha created her very own in anticipation for this game’s release.

\*Hm...\*

She was a better artist now than she was at age 13, so she was immediately able to discern her younger self’s flaws.

\*Some of these lines and shading are a bit off, but it’ll have to do for now.\*

As much as she wanted to change some things, she only had time to make a couple of minor adjustments before finally launching the game.

\*... this is so slow.\*

As someone who was used to jumping into Synergy right after setting themselves up, the loading space of this old technology was mind-numbing.

The loading meter took its sweet time - only after several minutes did it crawl its way to full.

\*Finally!\*

She was just in time to witness the countdown until the game's release.

\*>10 seconds before the world of Synergy opens to the public!\*

...

5...

4...

3...

2...

1...

\*>Welcome to Synergy!\*

"Welcome to Synergy!"

As the countdown ended, the world turned white and these words appeared in the space in front of her. At the same time, Jisha heard a cute feminine voice emitted from the same place.

A small fairy with blue butterfly-like wings popped into existence. She simply looked like a miniature human and was approximately ten centimetron in height.

"I am Lemieux! You can call me Lemi for short. I will guide you as you begin your journey in this world. Think of me as a tutorial bot!"

At this, she proudly stood in the air with her hands on her hips. Her dignified tone highly contrasted with her cute voice and contents of the message. Hearing this, Jisha couldn't help but smile.

"Beyond, what is your name?"

Jisha decided to use the Synergy username she had never changed.

"Fae Sol."

"Okay, Fae Sol! Please choose a class!"

A screen floated before her with two options:

\*>Melee\*

\*>Ranged\*

"You may notice something strange. There are only two classes! This is because the world of Synergy is more realistic than any other game so far. You must get used to your body before you can truly explore!"

\*Get used to your body, huh? Tell me about it...\*

Lemi was about to continue, but Jisha had no need to hear anything else. She only had one purpose in games, and that was to be a gunner. No matter what life she lived, this fact wouldn't change. Without a doubt, she chose...

"Ranged."

Lemi's face lit up at the answer.

"You're quite decisive. Ranged it is! Now, choose your birthplace in this world! Once chosen, your soul will return to this location should your body die. Choose wisely! Select a Hamlet within the Starshine Shogunate."

Put simply, Jisha was ordered to select a spawn location. There were many tiers of locations, such as Hamlet, Village, Town, and more. Hamlet was the smallest of these, and they were the most plentiful. They were also of the poorest quality. And unfortunately, they were the only places new players could spawn.

But these limited spawn locations had their benefits as well.

Etmos was a somewhat large planet with a circumference of over 80,000 kilometers and a population of over thirty billion, so the concept of these location tiers were created in hopes of getting people from similar locations on the planet to spawn together in the game.

Though Etmos was large, Synergy was even bigger. In fact, it was likely infinite. These worlds were too big. All of these small starter places simply consolidated people together. What fun would the game be without others to play with, especially those close to you in real life?

Jisha glanced over the numerous marked locations on the large continental map in front of her.

\*Where should I go?\*

She could pick something that she was already familiar with, or she could go somewhere new.

\*Hm...\*

For a while now, something had been bothering her. It was just this hunch - a gut feeling.

\*Is this even the spirit realm?\*

It was common knowledge on Etmos that the spirit realm was somewhere one went after their physical body had passed. Spirits were not an uncommon phenomenon. In fact, they were everywhere. And there was one thing every one of them would say about the physical world.

"Advanced technology is not visible".

It didn't mean that VR helmets were invisible to spirits, but concepts such as Etherless, cyberspace, and virtual worlds appeared blurry and incomprehensible to them. This topic was still under research among spiritual scientists and was difficult to solve.

The most common hypothesis was that such technologies had extremely low spiritual affinity. However, the hypotheses only existed due to this indisputable fact. No matter how much one wanted to deny this fact, it was a law of the world, just how water was wet.

So right now, there were several possibilities.

1 - Jisha wasn't actually dead but in a deep sleep or coma. Though technology was also blurry in dreams, it was much more likely to view technology in a dream than in the spirit world.

2 - The other spirits, hence known laws of the world, were wrong. Or, Jisha was a special spirit.

3 - Jisha had reincarnated into her past self.

After observing her world in detail, she ruled out the first possibility.

If she were in a dream, various elements of the world would be unstable. Written text and the color of objects were two prolific examples. If these elements remained consistent after heavy scrutiny, the world in front of her was real.

So... now what?

As much as Jisha wanted to entertain the third possibility, what was more likely? For water to become not wet, or to transgress into your past self? It was a problem that stumped her. But once that thought entered her mind, she couldn't get rid of it.

Everyone has the fantasy of reincarnating into their past self and redoing their younger years. This was why reincarnation novels were popular. Jisha was no exception.

In fact, she desired this even more than most. After all, her entire family and residence had been burned down without forewarning.

The most alarming part was that everything until those last moments seemed completely fine. If only she had a second chance and was able to figure out what exactly happened...

\*There's only one option.\*

It didn't take her much longer to decide. She pointed towards a place she was quite familiar with.

"Uval Hamlet."

There were a couple of reasons for choosing this location.

First and most importantly, Jisha had already decided to treat this situation as a second incarnation. Of course, this was still unlikely, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

She needed to take decisive steps to stand at the top. She couldn't just be content with being a top player - she had to overwhelmingly stand above all.

To prevent tragedy from occurring a second time, she would wield superior weapons. With enough power, everything would be simple.

In this world, there are only two that have ever existed. What are they?

Information and strength.

Currently, Jisha was lacking the latter.

\*Well... comparatively, anyway.\*

Starting in the Uval Hamlet would give her a massive advantage over other players who were just learning the game. After all, Jisha Slyker was Fae Sol the Gun Swap Goddess in her previous life. With 11 natural years of experience under her belt, her weapon of information was superhuman.

A secondary reason was that Synergy and Etnos were extremely vast, and the difference in power between certain entities was massive.

For example, guilds and organizations from previous VR games would join up to create alliances in this new game. The alliances of such orgs could easily bully smaller clans and individual players. And as the power dynamic in the late game became more and more chasmic, "super-guilds" and hegemonic powers could easily bully ordinary orgs.

If her memory served her correctly, Uval Hamlet was located in a relatively peaceful area. Of course, this didn't mean that it would be free of conflict. Nowhere in Synergy was truly peaceful. Jisha's goal was to rise quickly, and Uval Hamlet would allow her to do so with relatively little harassment from the aforementioned bullies.

No matter how much information one had, if the other side wielded a ludicrous amount of strength, it would all be useless.

The third and most unimportant reason was... she wanted to relive her first moments again. This was a harmless wish, so why couldn't she indulge in it?

"Are you sure?" Lemi asked.

"I'm sure. Please send me to the Uval Hamlet."

"Okay! You sure are decisive! Before you go, this is what you look and sound like. Would you like to make any changes?"

The 3D model she'd imported stood before her as it spoke preset voice lines.

Its body type was identical to her real one. She was an average height for a 13-year-old female Northeasterner standing at roughly 160 centimetron, and she had a petite build. However, the face of the model greatly differed from her real one.

Jisha Slyker had silky-flowing black hair. Fae Sol's hair was wavy and maroon giving her an uncouth look.

Jisha had deep brown eyes that were almost black. Fae had bright blue-green eyes with irises stylized like crosshairs.

Jisha had gentle facial features, while Fae had a sharper look.

If someone saw Fae Sol, there was a zero percent chance of associating her with Jisha Slyker.

This was important - as the princess of a nation, she was basically a small-scale celebrity. If her progress in the game became known, Slyker would immediately fall under the crosshairs of the world.

As for the voice, Jisha didn't have much experience in sound design. Because of this, she imported a voice modulator she found online. She didn't fiddle with it too much, so she sounded somewhat similar to her original self, but it was different enough for people to be unable to tell.

If anything, it was a bit... fiercer.

"These are the changes I would like to make," Jisha said as she confirmed her avatar with the system.

"Very good! I, Lemi, would once again like to welcome you to the world of Synergy!"

With that, the fairy disappeared as a tunnel of darkness enveloped the world.

## **2 - Shahar's Daughter**

The tunnel of darkness flew by to reveal a serene plain.

Green grass grew as far as the eye could see. Patches of colorful wildflowers sprinkled the fields. Trees were few and far between.

And on the right was a village with under twenty buildings. It was a small village - a hamlet.

When Jisha recognized where she was, nostalgia welled up within her.

\*I'm truly back...\*

This was truly the Uval Hamlet, Fae Sol's original spawn location 11 long natural years ago.

A resolve that was previously absent kindled within her.

\*I'm going to change.\*

Though Jisha's first life wasn't free of regret, she didn't dwell on the past. It was impossible to change it, so why waste effort fretting over it? Besides, her decisions built her character; she wouldn't be who she was today if it weren't for what she'd already done.

Some may argue this was a privileged mindset, and Jisha was inclined to agree. She was grateful for her circumstances from birth. However...

\*Something went wrong.\*

Her life wasn't perfect, but it was going very well. How did it come crashing down without warning? What exactly happened?

After experiencing the final events of her first life, deep regret nauseated her for the first time. Living idly was not an option anymore - every step would have a purpose.

History would not repeat itself.

\*And to do that, I need strength.\*

The path was clear. Jisha was sent back in time with vast knowledge of Synergy and the future of Etmos. All she had to do was exploit everything.

With a deep breath, Jisha started towards the hamlet.

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The hamlet was sparsely populated. There were various NPCs wandering about, but the player population was little to none. As Synergy's marketing was nonexistent, the player population at launch was a drop in the bucket compared to what it would become.

In addition to this, hamlets were everywhere. In fact, 11 natural years into the (supposedly) procedurally generated world of Synergy, there might have even been more hamlets than players.

Jisha opened her status window for the first time in this life.

\*>Status Window\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Class: Ranged\*

\*Level: 0\*

\*>HP: 10\*

\*>Atk: 1\*

\*>Def: 0\*

\*Haha... wow.\*

This screen was so bare that it made her do a double take.

It was the body that every player character spawned with. Regardless of whether you selected melee or ranged, everyone started with this blank slate. Minimal hit points, attack, and defense. No skills to work with. In addition, magic didn't exist until level 5, so stats like MP and magic attack were hidden.

\*Sadly this body isn't much less restricting than my real one... Anyway, what items did we start with?\*

\*>Inventory\*

\*>Ranged Starter Pellet: 50\*



\*Ah, these...\*

Despite it being the default starter weapon, the Ranged Starter Pellet was an interesting item. They were black spheres whose diameters were half of a human palm. No matter what, they would deal between 1-5 HP of damage upon contact with an enemy. And unlike virtually every other projectile in the game, they had infinite durability and could be recollected after use. They couldn't be found or purchased; they only appeared in a Ranged character's starter inventory.

These pellets were Jisha's starting weapon. They were projectiles that could be launched by any means possible. They seemed to be her only option in combat, but she was going to save as many as she could.

\*A complete set to start with... Not bad!\*

In the future, these trash items would become extremely valuable due to their peculiar properties and lack of access to them. In fact, the Sun Dragons, Jisha's old org in her previous life, only had a couple hundred sets of these in their guild inventory.

This was a tiny amount for a guild as large as the Sun Dragons.

The pellet's sister item was the Melee Starter Stick which appeared in a starter melee's account. Since the system gifted new items upon hitting level 1, these Starter items were completely useless after level 0. Almost no one kept the original Starter items. On top of this, it was impossible to create alternate accounts in Synergy. If you threw away your Starter items, you would never get them back.

Because of this, their rarity was not far behind Legendary items. All of these facts shot the price of these seemingly useless items to an insane amount.

Jisha's ongoing mission would be to collect as many of these Starter items as possible so she could sell them for a high price later. It would be many years before this action would even be thought of as logical, so she had a more urgent priority at the moment. She was going to complete some secret quests, collect some hidden items, and level up as fast as possible.

An ordinary new player would spend around an hour at level 0 fumbling around in the new world. This may seem like a long time, but time passed twice as quickly in Synergy. One hour in the game was 30 minutes in real life. However, Jisha knew of a quest that could instantly raise her level by a few. With this quest in her mind, she headed towards the only restaurant in town.

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The Lyocal Eatery was located almost in the center of the hamlet, and it was bustling for breakfast time. And “bustling” meant there was a grand total of 7 people inside, none of which were players.

"Welcome!"

An amiable female voice called out to Jisha as she entered the building. The waitress at the front desk was a very average-looking girl that one would instantly forget about, but this NPC was far more important than she looked.

\*I can't believe she's actually here.\*

"How many in your party?"

"... Just one."

"Alright, please follow me to be seated."

The waitress led Jisha to a small, empty table meant for 2 people at most.

"Would you like anything to drink?"

"Yes, some Ariosha would be nice."

When she heard this, the waitress raised an eyebrow. Ariosha was an uncommon beverage in this region - the locals weren't fond of it.

"A very peculiar choice. Then. One cup of Ariosha it is."

With that, the waitress departed.

The quest Jisha was hunting for relied on this waitress. One had to pass a favorability threshold with her for her to mention it. Originally, this was a difficult and meaningless task. Why would you try to curry favor with a nameless waitress in a starter hamlet?

And Fae Sol's character stats bumped this difficulty even higher - there were no options to view favorability with NPCs at level 0. However, Jisha was experienced and could easily tell what her favorability was with "small-time" NPCs like this one.

While the waitress was away, Jisha's eyes meandered around the room.

The small restaurant of Lyocal was constructed of a dark oak-like material. It had a very home-y feel due to the quiet hubbub of the few guests in the lobby. Every chair and table appeared to be handmade, so they weren't as flawless as mass-produced furniture. However, these flaws simply added to the charm.

After a few minutes, the waitress returned with a clay cup full of what appeared to be sparkling water.

It looked like water but tasted like milk. It was also a warm carbonated beverage - an oxymoron in reality. These features were only possible in a virtual world.

"Here is one cup of Ariosha for you. Have you decided what to order?"

"Yes, may I have a small serving of potato crisps?"

At this request, the waitress raised an eyebrow again.

"Crisps with Ariosha for breakfast? What kind of person are you?"

"Just somebody who's looking for a certain something."

"I see... A small serving of crisps is coming right up," the waitress interestedly responded. It was as if she understood Jisha's underlying motives.

The waitress departed once again.

Although what Jisha did was extremely simple, no one would have discovered this method to raise the waitress' favorability until years later.

Ariosha wasn't on the menu nor was it from this region, yet it was her favorite drink. After adding crisps on the side, it became this waitress' favorite breakfast combo. It was so unusual that no one could accidentally stumble upon the quest.

As Jisha was idling at her table, a notification popped up on her heads-up-display. It was a friend request from an account with the name "Synycal".

The person behind this account was another princess of a country - Syny Cytem.

This was her best friend in her previous life with whom she shared many joys and sorrows. However, towards the end of her life, Jisha slowly became distanced from her due to personal issues and the Slyker Dynasty's expansion. In the end, she didn't even have a chance to contact Syny before she was assassinated.

If there was a single large regret Jisha had in her first life, it was her inability to maintain this friendship.

\*This time, I won't let you go.\*

Jisha accepted the friend request, and a message immediately appeared in her inbox.

\*>Synycal: Jish, you've been online and you haven't added me yet? What kind of friend are you?\*

\*Ah...\*

What kind of friend was she? What kind of friend would abandon another as times grew more tumultuous?

Syny likely didn't mean anything significant by it, but the implications of this statement hit Jisha like a pile of bricks.

There was so much she wanted to say, but her plight would be impossible for this 13-year-old girl to understand. The only thing she could do was apologize for the young Jisha's clumsy mistake.

\*>Fae Sol: Sorry...\*

\*>Synycal: Ugh, that's so like you. Don't tell me you forgot about the conversation we had so we could start at the same spawn?\*

\*>Fae Sol: Um.\*

\*>Synycal: AAAAAAAAAAAAAA you airhead, wtf am I going to do with you? Where did you even spawn?\*

As Jisha and Syny chatted over the messaging system, the waitress approached her table once more with the food. Jisha hurriedly closed the HUD and focused her attention on the waitress.

\*Sorry, Syn. You're gonna have to wait a bit.\*

Jisha felt a bit guilty about doing this, the importance of this quest was by no means trivial.

"Here are your crisps. Enjoy."

The waitress set down the paper bag of hot crisps on the table and loitered absentmindedly. Jisha took a crisp, slowly dipped it in the Ariosha, and nibbled meticulously. The taste brought memories of the first time this strange drink was recreated in the real world.

\*Hm... It's pretty similar.\*

As Jisha nibbled on the crisps, the waitress continued to awkwardly linger around.

"Did you have something else for me?" Jisha asked.

"Well... yes. What exactly did you say you were looking for?"

\*Alright!\*

This quote was a good sign that the quest could advance. It was time to get to the point.

"Um, I'm not exactly sure, but someone from the center of the Cosmolai Continent said their friend had some belongings around here."

The waitress' eyes widened.

"Did you really...?"

"I don't know if it's the person you're thinking of, but he said his name was Razor. A friend of Shahar?"

"Ah..."

As Jisha spoke these quasi-bullshit lines, the waitress put a hand to her mouth as tears started forming in her eyes.

"You... really met Razor?"

"Yes."

Of course... she hadn't. However, the waitress had no way of confirming this besides asking a few questions which Jisha obviously knew the answers to.

Every continent had two legendary NPCs, and this one's were Razor and Shahar. There would be no NPC or experienced player who wouldn't know their names.

And this waitress... was the adopted daughter of the late Shahar.

### **3 - Abandoned Snow**

\*I may have broken the system.\*

Since Synergy's NPCs acted just like real people, quests that were acknowledged by the system were granted by NPCs, not the other way around.

Jisha exploited this fact to break into a chain quest - a quest with multiple parts. Originally, one was supposed to speak with Razor's descendants in the center of the continent, learn about Shahar's adopted daughter, Lilliana, and retrieve the items she kept in Shahar's stead.

This was not a combat-based chain quest, so Fae Sol didn't have to raise her level to gain strength. In fact, the hardest parts of the quests were gaining access to Razor's descendants and raising Lilliana's favorability which Jisha either neglected or breezed through.

One might wonder why Razor or his descendants didn't give anything tangible to those who completed the first parts of the quest to verify completion. This was because Razor's values lay in mind over matter; he was basically a monk who valued unorthodox knowledge. His teachings were obscure bits of knowledge and strange martial arts techniques.

Lilliana's interrogation regarding Razor and Shahar was like walking through a minefield, but where was the difficulty if you knew where the mines were?

"Looks like Father was right. I've waited for so long for someone worthy enough to show up, and in the end, you came. Here is the key to one of Father's greatly treasured items. I'm sure you can keep it safe."

With that, Lilliana gave her a circular token with the engraving of a phoenix flying towards a crescent moon. It was Shahar's emblem.

\*>System message: Quest Received.\*

\*>Name: Grave Robbery\*

\*>Description: The adopted daughter of the late Shahar has given you the key to a certain tombstone. Open it to see what's inside.\*

\*>Rating: F\*

"That token unlocks a tombstone in the cemetery. I'm sure you can figure out which one it is."

"Thanks. It was a pleasure to speak with Shahar's daughter. Oh, and here's 4 Copper for the meal."

"No, don't worry about it. It's on the house. It's only 4 Copper after all."

"Alright, then. We shall see each other again some time."

After their long conversation, Jisha left the eatery.

\*I'm glad I didn't have to pay for that.\*

As a freshly spawned account, Fae Sol was quite poor. That one meal would have depleted 40% of her bank account. Even if she had to pay for it, though, it would still be worth it. Because...

\*This is exactly what I needed.\*

This legendary token was worth far more than 4 Copper. In fact, it would be difficult to put a price on it at all. Without delay, Jisha rushed to find the cemetery.

As she walked, she skimmed through her direct messages. Syny was still bombarding her inbox.

\*>Synycal: Uval Hamlet?\*

\*>Synycal: Where even is that? Let me check the map...\*

\*>Synycal: Wait. You selected the Uval Hamlet as your spawn location?\*

\*>Synycal: Do you even know how far that is from the Erian Hamlet?\*

\*>Synycal: You and I. Literally decided to choose the Erian Hamlet. And you run off and choose that on your own?\*

\*>Synycal: Do you realize it's almost NOT EVEN IN THE SAME COUNTRY, YOU IDIOT???

Honestly, there was no excuse for this. Before Synergy was released, the developers leaked the map of the known world. It had no information on it except for the names of every major location. It was purely for social purposes so people could decide their spawn points together. However, Jisha ignored it in both lives.

Even this made her feel strangely nostalgic.

\*This... is just classic Syny, huh?\*

This bombardment of messages was practically proof that Jisha traveled back in time. Only the young Syny had this much energy...

\*>Fae Sol: Thanks.\*

\*>Synycal: What?\*

\*>Fae Sol: You're a good friend.\*

\*>Synycal: ... Are you serious? You pick a location that will take me OVER EIGHT HOURS TO TRAVEL TO and you say I'm a good friend? Saying these things won't make me not mad at you, you know!\*

\*>Fae Sol: Relax, I'm not staying here for long. You should eventually meet me in Orchid Town. I'll have something good for you there.\*

\*>Synycal: Orchid Town? ... Wait. That's almost even farther away! You want me to waste valuable leveling time and travel over eight hours to meet you in a random town???

\*>Fae Sol: Don't worry about reaching it today. Make sure to at least buy a map before you start traveling, and get to a nearby village so you can find some transportation. Anyway, I just got a really important quest so I'll talk to you in a bit.\*

\*>Synycal: Wait, don't ignore me! How do you know that? How am I gonna do that? Also how did you get an important quest when we literally just spawned here?\*

With a sigh, Jisha closed her messages. Syny wasn't dumb; if she was babysat too much, her development might be stunted instead.

\*She'll be able to figure out the basics on her own. Now, where was the cemetery again? ... Ah, this way.\*

The cemetery of the Uval Hamlet was an unordinary one - it was some distance away from the main settlement and well-hidden from sight. Coming across it accidentally was unlikely, so only those who knew of its location were bound to be there.

But why did Jisha know where this cemetery was if it was a random one near a starter hamlet?

Even without the virtually eidetic memory she retained from her past life, this cemetery was not one to be forgotten. The rules that dictated the inside of the cemetery weren't the same as they were on the outside. In the future, famous players and teams would come to fairly battle inside. With its convenient spectator feature, views and streams of this location were endless.

As she traversed the hamlet, far more players were walking around than before.

\*Looks like most people are finally done customizing their avatars.\*

Not everyone was an artist that had a custom model ready to go. But now, the relatively empty hamlet was teeming with life.

\*There's a lot of people here... Is this what it was like on launch day?\*

The Uval Hamlet was a small starter one. If everyone that spawned here decided to stay, the place would likely collapse. However, many of these players would only purchase a few essentials and meet up with friends before venturing into the wild.

Despite this, there was no one she recognized.

\*What a surprise. I'm solo again...\*

In her first life, she'd failed to make any real friends before meeting up with Syny.



Being a shut-in and a loner, making friends was incredibly difficult. Syny was the polar opposite - she was a social butterfly. Around her, making friends was a piece of cake for even the most reclusive hikikomoris.

Of all the skills Jisha had gained in her first life... making friends was not one of them.

But just as she was thinking this...

"Um... Sister?"

"Huh?"

Jisha turned around to find a girl tugging at her arm.

"Oh, sorry!! I thought you were my sister!"

The girl's blue and white chromatic hair glistened in the sun, and her pupils carried an icy aesthetic.

Jisha glanced at the name tag above the girl's head.

\*Abandoned Snow?\*

"Hey, don't worry about it," Jisha said. "But... why did you pick such a sad-sounding name?"

"Uh... I... couldn't think of anything else..."

The shy girl's voice tapered off as she struggled to finish her sentence.

"Abandoned Snow" wasn't a username Jisha recognized from her previous life. If she came across a future skilled player, she would undoubtedly socialize with them. However, she had an important quest to complete right now!

"Well, I hope you find your sister. I'm busy, so I've gotta go."

"Wait!"

Abandoned Snow grabbed her arm and spoke up before Jisha could complain.

"Can you... help me? I don't know if I picked the right starting location, so... can you stay with me until I find her?"

Jisha was about to reject her again, but as she stared at Abandoned Snow's pitiful face, several memories of her first life flooded back to her.

How had Fae Sol fared on her first day? Her circumstances were the same - shy, lonely, and solo.

How confused had she been? How lost had she gotten? How many times did she get scammed?

For just the first day... it was far too much.

Since Synergy had no tutorial, starting the game alone was like being stranded on a deserted island. If you had a friend, at least you could be stranded together.

\*...\*

Continuing on with the quest was of utmost importance. After all, it was related to Shahar, one of the continent's legendary NPCs. However, she couldn't stand the sight of a newbie struggling for no reason.

Jisha sighed.

"Well... If you really need to..."

Abandoned Snow perked up at these words. Even Synergy's facial expressions were as accurate as real life - those ice-colored eyes were incredibly captivating.

Those eyes... Could it be...?

"By chance... did you make your avatar? It's pretty."

Abandoned Snow's aesthetic avatar was not one that could be created without extreme customization. Who was its artist?

"Yes!"

When her avatar was called "pretty", Abandoned Snow's eyes lit up even more.

\*Impressive...\*

"A fellow artist, I see. I guess I've got no other choice. I'll help you out, Miss Snow."

"Yay, thank you!"

Abandoned Snow leapt at Fae Sol and wrapped her in a bear hug.

"Hey..."

\*It's only a small favor, yet she reacts this strongly? Haah... A shy artist and a lonely girl. I can't let her struggle like I did, can I?\*

From her mannerisms, Abandoned Snow was likely even younger than Jisha's physical self. Though the avatar looked like a late teen, she spoke in an incredibly childlike manner.

At this point, refusal would be cruel!

Jisha struggled to break free from the young girl's embrace without upsetting her. But when she did, Abandoned Snow didn't hesitate to grab Fae Sol's hand.

"... Let's go look for your sister."

"Yes!"

#### **4 - Woodcutting Quest**

"Hm... Not there... Not her... Not her either... hm..."

"What's your sister's username?"

"I forgot!"

\*... Why did I agree to this?\*

Jisha and her new "friend" were now supposed to search for an unknown player.

\*Scratch that, she's not a friend. I'm just babysitting her at this point.\*

The only clue she received from Abandoned Snow was the following:

"She's red like fire. I'm blue like ice!"

Somehow, Fae Sol's maroon hair looked similar enough to this "red like fire" they were searching for.

"Did you get any friend requests? If someone added you, it's probably your sister."

"Hm... nope."

"Do you think she logged in already?"

"Yep, we were supposed to log in at the same time. I made Sister's fire girl too!"

\*Fire girl?\*

Apparently, Abandoned Snow didn't know the word for avatar. She continued dragging Jisha by the arm while frantically searching through the crowd.

"Red like fire, red like fire, fire..."

\*If it's a custom avatar with red hair, it would be incredibly recognizable. We're not going to get anywhere like this.\*

"Snow, I'm pretty sure you picked the wrong spawn point."

"What?"

"We're not in the same town as your sister."

"Nooo!! She said it was "Uvan"! It's definitely here!"

\*That doesn't even sound like "Uval". How could she get it this wrong?\*

"Snow... do you know how to read?"

"What? Of course I do! I even know big words like 'abandoned!'"

\*Well... Looks like we've found the source of this problem.\*

Knowing this confirmed that Abandoned Snow was indeed a young child which brought its own fair share of questions.

"How did your parents let you play this game? How old are you?"

"Sister said I'm not supposed to tell strangers my age..."

She blatantly ignored the first part of the question.

"Haaaaa..."

Jisha scratched her head in frustration.

At this point, there was nothing else she wanted to do but leave. But every time she considered it, Abandoned Snow followed her around like a duckling would its mother.

To make matters worse, the both of them were still level 0 which meant it was impossible for them to go hunt monsters.

All mobs in the wilderness were at least level 1, and the gap between level 0 and level 1 was massive. Level 0 was the closest thing Synergy had to a tutorial, but this "tutorial" only got people used to their bodies.

If someone hadn't played full-dive VR before, entering a new body would feel strange at best and nauseatingly dysphoric at worst.

A short person creating a tall avatar would cause their world to appear completely different to what they were used to. Having two different bodily proportions in two different worlds could even lead to balance issues in both.

Balance, spatial perception, depth perception, and many more factors would become poorly calibrated just by creating an avatar that was different from your own body.

Even avid VR divers would feel a difference - no game in the current market felt as realistic.

\*Hopefully this girl doesn't suffer from any adverse side effects... But it looks like she's doing fine.\*

The young(?) girl continued to look around as if nothing was affecting her.

"Did you make yourself taller in the game, Snow?"

"Being tall is fun!"

"Hm..."

\*"Fun", not "weird" or "uncomfortable". Maybe young people get used to it more quickly?\*

"Well, if you're feeling alright, let's look for a way to level up so we can start hunting mobs."

"Sister told me not to go into the woods without her. It's scary..."

Jisha's eyebrow twitched in frustration. Sister this, sister that... Did this girl decide anything for herself?

"You sister isn't even here. We'll have to go outside if you want to find her."

"Nnnnn..."

Snow's wide eyes were still hesitant.

\*How am I going to convince her? ... Do I really have to say this?\*

To the Slykers, family came first.

Actually, family members were almost the only ones they were allowed to hold dear. Only several close friends were held in high regard, and the rest of their relationships were practically superficial.

Holding something close meant heartbreak once it was taken away.

And since Jisha had only held her immediate family and her one best friend close to her heart, she was spared from misery.

Almost.

It was why she would never lightly say the following line.

"I can be your big sister, too. There shouldn't be a problem now, right?"

"Hmmm.... Okay!"

\*That was easier than expected.\*

Jisha had no plans on getting close with this girl, but if this one sentence was all it took to be able to progress, it was worth it.

Right now, her XP bar was about half full and it was 15 minutes after midnight, or 30 minutes of in-game time. In 30 more in-game minutes, they would automatically level up to 1. But instead of waiting for this to happen...

"Let's take a look around town and see if there are any mini quests we can do to level up."

"Okay."

Hopefully Lilliana's quest wasn't the only one around. In a starter hamlet, there were bound to be several other options. Usually, there were enough for almost everyone to try something, so there was no point in worrying if they would find one or not.

\*Let's see... What's the best place right now?\*

Currently, the two were in the center of the plaza where a small circular water fountain lay. The only commercial buildings around them were the restaurant, a "frontier" shop, and a materials shop. The rest were likely residential.

\*Let's try one of these houses.\*

"Alright, Snow, follow me."

"Okaaay."

"House" was quite a generous word for these buildings. These residential homes were small stucco huts with few rooms.

The reason they'd likely be better for questing right now was that they were a bit removed from the clump of players visiting the shops. The shops weren't super crowded, but a lower player density meant more NPC interactions.

Any NPC could grant a quest - it was just a matter of if they wanted to give one out or not.

The residential area only had 9 similarly-designed huts. They were all cream-colored stucco with thatch roofing. The windows contained no glass, and most of them didn't even have doors.

And though it was a residential "area", the reality was that these 9 homes were well-spaced and arranged in a circle that surrounded the commercial buildings in the center.

The two of them approached one of these circumferential huts and peeked inside. As the hut was small and its windows were empty, it was easy to confirm that nobody was inside.

However, sitting on a wooden chair behind this hut was a lazy-looking old man.

\*>Name: Bourdois\*

\*>Level: 4\*

"Hey, if you two aren't busy, could you help these old bones with something?"

The two girls looked at each other. They'd found something already? An opportunity landed right at their doorstep!

Jisha spoke up before Abandoned Snow could.

"Of course, sir, we'd love to help out. What would you like us to do?"

The old man's eyes lit up when he realized he was finally getting some help.

"Ah, you girls don't have to push yourselves too hard, but can you chop some of that wood for me?"

The old man pointed at a small pile of wood next to an axe and a chopping block. "Back in my heyday I could do this for hours, but these days this type of wood's been giving me trouble."

\*>System message: Quest received.\*

\*>Name: Bourdois' Woodcutting\*

\*>Description: Help this man with some manual labor he's too old to do!\*

\*>Rating: F\*

"Ooh..."

Abandoned Snow was immediately captivated by the wood and the axe.

"Woow..."

She ran her fingers over the rough texture of the axe's handle and the smoothness of the flat part of the blade.

"Never cut wood before, huh? Though it would actually be weird if you had..."

There was no need to cut wood in the modern age unless you lived in a remote village, and the Northeastern urban population was far greater than its rural one. Even if Abandoned Snow lived in one of these remote villages, she was (probably) a girl and wouldn't be tasked with manual labor.

"Alright, Snow, you've gotta do this quest too if you want to find your sister faster. Hold the handle like this..."

Jisha carefully placed Abandoned Snow's hands on the axe handle and verified it wouldn't accidentally slip out when she swung it.

"Okay now look at that piece of wood. Imagine a line through its center. Raise the axe like this..."

"Ohhhh, whoa!"

"Careful!"

The axe must have been unexpectedly heavy for her - Abandoned Snow nearly fell backwards as she brought it over her head. Jisha quickly caught her before she could stumble and steadied her back into position.

"Nnnn...."

"Don't get discouraged, you can do this. Keep your eyes on the target and swing down hard!"

Abandoned Snow's eyes filled with determination, and the axe whizzed through the air as she swung. Jisha wasn't expecting much, but...

\*... Impressive.\*

The piece of wood cleaved cleanly in two.

"Is this your first time trying this, Snow?"

"Heehee, yep," Abandoned Snow said as she non-verbally begged for praise.



"Great job, girl," Jisha said as she ruffled Abandoned Snow's hair. "Hm... Looks like there's four pieces, so do one more. I'll do the last two. The quest should give us the same amount of XP."

"Okaaaay."

Jisha took another piece of wood from the small stack and placed it squarely on the chopping block.

This time, Abandoned Snow consciously kept her balance while raising the axe over her head. After focusing for a second, she swung down and cut the second piece of wood with no problems.

"Okay, nice work! I'll do the others."

"Mm."

Abandoned Snow gave a satisfied nod as she handed over the axe.

\*Alright, let's get this over with.\*

Jisha placed the third piece of wood on the block and effortlessly cleaved through it like an experienced lumberjack.

But when she reached for the fourth piece...

"Ah, what?"

"Whaaa??"

It started rolling away on its own!

Bourdois' eyes widened for a brief moment before he resignedly sat back in his chair.

"Yup, that's why I can't do this anymore..." he said with a sigh.

\*>Name: Living Wood\*

\*>Level: 1\*

\*Hm...\*

The autonomous wood wasn't rolling very quickly, so it wouldn't have been difficult to chase it down. Even for a level 1 monster, it seemed incredibly weak.

But the former "Gun Swap Goddess" had her own way of doing things!

\*This isn't even a throwing axe, but let's give it a shot.\*

Her new body was far weaker than her old one. If even moving her limbs felt different, it didn't need to be said that throwing an axe was going to feel different as well. She wanted to use this opportunity to "calibrate" the new body she was piloting.

The axe's weight was significant enough to shift Jisha's center of gravity. This made it impossible to throw it like a tomahawk.

Instead...

\*Two spins should work, I think.\*

There was a sport called "hammer throw". The participant would pick up a heavy hammer, spin around, and use the centrifugal force to launch it into a field.

Though her current weapon was an axe, its center of mass was similar enough to that of a "hammer throw" hammer.

So, she spun once...

Twice...

\*... Fly!\*

The axe shot forwards as it spun towards the poor sentient(?) piece of wood. It was too slow to dodge, and it was too weak to handle the force of an axe many times its weight hurtling into it.

\*Nice.\*

The final piece of wood met the same fate as the other three: cleanly cut in half.

Jisha heard an impressed whistle behind her.

"That was impressive, missy," the old man said while slowly applauding.

When she turned around, Abandoned Snow was looking at her with her jaw dropped.

\*...\*

To Jisha, this wasn't a very impressive feat. But if the performance made these two's day better, it wasn't all bad.

"Teach me how to do that! Teach me!"

"Sorry, Snow. I wasn't lying when I said I was busy earlier. I'll help you find your sister, but that's all I can do for you, okay?"

"Aw..."

Abandoned Snow looked at the ground, dejected. Jisha couldn't help but smile bitterly for a brief moment.

\*She seems like a good kid. Talented, too.\*

Not many people could cut wood perfectly on their first try, so Jisha wasn't being overly generous with her praise here. Abandoned Snow was also a talented young artist; her skills were wunderkind-like. This, along with her hyperactive mannerisms that reminded Jisha of a certain someone that was (still) nuking her inbox, made her really start to feel like this girl's second big sister.

But Jisha suppressed those feelings as soon as they arose. After all, nothing good would come from being attached to a random person.

She rid her head of these nonsensical thoughts and spoke to the old man so they could claim their quest rewards.

"Alright, sir, did we meet your expectations?"

"You met and exceeded them, missy. I was planning on paying you two 5 Copper for your troubles, but I'm doubling that. Fun to watch, that was."

\*>System message: Quest "Bourdois' Woodcutting" complete!\*

\*>+10 Copper\*

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Class: Ranged\*

\*Level: 0 -> 1 (+1)\*

\*>HP: x -> 100\*

\*>Atk: x -> 10\*

\*>Def: 0\*

When these system notifications entered her mind, Jisha couldn't help but give a satisfied smile.

"Ohh!"

Abandoned Snow, who had run off to collect the escaping piece of wood, returned to receive the same notifications as well.

"Thank you, sir. Well then, we'll be off."

"Take care, missy."

With that, the two walked back towards the commercial center of the hamlet.

"Okay, Snow. We've gotta buy a couple things before heading out. We're one step closer!"

"Okay!" Abandoned Snow replied with a bright smile on her face.

## **5 - First Frontier**

"Here it is."

In front of them was a shop named "Rai's Adventures". One glance at its universal logo would tell you what type of shop it was. With a sword and compass emblazoned on the sign, it was a no-brainer that this place provided all your essential exploration-related needs.

It was a "frontier" shop. Naturally, it was crowded.

\*Well, crowded for a hamlet, anyway.\*

There were 6 other players in the shop and one NPC clerk.

"Can I get this 'enforced' melee weapon?"

"Of course, that'll be 10 Copper."

"I'll take this light armor."

"That'll be 7 Copper."

"And this, too."

"6 more Copper."

It was clear that all of these players were spending their money on either weapons or armor. Most items in the shop were 10 Copper or less, which was perfect for a player who was just starting out. If this were an ordinary game, this wouldn't be a bad decision.

But were they playing an ordinary game?

Jisha led Abandoned Snow past the rows of weapons and armors to the back rows of the small wooden store. One or two players glanced at them strangely, and Abandoned Snow timidly sheltered herself behind her chaperone.

"Um... Don't we need protection from the monsters...?" she asked. She didn't want to object to Jisha's decision, but in reality, she was skeptical as well! In her mind, armor was the optimal purchase.

They finally stopped when they reached one of the rearmost aisles. There were no other customers here.

"Weapons and armor aren't good purchases right now. If you want to go outside, the first order of business is making sure you can find your way to safety."

Jisha gestured towards the items on these shelves.

\*>Mini Local Map: Free (Max 1 per player)\*

\*>Small Local Map: 10 Copper\*

\*>Medium Local Map: 25 Copper\*

...

"Maps?"

"Yes. I can guarantee you won't have any trouble dealing with the monsters in this area, so this is by far a more worthwhile purchase."

"Really?"

Jisha glanced at Abandoned Snow's icy but warm eyes. Right now, she looked like a clueless girl. But in the moment she had swung the axe... those icy eyes revealed their true colors!

Her hand-eye coordination was at an exemplary starting point.

"Yes. Trust me when I say you won't need armor against monsters below level 5. In fact, I'm confident enough to say that I'll quit playing Synergy forever if you die to one of those monsters."

"Ahhhhh whaaaaaat? Don't do that!" Abandoned Snow panicked as she waved her arms around.

"Haha... don't worry. You'll see soon enough. I'll buy a map and teach you how to use it. Without one, if you get lost... Well, in this area you won't die, but you'll be wandering around forever."

"Ohhh, okay..."

Jisha snagged a "Small Local Map" from the shelf and headed back towards the front of the shop to pay.

"That'll be 10 Copper.\*

\*>-10 Copper\*

\*>+1 Small Local Map\*

"Thanks."

Jisha then handed Abandoned Snow the map, and the two girls left the shop.

"Alright, before we leave, there's one last thing we have to do."

"Hm?"

"It's our class evolution quest. The system will gift us new weapons and skills once we do it."

"Class evolu...shon? It sounds hard."

"Don't worry, the first one is very easy. Once you wish to take the quest, you should get a message. When it comes up, just hit 'yes'."

Other than full-resetting your account, class evolutions were the only way to change the class you played. Nobody was going to be swinging a useless stick around for hundreds of levels.

\*>All prerequisites for class evolution Ranged -> Ranged+ fulfilled. Proceed?\*

\*>Yes/No\*

Though the class evolution tree contained countless branches later, at level 1, only one evolution option existed. So, Jisha naturally accepted the system's offer.

\*Yes!\*

\*>System message: Commencing class evolution.\*

\*>Evolution requirements: Don't move for 5 seconds.\*

\*>0%\*

\*>20%\*

\*>40%\*

\*>60%\*

\*>80%\*

\*>100%\*

\*>Minimum Tribulation threshold: 80%\*

\*>Tribulation score: 100%\*

\*>System message: Evolution successful!\*

\*>New Skill learned: Target Toss. >Expand for details.\*

\*>Dispensing quest reward items.\*

\*>Ranged+ Pellet: 50\*

It was so simple that it couldn't even be called a quest. And since it gave free items, it was naturally worth it.

"I think I did it. I got something new!"

Even Abandoned Snow couldn't fail.

Both avatars exuded a warm glow of white light, and the process was complete.

"Good work. Ah, you're Melee, right? Your old weapon is useless now, so I'll throw it away for you."

"Okay."

\*>+1 Melee Starter Stick\*

"You also got a new skill, so make sure you learn what it does before we head out."

"Okay."

---

"Ready?"

"Yeah..."

The two girls stood at the edge of the settlement. In the center was the fountain and commercial establishments. Surrounding that was the residential housing. Beyond that were a couple private plots of land owned by these residents.

And even beyond that was the great wide open.

Wilderness.

Frontier.

These were the two most common names given to the vast majority of space in the world of Synergy. In this regard, it was similar to real life. In most countries, humans only lived in a small area compared to the amount of land that existed in total.



Cities and towns were densely populated while the rest of the world was void of humans. That's just how it was.

And in the world of Synergy that no human had stepped in before was a lot to explore!

"No need to be nervous. Come on, let's go."

Jisha took off jogging - if they moved at a walking pace, they would be spending unnecessary time doing nothing. However, she glanced behind her to see Abandoned Snow treading carefully over the grass...

"Hey, it's safe to run. There's nothing dangerous around right now."

"Hmm..."

Abandoned Snow intently stared at some "eccentric"-looking wildflowers as if they could jump up and attack her at any moment.

It took Jisha a moment to understand what she was doing, but...

\*This is how I felt on my first day, too, wasn't it? Ah, the wonders of being a new player...\*

An experienced veteran would subconsciously ignore anything they deemed useless. However, a new player would sometimes marvel at these "useless" details.

\*>Name: Allunia\*

\*>Description: A bright red-and-purple phosphorescent wildflower.

This flower was one such example. It was an extremely common plant, and its only special property was that it glowed in the dark. If Abandoned Snow didn't stop to observe, Jisha might not even have noticed it was there.

There was no chance such a beautiful wildflower could grow in the harsh Northeastern climate of Etmos, so to Abandoned Snow, it was an awe-inspiring thing.

However, Jisha saw it as nothing more than a waste of time.

"Snow, come on. You can stare at the pretty flowers later. Or do you not want to find your sister?"

"Nn..."

Abandoned Snow briefly deliberated between her two options before rushing to Jisha's side.

"Good. Alright, follow me."

Jisha began jogging once again, but to her annoyance, Abandoned Snow seemed like she was struggling to keep up.

\*I'm not even running at full speed.\*

"You can run faster than that. Everyone has the same speed at level 1."

"Eh?"

Abandoned Snow attempted to pick up speed, but it didn't take long for her to trip over her own legs!

"Oof..."

And though she didn't take any damage, seeing a helpless girl lying face down in the grass was a bit distressing.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that?" Jisha said as she pulled Abandoned Snow to her feet.

"Can you keep up with me?"

"I don't know... I never ran before."

"Oh..."

\*I don't know how much longer I can keep doing this.\*

It was a given that Abandoned Snow was wasting Jisha's time. But the more time they spent together, the more attached she became.

The fact that Abandoned Snow ignored the earlier question regarding her parents and the fact that she'd "never ran" before were indicators that her life was... subpar.

Synergy was a game that was realistic; it gave you a realistic body. Because of this, it was the greatest blessing those with disabilities in the real world could possibly receive. If Abandoned Snow had "never ran" before, it was likely that she wasn't completely able-bodied.

Jisha didn't pry further.

"Okay, let's take it slow, then."

"Mm."

The two continued through the plains at a steady walking pace.

"Looks like you don't have any problems at this speed. Let's pick up the pace."

"..."

"I know you don't want to, but you have to try. The more you practice, the easier it'll get."

"..."

"Didn't I tell you already? I've got something to do. If you don't want to run, I'll just have to leave you here."

"..."

Abandoned Snow dejectedly looked at the ground, but with no other option, she sped up a bit to match Jisha's pace.

"I won't go too fast. This should be enough for you to handle. Just focus on putting one foot in front of the other."

It was a slow jog, a pace barely faster than speed walking. But it was much faster than earlier.

Jisha occasionally glanced over to her side to make sure Abandoned Snow was doing alright.

All of her attention seemed to be directed towards the ground, but she hadn't slipped up again.

\*Good, this seems like the perfect pace.\*

As they continued, the several small buildings of the hamlet they'd left behind continued to shrink, and the forest of sparse trees in front of them grew closer.

\*She's getting the hang of it.\*

Abandoned Snow's attention was still directed at the ground so she didn't notice, but Jisha was increasing her pace little by little. A few minutes ago, she'd tripped over her own feet trying to match this pace. Now, her agility was only a bit below average.

When it was put like that, it sounded like she was still incompetent. But if you looked at the progress she'd made in this short amount of time, it was nothing short of impressive. Jisha didn't know the precise state of Abandoned Snow's physical body, what was happening now wasn't far off from a cripple learning to run. How was this \*not\* impressive?

When Abandoned Snow finally looked up from the ground, the trees that were so far in the distance not long ago were now right next to them.

"I... did it?"

She never could have imagined reaching this place in such a short period of time, but here she was.

"Yeah, you did."

Abandoned Snow wistfully looked back at the settlement from which they came.

"I can tell Sister... I learned how to run..."

\*Hey, what?\*

Tears began forming in the young girl's eyes as she savored what she'd just accomplished. Jisha was once again flustered at this overly strong reaction. She quickly hugged Abandoned Snow to calm her down.

"Don't cry, don't cry," Jisha said as she patted the young girl's head. "You did it, so cheer up, hm?"

Jisha really wanted to keep moving and progress with her quest. She wanted to level up and progress through Synergy's world as quickly as possible. But when she stared at the teary-eyed smile of the young girl in her arms...

\*... Maybe we can stay like this for a little while longer.\*

## **6 - Slime Hunting**

It took Abandoned Snow another minute to calm down.

"Are you good now?"

"Yeah..." she said while sniffing.

"Alright."

\*... Finally.\*

Jisha felt a bit guilty for thinking this, but she never anticipated getting delayed for this long. She couldn't get rid of the tiny bit of annoyance that was constantly nagging at her.

After shelving those thoughts, Jisha led her impromptu disciple into the woods.

And just like with the "houses" earlier, calling this area "woods" was incredibly generous. The density of trees was extremely low; most of the sunlight still reached the ground.

It wasn't anything special - it could even be considered bland. But once again...

"Wow..." Abandoned Snow marveled at her surroundings.

"You're going to have heart attacks later if you're impressed by this..."

Clearly ignoring Jisha, Abandoned Snow walked over to a tree and ran her palm over the trunk.

\*>Name: Aspen\*

\*>A semi-sturdy wood with a powdery surface coating its bark. If applied properly to the skin, the powder functions as sunscreen with 3 SPF.\*

She clearly wasn't reading this, but Abandoned Snow was fascinated by the powder she'd rubbed off the bark.

\*How sheltered is she to even be impressed by trees? Just when I think her life sucks, it keeps getting worse...\*

At this point, if one still thought Abandoned Snow was an ordinary girl, their life needed some serious evaluation. Jisha's curiosity reached a breaking point.

"Snow, how old are you? How's your situation in real life?"

It was almost taboo to ask these things about another player, but Jisha felt like she deserved some answers.

"... Not telling."

"Alright..."

It couldn't be helped if she wanted to keep this information private. Asking beyond this point would be unscrupulous, and there was no way in hell Jisha was going to pull the "big sister" card again.

The two girls entered a period of awkward silence.

"..."

"..."

...

\*... Save me, please. Something interesting, please happen!\*

As if the game heard her pleas, Jisha noticed a round green object bouncing in her peripheral vision.

"Yes-! Ah, I mean... Snow, take a look over there."

"Hmm?"

Abandoned Snow followed Jisha's gaze until she noticed the bouncy blob.

"Look at it. Wish to know the monster's name, and the system should tell you."

"Hmm...?"

\*>Name: Green Slime\*

\*>Level: 1\*

"Did you get it?"

"... Slime?"

"Yep."

As if the slime heard its name, it menacingly jumped towards Abandoned Snow!

"Ahhh!"

She quickly took shelter behind her mentor!

\*Jeez, I don't even think I was this scared of a slime when I started.\*

In fact, this slime... was not menacing in the slightest. Every time it jumped, it moved less than 1 metron forward, and it jumped less than once per second. These jumps were its only method of attack, so as long as you didn't stand completely still, you wouldn't get hit.

It didn't look scary, either, as its entire body was a nondescript green. To Jisha, it was even cute.

But behind her was someone who didn't think so.

\*It's natural to be cautious of a monster you don't know the attack patterns of, but this...\*

Jisha sighed. This truly was just a babysitting job.

"Snow, look at it carefully. I'm in front of you, so there's no need to be scared."

Abandoned Snow trembled slightly as she peeked over Jisha's shoulder.

"Do you see how it's moving?"

Abandoned Snow's eyes hesitantly tracked the slowly-bouncing slime.

"Notice how often it can bounce. Can you tell?"

The young girl's trembling quickly subsided once she was given instructions. Now, her complete attention was on the monster in front of her.

"It's... slow?"

"Exactly. Once you know what it does, it's not so scary, huh?"

"Hmm... It's not scary."

"Do you think you can kill it?"

"..."

Abandoned Snow dispiritedly looked towards the ground.

Jisha patiently waited for her response.

In RPGs of old, you were far removed from your character's actions. With some control inputs, your character would move. With some more clicks, your character would attack. The controls were all you would feel - you would never truly feel like you were moving about like your character was in the game.

However, in Synergy, moving around meant you were using your brain to directly pilot a virtual body. The virtual body's sensory input would be delivered directly to your brain. Killing something meant ending its (virtual) life with your own hands.

And even though the thing in front of them was something that didn't even exist in the real world, you would have to deliberately move your body to terminate its life. It wasn't something everyone could do right away, especially if they'd never done it before.

So, Jisha waited. And after a few more seconds, Abandoned Snow looked up.

\*Yes. That's the spirit!\*

Those eyes were back. Icy cold determination filled the young girl's body.

\*Well, let's see how she does.\*

Jisha stepped aside to let Abandoned Snow do her thing.

Abandoned Snow took slow but deliberate steps towards her target. The green slime was her only point of focus. The rest of the world faded away - right now, nothing else was relevant.

She observed the green slime slowly bounce towards her. Its movements were rhythmic. It was a fixed pattern that never changed. Once she knew this, Abandoned Snow determined how she would strike.

The slime was only 4 metron away from her now.

3 metron...

2...

And at the one metron mark, this green slime would jump its last.

Icy eyes tracked the green body as it kicked itself off the ground.

It rose higher, higher, and higher... until it reached its apex.

And in this moment...

"Haa!"

\*>-10\*

\*... Damn.\*

What was once a green blob exploded into tiny particles of white light which were absorbed by Abandoned Snow's avatar.

-10! At level 1, this was a perfect strike. Since level 1 players had an attack stat of 10 by default, this was the most damage they could do with a single attack in a non-vital area. It was the upper limit, but there was no lower one. If the strike was imperfect, it would deal less damage. So, the attack stat shown on the status screen was only an idealistic number and not always attainable.



Of course, it could have been luck. And though luck was always a factor, Abandoned Snow's natural talent was extremely evident.

"... ey!"

\*Huh?\*

With a strange noise, Abandoned Snow immediately lost her balance and collapsed on the ground. Jisha rushed over to help her up again.

"You alright? Careful with the skills. You definitely need some practice before you can use them properly."

"Skills" in Synergy, especially with melee classes, moved one's body in a strange manner. Abandoned Snow struck the green slime without a skill but accidentally activated one immediately after.

The Melee+'s only skill was "Target Strike". Once every 5 seconds, the player could use this to strike a designated target (in range) with 100% accuracy. The system would automatically move their body to guarantee this strike. Even normal players could lose their balance if they accidentally activated a skill, much less someone who was learning how to run for the first time.

"Um, oops..." she sheepishly apologized.

"It's not a big deal. Lots of people mess up like this on their first day. Anyway, take a look at the ground. You can pick that up."

Upon dying, the green slime dropped a tiny portion of itself - a slimeball. It was routine in countless games in the past. If you kill a mob, it'll drop some XP and loot. However, doing it with a real body was different.

"Euh, it's sticky!"

Jisha amusedly smiled at Abandoned Snow's animated reaction.

Unless you had a loot-collecting item, even picking up drops had to be done with your hands. From the life of the one you took to its remnants in its afterlife, you had to experience all of it firsthand.

"Haha, put it in your inventory quick!"

"Aaaahh! Inventory! Inventory!"

The slimeball finally disappeared from Abandoned Snow's hands. She frantically shook her hands around in an effort to get rid of the slime. After a few seconds, they seemed to return to normal.

"Whew..."

"Let's keep going."

Abandoned Snow clearly didn't want to get any more slime on her hands, but she had no choice but to continue.

Before long, the two came across another mob.

\*>Name: Small Lesser Mayfly\*

\*>Level: 1\*

"Eeek!"

This one, unfortunately, was less visually pleasing. Though the bug's proportions were cartoonish and non-threatening, it was still a bug. No matter how "cute" it was, Abandoned Snow would be far more scared of a bug than a round ball!

The worst part was, it was flying!

Abandoned Snow got chills and sought shelter behind her teacher once again.

"I'll get this one," Jisha said.

Even if Abandoned Snow *wanted* to kill this one herself, it would be impossible. As a melee unit, this flying bug was out of her reach.

Using her skill "Target Toss", Jisha casually flicked a pellet at the mayfly.

\*>-10\*

And just like that, the bug was no more.

\*>+1 Copper\*

\*>+1 Small Insect Wing\*

Abandoned Snow sighed in relief.

\*This girl... is too pure.\*

She was scared of a small gelatinous blob. She was scared of a cutely-designed bug. If this continued, she would likely express fear once the next monster showed up as well.

How was she going to handle monsters later in the game?

A bit of hesitation was understandable. In the modern age, not many had experience with killing. It was why the early-game mobs were designed the way they were. Synergy was a game and was meant to be fun. And slaughtering realistic-looking creatures in a vivid world... wasn't.

\*The "fun" is just a trap, though.\*

Once the "fun" segment of the game wore off, Synergy would stop being a game and become a second reality. How would Abandoned Snow fare then?

How would she fare once the world plunged into chaos?

Jisha shook her head to rid herself of these thoughts.

\*It's too early to think about this.\*

She brought her attention back to the present, and the two continued their journey through the woods.

Mob spawns were uncommon in this level range - they only saw one every few minutes. And for better or for worse, they were all either slimes or mayflies. It took Abandoned Snow a bit, but she eventually exhibited somewhat of a resistance towards the mayflies. She could now whack one on her own if need be.

\*Slime, mayfly, slime, mayfly... Wow, we're really unlucky.\*

At this point, even Abandoned Snow was beginning to get bored. But it didn't take much longer for something different to show up.

A speck of red flashed in the distance.

It was too far away for Jisha to properly assess what it was. But, it was something that would break their monotonous grind.

"There's something over there," she said to Abandoned Snow. "Follow me."

Jisha led Abandoned Snow towards the anomaly in the distance. For a bit, nothing was out of the ordinary. But once they got close enough...

\*Players?\*

They'd finally stumbled upon life; they weren't alone out here. It was a party of four.

"Sister?"

And one of them was a female avatar with fiery red hair.

## **7 - Red Like Fire (1)**

"Frei?"

"Emmi!"

Blue like ice, red like fire. The two girls wrapped each other in an embrace. Though their "elements" were opposing, they were perfect together.

The three other party members looked a bit bewildered, but since "Emmi" was the party leader, they decided the two players that had shown up were friendly.

\*I guess they really are sisters... And her name is... Hearth Ember??\*

Jisha stood there, dumbfounded. One of her plans was to connect with high-level players from her past life, and one such player was in front of her now!

In the past, Hearth Ember was one of the first players to reach Tier 7. There were 9 tiers in total, so on paper, she wasn't far from the peak. However, she suffered an untimely death in the real world.

Being on Synergy's forefront meant that countries would covet your skills for war. So, Hearth Ember was contracted by a country called Arsen. She was dragged into their political schemes and was forced to fight an impossible battle. Her fiery passion had always resonated with civilians, so her death was a blow not only to Arsen, but the entire Northeastern region.

Hearth Ember became a case study on how to waste potential in the worst way possible. She was one of the world's most skilled players at the time, yet she was only in her early 20s. If given several more years, how far could she have gotten?

"Uh, Fae Sol? Fae Sol to ground control?"

Jisha realized this martyr-like figure was currently speaking with her!

"Ah, yes?"

"I can't thank you enough for taking care of Frei... I wish I had a way to thank you."

"Don't worry about it. Why don't I add you as a friend? That'll be enough for now."

"Really? I'll find something for you later, otherwise it won't feel right."

"If you're going to offer a free gift, I won't hesitate to accept. But I'm serious when I say adding you as a friend is enough for me."

\*>System message: Player "Hearth Ember" accepted your friend request.\*

"... Alright. I promise to make it up to you in the future, though."

\*Adamant until the end about this, huh?\*

Everything that Jisha had done thus far was going to be done anyway if she was alone. Her companionship with Abandoned Snow was simply happenstance. Though she complained about it, it honestly made the journey slightly more entertaining. At the end of the day, it wasn't the biggest deal in the world.

\*And, while I'm at it, I'll add Snow as well.\*

\*>System message: Player "Abandoned Snow" accepted your friend request.\*

"Frei, I'm glad you're safe, but why did you make your username "Abandoned Snow"? That is definitely not what you told me it was going to be..."

\*Ah, so that's the cause of the confusion earlier.\*

Obviously, if the username you were trying to find didn't exist, it would be a bit difficult to add that person as a friend.

"Um, I forgot."

"Hmm... Did you *\*really\**?"

Hearth Ember scrutinized her sister's facial expression - Abandoned Snow shifted uncomfortably under her glare.

"Haaah... Well what's done is done. What about the spawn point? How did you get that one mixed up?"

"Um... Uvan ham...let?"

"No, it was Evon Hamlet..." Hearth Ember lightly facepalmed. "Did you at least buy a map?"

"Big Sister Sol got one for me..."

"Ah, that's great!" Hearth Ember shot Jisha a grateful look.

\*In the end, I never got to teach her how to use it... Oh, well.\*

"I'm glad you're here," Hearth Ember said as she gave her sister another quick hug.

"So, Ember," Jisha said, eager to continue forward. "What brings you over this way?"

She was confused as to why a party of four would be headed in this direction. The only surefire way to progress in the game was to move closer to the center of the continent. Jisha had glanced at the developers' map to locate Evon, and if anything, Uval was slightly further away from the center. Yet, this party was here.

"If I remember from the beta correctly, there's a strong monster over here somewhere. It drops something I really want to get my hands on."

\*Oh?\*

"Makes sense. You wouldn't mind an extra player on your hands, would you?"

"If you're willing to help, I'll gladly accept."

It was a mutually beneficial trade - Jisha would get more XP from a "strong" monster than she ordinarily would grinding solo, and Hearth Ember would receive a valuable item she sought.

Hearth Ember sent a party invitation which Jisha unhesitatingly accepted.

\*>System message: You have joined player "Hearth Ember"'s party.\*

\*>Hearth Ember: Great, we can talk like this with party chat now. Fae, did you play the beta?\*

Jisha hadn't actually played the beta. In her first life, she hadn't heard about the game until about a week before its launch. However, was there a more convenient excuse for knowing a slew of Synergy trivia?

\*>Fae Sol: Yeah, I have.\*

Using the party chat was a bit strange if you'd never done it before. There was no keyboard; the "typing" input was simply your mind. It was a silent form of communication, almost like telepathy with subtitles. So, Jisha replied using this feature to demonstrate she didn't need a tutorial.

\*>Abandoned Snow: uuuuUUUuuuuuuuuu\*

\*This girl, on the other hand...\*

"Frei, stop. Only send what you would say out loud."

\*>Abandoned Snow: Uhmhhh okaaaay...\*

The party members couldn't help but giggle when they saw this unfold.

"Ok, everyone, listen up," Hearth Ember said with a lighthearted yet commanding tone. With two loud claps, everyone fell silent and directed their attention towards her. "Just so Fae and Frei are aware, I'll quickly go over this again. We're searching for a creature called a 'magma slime'. It doesn't look like a normal one, but it'll be extremely obvious when you find it.

"We'll be splitting into two groups of three. It's strong, but not so strong that we need 6 players to defeat it. It's classified as a rare monster, so it's not quite boss-level, and it's got around 300 HP. Naturally, I'm taking Frei with me. Icurus, you come with me as well - we still have things to discuss."

"Roger that."

"Vadium, Euphrates and Fae Sol will make up the second group. Any objections?"

"Nope."

"No, ma'am."

"This should be obvious, but let me remind you three just in case - let me know when you kill it! You three can take the XP if you manage it on your own, though. Fae, think of this as a thank you gift."

"Huh. You sure?" Jisha was a bit surprised to receive a "gift" so soon.

"Of course. I just need one of the items it drops. Anyway, good luck and happy hunting!"

---

"..."

"..."

"..."

After several minutes of walking with her two new partners, Jisha yearned for Abandoned Snow's presence. Of course, her occasional blunder still came up once in a while in the party chat, but it wasn't the same as traveling alongside her.

Neither Vadium nor Euphrates had spoken a word thus far.

\*Are they just DM'ing each other?\*

And Jisha, who was unable to make small talk with strangers, was silent as well. The only thing they could do was wipe out monsters together.

\*>+1 Slimeball\*

\*>+1 Copper\*

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Level: 1 -> 2 (+1)\*

\*>Class: Ranged+\*

...

\*>+1 Clay\*



\*>+2 Copper\*

\*>+1 Twine\*

\*>+1 Copper\*

...

"Hey, can you stop?"

Euphrates, the other ranged unit in the group, suddenly broke the silence. And since he had been silent this entire time, it wasn't a mystery who he was addressing.

"Hmm? Stop what?"

\*We've only been monotonously grinding this whole time. What did I even do?\*

"Stop taking so many kills."

\*Ah.\*

Naturally, Jisha was landing more shots than the other two in her group. Did they consider her to be a kill-stealer?

"I'm only hitting ones you guys aren't targeting. Don't worry about me."

"That's not it. You're clearly hogging all the XP. Leave some for us."

\*Interesting.\*

In many games, kill-stealing was a tactic that was frowned upon. If you spent all your effort whittling down a boss only to have the last hit stolen by someone else, it was like doing all of the work on a group project while most of the credit went to the lazybones who contributed nothing. Especially in games where only the last hit counted, it was quite literally stealing. Theft. Robbery. There was no sugarcoating it.

As Jisha wanted to maintain a friendly relationship with Hearth Ember, she obviously wouldn't kill-steal from her party members. But now, Euphrates was accusing her of this crime.

"You think I'm stealing your kills?" she asked.

"Of course," Vadium, who hadn't spoken until now, responded. "Did you think we would sit quietly and let it happen?"

Naturally, Jisha understood why these two were upset. However, she really wasn't kill-stealing... by the most well-known definition of the word. If Vadium or Euphrates engaged a mob in combat, she would not target it.

She was simply one-shotting the weak ones that Euphrates, the other ranged unit, couldn't even reach. Since one of her ongoing goals was to level up as quickly as possible, she would probably kill a mob if she saw one.

\*Hmm...\*

The only reason Jisha was even considering entertaining their request was because she didn't know how tight-knit Hearth Ember's party was. If she and these two were close friends, Jisha wouldn't want to risk offending them for a couple of low-level mobs.

So, she conceded for now... but not without shooting Heart Ember a direct message.

\*>Fae Sol: Are you close friends with Vadium and Euphrates?\*

\*>Hearth Ember: No, I just met them at my starter place. I didn't actually want to send you with them, but seeing Frei safe made me forget everything... Be careful of them, they might try something.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Oh? Hmm...\*

So not only were these two not close with Hearth Ember, their reputation was even in the negatives. If that was the case...

\*I've got an idea.\*

\*>Fae Sol: How many minutes passed between you spawning in and you meeting them?\*

\*>Hearth Ember: Uhm... Like one or two? They showed up pretty quick.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Have they visited the frontier shops? If so, what did they buy?\*

\*>Hearth Ember: Uh...\*

Hearth Ember was likely confused as to why Jisha was asking these odd questions, but since there was no downside to answering them, she answered them dutifully.

\*>Hearth Ember: I told them to buy a map, so Vadium ended up purchasing the "small" one. I think Euphrates bought ammo.\*

After a couple more questions, Jisha was satisfied with Hearth Ember's answers. Her plan was certain to work.

\*>Fae Sol: By the way. Do you care what happens to them?\*

...

\*If even the warm-hearted Ember hesitates to answer this question, something's definitely up.\*

\*>Hearth Ember: Don't scare them off. You'll need them to kill the magma slime.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Unlikely.\*

\*>Hearth Ember: What? Didn't you hear my briefing? There's no way you can take it out by yourself.\*

\*>Fae Sol: You said it has around 300 HP, right? If that's the case, it's as good as dead.\*

\*>Inventory\*

\*>Ranged+ Pellet: 39\*

...

Each of these pellets would do around 10 damage. With Jisha's skill, it wasn't likely for her to fire an "imperfect" shot in the game's infancy. So, with 39 ammo, she could deal up to 390 damage. On top of this, Vadium and Euphrates were also required to deal damage in this fight.

300 HP was well within tolerance; Jisha wouldn't run out of ammo.

\*>Hearth Ember: ... If you're that confident, do whatever you want.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Alright :)\*

\*>Hearth Ember: I won't play favorites, though. I do appreciate you looking after Frei, and I know I said those guys were sketchy. But I don't know where your confidence is coming from. I'd really like the three of you to work together. You can still raid it with two, but with three, the kill will be guaranteed.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Roger.\*

A smirk unwittingly crept onto Jisha's face. The final confirmation message she'd sent was simply to appease Hearth Ember. It was obvious that neither of the girls were a fan of those two, so why couldn't she mess with them a little?

After all, monsters weren't the only source of XP.

## 8 - Red Like Fire (2)

\*>Vadium: Damn, she split from us. But it's fortunate that we're still together.\*

\*>Euphrates: Right? She was pretty terrifying as a party leader.\*

\*>Vadium: ... I guess we got lucky that those two showed up.\*

\*>Euphrates: Yeah. But why did she split off? She was definitely suspicious of us.\*

\*>Vadium: I dunno, man. Maybe you're overthinking it? She didn't seem that scary to me.\*

Hearth Ember's intuition was right - Euphrates and his friend Vadium indeed had malicious intentions. The two were planning to sabotage the hunt, but with Hearth Ember's wariness, they weren't sure if they'd be able to pull it off.

However, when Abandoned Snow and Fae Sol showed up, Hearth Ember's wariness vanished. Perhaps she'd messed up and accidentally sent them alone?

And from how Abandoned Snow and Hearth Ember spoke to each other, Euphrates deduced Fae Sol wasn't a close friend of theirs like Icurus was. So, being alone with her was the best-case scenario.

If Hearth Ember's group found the magma slime first, there was nothing they could do about it. However, if *they* found it first...

\*>Euphrates: We're taking all of it for ourselves, right?\*

In other words, they would kill Fae Sol. A two-way XP split would naturally be worth more than a three-way split.

\*>Vadium: Yeah, but can you even deal with her?\*

Vadium wasn't blind - he'd been monitoring Fae Sol's behavior. Though she didn't kill *every* mob she saw, her accuracy thus far was 100%. Was she leaving some alive on purpose, or did she only take shots she was 100% confident to hit?

Euphrates knew he was outclassed when he saw this accuracy.

But what about the skill that was guaranteed to hit: "Target Toss"? Even if you used it, it still took time for the pellet, a projectile, to fly through the air. If you couldn't lead your shots properly, you wouldn't even be able to hit a straight-moving target. Fae Sol demonstrated she was familiar with not only the pellet's projectile speed, but the effect of gravity on it as well.

The throw of pellets was aided by the system - you didn't have to use much force to send it flying. Euphrates even witnessed Fae Sol flick the pellets in a strange manner; she was getting an absurd amount of speed on her shots with minimal movement.

As someone who didn't play in the beta, he wasn't familiar with Synergy's mechanics yet. Fae Sol... was. It didn't take a genius to figure out that he couldn't win. Was Vadium just taunting him?

\*>Euphrates: Obviously not alone. But there shouldn't be a problem 2-on-1.\*

\*>Vadium: Ha, didn't think our school's "darts god" would admit defeat so easily.\*

Euphrates wanted to roll his eyes in annoyance, but he stopped himself.

\*>Euphrates: She's a beta player, remember? Obviously she's more familiar with this game than I am. But it won't take me long to get used to this.\*

All he needed was a little practice. However, to practice, he needed practice targets. And right now...

\*Whzzz...\*

Two pellets whizzed by Euphrates' ear and clocked a dragonfly square in its abdomen.

\*-10\*

\*-10\*

When the second pellet connected, the bug dissipated into a bundle of XP.

How was he supposed to find practice targets with this inconvenience?

As noted earlier, she wasn't killing *every* mob, but Euphrates wanted to show off his skills as his school's "darts god" as quickly as possible. And to do that, he needed all the practice he could get!

"Hey, can you stop?" he asked.

"Hmm? Stop what?"

"Stop taking all the kills."

"I'm only taking the ones you're not targeting. Don't worry about me."

What? Didn't she know what she was doing here? Apparently, he had to spell it out for her.

"You're clearly hogging all the XP."

"You think I'm stealing your kills?"

\*>Euphrates: Back me up here, Vlad.\*

\*>Vadium: ... Fine...\*

"Obviously. Did you just think we'd sit quietly and let this happen?"

With that, Fae Sol sank back into silence.

\*>Euphrates: Wow, you're a menace.\*

\*>Vadium: I didn't expect it to work, either.\*

Several more mobs cropped up, but Fae Sol didn't take any action. It was peaceful, and it was Euphrates' time to shine!

\*>Name: Living Grass\*

\*>Level: 3\*

A thin wall of grass about 1 metron high threatened to lash out. With the target in his sights, Euphrates launched his weapon!

\*>Vadium: Hahahaha man you seriously missed that big of a target?\*

The pellet flew wide right hitting nothing but air.

Though he was annoyed at his friend's taunts, Euphrates focused up and launched another one forward. This time, he wasn't going to miss!

\*\_7\*

\*>Euphrates: How much HP does it have left?\*

\*>Vadium: Good question...\*

If you appraised a mob, it would only show you its name and level by default. The two didn't realize it, but a basic appraisal item was required to view other stats like HP and MP.

The only thing Euphrates could do was launch another pellet and hope for the best.

\*-9\*

Even with this second shot, the mob didn't die. Euphrates was about to launch a third shot, but they were now in melee range. Vadium stepped up and swung his sword...! Well, it was an extremely dull "sword", but that's how he treated it.

\*-10\*

Finally, the living grass withered away.

\*>Vadium: Man, you suck.\*

\*>Euphrates: This is harder than it looks, okay? All you have to do is walk up and whack it. Meanwhile, I'm required to calculate vectors to even be remotely useful.\*

\*>Vadium: Man, why you gotta bring up math when we're playing a game? What a buzzkill.\*

While the two bantered, another mob entered their sights.

\*>Name: Young Clay Doll\*

\*>Level: 2\*

It was 1 metron tall and shaped like a bell. A bit of a smaller target, but Euphrates wasn't going to miss this time! He used his ability "Target Toss" and struck the immobile clay... thing. If he missed an immobile target with an ability that guaranteed to hit, he wouldn't be qualified to be called his school's "darts god"!

\*-10\*

Now that this skill was on cooldown for 5 seconds, he manually fired his next shot.

\*-10\*

Another direct hit! Yet, the monster was still alive.

\*>Vadium: Dude, you suck.\*

\*>Euphrates: ...\*

\*>Vadium: But don't worry, man. Young Vlad's here to save the day.\*

Vadium stepped up to swing his sword again, but before his weapon reached its target...

\*-10\*

The clay doll exploded into white light right in front of their eyes...

"Are you kidding me?"

Vadium was furious, and Euphrates instantly knew who the culprit was. After all, the source of the final tick of damage was a pellet that whizzed from behind him again.

"What are you doing?" Euphrates asked as he looked at Fae Sol. Though they had accused her of kill stealing earlier, it was only to make her stop shooting. Now, however, it was a genuine offense.

"Hmm... what do you mean?" Fae Sol nonchalantly toyed with a pellet in her hands looking completely clueless.

Euphrates grew upset at this farce. "What do you mean 'what do you mean'? You really stole our kill this time."

"Oh? I 'really' did? So that means you falsely accused me last time, right?"

"??"

What did last time have to do with this? Now, she was just straight up admitting it!

"If you steal kills, you probably won't get to join many parties in the future."

"Thanks for the advice. I'll keep it in mind," she said as she launched another pellet.

\*-10\*

While Euphrates was berating her, Vadium had been fighting another mob. Yet, this pellet struck before he could finish it off. In other words... another blatant kill-steal.

What the heck? She'd been so obedient until now. Neither of the two friends could understand Fae Sol's change in attitude. If possible, they wanted to rid themselves of this annoyance.

\*>Euphrates: Fae Sol's kill-stealing from us. Can we kick her out?\*

This message was sent in the party chat, so all 6 party members saw it.



\*>Abandoned Snow: Wwwwwwwwwwwww\*  
www

\*>Hearth Ember: That's regrettable, but you three probably need to work together to take out the magma slime. It'll be difficult for only two of you. If you want, we can try to join back up. Where are you?\*

Joining back up was the worst-case scenario. Not only would their XP be split 6 ways, they wouldn't be able to get their hands on the magma slime's loot.

\*>Vadium: Don't worry about it, we've got it under control.\*

\*>Hearth Ember: Hm... Alright.\*

This was troublesome. If what Hearth Ember said was true, they couldn't kill Fae Sol. After all, how were they going to collect the loot if they died first? On the other hand, they weren't receiving much XP due to her persistent kill steals.

\*>Vadium: You think we should get rid of her right now?\*

\*>Euphrates: ... No, just bear it. If Ember's right, we'll genuinely need three people for the raid. The magma slime's probably worth more than the useless mobs she's stealing from us anyway.\*

The silver lining here was that Fae Sol wasn't stealing *every* kill, so they were still getting something out of this.

\*>Euphrates: But we will get rid of her eventually. I think we can do it like this...\*

## 9 - Red Like Fire (3)

\*>Inventory:\*

\*>Ranged+ Pellet: 28\*

As much as she wanted to, Jisha wasn't allowed to kill every mob she saw. She needed to preserve some ammo for the magma slime.

In her first life, Jisha recalled beta players complaining about how some of the same mobs in the full release were stronger for no reason. There was a good chance that this slime would actually have more than 300 HP. So, even though Vadium and Euphrates would also be dealing damage, she needed to preserve a good amount of ammo.

The worst-case scenario was that the slime was somehow way stronger and she would run out of ammo anyway.

\*If that happens... I'll just have to figure something out.\*

The good news was, kill-stealing from Vadium and Euphrates actually allowed her to save ammo. They would whittle the mobs down, and she would only need one shot to take them out. On top of this, she only targeted the ones that looked the most valuable.

\*Quite a bountiful clearance sale here.\*

XP was being sold for a third of its original price? Count her in!

\*27... 26... Let's stop at 25.\*

With 25 ammo left, she'd be able to deal up to 250 damage. With this number, Jisha was likely to remain safe.

When she stopped firing, the two in front of her were a bit confused. However, they weren't complaining. After all, they were free to grind without being stolen from!

After several more minutes of searching, they came across a clearing in the forest. This landscape was slightly different than the one they'd been walking through, so the trio was naturally curious.

This clearing was similar in appearance to the plains they'd seen in the very beginning of the game; lush green grass grew with several wildflowers sprinkled in the midst. However, there was one key difference Jisha immediately noticed.

Towards their right, smooth stone coated the ground.

\*Extrusive igneous rock?\*

Igneous rock was a type of rock that formed from "frozen" magma/lava. When magma or lava cooled near or above the surface, it was further reduced into a subtype known as "extrusive". Since the rock coated the ground and was glassy and "bubbly", it was likely a product of frozen lava.

Were they close to their target?

Jisha walked towards the stone-coated ground, and once she was 15 metron away, the answer revealed itself.

Slowly, the smooth stone began to crack. Like glass that was about to break, the crack crawled across the surface. A hint of red and orange shone through, and a small wave of heat washed over the three players.

Red-orange material oozed, and the cracks shattered to reveal what they'd been after this whole time. The mass of red-orange crawled out of its rocky pit.

\*>Name: Magma Slime\*

\*>Level: 5\*

Though it was called "slime", it wasn't neatly spherical and monochromatic like the green ones Jisha had encountered with Abandoned Snow. It was more like an amorphous solid that stretched and contracted however it pleased.

Its colors were spotty as well. Though most of its body was a red-orange like standard lava, bits and pieces of it were covered in gray rock.

And though it was only level 5, it was clear this mob was on a different level from everything else so far.

If they were an ordinary party, some communication was in order here. However, the two friends had remained silent this entire time.

\*They're honestly terrible at this. Even Abandoned Snow would have found something suspicious by now.\*

Jisha didn't know what they were going to do, but it was obvious they were about to do something\*.

Footsteps rustled in the grass behind her. She turned around to find Vadium attempting to sneak up on her.

\*... Real smooth, guys.\*

They were clearly found out, but Vadium attempted to nonchalantly waltz forward as if nothing happened.

"So... You got a plan?" he awkwardly asked as he... totally wasn't going to try anything strange.

Jisha was dumbfounded - this guy was even terrible at acting!

This entire time, the magma slime had been crawling towards them. It wasn't going to wait for a couple of players to finish a conversation.

She was looking away from it, but her ears still worked. At the low levels, monsters wouldn't silently attack. The magma slime emitted a \*WHOOSH\* that sounded like a gas fire starting. A small fireball shot directly towards them!

Jisha stepped to the side as the fireball passed her. And behind her...

"Whoa!" Euphrates exclaimed in surprise, and the lava sizzled as it brushed his arm.

\*-17\*

At the lower levels, stat increases per level were extremely small. So even though Euphrates and Vadium were level 3, their HP pool was only slightly higher than that of a level 1. In other words, the extremely indirect hit Euphrates suffered indicated that a singular direct hit would prove fatal.

"Yeah, here's the plan," Jisha said as she patted Vadium's shoulder. "Hold the front line as a melee, alright?"

---

\*>Euphrates: You idiot!\*

Euphrates' "plan" was immediately ruined. They were going to kill Fae Sol by pushing her into one of the monster's attacks. Ideally, he wanted to do it when her HP was already reduced. But when he felt the heat radiating from the magma slime, he concluded that simply touching it would deal massive damage. So, all Vadium had to do was walk up to her and push her. It was simple, yet he'd already screwed up.

"Wha-"

Vadium wanted to object, but what was he going to do now? Fae Sol had already retreated to the back line and was likely wary that they were up to something. They were going to have to find another way to get rid of her.

Meanwhile, the slime extended a part of itself, almost like it was generating an arm. And with this "arm", it swung itself towards its nearest target!

"Ugh..."

\*-2\*

Vadium dodged, but barely. Even though he didn't get hit, the heat from being so close to lava scraped a bit of HP off him.

\*>Vadium: You gonna help me or what?\*

Euphrates clicked his tongue in annoyance. Though they wanted to get rid of the XP leech, the magma slime was their priority. What sort of item would it drop? How much XP would it give? There was only one way to find out.

Hearth Ember was correct; the two of them might have a bit of trouble taking this thing out. Regrettably, Fae Sol's help was required. As much as it pained him, Euphrates forced himself to speak up.

"Alright, Fae, let's take this thing down.....?"

She was gone.

Last time he saw her, she was right next to him. She'd disappeared in the brief moment he was focused on the slime's movements. Did she chicken out?

"Hey, keep your eyes on the target," a girl's voice called from above him.

Euphrates was bewildered to hear something from this direction. He turned around and looked up to find Fae Sol... sitting in a tree? How did she even get up there?

"... What are you doing? Let's take this thing out."

Euphrates was truly baffled as to why she would do this. Two players vs the magma slime was already a risky endeavor, yet Fae Sol wanted to kick back and relax?

"And what are \*you\* doing? Turn around!"

Euphrates had a gut feeling something was wrong, and he turned around to find a fireball right in his face! He tried to dodge, but it was too late.

\*-88\*

"Agh...!"

Pain in Synergy was drastically reduced, but extreme heat was one of the most painful things one could experience. Even though the attack didn't hurt, it was still extremely uncomfortable.

It was a miracle he hadn't died - his HP was in the single digits. Fortunately, they'd come prepared. Euphrates snagged a health potion from his inventory and chugged it as quickly as possible.

Slowly but surely, his HP regenerated to about a third.

Euphrates glared at Fae Sol, and she gave a small smile in return.

Frustration clouded his mind. He wanted to kill her this instant! However, he had to focus on the task at hand.

\*>Hearth Ember: You guys found it?\*

As a party, every member had access to everyone else's level and HP. Hearth Ember clearly saw the fluctuations in HP and accurately assumed that they'd located their target.

\*>Fae Sol: Yeah, we did. We'll take it out, easy.\*

What? Easy?? She was leaving them out to dry yet had the gall to say she had it easy?

Euphrates was speechless. All he could do was focus on dodging the fireballs that were coming at him. With this thing's damage, one more hit, and he was toast.

Focus! Focus! He couldn't let frustration throw him off the rails.

Vadium, on the other hand, was doing alright. He still hadn't been directly hit, but his HP was slowly whittling away. He'd seen how much damage a single attack did, so he was pushing himself to the limit just to dodge. The slime would not only swipe at him, but occasionally try to body slam him as well. The first time it used this move, Vadium was caught extremely off guard. It was a miracle he managed to dodge it.

Since he'd been fighting this entire time, Vadium got a handle on the slime's attack patterns. He was confident enough to hold his own for a while.

And since the fireball looked to be its only ranged attack, Euphrates quickly learned what he needed to do as well.

\*-10\*

\*-2\*

\*-7\*

\*-7\*

...

Little by little, they shaved away at the monster's HP. They got into a rhythm - since they were comfortable with its movements, the road ahead of them was smooth.

But... How long was this road?

\*-5\*

\*-9\*

\*-8\*

...

Neither of them knew how much HP they'd shaved off, nor did they know how much HP the boss had remaining. No matter how smooth of a road they walked, without an end in sight, they were bound to falter.

Vadium was the first to taste fatigue.

"Ah!"

His mind wandered for a brief moment: the wrong moment.

\*-33\*

The slime's swipe clipped his torso. He managed to avoid a direct hit, but even this was deadly since his HP was already being whittled down from the heat. Now, both of their HPs were under a third.

The hit was akin to a slap on his face - Vadium was wide awake. But how long would it be before the monotony lulled him again?

Euphrates was also experiencing this combination of boredom and fatigue. He didn't know how much longer they had, and something was definitely wrong.

\*>Vadium: Wasn't this thing only supposed to have around 300 HP?\*

They had hit this thing over 30 times, right? Probably? Neither of them kept track. All of their recent actions coalesced into a single unmemorable blur. How much time had passed? It was only a little bit, right? Or was it longer?

\*>Euphrates: Damn, we can't keep this up for much longer.\*

"Fae Sol, dammit! Help us!"

They didn't have the luxury to kill her anymore. It still pained him to ask for help from someone they were planning on getting rid of, but they were out of options.

But... he didn't receive a response.

What the hell was she doing? He couldn't look back as the monster glowed brighter and began launching attacks at an increased rate.

\*>Vadium: What? Why does this thing have a second phase???

Something was clearly wrong with the information they received. It was only supposed to have around 200 HP. It was supposed to be a 'rare monster', not a true 'boss'. Yet, this monster had a second phase. Had they been tricked?

\*>Euphrates: Hearth Ember, you scammed us!\*

Euphrates vented his frustrations in the party chat.

\*>Hearth Ember: What do you mean?\*

\*>Vadium: We've definitely dealt over 200 damage at this point, but we've only entered its second phase.\*

\*>Hearth Ember: Second phase?? What?\*

\*>Euphrates: Ahhhh don't 'what' me!! We're really gonna die out here!\*

\*>Hearth Ember: I'm serious... in the beta, it only had 200 HP as a rare monster.\*

\*>Fae Sol: And you assumed it was going to be the same as the beta?\*

...

Euphrates was about to reach his breaking point. Not only was Fae Sol not helping them, but she was taunting them as she watched...

But this was a good thing. If the two managed to take the slime out without Fae Sol, she wouldn't receive any of the monster's XP; they'd achieve their goal of a two-way XP split without needing to kill her. He hoped the end was near. He just needed a sign, no matter how small! Please!

But... his hopes were immediately dashed.

"Ah?"

He ran out of ammo.

How? He was sure he'd purchased extra! But maybe Vadium could hold out until the end...?

A snapping sound rattled Vadium's hands. His weapon was destroyed.

Euphrates ran out of ammo. Vadium ran out of durability. And the slime was still alive and well.



Without their weapons, how could they fight?

\*>Euphrates: ... Retreat.\*

\*>Vadium: Thanks, genius.\*

Vadium didn't need to be told what to do. He turned tail and ran. But before he could get very far...

\*-72\*

The slime emitted a flamethrower-like attack. It wasn't close-range like the swipes and body slams, and it wasn't long-range like a fireball. It caught him off guard - it was the first time they were seeing this mid-range attack... and it would likely be the last.

The red flames consumed Vadius as he, just like the many monsters they'd confronted thus far, dissipated into a pool of white light.

"Dammit...!"

Euphrates booked it as well. There was nothing to accomplish here anymore. The best case scenario now was escaping without getting hit again!

He ran to take cover behind the nearest tree. But before he reached it, the slime emitted the telltale sound of a fireball being launched. This was expected - the fireball was its long-ranged attack. He turned around to dodge it, but it was launched much faster than the ones beforehand!

He was reliving his previous mistake, but he wasn't going to die like this!

He used all of his focus - mind and body - to push himself out of the way. And...

\*-22\*

Yes! He did it! He was alive! Once again, his HP was in the single digits. Yet, he was alive. Now, all he had to do was make it back to the Evon Hamlet to recover.

He was home free. If he saw Hearth Ember again, he and Vlad were going to give her a piece of their-

\*-10\*

Huh?

His vision turned grayscale. What did he get hit by? He looked around to locate the culprit.

If you died in Synergy, you had to wait out a death timer before you could respawn. During this time, you could only remain in the spot you died as a spirit. You could not interact with the world, but you could still observe it.

In the low levels, the death timer was so short that it was practically irrelevant. In fact, Euphrates was already free to respawn. But he wanted to know what killed him!

He turned around. And when he saw it, he felt dumb. It should have been obvious. Why did he have to see it to believe it?

Fae Sol was hanging from a tree branch upside down. Her whimsical green eyes pierced his soul.

They were planning on eliminating her and taking the rewards for themselves, but the tables had turned. She mockingly smiled as if to say, "What the hell were you guys thinking?" She jumped to the ground, and with a smooth parkour roll, she mitigated all fall damage.

She didn't look back.

Euphrates sighed. Did they bring this upon themselves, or could they have come up with a better plan? He wasn't sure, but what was done was done. The only thing he could hope for now was that Fae Sol would die and they would stumble across the slime again.

Regretfully, Euphrates chose to respawn back at Evon.

## **10 - Red Like Fire (4 - Final)**

Jisha was grateful for Vadium and Euphrates' contribution to the boss fight. As she watched them, she counted the amount of damage they dealt. It totaled to 477, yet the magma slime still stood strong. If she tried to take care of it herself, she would have run out of ammunition in a heartbeat.

\*Yup... As I expected.\*

The series of questions Jisha had asked Hearth Ember was to confirm how much durability and ammo Vadium and Euphrates had respectively. The answers revealed that they would likely have enough to kill the slime if it had the expected amount of HP. However, neither they nor Hearth Ember considered the fact that the release version could differ from the beta.

Jisha didn't even have to do anything to "mess" with them. All she had to do was watch. It was incredibly satisfying to watch them stumble into their own demise.

Why interrupt an enemy when they were making a mistake?

The party chat, especially Hearth Ember, was exploding now that two of the three players of the strike force were downed. Jisha just ignored it.

From watching the fight, she had a good idea of all of the slime's attack patterns. This naturally included the fireball's range.

\*Hmmm... Here should be good.\*

Jisha stood just over 30 metron away from the slime. From here, she unleashed a barrage of pellets.

\*-10\*

\*-10\*

\*-9\*

\*-10\*

...

It didn't take long for her to exhaust her 25 ammo. Yet, the slime was still alive.

\*726 damage...\*

The only thing that changed was that it seemed even angrier than before.

\*... Third phase?\*

Now, it was firing laser beams and fireballs in random directions.

Jisha frowned. What the heck? This truly was the worst-case scenario, the one in which she ran out of ammo.

\*Why is it THIS different from the beta? What a pain.\*

Fortunately, she still had another weapon in her inventory.

\*>Inventory:\*

\*>Melee Starter Stick: 1\*

It was time to display the utility of the starter weapon!

Starter weapons had unique properties that were not replicated by any other items in the game. First, they only dealt between 1 and 5 HP of damage no matter what. You could use it as a level 0, or you could use it as a Tier 9, and the result would be the same.

Secondly... they were practically indestructible. She could whack the slime as many times as she liked without worrying about damaging the weapon.

The only thing that bugged Jisha was...

\*It's melee... bleh.\*

It wasn't only that she disliked melee weapons - there were a couple problems.

\*-2\*

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

\*-2\*

...

If a weapon didn't match your class, the best-case scenario was that your damage would be halved.

\*This isn't going to get me anywhere.\*

After whacking it some more, Jisha had only raised the damage total from 726 to 751. Not only was hitting this blob for 1 damage per shot an extreme waste of time, but the heat aura whittled her HP.

\*Let's try something else.\*

She wasn't sure if this was going to work, but it was worth a shot.

At melee range, the slime had stopped launching fireballs. Her plan relied on this long-range attack, so she backed up until she was at the appropriate range.

\*WHOOSH\*

At the 10 metron mark, the slime finally fired one.

\*Alright, batter up... I guess?\*

Jisha held the Melee Starter Stick like a baseball bat, and her eyes tracked the fireball approaching her. After confirming that its trajectory was steady, she waited for it to arrive.

\*And... now!\*

A swing, and... a hit!

Jisha cleanly reflected the fireball, and it collided back into the magma slime.

\*-57\*

The "fireball" wasn't made of 100% gaseous fire; the center was actually solid. Whether it was lava or solid rock was difficult to determine, but the point was it could be struck with a solid object!

\*Nice. Honestly, I would have been a bit creeped out if a lava monster wasn't shooting lava...\*

With this strategy, this hunt became many times more efficient.

\*Not dying to the aura damage is a nice bonus, too.\*

\*-39\*

\*-53\*

\*-60\*

\*-44\*

...

Before long, the magma slime finally bit the dust.

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Level: 2 -> 5 (+3)\*

...

A multi-level-up was unheard of in Synergy's late game, so this notification made Jisha's heart flutter with excitement.

Three whole levels!

The boss that was meant to be killed by multiple players had been soloed... kind of. And, it was of a higher level. On top of this, leveling up in the early game was extremely easy. It would have been more of a surprise if she *\*didn't\** gain multiple levels.

And, as a bonus, players would undergo a "full heal" upon leveling up. HP and MP would be restored, and all status effects, negative or positive, would be removed. So the HP loss Jisha suffered from the slime's heat aura was instantly healed.

*\*Alright, what's Ember after?\**

*\*>+2 Shard of Heat\**

*\*>+5 Bronzium\**

*\*Oh?\**

The cash was nice - 5 Bronzium was roughly equivalent to 500 Copper. But what truly caught her eye were the shards that dropped.

Shards were solid items. They were prevalent throughout the entire game, so they would never become useless. They could be fused to create more powerful shards, and they were often used to upgrade equipment. A shard this early in the game was undoubtedly valuable.

*\*Now, what did those guys drop?\**

The slime wasn't the only thing that'd died around here recently. A player that died in the wild would drop at least one item, one level's worth of XP, and half the coins in their Coin Pouch. First, Jisha walked up to Vadium's would-be corpse. A pool of XP was sitting in the place he'd died - unlike monsters, whose XP would be collected automatically upon death, XP from players had to be manually collected. And on top of that...

*\*>+1 Melee Starter Stick\**

*\*>+22 Copper\**

Jisha nodded in satisfaction. Another Starter item wasn't anything to complain about, and cash would always be useful. Unfortunately, since she was level 5, the XP Vadium dropped at level 3

wasn't enough to push her to the next level. But there was someone else who'd dropped their loot as well.

\*>+1 Healthy Twine Juice\*

\*>+16 Copper\*

The "Healthy Twine Juice" was a rudimentary health potion. It was better than nothing, but couldn't she have gotten something more valuable? Euphrates' XP didn't push her to the next level, either. Her XP bar remained at 97% of the way through level 5.

\*Well, I guess I can't get too lucky.\*

Meanwhile, the party chat was still in shambles. Jisha captured a snapshot of her inventory and sent the image directly to Hearth Ember. It wasn't worth the effort to engage in further drama.

\*>Fae Sol: Where should we meet up?\*

Items couldn't just be mailed through the ether, so the two would have to physically meet in the game. The location wouldn't matter as long as both parties showed up.

\*>Hearth Ember: ... You really killed it?\*

\*>Fae Sol: No, I just found these shards in a tree.\*

\*>Hearth Ember: ...\*

\*>Hearth Ember: Also, it was only supposed to drop one. How did you get two?\*

\*>Fae Sol: Where are we meeting?\*

\*>Hearth Ember: ..... Let's just go with Evon Hamlet. It's probably the nearest settlement, anyway.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Sounds good. See you there.\*

Jisha glanced at the developers' map, located Evon Hamlet, and took off running. And since stamina didn't exist yet, Jisha sprinted full speed the entire way without even raising her heart rate. At level 10, this would no longer work, so she wanted to abuse this mechanic as much as possible.

\*Ah, I wish this could last forever.\*

Sprinting with zero effort was a unique experience. If there was one word to describe it, it was "exhilarating". You were pushing your body to the limit, but your muscles never protested in agony. While running, you were as free as the wind! However, all good times came to an end.

In well under 5 minutes, she stumbled upon a settlement.

\*>System message: Welcome to Evon Hamlet.\*

Now, she had some time to kill.

\*Hmm... This is probably the perfect chance to evolve my class again.\*

She was now level 5 which meant she could tackle another class evolution quest. By the time she was done, Hearth Ember would likely arrive at Evon.

This time, there were multiple options to choose from.

\*>Ranged+ -> Pitcher\*

\*>Ranged+ -> Slingshot\*

\*>Ranged+ -> Neophyte Mage\*

The first one, "Pitcher", was the most similar to her current class. It would allow the user to rapidly fire pellets with a "Finger Gun Glove". Out of the three, it had the highest rate of fire but the lowest damage per shot.

The second one, "Slingshot", gifted the user a slingshot (unsurprisingly) upon completing the quest successfully. Its rate of fire was low, but its damage per shot was high. Out of the three, it was the most difficult to use. Aiming your attacks with a "Finger Gun" or cast indicators in the Mage's case was far easier than aiming a slingshot with zero aid from the system. But, if properly used, it had the highest range of the three as well.

The final one, "Neophyte Mage", dealt the highest burst damage, but that damage came from spells with a relatively high cooldown. It also had a basic attack that didn't consume mana, but it hardly did any damage. It was longer-ranged than Pitcher but shorter-ranged than Slingshot.



It wasn't a tough decision. For the meantime, she would take the same path as she had in her first life.

\*>System message: Ranged+ -> Slingshot class evolution prerequisites:\*

\*>Level 5: ✓\*

\*>100 Copper: ✓\*

\*>All prerequisites for class evolution Ranged+ -> Slingshot fulfilled. Proceed?\*

\*>Yes/No\*

Later class evolutions would cost more resources. The first one had been free, but this one costed 100 Copper. Because of this, it was difficult to spam repeated trials every time you failed. Jisha had received an equivalent of 500 Copper for killing the magma slime, so she naturally met this requirement. There was only one option now.

\*Yes, continue!\*

## **11 - Second Class Evolution**

\*>System message: Commencing class evolution.\*

The buildings and players around her slowly faded away to reveal a different landscape.

The blue sky was crystal clear, and the lush green grass spread out in all directions with no obstructions as far as the eye could see. There was no wind and the temperature and humidity were ideal for humans.

This was the first "real" class evolution quest. Although the surroundings weren't too different from before, this was indeed a separate "dimension" - a separate space for the sole purpose of completing the quest. The first one, which Jisha had done with Abandoned Snow, couldn't be labeled as more than a sneak peek for class evolution quests. All class evolution quests in the future would be more similar to this one.

\*>Evolution requirements: Using Ranged+ Pellets, strike the target at least 5/10 times.\*

\*>Dispensing quest items:\*

\*>Ranged+ Pellet: 10\*

These quests usually didn't require the player to use their personal items. The system was generous enough to give her extra ammo to complete the task.

A target appeared roughly 5 metron away. It appeared to be a standard modern archery target. As a ranged weapon fanatic, she was obviously familiar with this. It was 122 centimetron in diameter with the center being 130 centimetron off the ground. The face of the target was also tilted at a 15 degree angle. In a standard competition, the yellow center represented 10 points, and each ring outside of it was worth 1 less point.

\*Ahh... I remember this. It's been a while. Hmm... The rules only say I need to hit the target, but they don't specify how.\*

As a beginner in her past life, she completed this quest how most people would and received a normal reward. However, after experiencing many class evolution quests, Jisha knew that there would always be bonus opportunities hidden within the temporary dimension. Exploiting loopholes in the rules and imposing restrictions on yourself were the most common ways to achieve these bonuses.

The first thing she tried was moving closer. This was a fundamental rule to all ranged attacks: the closer you were to your target, the easier it was to hit. From the greenest newbie to the Gun Swap Goddess herself, this rule remained ironclad. Even though the target was only 5 metron away, moving closer would still exponentially increase the odds of success.

However, an invisible barrier rendered her attempt useless.

\*Well, that's to be expected. Let's see...\*

\*>Skill: Target Toss\*

\*>Description: Throw an item at the system's designated target.\*

\*>Rank: Level 1, Common\*

\*>Cooldown: 3 seconds\*

\*I don't think I'll be using this.\*

It was a skill she'd been using once in a while until now, but it was unlikely for her to achieve the bonus if she used it. It was a very useful skill for new players; the system would move your body for you, throwing an item with pinpoint precision. However, this simplified the quest immensely.

\*I'll toss them manually and go for the bullseye every time. I'll definitely score over 100% like that.\*

With a pellet in her hand, Jisha wound up her throw like a professional pitcher and let loose at a target that was virtually right next to her.

A satisfying \*ding\* resounded as the pellet struck the bulls-eye, and the target moved 5 metron back.

\*>11%\*

\*Hm... Seems to be working. Let's continue.\*

Hitting a 1.2 metron-wide target from 10 metron was still a piece of cake.

\*Ding!\*

Bullseye.

\*>22%\*

The target moved to 15 metron.

\*Ding!\*

Another one.

\*>33%\*

20 metron.

\*Ding!\*

Like a machine, Jisha continued striking the bulls-eye.

...

Finally, at 35 metron, she made a mistake.

\*Whoops. That's a 9.\*

She knew it before the projectile even landed. But...

\*Ding!\*

\*>77%\*

\*Huh? Still +11%?\*

If there were 10 targets to hit and the maximum score was 100, this meant each target gave 10 points. The extra percentage point she was receiving was confirmation that she was en route to achieving the bonus.

Until now, she had assumed that hitting the bulls-eye with manual throws was the requirement for a bonus point, but apparently that wasn't the case.

\*Looks like I just have to not use Target Toss. That's a relief, but I'm still going to try my best!\*

The pressure was off, but Jisha was still going to push herself to the limit. This was the key to sharpening your skills!

40 metron.

\*Ding!\*

\*Bullseye.\*

\*>88%\*

45 metron.

\*Ding!\*

\*9.\*

\*>99%\*

50 metron; the finale.

\*Ding!\*

\*... 8.\*

\*>110%\*

Even though the system aided the launch of pellets, Jisha was only slightly less accurate than world-class archers with her arms. Yet, she still let out a dissatisfied sigh.

\*>System message: Quest complete.\*

\*>Minimum Tribulation threshold: 50%\*

\*>Tribulation score: 110%\*

\*>Evolution successful!\*

\*>Dispensing quest rewards:\*

\*>Wooden Sling: 1\*

\*>Ranged+ Pellet: 50\*

\*>Quest Bonus achieved!\*

\*>Dispensing Bonus rewards:\*

\*>+100 Copper\*

\*>Golden Sling: 1\*

\*>Ranged+ Pellet: 50\*

With a massive system message flooding her HUD, Jisha was transported back to Evon Hamlet as her avatar wrapped itself in a white glow.

\*>Coin Pouch\*

\*>Copper: 577\*

\*Looks like the system was generous enough to refund my quest fee with the bonus completion. Also... I wonder what this Golden Sling does?\*

In the past, Jisha didn't complete the bonus and only received the Wooden Sling. She had never owned a Golden Sling before.

\*>Name: Golden Sling\*

\*>Type: Weapon\*

\*>Class Restriction: Ranged-branch\*

\*>Description: Have you considered becoming a professional pitcher?\*

\*>Rating: Level 5, Epic\*

\*>Abilities:\*

\*>Passive: +50 ATK, -50% AS while equipped.\*

\*>Targeted Sling: Sling a projectile at the system's designated target. Cooldown: 8 seconds.\*

\*That's pretty good.\*

Jisha was impressed by its stats. In comparison, the Wooden Sling was quite a bit weaker.

\*>Name: Wooden Sling\*

\*>Type: Weapon\*

\*>Class Restriction: None\*

\*>Description: Slingshot's standard weapon.\*

\*>Rating: Level 5, Common\*

\*>Abilities:

\*>Passive: +33 ATK, -67% AS while equipped.\*

\*>Targeted Sling: Sling a projectile at the system's designated target. Cooldown: 10 seconds.\*

The abbreviation AS stood for Attack Speed, and it was a hidden stat until level 5. By default, AS was 1, which meant that players could fire one "basic attack" per second. In a melee player's case, it was one swing of the stick. In a ranged player's case, it was one pellet toss.

This was her status screen thus far:

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Class: Slingshot\*

\*Level: 5\*

\*>HP: 107\*

\*>MP: 107\*

\*>AD: 61 (11 + 50)\*

\*>AP: 53\*

\*>AR: 0\*

\*>MR: 0\*

\*>AS: 0.5 (1 - 50%)\*

By equipping the Golden Sling, Jisha's attack power rose from 11 to 61. Though she could only fire it once every two seconds, her overall damage output increased by over three times.

Meanwhile, a standard Wooden Sling increased attack power from 11 to 44, and it could only be fired once every 3 seconds. This was less than double the base damage per second (DPS).

Even without consulting the ratings, it was obvious which weapon was superior.

Jisha smiled. Her efficiency had increased immensely.

Now, it was time to wait for Hearth Ember's arrival. She looked around her, and... she'd somehow become the center of attention.

"What is that?"

"She leveled up, probably."

"No! I played the beta, and that type of light means she's completed a class evolution quest. Look, she's level 5!"

"Lucky."

\*Uh...\*

The crowd wouldn't stop murmuring their opinions on her, positive or negative. She didn't mind, but she wasn't expecting so much attention already...

\*Eh, whatever. Where's Ember anyway?\*

If nearly everyone at Evon noticed her, Hearth Ember likely would have as well. However, the fiery red hair was absent from the crowd.

\*Oh?\*



A DM from Hearth Ember had lit up her notifications - it was sent several minutes ago. During a class evolution quest, contact with the outside world was cut off. So, Jisha only noticed this now.

\*>Hearth Ember: We found a player out here who said he needed help with a special dungeon. Me and Snow are gonna help him out. I don't know how long it'll take, so you don't have to wait for me at Evon.\*

\*Helping a stranger for potentially no reward? Sounds like Ember.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Alright. I've got a quest of my own I need to get done, too, so this works out.\*

Jisha was glad she was *\*finally\** able to continue the first quest she'd received since spawning.

\*>Quest Information:\*

\*>Name: Grave Robbery\*

\*>Description: The adopted daughter of the late Shahar has given you the key to a certain tombstone. Open it to see what's inside.\*

\*>Rating: F\*

Building camaraderie with Hearth Ember was undoubtedly important, but the item this quest would dispense was arguably more so. The good news was that meeting Hearth Ember wasn't an urgent matter. Also, there was an absolute 0% chance of someone else stealing this "Grave Robbery" quest.

Though there were a couple hiccups in the road, nothing had truly gone haywire yet.

\*Let's hope it stays that way.\*

---

"Thank you so much for helping out... I spawned in the wrong hamlet, so I guess I was separated from my friends. When I found this dungeon and it said it required at least 3 players, I had no idea how to get my friends there. Why doesn't this game have a coordinate system? What kind of BS is that?"

Hearth Ember giggled as she watched the player called "Kenshi" ramble on about his misgivings.

"Trust me, I'm all too familiar with your predicament," she said as she glanced at Abandoned Snow.

"Hm?" Abandoned Snow tilted her head in confusion.

\*She still doesn't know what she did, huh?\*

Hearth Ember wanted to scold her little sister again, but how could she bring herself to when she saw that cute face?

"But," she continued, "it looks like you've done a decent job for yourself so far. Can your friends say the same?"

Hearth Ember was referring to Kenshi's level: 4. She and Abandoned Snow were level 3, so a level 4 player was definitely on the high end right now. Perhaps it was because he had nothing else to do?

"I... guess. Solo XP has definitely been treating me well. But I didn't play the beta, so I don't really know what I'm doing out here. Also, it's a bit lonely, you know?"

Hearth Ember nodded in agreement.

The two hit it off extremely well. Since they were about to tackle a dungeon together, this was a fantastic sign. Even small interactions like this would foreshadow the upcoming dungeon experience. A tense atmosphere beforehand would undoubtedly lead to stress, whereas the current lighthearted atmosphere would lead to an enjoyable adventure.

"Ah, that's right. What's this dungeon like?" Hearth Ember asked. Of all the things they'd discussed so far, they'd kept skirting by the most important subject.

Kenshi's expression darkened slightly.

"Honestly, I'm not sure if you'll be willing to do it when we get there. It's a bit... spooky."

"Eh?" Abandoned Snow jumped.

"Frei, don't worry, don't worry. Kenshi, what do you mean, exactly?"

"Well... From the outside, it looks like a cemetery. I don't know how difficult it's going to be, but it looks like it's going to be hard. We'll probably die at least once."

Abandoned Snow shivered. Cemetery? Ghosts? Scary!

"But don't worry," Kenshi continued, "It's possible that some of my friends will show up to help. The dungeon's made for \*at least\* three people, but it didn't specify a maximum."

"Ah, Frei, did you hear that? Big Sis Emmi and Big Bro Ken will help you, okay? There's no need to be scared."

"Big Bro Ken...?" Kenshi hesitantly said.

"Yeah, Frei here feels more comfortable when you call yourself her brother or sister. So for now, you can be Big Bro Ken, haha."

"Yeah, hahaha..." Kenshi gave a strained laugh. "Anyway, check it out, this is a sign we're getting closer." He pointed to their surroundings that were progressively getting darker and denser.

The trees became more "spooky"-looking as vines covered more and more of them. The hue of the sky shifted to add a hint of purple. A thin haze obscured visibility as well. It was truly strange; the only thing they'd done was walk a couple of minutes, but it seemed like they were in a completely different part of the world.

"It's over there," Kenshi said as he pointed past the dense trees. A wall of vines was visible on the other side.

"Are you two ready?"

"Nnnn..."

"Frei, it'll be fine, okay? If you can do it, you can get stronger, and you can run faster!"

"Okay!" Abandoned Snow's expression did a complete 180.

Kenshi was a bit dumbfounded when he saw this.

"It was really that easy to convince her?" he asked.

"Yeah... Don't ask, haha."

"Well, alright. Let's go."

The three players crept closer and closer to the wall of vines. And when they came out the other side of the trees, a grand entrance gate came into view. It, along with the wall of vines, was at least 10 metron tall. Kenshi wasn't lying when he said it was spooky. The previously confident Abandoned Snow became hypersensitive once again.

Kenshi pushed the grand gate open with ease - it was unlocked.

"Let's go."

Upon entry, the three players received the same system notification.

\*>System warning: Now entering a Fixed Field.\*

"Fixed field? What kind of dungeon is that?" Hearth Ember asked. As a beta player, she knew that there was a lot about Synergy that had yet to be explored. This "Fixed Field" was something she had never seen before.

"Check out my level," Kenshi said.

"Oh..."

The three players were now all level 3.

"It 'fixes' all of our levels to be the same as the lowest player's."

"Interesting."

The gates creaked shut behind them, and Kenshi signaled for them to walk forwards.

This cemetery was littered with extremely tall tombstones. Even the shortest ones were about 5 metron high. Unlike a normal cemetery that had tombstones organized in rows, these seemed to be in random locations. In some parts, they were extremely dense; it was a forest of stone trees. And in others, there was hardly anything at all.

"So, what's the clear condition for this?" Hearth Ember asked.

The three walked forwards in silence.

"... Hey, Kenshi?"

The previously amiable atmosphere dissipated as Kenshi didn't respond. What was going on?

"Kenshi...?"

Hearth Ember suddenly realized something odd. Some of the things Kenshi said didn't line up.

\*"But I never played the beta..."\*

\*"Check out my level..."\*

If he'd never played the beta, how did he know what a Fixed Field was?

"Emmi-sis, I'm scared..."

"Shh, Frei, it's alright."

As Hearth Ember comforted her sister, Kenshi abruptly stopped.

"We're here," he said.

"Huh? Where?"

Hearth Ember looked around, but nothing was different. The landscape of the entire cemetery was pretty consistent, and there was nothing special about this specific location.

But she quickly realized that Kenshi wasn't addressing her.

"Haha, Mr. Arsen's done it again!"

"Nice work."

\*Huh?\*

One, two... five, six...?

Six other players stepped out from the forest of tombstones.

"Huh? Who do you think I am?" Kenshi said.

As if the 7 of them were telepathically linked, they simultaneously turned to look at the two girls.

The purple haze only made the situation more ominous.

Chills ran down Hearth Ember's spine, and Abandoned Snow shivered as she clutched her sister's clothes.

Something was wrong.

## **12 - Second Class Evolution**

\*Whoa, they have these here?\*

At Evon, Jisha was preparing for her second journey into the wild. One of those steps included glancing at the consumables shop to see if their products were worth it.

\*I'm glad I checked this place!\*

It was always worth it to peek around at a hamlet's shops. You never knew if you'd find something you fancied.

"Excuse me, I'll take... 10 cinnamon buns!"

Unlike Uval, in which the consumables shop took the form of a restaurant, the one here was more like a food stall. The shopkeep had products on display across multiple carts, and the scent of the delicious pastries wafted through the air.

"100 Copper, please."

Jisha was about to pay, but tragedy struck!

\*Ah, crap. My inventory's full!\*

"One second, sir. I'll be right back!"

Jisha dashed over to Evon's materials shop. It, like frontier shops, also had a universal logo plastered on the front: a pyramid of six boullions. Here, she could dump her trash mob loot in exchange for a bit of cash.

\*>Inventory:\*

\*>Ranged+ Pellet: 100\*

\*>Melee Starter Stick: 2\*

\*>Ranged Starter Pellet: 50\*

\*>Shahar's Token: 1\*

\*>Shard of Heat: 2\*

\*>Healthy Twine Juice: 1\*

\*>Wooden Sling: 1\*

\*>Golden Sling: 1\*

\*>Slimeball: 9\*

\*>Lesser Insect Wing: 7\*

Though practically no material was completely useless, all 10 slots of Jisha's inventory were occupied. But her cinnamon snacks took priority!

"Shia's shop, what can I do for you?"

"Hi, can I sell these?"

Jisha dumped all of her trash loot on the counter.

"Of course. Here's 26 Copper for 9 Slimeballs, 7 Lesser Insect Wings, and 1 Healthy Twine Juice."

\*>-9 Slimeball\*

\*>-7 Lesser Insect Wing\*

\*>-1 Healthy Twine Juice.\*

\*>+26 Copper\*

"Thank you!"

Without delay, Jisha sprinted back to the precious food stall.

"Sorry about that, here's the money."

"No problem, young lady. Here's the sweets - I've boxed them up for ya."

\*>-1 Bronzium\*

\*>+10 Cinnamon Bun\*

\*These are worth it! Worth it!\*

\*>Name: Cinnamon Bun\*

\*>Type: Foodstuff (Edible, Consumable)\*

\*>Description: A surfeit of sweet! Eloquently punctuates any meal.\*

\*>Rating: F\*

\*>Abilities: +1 HP/s for 10 seconds upon consumption.\*

In all honesty, if one looked purely at the functionality, they were overpriced. But functionality wasn't the only property of items!

Jisha quickly took one of the Cinnamon Buns from her inventory, tore off a bite-sized piece, and stuffed it in her mouth.

"Sho good... mm..."

One of her favorite snacks had made an appearance! How was this purchase *\*not\** worth it?

As she nibbled on the soft bread, Jisha made her way towards Evon's frontier shop. There were several legitimately essential items she needed to pick up.

The first order of business was a quality appraisal item. The magma slime situation really bothered her. The next time she stumbled upon another uselessly strong mob, she would at least know what to expect. There wasn't anything to fear, necessarily, but ammo management was an issue. It would be incredibly annoying to run out of ammo in another fight.

The second was a map. Jisha had given her previous map to Abandoned Snow, so she currently didn't have one. With many years of experience in Synergy, she could easily create a mental map of a small area, but it was always a handy tool to have. They didn't cost much, either.

*\*Hm... Those are the only things I need at the moment. If they've got some decent ammo, might as well pick some up.\**

Jisha wandered around the store and collected the items she was after. Unfortunately, they didn't have any good ammo, so she had to make do with a pack of 50 more "Ranged+ Pellets".

*\*>-2 Bronzium\**

*\*>+1 Appraisal Eyepatch\**

*\*>+1 Large Local Map\**

*\*>+50 Ranged+ Pellet\**

*\*Ugh, my inventory's full again...\**



All 10 slots were filled, and this time, none of the slots held a useless item. With this small of an inventory, how was she expected to hold anything?

There were multiple solutions to this problem, but only two of them would be accessible this early. The first one was to purchase additional inventory slots. The second was to rent a storage container at a settlement. However, in a hamlet, the smallest type of settlement in the game, neither of these options were available. She would have to reach a Village or maybe even a Town to access these privileges.

It was unfortunate, but Jisha would have to forgo any mob loot she encountered unless it was valuable.

\*I think that's everything.\*

It was always important to double and triple check one's preparations before venturing out into the wild. Even at level 5, Jisha would not overlook this routine.

In the real world, if one were going on vacation, camping, or some other natural expedition, it would be asinine to not ascertain a high chance of survival. In Synergy, the same concept applied.

Jisha finished her checks; everything was good to go.

She took off into the wild once more.

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Level: 5 -> 6 (+1)\*

...

Since she was already 97% of the way to the next level, it didn't take very long for her to level up.

\*-61\*

\*-61\*

\*-61\*

...

The poor mobs in the area didn't last more than one shot against the Golden Sling. With only one pellet per mob, the cost per XP decreased significantly.

Firing ranged weapons in a low-pressure environment was as natural as breathing for Jisha, so she used this spare time to scan her socials.

\*Friend requests... All useless.\*

There were a decent number of incoming requests, but they were all either from the Evon or Uval randoms. Was it because of her high level? Or was it because of her beautiful avatar? Perhaps it was both, but there weren't any significant names in the mix.

\*DMs... Ugh.\*

There was a dreaded mountain of unread from a certain someone...

\*>Synycal: Heeeeee! Answer me! What quest did you get?\*

\*>Synycal: omg... How am I supposed to get to Orchid Town? Huh???

\*>Synycal: Hmph. Fine, I guess I'll trust you (~\_~)\*

\*>Synycal: AAAAAAH!!!! I died from falling in a hole!\*

...

They were all useless messages, but they were just like her.

\*>Synycal: I figured out how to get to the next town! Probably! But you're still not responding..\*

\*>Synycal: Where are you?\*

A heavy weight grew in Jisha's heart as she read the last two sentences.

\*Haah, why is it like this every time?\*

The last time they talked was less than two hours ago, so why was she feeling like this? If any of the messages didn't carry Syny's characteristic hyperactivity, Jisha felt guilty reading them.

\*>Fae Sol: You're doing great! I promise I'll get you a gift when we meet up at Orchid Town okay?\*

\*>Syny: Hah? Airhead Jish who didn't even play the beta gave me a compliment???

\*How did I forget she was a beta player? I guess I don't need to give her any early-game advice.\*

It was an extremely embarrassing thing to forget - her best friend was the reason she got into Synergy in the first place. How did something so crucial slip her mind?

\*>Syny: But gimme a gift! Let's see, what's it gonna be?\*

\*>Fae Sol: Uh...\*

Jisha vowed to give Syny a valuable item when they met up, but she had yet to find one.

\*>Fae Sol: It's a surprise.\*

\*>Syny: "Uh", you don't have anything, do you?\*

\*>Fae Sol: ...\*

\*>Syny: Well I'm looking forward to the gift :)\*

\*>Fae Sol: I promise it'll be something good!\*

\*>Syny: Sure... I'll bet you forget though.\*

Jisha sighed and closed her DMs. Syny was treating her like an idiot, but it wasn't unwarranted. In her first life, Jisha was notorious for being unable to pay attention to anything important. "Airhead" was probably even an understatement.

\*But was I really that bad?\*

Syny's expectations of her were rock-bottom. She was essentially saying she'd be impressed if even the concept of the gift was remembered...

\*Oh well, that'll just mean it'll surprise her extra when she actually gets something.\*

Jisha looked around as her surroundings finally began to change. The sky turned slightly purple, and a light fog dropped visibility by several metron. It was a sign she was approaching her destination: the Uval Cemetery.

Even though it had "Uval" in the name, it wasn't actually \*in\* the Uval Hamlet. However, it wasn't far from it. This whole time, Jisha had gone on a massive detour to arrive at a location that wasn't even that far from her original spawn point.

This cemetery was in a special location, and only those who knew the exact methods to get there could see it. It was almost as if it was in its own dimension, because if you tried accessing it with the incorrect methods, there would be nothing there. It was almost like a certain train station from a certain wizarding world.

The location wasn't the only thing special about it - Uval Cemetery was a special type of zone called a "Fixed Field". Fixed Fields were incredibly important for competitive integrity. They were often located in battle domes or colosseums of large settlements, but it was also possible for them to show up in the wild.

In this environment, by default, every player's level would be reduced to the lowest's. For example, if a level 50 player entered a Fixed Field with a level 5 player, the level 50 player would be reduced to level 5 for as long as they were both alive in the designated zone.

However, this wasn't the only thing it could do. It depended on which particular Fixed Field one was in, but across the board, they could host almost any type of custom match. Team matches, solo duels, battle royales... If there was a tournament format, it was useable in a Fixed Field somewhere in Synergy.

And the one she approached now was infamous in her first life.

A 12.5 metron wall laced with vines showed up in front of her. A black gate with detailed engravings of phoenixes guarded against the outside. It was time to complete the "Grave Robbery" quest.

Yes, of the thousands of tombstones in this large cemetery, one of them was dedicated to none other than the legendary Shahar. And since this place was famous, nearly everyone who knew about it knew which tombstone was Shahar's. Jisha was obviously one of these people.

\*I'm literally hacking.\*

Was time travel a hack? An extremely complicated quest became excruciatingly simple with this easy hack! Just travel back in time and know everything about the future!

Jisha bitterly smiled when she thought of the poor soul that would go through all the legitimate red tape to access this quest only to find that the reward was already claimed...

\*Well, that's none of my business.\*

She pushed the gate in front of her.

... But it didn't budge.

\*Huh?\*

This was genuinely surprising. If the gate didn't open, it only meant one thing.

\*Who the heck found this place already?\*

It should have been expected. After all, someone in the beta could have easily found this place by accident. Maybe she had underestimated how lucky new players could get?

\*Eh, whatever. Let's just see what's going on in there.\*

Another convenient feature of a Fixed Field was its spectator mode. The method varied across Fixed Fields - usually in a colosseum, you would just sit with an audience. But this was a cemetery, so naturally, the spectator mode would be properly themed!

The light disappeared from Fae Sol's eyes as Jisha became a free-floating spirit. Naturally, her body was vulnerable like this, but this wouldn't take long. She was curious as to who was fighting. What would a low-level battle look like?

\*Will it even be watchable?\*

Skilled players often found low-level gameplay unbearable to watch. Jisha typically had a high tolerance for this compared to others, but who knew what would happen on the literal first day of the game? On the first day of any new game's launch, nobody knew what they were doing. Everyone sucked.

After floating around for a bit longer, Jisha found the source of her predicament.

\*9 players???\*

It wouldn't have been too surprising if one or two people found this place. But 9?

\*How?\*

They must have been a large friend group. There was no other possibility. Jisha grumbled about how these people had so many friends... but these thoughts quickly dispersed as she recognized two of the nine players.

How could she not? After all, they were two players Jisha had spent a significant amount of time with in this life.

It was obvious what was happening here.

Like a well-oiled machine, the seven other players turned to look at the girls of ice and fire.

And in a very well-coordinated manner...

\*-25\*

\*-20\*

\*-10\*

\*-44\*

...

The seven players pounced.

The elemental girls weren't unskilled. They put up a decent fight. But it was two versus seven. They had no chance.

In less than 5 seconds, Hearth Ember and Abandoned Snow met a cruel fate.

It wasn't a very long engagement, but Jisha watched it from start to finish. It was a cowardly assault. Even though they greatly outnumbered their opponents, the seven players still used ambush tactics to grasp victory.

"Hahaha..."

Jisha coldly laughed.

Why? Even she didn't know.

Technically, there wasn't anything wrong with what just happened. At the end of the day, this was a battle. Battles were meant to be won; the means were irrelevant.

So why was she feeling this way? If Jisha had a physical body right now, what kind of face would she be making? She didn't know. What was this emotion? Annoyance? Lament? She didn't know its name, but the feeling was crystal clear.

The depths of her heart were shrouded in both ice and fire.

These seven players...

They were in her way.

### **13 - Bren's Plan**

Bren Tchan was more excited than none other on the night of Synergy's release. This virtual reality game had received the most hype out of any thus far. The developer was unknown and there was no marketing done, so he'd only stumbled upon it by luck. There weren't many who knew of the game, but anyone who did \*knew\* this would be the game to define the new age of VR.

As a lucky beta player one year prior, he formulated a plan to gather experience points faster than anyone.

First, they'd complete a nearby dungeon. After that, the real plan began.

Again, by luck, he'd stumbled across an area near his spawn point known as a "Fixed Field". There were numerous settings to customize this place, and one of them was the key to this strategy.

It was simple: Lure players into the Fixed Field and kill them. Ordinarily, if a player died in the wild, they would drop one level's worth of XP, one item, and half the coins in their pouch. If you killed a player, you would also lose a hidden stat known as "Karma". Killing many players or losing enough Karma would make you a "Red Player", and this brought its own set of disadvantages.

In a Fixed Field, after changing some settings around, they would not lose Karma for killing players. On top of this, they could make someone fall back to level 0 with one death and harvest all their XP. They would also drop all of their items \*and\* coins.

In other words, if they could trick players into entering the Fixed Field, it was the most efficient method of grinding!

\*>BrenT: What do you guys think?\*

On a messaging app called Concord, Bren shared this plan with "The Coalition" - a group of him and six of his friends.

\*>Allux: It's good.\*

\*>Molotova: Ha, let's blow 'em up!\*

\*>Liuzhi: I don't have anything better.\*

\*>Kenshi: As long as we're stronger than everyone we fight, I don't see a problem.\*

\*>Adverse: That's what I was going to say. What if we find someone who can beat us?\*

\*>Rizako: ...\*

One of his friends, Adverse, raised a valid point. This strategy was a double-edged sword - if they died instead, they would be the ones receiving the Fixed Field's penalties.

\*>BrenT: That's practically impossible.\*

Bren had already taken this into consideration.

The most popular game on Etmos in the current day was Virtual Martial Arts, or VMA for short. Before Synergy, VMA was the greatest full-dive software on the market. Everything it had done was on the forefront of full-dive.

Full-range bodily motion. Superhuman abilities that weaved seamlessly with one's movement. Accurate anatomy and hitboxes, as well as complete sensory input.

But Synergy had all of this, and more.

Bren and his friends were extremely talented VMA players. The highest rank was "black belt", and all of them were in this echelon. Since Synergy contained all of the aforementioned features, the group of seven wouldn't have a hard time adjusting. Their VMA skill would even carry over, and their combat ability would be leagues above ordinary players.

With their teamwork, it would take an insanely high ranked group of VMA players to take them out. High-ranked players were high-ranked for a reason; they were extremely uncommon. If everyone was high-ranked, no one would be. The black belt echelon comprised the top 1% of ranked VMA players. Most players were casual, so the ratio of black belts to total players was actually even less than 1:100.

If they ran into a group of players that was better than them... they could only curse their luck.

Most people weren't privy to this info. Ranked matchmaking would only place you with and against players of similar rank, so it was easy to forget about the rest of the player population.

The overly-caution Adverse acquiesced when he heard this.

\*>BrenT: Great. Meet me in the Uval Hamlet.\*

---

Ten minutes before midnight, Bren booted up his Vbian-01 helmet and prepared to log in. Anxiously, he opened Concord.

\*>BrenT: I can't calm down. Is everyone ready?\*

\*>Allux: Yes. Everyone's got their models and voice mods prepared, too.\*

\*>BrenT: Perfect.\*

\*>Molotova: Yep, yep! Let's slaughter some noobs!\*

...

\*>10 seconds before the world of Synergy opens to the public!\*



...

5...

4...

3...

2...

1...

\*>Welcome to Synergy!\*

"Welcome to Synergy! I am Lemieux," said a white-dressed fairy that materialized in front of him. "I will guide you as you begin your journey in this world. Think of me as a tutorial bot!"

Bren grit his teeth and rushed through the starter screen as fast as he could. The faster they could get out there, the more easily they could execute this plan.

The seven of them spawned together in the center of Uval.

"Holy shit! This is a VR game?"

"For real! Everything looks incredible!"

...

Though Bren was somewhat in a hurry, he empathized with his friends' awe at the scenery and allowed them to gawk; this experience was more realistic than even he had expected. Though the surroundings were bland with vast plains on the right and shabby buildings on the left, the level of sensory realism was unprecedented. It was even greater than the beta's.

Bren dished out some orders as the group finally calmed down.

"First order of business is to hit level 1 ASAP," he said.

Low-level quests in starter hamlets were numerous and simple. The goal of most were to acclimate one with their new body. As VMA black belts, though, The Coalition quickly hit level 1 with no problems.

After purchasing some essentials from the frontier shop, they dashed into the wild.

"This way."

Bren guided The Coalition to a nearby low-level dungeon.

They completed it with ease. Most of the monsters were inanimate objects that had gained sentience, and they were all incredibly weak. Even the boss was easy - it was just a big slime that had more dangerous jump attacks than normal ones.

But the dungeon was worth it. The "XP per hour" they received was much greater than it would have been outside. On top of that, they received cash and items as well.

\*>Name: BrenT\*

\*>Level: 3\*

\*>Name: Allux\*

\*>Level: 3\*

\*>Name: Molotova\*

\*>Level: 3\*

...

The Coalition were now all level 3. Bren was quite satisfied with their progress in under an hour.

Now, it was time for their plan's second phase.

"Alright, this place is kind of tricky. Do you see these two trees? If you don't walk between them, you can't reach the Fixed Field."

"What?"

The two trees Bren pointed to were uniquely shaped if observed closely, but nothing else about them seemed special. It seemed like a strange entry point, but The Coalition followed his orders.

Before long, the atmosphere shifted.

"What the hell..."

Even the VMA black belts were slightly creeped out by the purple haze and vine-laden trees. They gasped when the grand gates appeared before them.

"These engravings..."

The handiwork of the metal sculptor was fantastic. The phoenixes of black metal were highly detailed down to every last feather. Even their eyes seemed to gleam with intelligence.

Bren cleared his throat to interrupt his clanmates' fascinated stupor once more.

"Alright... So, Ken and Tova. Do you two remember \*exactly\* how we got here?"

"Yeah, yeah. We just gotta walk through those two trees, right?"

"Course I do. Who do you think I am?"

"Perfect. I'll entrust the two of you with this - go wild! Find as many players as you can!"

"Thank you! Oh, won't you PLEASE come with me~?"

"Tova, shut up..."

Molotova's change in tone caused the rest of the party to grimace, but no one could deny her acting talent. If she found anyone, she was guaranteed to be able to bring them back. Kenshi's bright personality made him easy to get along with as well - these two were the ultimate player lures!

And so the hunt began.

A group of three, four, and even five met their demise upon meeting The Coalition. Killing all of these players under the rigged settings of the Fixed Field allowed the five players that'd camped in the cemetery to reach level 5, while Molotova and Kenshi reached level 4.

The loot wasn't to be taken lightly, either.

"... That's a hell of a lot of Cinnamon Buns..."

The group of five had even purchased two of these healing items for each.

"What kind of person buys 10 Cinnamon Buns right away?"

"I don't know. Some sweet tooth they've got."

"That's a nice way to put it. I'd call it a sugar addiction."

The group continued to banter with each successful hunt; it was smooth sailing. The lighthearted atmosphere contrasted their gloomy surroundings.

At this point, Molotova had hit level 5. Now, only Kenshi was still level 4. Once they'd killed one more group of players, he'd hit 5 as well. After that, it'd be time for them to move on to the next phase of the game: entering a Village.

\*>Kenshi: Guys... I don't want to kill these last two.\*

\*>BrenT: Why? You're almost at 5. We're booking it to Ecling Village next.\*

\*>Kenshi: Yeah, but...\*

\*>BrenT: But what? This isn't like you.\*

\*Kenshi: ... Nevermind.\*

Kenshi always loved to act in a flashy manner, so his hesitation was undoubtedly uncharacteristic. However, he wasn't deviating from the plan.

Before long, Kenshi arrived with his two victims in tow.

"We're here."

The two girls' eye-catching avatars were impossible to miss.

\*>Molotova: Ha! Don't tell me you fell for some avatars!\*

\*>Kenshi: No... that's not...\*

The girl with the blue-white avatar timidly glanced around.

"Big Bro Ken... Who's that?"

\*>BrenT: Alright, get rid of them quickly. Let's get a move on.\*

\*>Kenshi: ...\*

"Sorry, Abandoned Snow."

Before the two girls could react, countless attacks assaulted them.

"What- Ugh, why did we trust you!"

The girl with the bright red avatar instantly understood they'd been tricked. And just like the color of her clothes, the anger tainted Hearth Ember's words a palpable red.

\*-25\*

\*-20\*

\*-10\*

\*-44\*

...

2 seconds. That was all it took for six level 5 players and one level 4 player to wipe out two level 3 players. And it was commendable that they even held on that long. If Kenshi had properly acted, it would have been over even sooner.

A message popped up on his HUD.

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Kenshi\*

\*>Level: 4 -> 5 (+1)\*

...

He blankly stared at it along with the white particles his avatar absorbed.

\*>BrenT: Don't be sorry for them. I know it feels real, but they'll respawn just like in any other game.\*

Kenshi stared at the ground in silence for several more seconds before finally picking up the two girls' useful drops.

He sighed.

"... Yeah, let's go."

"Hahahaha, look at this loser! He's in loooove~"

"Tova, shut the fuck up!"

Unwilling to deal with his party's antics, Kenshi left the cemetery alone. He leaned on the stone walls and dejectedly looked at the ground. Why hadn't he let them go? He could have easily found someone else to farm.

Kenshi shook his head to rid himself of these thoughts. He was level 5 now, and like Bren said, there was no real harm done to the two girls. They'd respawn normally. Everything was fine. He just needed a moment away from the annoying Molotova.

After cooling his head, Kenshi finally looked up... to see something unexpected in front of him.

Leaning against a tree about 10 metron away was a girl with maroon hair and piercing blue-green eyes. Just like the two girls he'd just encountered, this avatar was beautifully customized. Beautiful, and... uncaged. Her gaze clearly conveyed hostility.

Fae Sol was Level 6. It was higher than anyone in their party so far... but it wasn't going to be a problem since stats gained per level were extremely small. If one disregarded equipment, there was practically no difference between level 5 and level 6.

But why did he feel a strange sense of foreboding? Her crosshair-like irises were trained on him like a sniper observing their target.

Intrigued, Kenshi stepped towards her.

A patch of dirt immediately sprayed in front of him.

Startled, he stumbled back into the stone wall. He looked down to find a pellet embedded in the ground. When he looked back up, it was clear that Fae Sol had fired a golden-colored slingshot weapon. She'd drawn it so quickly that Kenshi failed to react.

"Stay there. I'll talk to all of you at once."

"Uh... Okay..."

Kenshi wasn't sure what to do. His usual decisive nature had vanished... in front of a seemingly unthreatening girl? He looked at her again. Her build was tiny, and she was quite a bit shorter than him. Was he going to be done in by a girl? Or was it a boy pretending to be a girl?

Whichever one it was, his fear was humiliating. He'd clearly forgotten that stature was nearly irrelevant in full-dive VR. Rage bubbled within him, but before he could make a move, the rest of the Coalition merrily strolled out of the cemetery. They clearly hadn't noticed an unwelcome guest nearby.

\*PING\*

A pellet weaved through the Coalition's bodies and ricocheted off a metal phoenix. The Coalition's merry banter suddenly ceased.

Immediately discerning Fae Sol's intentions as hostile, the Coalition geared to to fight. However...

"One second," Fae Sol haughtily said. Her attitude was so unexpected that Bren and co. forgot to attack. "Let's fight in there." She signaled towards the Fixed Field.

The Coalition looked at each other in confusion, and Molotova burst out laughing.

"Ha, you want to take us down one at a time? Are you stupid? Why would we give up our numbers advantage?"

Fae Sol's suggestion was actually smart if considered from her point of view. It was one versus seven, so she obviously had no chance of winning a straight fight. Her best chance was arranging a series of duels against the Coalition and taking them out one by one in the Fixed Field.

Fae Sol coldly narrowed her eyes, and her next words immediately shut Molotova up.

"No. I want all of your loot and XP. With those Field settings, you're prepared to lose everything as well, right? And don't worry about your precious numbers advantage. I'll fight all of you at once!"

## 14 - No Mercy (1)

"Wha...?"

Nobody on the Coalition could believe what they just heard. It had to be a joke, right?

"Uh, Fae Sol..." Bren knitted his eyebrows. "Say that again?"

"All of you. At once. In there."

There was no mistaking her this time. She enunciated every word slowly and clearly.

"You are one incredibly stupid girl. We're students of the most prestigious Academy on the continent. It's suicide to even fight seven ordinary players alone, much less us, VMA black belts!" Kenshi fumed.

"Oh, wow!!!!... is what you thought I'd say, right? Look into my eyes and guess how much I care."

"..."

\*>Liuzhi: So... what do we do?\*

\*>BrenT: Uh, let's vote, I guess. Who's in favor?\*

\*>Kenshi: No! Let's just kill her now, please.\*

\*>Allux: Let's humor her. 6 levels of XP will be great for all of us.\*

\*>Molotova: Yeah, she's lost it. Let's take all her levels.\*

\*>Liuzhi: Tova, you've got some nerve to accuse someone of "losing it". But, for once, I agree with you.\*

\*>Adverse: We should obviously take the offer for the reason Allux specified. However, what if she has a secret method to kill all of us? We should remain cautious.\*

\*>Rizako: ...\*

\*>Molotova: Huh? You're kidding, right? A secret method to wipe out \*all seven\* of us?\*

\*>Adverse: I don't think such a thing exists, either. But think about it. Why else would she be so confident?\*

\*>Liuzhi: Of course. This is a strange situation. I believe we should alter the settings a bit to guarantee our victory.\*

\*>Molotova: Wha... You guys scared of one player?\*

\*>BrenT: Whatever. It can't hurt to be too careful.\*

\*>Molotova: I- I don't get it. You think I'm crazy, and you're deciding to go all out even though we outnumber her by seven times? Who's insane here?\*

Nobody had the heart to object Molotova's protests. Eventually, they ended up adhering to Adverse's advice and altered the settings according to his suggestions.

"Alright, Fae Sol," Bren said as they wrapped up. "If you want to fight us in there, these are the settings we'll use. You'll have no objections, right?"

---

"I see..."

When Jisha saw the Fixed Field settings, she sneered in her heart. They were the pinnacle of shameless!

Not only did they ambush Abandon Snow and Hearth Ember with 6 players, but they were making it as difficult as possible for her, a single enemy, to win this match. They must have assumed she had a secret tactic, item, or something else that allowed her to easily deal with the seven of them. However, they couldn't have been more wrong. She would win with raw skill!

A steely sensation hardened her heart as she recalled how the two girls met their end. If it was merely a single death in a Fixed Field, Jisha probably wouldn't have felt this way. However, with these Field settings, it was impossible for her to sit still.



The settings they'd used against their victims were, in the future, known as "No Mercy". Just the name suggested, it was the highest possible stakes PvP could offer in Synergy. It was difficult to comprehend the scope of No Mercy in the early game, but the higher one's level was, the more they'd feel the weight of this gamble.

The concept of No Mercy was simple. If you died, your account would essentially undergo a factory reset. Those who had spent years of their life raising their levels would see their efforts wiped from existence in mere moments. Time waste was life waste; these players had literally lost years of their lifespan.

This was the dark truth of No Mercy. With a loss, years of your life would be shaved off. It was inherently a fractional share of real-world death.

Of course, on day 1 of the game, it was only a few hours' worth of effort, so Bren likely didn't mean to inflict much harm. However, the most extreme cases of No Mercy losses, in which players lost 10 years' worth of efforts, were ingrained in Jisha's mind.

She smiled sweetly at Bren.

"Of course I have no objections. This is a completely fair fight, right? Let's have a good match!"

"..."

Awkward silence.

Bren, being the leader, was the first to regain his composure.

"... Yes, let's."

The eight players entered the cemetery and completed the pre-match arrangements. This was a Closed Field match, so the system designated everyone's spawn points.

The Uval Cemetery was a square whose sides were 500 metron in length. In the center of one of the sides was the grand black entrance gate. Jisha spawned directly next to this gate.

This cemetery's tombstones were seemingly randomly placed, and there was a lot of open space where nothing existed at all. In front of her was one such space - it was a clearing that extended roughly 25 metron in front of her and 70 metron to each side. Her seven enemies spawned in front of her at the edge of this clearing.

Jisha checked her status window and inventory.

\*>Status Window\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Class: Ranged\*

\*Level: 0\*

\*>HP: 10\*

\*>Atk: 1\*

\*>Def: 0\*

\*>Inventory\*

\*>Ranged Starter Pellet: 50\*

These were the settings Bren and co. were so adamant about instantiating. Everyone would fight at level 0 with starter items. The main reason for this was that it prevented her from using any "secret item" she might have had.

\*There's another potential reason, but is it something they really thought of? Maybe... They're quite crafty.\*

At level 0, there was a lack of tools at everyone's disposal. This arrangement reduced the fight's element of skill and boosted the element of luck. It was analogous to asking a newbie chef and a starred chef to create the best possible meal with only a slice of bread. The end result would objectively be similar despite the two's differences in knowledge and skill. With so few tools, the number of possible mistakes and grasped opportunities were few. Only a small variation from the starting position was possible. On a lucky day, a judge could deem the newbie chef's product the more delicious one.

Technically, the fight would be far more difficult than if everyone was level 5 with twice-evolved classes. But the end result would be the same.

Why?

If the skill difference between two parties was vast enough, introducing small elements of luck would be irrelevant. If you gave the world chess champion only a king and queen, they would still crush a newbie's full set!

\*I'll show you a gap in ability cheap tricks can't overcome.\*

\*>System message: Closed Field commences in...\*

\*>5...\*

\*>4...\*

\*>3...\*

\*>2...\*

\*>1...\*

\*>System message: Closed Field (Uval Cemetery) - Start!\*

---

The seven members of the Coalition spawned side by side 25 metron away from their target. Bren checked his party window.

\*>Party: 7 players\*

\*>Name: BrenT\*

\*>Class: Melee\*

\*>Level: 0\*

\*>HP: 10\*

\*>MP: 10\*

\*>Name: Allux\*

\*>Class: Melee\*

\*>Level: 0\*

...

\*>Name: Molotova\*

\*>Class: Ranged\*

...

\*>Name: Adverse\*

\*>Class: Ranged\*

...

\*>Name: Kenshi\*

\*>Class: Melee\*

...

\*>Name: Liuzhi\*

\*>Class: Melee\*

...

\*>Name: Rizako\*

\*>Class: Melee\*

...

\*Alright.\*

Everyone's stats and items were as expected: level 0 with a default kit. No items from before the Closed Field's commencement could be used, which meant their precious healing items, the Cinnamon Buns, were off the table. However, Fae Sol wouldn't have anything special to use, either. A battle of attrition would favor the side with more resources, and their combined HP was seven times their opponent's.

Bren delivered his first command.

\*>Bren'T: Horseshoe formation. Molotova!\*

\*>Molotova: Aye!\*

It was only a one-word address, yet his ally immediately discerned his intentions. In a situation where every split second mattered, callouts had to be as succinct as possible.

The Coalition was a group of seven friends that'd been playing team games together for years. Everyone understood each others' strengths and weaknesses, and they knew what they had to do in basic situations. Right now, the shot-caller's job was only to bring everyone's attention to the starting plan.

Their formation shifted. They were previously side-by-side, but the melees slid in front of the ranged units. These melees made sure to obscure Fae Sol's line of sight to their rear, and once Molotova was out of sight, she fired a preemptive attack!

Molotova was a projectile expert. The Starter Pellet was indeed within her realm of expertise. She was out of Fae Sol's line of sight, but this meant that Fae Sol was out of her sight as well. But if she couldn't tell where to launch an attack at an enemy she'd just seen, could she be called a projectile expert?

The true intention of this mini hide-and-seek game was to obscure the ranged avatars while they attacked. At 25 metron away, even a turtle might be able to dodge a Starter Pellet if it saw the entire windup process. However, from Fae Sol's point of view, the pellets would suddenly appear from the top of the front line's heads. It was a small difference, but actions that improved the odds of success by even a fraction of a percent were often worth it.

But alas, 25 metron was 25 metron, and Fae Sol was not a turtle. If the projectile were a pistol's bullet, it may have been a sufficient range to guarantee a hit. However, Starter Pellets weren't bullets. The pellets harmlessly glided by Fae Sol.

At nearly the same time Molotova fired her pellet, Fae Sol fired one at Bren. It was slow; he sidestepped. There was no winner in this exchange...

"Ah?"

... is what he incorrectly assumed.

\*>Name: Molotova\*

\*>Class: Ranged\*

\*>Level: 0\*

\*>HP: 9/10\*

...

The first point of damage had been dealt, and it was their loss.

\*>Molotova: Are you kidding me... A little warning next time?\*

Molotova realized their mistake the moment she saw an undodgeable pellet approach her. In short, Fae Sol used the exact same strategy as they did, only more efficiently.

She did not see Fae Sol's windup process, nor did she see the pellet approach her until Bren, who was only 1 metron in front of her, sidestepped.

\*>BrenT: ...\*

From 25 metron, he'd never expected one of their teammates to get hit. Ranged Starter Pellets traveled quite slowly, so even an aimbot would miss. There was supposed to be too much time to dodge...

But whatever. It was pointless to dwell on a small mistake this early.

The Coalition were now 22 metron away from their target, and their "horseshoe formation" began to take shape. They only had a single target, and she was basically up against a wall. This formation existed to completely surround their target. With the wall on one side and the human-comprised "horseshoe" on the other, the target would have nowhere to run.

But Fae Sol immediately dashed to her left.

Naturally, she had to sprint in one of two directions to escape being surrounded. But why left? When Bren observed his formation, he immediately understood.

The Coalition had an odd number of members. If they'd executed their horseshoe formation perfectly, there would be one player in the center and three players on each side. However, the formation contained a miniscule imperfection.

Instead of one central player and three players per wing, their right side contained three players and their left contained four. In other words, Fae Sol's less-threatened side was her left.

Bren hadn't even noticed this imperfection until reverse engineering Fae Sol's decision.

\*Impressive. But it doesn't matter.\*

\*>BrenT: Crush her against the wall! End this quickly!\*

So what if she made one quick decision? There were still 69 hit points among them, and she would have to reduce that number to zero if she wanted to win!

Fae Sol continued to dash parallel to the stone wall, and the Coalition's horseshoe began surrounding her.

\*\_1\*

...

\*\_1\*

...

One out of every few of her attacks would strike a Coalition member, and even fewer of theirs hit her in return. However, this wasn't a problem.

\*>BrenT: Keep it up.\*

Fae Sol was taking little damage, but she had to change her trajectory to dodge most of the return fire. At level 0, everyone had the same movement speed. Her quick decision in the beginning would have actually allowed her to outrun her pursuers for 70 metron... but only if everyone truly moved at the same speed.

The shortest path of travel from point A to point B was a geodesic. Deviation from this geodesic would incur a time loss.

The Coalition was abusing their massive HP pool. By tanking several hits, they mitigated this time loss. However, Fae Sol, with 10 HP, could not afford to take as many hits. She had to dodge more, and this slowed her down.

\*>BrenT: Perfect. We've got her.\*

At this rate, the horseshoe formation would be complete, and Fae Sol would be trapped against the wall. With nowhere to go, she would enter melee range and perish.

\*It was a valiant effort, truly.\*

Bren was genuinely impressed that she survived this long; even the group of five players hadn't survived much longer than this.

\*\_1\*

...

The more hits they tanked, the closer they drew. Now, Fae Sol would be trapped within 3 seconds. Bren counted down in his head.

\*3...\*

\*2...\*

\*1...\*

And this was it. The final pellet. No matter what she did, she would meet her end.

Fae Sol had been hit 9 times. In other words, she was at 1 HP.

If she dodged, she would become trapped in the formation. If she got hit, she would die.

Allux fired a shot that would guarantee the end of the fight. Molotova and Liuzhi, for safe measure, also fired shots that were guaranteed to hit.

But... Allux's pellet missed.

\*>Allux: What?\*

His pellet had been neutralized... by one of Fae Sol's. In other words, Fae Sol launched an attack which accurately struck down Allux's pellet mid-flight.

Though the pellet wasn't traveling very quickly, it was a fairly small target, only half the size of a human palm.

\*>Liuzhi: To be able to hit that while sprinting..\*

It was impressive, but it didn't matter. Two pellets still flew towards her. At level 0, one could only fire one basic attack per second. Since Fae Sol's was on cooldown, it was impossible for her to pull the same trick again.

But the two remaining pellets whiffed as well.

"What a shame. You've let me escape," Fae Sol calmly said, as if her precarious situation were an illusion.

She jumped off the ground while maintaining her speed, and with her left leg, she pushed off the wall.

It was a parkour wall-run. With this push, her momentum carried her over to... another wall that suddenly appeared on her right.



\*>Kenshi: What the... That shouldn't be possible!\*

The open space they'd been running in made them forget where they were. They only had 70 metron's worth of space to capture their quarry, yet this space had run out.

The "wall" that appeared on Fae Sol's right was simply a tombstone. They'd now entered a stone forest, and visibility was drastically reduced.

Despite Kenshi's words, the Coalition shouldn't have been surprised. The stone walls, as well as the tombstones, were unrefined and rough. Someone skilled at parkour could easily push themselves into the air using these walls.

They'd assumed "special" moves like this weren't available at level 0, but parkour only required bodily control - it wasn't a system-defined skill.

The carefree girl chained dizzying wall jumps in succession and became impossible to track.

The tombstone forest only became denser, further reducing visibility.

Before long, Fae Sol disappeared.

## **15 - No Mercy (2)**

\*Good, I've lost them.\*

Jisha glanced at her HP.

...

\*>HP: 1/10\*

...

\*Tch... They're beyond shameless. But as much as it pains me to admit... their teamwork isn't that bad.\*

There were multiple reasons she tanked 9 hits.

Firstly, though she could have dodged everything, excessive dodging would have left her trapped in the "horseshoe" formation.

Secondly, and by far more importantly, she had to preserve ammo.

\*>Inventory\*

\*>Ranged Starter Pellet: 40\*

She could have neutralized most of the hostile pellets, but each neutralization cost one pellet.

This was the reason her opinion of the group descended from "shameless" to "beyond shameless."

In total, the seven of them had 70 HP. Each pellet's standard attack value was merely 1. Jisha had 50 pellets. With ordinary attacks, it didn't matter how skilled she was; she didn't even have enough ammo to finish them off..

However, there was a simple way for her to restock: kill one of their ranged units! "No Mercy" settings forced players to drop ALL items upon death. This included their player inventory AND Closed Field inventory, so she could theoretically gain +50 ammo with a kill.

"Sweep the field!"

Bren's echo-y voice suddenly reverberated into Jisha's ears. Perhaps it was by mistake, but he gave this command using his voice rather than in party chat. But even if she didn't hear this, "sweeping the field" was the likely play she guessed they'd make. They'd lost visual of her, so they needed to run through the area with a fine-toothed comb.

The main problem with this strategy was that a coordinated search party of seven would almost always move slower than their singular target. While they were busy searching one section of the cemetery, she could have easily run off the other side.

\*The only thing is... I'm not sure how far ahead they've planned.\*

Did they have a secret strategy or had they just blundered?

\*I guess it doesn't really matter.\*

None of them knew where she was, and their search party would move slowly.

Not only that, but Jisha was incredibly familiar with the layout of the cemetery's tombstones. As a relatively popular Fixed Field even ten years into the future, the Uval Cemetery, later dubbed "Shahar's Cemetery", would be used as a fair battle ground for countless fights. On top of this, Shahar was one of only two legendary NPCs on the continent. It would actually be shameful if a high-level PvP addict didn't know this map.

The tombstones weren't randomly placed, either. This wouldn't be discovered for a while, but their formation created something akin to pixel art of Shahar's emblem when observed from above.

Jisha was strolling through her own backyard while Bren's group was nervously traversing through a dense forest. Now, she was free to go almost wherever she pleased. So what was the game plan?

\*Say goodbye to your life, Bren.\*

Her first target: the commander!

This was the simplest way to throw a large group of fighters into disarray. With a broken chain of command, it was even possible for a group to work against themselves. However, because this was common sense, it was normally guarded against in multiple ways.

In this case, though, Bren and co.'s offensive and defensive capabilities had likely diminished since they'd been reduced to a search party. A search party was most efficient when they were spread out. And since they were spread out, it was possible that the commander was easy to pick off!

\*Right now, the only possible countermeasure for the death of the commander is having a backup commander.\*

Since Jisha had regretfully appraised her foe's teamwork as decent, they would naturally have a backup plan for a dead commander. However, it didn't matter. A backup commander would generally be less experienced than the main commander anyway.

Now, the hunter became the hunted.

She listened to everyone's footsteps closely. Since she could estimate Bren's location from his earlier shout, she would eventually find the set of steps that belonged to him. Rustling reached her ears loud and clear; they outnumbered her seven to one, so why would they need to hide their footsteps?

Jisha was thankful they were stepping on so many dead leaves and vines. Her mental clarity was severely debilitated after reincarnating into a weaker body, but her opponents broadcasted their intentions loud and clear. They were incredibly easy to track. There weren't even that many dead leaves around. All you had to do to not make noise was pay attention, and this was as simple as breathing for someone who excelled at stealth-type missions.

She hid behind a tombstone, closed her eyes and aurally observed.

\*One step, two steps, three... One behind me to the right, two behind me to the left...\*

Her mission was to draw a path that led to her target while remaining out of seven players' lines of sight.

For what seemed like forever, no good opportunities arose.

\*Ugh, parallax is such a pain.\*

But finally, one did arrive.

\*Now!\*

She stealthily took cover behind another tombstone.

\*Alright, one step closer.\*

All she had to do was repeat this process until she closed in.

\*Damn, level 0 is truly restricting.\*

If she were in her prime, Jisha could have subconsciously conjured a clear picture of all seven targets' movements through the maze-like cemetery. However, she had to make do with the status quo. Though they were open about their positions, there were still... six or seven of them. It was a little difficult, but it wasn't even close to impossible. She'd faced far more difficult trials, whether they were in Synergy or the real world.

Little by little, she inched closer and closer to Bren's footsteps.

---

\*>BrenT: Adverse, how's it looking out there?\*

\*>Adverse: No joy.\*

Currently, only six players were inside the stone forest. This particular section of gray obelisks wasn't very large, so Bren had tasked Adverse to keep a lookout from the outside. If Fae Sol somehow managed to escape back into a clearing, Adverse would immediately notify the party.

Adverse hadn't said anything yet which meant their target was still inside. But Bren was getting impatient, so he explicitly asked for confirmation.

\*What the hell, where is she?\*

He was certain their search formation was very good if not optimal, and they must have swept the entire section by now. This was how the formation was supposed to work:

Allux was closest to the wall of the cemetery. Bren was next to him, and the rest of the Coalition formed a line almost perpendicular to the left wall. They had no way to locate each other if they got lost, so it was determined that each of them should maintain line of sight with the member on their left. In this fashion, it would be a simple task to pinpoint everyone's locations easily while maintaining high efficiency while searching.

Placing Adverse outside reduced their group size by one, so this was also a small bonus to their overall movement speed. Yet their target still eluded them. Was their fine-toothed comb not fine enough?

\*>BrenT: Anyone else?\*

\*>Allux: No.\*

The more impatient he grew, the further the "very good" search party formation fell apart. Now, the six of them were almost like headless chickens running around aimlessly.

If everyone maintained line of sight, it should be impossible for them to lose each other. It would also be impossible for Fae to sneak by unnoticed. But...

\*Everyone's still maintaining line of sight. It's not possible for us to lose each other. We should have a good overall field of view of this section. It should be impossible for a target to escape. What's going on? Where did she go? Where where where where...\*

The longer this hide-and-seek game continued, the more uselessly agitated Bren's mind became. Random thoughts bouncing around made it impossible for him to focus.

\*We have to commit to the plan... the plan...\*

"The plan": something Bren would swear by. His meticulously-crafted plans often accounted for failures, so when something unexpected happened, his entire train of thought derailed.

He nervously glanced towards Allux who was still within line of sight.

\*Ugh, at least they still trust me...?\*

\*-5\*

Bren jolted back to reality when an unpleasant sensation crashed into the side of his head.

\*WHAT? Half of my health?\*

This jolt was so powerful that his brain short-circuited.

He whirled around to find a wild Fae Sol WAY closer to him than a ranged character should have been.

"Hello there~" she whispered.

"Ah!"

Bren swung his weapon in a panic, but this overreaction was incredibly easy to dodge.

He missed.

Now, his basic attack was on cooldown for one second. This was more than enough time for Fae Sol to fire another of her "ranged" basic attacks.

\*-5\*

\*What the hell? Starter weapons were only supposed to do 1 damage each... Oh...\*

\*>BrenT: We messed up...\*

He understood how it happened, and he realized this mistake far too late. This pathetic message was the last the group chat received before Bren's field of view turned grayscale.

He fell to the ground and dissipated into white mist like so many players they'd killed thus far.

When their party leader died, the Coalition were momentarily confused, but they quickly comprehended the gravity of the situation. Bren was defeated in two strikes. They were dumbstruck!

## 16 - No Mercy (4)

\*>Allux: I'll be taking command.\*

The vice-commander was the first to regain composure, but it wasn't so simple for the rest of the group.

\*>Molotova: How...\*

\*>Adverse: What happened? Were we not careful enough?\*

Bren had simply died way too fast! In disbelief, they continued to stare at the gray indicator next to "BrenT" in their party window. However, in the next second, it turned green.

He was now rushing back from Uval as quickly as possible. It was devastating; he'd been sent back to level 0, so he would die to one hit from almost any nearby mob. He'd lost all of the XP they'd grinded as well as all of his items and cash. But it wasn't the end of the world. As long as they killed Fae Sol and reclaimed some of it, it would still be fine.

\*>BrenT: On my way. Obviously, since I'm not there, Allux is in command.\*

\*>Allux: "Obviously"? I've already said this. Why are you repeating what I say?\*

\*>Bren'T: ...\*

\*>Bren'T: Anyway, each of her hits did 5 damage. I'm not sure how, but enabling vitals was a mistake.\*

\*>Adverse: Sorry.\*

\*>Allux: Ugh, what's done is done. Just find her. Since she went on the offensive, she shouldn't be trying to escape. Search the nearby area. Break formation and search in pairs! Don't get caught out alone.\*

Just as they were about to move forward with this plan, Adverse spoke up.

\*>Adverse: I have visual. ... She's too fast.\*

\*>Allux: ...\*

Fae Sol escaped from one stone forest and slipped into another. This was a disaster; the tombstones were too tall, so seeing past them was extremely difficult. Considering how she'd ambushed their captain by abusing this fact, it might be impossible to find her again.

\*>Kenshi: What a cowardly playstyle.\*

\*>Bren'T: It works for her, though. Looks like she really knows this map, somehow...\*

This was new information to the rest of the Coalition, and it was a problem. If they continued with their "search party" plan, Fae Sol might just lead them around by the nose while they fumbled around unknown terrain. Something had to change.

\*>Allux: ... We're going to use Adverse's cheese tactic.\*

\*>Molotova: ...\*

\*>Kenshi: That's...\*

\*>Liuzhi: Of course we are.\*

\*>Adverse: The question is, why didn't we use it earlier? I didn't create these settings to not be abused.\*

\*>Rizako: ...\*

\*>Allux: So, who's it gonna be?\*

\*>Molotova: Me, please. I've had enough of this nonsense.\*

\*>Allux: Sure, we can use you. And, hm... Sorry, Riza, but do you mind?\*

Rizako shook her head to convey that she was alright with the plan.

\*>Allux: Thanks.\*

\*>System message: Molotova has left the party.\*

\*>System message: Rizako has left the party.\*

\*>Allux: Kenshi, do it.\*

\*>Kenshi: Wha- Me?\*

\*>Allux: Of course. For some reason, I feel like you caused this whole mess, so you should be the one to clean it up, right?\*

\*>Kenshi: What??\*

Kenshi stared at the nonchalant Molotova and meditative Rizako.

"Tch. Fine."

He raised his weapon... and began to swing!

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

\*-2\*

...

Molotova obediently stood in place as Kenshi constantly thwacked her. Unsurprisingly, she died in less than 10 seconds.

Rizako remained zen-like with her eyes closed. Kenshi felt a twinge of discomfort as he did the same to her.

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

...



In the end, she met the same fate as Molotova.

Kenshi walked forwards and collected the XP they'd dropped, and when he did, a message popped up on his HUD.

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Kenshi\*

\*>Class: Melee\*

\*Level: 0 -> 1 (+1)\*

\*>HP: x -> 100\*

\*>Atk: x -> 10\*

\*>Def: 0\*

He'd leveled up! And when he did, the Coalition witnessed a warm pillar of white light extend into the sky.

But little did they know, there was one more player on the battlefield that bore witness to this sight.

---

\*Yup. There it is...\*

Jisha observed one of her foes level up, but this was to be expected. If anyone challenged you to a Fixed Field match at level 0, this cheese tactic was always one that you needed to watch out for.

\*>Status Window\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Class: Ranged\*

\*Level: 0\*

\*>HP: 10\*

\*>Atk: 1\*

\*>Def: 0\*

Only after looking closely at the stats would most people realize the true difference between level 0 and level 1. The system discouraged fighting at level 0. It basically forced you to do body-acclimating quests before anything else, and the first level was extremely simple to gain. Even if you did nothing, you would still hit level 1 after an hour.

This "automatic level-up" even persisted in a Closed Field. Around 20 minutes had passed since the battle began, which meant everyone's XP bar had automatically filled to 1/3. By killing two of their own party members, one of them maxed their XP bar.

Jisha stared at her XP bar that was almost 2/3 full and was crawling higher still. If nothing special had happened, she would have hit level 1 before her foes.

\*A huge mistake on their end... I guess they *\*really\** didn't expect me to get a kill.\*

She wasn't sure if they considered this, but without executing that strategy, they had a 0% chance of winning.

When people realized level 1s one-shot level 0s with no effort, this "level 1" tactic ran rampant throughout the Fixed Fields of Synergy. But there were some obvious flaws, which is why it was relegated to a mere "cheese" strat. Firstly, to complete the first class evolution quest, one had to remain still for 5 seconds. This was quite easy to disrupt; if you damaged them, it would cancel the class evolution process. Secondly, you had to kill your own party members, so the punishment for failure was a guaranteed loss.

But all of this was of secondary importance. She had a more important matter to attend to.

\*Holy... Where is it?\*

\*>Quest Info\*

\*>Name: Grave Robbery\*

\*>Description: The adopted daughter of the late Shahar has given you the key to a certain tombstone. Open it to see what's inside.\*

\*>Rating: F\*

This quest, despite being ranked F, didn't mean it was simple. Sometimes, a low-ranked quest would run you no risk of dying but was extremely tedious to complete. This quest turned out to be one of them!

The problem was that Shahar's tombstone would teleport around randomly, so Jisha's knowledge from her previous life wasn't helpful. She'd been running around for over 10 minutes with no luck.

But suddenly, she found it.

\*Shahar... Screw you.\*

You know the feeling when you're frantically looking for something, but it was in your hand the entire time?

\*In my defense, it looks almost identical to every other dumb rock here.\*

It was the tallest tombstone in the cemetery, but other than that, it was indistinguishable from the others. Jisha shamefully sighed as she relaxed against the wall.

\*Ugh, give me a break...\*

---

\*>BrenT: Alright!\*

Bren, despite not being physically present on the battlefield, was staring at his party screen as if he were a helicopter parent. He couldn't help but exclaim with joy once he saw a player hit level 1. Now, they were guaranteed to win. With 100 HP, there was no way Fae Sol even had enough ammo to deal with Kenshi alone.

The "-5" was still fresh in his mind, but this x5 critical strike was almost never seen in the beta. It was undoubtedly a fluke and there was no way for her to execute it consistently.

A player leveling up to 1 also gave them another advantage.

\*>Allux: Kenshi, swing away.\*

\*CRACK, CRUMBLE\*

The level 0 Fae Sol wouldn't be able to hide for much longer. Only at level 0 would his hide-and-seek game greatly benefit the hider; now, Kenshi had sufficient strength to one-shot the tombstones in their way. Naturally, this greatly aided their visibility.

Every second, he swung his Melee+ Stick at a tombstone. And every second, a tombstone was pulverized, clearing some line of sight.

\*>Liuzhi: Even though your attack speed hasn't changed, this really is a huge difference.\*

\*>Adverse: Of course. Kenshi, how are you feeling?\*

\*>Kenshi: ... Shut up.\*

Kenshi continued to vent his frustrations on the unsuspecting tombstones. Despite moving to the patch that Fae Sol had supposedly gone into, their search failed to yield results.

The clock was ticking. If they spent too long, their enemy would level up to 1 as well. Adverse cursed under his breath as he realized their group had stumbled into not one but two double-edged swords...

Once again, their strategy had to change.

\*>Liuzhi: Can you observe from up high?\*

\*>Allux: It's not "can" he. There's no other choice.\*

\*>Kenshi: Yeah, I "can".\*

When the Coalition observed Fae Sol cleanly executing parkour moves, they learned that any move not defined as "skill" by the system could be executed whenever. As black belts in VMA, all of these players had exceptional physical control. She wasn't the only one who knew parkour!

Unfortunately, Kenshi wasn't able to move \*as\* freely. The best he could do was chain wall jumps and reach the top of the nearby peak. These tombstones were at least 10 metron high, so scaling one was quite a feat in and of itself.

Though the fog still hindered visibility, searching would become far easier with the high ground. But as he looked around, this high ground wasn't "ground" at all... From below, it looked like jumping from the top of one stone to another would be a simple game of "the floor is lava". However, though the floor wasn't lava, it was a 10 metron drop. The space below became a chasm that spelled doom. He almost attempted to jump, but the abyss threatened to swallow him whole.

\*>Kenshi: ... Wait, what?\*

He was about to figure out how to get down, but at the edge of the purple haze... was the source of all of their problems. She was sitting atop the tallest tombstone in the area with her legs dangling off the side.

\*>Allux: ?? Report properly.\*

\*>Kenshi: Sure, Mr. Vice Commander. Bogey dope vector 090! You happy?\*

\*>Allux: ... Back in formation, everyone. Don't act alone!\*

Before Kenshi hopped back to the ground, he took one last look at their target.

Fae Sol placed a hand on her chin, smiled and waved.

"..."

As if that wasn't enough, she closed her eyes and stuck out her tongue-

"Okay, that's enough!"

\*>Allux: Ken, get back here!\*

Without hesitation, Kenshi leapt forwards, breaking away from the group. His agitation from the previous events reached its boiling point. His fear of the abyss evaporated as he raced from block to block.

---

\*Wow, that was easy.\*

Regardless of what happened next, Jisha's position atop Shahaar's tombstone was part of her plan. Fortunately for her, a lone Kenshi popped up on top. So naturally, she taunted him.

This was a low risk high reward play, so she gave it a shot. Since the time they'd initially met, she observed the mannerisms of all seven players. When she shot the slingshot pellet at the ground in front of Kenshi, a look of unbridled rage flitted across his face for a brief moment. Did he anger quickly?

Apparently, the answer was yes.

She patiently waited for Kenshi's arrival.

---

"..."

"..."

There was now a 4 metron gap between them. As a level 1 player with expert bodily control, Kenshi had the ability to reach her. However, perhaps because his anger faded, he hesitated to make the last jump.

Fae Sol didn't even bother getting up. Her smiling eyes continued to observe Kenshi's movements.

"Aren't you going to do anything? What was the point of coming all this way by yourself?" she said, continuing to taunt him.

"\*It proved effective so far, so why stop.\* Is that what you're thinking?\*

This time Kenshi refused to budge.

"There's only 4 metron between us, and you're level 1. Just hit me!"

"... What are you planning?"

Kenshi was quick to anger, but he wasn't dumb. If he completely succumbed to rage every time he was provoked, he wouldn't be a black belt in VMA. Though his recent decision was fueled by rage, he could not think of a way for him to lose. Fae Sol had 2 HP, and he had 100. So something was clearly wrong here. She probably had something up her sleeve, but he just didn't know \*what\*.

"Nothing in particular. Just waiting to see how you'll attack. I'll easily dodge your basic attack. Ah, did you know you can even throw your weapon? Though that would obviously make you lose it..."

She smiled again.

Kenshi wasn't the sharpest bulb on the tree, but he was still decently capable at problem solving. She likely had countermeasures for the options she stated. But...

"Heh. Did you think that's all I can do?"

He suddenly jumped forwards and wound up an attack...!

"...?"

A look of surprise flashed on Fae Sol's face.

\*Ha! Got her.\*

She must have assumed Kenshi wouldn't go for her directly. She was likely surprised that he'd "fallen" for her taunts again.

But it was a feint!

According to Bren, a beta player, all of the tombstones were easily destructible. He was going to release all of his anger one final time! After her footing was destroyed, Fae Sol would naturally fall to the ground where he could easily finish her off.

As Kenshi's attack approached the tombstone, he expected to hear another satisfying crack. It was almost like popping bubble wrap - he just couldn't get enough!

However, his attack never landed.

His vision went black.

## 17 - No Mercy (4)

The Coalition flew into a panic when Kenshi's status grayed out in the party window.

\*>BrenT: ...\*

\*>Allux: What???

\*>Molotova: Hah? How did you guys mess up that badly?\*

\*>Kenshi: I don't even know what happened.\*

\*>Adverse: ... There's no way we weren't careful enough.\*

\*>Liuzhi: Perhaps...\*

Everyone understood the implications of this, but none of them could understand *how* it happened!

Kenshi had 100 HP, and Fae Sol had 2.

Kenshi had 10 attack, and Fae Sol had 1.

It should have been a hundred-to-zero matchup, yet the reality in front of their eyes told them otherwise.

Psychotic messages flew through the party chat as everyone tried to find something to blame, even if that "something" was their own friends.

\*>Molotova: Kenshit, you're literally the dumbest teammate on the planet.\*

\*>Kenshi: Says you, you rat!\*

\*>Allux: Well, I did tell you to stay with our group. And Adverse, were these the best possible settings you could have come up with?\*

\*>Adverse: After all of this preparation, with you as the shot caller and with my settings, we lost. Please tell me what we could have done better.\*

\*>Allux: Me as the shot caller? Ken couldn't even follow my orders! And Bren's the real shot caller AND captain here. With both of those roles, can you even get more greedy?\*

\*>BrenT: ...\*

\*>Liuzhi: Guys, calm down.\*

\*>Molotova & Kenshi: SHUT UP!\*

\*>Rizako: ...\*

After losing themselves in arguments for several minutes, they finally realized something was wrong.

"Hey, where is she?"

They'd forgotten about the target they were hunting this entire time, and unfortunately, they were now the prey. Supposedly. The level-up aura from where Kenshi died was a clear indicator that the three of them were now under-leveled. They expected to be made quick work of, yet nothing was happening.

\*>Adverse: What do we do now?\*

\*>Allux: Hell if I know. Just stick together. Let's try to stay alive until we automatically level up.\*

\*>Liuzhi: That...\*

There were still almost 30 minutes before they leveled up themselves... Could they turtle the match for that long? Nobody had any better ideas, though, so the two followed Allux's command.



\*>Allux: Keep your head on a swivel. We can't sit still.\*

If Fae Sol knew the direction Kenshi came from, it wouldn't be difficult for her to find them. They had to move.

The three players stealthily crept through the forest as they frantically attempted to maintain a 360 field of view. They approached a clearing, but there was no sign of life.

\*>Allux: Let's go.\*

Taking care to not be seen, they bolted over to the next plot of cover. Like this, they continued slinking around while praying to remain hidden.

5 minutes...

10 minutes...

20 minutes...

What was going on? They were almost level 1, yet they'd continued to elude her. Were they lucky, or was their opponent actually an idiot? Regardless of which was true, the suspense grew the closer and closer they were to leveling up.

They braced themselves as if guarding against a jump scare. But...

\*System message: Level up!\*

...

All three of them simultaneously received this message.

Nothing else happened.

Or so they thought.

\*THWACK\*

\*-10\*

A pellet suddenly struck Allux's arm.

Everyone instantly snapped to attention.

\*>Adverse: Where did that even come from?\*

Nobody had an answer for him. They thought they were paying attention, yet they were still caught off guard. They quickly formed a circle standing back-to-back. As residents of another world would say... they were up against an "Avengers level threat"!

\*THWACK\*

\*-20\*

Out of seemingly nowhere, another pellet struck Liuzhi in the neck. They tried to estimate where the attack came from by reverse engineering its trajectory, but by the time they were able to figure it out...

\*THWACK\*

\*-20\*

... another one came from a completely different direction and struck Adverse in the head.

None of them knew what to do. If they stood still or moved together as a group, they'd get pelted from afar. If they moved separately, they'd get picked off one by one. None of them knew how Kenshi died, either, so they had to be extra careful.

\*>Allux: Tch... Everyone, keep your eyes peeled. We'll observe for now. Just make sure to guard your vitals. Once we pinpoint her location, we'll rush her at once.\*

\*>Kenshi: You guys better win.\*

\*-10\*

...

\*-10\*

...

\*>Liuzhi: How are these hitting?\*

Though they tried as hard as possible to dodge, a good percentage of them still managed to hit their mark.

\*>Adverse: The frustrating thing is they're not even moving very quickly...\*

\*>Allux: Guys. Just focus. We can make it through this.\*

As more pellets flew at them, Liuzhi noticed a harrowing thing.

\*>Liuzhi: Some of them are spinning... and ricocheting as well.\*

\*>Allux: What?\*

\*>Adverse: ... It's true, and I didn't want to believe it. We can't win.\*

Allux frustratedly glared at his party members who'd suddenly lost all hope.

\*-10\*

...

\*-10\*

...

\*>Adverse: I'll explain later so even a swordsman like you can understand. Let's just try to make a last stand.\*

\*>Allux: ...\*

Little by little, bits and pieces of their HP shaved away. And as their HP whittled away, so did their psyche. After all this time, they'd still failed to uncover the enemy's location.

\*>Allux: She can't keep this up forever. Don't lose focus!\*

Allux's words were prophetic - for a brief moment, maroon hair flickered in his vision. He sent the command to charge in party chat. But before these orders could be processed...

"What-!"

Even the coolheaded Liuzhi yelped in surprise.

"What-? Aren't you a ranged character?"

They were stunned.

This time, another projectile headed their way... and it wasn't a pellet.

"I don't prefer to do this, but who says I have to keep my distance just because I'm ranged?" Fae Sol said as she surged forwards to engage Allux in melee combat.

\*Whoosh.\*

All three of them had panicked, and everyone attacked nearly simultaneously. Allux swung his sword, and Adverse and Liuzhi fired their bullets. If they hadn't been worn down by the battle of attrition,

they might have been able to react in a more orderly manner. However, the pressure they faced significantly crippled their judgement.

Every attack whiffed. Fae Sol's steps precisely stuttered at a range where the solo melee Allux couldn't reach her with a swing and dodging ranged attacks with minimal movement was comfortable.

There was now a one second cooldown before they could release another attack, and Fae Sol took advantage of this to kick off the ground and rapidly close the gap even further.

When he saw this positioning and footwork, a heavy pressure bore down on Allux.

\*>Allux: Why?\*

His HP had been significantly shaved from the previous pelting, but hand-to-hand and swordplay were his fortes in combat. Was he going to lose like this?

"Dammit!"

The wild girl pounced on him like a tigress, and he was helpless within her jaws.

"Goodnight."

\*CRACK\*

\*-50\*

... A pellet struck the left side of Allux's head from pointblank. Receiving damage that easily exceeded his remaining HP, his body exploded into white. Fae Sol absorbed his essence while sidestepping Adverse and Liuzhi's basic attacks.

\*>Adverse: Ah, crap. She's easily tracked our cooldowns.\*

\*>Liuzhi: That should have been obvious... But yeah, it's over.\*

It was no longer a fight but a one-sided beatdown. Fae Sol completely overwhelmed the two of them in melee combat. Adverse, an avid sniper, and Liuzhi, a spellcasting fanatic, had no clue what they were doing. They knew how to hold out until support arrived, but right now, no one would come.

They slumped to the floor as Fae Sol absorbed their XP. The last thing they heard was her nonchalant voice as if she were strolling through a park.

"Ugh, my inventory's still full..."

---

\*>BrenT: ...\*

\*>Allux: ...\*

\*>Molotova: ...\*

\*>Adverse: ...\*

\*>Kenshi: ...\*

\*>Liuzhi: ...\*

\*>Rizako: ...?\*

After the battle's conclusion, the losers could only stare at themselves in a combination of awe and resentment.

\*>BrenT: ... I'm sorry, everyone. Meet me back at spawn.\*

A few of them had spectated the end of the battle, but there was no longer any reason to stay. About ten minutes later, everyone reconvened in Uval.

"That was just... unlucky," Adverse said.

No one disagreed with him. They'd taken all the necessary precautions and tried their best... yet still came up short in the end. They'd met a terrifying opponent.

They could only curse their bad luck.

They stared at the ground in silence.

No one knew what to say. How could they explain what happened without losing face? But Bren suddenly perked up.

"Maybe... Maybe our luck's not so bad after all."

"Huh?"

They stared at him like he'd gone mental. Their plan spectacularly faceplanted, so how could he remain positive? Some of them sighed.

"That's just like you, huh?"

They assumed Bren was simply trying to raise morale, but he denied it.

"Everyone. Take a look at this. I've got something genuinely good."

Nobody knew what he was talking about, but they obediently checked the party chat. When they saw the snapshot of Bren's friends list, they instantly understood.

On this friends list, the six of them naturally existed. However, there was a new, seventh addition at the bottom.

How? Why? Nobody knew.

But the image was real.

Everyone rubbed their eyes and glanced at it once more, but nothing changed. Because at the bottom of this image was...

\*>Fae Sol - Online\*

## **18 - Shahar's Nightwalker**

Jisha furrowed her brows.

Her inventory was full, and there were countless items in front of her. The Closed Field ended with her victory, so the system gave her an ample amount of time to collect everyone's loot. But what was she going to do? How was she going to transport seven, no... eight players' full inventories' worth of material?

A time-consuming method known as "item cycling" existed, but it would take far too long. She didn't immediately need any of these items, either, so she had another plan.

\*Here's good I think... Yeah, I'll definitely remember this one.\*

She picked an arbitrary tombstone and began digging a hole near it. Spirits were prevalent in Synergy as well, so this was usually taboo. However, Shahar's tombstone was the only real one in the cemetery. In other words, the rest of them were fakes.

\*There, there, and... there.\*

\*>System message: Level up!\*

...

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Level: 7 -> 8 (+1)\*

...

After running around the cemetery and a bit of inventory shuffling magic, Jisha collected the remnant XP and dumped 70+ items into the hole. She placed the dirt back on top and made sure it blended in with the surrounding soil. Nothing despawned in Synergy, so no matter how long she left it there, it would remain unless someone else stumbled upon it.

One thing that she *was* able to pick up, though, made her revel at her inventory numbers.

\*>Inventory\*

\*>Melee Starter Stick: 9\*

\*>Ranged Starter Pellet: 372\*

...

The number of level 0 items was incomprehensible for a single player. It wasn't a lot for now, but it was a different story for someone who'd traveled back in time.

Jisha sighed.

\*I would love to sit here and farm kills, too... But it's not likely that anyone else will come.\*

Fixed Fields were lucrative XP grinders if set up properly, but unfortunately, no one else had found this place.

\*Anyway, time to finally receive my reward.\*

---

The tombstone had teleported again, so after several more minutes of running around, Jisha finally reunited with her long-lover, Shahar! Her heart skipped a beat when she imagined-

\*No, no, calm down!\*

She walked up to it, and a small, circular engraving manifested at its base. The engraving was an identical but concave image to what she was now holding in her hand - Shahar's emblem, a phoenix flying towards a crescent moon.

Anyone would know what to do at this point.

\*Here goes nothing...\*

Jisha nervously placed the token face down and fit it snugly into the engraving. After a second, the token embedded and emblazoned itself into the slot.

\*>System message: Quest complete: Grave Robbery.\*

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Class: Ranged\*

\*Level: 8 -> 9 (+1)\*

...

\*Only one...\*

The quest likely gave one level's worth of XP no matter what level you were, but she wasn't here to complain about something so trivial.

\*Come on, come on...\*

\*>System message: Dispensing quest rewards:\*



\*>Shahar's Nightwalker: 1\*

\*Yes!\*

This was what she was after! Her heart raced as she excitedly read Shahar's Nightwalker's properties.

\*>Name: Shahar's Nightwalker\*

\*>Type: Armor (Accessory, Drape)\*

\*>Description: "From darkness, bring them to the light."\*

\*>Rating: Unique\*

\*>Abilities:\*

\*>Absolute Anti-Appraisal (Passive, Toggle: No cooldown): When equipped, user name and level will be hidden from all parties. You may reveal them to anyone at any time. Exception: Rexian's Eyes.\*

\*>Anti-Paparazzi (Passive, Toggle: No cooldown): While enabled, all attempts to record you will become corrupted.\*

\*>Breeze (Passive(s), Toggle: No cooldown): While enabled, stamina drain is reduced by 50% and/or Presence is decreased by 50%. While out of combat for 5 minutes, Top Speed is increased by 200%.\*

\*>Night Walk (Toggle: No cooldown): Presence -99% for up to 10 minutes. Time remaining: 10:00.00. Cooldown: 1 week.\*

\*>Object Impermanence (Toggle: No cooldown): Gain up to 5 seconds of Incorporeality. Time remaining: 5.00. Cooldown: 1 week.\*

\*>Shahar's Blessing - Item Cloak (Rank 0): Mask the Presence of up to 10 Rank 0 Consumable-type items by 99% for one week. Items cloaked: 0/10. Cooldown: 1 week. Upgrade this ability using Shards of Darkness. Shards: 0/1.\*

None of these abilities could be overlooked, but one of them stood above the rest.

\*Incorporeality??\*

"Incorporeality" was arguably the best status effect in the game. Once you were incorporeal, you "disappeared from the world". You would become a ghost-like presence with zero ability to interact with the world of Synergy.

This status effect had a long history behind it, but once players figured out its true worth, incorporeality potions that granted even a couple seconds of the effect sold for thousands of gold.

Once incorporeal, you would become unable to become targeted, tracked, sensed, etc. You would also be able to pass harmlessly through any object, whether it be physical walls or magical barriers.

\*Wow... As expected of Shahar.\*

Calling this overpowered would be apt. She had unlimited access to a status effect that would ordinarily fetch a hefty sum. Not to mention its abilities were extremely convenient for her circumstances.

Appraisal blocking was something she desperately needed since she would likely be the highest leveled player in the game for a while, if not forever. Having a passive ability that was a guaranteed block would prevent her from being hunted down for her leveling knowledge.

The Anti-Paparazzi skill was also incredibly convenient; it disallowed any of her combat techniques from being captured and studied extensively.

Finally, Breeze would allow much easier exploration of the massive world of Synergy.

Shahar's Blessing and Night Walk were the only ones she didn't immediately have a use for, but they were extremely practical.

Presence was a genuine hidden stat in Synergy whose value ranged from 0 to 100. Even at max level, the system wouldn't tell you what someone's Presence value was. Only with a special item could you appraise someone's Presence.

Presence determined how difficult it was for others to detect you. Not just be seen, but be \*detected\* by any method in Synergy, whether it was audibly, magically, or something else entirely. An item (or player) with a Presence value of 50 was twice as hard to detect as one with 100 Presence. In other words, simply wearing Shahar's Nightwalker made it twice as difficult for its wearer to be detected. And Presence -99% meant that the object would be left with a value of 1.

\*100 times harder to detect, huh. I would have trouble dealing with that even in the end game. Overpowered and convenient... I couldn't ask for anything better.\*

Equipping armor and clothing didn't use ordinary inventory slots, so Jisha equipped Shahar's Nightwalker without hesitation. The thin, black cloth fashionably covered her whole body and didn't hinder her movement.

\*If I could dual wield swords, I'd be the picturesque VR swordsman. Or woman.\*

After admiring her new looks, Jisha noticed a new notification on her HUD.

\*Huh?\*

Something unexpected appeared - it was a friend request from an unlikely source.

\*Uh... Guess I'll accept.\*

\*>System message: User "BrenT" has been added to your friends list.\*

She hadn't forgiven them for luring two girls to their deaths, but there was something she wanted to confirm. Before she sent a message, though, Bren initialized the conversation.

\*>BrenT: Who are you?\*

\*Huh...\*

How was she supposed to answer this?

\*I guess it's normal for them to be curious.\*

Their skills were above average, and if what Kenshi said was true, they'd naturally have questions.

\*>BrenT: I've never considered myself a good player, but to meet someone that much better is quite humbling.\*

Jisha smirked at Bren's self-deprecation.

\*>Fae Sol: Is that why you lured and ambushed players instead of fighting them fairly?\*

\*>Brent: Uh, no. That's...\*

...

Silence. Jisha patiently waited for him to answer. \*He\* was the one that added \*her\*, so she could get away with stiff-arming him.

\*>Bren'T: We simply took extra measures to make sure our plan wouldn't fail.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Yet look what happened.\*

\*>Bren'T: Ugh... Anyway. Would you mind reviewing the battle recording with us some time? Any advice would be appreciated.\*

\*>Fae Sol: ... Shameless.\*

\*>Bren'T: Yeah, we get that a lot. But I need to shoot my shot, right?\*

\*What... What is this guy...\*

Bren's social power level was blinding! Where was his self-awareness? But he wasn't wrong. Now that he'd asked, there was a non-zero chance of his wish coming true.

\*>Fae Sol: Answer my question first, and I'll consider it.\*

\*>Bren'T: Go ahead.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Kenshi mentioned you were "Academy" students. By chance, does this refer to the Royal Academy?\*

\*>Bren'T: Yes, we're all students of the Northeastern Royal Academy.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Oh? Really?\*

If this was true, Jisha would definitely keep an eye on them. Upper-class children from all over the Northeast would attend this prestigious academy. This meant it was a prime spot to gather intel on other countries from primary sources.

Including clues as to what happened on her final day.

\*But first, I've got to make sure he's telling the truth.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Who's the Classical Elycai instructor?\*

\*>Bren'T: ... Professor Mereot.\*

\*>Fae Sol: And the Centralite History professor? Answer quickly.\*

\*>Bren'T: Professor Crael.\*

\*>Fae Sol: What's the colloquial name of the student commons?\*

\*>Bren'T: Nine-point.\*

...

Bren proceeded to answer every question flawlessly, including some obscure trivia. There was no doubt about it. She couldn't guarantee the status of the other six, but Bren himself was, without question, enrolled in the Academy.

\*>BrenT: Seriously, who are you?\*

\*>Fae Sol: Just an average alumnus.\*

\*>BrenT: Huh...\*

He was clearly unsatisfied with this response, but Jisha wasn't going to reveal any more about herself.

\*>Fae Sol: Well, I'm happy with your answers. If you want my help, I've got one more condition.\*

\*>BrenT: ... What?\*

\*>Fae Sol: After the first update, join my guild.\*

\*>BrenT: That...\*

Jisha was aware that she was asking something that couldn't be answered right away. But if she was going to spend her time on someone, it better be someone that could help her!

\*>BrenT: I'll think about it.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Think hard. No join, no review! (☘~^~)\*

Guilds didn't exist yet, but Jisha was planning on creating one with the same name as her previous life: "Sun Dragons".

In reality, she'd mentally downplayed Bren's abilities to a significant degree. Looking at it objectively, his commanding capability was actually pretty good. Having him as a cadre would benefit her greatly.

And there was one more thing she was curious about. He was a talented v-sports player with charismatic lackeys behind him, and he was at a critical crossroads in his life. On top of that, he attended the prestigious Northeastern Royal Academy. Yet in her previous life, she had never heard of Bren.

\*Something big must have happened to him.\*

What made him disappear from the face of the planet? And if he proved his loyalty to her, could she stop it?

\*Hmm... It's something I'll look into once I log out.\*

## 19 - Sentinels

Jisha dashed out of the cemetery and headed to the nearest village. Thanks to the Nightwalker's Breeze passive, sprinting through the forest was even more exhilarating than normal. The only thing to do now was run, so she took advantage of this downtime to go through her unread messages.

\*>Hearth Ember: We've died...\*

\*>Hearth Ember: Where are you?\*

\*>Hearth Ember: You still have the shards, right?\*

\*Whoops, these are from a while ago.\*

Hearth Ember was rightfully worried that Jisha had just run off with the shards.

\*In my defense, though, I was a bit busy...\*

Fortunately, Jisha had been recording the battle, so she sent Hearth Ember the footage.

\*>Hearth Ember: What... What's this?\*

\*>Fae Sol: Meet me at Covan Village.\*

\*>Hearth Ember: ...\*

Without further explanation, she switched over to reading Syny's messages.

\*Wonder what she's up to right now.\*

\*>Synycal: Don't forget my gift!\*

\*>Synycal: Don't forget my gift!\*

\*>Synycal: Don't forget my gift!\*

\*>Synycal: Don't forget my gift!\*

...

"..."

\*>Fae Sol: Are... are you doing okay?\*

\*>Synycal: No.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Uh, what's going on?\*

\*>Synycal: If only I had a special item from a special person, I would feel a lot better... (TT~TT)\*

\*>Fae Sol: ...\*

Jisha closed her messages, and the nearby Covan Village finally revealed itself.

\*>System message: Welcome to Covan Village.\*

Villages were a step up from Hamlets, and they offered supplementary amenities. Unfortunately, this particular Village was on the extremely small end. It was only a couple hundred metron across, so there wasn't too much else here. Despite this, it was fairly packed.

\*Why're there so many people here?\*

This place was even more crowded than the two Starter places she'd visited! It didn't take long to figure out why.

"Still another hour and a half? What are we doing here so early?"

"We need to grab good seats before the others."

"Hold them off! Don't let those bastards near the doors!"

The answer to all of her queries was the largest building in the area - an auction house.

Its function was self-explanatory; every so often, they would hold an auction. These auctions were battles in their own right, and the weapon of choice here was money!

\*Hm...\*

\*>Coin Pouch:\*

\*>Bronzium: 3\*

\*>Copper: 668\*

She definitely had more cash than the average player, but was it enough to snag anything useful?

Meanwhile, many players were still quarreling around the grand wooden building.

"This is for Shock Collar! Anyone that steps past here has to deal with all of us!"

"Huh? Who said you owned this place?"

"Precisely. We, the Ravaging Crows, own this place!"

"Wha- Like hell you do!"

\*Uh oh.\*

Arguments like this often resulted in physical altercations, and this exact scene had played out countless times in her previous life.

\*Normally, I'd say they deserve it, but... Haah, nothing I can do here.\*

\*-5\*

Someone had snapped; the first attack flew out!

"Wait, what?"

This player clearly hadn't expected their attack to do anything. After all, they were in a settlement, and in most other RPGs, these were designated no-PvP zones. His world was clearly flipped upside down when damage values popped up over his target.

This was the spark that lit the fuse.

\*-10\*

\*-13\*

\*-9\*

...

For a couple of brief moments, a lively brawl broke out. However, before anyone could die...

"Ah, what???"

"What? What?! They started it, not us!"



Several black-armored NPCs roughly 2.5 metron tall rushed in and dragged away the players that threw the first attacks.

\*>Name: Settlement Sentinel\*

\*>Level: ???\*

These Sentinels were all over Synergy, and though their strength varied immensely, they were always quite a bit higher-leveled than the "recommended" level of the area.

In areas they guarded, if they spotted any physical violence, they would come over to break it up immediately. The level of punishment varied as well, and for a low-leveled area like this one, the punishment would probably only be a small cash fee.

However, it wasn't the punishment that made this scene unsightly.

Jisha grimly stared at the riled-up newbies that were helplessly being dragged away.

\*More newbie hazing, huh...\*

This was also a relatively common trick, and no matter how far the game progressed, there would always be *\*some\** players that gave into their rage. However, it was clear that these particular players had no idea what was happening.

She took a mental note of which players were the *\*true\** aggressors. It was clear that mostly everyone was here for the auction, and though she'd planned on taking a look at it regardless, she was now going to take a more... *\*proactive\** approach.

She didn't have enough capital to do anything significant right now, but there was a stockpile of items a certain somewhere waiting to be sold. But first...

\*Gotta get rid of some of this stuff.\*

Her inventory was still practically full, so it was impossible to transport the large stash of items in a timely manner. Fortunately, one of the additional amenities a Village offered was rentable storage space.

Jisha walked into a nondescript building nearby. Unlike the auction house, this place wasn't swarming with players, so she received service right away.

"Welcome to Covan's warehouse, what can we do for you today?" asked the NPC clerk.

\*>Name: Sidio\*

\*>Level: ???\*

\*Oh, nice.\*

Question marks indicated this NPC's level was too high to be appraised with her current methods, so it was a sign that this place was secure.

"How much is 10 slots?"

"Our 10-slot cubby runs at 10 Copper per hour or 400 Copper per day."

"Anything you can do to help me out a little?"

This was a very reasonable price, but it didn't hurt to ask for something better.

"Of course. Since you are one of our first Beyonders customers, I'll triple your time. If you'd like, you can rent 3 hours for 10 Copper."

"Wha-?"

\*Though I was looking to get a discount, isn't this a bit nonsensical?\*

Like the saying went, if it was too good to be true, it probably was. Sidio must have understood her concerns, so he immediately followed up.

"We're all glad to have you here for our auction, after all. Our village's about to make a killing," he said as he winked.

"Ah, that makes sense."

This was a tiny Village, so a large chunk of its profits likely stemmed from the auction house's service fees. And since this would be the first auction with players, or "Beyonders" in NPC terminology, this Village was indeed about to "make a killing".

\*>-10 Copper\*

The two finalized the transaction, and Jisha dumped her inventory into storage, keeping only the absolute necessities.

It was now time to begin the transportation process.

\*Guess I'll have to do this by myself.\*

It was quite common to pay other players to help transport items, but this would only deplete her account further. Right now, cash was paramount.

After completing her "front-runner checks", Jisha took one last look at the Village before dashing back into the wild.

---

\*>+10 Copper\*

\*>+12 Copper\*

\*>+12 Copper\*

...

A party of 5 swiftly made their way through the forest surrounding a nearby village. They were not only individually skilled but also cohesive as a group. Their teamwork wasn't as seamless as The Coalition's, but it couldn't be looked down upon. The beginner-level mobs didn't pose a threat in the slightest.

\*>Quaterniana: Commander.\*

\*>Stein: What is it?\*

Their surroundings were quite monotonous, so the sudden DM from his subordinate indicated something unusual occurred elsewhere.

\*>Quaterniana: News was sent to me by First Son. This needs to be seen by you.\*

\*>Stein: Is this from the Fixed Field?\*

\*>Quaterniana: Yes. The player's level should be noticed by you. It's from about 30 minutes ago.\*

She sent him an image of The Coalition standing outside the cemetery's gates with a lone girl opposing them.

\*>Stein: Six?\*

This was quite high.

\*>Party: 5 members\*

\*>Name: Stein\*

\*>Level: 7\*

...

\*>Name: Arcadia Black\*

\*>Level: 6\*

...

\*>Name: Cargo Biscuit\*

\*>Level: 6\*

...

This party's members had all reached level 6 at the very least, and they hadn't wasted a moment since logging in. They'd been focused on grinding XP since minute 1. There was a decent chance that they were among the highest-leveled players in the game right now, so the fact that a level 6 player existed 30 minutes ago surprised him.

"Probably... just luck?"

Stein was a beta player, so he knew the leaderboard would be bloated with lucky individuals in the early game. Only once things started moving along would the truly skilled begin to rise. Luck could boost you to the top, but only skill could allow you to remain there.

\*>Quaterniana: This was also sent by him. Compared to the earlier image, it's described as "incomprehensible" by him. However, it has yet to be seen by me.\*

\*>Stein: A recording of the fight?\*

Stein half-heartedly began watching the battle footage. Though First Son wasn't one to be doubted, Stein had a hard time believing it himself. So, he began to watch it half-heartedly. He could watch and fight at the same time, anyway - every party member could grind level 5 and 6 common mobs without much effort. But as the footage progressed, he gradually lost focus of his surroundings. The events from the Uval Cemetery sucked him in.

\*>Stein: What... It's... a wipeout?\*

\*>Quaterniana: ... How many?\*

\*>Stein: All of them, I think... That's... I think that's what's happening here...\*

His eyes were glued to the screen as he diligently watched the movie until the final second. The end of the fight did not include First Son, so it was apparent that another Coalition member captured it.

Stein replayed the finale again and again, but even after watching it multiple times, he still couldn't fully understand what happened.

It truly was "incomprehensible".

"And this..."

\*>Quaterniana: What's in it?\*

\*>Stein: Skip to the end. Did you know pellets could be used like that?\*

\*>Quaterniana: I...\*

In the beta, the only way players fired their ranged weapons, whether it was arrows, pellets, or even spells, was a direct shot from point A to point B - a straight line. However, the dance of the pellets on-screen depicted another tale.

They'd heard of others getting stuck by an unlucky ricochet, but nobody considered that it could be done on purpose. Simply put, it was a LOT harder than it looked. It was undoubtedly a skill that took years of practice to master.

This fact begged a lot of questions. What was this player's identity? Why did they have years of practice with this seemingly useless skill? Where did they get the chance to practice it?

A nonsensical thought popped into his head.

What if it wasn't even a human being? What if it was an AI? If this were true, it was a convenient solution for all three questions.

The Reconstruction Treaty put a tight lid on most machine learning, especially those with general intelligence. But they weren't *\*completely\** extinct. Was there a country that'd hidden their ML weaponry from the world?

Stein shook his head. This was nearly impossible. Nobody even knew if third-party AI could play Synergy in the first place. How could someone have trained a program to excel in it?

Though they couldn't pick up those inhuman mechanics any time soon, there *\*was\** something simpler they could learn from this footage.

*\*>Quaterniana: \*That\* usage wasn't known to me, either... Though it seems so obvious.\**

In the case of most people, a figurative box encapsulated their minds when they read class names and descriptions. This was why the phrase "outside the box" was used for unconventional methods. In the case of the "Ranged" class branch, it was no different. Perhaps the effect was even stronger *\*because\** of this restrictive-sounding name.

The end of the battle depicted Fae Sol's martial arts skills. Though the remaining three weren't highly adept, they weren't incapable, either. Their loss wasn't something to be overlooked.

"What level of combat is this? 5th degree? 6th?"

The black belt degree system was a standardized level of skill in the martial arts world, and it even inspired the ranked system of the world's most popular VR game: Virtual Martial Arts. Winning a 1v3 brawl against Coalition members placed them at this tier at the very least.

However, this wasn't quite what Quaterniana was referring to. Rather, it was the method in which Fae Sol dealt damage.

In the instant before landing the strike, she materialized a pellet in or near her hand. By default, her damage should have been halved. Even martial arts moves were considered weapons, and these moves weren't compatible with the "Ranged" class.

However, firing a "basic attack" at pointblank mitigated the half-damage penalty.

Reviewing this footage forced Stein to reconsider what he knew about the game thus far. As a beta player, he knew that martial arts moves from the real world were valid in the world of Synergy. However, to what extent were they viable? Not many system-aided skills existed right now, but they would become prevalent within a couple of days. These system-aided skills often pushed a player's body beyond the limits of what was physically possible in the real world. Hence, they were basically impossible to control manually, rendering martial arts useless.

But... what if they could be controlled?

He had to try. If the person in this clip could push the boundaries of possibility, why couldn't he do the same?

But first...

\*>Stein: Is there any further news of this Fae Sol's whereabouts?\*

Tracking someone like her would undoubtedly yield fruitful results. However, he didn't have high hopes.

\*>Quaterniana: No, this player has been lost.\*

A skilled player wouldn't be easy to track, so Stein wasn't disappointed. However, he didn't have to look alone.

\*>Stein: War dogs, search for this player.\*

He sent Fae Sol's information to his underlings stationed in different starter hamlets which were now headed to nearby villages. Players heading towards the Eclian, Inkling, and Covan villages simultaneously received word.

...

"Ha, she'll definitely join our group when she sees us in action!"

"What? Why would she? Are you stupid?"

"Wha- No, are you?"

...

"This strength..."

"What's up, Brooks?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just a word from my boss. Us 'war dogs' gotta sniff out a trail."

...

"I'm not even a member of your stupid guild. Why do I have to join you?"

"You're young, right? She can be your girlfriend! Plus, Commander is offering us some real-world cash for a successful capture."

"Wha- I... I could use some cash, I guess..."

...

The word was out. The hunt was on!

## 20 - Brookie's Wish

The frontier. Traveling through this mystical land meant that you were discovering new territories - you were stepping foot where no man had gone before!

"... At least, that's what it's supposed to be. Come on, I've already played Jungle Simulator."

Brooks Lacaia's disappointment was evident as he wandered aimlessly. His friend Dharr had pestered him nonstop about this game saying the places to explore were "awesome". And when Commander had told him to test out Synergy as well, Brookie's expectations shot up. However, other than its sensory realism, nothing about it seemed extraordinary.

The VR market already had realistic sensory input for small games such as "Jungle Simulator".

Other simulators such as "Mountain Simulator" and "Ocean Simulator" existed as well, and Brookie was a connoisseur of these titles. Sure, Synergy was more realistic, but only marginally; a layperson would be hard-pressed to discern the difference.

"I can't believe it. How can you play \*those\* games out of everything on the market? You really exaggerate how good they are - they're so boring. Everyone knows Space Station Sim is the only good one."

"Yes, for most people-"

"I don't want to hear another of your rants, man. Just follow me already."

Just like almost everyone else at the beginning, the two completed their tasks in their starter Hamlet and ventured into the wild.

"Just do your best to level up so we can evolve. Let's kill some monsters. I know you didn't play the beta, but hunting mobs is pretty interesting in this game," Dharr said.

"I hope so..."

"See, look. There's a Green Slime. I'll let you take it out by yourself."

Brookie looked at the round object bouncing towards him. It was too pathetic to be called a "monster".



"How did you see its name?"

Though it was obviously green and gelatinous, there had to be a way to see its name verbatim.

"Just think about appraising it in your mind as you look at it. You should automatically know its name and level like that."

"Is that all it takes?"

Brookie doubtfully did as he was told. As he thought of "appraisal" while looking at the slime, information directly transferred into his mind.

\*>Name: Green Slime\*

\*>Level: 1\*

"Whoa... Honestly, that's more impressive than anything else so far."

Brookie's apathy vanished. This was incredible technology - it was directly able to transfer information without the necessity of a HUD. No screen had popped up in front of him; after the appraisal, he just *knew* this information.

"You're really impressed by something so simple?" Dharr asked.

"Simple? How is this simple? Let me ask you something, Mr. Beta Tester. Does this work in other languages?"

"What? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Just tell me."

"Well..."

Though everyone in the Northeast learned Etmos Common, not everyone remembered it. The Northeast was a fairly isolated continent, and it was common for inhabitants to never leave it in their entire lives. These people would not have much use for this language.

The most popular language here was Frost 7, and even then a lot of people preferred speaking their local tongue. Because of this, the answer to Brookie's question should have been obvious. But he wanted to hear the answer out loud.

"It... does, clearly."

"So you don't see the potential of an automatic translator here?"

"... Only you would think of that."

"Haah, I've never told you why I play all those simulator games, have I?"

"What's this all of a sudden? Why didn't you tell me the thousand times I actually asked?"

"Well... I just feel like the time is right. I've always wanted to travel, but due to... reasons, I can't. I've always wanted to go around the world and see, hear, and experience different things. I've always wanted to experience what's out there with my own five senses. So, what's the best option for someone like me?"

A childish side of him always wanted to be an "adventurer" as well, discovering unmarred lands. It was difficult to do that in modern times where almost every square metron of the surface of Etmos had been tread upon by humans. There was nowhere in real life you could easily explore that no one had been. Even if you were in an isolated area, it was likely someone had been there before. Whether it was the peak of the highest mountain or the bottom of the deepest valleys, they had been traversed upon and named.

It also helped that death didn't mark one's true end here, so the degree of risk was lesser. You could always go back and try again if you messed up.

"..."

"You get it now, right? But even then, it's not the same as experiencing the journey myself. When you said there's a lot of 'awesome' places to explore, you caught my attention. This game can maybe provide some sort of replacement for that desire."

"What does that have to do with languages?"

"Wha- I really have to spell it out for you? What if I meet someone? People speak different languages in different places, dummy."

"Oh..."

Brookie wanted to elaborate further, but Dharr was losing interest. Brookie shook his head - why couldn't this guy see it?

When the information transferred into his mind, he didn't have to read it. Reading took time, and language was essentially a "middleman" when it came to conveying information from one person to another.

The words "sad", "mad", "glad"... They all had slightly different meanings for every person. It was 100% certain that Brookie's "sad" wasn't identical to Dharr's. Even what I'm conveying here... everyone sees something different.

In a hyperbolic sense, simply talking to someone was akin to a game of telephone. By removing this middleman, one's raw intentions could be conveyed to someone else.

Not only that, but complex information could be communicated immediately. If you received a command or even a briefing from a superior, the delivery of this information would take time. At the end of this delivery, you would walk away with an understanding of the concept.

But what if there was a way to instantly deliver this "understanding"?

"Brooks, stop dawdling and attack the slime. Let's see if you can hit it from here."

Brooks shook his head and returned to the present.

The Green Slime was roughly 10 metron away from the two, and it was slowly bouncing closer. Brookie carefully lined up a shot and precisely threw a pellet. In his mind, it would go straight through the slime, vaporizing it... but reality was different.

The pellet slung in a random direction and struck an unrelated tree.

"Hahaha...! I knew something like that would happen!" Dharr ridiculed.

"What the hell?"

In the real world, Brookie was a skilled darts player. Though throwing a ball was slightly different from throwing a dart, the experience of seeing projectiles flying from your hand was shared across both activities. Naturally, he was surprised when something he threw did something completely unexpected.

"You don't play VMA, right? Obviously you're confused."

"... I've got enough martial arts in the real world."

"Well, Mr. Tough Guy, watch the skill master!"

Dharr confidently walked up to the slime, and his body moved in a slightly unnatural manner. Brooks was a skilled martial artist in the real world, so he could tell that something was... off about that movement.

"So that's what skills do, huh. They can even make a wimp like you worth watching."

"Wha- Says you!"

As the two bantered, Brookie's inbox popped up with an unread message. When he saw the sender's identity, he made sure to thoroughly read it. His countenance immediately turned serious. Along with the message was some battle footage, and he immediately recognized its location. Though he'd never seen it before, he could infer that it was roughly the location of First Son.

He watched the whole thing, but he couldn't help replaying the end several times.

"This strength..."

"What's up, Brooks?"

What the heck was going on here? Were his eyes playing tricks on him? The girl in the video - or rather, the female avatar - executed her martial arts moves flawlessly. As the head of the "War Dogs", Brookie's martial arts were in the elite echelon. There weren't many better than him, and even after playing \*their\* replays back, he could still find a few minor errors.

However, here, there were none. But how was he going to explain this to Dharr, who had no real martial arts experience?

"Oh... It's nothing. Us 'war dogs' gotta sniff out a trail."

"Huh. Yeah?" Dharr narrowed his eyes.

"You \*still\* don't believe me," Brookie sighed.

"Yeah? No, I totally believe that you have a boss that gives you and your elite group of 'war dogs' a bunch of secret missions."

"..."

"It's really easy to prove yourself. 1v1 me in VMA."

"No."

"Because you know you can't win, ha!" Dharr laughed as he smugly crossed his arms.

The two continued to banter as they killed mobs, and before long, they reached the next settlement.

\*>System message: Welcome to Covan Village.\*

...

"How'd your class evolution quest go?"

"Easy. You?"

"Ha, you expect the beta tester to fail the first class evolution quest?"

"Isn't this the second one? Plus, you actually did fail the first one."

"..."

At this point, most players in the Village had breached level 5 and had completed their first major class evolution quest, and these two were no exception. But out of all the people around, the one he was looking for wasn't here.

\*>Name: Silver Soul\*

\*>Level: 5\*

\*>Name: Chutzpasta\*

\*>Level: 6\*

\*>Name: CDominica\*

\*>Level: 6\*

...

Fae Sol's avatar was extremely aesthetic and wild-looking, so it was impossible to miss even in a packed crowd. Unfortunately, there weren't many custom avatars in this village, so the horde was rather drab.

"Hey, let's go. What are you looking for?"

"A player named Fae Sol. Her avatar's got maroon hair and green eyes, and it's extremely noticeable. Let me know if you see her."

"Ohhhh! I get it," Dharr said as he winked. "Don't worry, I'm a trusty wingman."

"No, that's not... Sure, yeah," Brookie relented. There was no point in arguing with this idiot.

After several minutes, she didn't turn up. However...

\*>Name: ???\*

\*>Level: ???\*

"What?" Brookie exclaimed.

"What is it?"

"Look over there, what's that player's name?"

The names and levels of all the players so far could be appraised; an exception to the rule appeared!

"Uh... That's weird, it's not showing up for me, either. Wait, unless... Nah, that's not..."

"What are you mumbling about?"

"In the beta, a bunch of the top-level players found anti-appraisal items. But that was only towards the end. Something like that this early... There's no way, right?"

"Hm..."

Brookie rubbed his chin as he rewatched the martial arts footage one more time. In front of him were two outlandish anomalies. What were the odds they were linked?

"Why don't we follow them?" he asked.

"Wha- and just ghost your date?"

"It's not a date, it's the secret mission."

"... You really are hopeless. But I can't lie... I'm curious as well."

"Oh, they're leaving. Let's tail them," Brookie said as he attempted to take the lead. But Dharr stopped him.

"Check your inventory, we're not gonna get stranded out there, right?"

"Uh... Map, regen items... that's it right?"

"Well, for now. I've got a compass, so we should be good to go."

"Great. Let's explore - they'll lead us to unknown lands..."

"You're daydreaming. There's nothing special around here for now. Wait just a couple of days, and we'll see some cool stuff."

"Right..."

Brookie was slightly disappointed, but he had a job to do. And something told him he was on the right track.

---

\*Alright, just one more.\*

Jisha's hectic porter trip was coming to a close. She expected there to be just over 70 slots' worth of materials. However, she searched the rest of the cemetery just in case, and in the end, there turned out to be almost double that.

\*How many people did they kill in there? Jeez... Can't complain, though.\*

"Thanks for your business once again," Sidio said.

"No, thank you for purchasing all of this."

\*>Coin Pouch\*

\*>Bronzium: 5\*

\*>Copper: 968\*

Her net worth after the final trip would be more than double what it was beforehand. Without Breeze, this trip would have been a nightmare.

\*It's taken me almost half an hour even \*with\* Breeze...\*

But it was finally almost over. She passed through the twin trees, and the atmosphere tinted purple once more. But before she approached the black metal gates, her instincts screamed danger.

\*Ah...\*

She peeked out from behind a tree and looked up, and perched on top was a black phoenix - the same one that had been a mere sculpture a little bit ago. Compared to ordinary phoenixes, it was tiny

- it was a bit smaller than even Jisha's avatar. However, size was the most misleading thing when it came to appraising a monster's strength.

Just as players could slay monsters many times larger than them, monsters many times smaller could do precisely the same to a player. And Jisha knew that if this phoenix had malicious intentions, she would have died before she knew what hit her.

The fact that she wasn't dead meant it wasn't hostile. In other words, it was safe to approach. But this was like walking into a lion's den after being told they were harmless. One wrong move, and she would die.

She didn't even bother attempting to appraise it - even something as small as this could potentially offend it.

She slowly walked into the clearing where the mystical bird displayed itself in its full glory.

After what she considered was an appropriate distance, Jisha quickly prostrated and awaited its words.

The wind howled through the forest.

Her heartbeat shook her eardrums.

The cold grass beneath numbed her hands.

But she continued to wait.

...

...

"\*Sigh\*, get up."

Only several seconds had passed, yet it felt like eons. Jisha slowly stood up and remained in a respectful position.

"When I say get up, I mean it. How can someone like you bow to me?"

"What?"

The implications of her words froze Jisha's thoughts in place.

The phoenix sighed again.



"Ah, you don't remember. Anyway, I didn't expect it would be you, of all people. I wish I could help, but... she won't let me. Not after what happened last time. The only thing I can say... is

IRXW43UEBWC64TEB4W65LSONSWYZRO"

\*What?\*

With these words, the phoenix took off towards the crescent moon in the sky leaving Jisha as dumbfounded as she'd ever been.

The phoenix's words repeated in her head over and over.

\*"How can someone like you bow to me?"\*

As much as she wanted to know what this meant, overthinking about it right now wouldn't yield any results.

\*But there is something I want to check out.\*

The phoenix was truly gone, so Jisha quickly snagged the final items and sold them back at Covan.

Now, the black gates were in front of her once more. This time, she didn't go inside.

\*There shouldn't be anything over here, but...\*

She skirted the stone wall perimeter and headed in the same direction the phoenix had. Ordinarily, this would only lead her back to the normal world - Synergy' mainland. Instead, in its place was...

\*Traveling Corrupted Land???

It was something that didn't show up in the beginning of the game.

Traveling Corrupted Land - a rare biome. A phenomenon that was aptly named - it was a mobile biome that poisoned and "corrupted" land as it randomly traveled.

Half of the grass in the clearing was reduced to a dark green, almost blackened hue. In the distance, the grass had even turned a shade of purple.

It was a dangerous area, yet it felt like the phoenix led her here. There had to be something inside.

Jisha grit her teeth and took a deep breath. After a brief moment's focus, she sprinted directly into the Corrupted Land.

## 21 - Corrupted Land

"How are they so fast?" Brookie asked.

It didn't take him and Dharr long to lose the mystery player.

"A movement speed item, I guess? I can't believe it..."

With over a twofold difference in speed between the two parties, it was natural that they'd separate eventually.

"Let's keep going," Brookie said. He still had a job to do, and something told him this mystery player could be a clue.

However, Dharr wasn't so enthusiastic.

"With that movement speed, they could be anywhere by now. Let's just grind a bit more then go back to check out the auction."

"Hm..."

"You're still considering chasing them? Let me tell you it's hopeless to try to find someone that's \*that\* much faster."

Brooks could act as a bona fide bounty hunter in the real world, but he wasn't sure if his skills would translate into the game. Regardless, he didn't want to completely give up.

"How about this. We'll grind wild mobs, but you'll follow my lead," he suggested.

"Sure, but remember that we've got an hour, and you need to plan for the return trip, too."

"Of course."

With that, the two continued grinding for XP, cash and loot. But after following the mystery player's path for only a minute, something odd arose.

"Aren't there... a lot less monsters here?" Brookie asked. Nothing else had changed, but the density of mobs continued to shrink despite moving into supposedly more dangerous territory.

"Yeah. There could be something else here, so keep your guard up," Dharr said. "Maybe like a strong monster or something."

"Makes sense. Let's keep going, then."

What was it? Before long, they had their answer.

"What's that?"

Ahead of them, the grass had darkened into a strange black-and-purple combination.

"I... don't know."

"What? Didn't you say you made it to like level 25 or something in the beta? You should know everything around here."

"Well I clearly don't," Dharr grunted. "If I did, that anti-appraisal item would have been mine."

If even the beta player Dharr hadn't seen this, that meant it was completely new territory. Brookie's adventurous side fluttered with excitement.

"Right... Let's go take a look?" Brookie asked.

"... Just a look. We don't know how dangerous it is."

...

"Whoa..."

"This is..."

In the dark grass in front of them, the flora were all dead. Or were they? Flower petals were brown and the grass was blackened. Yet, upon closer inspection, they appeared to be properly nourished. The petals were soft and the grass was lush. With the purple atmosphere peeking out in the distance, it was as if they were looking into another world.

"Nah, Brooks, I'm drawing the line here. You can go in there by yourself, Mr. Tough Guy."

"Come on. We're discovering something for the first time. Doesn't the prospect of this excite you?"

"How can it not terrify you? We don't know what's gonna happen in there."

"Say that last part again."

"Uh... We don't know what's gonna happen in there?"

"That's *\*exactly\** why I want to find out."

Dharr wanted to rebut by saying fear of the unknown was completely reasonable, but Brookie was already striding towards the anomaly.

With a sigh, Dharr tagged along behind him.

---

\*>System message: New biome discovered - Traveling Corrupted Land.\*

\*>You are the first player to discover this biome! Dispensing rewards:\*

\*>+1 Silverium\*

\*Oh?\*

As soon as Jisha stepped onto the darkened grass, the system gifted her this message. 1 Silverium, though worse than peanuts in the late game, was a ludicrous amount of money for the current Fae Sol.

Since 1 Silverium = 100 Bronzium and 1 Bronzium = 100 Copper, she essentially gained 10,000 Copper.

\*Honestly, I'm surprised it's not more.\*

Synergy incentivized exploration, and the system would give exploration-related rewards quite often. Traveling Corrupted Land was not a common biome, and it was extremely unlikely for it to show up where it did. Hence, the reward was fair.

\*I forgot about biome discovery rewards. They were so rare in the end game...\*

Jisha was going to take everything she could get in this game, including more discovery rewards... and the Boss of this Corrupted Land. At the center of every Traveling Corrupted Land, there would be a boss monster that was the source of the corrupting miasma. If she could find and defeat it, the system would reward her handsomely.

\*Gotta stay careful, though.\*

There was no telling what would happen especially since the black phoenix practically led her here.

\*\_1\*

\*Looks like it's started.\*

After entering this biome, Fae Sol was exposed to miasma that was dangerous to normal players. Unlike most poison gases, which could only be ingested by breathing, miasma negatively impacted a body just by touching it.

\*This could be bad...\*

Though this was a low-level Corrupted Land, Jisha's level was still too low tackle this place for most players. Even she might have to abandon ship if things went south.

Her time limit in this place was 20 minutes, and that was \*with\* the Cinnamon Buns. Without them, it was only around 10. This time limit didn't account for additional damage taken, either.

Natural regeneration was practically nonexistent right now, so there was no point factoring that in.

\*\_1\*

After a couple of minutes of running, Jisha encountered her first mob in this land.

\*>Name: Corrupted Air [Rare]\*

\*>Level: 5\*

It was a massive purple gas cloud that hung in the air, blocking her path forward.

Though it was called Corrupted Air, in reality, this cloud comprised thousands of floating small organisms. These organisms thrived on the miasma of the area making them dangerous to the touch. Jisha would need a stronger area-of-effect attack to be able to wipe them out; it was impossible to do significant damage with pellets slightly smaller than her palm.

\*Tch...\*

It was an unkillable mob for her right now, but that wasn't why it was annoying. Since this Corrupted Air coated a wide area, it practically turned the area into a maze. There was no current method to clear it out, and walking through it was suicide. The only choice was to detour around them.

\*\_1\*

\*There better be a way out of here...\*

She glanced at her map - her current area was a scrambled mess. Maps recorded the places it had traveled plus a snapshot of the terrain at that time. But since this was an early-game map, it didn't support multiple dimensions.

In other words, her map was currently useless.

\*Great.\*

Memorizing her path was a bit annoying, but it wouldn't give her too much trouble here. The real issue would be if there was no route to the center - it would make this trip worthless.

\*>HP: 104/114\*

At this point, the miasma chipped away 10 HP. Her regeneration items, the Cinnamon Buns, healed precisely this much.

\*Time to eat!\*

Was this cursed land a blessing in disguise? It was the perfect excuse to stuff herself with sweets...

So she ate 1 Cinnamon Bun...

2...

3...

\*And... Finally!\*

After losing a total of 30 HP to the miasma, Jisha found herself on the other side of the Corrupted Air. The grass was a more vivid shade of purple - she was approaching the center.

She continued forwards, and now there was nothing in the way.

\*-1\*

No more mobs appeared, but the miasma's effects intensified.

\*-1\*

The grass was now almost a translucent purple.

\*-1\*

The damage-over-time's severity kept ramping up.

Finally, in the distance, through the wilted trees and dead leaves, Jisha caught a glimpse of the Biome Boss.

\*>Name: Corrupted Tamaskan Devil [Biome Boss]\*

\*>Level: 11\*

\*HP: 2,300\*

\*Yep, it's strong alright.\*

If it was an ordinary level 11 monster, Jisha would have been able to kill it in a few seconds. However, this was not a level 11 common mob, but a level 11 Biome Boss. Despite being described by the same number, the two were not on the same playing field.

\*Yeah, this definitely isn't early-game material.\*

If a new player were to see this, they would experience quite the shock. This dog-like creature was not at all like the overly-cutesy mobs the game had presented thus far.

This dog was much bigger than an ordinary one. Even while standing on all fours, it was a bit taller than the current Fae Sol. It was limping, its fur was wretched, and it was covered in bald spots of peeling skin. A portion of its jaws was torn clean off too, exposing its sharp teeth for the world to see.

\*It was probably cute in the past. That sucks.\*

Under ordinary circumstances, Jisha could easily solo this boss. However, she was on a time crunch. With now 5 of her Cinnamon Buns consumed, she had to make a quick decision on whether to fight or flee. Considering the boss' large HP pool, it was no walk in the park.

However, if she *could* kill it in time, she would be completely safe - she was guaranteed to level up at least once and receive a full heal. Plus, killing the boss would cleanse the surrounding corruption, so the exit route was stress-free.

\*The Nightwalker... is a no-go for now.\*

The Night Walk ability would instantly remove all the difficulty of this mission, but it should only be used as a last resort. There was still time, albeit only a little bit, to brainstorm a more efficient method.

The Tamaskan was currently 100 metron away. After observing its movements for only a few moments, its weakness was evident.

\*Oh... It's blind.\*

It was relying on its nose far more than an ordinary dog would, so being spotted in the traditional sense was less of a worry. But its sense of smell extended to an unknown range. What was a good way of closing in without alerting it?

Shooting from afar would take too long. Though Jisha was capable of landing 100-metron shots with a slingshot, it took a lot of time to line up those shots. Firing from closer was simply easier, plus she could divert more of her focus to speed rather than accuracy.

So what was the plan? It was blind, so it relied on its nose. So maybe...

\*Haha. This might actually work.\*

This was a bit risky, so she would have to flee immediately if it failed. Maintaining a distance of 100 metron from the Tamaskan, Jisha navigated to a spot where she had an open line of sight. Now, nothing was in the way.

Jisha withdrew her ultimate weapon from her inventory: the Cinnamon Bun.

Its sweet scent made her mouth water... but she couldn't eat it...

\*Ugh... I'm definitely buying lots more next time I see them for sale!\*

She crushed the massive Cinnamon Bun into a tiny ball - it was soft enough to not crumble. She then equipped the Golden Slingshot and loaded the Cinnamon Bun as if it were a projectile.

\*I can't believe this works.\*

The Cinnamon Bun wasn't directly categorized as a projectile weapon by Synergy, yet for some reason, it didn't matter.

Jisha pulled back on the slingshot, aimed at the Tamaskan, and released.

\*Goodnight, \*sweet\* prince...\*

By some absurd logic, the slingshot had no difficulty firing.



After arcing through the air, the Cinnamon Bun landed right next to the nose of the dog sniffing the ground.

\*Huh, I missed.\*

It was already extremely difficult to land a 100-metron shot with a slingshot, much less with a Cinnamon Bun as a pellet. This didn't matter, though, as striking the Tamaskan wasn't necessary.

It was suddenly assaulted with a strong scent at point blank - an olfactory flashbang... of deliciousness? Unable to resist the sugar, it gave the source of the scent a tentative lick. After a pause, it quickly devoured the whole thing.

\*It really likes them, huh? Let's send in another one!\*

While the Tamaskan's nose was filled with cinnamon-y goodness, Jisha advanced 20 metron. She quickly loaded and fired another Cinnamon Bun.

This time, she didn't miss, but no damage was dealt. The dog happily devoured the second sweet treat. Little by little, Jisha fired more Cinnamon Buns and stealthily approached the Tamaskan. After using all of her Cinnamon Buns (ammo), she was right behind the dog, yet it still hadn't reacted to her presence.

\*It should have noticed me by now, but I guess those Cinnamon Buns are just that good?\*

The sugary sweetness wasn't the only reason Jisha had decided on Cinnamon Buns as a weapon, however.

\*Please work...\*

She tentatively waited for the dog to finish its meal.

"..."

The Tamaskan licked its lips and slowly turned to face her.

\*Come on...\*

It lazily sauntered towards her. There was no rush. It was only a single player that was lower-leveled than it was, and its full stomach only made it lazier.

\*...\*

It was now close enough to swipe its paws at her. Jisha prepared to withdraw, but the Tamaskan suddenly keeled over.

\*Yes! Now!\*

She quickly ran onto its back and started firing pellets at its head from practically pointblank.

\*-104\*

\*-104\*

\*-104\*

...

\*This is hilariously stupid, but it's actually working.\*

The Cinnamon Buns were the MVPs through and through. Cinnamon wasn't fatally toxic to dogs, but overconsumption would undoubtedly leave them with stomach problems. As if on cue, the Tamaskan vomited. Its movements were sluggish, and Jisha was easily able to maintain her position atop the monster.

\*Don't they do this in the Far West? It's pretty fun, actually.\*

As if she were one of those bull riders with the large hats, she maintained her balance while slugging the creature to death with furious pointblank shots.

...

After 22 shots, the Tamaskan helplessly toppled over, exploding into white. Jisha took no damage from the boss itself, but she accumulated a sizeable chunk of damage from the miasma. If she were forced to leave the same way she entered, she would have undoubtedly bitten the dust. However, all was well now.

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*Level: 9 -> 11 (+2)\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Class: Slingshot\*

\*Level: 11\*

\*>HP: 118\*

\*>MP: 118\*

\*>AD: 62 (12 + 50)\*

\*>AP: 59\*

\*>AS: 0.5 (1 - 0.5)\*

\*>AR: 0\*

\*>MR: 0\*

A single level-up was enough to full-heal her, much less two level-ups. She had soloed a Biome Boss that was two levels higher than herself. Though it was only a dumb level 11 monster, Jisha was proud of her equally dumb but functional tactic.

When the white light cleared, one small item rested on the ground.

\*This better be good.\*

\*>Name: Shard of Corruption\*

\*That's it?\*

Shards were valuable, but she'd expected something a bit more...

As a low-leveled Tier 0 being, she couldn't properly judge the phoenix's strength, but it was clear that it was many Tiers above her current self. Something of that level only gifted her one shard?

\*>System message: You have liberated a Corrupted Land.\*

\*>+10 Karma\*

\*>System message: Calculating First Kill Bonus...\*

\*>+1 Shard of True Essence\*

\*Or rather, two shards...\*

Shards often had attributes and could only do a very limited amount of things. However, Shards of True Essence were basically all-attribute shards. It was undoubtedly valuable, but...

\*Whatever, there's no point complaining.\*

As the system messages popped up, the purple grass slowly turned green where the Corrupted Tamaskan had died. The circle of green expanded slowly, and as it did, the terrain teemed with new life. It was truly a sight to behold.

However, Jisha paid no attention to this. Another hidden stat had caught her attention.

\*Karma, huh...\*

This genuine hidden stat represented one's "alignment". Positive Karma was usually related to "good" beings, and negative Karma was usually related to "evil" beings. Being good-aligned was alright, but there was a small problem with it. If one was good-aligned, they would be punished for killing players. This wasn't a worry for evil-aligned players.

Jisha was still unsure which direction she wanted to take in this new life. It was best to remain neutral until making concrete plans. In her previous life, she had been good-aligned. It served as a PvP deterrent in the wild; two good-aligned players were discouraged from fighting each other. It was only a problem if a good-aligned player came across an evil-aligned one. Only then would conflict be almost inevitable.

The color of the player's name above their head represented their alignment. If it was some shade of green or white, they were good-aligned. If it was yellow, orange, red, or black, they leaned towards evil.

Conveniently, though, Jisha had Shahar's Nightwalker. It wasn't possible for players or NPCs to glean her alignment at a glance.

There were many pros and cons to both sides, so the definite decision would have to wait for another time.

For now, she headed back towards Covan Village - there was an auction to crash.

## **22 - Auction Preparations**

\*-1\*

"What's this, poison damage?" Brookie asked.

"I don't know, man. It's not normal poison though," Dharr replied.

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

...

"It's getting worse, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is."

...

The grass turned more and more purple, and the atmosphere began to fog.

\*>Name: Corrupted Air\*

\*>Level: 5\*

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

...

It was odorless, but this "Corrupted Air" whittled their HP at a ludicrous rate.

"No, screw this. I'm not going any further," Dharr said as he fled back.

Even Brookie gave in for now; the Corrupted Air was life-threatening. Though dying wasn't the end of a journey, it still incurred a sizeable loss. Avoiding death was common sense.

The two ingested their health potions and took a moment to gather themselves.

"Seems like we've gotta make a plan before going in," Brookie said.

"Wow! You're a genius, my friend."

Brookie ignored Dharr and pulled out his map. But... it was unreadable...

"Huh... Is this supposed to happen?"

"Wha- What is this?" Dharr asked as he looked at his own. "I don't know what's happening, either..."

"Well, doesn't look like we can rely on these anymore," Brookie said as he stuffed his scrambled map back in his inventory.

"We've gotta get out of here."

"Hm... Yeah."

Though Brookie didn't share Dharr's sense of danger, Dharr had drilled the importance of a map into him relentlessly. Without one, it was pointless to continue forwards. They could only rely on their memory for directions to safety, and you couldn't spare much brainpower for this while in a dangerous area.

The two turned around and ran back in the direction they came. However...

"Uh..."

\*>Name: Corrupted Air\*

\*>Level: 5\*

...

This tainted air blocked their way! They had no choice but to make detours.

"This way."

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

...

"We came from over here."

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

...

"You sure about that?"

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

...

"Uh..."

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

\*-1\*

...

"Yeah, we're lost..." Brookie sighed.

"Shit, I should never have followed you in here. Ugh, these taste awful," Dharr said as he took a swig of more Healthy Twine Juice.

They still had several of these potions left, but how long would it last them?

No map, no sense of direction. The deadly air surrounded them on all sides. They were running around like headless chickens - it was game over.

Of course, that didn't mean they were going to give up. However, no matter how much they scuttled around, they could only helplessly watch their HP tick away...

10 HP...

9...

8...

"Promise me you'll listen next time, huh?" Dharr asked.

"... Sure," Brookie replied. He had no choice - his lack of travel experience placed both of them in a precarious situation. "Yeah, it's my fault."

7...

6...

5...

The two of them were dead for sure.

4...

3...

2...

But what happened next shocked them.

"..."

"..."

The purple atmosphere washed away as lush green took its place. The leaves and branches swayed in the soothing breeze as if the Corrupted Air had been a lie.

"... Guess we took living normally for granted, huh?" Brookie asked.

"Who's 'we'?"

"..."

"Whatever, let's go back."

"..."

"Brooks... Come on. We're literally at 2 HP. Do you want to get one-tapped by a slime?"

"No... Look over there."

Brookie was being stupid again, but Dharr couldn't help looking in the same direction. Deep in the forest, a figure was running straight towards them.

"Okay, run???" Dharr asked. This should've been common sense, especially since they were coming from the center of where the corruption had been!



But Brookie was stubborn - was this figure the mysterious player they'd been trying to find?

"I'm staying."

"Okay, you're on your own for this one. See ya!"

There was no point in trying to convince him, so Dharr immediately ditched his friend. What were they going to accomplish with 2 HP? If the player was hostile, even a small attack would instantly kill them!

But Brooks was willing to take this risk. After all, he had a job to do, and dying wasn't the end here!

The cloaked figure approached rapidly.

Closer...

Closer...

Brooks braced himself. As a newly-minted Slingshot class, the figure was now in his range. But he didn't move. He held up his arms in surrender - he truly didn't mean any harm.

His fate was now in this mystery player's hands.

Their first words?

"What the hell are you doing?"

Brookie's first reaction was to reply with "And what the hell are you?" but quickly stopped himself. Though he understood a voice was speaking in front of him, it gave away no information about the player. Male or female? High-pitched or deep? Even the accent, locution and other telltale speech patterns were likely "censored"; there was no other explanation for its strange sound.

Was it even a sound? Was this one of the wonders of "instant communication"?

Regardless, he wasn't going to be able to learn anything else simply by listening.

"I'm lost," he admitted.

"Hm..."

The two players stared at each other in silence.

"Did you play in the beta?" the mystery player asked.

"No. My friend did, though."

"Hmmm...."

More silence.

"I'll lead you back to town, then," they said.

"You mean it?" Brookie asked as he raised an eyebrow.

"Of course. You're a new player who got ditched by your friend, right? I'm headed back to town anyway, so just follow me."

"Well... Thanks."

"Watch your HP, though. I can't heal you."

"Right, of course. So... what's your name?"

They were probably hiding their name for a reason, but it didn't hurt to ask. Unsurprisingly, they didn't answer.

"Just follow me back to town for now."

"Ha... Roger that."

---

When Jisha saw a player nonchalantly standing around with 2 HP, she marked him as a lunatic.

\*Like... a \*big\* lunatic... physically, too. Is he even taller than Father?\*

The Emperor was the largest man she personally knew, and Brookie rivaled him.

\*I doubt he's that tall IRL... What's he doing just standing there?\*

His partner had fled the moment he saw her, so it was likely they were both low.

The answer quickly became clear - Brookie was a new player, and Dharr was a beta player that was helping out. Dharr assumed Jisha was hostile, but Brookie took a gamble... and won.

\*Haah, I can't \*not\* help him now...\*

She wasn't going to waste as much time with him as she did with Abandoned Snow, but she couldn't leave a 2 HP newbie alone in the forest.

"So, what business do you have in that village? Are you interested in the auction, too?" Brookie asked as he followed along.

\*So he knows.\*

This wasn't surprising. Covan, the home of this auction, was the nearest settlement. They were likely stationed out of there for the time being.

"Yeah, you could say that. What about you?"

"It would be a lie to say I'm not, but we probably can't afford anything..."

"Did your beta player friend let a newbie like you stay poor?"

"It's just not that... Dharr's said that stuff's gonna be pretty expensive."

Jisha glanced at her balance.

\*>Coin Pouch\*

\*>Silverium: 1\*

\*>Bronzium: 5\*

\*>Copper: 968\*

"You want me to change that?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"I've got cash. If you're willing to help me out with something, I don't mind buying something for you."

"Huh... I'll think about it. To tell you the truth, I've got another job to finish in the meantime. Dunno how much I can do."

"Alright. Also, you said you're lost, right? Take this," Jisha said as she tossed her fried map to Brookie. "One thing led to another, and it's now useless. If you take it to a Cartographer at the next Village, they should be able to fix it up for you."

"Oh? Actually, this... Uh... Never mind. Thank you."

Several words got caught in Brookie's throat, but he didn't speak up again.

The two walked the rest of the way in silence.

---

In Covan Village, players of many factions gathered for one purpose: the auction! Nearby beta players had all heard of this place, and the news eventually spread to the new players as well.

Many players here were with some sort of group or guild, but most were independent. Guilds weren't an official thing within Synergy yet, so all of these "guild" players were in some external organization. A good chunk of these players earned income for their orgs which technically classified them as "professionals".

This didn't mean they were skilled gamers in the traditional sense, though. Of course some of them were, but many other jobs existed as well. VR trainers, simulation designers, virtual item entrepreneurs... the list of professions went on and on. In any general player base, 99% of people were "unaffiliated". Even if a player was a member of a guild, they didn't have any contractual obligation.

This was only natural; most gamers played games for fun, not work. But the current Covan was different - around half of the players here were affiliated with an org!

These players knew the other orgs were essentially business rivals, so they tried their hardest to claim superiority. Players scuffled nonstop in hopes to get the ultimate leg up on the auction.

Unfortunately, they'd drawn the attention of the Village guardians - the Sentinels - so they couldn't do much else besides squabble... Was there anything that could break this deadlock?

---

"They're still a lively bunch, aren't they?" Jisha said as she arrived with Brookie in tow. She'd gone on an adventure and returned, but the commotion in front of the auction house might have been even worse than before.

Since the Sentinels were wary of the hubbub now, the players feuding looked a bit ridiculous. They couldn't punch each other, so all of their animosity remained bottled up.

If there was a way to manipulate this animosity...

"Brookie, I've got a question for you."

"Yeah?"

"What do you know about the general situation here?"

"I was watching them for a while earlier, and it seems there's one big dog in this pack."

"Oh? Go on."

"Out of all the groups here, the biggest one's called 'Shock Collar'. Kinda diabolical name if you ask me, but maybe that's a reason they attracted so much hate. Anyway, they got so many players around that the rest of 'em can only whine about not getting to certain quests sooner."

"Wow."

\*I wasn't expecting him to know so much.\*

Perhaps Brookie wasn't a stupid lunatic - Jisha's evaluation of him climbed a notch. With this information, she formulated her next plan.

"Say, where's Dharr?"

She didn't know what to make of this character, but since he was Brookie's friend, the two would likely agree to work together. For this plan, it was "the more, the merrier". Having Brookie and Dharr both help out would be phenomenal.

"Dunno, he should be around here somewhere..."

"Let me know if you two meet up. I'll look for some more help."

"Roger."

With that, Jisha split from Brookie. There was someone else she needed to find right now. It was one of the few Synergy players she knew she could trust.

\*>Fae Sol: I'm here. Look for a player with a hidden name and level.\*

\*>Hearth Ember: Level concealment? Already?\*

\*>Fae Sol: Yup. Jealous? Hehe.\*

\*>Hearth Ember: Haah, I don't know... after watching your battle footage, I don't think- Oh, I see you. That was easy.\*

Name concealment was supposed to suppress information about a player, but in a place where everyone's name was known, name concealment ironically became the most unique identifier.

Jisha beckoned towards the fiery red avatar. Dragging along behind her was another one - this one was ice blue.

"Haha, we're here! Do you have them?" Hearth Ember excitedly asked.

"Of course. These, right?"

\*>-2 Shard of Heat\*

"Yessss! Thank you!"

"Uhm... Emmi... who's that?" Abandoned Snow timidly asked.

"Aw, Snow, did you already forget me? After I helped you run, too..." Jisha said with mock disappointment.

Abandoned Snow's eyes lit up.

"Big sis S-! mmmmmfggg..."

Jisha quickly covered Abandoned Snow's mouth before she could say too much.

"Snow, I'm hiding, see?"

"Ohhhh, hiding. Are you hiding your talking too?"

"Actually, I wanted to ask about that," Hearth Ember interjected. "That thing even disguises your voice? What's up with that camouflage? I've never seen anything like it before. If you didn't tell me, there's no way I'd know you were under there. I feel like even your height's different..."

"Yeah, this? Secret!"

Jisha obviously wouldn't reveal a legendary NPC's item so readily, even to someone as trustworthy as the girl in front of her. Hearth Ember shrugged. There was no point pressing any further.

"Anyway, are you two busy?"

"Not particularly. We've been meaning to get a good look at the area, but the guild calling themselves 'Shock Collar's been messing with us..."

\*That group again...? They're quite the troublemakers.\*

The corner of Jisha's mouth curved upwards into a smirk.

"Perfect. Wanna help me out with something?"

"Um, sure. What is it?"

"I'll tell you in a bit. Just follow me."

---

Jisha led Hearth Ember and Abandoned Snow back to Brookie's waiting spot... and there was another player waiting for them.

\*So he didn't run off.\*

As much as she wanted to berate Dharr, Jisha kept her insults to herself. Ditching a newbie in the woods was practically a crime in her books, but she didn't want to antagonize a potential aide.

It was clear Dharr wasn't happy to see her, either. His jaw was tense; it looked as if he'd launch a tirade at any moment. Jisha spoke up before he could.

"Alright, you two. These are my friends. And for now, they're your comrades-in-arms. Ember here's got a good understanding of the Village's situation, so she'll give us a quick briefing. Care to explain it to all of us?"

Hearth Ember sighed.

"Shock Collar has monopolized almost everything in this village. All the quests that give a decent payout have also been taken by them. It's impossible for us to do much. Right now, some of the smaller groups are putting up a fight, but they aren't able to do anything significant..."

"That's rather curious, don't you think?" Jisha pointed out.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Look around. Shock Collar is only one group, yet they've somehow taken over the entire village. The combined manpower of the rest of the groups easily exceeds Shock Collar's. So why are they struggling?"

"Um..." Hearth Ember uncertainly trailed off. Instead, it was Brookie who suddenly answered.

"There's potential for infighting."

Jisha raised an eyebrow. "That's right."

\*Looks like he's not a brainless brute after all.\*

Shock Collar had a smaller number of players than the rest of the organizations combined, yet the larger number of players was unable to make any headway. The solution seemed obvious - just work together, right?

A truce and/or alliance was only effective if all parties had a specific goal in mind and trusted each other. Though their goals aligned, any one of them could turn on another at any moment. With the looming threat of betrayal, it was impossible for them to form any strong bonds.

However, at the end of the day, the reason to band together genuinely existed. With a strong enough commanding voice, it was possible to rally them together.

The group nodded in understanding as Jisha explained this to everyone.

She could easily assume the role of this commander if she wanted, but there wouldn't be much in it for her. Instead, she would move forward with her other plan.

"Do any of you know when exactly the auction starts?" she asked.

"At the top of the next hour, so in 30 minutes," Hearth Ember replied.

"Perfect. So here's what we'll do..."

---

Brookie and Dharr were dumbfounded when they heard what Jisha said. Hearth Ember's reaction wasn't pretty, but it was clear she trusted the mystery player. Abandoned Snow, on the other hand, looked like she had no idea what was going on.

"What the fuck? That's highway robbery!" Dharr exclaimed.



"Yeah... But you want items from that auction, don't you? I can guarantee that for you." This response from the mystery player was all it took to sway him.

"... Fine! But you better promise your end of the deal!"

"I have no reason not to," the cloaked player said as they (probably) rolled their eyes. "This amount of money means nothing to me. You, on the other hand, better think twice if you want to cross \*me\*."

Brookie couldn't clearly see their face, but under that hood was an undoubtedly chilling glare - a sensation he only felt due to his years of experience in martial arts. He glanced at Dharr... who was oblivious to the pressure.

Someone that could make even someone like Brookie feel pressure... who was this player? Could it be...?

"By the way..." they - no, \*she\* - said as she slowly pulled down her hood. Vivid, wavy maroon hair fluttered in the sunlight. Her head tilted back as she brushed the hair away from her face. Her blue-green eyes shone with confidence.

Brookie suppressed an urge to chuckle. His instincts were right - this player was worth following!

"I might as well properly introduce myself now. I'm Fae Sol. Good to be working with you," she said as she extended an arm towards him.

"... Likewise."

Brookie accepted Fae Sol's handshake. Shortly after, all of the cash in his Coin Pouch vanished. Perhaps it was a bit naïve of him to believe this, but he was sure Fae Sol would keep her word. So, he decided to move forward with this plan.

The three other players around him experienced the same thing - all of the money drained from their accounts.

Fae Sol mischievously smiled as the transactions completed.

"Let's start the show, shall we?"

## **23 - Gathering Allies**

The "battle" of Covan was making no further progression - all sides remained at a standstill. The Sentinels silently patrolled in the background, so every argumentative statement was dished out with caution. Fortunately, it didn't look like the Sentinels reacted to simple words.

These words were all the small orgs could manage to hurl at the dominant Shock Collar. They'd managed to take almost all of the lucrative quests while heckling everyone else near the entrance of the auction house.

The small orgs wanted to form alliances, but as expected, they were shooting sidelong glances at their would-be compatriots. It was clear no one trusted each other. Would this series of unfortunate events continue until the auction began?

Just as everyone was thinking this, five unknown players joined the fray. Every guild player noticed them, but they had to keep their eyes on each other. But the question rang at the back of everyone's minds: who were these players?

Until this point, the unaffiliated players kept their distance - they didn't want to get involved with this. Most of them were lower leveled, anyway. Plus, not everyone clearly understood the ins and outs of the Sentinels' functions. Would they get punished for trying to break in? No one knew.

But these five players moved with confidence, and all of them began striking up conversations with the guild players.

"Hey there," a beautiful girl with fiery red hair quietly said as she approached the nearest player. "How many guilds are lined up here? And who's the leader of yours? I've got an interesting proposition for you."

Hutian Crest, the nearby player in question, gave Hearth Ember an irritated look. "You don't even know the situation here, and you wanna butt in? Who do you think you are? I'm the leader of my clan here, so say it to me if you got anything to say."

Hearth Ember was unfazed by Hutian Crest's attitude. "How about we band together to take down Shock Collar?" she asked.

Hutian Crest looked at her as if she were stupid. Many players had already attempted this sort of thing, so how was this any different?

"Yeah? How are we going to do that?" he said. He wasn't very optimistic, but \*maybe\*, just maybe this was the stone that'd tip the scales. This was an unknown third... or sixth? seventh? party - The number wasn't relevant, but if they joined hands, could they break the standoff?

"Ha, easy. We just need 80 to 100% of your liquid assets."

If Hutian Crest were drinking something right now, it wouldn't have stayed in his mouth.

What the heck? What kind of nonsense was this?

"Take a look at this," Hearth Ember cheerily continued like nothing was out of the ordinary.

Hutian Crest raised an eyebrow - she'd sent a snapshot of a coin pouch. When he saw the value of said pouch, he couldn't help but do a double take.

\*>Coin Pouch:\*

\*>Bronzium: 25\*

...

"There's no way this is yours," he retorted. It was obvious he'd be doubtful - even as the leader of this small org, he hadn't seen this much cash today!

"It's up to you whether you want to believe me," Hearth Ember said. "And, by the way, remember that this is only \*my\* coin pouch."

"What do you mean?"

"Haah, Do I gotta explain it for you? Look, we came with five players."

"Wha- you don't mean..."

"That's exactly what I mean."

Hutian Crest went silent as he processed this information. If he understood correctly, the net worth of Hearth Ember's mystery guild was around five times this amount. This was even more unbelievable.

"Prove it. Send me a snap of all of their coin pouches!"

"If you insist," Hearth Ember said as she shrugged.

When Hutian Crest received four new images, his eyes widened once more in disbelief.

"Well?" Hearth Ember said.

"Uh, well, this..."

"Are you still not convinced?"

"Well, even with this much money, I don't know if we can band together to take everyone else out..."

"And if I told you we have more than five people on our side?"

"What?"

"Look around again. How many players are just standing there spectating? Did you not consider that we could have more allies in the pack? Also, you're not the only one who's being offered this deal. Actually, one - oh! Another deal went through, so now two of your competitors are already in with our plan."

"Shit!" Hutian Crest grit his teeth. The higher-ups had tasked them with retrieving as many items as possible from the auction. Shock Collar had already diminished their chances at winning even a single item, but if they had to go against this new impromptu group as well, they would have absolutely no chance!

\*>Hutian Crest: Everyone, send me 80% of your Coin Pouches now!\*

He sent this message in his party chat, and there was some obvious resistance to this plan.

\*>Hutian Crest: There's no time to waste. If we don't do this, we'll have a 0% chance of winning anything. Do you want to get chewed out by corporate?\*

This message seemed to get through to them, and Hutian Crest's guildmates reluctantly coughed up the funds.

"Here. But I want hard evidence that our money's safe, deal?" Hutian Crest said as he handed Hearth Ember the money. "Otherwise, all of our guild will hunt you down."

"Sure," Hearth Ember shrugged. "Obviously, we don't want to make an enemy of everyone here."

Hutian Crest sighed in relief. After all, the names of these players were already known, and this wasn't the only Village in which these org members were stationed. They would be merciless with any traitors!

"Good doing business with you. Once it's time, send a friend request to Fae Sol and meet us near the doors, alright?" Hearth Ember said.

"Roger that."

"Okay, see you around~"

With that, Hearth Ember's mission was complete.

---

Dharr skeptically looked at the mountain of cash he'd just received. It was a grand sum, but was it really enough to take out an entire large guild? This thought plagued the back of his mind nonstop.

"I don't get it..."

He didn't even think the plan would get *\*this\** far. After all, who in their right mind would immediately give up a large percentage of their liquid funds? Yet reality was in front of him - all he did was follow the instructions he was given, and voilà... free money.

However, there were still more phases of the plan to go. It could go wrong at any moment, and there were definitely things Fae Sol deliberately kept hidden.

What was it? A lack of trust? Probably. He didn't trust her, either. Yet Brookie followed orders like a loyal dog the moment she gave him instructions. Dharr even suspected she used some sort of hypnosis or charm technique.

Naturally, this lack of trust bore fruit to thoughts of double-crossing. Why couldn't he just run off with this money? It was quite a bit more than he'd saved up on his own. Was he going crazy? He needed validation. Was there anyone else in their makeshift group that harbored doubts?

The two girls likely didn't... for whatever reason, they seemed to completely Fae Sol. Obviously, Brookie wasn't an option, either. So that only left...

"Castle..."

He didn't know what to make of this character. What was this kid thinking? Why did *\*he\** agree? There was no other way to know but to ask!

"Hey, brat," Dharr said as he found Castle mingling a distance away from the crowd. "Did ya get the cash?"

Castle curtly nodded.

"Hm... What're you thinkin'? Doesn't this plan seem a bit off?"

"Um... No..." Castle quietly replied.

"That doesn't sound very convincing. Why did ya decide to go along with this in the first place?"

"Uh, well... That's..."

Unbefitting of his avatar's stern looks, Castle's eyes frantically darted around.

"Kid... Well, not sure if you're really a kid, but... Use your head a little. Isn't this a bit weird?"

"Uh..?"

Once he was prompted to think, Castle's nerves seemed to settle down.

"Well, now that I think about it, maybe it's a bit strange..."

"Good, so I'm not crazy, yeah?"

"Well, I don't know about that, but... I think I got scammed like this before."

Dharr sighed in satisfaction. His misgivings were validated!

"So what're you gonna do? Now that I've got all this cash... I think I'll run for it."

Castle doubtfully tilted his head.

"Are you any good at games? Everyone here saw your name. You'll just get chased around."

"Wha- Shut up, brat."

"I'm not scared of them, though. I'll be able to run away just fine," Castle snarkily said.

Dharr clenched his fist in frustration, but Castle continued.

"Anyway, this auction will have some nice items. I'm staying."

"Oh. Hm..." Dharr rubbed his chin in thought - he hadn't considered this. Were the auction items really worth it? Before he could come to a clear decision, Castle entered the auction house alone.

Dharr wanted to leave, but Castle's words haunted him. "You'll just get chased around". There were probably almost 50 guild-affiliated players in the immediate vicinity...

"Tch."

His willpower dissipated. What if he did get caught? Would they just let him off with one death? Would they hunt him until he fell back to level 1? The risk... probably wasn't worth it.

Grumbling to himself, Dharr followed Castle inside.

"This better be worth it..."

---

As her newfound underlings completed their tasks, Jisha made her way to the Village's bank. It was quite easy to spot, since it had the word "BANK" embedded on the front of the building.

At the moment, there was not much she could do with a Silverium coin - its denomination was simply too large. At this bank, it was possible to trade certain denominations for others.

"Hello, I'd like to exchange Silverium for Bronzium, please," she said to Tali, the teller NPC.

"Of course. There is no service fee for down-trading, so here's 100 Bronzium."

\*>-1 Silverium\*

\*>+100 Bronzium\*

This amount of Bronzium was less than pocket change in the late game, but for now, it was probably too much to even have in one account.

\*Something something about eggs in a basket, yeah?\*

"Do you offer wired accounts?" Jisha asked.

"I'm surprised you asked - we do! Since you're the first Beyonder to open one with us, you can open one with no strings attached."

"Great. I'll deposit 50 Bronzium to start."

\*>-50 Bronzium\*

The account Jisha opened was just like an ordinary checking account. For the time being, 50 Bronzium would be stored here. It didn't hurt to be too safe.

"Thanks for doing business with us. Have a nice day."

"You as well."

With the rest of her money, it was time to see if there was anything worth buying at the Village's frontier and materials shops.

\*Anything useful here...?\*

It was always important to browse shops of any small settlement even if it was for a brief moment. There were countless stories about how players managed to find some rare item for cheap in the frontier shop of a remote Hamlet. And even if there weren't any rare items, it was very possible that one could find other expensive items for a better price.

And today, checking the shops paid off.

\*Oh? It's interesting they sell these here...\*

What was this item?

\*>Small Lightweight Tracker: 1 Bronzium\*

It was an item that could be paired with a map. Once paired, this small device would relay its position to the map it was paired with even if the terrain was unknown. It had quite a long range, so losing it wasn't an issue for now. Its main uses were keeping track of monsters or objects.

\*Hmm...\*

\*>Hearth Ember: It's done.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Oh?\*

\*>Friend request received from user "Dolphin Killer".\*

\*>Friend request received from user "Aphro Expo".\*

\*>Friend request received from user "Hutian Crest".\*

\*>Friend request received from user "Simulator Child".\*

\*Friend request received from user "Censer".\*

A slew of friend requests suddenly piled in as Hearth Ember reported the status.

\*>Fae Sol: Good work.\*



\*Alright, it's decided.\*

Jisha accepted the friend requests, purchased 5 trackers, and strode back to the auction house. Using this spare time, she created a group chat with her newfound allies.

\*>Hutian Crest: This better be worth it...\*

\*>Dolphin Killer: Are you kidding me? It'll be more than worth it! I can't wait to see the looks on that stupid guild when we beat their faces in...\*

\*>Aphro Expo: Agreed. There's no better time to come together in a truce than right now. We are all struggling together, so we might as well do something about it while we can!\*

\*>Simulator Child: You guys are too optimistic. Whoever organized this didn't even tell us the catch. Something's definitely going on here...\*

\*>Dolphin Killer: You say that, but you still accepted...\*

...

Jisha smiled as she watched the chaos unfold in the chat.

\*Everyone's so frantic... In chat, and in-game, too. But it looks like they're ready to go. It's showtime.\*

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! Are you all ready?" she flamboyantly asked the crowd.

The unexpected diversion caused the chaos to halt for a few seconds, but it didn't take long for them to speak their mind.

"You better promise your end of the deal," said Aphro Expo.

"Yeah, otherwise..." Dolphin Killer ominously said.

Several of the guild players made threatening gestures.

Jisha suppressed a chuckle.

These people scammed newbies and threatened to gang up on a single player. Did they think they would get off easy?

She took off her hood and revealed her face. There was no good reason to do this - in fact, it was counterintuitive. Logically, it was optimal to remain hidden, but... some emotions overrode logic.

"Are you stupid?" Hutian Crest exclaimed. "I don't know how you got your hands on such a stealth item, but you're deliberately disabling it? We know your name and face. If you run off with our money, we'll kill you back to level 1!"

Jisha smirked as she fiddled with several ammo pellets in her hand.

"I can get away if I really want to," she said as she nonchalantly leaned against the wall.

"You-! You're just one girl. You think you can get away from all of us?"

Tens of unfriendly gazes landed on her. Jisha returned the favor with an icy glare.

\*Night walk.\*

"!!!"

She toggled Night Walk - Shahar's Nightwalker's ability that decreased Presence by 99%.

The avatar Fae Sol seemed to disappear from the world. The guild players froze in shock. This shock turned to confusion, and confusion turned to panic. But before everyone fully processed what happened, Jisha disabled Night Walk right in front of Censer.

"Wha-"

Before he knew it, a slingshot was drawn pointblank at his throat. His eyes widened. Where were the Sentinels? This was a threat of physical violence!

But the pressure disappeared as abruptly as it started. Censer looked back at the building in front of them - Jisha resumed her nonchalant pose against the wall as if nothing had just happened.

"What do you think now?"

"..."

Their minds were blank. Had they let their guards down because the avatar in front of them was that of a young girl? Perhaps subconsciously, some of them had, but these were all experienced players; none of them would be fazed by something as simple as this.

Yet now they were all stunned into submission. They could only silently stare at the fierce-looking girl in front of them.

"What... what are your conditions?" Simulator Child asked.

"My conditions, huh... How about I tell you after the auction?"

"That... That's simply too far. Tell us now. Or..."

"Or what? You're going to leave? You'll turn against us? Can you afford to do either of those right now?"

More silence.

"If anyone wants to leave, you are free to do so. No refunds!"

"..."

Most, if not all, of their cash was in the hands of an unknown organization. They had to take the risk - retrieving items from this auction was paramount! Naturally, no one volunteered.

"It looks like you are all very obedient! Let's head inside, shall we?"

Jisha entered the Auction House leaving the five leaders outside.

They briefly looked at each other before trudging inside like prisoners heading into a cell.

---

\*>Fae Sol: Dharr, Castle... are you inside already? Where are you?\*

There were still 10 minutes before the auction started, but the inside of the auction house was starting to get crowded.

\*Where the heck are they?\*

\*>Dharr: We're on the far right wall.\*

Dharr waved her down. Though he wasn't as big as Brookie, he was still larger than average. Picking him out among the crowd was a fairly simple task.

"Let's get this show on the road, hm?" she said as she casually approached the two of them.

"..."

Neither of them responded.

"What's going on? Did you forget the last step of the plan?"

"..."

Jisha's expression turned serious.

"Come on. Hand over the cash," she said with an outstretched hand.

"... Why should we?" Dharr asked.

\*Are they trying to betray me?\*

Jisha had half expected this to happen. It would have been stranger if they were 100% obedient. Not everyone was Brookie, after all.

"Didn't I tell you to worry about yourselves if you betrayed me? I wonder if you've thrown caution to the wind..." she said dramatically.

"Yeah, I wonder," Dharr harrumphed. "If you want the cash so bad, \*make\* me hand it over."

"Ha... Hahahaha!"

Dharr grimaced. Was this person crazy?

"Sorry... It's just that... Are you serious? \*Make\* you hand it over? Is there a more childish response?" Jisha looked at Castle. "Maybe \*you're\* the adult in this situation."

In truth, Jisha didn't care about Dharr that much. Sure, he had a bit of money on him right now, but she'd already written him off as a clown. Castle, on the other hand, was a future Tier 9 player - he was someone she wanted to get under her wing at all costs.

She sent Castle the battle footage from the cemetery and timestamped the highlights.

"Decide whether you want to follow me after watching that. We've got seats in the upper balcony."

With a wave, she departed to meet Brookie, Hearth Ember, and Abandoned Snow who'd saved the best seats in the house.

"Huh?" Hearth Ember quietly uttered. "Where'd they go?"

Jisha silently sat down.

"Uh... Fae. Did they run off?"

"Just wait."

"Okay..."

One minute passed.

Two minutes.

Five minutes...

"It's about to start... I guess they really did run off," Hearth Ember disappointedly said.

But one minute before the auction was due to start, two familiar figures climbed the stairs and showed themselves on the balcony.

Dharr still looked a bit disgruntled, but Castle was white as a sheet. He trembled nonstop as he sat down next to her.

"H- Here... Here's the money."

A system message appeared on Jisha's "HUD". All of the transactions were now complete.

\*>Coin Pouch:\*

\*>Bronzium: 69\*

\*>Copper: 2,408\*

Jisha leaned back and placed a hand on her chin.

"I'm glad we have an agreement, Castle."

"..."

"Now, just relax and enjoy the show."

## **24 - Crushing Covan's Auction (1)**

Players fervently checked their system times in anticipation for the top of the hour.

"Time really slows down when you're waiting for something, huh?"

"Yeah, it almost feels like we've been waiting twice as long."

At 0300 natural hours, the lights dimmed and the audience quieted down.

The hall inside was shaped almost like an amphitheater. The balconies looked out above everyone else, and the rows of ordinary seats sloped downwards. The stage rested in the lowest spot, and its lighting drew in everyone's attention like a gravitational field.

On the rearmost edge of the stage were large tan curtains with intricate floral designs stitched in brown. The curtains fluttered, and an NPC auctioneer appeared from backstage. She had a modest appearance, and her dress almost seemed to blend in with the background.

Cheers erupted from the audience. The auctioneer waved at the crowd causing some players to go even more wild.

This was clearly unexpected for her - with a mystified expression, she signaled everyone to calm down. After another minute of chaos, the NPC finally began the program.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the first auction of Covan Village featuring Beyonders! I'm your host Kayla, and I hope everyone enjoys their stay. The finale will be something to look forward to!"

The auctioneer NPC, Kayla, wasn't holding any sort of device to amplify sound, yet every word resounded through the auditorium crystal clear. And when the players heard a term they weren't familiar with, they began murmuring among themselves.

"Beyonders? What is that?"

"Don't look at me. This is different from the beta."

"Is that some sort of rare item?"

"Is there something special about this auction?"

...

Though Jisha had heard this term countless times in her past life, the current players had no idea that they were basically alien beings to the NPCs, the current residents of the world. This fourth wall-breaking quirk wasn't unique to Synergy, but the fact that NPCs realized there was another world outside their own gave them a little more depth.

Even as a top player in her past life, neither she nor anyone she knew of truly understood where the name "Beyonder" came from. The most believable hypothesis was that players came from "beyond" the scope of the virtual world. However, this hypothesis could neither be confirmed nor denied, as no NPC would ever give a direct answer if you tried to ask.

The players and NPCs in the audience looked on in anticipation in lieu of these "Beyonders".

And yes - there were NPCs in the audience. Just like players, NPCs from all over the world of Synergy could take part in events that were usually player-only in other games. It was a factor most people neglected in the game's infancy, but players quickly realized that they weren't the only intelligent beings in this new world.

"I will now be introducing our first item. As a cheer to the Beyonders, our first item is an ode to their arrival!"

Kayla clapped twice, and an Ancient Middle Age-styled wooden cart automatically rolled out from behind the stage.

"Wow, it's moving on its own? Doesn't look like it has a motor."

"Yeah, sometimes it's hard to remember that this is just VR."

\*Haha, I forgot how easily newbies are impressed.\*

Every minor incongruity with the real world fascinated players who'd never experienced hyper-realism of all five senses. Jisha herself had been infatuated with many aspects of this virtual world for many years after its launch. Even over 11 natural years after the game's launch, she still found things that surprised her once in a while.

The item on the cart, which was now in the center of the stage, was covered with thin black cloth. With exaggerated movements, Kayla tore the veil off.

"Ooh..."

"What the..."

"That's... something."

"As a welcome to our world, here is one of Starshine's unique feathered friends!" Kayla announced.

Inside a flimsy-looking iron cage was a large ball of... fluff.

\*Wow, that thing's fat.\*

\*>Name: Hydrangean Turkey\*

\*>Level: 1\*

A flightless bird whose body was too large and wings were too small. A flurry of blue and purple gradients sparkled on its countless fine feathers. Though not rare, they weren't exactly common, either. They could appear anywhere on the mainland, but since they were so weak and bright-colored, they died quickly in the wild. As such, they were only a novelty.

But it wasn't just any novelty. It was the *\*first\** novelty of its kind.

"100 Copper!"

"160 Copper!"

"180 Copper!"

...

NPCs went into a frenzy. The bids quickly exceeded the bird's regular price.

*\*Good, it's exactly as I remember!\**

Items from this specific auction were a bit special. It was the first auction in all of Synergy to host Beyonders. Regardless of where or when it occurred, people always had an infatuation with the "first" of anything. As the first item in the first auction with Beyonders, its price went far beyond material value.

*\*>Censer: What... What are these prices?\**

*\*>Simulator Child: Looks like we'll have to give up on this one.\**

*\*>Hutian Crest: ... Do we really have to?\**

"10 Bronzium!"

"10 Bronzium, 50 Copper!"

"20 Bronzium!"

...

"Twenty Bronzium going once! Going-"

"10 Silverium."

...

...



...

Silence.

It was a nonsensical bid.

A bucket of cold water poured over the audience's fiery passion.

\*>Aphro Expo: Guh, seriously, what the heck is this?\*

"Huh? Huh?"

Hearth Ember couldn't remain calm. Nobody in the audience could, either.

"What's happening?" she asked.

Jisha shrugged.

"What- how can you be so calm? This didn't happen in the beta! We can't even afford it now!"

"Relax. If even we can't afford it, do you think anyone else can?"

"Obviously? You can't place a bid if you don't have the funds. Oh, wait..."

It was impossible for players to have this net worth right now, but players weren't the only residents of the auction. It didn't take long for others to realize this bid was from an NPC!

"What... How is that fair?"

"We've only been playing for a few hours! How are we supposed to beat that?"

"The worst progression of any RPG. I'm refunding tomorrow!"

For a bit, even Kayla forgot to speak.

"A- anyway, ten Silverium going once! Going twice! ... Sold to the anonymous world resident! Please come claim your items after the main event, thank you!"

There was no suspense whatsoever. Several players groaned. Of course it was sold! Was the rest of this thing going to be normal?

Only Jisha lazily leaned back in her seat - this was to be expected.

Another way Synergy differed from mainstream games on the market was that various game development decisions were extremely odd. In fact, a lot of these decisions made the game objectively worse. The issue everyone was complaining about right now was one such oddity.

The average level of players and NPCs in the audience was under 10, but nothing stopped NPCs from other parts of the world from participating in these auctions. In other words, the NPC that'd made the purchase wasn't from nearby.

Ordinarily, NPCs wouldn't stray far from their designated level zones, but today was an extraordinary circumstance. Somehow, somewhere, a high-level NPC caught wind of the arrival of new beings in their world. Gambling on the fact that these new beings, Beyonders, would significantly impact the world in the future, this NPC underwent an arduous journey to the outskirts of the world.

Eventually, this gamble would pay off.

The price of this bird, the first symbol of gratitude from NPCs to players, would skyrocket as the game got more and more popular. Even the day it died became somewhat of a historic meme.

\*I used to be jealous of lucky situations like this, but the Goddess must be on my side.\*

There was no need for Jisha to gamble on the future - she already knew it!

In the meantime, Kayla had already started auctioning the second item - the level 5 "Oak Knuckles" looked almost like brass knuckles, but made of... well, oak.

"30 Copper!"

"55 Copper!"

"60 Copper!"

...

Waves of relief swept through the crowd. These bids were much more reasonable! Fortunately, the mystery high-level NPC seemed to have no interest in this item.

\*>Censer: We want this. Bid 150!\*

\*>Aphro Expo: No, 160!\*

\*>Hutian Crest: 170!\*

\*>Simulator Child: ...\*

"350 Copper!"

\*>Dolphin Killer: What???? Why?\*

Before Jisha could speak, someone else placed another ridiculously high bid. Understandably, many were confused.

"Three hundred and fifty Copper... Going once!"

\*>Hutian Crest: Someone bid for it!\*

\*>Censer: 350 Copper for a level 5 weapon? You're insane. You bid for it!\*

An item that was only around 100 Copper on the market was selling for more than three times as much. Why? Because the same "novelty" that applied to the turkey applied to the rest of these items, too, just to a far lesser degree.

The beta players, who'd played the game for several weeks, saw this happen in real time.

\*>Simulator Child: It's not worth it. It'll just break, anyway.\*

However, weapons had limited durability - if used improperly or too much, it would cease to function. Did the value of this "novelty" weigh more than the weapon's impotence?

"Three hundred and fifty Copper going twice!"

...

More silence.

Clearly, no one in the audience believed it did. Which lunatic was spending an obscene amount of money right out of the gate?

"Sold to the Beyond Luden!"

When Kayla announced the name of the customer, everyone understood.

Some grumbled in their seats.

Some vehemently booed him.

One even attempted to resort to physical violence which prompted a Sentinel to silently drag him away.

\*Looks like he's the leader.\*

The only one willing to spend so much right away was the one with the most money. And right now, there was only one guild that had garnered infamy in this Village!

---

Luden Grace believed he only had one purpose in this world: money! Watching his net worth rise was euphoric; it was almost like trying to get a high score on some arcade game. How did it become like this? Ever since he was young, he had some sort of sixth sense that told him how to use his money. This sense single handedly catapulted him out of poverty. It was like some divine being was speaking to him - this was his purpose!

When he was 4, he begged for change on the streets and scrounged for cash wherever possible. When he was 5, he had saved up enough for an e-reader and publicly rented it out. Over the next several years, he expanded this "library" to include other gadgets, and by age 7 he could easily sustain himself with passive income.

With this money, he traded various stocks and tokens and by age 16, he had a net worth higher than most adults. When he was 22, he bought out several companies and prime real estate properties in their infancy and watched their values grow manyfold.

However, a couple weeks ago, just after his 30th birthday, his worldview flipped upside down.

It started like any ordinary day - he checked the markets and the status of his portfolios. Every day, he would almost automatically know how to move this money around. But for some reason, he couldn't. His "sense" had vanished.

Imagine suddenly losing a crucial sense like sight or hearing... wouldn't you panic? This is how frantic Luden was while staring at the charts for hours.

It couldn't be!

How? How how how how how...

He hadn't even achieved his goal yet. He was nowhere near the richest man in the world. In around 30 more years, he was certain he could get there. But now, that dream was shattered.

He frantically surfed through Etherless attempting to find any sort of information on investing. He slowly descended into madness while browsing through get-rich-quick schemes. But just like a deaf person couldn't be cured with a book titled "How to Hear", all of Luden's efforts to reclaim this skill were for naught. A part of \*him\* was gone.

But that's when he found it. An innocent-looking game available on full-dive platforms called Synergy. It boasted technology quite literally out of this world - nothing like it had ever been done before. And it called to him. It was a strange feeling, almost like the day he first discovered his special sense.

Could Synergy bring him and money together again?

As much as he wanted to jump in, he decided to do some basic research. However, he was shocked to find no information about the developers. Even if the project was a scam, there would at least be some bits of false information. However, there was nothing. On top of that, the developers never communicated with the public. There was no way to contact them, either, as they didn't use social media.

For a brief moment, he was at a loss. What was the right choice?

But Luden was itching for *\*anything\** to cure his "illness". This newfound opportunity called to him. Perhaps it was another divine revelation.

And when he entered the world for the first time...

*\*...\**

He was a fish back in water. This was *\*home\**.

His sixth sense returned, and it told him there were profits to be made.

So, he decided to start a gaming organization solely for the purpose of earning money within the world of Synergy. Though there was no clear revenue stream from the game yet, Luden had a strong feeling that real currency wouldn't be too different from this virtual one in the not-too-distant future.

Thus, Shock Collar was born. His public reasoning for the name was that it would make their enemies seize up in fear. But his true reasoning was that he never wanted his sixth sense to leave him again!

He didn't play for the full duration of the beta, but it was enough to let him know what to do once the game released for real.

He was sure that some items in a tiny Village called Covan would skyrocket in the future. He would do whatever he could to secure these items!

And now...

"Sold to the Beyonder Luden!"

Satisfied, Luden reclined in his seat. There was nothing to worry about. He knew his instincts would lead him to success.

## 25 - Crushing Covan's Auction (2)

\*>Hutian Crest: Maybe we should have bid on it?\*

\*>Censer: No, let's save our strength for the final items.\*

\*Hm...\*

Jisha wasn't sure which of the auction items were more valuable than others since the price they sold at didn't necessarily equate to their value in the future. However, there was always a constant with auction houses: the most expensive items were always sold last!

Obviously, the ideal outcome was winning every single item. But even their alliance plus Jisha's net worth would likely not be able to outbid everyone on everything.

The crowd remained rowdy for another several minutes despite Kayla's best attempts to calm them down. Finally, the cart rolled off stage and returned with another item.

"Next, we have a masterful potion from a world resident who's very dear to us. It's one of the best in the business under level 20 - Quex Chet's Homeopathic Twine Remedy! Bidding starts at 20 Copper!"

\*Ugh, useless.\*

Kayla wasn't wrong... this potion *was* one of the best under level 20. However, its efficacy after that point was practically null. If things went really well, Jisha would cross that threshold before morning in the real world.

Plus, potions were consumables. No matter how much you tried to preserve them, they would get used up eventually. Most potions also expired, and this one wasn't an exception.

But just because it was useless to Jisha didn't mean it was useless to everyone else.

"30 Copper!"

"50 Copper!"

"55 Copper!"

...

\*>Hutian Crest: Bid 70!\*

\*>Dolphin Killer: No, 80.\*

\*>Hutian Crest: Tch... 1 Bronzium.\*

"1 Bronzium!"

For the first time tonight, Jisha placed a public bid. This number weeded out most as sighs of discontent could be heard from the crowd.

"1 Bronzium, 10 Copper."

\*>Hutian Crest: 2 Bronzium.\*

\*>Simulator Child: Are you insane?\*

\*>Fae Sol: If no one else has anything, I'm placing Hutian's bid.\*

...

No one else replied.

"2 Bronzium!"

"2 Bronzium, 25 Copper."

\*Someone's still bidding?\*

Unsurprisingly, the culprit was none other than Luden.

\*>Hutian Crest: We've got the money, right? 3 Bronzium.\*

"3 Bronzium, then."

"..."

Luden didn't respond. He was clearly hesitant about putting more money on the table for a consumable like this one.

"Three Bronzium going once...! Going twice!"

"..."

"Sold to the anonymous Beyonder!"

\*>-3 Bronzium\*

"Please come claim your items after the main event, thank you!"

\*>Hutian Crest: Ha, take that, Luden!\*

\*>Censer: Ugh, the only thing you've done here is get ripped off...\*

\*>Fae Sol: After the auction, meet me near the stage. I'll distribute everything there.\*

This was the gist of the plan. With all of their cash pooled in one account, they'd be able to successfully snatch most of the auction items from right under Shock Collar's noses.

The alliance's morale was up, and the auction continued. The cart brought the third item onto the stage which Kayla introduced with zeal.

"This glorious shield is brought to us by the world resident Arvinter, a citizen of Azhen Town! This is the Claysque Frontplate; meticulously crafted at the behest of countless Clay Dolls, it's a reliable tool that practically nullifies all damage below level 10! Bidding starts at 500 Copper!"

"550 Copper!"

"570 Copper!"

"580 Copper!"

...

As this shield was created by an NPC from a Town, it was a clear step up from the previous items. Players' bids rapidly piled on top of each other.

"1100 Copper!"

"..."

"1100 Copper going once!"

This was the breaking point for many, and bids significantly slowed.

"12 Bronzium."

But, determined to shut everyone else down, the player called Luden pressed on. No one else could compete, but bids flew left and right in the group chat, and Jisha matched his numbers.



"12 Bronzium, 50 Copper!"

"... 13 Bronzium."

"13 Bronzium, 80 Copper."

"13 Bronzium, 80 Copper going once!..."

\*>Censer: I'll take it for 15 Bronzium.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Hm? Alright, then.\*

"15 Bronzium!"

Murmurs sprung up in the crowd. None of them had nearly this much, so they were relegated to spectators. They'd assumed a single guild had a monopoly over this auction. But who was this player taking on the much-feared Shock Collar? A dark horse had arrived, and everyone prayed for an upset!

"15 Bronzium going once!"

"..."

No bids.

"15 Bronzium going twice!"

"... Tch, 17 Bronzium!"

Just as it was about to sell, Luden reluctantly raised the bid.

Audience members sighed. Perhaps their hopes were too high. This was Shock Collar they were talking about, after all, the guild that'd terrorized the Village for several hours straight. Who could be their match?

But...

\*>Censer: 20, it's worth it.\*

"20 Bronzium."

"20 Bronzium going once... going twice..."

Everyone waited with bated breath. The dark horse did have something up their sleeve after all! But would this be enough?

"Sold to the anonymous Beyonder for 20 Bronzium!"

It was!

The audience suddenly erupted with cheers! It was so abrupt that even Jisha was taken aback.

\*>Hutian Crest: YEAAAAH, DUMBASS, TAKE THAT!\*

...

...

\*Wha- How much did these guys do to cause a reaction like this?\*

\*>Censer: You did nothing, that was my cash.\*

\*>Hutian Crest: You mean OUR cash, comrade.\*

\*>Censer: ...\*

\*>Simulator Child: \*Sigh\*... Regardless, it's great we've taken something from them.\*

Jisha shook her head as she sifted through the group's silly messages.

\*Haha... It's nice they're getting along... for now.\*

---

"What's going on here!?" Luden yelled as he slammed his armrest.

How was this happening? He refused to believe they were seriously being outbid! They were supposed to have a monopoly! Yet a fierce back and forth took place between him and an unknown player?

An unknown player! A vein bulged on his forehead.

"Why is there no information about this player?" he chastised a subordinate sitting right next to him.

"Well... There wasn't any information about her before today. I managed to get her name from a player from a guild called Ravaging Crows, and apparently her name's Fae Sol."

"..."

As someone who knew the usernames of all the major players in the auction's beta, this name was foreign to Luden as well.

"Since she didn't participate in the beta auction, it's probably someone's alternate account. There is no further information about her. Even her class and level are unknown."

Luden bit his lip and refrained from berating his messenger further. This was strange. How did a new name suddenly show up out of nowhere and successfully take command of multiple other guilds?

Of course, he'd caught a glimpse of their shenanigans right outside the auction house, but he didn't think anything of it. Even in the low chance they'd successfully ally with each other, Luden was confident that Shock Collar still had more capital than those teams combined.

But that clearly wasn't the case. He'd underestimated them.

"Another piece of news: she's the only player in the vicinity with a stealth item..."

"Shut up," Luden growled. "I don't want to hear another word about your incompetence. We're winning the rest of the items."

"... Yes."

---

On the other side of the aisle, Jisha spotted a very frustrated man. She reclined in her seat with a satisfied smile.

\*I'm not a sadist, but... Your resentment feeds me.\*

Luden looked her way with a vicious glare, but she simply gave a sweet smile and waved back.

She'd heard the cheers of the crowd just now. Castle, without a doubt, wasn't the only newbie Shock Collar had preyed upon. How could she not feel vindicated when Luden was getting a taste of his own medicine?

The cart wheeled itself to the center for the fifth time. Like a hawk, Luden zealously stared at the item atop it.

And he wasn't the only one excited for it. Before the auctioneer even said a word, the audience excitedly clamored, and the group chat exploded.

\*>Censer: Is that what I think it is?\*

\*>Aphro Expo: Yeah. We definitely need that.\*

\*>Dolphin Killer: We need it more!\*

"Here's the only omni-class item of the day! Boosting all attack potential by a significant percentage until level 20, please welcome our Rudimentary Strength Bracelets! The bid will start at 300 Copper!"

It was understandable why everyone was so hyped about it, but once again, it was useless to Jisha from a practical standpoint.

All-class items that boosted stats by a percentage were great, but like the potion from earlier, they had a level cap.

However, this fact didn't stop everyone else from going crazy.

"500 Copper!"

"520 Copper!"

"570 Copper!"

"650 Copper!"

...

The higher up you climbed a mountain, the thinner the air became.

Past 1000 Copper, bidding slowed significantly.

...

\*>Simulator Child: I think I'm willing to put 12 Bronzium on the line for this.\*

\*>Hutian Crest: Careful, buddy. I just might outbid you on that.\*

\*>Simulator Child: You- Did you even contribute that much money to the pool?\*

\*>Hutian Crest: Why does it matter? The pool's shared between all of us now. Like I said earlier... It's *\*our\** cash.\*

\*>Dolphin Killer: You guys are dead if you spend any of my money.\*

\*>Fae Sol: Hm... Well, it's all in my account right now, which means for the time being, it's mine, right? And I give you full permission to go all out!\*

\*>Dolphin Killer: You can't be serious.\*

\*>Hutian Crest: See? 15 Bronzium. Put it up.\*

\*>Censer: Hey, just a reminder that we *\*must\** claim the final item over Shock Collar. Otherwise what's the point of this alliance?\*

\*>Hutian Crest: Right, right.\*

"15 Bronzium."

"..."

This was the breaking point for the audience.

"Fifteen Bronzium going once... Going twice..."

"16 Bronzium."

But for Luden, it was a different story.

Some people in the audience sighed. Just how rich were these two?

\*>Censer: I'm out. Save the money.\*

\*>Aphro Expo: I'll have a shot at this one. 17 Bronzium.\*

\*>Simulator Child: Eh, I'm with Censer on this one. By the way, how much money's left in the pool?\*

\*Here we go...\*

Jisha posted a snapshot of her Coin Pouch in the group chat.

\*>Hutian Crest: Wha- Save money my ass! 25 Bronzium! Put it up, hurry!\*

\*>Aphro Expo: Huh, yeah, there's a lot more than I expected.\*

"Heh, 25 Bronzium!"

The audience watched on in a daze. What was the point in trying to understand this now? To them, these heights were already unreachable. It was impossible to become any more impressed.

...

...

"27 Bronzium."

But Luden kept climbing.

"27 Bronzium, 50 Copper.\*

"28 Bronzium."

...

\*>Aphro Expo: You all don't mind, do you? 30 Bronzium.\*

\*>Hutian Crest: Uh, yeah, I think that's a bit much even for me.\*

"Alright. 30 Bronzium!"

...

"... going once..."

How much was 30 Bronzium, exactly? Was this going to be enough? The audience couldn't stop wondering.

"... going twice..."

Some knew they were wishing for a miracle. They'd seen how many members Shock Collar was touting. But this didn't stop them from hoping!

And...

"Sold to the anonymous Beyonder!"

\*>-30 Bronzium\*

"!!!"

Euphoria ran through the crowd once again. The guild that'd tormented them for hours was meeting their demise!

"Pft... Hahaha...!"

Even Castle, who was silent this entire time, burst out laughing.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Jisha asked.

"Huh? Um, yeah..."

"Haha, well... the show has yet to end. Keep watching!"

---

Luden was fuming. But even more so... he was confused.

Confused on who this player was.

Confused as to how this player had so much money.

Confused as to why he hadn't heard of her before today.

And if that wasn't enough, there was one more minor annoyance.

"You're seriously saying that no matter who you talk to, none of them have recordings or recollections of this player?"

"Yes. All attempts to record this player become corrupted."

"What the fuck kind of stealth item does that???"

"... None of us know, either."

Luden aggressively facepalmed.

"Useless, all of you! What do you think I hired you guys for?"

"..."

How could no one have heard of someone with this much influence? If no one in the game had heard of them, then... maybe the company Arkline had something to do with this?

It was his main competitor from the real world. It was the only possibility he could think of. Who else could it be?

Luden snuck a glance at the mystery player with nearly bloodshot eyes.

She had to run out of money soon. There was no way she had enough to outbid him on every single item! To secure the thousands of Copper for Shock Collar's auction funds, Luden not only had to monopolize almost every quest that dispensed a monetary reward in Covan, but he also had to secure hunting grounds in a wide radius of the Village using the entire manpower of his organization.

Not only that, some of them had even sacrificed their Karma by killing and looting the corpses of players.

Now, he was relegated to the position of an ordinary audience member.

Him, one of the wealthiest people in the Northeast... ordinary?

Luden grinded his teeth in frustration.

If he couldn't even win one item, he wouldn't be able to live with himself!

---

"Take that, Luden!"

"How dare you to ruin the game for new players!"

"Die, Shock Collar! Die, you useless lackeys!"

The taunts from the audience were as strong as ever.

It was the relief of a weight being lifted from their shoulders. For several grueling hours, the new players in Covan were oppressed beyond belief.

Oppressed... wasn't that a bit of an exaggeration? But to players who logged in and wanted to explore a new world? For players that wanted to relax and play a game after a hard day at work? For players who wanted to escape their current reality and have fun? They were definitely feeling oppressed!

When an underdog showed up to free them, of course their reaction was radical!



...

...

Kayla kept signaling for silence with an increasingly bewildered expression. And after several minutes, the audience finally let out all their steam.

The cart rolled onstage once more, revealing the sixth item.

"..."

For a brief moment, Kayla muttered some strange words as her eyebrow twitched in annoyance.

\*...?\*

After a quick pause, she introduced the item.

"This next one is a panacea! Until level 30, it's a full heal, ladies and gentlemen! The bidding starts at 700 Copper!"

When Jisha saw the item being advertised, she immediately understood the reason for Kayla's annoyance.

The item was a spectacular one, but once again, it was a consumable. Even so, its value was roughly on par with the shield's.

"750 Copper!"

"1 Bronzium!"

"1 Bronzium, 50 Copper!"

...

With Luden and Jisha around, the audience didn't have much hope of winning. But they threw their bids in to have a chance at winning this precious item, no matter how small.

The auctioneer ornerily labeled this item as a panacea, but from what Jisha could remember about it...

\*Hehe... This one's a classic!\*

\*>Dolphin Killer: I'm taking this one, everyone. 2 Bronzium.\*

\*>Hutian Crest: No you're not. 5 Bronzium!\*

\*>Dolphin Killer: Tch, 8 Bronzium.\*

\*>Hutian Crest: 20!\*

\*>Censer: Hutian, you've absolutely lost it...\*

"Haha, 20 Bronzium!" Jisha said as she tried not to laugh.

\*This is a lot more entertaining than I expected!\*

---

"I need this."

Luden was determined to snatch the next item no matter what it was. It's not that this was a bad item. In fact, it was quite the opposite. From his beta testing experience, it was a bona-fide full heal potion that not only restored all HP and MP, but also removed all status effects.

But the quality of the item didn't matter. It was a matter of pride at this point. He couldn't lose again!

"21 Bronzium!" he said; he thrust out a vicious attack!

"21 Bronzium, 50 Copper!"

Yet the opponent defensively parried.

"23 Bronzium!"

Another critical strike...

"23 Bronzium, 50 Copper!"

... and another parry.

He could tell his opponent was on her back foot. He was on the offensive, while she played pure defense. She couldn't hold out much longer. This *\*had\** to be the case!

There was only one thing left to do: go in for the finishing blow!

"27 Bronzium!"

"... going once..."

Luden patiently waited. Now, he had all the time in the world.

The audience became restless. Was this the end of the dark horse's run?

"... going twice..."

Luden coldly glared at them. How dare they mock him! It was about time for them to shut up!

He smugly looked over at his opponent; the female avatar didn't appear to be making any more moves.

And he knew his victory was secured.

"Sold to the Beyonder Luden!"

The audience sighed in disappointment. They were indeed hoping for too much - Luden wasn't about to lose *\*every\** battle!

But when Kayla confirmed the sale, Luden thought he saw the anonymous player's face twist into a grin.

It had to be his imagination. Why would her face express such glee upon a loss?

"Please come claim your item after the main event, thank you!"

Luden inhaled deeply to clear his head. Whatever the case was, a win was a win.

Now, the endgame was upon them.

From his beta experience, he knew the next item would be the last. He knew his victory was secured. In fact, he might even have to thank his opponent for allowing him to save all of his money for the finale.

After all, this item was the one that mattered the most!

"I can't wait to see your face after I crush your stupid little alliance!"

## 26 - Crushing Covan's Auction (3 - Final)

\*>Simulator Child: Are you sure that was the right move?\*

\*>Fae Sol: Like I said, that item is far too overpriced.\*

Luden didn't know it yet, but this potion, the Magic Milk Bottle, was a bit of a quirky item. It was indeed a full-heal item under level 30, but it wasn't without drawbacks...

And Jisha had learned this the hard way.

---

Two players stumbled through thick underbrush. Thorns, branches, and leaves plastered all over their bodies as they tore forwards panting uncontrollably.

\*>Fae Sol: Syny, I'm almost dead! Why is there a wild boss here???\*

This was supposedly a peaceful area, so why'd they have to come across such a powerful monster? What was this luck?

\*>Synycal: Aaaaaah! Keep running! Don't worry, Jishy, I've got us covered! Take this!\*

\*>+1 Magic Milk Bottle\*

\*>Fae Sol: Is it a potion?\*

\*>Synycal: Yeah. Just drink it!\*

Jisha downed the bottle without a second thought.

\*!!! Ugh... This isn't... healing...\*

\*>Fae Sol: Syny, what the heck is this?\*

\*>Synycal: Hahahahahaha!\*

\*>Fae Sol: Ugh, my head feels kind of weird... What did you give me???

\*>Synycal: It's the best potion ever! Eep!\*

\*>Party member Synycal has died!\*

Syny tripped and fell in a whimsical manner, leaving her a sitting duck against this over-leveled wild boss.

\*>Fae Sol: Ah... Come on...\*

Shortly after, Jisha stumbled to the ground as dizziness took hold. She looked up to find the large monster swinging a club right at her face... and she couldn't dodge.

Only afterwards did she find out that Syny had spent all her money on this rare potion only for it to expire within two hours...

"After all that work, I wasn't gonna just throw it away! Hmph!"

---

\*Haah, was that really 11 natural years ago? It almost feels like yesterday...\*

All those years ago, when she played Synergy... it was truly fun.

But after the beginning of the Great World War and humanity's race to research the third quantum field... Synergy became a necessity.

\*Sometimes I wish I could go back for real...\*

Sure, right now she'd gone back in time, but all the events that happened in her first life were still real. They lived on as memories, and these events and experiences molded Jisha into a far different person than what she'd originally been. It wasn't a true reset.

\*Beggars can't be choosers, I suppose.\*

Ignorance was bliss, but even if she remained ignorant, it wouldn't stop chaos from sweeping the world. Her future knowledge was paramount, so this situation was a blessing in this cruel reality.

But... while the world remained innocent, she could afford to have a little bit of fun, right? It'd been so long...

She looked at Luden who was reveling in his victory. What kind of face would he make when he discovered the truth about his item?

Kayla seemed to be a bit remorseful for selling such a scammy item, but she continued the auction nonetheless.

"This shiny new set of gauntlets brought to us by Covan's very own Saio! A perfect chance to get an edge up on all fledgling brawlers, the bid on this level 5 Epic item will start at 500 Copper!"

"500 Copper!"

"550 Copper!"

"600 Copper!"

...

"Why did a level 5 item appear now?" Castle asked.

"I think it's because the other items had level restrictions, and this one doesn't," Hearth Ember replied.

"Yeah, you're right," Jisha confirmed.

Items without level restrictions were often more valuable than those with. And since this item's rarity was "Epic", it was almost like a level 15 Common item.

Once again, Jisha wasn't too enthralled by it, but her group chat thought otherwise.

\*>Dolphin Killer: We'll take it. 1000 Copper.\*

\*>Aphro Expo: Nah, we'll take it. 10 Bronzium, 75 Copper.\*

\*>Hutian Crest: Fellow friends, can't you see our proud benefactor is made of coins? Go all in! We want this!\*

\*>Simulator Child: You're so-! What makes you think you can say that?\*

\*>Hutian Crest: Isn't it obvious? It's not my money!\*

\*>Censer: Hutian. Fuck you.\*

The audience's bids kept rising, and the group chat wasn't going down without a fight.

"10 Bronzium, 75!"

The rate of bids dropped significantly, but this didn't stop Luden!

"10 Bronzium, 80!"

\*>Dolphin Killer: ... 11 Bronzium."

"11 Bronzium!"

...

"15 Bronzium!"

\*>Hutian Crest: Haha, does he think he can fight us? 20 Bronzium, quick! Put it in.\*

\*>Fae Sol: \*Sigh\*, if you insist~\*

"20 Bronzium!"

...

"Sold to the anonymous Beyonder for 20 Bronzium!"

\*>-20 Bronzium\*

... and an audible slam echoed from across the hall.

---

"What did I pay you guys for?? The revenue you collected was abysmal, and the lack of info on this party is fatal! You hear me??"

None of his subordinates responded.

"It all comes down to the last item, then..." Luden sighed.

He looked at his coin pouch, and a smile crept onto his face. He expected most bids to max out at around 10 Bronzium, but the previous item had cost him nearly 30. However... another item lost meant more coins saved for the finale!

"We're going all in."

"..."

His subordinates' morale was waning. Initially, they'd been confident in the amount of in-game currency they collected. By their estimates, no single clan should have more than 10 Bronzium at this time. The worst case scenario was that they lost one item.

But reality treated them very differently! The wealth they'd gathered with confidence was paltry in front of this mystery adversary. It wasn't just Luden's pride on the line but also theirs as professionals.

The cart wheeled the final item of the auction out onto the center of the stage.

It was the grand finale. The audience could only look out in awe.

Though it was a much-awaited item, nobody was expecting to win. Another fierce back and forth between the two titans was bound to commence.

However, before Luden could place his bid...

Before the auctioneer even spoke a word...

"60 Bronzium."

A girl's clear, calm voice pierced through the audience.

Despite how quietly she spoke, everyone heard it clearly.

The voice carried unyielding tenacity, but the audience couldn't believe their ears.

"Huh?"

"Did I hear that amount right?"

They thought they'd seen the limit only to be shocked again. Disbelief struck, but this was definitely real! After all, you couldn't bid more money than you had.

"How is that possible?"

60 Bronzium, or over 6000 Copper, was casually thrown out. The voice was powerful yet carried no hint of ego.

This person was simply here to pick up what was theirs all along.

The hall was silent.

There was no competition. The one they assumed to be a dark horse was the true titan all along.



"... Sold to the anonymous Beyonder for 60 Bronzium!"

And just like that, the auction was over.

---

The group chat burst into flames after Jisha's bid, but she ignored it and silently stared at the stage.

\*Why is this here?\*

The item she'd purchased was a dagger, and it wasn't an ordinary one. Everyone likely thought it was just a level 10 magic weapon, but in reality, it was the best dagger in the game below Tier 1.

As long as one had enough shards of the correct element, this dagger's performance could be upgraded for many, many levels to come.

Jisha opened her direct messages and responded to a mountain of unread messages from a certain someone.

\*>Fae Sol: I've got your gift.\*

\*>Synycal: Whaaaaaaaat? You remembered? You???\*

\*>Fae Sol: ...\*

She wanted to retort, but...

\*Heh... I'll just let her enjoy the moment.\*

Syny Cytem, also known as Synycal in the game, would, alongside Fae Sol, become a very well-known player in the future. In her past life, Syny had become one of the greatest dagger wielders in the game... And this was only after she was indecisive about her class for so long. If Jisha could nurture Syny's talent at an early stage, how monstrous would she become?

And though Synergy professionals didn't exist yet, Jisha was certain that Syny would stand above all future pros if she was trained properly.

\*I can't wait for that day... It's not too far away.\*

The worst-case scenario was one year of training, but she most likely wouldn't even need that long.

When you begin learning a skill, whether it be a game, craft, hobby, or something else, you will struggle. In the very beginning, you are... well, a beginner.

But if you train properly, you can easily exceed average.

A large subset of the population, regardless of what they practice, are not practicing optimally. If you receive guidance on *\*how\** to and how *\*not\** to practice, you will avoid practicing improperly. This puts your fundamentals at an unshakeable standard. Without proper fundamentals, it's impossible to reach a high level. How high can a tower truly reach without a proper base?

In Synergy, when nobody had a clue about any optimizations, those who would rise above were either lucky to have found an optimal path or had exceptional talent in some area. But what if someone who already knew all optimizations fostered a protégé? The results would be astounding.

Of course, Jisha wasn't going to write any guides, at least not ones that were available for the public. The information she knew about the future was worth an unfathomable amount of money. It was suicide to simply give it away. This information was only to strengthen herself and those important to her.

And this gift was one of the first steps.

*\*>Fae Sol: Everyone, meet me near the stage.\**

*\*>Censer: ... Yes.\**

Jisha's cloaked figure made its way down the stairs, and the crowd scattered to make way. This person had even defeated Luden, so she obviously wasn't to be messed with! Tales of this mystery player who'd shown up and taken out an oppressive guild would be recounted nonstop the rest of the day.

On the right side of the stage was a tunnel with a door at the end of the hall. As this tunnel was guarded by a Sentinel, players steered clear from the area. After leaving the crowd behind, Jisha knocked on the door twice before it swung open.

A mystified Kayla awaited on the other side.

"She told me you'd be coming... It really is you..."

"Sorry?"

Jisha confusedly tilted her head; Kayla was spouting some nonsense under her breath.

Kayla snapped back to attention realizing she still had a role to fulfill.

"Ah, well, here are your winnings," she said as she gestured towards a brown bag secured with sturdy string.

"Thank you, but I'd like to wait for five others to arrive. Would you mind letting them in?"

"Of course."

This room was under strict security, and there was even a Sentinel inside. Typically, only one auction winner would be granted entry at a time to prevent any mishaps, but there were exceptions.

Before long, a vigorous knocking resounded throughout the room. Kayla opened the door and five disgruntled players floundered inside.

---

"Give us the stuff."

"We know your identity, so you're truly dead if you try running off!"

"They're all here, so relax," Fae Sol said as she took the first item out of a bag - the health potion called "Homeopathic Twine Remedy."

"Ha, that's mine. Give it here," Hutian Crest said as he confidently strode forwards.

Fae Sol gave him a kind smile and placed the potion directly in his hands.

"Um..." Hutian Crest grimaced. She wore a pretty smile, but how could he relax? Something felt amiss, but he couldn't pinpoint what.

"Hey, hey, don't be shy," she said as she gave him a congratulatory pat on the arm. "Enjoy your bitter potion, alright? Next!"

As if it were a soup kitchen, she handed out an item to each of the five guild leaders. None of them got away without receiving a smile and a pat on the arm.

"That concludes the trade, then?" Simulator Child said as the last item was given out.

"Pretty much," Fae Sol replied. "But..."

"... What are you planning?"

"Hm... Do you remember how much money you spent?"

"We spent 20 Bronzium," said Censer.

"Oh? Very good. Anyone else know?"

...

No response.

Why was she asking this now?

"\*Sigh\*, I had low expectations, and you still let me down..."

The guild leaders looked at each other awkwardly. This should have been the end of the deal, right? Was there something they missed?

"You all seem like financially responsible individuals, you know? So much so that you even dug into my personal account just to win some auction items. Naturally, don't you think you owe me something?"

"Pft... That's what it is?" Hutian Crest guffawed. "Once we pooled our money, it was ours to spend. So what if I spent more than I put in?"

"That's curious coming from the person in the most debt. You owe me 10 Bronzium, you know?"  
(a/n - so many of these numbers are messed up, i'll have to go back and review the entire arc and fix everything. right now they're pretty much just placeholder values. will be updated some other time, + fix other miscellaneous errors)

"Huh?"

"Do I have to remind you? You all pooled your money into \*my\* account. As a fiscally responsible individual, I know exactly how much \*I\* spent."

"Then you can only blame yourself for overspending," Censer said. "We don't owe you anything."

"Why not? Was there a binding contract anywhere?"

"..."

"Anyway, Censer, you also owe me 10 Bronzium. How tragic. And you, Aphro Expo... You owe 7 Bronzium, 65 Copper."

One by one, Fae Sol recited every guild leader's "debt" to her - the amount they spent subtracted from the amount they contributed. This meant she perfectly recalled the initial contribution as well as the amount spent by all 5 players...

The guild leaders stared blankly. What was the point of doing all this tedious arithmetic? Why was she going out of her way to torture them with this meticulous information?

Finally, the recitation came to an end.

"All of you understand what's happening right now, correct?"

"..."

"You're all deep in the red," Fae Sol said as she lowered her voice. "You are indebted to me and are to pay me back this value by this day next week!"

"...?"

"She's crazy."

"As if something like that would happen."

...

Fae Sol kept ranting, but the guild leaders tuned her out. What the heck was she talking about? Sure, she had some combat capability - they'd witnessed it firsthand before the auction. But what gave her the confidence to threaten all 5 of their guilds simultaneously?

"Alright, so how much do we owe you?" Aphro Expo said, deciding to humor her for a bit.

"Hm... You all clearly aren't taking me seriously, are you?"

"Pft... What do you mean? Of course we are..." Hutian Crest said as he tried containing his laughter.

"Well, I supposed it's not a serious matter," she said as she shrugged in an exaggerated manner.

"Why don't I just ask you next week?"

"Okay... And... you'll find us how, exactly?"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," Fae Sol said with another smile.

"..."

Something was off, wasn't it? What gave her the courage to speak like this?

The guild leaders stared at the person standing in front of them once again - she was just a young girl. After taking a good look at her, they determined her words were simply borne of a chuunibyous confidence.

"Whatever, let's go," Simulator Child said.

The 5 guild leaders turned to leave, and as they stepped out into the hallway, Fae Sol spoke from behind them once more.

"Don't forget!" she said cheerily. "Prepare the funds by next week!"

"Tch..."

"What a simple-minded girl."

"Truly idiotic."

...

---

Jisha sighed as the door closed behind the guild leaders. She wasn't expecting them to show her any face, but this was worse than she imagined!

\*Looks like they'll have to repay me many times over!\*

In one week, these guild leaders would likely have a sizable wealth built up while not being too far away from each other. Once that time came...

\*Hehe... I'm so lucky \*those\* were in the shops here.\*

What specifically was she referring to? How would she find their bases in order to... er, \*kindly\* ask for a reimbursement?

Simple - it all came down to when she gave each of the guild leaders a pat on the arm. Because when she did...

\*>-1 Small Lightweight Tracker\*

\*>-1 Small Lightweight Tracker\*

\*>-1 Small Lightweight Tracker\*

...

\*>Name: Shahar's Nightwalker\*

...

\*>Abilities:\*

...

\*>Shahar's Blessing (Rank 0) - Item Cloak: Mask the Presence of up to 10 Rank 0 Consumable-type items by 99% per week. Items cloaked: 5/10. Cooldown: 1 week. Upgrade this ability using Shards of Darkness. Shards: 0/1.\*

They'd walked off thinking they'd emerged victorious, but little did they know that there was only one true winner of this auction.

She would definitely find them!

### **27 - Brookie's Loyalty**

Jisha departed the secure room to find the auction house still thronged with players. Tensions ran high, but with Sentinels overlooking the crowd, no one dared to make physical moves. As she swam through the mob, a familiar distressed face passed her by.

She smiled at him, and before he could retaliate, she slipped away.

\*Yeah... Luden's not having a great time...\*

It was the face of a gambler who'd lost everything.

Whether he'd attempt to enact vengeance remained to be seen. It was common knowledge what someone backed into a corner would do, so the possibility wasn't small. They'd have their work cut out for them, however - trailing a player with the best stealth item in the game was no trivial feat.

There was no point worrying about it right now.

She took the staircase leading to the exit of the auction house to reconvene with her posse. However, one player was absent.

"Where's Dharr?" Jisha asked.

"He... ran off," Brookie replied.

"How come?"

"Embarrassment," Brookie said as he shook his head.

"Well, I'm not surprised..."

\*He's been humiliated too many times tonight. It would've been stranger if he'd opted to stay...\*

"And... Castle. Do you have anything to say?" Jisha asked.

The young boy's body language was all too obvious - his fidgeting betrayed his anxiety.

"Yeah, well... I didn't get anything from this??? Where's my stuff?"

"I didn't get anythin', either," Brookie chimed.

A valid complaint. They'd helped her only to receive nothing in return...

"I don't have anything good for you two right now, but mark my words. I'll find something for both of you - and the both of you too - tomorrow. I repay my debts manyfold."

Brookie, Castle, the fire and ice sisters, and the random guild leaders had sacrificed most of their cash for today's spectacle. It was the least she could do.

"Well, don't worry about me," Hearth Ember said, "I was only looking for 1 heat shard but you gave me two, so I'd say we're even."

"Ember, you selfless girl... I can't let you say that. It'd be a weight on my conscience if anything."

"But-"

"No buts. If you still feel indebted to me, how about you both join my guild?"

"Um..." Hearth Ember trailed off as she looked over to her sister.

"Eh? Party with Emmi and Big Sis Sol? Yes!" Abandoned Snow said while vigorously nodding.

"Perfect!" Jisha said with a smile. "What about you two?"

Hearth Ember was a talented player, and Abandoned Snow's future abilities might even surpass hers. Learning to run in that short of a time... It was nothing short of genius.

Brookie and Castle weren't ordinary, either. Nothing needed to be said about Castle, a future Tier 9 player, but Brookie was different.



Skilled fighters had a certain aura around them. It was difficult to describe with words, but they radiated confidence with every spoken word. They subconsciously drew attention to themselves like a magnetic field, yet at the same time, it felt impossible to get too close.

Objectively, his current capabilities were akin to an ant's ten years into the Mana Age, but they were by far the best she'd seen in this life.

\*Really... Where did this guy go in the future?\*

"Not gonna lie - I \*am\* interested," Brookie said. "I'm fascinated by strength, and... for that, you've got my respect. But there are some old monsters in my guild I have yet to surpass."

\*Interesting. Since when did the Northeast have such potent fighters?\*

"'Old monsters', you say... And you're loyal simply due to their strength?"

"Of course," Brookie said as he chuckled. "It's why I'm... where I am."

"If I show you pure strength, will you change your mind?"

"... Dunno. Those old guys are the best of the best in the Northeast. In terms of raw martial ability, they'd even be able to compete in the top Central leagues."

"Whatever 'old monsters' you're talking about are nothing compared to me," Jisha said as she nonchalantly waved her hand. "If you're not convinced, just follow me."

"Can't say I'm not interested," Brookie replied.

"Well you- You still owe me money, so..." Castle hesitantly said.

"Then it's decided, no?"

"Ah, well," Hearth Ember said, "Me and Frei were planning on meeting up with some more friends, and we're already late. The auction was fun though!"

"Hm? Well that's fine. I'll send you an invitation once I make the guild, alright?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Bye-bye Sister!"

With that, the ice and fire disappeared.

"Alright you two, let's go," Jisha said as she led the way outside.

After exchanging a nonplussed glance with each other, Brookie and Castle tagged along behind.

---

"..."

"..."

"Well?"

It was the two guys' first time laying their eyes on the Fixed Field, so they both stood speechless at its splendor.

The allure of the purple fog and the intricacies of the black metal gates entranced them.

"Where are we?" Castle asked.

All they'd done was walk through the forest. He'd definitely been around here before... How could he have missed such a spectacle?

"Somewhere we can fight fairly. Take a look at this," Jisha said as she explained the ins and outs of the Fixed Field.

"So that's how it is..." Brookie mused.

"How about it?"

"Haha, sure. Let's start."

The inky gates menacingly creaked open as Jisha finished applying the settings.

"I think I'm just gonna watch..." Castle said.

"Suit yourself."

The two of them passed through the entrance, and the system recognized both of them as combatants.

The countdown began.

\*>5...\*

\*>4...\*

\*>3...\*

\*>2...\*

\*>1...\*

\*>System message: Fixed Field, start!\*

\*Let's see what this guy's made of.\*

---

Brooks Severin was a lifelong fan of martial arts. However, the Northeast region of Etmos wasn't exactly ideal for this passion.

Being in the top 3 technologically advanced regions, as well as the extreme cold weather, greatly decreased their need for hand-to-hand combat. As deadly weapons following the Intelligence Age and the Truth Casualty Age were banned, conflict was relegated to remotely-operated weapons such as drones and mechs.

Remote mech piloting was similar to martial arts, but at the end of the day, you weren't piloting your own body. It paled in comparison to the real thing. Putting your safety at risk was a far more thrilling experience.

However, most of his countrymen disagreed. With the Northeast lacking motivation in martial arts, strong sparring partners were few and far between. Most of his time was better spent watching and studying the Central Leagues, the most prestigious martial arts circuit in the world.

He longed to travel, but alas, was isolated here with 300 million others. This continental region was practically its own planet as it sat roughly 35,000 kilometron from the nearest foreign territory. Aberrant weather swirling violently in the nearby oceans discouraged travel as well. Trips to and from the Northeast only became safe relatively recently, but they were still expensive.

He made money the only way he knew how - fighting in the Northeast's martial arts leagues. Though martial arts weren't popular, there were still some people who were interested enough to keep the leagues running. He resolved himself to dominate every one of these small-scale leagues before heading to the Central Continent. If he couldn't even do that much, there was no point in pursuing this career.

So, Brooks toured his world, and, like he sought to do, dominated one league after another.

Before long, he'd done it. He was confidently the top-ranked fighter in the Northeast. It was time to pursue greener pastures. However, before he could do so, he received an offer from an unknown source. As the top fighter in the region, it wasn't surprising for him to receive offers. But, as they'd only offer monetary rewards, Brooks never cared much for them. At this point, he had more than enough money to travel comfortably, and he didn't desire much else.

So, he was expecting to brush it off like so many he'd done in the past, but this message only had two words.

"Let's fight."

Of course, many lunatics had futilely challenged him in the past, but he could feel that something about this one was different. Perhaps it was his intuition as a top-level fighter telling him that accepting this trial wouldn't be a waste of time.

So, he rendezvoused with this mysterious person... in a public place, of course. As strong as he was, Brooks was only a single human. It wouldn't be difficult for him to get overwhelmed by numbers and superior weaponry.

The two sparred in a nearby gym, and Brooks found the situation strange. The man in front of him could easily rank top 10 in the region, yet Brooks did not recognize him. Being the top fighter came with connections; he knew pretty much everyone in the Northeast who fought at a high level. So how did this man slip under the radar?

But then came the more surprising news. This mystery man claimed he came from a place that had fighters of an older generation that made him look like a white belt - a beginner.

How could that be?

It was a suspicious claim, but Brooks had already come this far... there was no choice but to see the situation all the way through.

After traveling with the mystery man to a secure location, Brooks was bewildered that he was telling the truth. Apparently, with the combination of cryochambers and a hidden technology called "telomere therapy", the bodies of several legendary fighters of previous generations stood in good condition.

New opponents! Like a kid in a candy shop, his excitement shot through the roof at this prospect.

And they served him what he ordered.

Though the "old monsters" bodies were past their primes, they still had no trouble dealing with Brooks, the top fighter of the modern day...

The Central continent would have to wait. Training here would be beyond invaluable.

Today, however, a random girl showed up in front of him and claimed the "old monsters" were nothing...? Even though he saw her defeat seven players on her own, this had to be a delusional claim. She was simply a large frog in a small well.

Brooks had even changed his last name to enter that reclusive society. His pride was on the line.

But the miniscule chance that she knew what she was talking about gnawed at him. What was the truth? There was only one way to find out.

\*>System message: Fixed Field, start!\*

The two of them started in a clearing in the cemetery. From Fae Sol's previous battle footage, it was clear she knew her way around the map. However, this wasn't an issue. As long as they remained in the clearing, the advantage of map knowledge was irrelevant.

Once the countdown hit 0, neither player moved rashly. Slowly... slowly... they crept towards each other.

Observing. Gathering information.

Small movements. Searching for an opening.

Finding a time to strike!

This was the mark of a skilled player. Those who mindlessly charged in with no game plan were unlikely to get far.

The two stopped moving once they were 5 metron away from each other.

In front of him was a much smaller girl called Fae Sol... who appeared in a relaxed stance. Someone standing like that... There should be openings, right?

But the more Brookie watched, the more tense he became.

There were countless openings, yet at the same time, there were none.

"..."

What was going on? It didn't make sense. All she was doing was standing there, yet his nerves were on a razor sharp edge. Had he ever felt anything like this before? In the past, no matter how tough his adversary was, he could always formulate a plan of attack after some amount of study. Every fighter had their own personal tendencies, and sometimes these tendencies worked against them. It was up to the opponent to exploit these weaknesses.

However, now, as he calculated his moves against this opponent, he lost himself in an endless maze.

He gritted his teeth. There was no point thinking about it any further.

The blue-green eyes staring back at him were almost enchanting. Almost as if they were beckoning him to come forth.

And so Brookie met them head on.

He lunged. And before she could make a move, he kicked the topsoil in front of him. Quite literally a \*dirty\* trick, but for victory, didn't the ends justify the means?

Those eyes were the weakest points, and his attack pinpointed them in an unconventional manner.

But wait...

Too late did Brookie realize this wasn't real life - it was only a game! Would the old "sand in the eyes" trick work here?

The answer was...

No!

Fae Sol didn't even flinch.

"!!!"

The split second after he realized he'd messed up, he faltered.

\*\_3\*

In this level 0 fight, each player only had 10 HP. One strike from Fae Sol reduced his HP by nearly a third.

That was just bad luck. He could alter the course of the battle over the course of the next few moves.

\*\_2\*

However, the first hit led him by the nose to the second...

\*\_5\*

... which culminated in the third.

Brookie's in-game body dissipated into white mist as his spirit floated about the cemetery.

Dead?

Just like that?

He respawned outside the gates and stared forwards, dumbstruck.

The fight ended way too quickly. He'd made a terrible mistake... it was just bad luck.

"Again."

In the next fight, he'd surely be more careful.

...

\*>System message: Fixed Field, start!\*

...

\*-2\*

\*-3\*

\*-5\*

...

The second fight was only slightly longer than the first, but the result was the same.

Brookie respawned outside after dying in merely three moves, and he couldn't land anything in return.

Clearly, the problem was the "attack speed". In real life, he could make as many moves as his body would physically let him. However, in the game at level 0, he could only attack once per second. He wasn't used to this - it was obviously the reason he lost this time.

"Again..."

...

\*-1\*

\*-4\*

\*-5\*

...

A nearly identical result. What went wrong this time? Obviously, it was the purple fog. He'd never seen purple fog before, so this was clearly the problem.

"Again!"

...

\*-2\*

\*-4\*

\*-4\*



...

A glint of moonlight messed with his vision. Why was the moon out during this time of day? Next time, he'd surely account for this variable!

"Again!"

...

Loss. What was the problem this time? Surely there was something to blame, right? Surely she couldn't be telling the truth about what she thought of those "old monsters"... These wins had to have been lucky.

"Again."

...

More losses.

"Again..."

...

Brookie finally quit deluding himself. The wins were far from lucky.

But it didn't make sense. A random girl in front of him was the top fighter on the continent. How was this possible?

"Another one!"

...

The more he sparred with her, the more he realized the difference between them.

He quickly recapped the previous matches in his mind. The result of all of them was almost the same.

The first two moves were light in comparison, and the third hit always targeted a vital area, rendering the attack fatal.

No matter what he tried, the first two moves always led to a checkmate in the third.

He tried everything.

Attack.

Retreat.

Defend.

Misdirect.

Nothing worked.

Of course, he could delay the beginning of the game. But once it started...

One, two, checkmate.

One, two, checkmate.

The endless maze of possibilities converged on a single point. The game was over the moment it started.

...

"... I give up."

After over twenty bouts, Brookie finally threw in the towel.

"You're annoyingly persistent," Fae Sol said as she materialized in front of the cemetery gates. The Fixed Field was over. "I wager you're rather skilled."

"... What?"

Brooks Severin, whose name had now changed to Lacaia, was the top fighter recognized by Northeastern leagues. Yet this top fighter was only "rather skilled"?

Who is this person?

"You... have to be a top Central fighter undercover."

It was the only possibility. Even the "old monsters" he sparred in the real world didn't pressure him this hard. Of course he would usually lose to them, but he could see himself overcoming them some day.

However, here...

The farther he looked, the larger the crevasse between the two appeared. No amount of training in the near future could lead to a victory over her.

It was extremely strange for a Centralite who endured eternal summer to move to a frozen wasteland, but there was no other possibility. It also explained her unfamiliarity with Brookie's Northeastern identity.

"I suppose that's a good guess," Fae Sol said as she cryptically smiled.

Brookie sighed and looked towards the sky. The purple haze that drifted through the light breeze. The moon appeared to swim behind the clouds.

"I have a long road ahead of me..."

"Would you like to travel that road with me?" Fae Sol unexpectedly asked. "I'd like you to join my guild once the first update hits."

It was a surprising question, but it made sense. Brookie craved strength, and it was right in front of him. Fae Sol was likely a Centralite immigrant, and securing ties with a strong fighter of the Northeast was only natural. Plus, as a local, he might be able to offer some useful information.

It was an extremely tantalizing offer, but...

"... Not yet. One day... when I'm qualified."

"Hmm? What's holding you back?"

Brookie's future path had been altered. Once he overcame all the challenges of the Northeast, he would move to the Central continent. However, one more alluring "Northeastern" challenge appeared in front of him.

And so he explained his plan to the girl in front of him.

"I'd like to stay in touch, though," he said. "Don't unfriend me."

"Of course," Fae Sol replied with a twinkle in her eyes. "I won't let you get away that easily."

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

Brookie only then remembered that a young boy named Castle had been spectating the whole time. Was it due to shock? He hadn't made a peep until now.

"Come along, young one," Fae Sol said as she gave him an exaggeratedly friendly pat on the shoulder. "Let's head back to town. I've still got lots to do out there."

And such was Brooks Lacaia's first true glimpse of this enigmatic young woman.

---

"Mana palm strike..!"

...

\*>+8 Copper\*

"That's the last of them in this area, right?"

"Yes, let's continue."

A party of five made their way through the dense thickets. As beta players, they knew there were some sort of ruins in this area.

"Let's hope no one else got here before us."

"It's unlikely. We booked it straight here."

"Mana palm strike..!"

Despite the fact they'd already cleared the area, a small blue streak flashed forwards.

"Commander, what...?"

Everyone was confused as to what their commander, Stein, was up to. For a while now, he would just use his Battle Mage ability, "Mana Palm Strike", whenever it came off cooldown. It wasn't long before he ran out of mana, but he spent all of his money on mana potions only to repeat this cycle.

"It's nothing, Yana," Stein replied.

The player next to him called "Quaterniana" looked at him in confusion.

"Are you sure...?"

"..."

Stein sighed.

"Yeah, you're right... It's not 'nothing'. It's just..." Stein trailed off again.

His subordinates looked at him in eagerness since he was about to continue.

"You've seen the battle footage sent to us by First Son. That player... 'Fae Sol', used abilities in a way nobody has before."

"Yes, this Fae Sol indeed has exceptional battle prowess," Yana agreed.

"No, it's not that."

"Really? Then what...?"

"Look at this clip one more time."

Stein and Yana poured over the final segment of the battle footage.

"See here?" Stein asked. "Auto-attacks like throwing a pellet are aided by the system, but hers are different. How do I put this... What happens when you click in an old-fashioned computer game?"

"Er, there are many possibilities."

"Yes, but there's only one type of click. You can click multiple times or click for longer, but each individual click is its own entity that cannot be changed. But the way these pellets almost seem to curve through the air... It's as if the 'click' itself is different. So..."

\*Whoosh\*

Another Mana Palm Strike flew through the air.

"Tch, it's no good..."

"What is exactly being tried here?" Yana asked.

"It's definitely possible to change the fundamental way you attack with a skill or spell. It's not necessarily a one-click cast, and that video is proof. I'm trying to accomplish something similar."

"..."

"Look here, Yana," Stein said as he threw a Mana Palm Strike. "I can control where and when I release the attack, but after that, the system takes over and I lose control over it. It always flies in a straight line at the same speed. But... it should be possible to change that."

\*Whoosh\*

"I wonder what I'm doing wrong..."

"A suggestion from me: perhaps the money earned by you should be spent in something other than mana potions..." Yana said as she shook her head.

"Perhaps. But I'll have to decline that suggestion."

"..."

"Yana, I know what you're thinking. That this is useless... a waste of money and mana potions. Am I correct?"

"Er, no, sir... I..."

"It's fine. If I hadn't witnessed Fae Sol's capabilities today, I would agree with you. But in the long run, once I learn how to do this... Basically, true skill is worth much more than weapons or equipment."

"..."

"\*Sigh\*, forget it. Everyone, let's-"

Just as he was about to lead his party forwards, Stein froze momentarily.

"... Commander?"

"One second, everyone," he said with a grin. "Our favorite 'War Dog' has faithfully returned some news."

"And?"

Everyone looked on expectantly. Their guild, Asunder, had members in quite a few starter Hamlets, and by now, they were spread throughout various Villages... though none of them had reached Towns quite yet.

"War Dog" Brooks was the most capable of these players - his martial arts capability outside the game was at the peak of the public world, so he was naturally entrusted with a role in Synergy himself.

"It looks like we've got ourselves a destination," Stein said.

This was indeed good news. Until now, it wasn't that they were wandering aimlessly, but they had the option between several Towns to proceed to. The ruins they were trying to find was almost equidistant from all of them, leaving it as a nice detour.

"After this, we're headed to Orchid Town. Looks like \*she\* is headed there as well."

Everyone understood - Fae Sol was likely the largest threat to Asunder thus far, so investigating and potentially suppressing her development would lead to the best results.

But for now...

Rotten wooden structures loomed ominously in a small clearing. The treetops towered over them at a height of almost 100 metron, and the leaves blocked much of the sunlight making the buildings look even more harrowing.

"Let's clear this dungeon first. Once we get that item, we should have an upper hand in the next battle no matter what foe we're up against!"

""Yes, sir!""

## **28 - Luden's Dash**

Luden entered the secure room under the auction house to receive his items - or rather, singular item - that he'd won in the auction. Despite undoubtedly having enough capital to win every bid, they'd ended up losing...?

It was a shame, but the only thing he could do was keep his mouth shut and try again. Perhaps he could resell the item for a higher price later. For better or worse, it was the only thing leaving his sanity intact.

He opened the door and entered the room alone. Not only were his subordinates not allowed to enter, but Luden himself was paranoid that his lackeys would screw something up. The auctioneer and one of those aggravating Sentinels waited inside.

The auctioneer began speaking, but Luden tuned it out. It wasn't anything important, anyway, just some twaddle regarding his winnings. Why wasn't there an option to skip dialogue? He needed to get a move on ASAP! He knew better than anyone else that time was money!

"Finally..."

The auctioneer deposited the item into Luden's open palms.

But what was this item?

"Are you kidding me?"

\*>Name: Magic Milk Bottle (Spoiled)\*

\*>...\*

This singular item he'd strained himself to get... was defective!

\*CRUNCH\*

In a fit of rage, the fragile glass bottle shattered in Luden's grasp.

Why? What went wrong?

He'd happened to purchase a bottle of spoiled milk. Big deal, right? To an ordinary person, they would lament for a few minutes and move on with their lives.

But to Luden, this wasn't merely an expired potion. It seemed dramatic, but this auction and this entire sequence of events was challenging everything he knew about the world. His sixth sense was supposed to lead him to victory. He was supposed to be a bloodhound that could sniff out gold, yet this pyrite had played him for a fool!

There was clearly one person at fault for this.



"..."

A snide player he'd passed in the crowd.

\*She\* was the one who'd driven him into the ground.

Luden wasn't overly familiar with the nature of games, but he wasn't completely incompetent. When they'd passed each other, he'd attempted to glance at her info and stats... to no avail. After asking his subordinates, he learned that a stealth item of that caliber was an unusual possession for a player this early in the game.

An unusual possession... A rare item... Money!

But how could she be \*richer\* than him?

"How much does she know? Do the heavens favor her over me?"

Once this thought entered his head, it would not leave.

For Goddess' sake... even the first syllable of his name, "lu", referred to heavenly power in ancient Northeastern languages. For him to not be the chosen one was...

"Blasphemy!"

He darted outside, and, using party chat, quickly ordered every single one of his lackeys to track this player down. It couldn't be that hard, right?

How wrong he was.

At first, tracking her had been easy. She'd left the Village with two other players in tow, and it was much easier to track a group of three players than a singular one.

They would set up an encirclement and surround them. But just as the plan was about to be set in motion...

\*>Luden: How could you idiots lose them???

\*>Axis Jack: We... suddenly lost visual. One moment they were well within our sights, and the next...\*

\*>Luden: I don't want excuses. I want results!\*

He clutched his head in his hands. Why was everyone around him so \*useless\*? He was probably better off doing this himself!

He grabbed his two most skilled subordinates and took off into the forest. No matter how useless they were, three sets of eyes would cover more ground than one. Plus, they could serve as meat shields in emergencies.

Was this cruel? Absolutely not! They were getting paid IRL. What was there to complain about?

\*>+5 Copper\*

\*>+6 Copper\*

\*>+4 Copper\*

...

Luden continued his mad dash through the forest while, unbeknownst to him, his lackeys exasperatedly DM'ed each other. They wanted to voice their complaint out loud, but doing so would put them at risk of not getting paid at all. So, they kept quiet.

Luden was confident in his abilities not only because his intelligence was absolute, but also because he'd experienced the beta. He knew the lay of this land. As a Northeasterner, all of this terrain had been foreign to him, but now, he was confident in his ability to navigate.

"Come on... where did she go?"

He continued sprinting with his head on a swivel. If he were astute enough to notice his subordinates' expressions, he would have noticed their exasperation. They knew there was only a matter of time before something went wrong.

But Luden was non the wiser. All he wanted to do was keep running. After all, the faster he ran, the faster he'd find his target.

This led to his first careless mistake.

Luden had indeed gotten a feel for this terrain in the beta. But, the beta only lasted several weeks - a drop in the bucket compared to his 30+ years as a Northeasterner on Etmos. At the end of the day, he was still foreign to the endless greenery of Synergy's starter area.

"Shi-"

He narrowly avoided a thick tree trunk while running at full sprint.

His focus wasn't on the road ahead of him, but rather anywhere a wild player could appear. This was bad - when in unfamiliar terrain, not looking where you were stepping was akin to suicide.

He'd nearly stumbled and fallen over - a most embarrassing happenstance if it were to happen in front of the very people he was labeling as incompetent in his mind. Little did he know that public opinion of him was already in the gutter...

Regardless, he wouldn't make the same mistake.

However, that thought slipped his mind as abruptly as it had arrived, and before long, his manic obsession of finding \*that player\* seized his thoughts.

"!!!"

This time, the identical gaffe wasn't as forgiving.

He'd almost run headfirst into the tree but dodged it just in time. However, he didn't make a clean getaway - a piece of his clothing snagged itself on a piece of tough bark.

"Are you kidding me-"

In hilarious fashion, Luden tumbled to the ground.

He quickly got up and dusted himself off, but not before giving his party a stern glance.

"You," he said as he pointed to one of them. "Was that funny to you?"

"Uh... No sir..."

"Good."

Since he'd embarrassed himself, the only logical thing that others would do was laugh at him. He needed to make sure he kept his subordinates in line, but he could only do so if he kept a good example himself.

It didn't matter, though. His subordinate wasn't even lying. It wasn't the least bit funny at all. They were already so tired of his antics that they'd already marked him as a fool long ago - a far worse outcome than Luden could comprehend.

The three continued forth.

He'd spotted nothing so far. It was odd - normally, there'd be at least one or two common monsters in the area. However, there were none. Obviously, they were intimidated in Luden's presence... but he didn't realize his skilled subordinates picking off the dumb mobs from a distance.

The search continued for several more minutes with no luck.

Luden's subordinates nervously glanced at each other. If all of Shock Collar together couldn't locate their quarry, how could their boss hope to accomplish the same by himself? Should they tell him?

Neither one of them wanted to be the bearer of bad news - their boss was exactly the type of person who'd shoot the messenger.

So, they could only carry on in silence and do what they were paid to.

\*-3\*

\*-5\*

\*-2\*

...

They were only security guards at the most rudimentary level, not even encouraged to speak.

Time continued to tick on, and Luden only grew more and more frustrated.

"Where? Where could she have gone??"

Once again, tunnel-visioned on his singular task, he once again forgot what his body was doing.

"Guh-"

A tripwire-like root caught Luden's foot mid-sprint.

In an even more devastating fashion, he tumbled to the ground once more.

His subordinates grimaced and facepalmed respectively. They stared at each other with only one thought in their heads.

"At least we're getting paid!"

Luden clumsily rose to his feet... only to step on a pile of loose sediment to fall down again.

"What-!"

Before he could regain his bearings, his arm was getting sucked into the ground.

Deeper, deeper, deeper...

The further down it dug, the less autonomy he retained over his own appendage. What was he supposed to do?

Suddenly, an icky crawling sensation danced at the end of his fingertips.

Chills ran up his arm; this disgusting feeling forced adrenaline through his body, and he successfully tore his arm out of the ground.

As much as he didn't want to see what had attached itself to the end of his arm, aversion to the sight was impossible.

\*>Name: Small Carnivorous Groundworm\*

\*>Level: 5\*

"What the- How is this thing \*small\*?"

It was almost 2 metron long!

It looked like an ordinary worm for the most part, but a gaping opening revealed razor-sharp canines that coated the insides.

Coming face-to-face with a fantastical, menacing creature's maw was beyond jarring.

"Creepy-crawlies", as Luden liked to refer to them as, didn't really exist in the Northeast, and for that, he was thankful.

"Curse this damn game!"

The starting area of Synergy was designed to be easy to traverse for everyone, but ironically, as a resident of the most remote continent of the planet, it was a nightmare!

He couldn't help but think that this game world had baited him into playing it like a moth to a flame.

"Shit, shit, shit!"

\*-2\*

\*-7\*

\*-8\*

...

Luden swiped frantically at the worm with his dagger.

\*>+10 Copper\*

It didn't take too long, but the memory of a gaping crevasse lined with carnivorous teeth would haunt his thoughts for days to come.

Just as he thought he was out of the woods, something else forcefully tugged his leg in another direction!

\*>Name: Hostile Twine\*

\*>Level: 6\*

He looked down to find some green growth twirled around his calves.

Fortunately, despite the higher level number, it was far less intimidating-looking than the worm. Plus, it was another enemy his dagger would work wonders on.

...

\*>+12 Copper\*

He whipped around and glared at his subordinates.

"You guys... Why aren't you on the lookout for monsters?"

The two resisted the urge to roll their eyes. What had they been doing the whole time? Sadly, it didn't matter how hard they worked if none of it was recognized by authority.

"Whatever," Luden growled when they remained silent. "Just know I'm not paying you for nothing."

Luden took a moment to regain his composure.

Where was he, again?

"Oh?"

As if the world wanted to remind him of his mission, he heard some unusual rustling and squelching in the distance.

"You two, we're going to investigate over there," he said as he looked back at them.

"Finally," the two wanted to say. A change of pace!

The three players crept closer to the strange sounds.

They took their utmost care to not make any unnecessary noise.

Luden had learned his lesson from earlier - now, he was going to carefully look where he was going!

They closer the approached, the more distinct the rustling noises became. Eventually, they were identifiable as player footsteps - and there were three sets.

Conveniently, the group of players they were after also had three players. Could it be?

The followers wanted to cry. How was it possible for this idiot Luden to locate their target so quickly? His luck was off the charts!

Luden, meanwhile, refrained from charging in alone. He knew his limits. Now was the time to call in backup.

\*>Luden: Everyone, meet me at this location ...\*

With some help, Luden articulated his position to the rest of his clan members.

Eventually, all 10 were in position. It was time for revenge!

## **29 - Shocking Discovery**

"Wha- What was that?" Castle asked.

For him, it was all too sudden. They'd been in a lush green forest then were suddenly in a purple hazy graveyard. Now, in the blink of an eye, they were in a section of the forest he'd never seen before - one covered in mud and strange-looking leaves.

"Hmm... For now, it's a secret, okay?" Jisha said with a slight chuckle.

Castle groaned.

The edges of the leaves were prickly and easily stuck to his clothes. The ground was wet and the atmosphere was muggy. The mixture of mud and leaves on the ground made strange rustling and squelching noises as they walked. Why couldn't they have ended up somewhere more normal?

Jisha ignored Castle's disgust and turned to Brookie, whose demeanor had become uncharacteristically ambivalent.

"Hey, are you doing alright?"

"Hm? I'm fine, I'm fine," Brookie said as he snapped out of his daze.

"You sure?" Jisha asked.

"Yeah."

It was very subtle, but there was distinct distress in his tone.

"What's bothering you?"

"I said I'm fine. Just thinking about training."

\*He really doubts himself...\*

It was a strange phenomenon. The self-perception of those who achieved a certain echelon of competence burned to ashes, while fools radiated confidence. Only when you scale a mountain yourself can you understand how much you have left to go.



Brookie was one of these competent individuals, and his self-confidence was in the gutters.

In their bouts, he'd clearly felt the difference between the two, and with his fundamental understanding of martial arts, he truly experienced how large the gap between them was.

\*Knowing\* the difference versus \*understanding\* the difference... A small change in wording, but a world of difference in meaning.

You can \*know\* a stovetop is hot you without ever seeing one, but no combination of words can accurately convey the \*feeling\* of burns!

At times, it's a gut-wrenching feeling. You've tried your hardest only to be surpassed by someone you've never put in your eyes. Such was the cruel way of the world of martial arts... and the world.

"Hey," she continued, "Are you a good martial artist here?"

"I am... definitely someone that can do martial arts here."

"... Be more specific," Jisha said. "How do you compare to everyone else here?"

"I... I'm better'n most people, I guess..."

"I can tell you're a competitive fighter. Naturally, you should know your ranking?"

"..."

"Listen, I'm sure you know it's useless to compare yourself to me. If what I knew about reality was true, I wouldn't even be here right now."

"S'pose you're right..." Brookie grunted.

\*Let him interpret that however he wants to.\*

What, if any, was the purpose of her being here? Time travel to the past was supposed to be impossible, yet here she was. Was she special, or was what humanity knew about the truth of the world simply incorrect?

Jisha grimly smiled.

\*There's more pressing matters at hand. Like...\*

"Brookie."

"Yeah."

"... What?"

She and Brookie both felt something was off, and only Castle was clueless.

"Castle... This is something you've got to learn," Jisha lectured.

She suddenly shoved him aside. Not expecting it, he fell down onto his bottom and shrieked with disgust.

"Whaaa-? You-!"

\*Whzzz...\*

A small blue ball rocketed by and sizzled on contact with a tree trunk not far behind.

Castle realized he didn't have time to quarrel. They had company!

But how did Jisha know the spell was approaching? She didn't have superhuman perception. In fact, with her current body, it probably even worse than an ordinary human. This, however, didn't stop her experienced mind from being able to pinpoint the "windup" sound for the Neophyte Mage's ranged spell.

\*It's been a long time since I've heard these sounds.\*

The first time she'd been on the receiving end of this spell, it hadn't been fun.

"H- How did you know-"

"Listen," Jisha said, quickly shushing him.

She closed her eyes to heighten her hearing.

\*Fwip-fwip-fwip-\*

It was the triple shot of a Finger Gun Glove, a weapon one of the Ranged classes would receive at level 5.

She opened her eyes and took three small steps backwards, leaving footprints in the mud.

Three ammunition pellets embedded themselves in them, splattering mud in the process. It was almost like her footprints were awaiting their arrival.

Castle stared wide-eyed, but there wasn't any time to sit around and be stunned. These were only the opening shots!

\*>Fae Sol: Did you hear that?\*

The fact that there was no time to sit around meant that there was no time to talk, either. And this is where the revolutionary Synergy party chat came in.

Information relayed itself to the minds of Brookie and Castle who were surprised to receive an unexpected method of communication.

The reason for the name of the game was never disclosed, but a popular hypothesis was that it was the first environment to be able to "synergize" human minds without the middleman known as language.

Normally, you had to write down your thoughts and send them, only for them required to be read by another party. Every step of this process took time. In the heat of battle, the luxury of time didn't exist.

Codes and signals were about as good as short-form communication could get, but they couldn't acclimate themselves to the complexity of a live battle.

In this moment, Jisha picked out a couple more quiet but important sounds amidst the chaos. For her, dodging wouldn't be a problem, but what about the other two? There was no time to warn them... if she were to use traditional methods.

\*>Fae Sol: You two didn't play the beta, correct? Listen up. There's a windup sound for every attack. Right now, we're likely dealing with all three level 5 Ranged classes. There's the mage and glove gunner you just saw, and there's a sling hiding somewhere as well. The mages sound like this:... The glove gunner sounds like this:... And the slingshot sounds like this:... Got it?\*

"" ... ""

\*That's understandable.\*

Of course they were confused. Nobody knew how to use party chat properly yet, after all. People were still used to writing and reading messages even several years into Synergy's release. It took time for people to discover how deep communication within Synergy went. Learning the techniques of voiceless chat was a skillset in and of itself!

Jisha tilted her head to the side as a slingshot pellet flew by her ear before glancing to the side.

\*Not bad.\*

She knew what to expect from them. Neither Castle's potential nor Brookie's ability needed to be restated. They'd survived the first wave of fire with minimal damage.

But, it was only the first wave. With their low HP pools in the early levels, it was unlikely they'd be able to survive the complete onslaught. They could only try their best!

Another torrent of ammunition flew forth.

Jisha furrowed her brows. She hadn't expected to get ambushed by so many people so early on. Why was this happening?

\*Well, the \*why\* is obvious. It's more like \*how\*\*...

Exiting Shahaar's dimension left the three in an undiscovered place in the forest. Like the graveyard itself, it was difficult to stumble upon this place by chance.

\*Besides dumb luck, is there any other possibility?\*

There was no point dwelling on it further; she needed to save her brainpower to gather intel on the opposition.

Based on the attacks that came through, there were 5 ranged attackers.

Two were mages, two were glove gunners, and one was a slingshot. The classes had official names, but most people used colloquial terminology to describe them. This wasn't a problem though. The problem was, were there more lying in wait?

As far as she could tell, they weren't employing any sort of strategy. It was possible to estimate their position based on the direction the attacks came from, but this revealed a problem. They were scattered all over the place!

\*Their firing patterns aren't coordinated, either.\*

From their current position, no members of Shock Collar were visible. However, any experienced hide-and-seek player would tell you that it's very possible to see someone without having them see you.

What was their plan?

Did they have some terrain advantage? This wasn't possible. She knew this area well, and the local biome was fairly uniform.

Did they have some sort of tool that granted them augmented vision? Was there even anything like that in the game's infancy period? Of course, the possibility wasn't 0, but there wasn't anything like that according to her knowledge.

\*Do... they have no plan at all?\*

\*>Fae Sol: The enemy doesn't have visual of us. They're relying on the sounds of our footsteps to launch attacks. Brookie, Castle, two o'clock. I'll follow right behind you.\*

"" ... ""

\*>Fae Sol: If you have any questions, save them for later. For now, just do as I say!\*

It was impossible to know how much of the messages they'd understood. Those three messages had all been sent in under two seconds, and, just like a new language, it would stand to reason that any ordinary person without training would only interpret the communication as gibberish.

However, were Castle and Brookie ordinary?

They clearly understood the most important part - charge!

---

\*>Luden: Do we have them surrounded?\*

\*>Axis Jack: Possibly...\*

Axis Jack, second-in-command of Shock Collar, just like everyone else, was beyond fed up at Luden's antics. Like any exhausted employee at work, there was only one thought in his head.

Is it time to go home yet?

There were times where you knew a certain solution was more optimal, but because of the strict workplace hierarchy, you just had to do as you were told! It didn't matter, though. If they spoke up, they'd be reprimanded. If they failed to follow orders, even if they were terrible ones, they'd also be reprimanded. If they successfully carried out the mediocre orders and brought mediocre results... No surprise, more reprimands!

For some reason, they were ordered to shoot from a distance at the three targets hidden in some underbrush. There were ten of them, yet from this range, only 5 were effective. It didn't need to be said that 5 outnumbered 3, but did it matter if you were trying to snipe with a shotgun?

All they had to do was sneak up with all 10, close the encirclement, and strike at once. But no, apparently that's not how it works. This plan was so atrocious that Axis Jack had to fight the urge to forfeit his paycheck and abandon everyone. His only solace was that this dumb rich guy was absolutely \*loaded\*.

For this amount, he was willing to sacrifice his dignity a little bit.

\*>Luden: What do you mean "possibly"? Why can't you check where everyone is?\*

\*>Axis Jack: That's... not possible.\*

Unbeknownst to him and every other experienced gamer, tracking the location of your party members in the world was not available in the beginning. One had to visit a Cartographer in a Town at the very least to implement this functionality into their maps.

\*>Luden: Why not?\*

\*>Axis Jack: ...\*

\*>Luden: Ugh, useless. Fine! Everyone, charge forwards!\*

Finally! It was about time!

They could go in, clean up, and get the hell out. Surely they would get to leave afterwards!

Axis Jack ordered everyone to tighten the circle on the location of the suspected targets.

\*>Luden: They're this way. Follow me!\*

Axis Jack pursed his lips together in frustration. That was one direction they \*weren't\* going to go!

The four melee players charged into the mud-riddled clearing, with the five ranged ones following close behind. They expected to see their three targets, but they weren't there. Rather, there was only one.

\*>Name: ???\*

\*>Level: ???\*

A cloaked figure! There was only one player they knew of that had concealment methods, so there was no doubt about it! This was their ultimate target!

\*>Axis Jack: Everyone!\*

There was no hesitation on what to do next!

Weapons drew, ammunition flew. Every attack converged onto a single point.

Escape was impossible! She was dead!

But...

"...?"

"I can't move???"

"What-!"

\*-10\*

\*-10\*

\*-10\*

No one could move a muscle.

Under the form of crowd control known as a Stun, players lost the ability to move, use abilities, and use items. The only thing they could do was yell in confusion as a deadly field of static electricity rapidly dealt damage-over-time.

Nine players of Shock Collar died in remembrance of their namesake.

Their offense was smothered before it even began.

Not long after, all of them woke up at their initial respawn point - a Starter Hamlet!

"..."

"..."

"..."

What just happened? Had they truly stumbled across a player?

"It's impossible, right?"

How could one player effortlessly kill nine with a single spell? What class used that sort of electric attack? Something wasn't right, but they didn't have the energy to consider it.

Something they did notice, though, is that a key player of their team was missing from the respawn point.

"Wait, where's Luden?"

"Uh..."

Luden was the only one that hadn't died in the disastrous attack. Maybe, just maybe... this once, they should have followed their lunatic boss.

"We're screwed..."

---

\*Something's not right.\*

A muddled mess of footsteps was converging on their location. This was all to be expected. But...

\*Why do I feel like something's off?\*

It was just the sense Jisha had developed over countless hours of Synergy battles. It wasn't something that could be described with words, but certain elements in the atmosphere weren't congruent with the concept of safety.



It all happened in an instant.

A faint crackling sound.

Her survival instincts flooded adrenaline through her body.

\*Night Walk!\*

She was safe, but...

\*Dammit...\*

Brookie and Castle were still focused on the incoming footsteps.

\*>Fae Sol: ...\*

What could she say to help?

The crackling sound quickly amplified, and a burst of electricity shot through the mud.

\*-477\*

\*-218\*

Her two companions instantly vaporized into white light. They died without even knowing what hit them...

Another crackling noise permeated through the air, and Jisha retreated as quickly as possible under the protection of Shahar's Nightwalker. The players of Shock Collar brushed by her being none the wiser about her existence, but they were the least of her worries.

The two distinct sounds of electricity were enough to allow Jisha to appraise the class of the being they emanated from. And the answer didn't spell good news.

\*What is an Enhanced Lightning Mage doing here???\*

The second crackling sound formed a sparkly cloud in the middle of the muddy clearing, and it congealed to form a human-like figure wearing a cloak.

\*>Name: ???\*

\*>Level: ???\*

\*Tch... As expected...\*

One factor that blocked appraisal was concealment items. Another factor that blocked it was level differential. And right now, it was likely both.

This Enhanced Lightning Mage was a Tier 1 entity, a being on a fundamentally different plane of existence from Tier 0 beings like current players!

She peered on from a distance as nine poor players walked into the range of its Stun and perished.

The deaths of Tier 0 players in the face of a Tier 1 was expected, but the real question was... why was it here in the first place?

Tier 1 entities were Level 100 at minimum! Not only that, every Tier had 90% absolute resistance against the Tier below it. A Tier 0 10 HP attack against a Tier 1 would only do 1 HP of damage, which meant ascending Tiers made you at least 10 times stronger.

Fortunately, Shahar was a legendary NPC, so there was basically a zero percent chance that the Tier 1 mage could see through Jisha's stealth.

She continued peeking through the brush. What was it going to do next?

The mage quickly scanned the items Shock Collar had dropped upon dying.

"It's not here..." he said quietly.

\*Ah, that's why.\*

Though she wasn't completely sure, somehow, some way, the mage had caught wind of this special auction. Higher-level NPCs leaving their designated areas wasn't an uncommon occurrence in the slightest, but the sheer scale of this event made it unusual.

Items that were extra-valuable to any beginner player were worse than trash for Tier 1 entities. This NPC wasted way more time than it was worth to travel all the way to a Starter area for a simple auction.

The only explanation was that the appearance of Beyonders fascinated it to a great degree.

\*But still... a Tiered entity appearing in a Starter area?\*

It was still too bizarre. Jisha, with her foresight, knew the first player-attended auction would become famous among NPCs in the future, but the same couldn't be said about this mage...

She continued watching as the lightning mage NPC inspected his surroundings for a little while longer.

Before long, it mumbled to itself, activated its teleportation spell, and vanished in another crackle of sparks.

After waiting for a moment longer, Jisha undid her stealth...

"Wha-!"

"Huh?"

...and apparently, someone else was right behind her!

\*>Name: Luden\*

\*>Level: x\*

\*Oh, it's just this guy...\*

"Why are you here? Aren't you the leaders of all those guys? You really just sent them to die?"

"Wha- You- You-!"

Luden stumbled over his words as he pointed at her.

She'd removed her hood along with her stealth, so it was obvious he recognized her.

"Pfft... What's wrong?" she asked innocently. His reaction was so over-the-top that she almost burst out laughing.

"You!"

In a fit of rage, Luden lunged at her with a dagger in hand. But to Jisha, he was simply a toddler holding a twig.

Luden uncontrolledly swung his dagger, and Jisha effortlessly leaned backwards to avoid it. With his momentum carrying him in an unwanted direction, he was a sitting duck. She quickly equipped her Golden Sling, aimed, and fired at Luden's head.

\*-72\*

Without another chance to speak, he vanished like the rest of his clanmates.

Jisha absorbed the XP mist and looked at the items scattered around by dead Shock Collar members. The NPC didn't have any use for them, but selling them could fatten her wallet a healthy bit.

"\*Sigh\*... But I don't have enough inventory space again..."

### **33 - Shock Collar vs NPC**

Jisha heard the unfamiliar voice as well and was surprised to find another entity was trailing them. It was easy to deduce that this entity was not a member of Shock Collar as they seemed to show signs of surprise as well.

\*Hm...\*

\*>Name: ???\*

\*>Level: ???\*

\*It's an NPC.\*

Players would instinctually know whether an entity was a player, NPC, or something else simply by appraising it. This was one of the conveniences of full-dive VR; information could be relayed to the brain without any sort of verbal communication.

Though Jisha didn't find this situation bizarre, it was clearly different for Shock Collar.

"Who are you??" asked a panicked member.

"Hand over the dagger, and nobody needs to get hurt," the NPC said.

\*Yep, just as I expected...\*

A high-level NPC had shown up to claim the unique dagger by the same "fickle means" Jisha had predicted. But even though this NPC was "high-level", she didn't feel like she was in too much danger. Why?

There were a few reasons for this.

First off, Synergy's early game, or levels below 100, was a bit strange. Before this level, fights were a bit rudimentary and NPCs' combat intelligence was still very poor.

\*And... it still feels a bit strange to fight without the gem system.\*

Secondly, every level was a small percentage boost to one's stats. Even by level 100, this percentage wasn't affecting base stats by that much. A level 1 player had around 100 HP as a base stat, but a level 100 player only had around 500-550 HP as a base stat.

\*If I recall correctly, level 250 is where stats really start to ramp up...\*

But there were obvious caveats here. These stats were only the base. There were many factors that affected one's base stats, such as weapons, armor, and more. In addition, an NPC was not a player. Their HP was not determined by the same formula as the players'. So it was impossible to predict how much HP an NPC had simply by their level.

Thirdly, as long as the NPC was below Tier 1, it wouldn't be too dangerous.

At the moment, every player was Tier 0. Along with class evolution, players would have to undergo Tier upgrade quests as well. And Tier upgrades were more significant than class and level upgrades. This was because any Tier had a 90% resistance to any Tier below it! For example, an attack from a Tier 0 that ordinarily dealt 100 HP would only deal 10 HP of damage to a Tier 1 entity.

And this effect only stacked at higher tiers. A Tier 2 entity would receive 99% less damage from a Tier 0. A Tier 3 would receive 99.9% less damage from a tier 0. And so on and so forth.

But in Synergy, rewards only came with appropriate difficulty. Tier upgrade quests were much more difficult than class evolution quests... so much so that only roughly 10% of the player base could ascend to the next tier at the minimum level.

One in ten could ascend to Tier 1 at level 100. And one in those ten could ascend to Tier 2 at level 200, which meant only 1 in 100 would be Tier 2 at level 200... and so on and so forth. Naturally, if one could accomplish the feat, it was well worth it.

So Jisha watched on as the newly-arrived NPC harassed Shock Collar.

\*I wonder if I can kill it?\*

---

\*>Lujen: Who the fck is this?\*

\*>Axis Jack: ... It's an NPC.\*

\*>Lujen: Well we know why it's after us, don't we? Get rid of it!\*

Luden was furious that none of his subordinates had taken care of the obvious threat. But he couldn't hear their silent prayers for peace!

Axis Jack was also getting a bit frustrated with Luden's antics. Jack knew that Luden wasn't good at games but only skilled at managing finances in the real world. And with those finances, he was also good at allocating tasks to those who specialized in a skill. And in this case, Axis Jack and the rest of Shock Collar were the "specialists". They knew this NPC wasn't something they should be provoking, but Luden's quick temper prevented them from speaking up.

\*>Axis Jack: We don't know what level it is. Appraisal yields no results. It's highly likely this NPC is too strong for us to deal with. Between this mysterious NPC and the anonymous Slingshotter, we're pretty screwed...\*

\*>Lujen: Are you saying we should just give it the dagger we spent a thousand Copper on?\*

\*>Axis Jack: That's...\*

\*>Lujen: Either we die, or they die. We're not handing anyone our valuables.\*

\*>Axis Jack: ... Run and we'll distract them. None of our items are worth what that dagger is. Everyone, get ready.\*

When they received this order, Shock Collar wanted to cry, but at least they were getting paid in real life!

---

Jisha watched as Lujen booked it deeper into the forest.

\*Huh. Guess he has a lot of money but no game sense.\*

She chastised his decision to run away from the Safe Zone and turned her attention to Shock Collar's attempt to fight the NPC. But...

"...?"

Jisha would have raised an eyebrow if she could have. A couple of pellets headed her way, but she easily avoided them.

\*Aaaand I'm surrounded.\*

She held up her hands to offer an armistice.

"Can you really afford to fight me right now? I won't kill you guys if you all focus on that NPC," she said.

The Shock Collar members looked at each other in confusion.

"You promise?" one of them asked.

"Of course," Jisha replied.

She knew Luden was running towards Inkling Village and could catch up to him easily. She would rather observe how this NPC behaved.

"You three keep an eye on her. The rest of you, basic formation!" said the player named Axis Jack, who was presumably the secondary leader.

Jisha relaxedly leaned against the nearest tree as if the three players guarding her didn't exist.

"You think they can take him out?" she nonchalantly asked.

The three players, who seemed oddly tense, looked at each other awkwardly but didn't say a word.

"Tch, you're no fun."

Jisha turned her attention to the NPC who was about to blow a casket.

"Fools... You think you can hold me back??? Tell me. Who has it?" it said.

\*... It couldn't figure it out?\*

If any rational player were in the NPC's shoes, they would easily be able to tell that the single player that broke off from the group was most likely the owner of the valuable item. However, this NPC wasn't very smart. Though this surprised Jisha at first, after thinking about it, it seemed reasonable.

When Jisha had first played the game many years ago, all of the NPCs seemed extremely realistic to her. And this sentiment wasn't entirely false. After all, you could hold conversations with them almost as if they were real people. But NPCs, like everything else in the early game, had very poor combat skills. She hadn't noticed back then since *\*everyone\** possessed poor combat skills right after the game's launch. But as someone who'd spent more time in the game than outside of it, it appeared laughable.

Jisha observed Shock Collar's attempts at fighting this NPC. Without responding to its interrogation, they attempted to fight it.

Similarly to level 0, level 1 and 2 players didn't have any offensive options besides basic attacks. And so, this "fight" couldn't even be called an attempt.

*\*-2\**

*\*-0\**

*\*-1\**

...

"Fools. Is that all you can muster? You have one more chance to give me the dagger before I eliminate all of you!"

Pellets and sticks flew at the NPC, but the results were trivial.

"What? How are we doing no damage?"

"I don't know, but just keep it occupied for just a bit longer!"

*\*Yup. Tier 1 confirmed.\**

It was unlikely that even beta players knew about Synergy's Tier system which explained Shock Collar's surprise. After all, one needed to reach level 100 or fight a level 100 NPC to even have a clue about it. The beta phase only lasted a couple of weeks; level 100 was not achievable for normal players in this amount of time.



The 90% damage suppression made it absolutely impossible for Shock Collar to have a chance of victory.

\*And it makes my chances of victory nonexistent as well. Unless I spam Night Walk... but it's not worth it.\*

Using Night Walk would allow Jisha to attack the NPC endlessly for up to 10 minutes. But since she didn't know how much HP it had, it was possible that attacking it for 10 minutes wouldn't even kill it.

Even if it was a guaranteed kill, she didn't know whether it was carrying any valuable items with it. Killing an NPC didn't guarantee gaining XP and it was possible it'd shift her Karma value massively.

At the end of the day, wasting Night Walk on something so risky wasn't worth it.

"I'm gonna watch from over there. Have fun!"

"Wait-"

Before her guards could react, Jisha had already escaped the encirclement. She quickly dashed to a tree that was a bit farther away and peeked out from behind it.

The three guards reluctantly decided they should join up with the rest of their group and attempt to take down the NPC, but...

"Alright, you fools... I've had enough of this charade! Disappear!"

The NPC began to charge a large-scale spell. A red circle expanded on the ground with the NPC standing in the center. And before Shock Collar could properly react...

\*-10\*

\*-10\*

\*-10\*

\*-10\*

\*-10\*

...

A field of electric shocks sprouted from the ground! Though each instance of damage wasn't very high, every time a player was hit by the sparks, they received 10 damage and were briefly stunned, causing another spark to connect. And these sparks were happening quite quickly. It was impossible for a new player to avoid them.

\*Getting chain CC'd like that on day 1? I'd quit.\*

And just like that, within a few seconds, the 13 remaining Shock Collar players were... shocked to death!

### **34 - Luden's Dash**

"Now let's see which one of you had that dagger!" the NPC said as it was about to inspect the loot of the fallen players.

Upon an ordinary death in the frontier, one would lose a level, an item, and half the coins in one's pouch. So PK'ing was a valid method of farming loot. The only downside was that it'd push your Karma value into the negatives, and it was possible that good-aligned establishments would turn you away.

Karma value was something that affected NPCs as well, so it was easy to deduce that this NPC's Karma was also negative. Of course, since it was hiding its name, it was impossible to be 100% certain.

\*But a Tier 1 NPC this far out on the edge?\*

The "edge" of the continent, or the starter locations, were normally peaceful and full of neutral to neutral-good players and NPCs. And Tier 1 NPCs were usually Village Elders at the very least. So it was a bit strange that there was an evil-aligned NPC just sitting in an auction house of a starter hamlet.

\*Unless... Meh, whatever.\*

Jisha wasn't about to pry into this nonsense. Though she had an idea of what was going on, it was unlikely that interfering with this situation would yield her any benefit.

\*I'll just take what I can right now! Night Walk!\*

For the first time in her life, Jisha activated a legendary NPC's item's active ability. Her Presence was decreased by 99%, and though she didn't feel any different, she was undetectable to everyone at this low level.

Jisha dashed towards the loot and Coins that were lying on the ground.

\*Come on!\*

The NPC had already picked up one of the items. But as soon as it was done inspecting it...

"What on ~~Earth~~-!"

From its point of view, the items and Coins on the ground began to vanish!

"No! What is happening??"

\*Hahaha! Mine, mine, and... mine!\*

Jisha quickly assessed the value of the items of the dead Shock Collar members and switched out some items in her inventory, taking only the most valuable ones with her. She didn't have enough inventory space to take everything.

\*Annoying. Gonna have to buy an inventory upgrade at Inkling.\*

But fortunately, Coin pouches didn't have limited space. All the Coins on the ground were hers for the taking.

\*Payday!\*

After sufficiently stuffing herself on goodies, she dashed away from the NPC as quickly as she could. It could only stare at the ground in shock after what just happened.

\*>Night Walk (Toggle: No cooldown): Presence -99% for up to 10 minutes. Time remaining: 9:47.80. Cooldown: 1 week.\*

\*Not a bad outcome.\*

She had barely used any of her limited Night Walk time and had gained a decent harvest.

Though the total value she had gained wasn't close to what she already had, it was worth using Night Walk for it.

\*Now, let's find where this man has escaped to.\*

---

After a short death timer, 13 players appeared at Covan's respawn point.

"Sh\*t, what was that thing?"

"Hell if I know... at least Luden's escaped."

"Yeah... Wonder how much he'll pay us?"

Every member of Shock Collar had died in the wild; 6 to the anonymous Slingshotter, and 13 to the mysterious NPC. After this ridiculous death, some of them were considering calling it a night and playing again tomorrow. The level they'd spent almost an hour to get was reverted just like that. However, they were bound by a strict contract. They had to play a certain amount of hours every night otherwise they'd have no chance of getting paid...

As Shock Collar agonized over this black-hearted boss they were under, they received a message from him.

\*>Lujen: All of you idiots died? What are you doing?\*

\*>Axis Jack: Yes, we died. Fortunately, the Slingshotter didn't attack us any further after we decided to confront the NPC. However, the NPC was extremely powerful. Some of our attacks didn't even deal a single point of damage. On top of that, its attacks were devastating and team-wiped us instantly.\*

\*>Lujen: ... Are you serious?\*

\*Axis Jack: Yes. None of us have ever seen anything like it.\*

\*>Lujen: Hmm...\*

...

There was a bit of a radio silence after this message from Luden.

The members of Shock Collar were tense. Would their unreasonable boss understand their plight? But after a few more agonizing seconds, Luden responded...

\*>Lujen: Well, if what you say is true, it can't be helped. Just tell me you managed to get the Slingshotter off my tail?\*

... rather reasonably?

The members of Shock Collar looked at each other nervously. Was this their boss?

"Maybe he's finally gained a bit of game sense?"

"I think so. After seeing that Slingshotter's performance, I think he's changed a bit."

They weren't complaining about this positive change! But three players were a bit more nervous than the rest when the Slingshotter was mentioned...

"You three. Did you keep an eye on her? Why'd you join us in the attack on the NPC?" Axis Jack asked.

"Uh..."

"From the looks of it, she wasn't hostile during the fight. She was simply observing us."

"Yea yea that's it! She was like looking at us from behind a tree and stuff, pretty weird huh?"

"Hm..." Axis Jack contemplated what to report to Luden.

\*>Axis Jack: During our fight with the NPC, she refrained from hostile actions. On top of that, she observed the entirety of our fight. It's unlikely she can catch up with you, but to be on the safe side, make sure you sprint full speed towards Inkling Village for protection.\*

\*>Lujen: You better not be wrong.\*

"..."

Axis Jack was a bit nervous when he saw this message. But there was no chance Luden, who had over a minute's head start, would get caught, right?

"Let's hope we're not wrong..."

After all, Shock Collar wanted to get paid tomorrow.

---

\*Lujen, Lujen, where are you? You'll be giving me the dagger and some Coins, too!\*

Jisha was running full sprint through the sparse forest. And since Stamina didn't exist yet, she could keep 100% of her speed with no interference.

\*Sprinting as fast as possible without getting tired was one of the most exhilarating things ever!\*

Jisha made sure to regularly check her map to confirm her trajectory. She assumed he was headed towards the nearest Village, and that was where she was headed too. So naturally, keeping an eye on the map and maintaining heading was paramount.

As she sprinted, Jisha encountered various mobs. However, she was too fast for them, and killing these low-level mobs wouldn't yield her any benefits. The cute low-level mobs could only watch as a speedy player wearing a cloak whizzed by them.

After several minutes of sprinting, the terrain began to slightly change. The forest was still sparse and trees were still quite spread out, however, the ground began to become slightly bumpier. Small rolling hills, rocks, loose sediment, and various other subtle changes were introduced to impede one's movement. However, these trivial obstacles were nothing to the Goddess. Jisha's sprint was completely unimpeded by these changes; she continued dashing towards her target.

---

Luden sprinted as fast as he could through the forest. Being a beta player and having explored this area before, he knew how to get to Inkling Village. However, his first walk through this area was relatively leisurely. At an ordinary walking pace, the changes in the terrain didn't affect him at all, so he failed to take much notice to them.

However, Luden was currently on a time crunch. Running full sprint on bumpy terrain was quite different from walking on it. Obstacles became harder to dodge, and loose footing slowed his sprint.

But he knew he couldn't afford to be slow!

Though Luden lacked game sense and was arrogant, he wasn't a dumb person. He saw the skills executed by the Slingshotter, and when Axis Jack, his trusted game expert subordinate, called her "too skilled", he knew this wasn't an ordinary player.

Axis Jack had confirmed that the Slingshotter wasn't chasing him during their fight with the NPC. Yet he was still concerned that she would catch up to him, even with the head start.

Luden knew better than to be cocky at this moment. He put his full effort into reaching Inkle Village; he didn't waste an ounce of sweat by slowing down. But running full sprint through a forest was something he'd never done before. After all, this terrain was foreign to a Northeasterner. And this unfamiliarity began to show rather quickly.

"D\*mn..."

Luden nearly ran head first into a tree while looking behind him.

"Sh\*t!"

And after barely sidestepping the tree, he lost his footing on loose sediment.

"F\*ck!!"

And this sediment was on a downslope! Luden tumbled to the ground, and gravity did some work on him as well. Luden was unable to regain his footing and... basically "ate sh\*t".

But he couldn't afford to waste time here! He desperately tried to get up... but he realized his arm was stuck in the ground!

"Why is there mud here!"

\*-5\*

\*-2\*

...

His HP began to fall in small chunks at a rapid rate. And with great effort, he pulled his hand out of the mud. Only to find that he was under attack by subterranean creatures...

\*>Name: Small Carnivorous Groundworm\*

\*>Level: 5\*

"How the f\*ck is this small???"

Luden's surprise was justified. This groundworm had vicious teeth and was at least a 30 centimetron in length! Luden was free from the mud, but didn't have time to fight these mobs.

He quickly got up and began sprinting once again. This time, he slowed down a little bit in order to maintain his footing. But after some minutes, even after he was being so meticulous...

"Are you kidding me..."

His foot got caught under a tree root that was exposed above ground. Luden tripped to the ground in another ludicrous fashion.

Sprinting at this speed allowed Luden to outrun most mobs, but once he was briefly immobilized, several nearby mobs took notice of him.

Luden was no longer in a starter area. Mobs were no longer a rare encounter. In this section of the forest, though the mobs were still low-level, one would have to remain vigilant. An encounter could happen at any moment! In this moment of Luden's non-vigilance...

\*>Name: Hostile Twine\*

\*>Level: 6\*

Some nearby grass that appeared harmless threatened to slice him up. To make matters worse, there was a "group" of them, and one of them had immobilized his leg! He had no choice but to fight his way out.

In order to waste the least amount of time, Luden targeted the Twine that was grabbing his leg.

\*This is... unacceptable!\*

Luden equipped the Wooden Dagger and started slashing the roots of the Hostile Twine.

\*-22\*

\*-27\*

...

But as he was attacking it, the nearby Twine monsters retaliated!

\*-2\*

\*-3\*



\*-1\*

...

Though their attacks didn't deal much damage, their rate of attacks was indescribably high for a low-level mob.

By the time he broke free and was some distance away from the Twine mobs, he had already lost over 40% of his HP. And unfortunately for him, Luden's only item in his inventory was the dagger, which meant that he needed to arrive at Inkling Village to purchase healing items...

Luden continued stumbling through the forest. His current speed was even lower than before. And now, he wasn't fast enough to outrun every single mob...

At this moment, some strange animal-looking mob was on his tail! Luden couldn't keep himself from glancing over his shoulder to make sure he was keeping a pace that was slightly faster than the animals he was getting chased by. But of course, looking behind you meant that you weren't keeping your eyes on the road...

Luden grazed a tree, lost his balance, and fell to the ground once more. The four-legged animal pounced on top of the immobile Luden. It threatened him with death, but...

\*I can't die such a humiliating death here!\*

With a bit of willpower, Luden was able to block the attack of the animal with his dagger, taking zero damage!

\*... I did it?\*

Luden, who had subpar game mechanics, pulled off a lucky feat in this moment. However, it was too early to celebrate. He was about to turn around and flee, but before he could...

\*-172\*

The animal in front of him dissipated into white light and mist...

The first emotion he felt was relief. He was free of danger! But that feeling passed as soon as it arrived. Something obviously wasn't right... Was he really safe? The answer was revealed to him immediately.

"Hello, big boss~"

A cheerful girl's voice could be heard from behind the white mist.

Luden didn't know what to feel!

"Sh\*t!"

\*>Lujen: Some of you are definitely getting fired today!\*

### **35 - Entering Inkling Village**

\*>Name: Miniature Lush Dingo\*

\*>Level: 5\*

\*Huh?\*

After almost 10 minutes of running full at full sprint, Jisha spotted a cute dog. But it wasn't like any of the other mobs she had encountered so far. Normally, any mobs she ran by would acknowledge her presence. Some would even start chasing her before realizing they were far too slow. However, this one was running away from her in some seemingly random direction.

\*Bingo!\*

Why? There was only one logical answer. The Miniature Lush Dingo was locked on to a player; she'd found her target!

Being faster than all mobs in the area, Jisha easily caught up to this cute Dingo. She loaded a pellet in her Golden Slingshot and fired at its weak spot!

\*-172\*

"Huh?"

And as soon as the mob died, a questioning noise left a man's mouth.

\*Found you!\*

"Hello, big boss~" Jisha said in a playful manner.

"Sh\*t!"

Jisha absorbed the XP the mob had dropped. On the other side of the mist, a man with dark blonde hair and a sour expression on his face laid on the ground.

\*Haha, show me more of that face.\*

For several seconds, neither of them moved.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" Jisha said, breaking the silence.

"Tch..."

Lujen quickly attempted to get up from the ground. But as he was about to get up...

\*\_7\*

"Ugh...!"

... Jisha kicked him back down mercilessly.

Lujen glared at her, but looks from a level 3 player couldn't kill!

"... Coward," he said under his breath.

"What was that?" Jisha asked as she cupped a hand to her ear.

Her Tier 9 awareness didn't miss this insult, but she pretended otherwise.

Lujen continued glaring at her and slowly attempted to back away. Jisha crossed her arms and simply watched.

Once he assumed he was at a safe distance, Lujen got up as fast as his body would allow him and booked it towards the Village.

"Haah... What kind of man runs from a girl as pretty as me?" Jisha said in an fake exasperated manner.

She began walking in the same direction as Lujen's sprint. At this speed, she couldn't catch up, but she didn't need to yet. The Village was still some distance away. Jisha had a couple of minutes to toy with!

---

\*... Did I seriously catch her off guard?\*

Though Luden didn't fully believe this, he was still surprised. He didn't forget the massive damage numbers that befell his subordinates and the wolf-like monster.

\*Maybe she's only good at close range?\*

Strange thoughts began to appear in his head as he tried to rationalize what just happened. But it didn't matter what he thought. He ran as fast as he could. And when he looked back, she was gone.

\*Holy sht, did I actually get away?\*

A strange sensation of relief began to assuage him.

\*But just to be safe...\*

He continued running in the same direction as fast as his legs could take him.

\*Just a bit farther now!\*

Inkling Village was just up ahead. He remembered this landmark from the beta. It was a rolling hill that was slightly bigger than the rest, and on top were several trees that were larger than the rest. It was basically a sign that said "the terrain from here on out only gets more difficult".

But he knew that on the other side of these trees was a massive clearing. And this clearing was the home of Inkling Village!

50 metron...

40 metron...

30 metron...

Luden sped towards the clearing he knew was on the other side.

There was an obnoxious noise that was coming from somewhere in front of him and above him, but now wasn't the time to focus on such things!

20 metron...

10 metron...

When he reached this distance from the top of the hill, he caught a glimpse of the clearing. But a creepy and unnatural noise sounded from above.

It was too unsettling to ignore. Luden had to look up. And when he did...

\*???

A branch that was thicker than his leg was falling from the sky.

Luden felt his stomach drop as he realized he was helpless.

He saw the branch falling and tried to correct his course, but it was too late.

He didn't know what to feel as he caught one last glimpse of Inkling Village before the branch fell on him and the world turned black and white.

---

\*-57\*

The player called Lujen exploded into white.

"What?" Jisha couldn't help muttering. "That actually killed him?"

She wasn't expecting him to have such little HP remaining!

But how did he die?

The "obnoxious noise" Lujen had heard earlier was the sound of pellets hitting a tree. Jisha saw Lujen's trajectory and began to fire pellets at the base of a branch that was far above him. These pellet shots weakened the branch's connection to the tree. And right as he was about to cross over the hill, the base was whittled enough to the point where it snapped!

Calculating where a target would be well in advance. Hitting a branch from far away. Hitting the same spots over and over in order to weaken a specific point. Knowing how many shots it would take to destroy the branch. And timing the last shot perfectly, leading to a kinematics estimation!

These were all the factors Jisha instantaneously considered in order to pull off this stunt. But she miscalculated one aspect: how much HP Lujen had remaining!

\*Oops.\*

She wanted to toy with him for a bit longer, but after some consideration, she concluded that this was probably for the best. Early-game time was precious.

\*But I wanna have some fun... Isn't that allowed? Oh well, there'll be other ways.\*

Jisha leisurely walked up to the condensed white mist that was sitting on the ground. Since she hadn't directly killed Lujen, the system determined his death as one from a "natural cause", and Jisha didn't automatically claim the XP that Lujen lost.

\*But this works out for me.\*

She could collect the XP and Lujen's dropped item at once. Her avatar absorbed the mist, moving her XP bar to over 90% of level 7. And with the mist out of the way, she could clearly see the item he dropped.

\*Is he dumb?\*

The dagger she had sold was laying on the ground right in front of her feet. In the wild, if your death was "normal", you'd lose one level, half the coins in your pouch, and one item.

The fact that the one item that Lujen happened to drop was the dagger he had purchased in the first place meant one of two things: that he was unlucky or it was the only item he was carrying! The second option was more likely, and if it were true, Jisha couldn't believe he'd leave for a Village without any other items with him.

\*I guess it was why he was so low in the first place.\*

Jisha picked up the dagger and looked at its stats.

\*>Name: Small Wooden Dagger\*

\*>...\*

\*Hm...\*

The flavor text had been changed. This item would truly be worth a fortune in the future. Not because it was useful but because of its novelty. And the fact that Lujen was the one who had originally purchased it in Covan meant that news about her reclaiming the dagger wouldn't leak.

Even if it did, the only thing people had to go on was "an anonymous rich girl". Lujen didn't know her name, so it would be very difficult for him to find her identity.

\*And even if they find me somehow... I'll just have to deal with it then.\*

Jisha would only continue to get stronger. The more time passed, the more difficult it would be for a small group to hurt her.

She stashed the Dagger in her inventory and picked up the last of what Lujen had dropped: his Coins.

\*>+...\*

\*Huh. Filthy rich bastard.\*

Even though Lujen had used a significant amount of manpower to gather this much, Jisha was still surprised at his ability to earn money.

\*But the dagger, and now this... Is he a gambler?\*

The antithesis of the saying "don't put all your eggs in one basket" was showcased by Lujen here. Not only did he drop the Dagger upon death, but he dropped what could only be considered (half) Shock Collar's entire net worth. If he had distributed the Coins among his org members, the loss would have been greatly mitigated.

\*Guess he doesn't trust his underlings with money or something. Well, I'm not complaining!\*

Her enemy's mistakes only made her happier. After all, she was directly benefiting from every one of them.

Jisha walked to the top of the hill.

\*Ha, what a shame.\*

Lujen was so close to seeing Inkling Village in its full glory, but of course he had died right before he reached the crest.

Atop this hill, Jisha had a clear view of the entirety of the Village. It was located in a valley-like area among the rolling hills that only continued to grow larger past it. And though it was called a "Village", its territory most likely approached 1 square kilometron.

The circular shaped Village highly resembled some cities from ancient times in other parts of the world. The simplicity of the circular village allowed its residents to navigate it easily as well as transport goods through the roads, as well as evenly distribute water throughout the territory. Though the roads were poorly developed, the design of the layout prevented any problems with traffic.

Yes, there was traffic! Though from atop the hill, some of the Village residents looked almost like ants, some tamed monsters could be seen dragging carts through the streets. The outdated transportation technology combined with the almost modern civil engineering structures looked a bit strange.

But this was the nature of a virtual world. Since it wasn't real, all sorts of strange things could be seen within it; this was just the beginning. Physics-defying buildings, supermassive structures, unnaturally imposing landmarks... These were all waiting in the future.

But getting there was a matter of progression. One had to pass through the more mundane areas first! And though this Village was one of the "mundane" areas, there were some important things to do here. The Village gates awaited her at the bottom.

Jisha ran, hopped, and somersaulted down the large hill. Even a professional gymnast couldn't compete with her.

\*The freedom of movement with no Stamina drain is too exciting. If I don't stop, I will definitely get addicted to this feeling...\*

Jisha observed the Village in more detail as she drew closer. The wall surrounding the Village was several metron high, which meant it was impossible to scale for current players. And though some sections of the wall were weaker than others, this gate that directly faced the Covan Hamlet appeared quite sturdy. It was even being guarded by several NPCs.

"Halt!"

Jisha slid to a stop roughly 5 metron away from the gates. The NPC guards drew their weapons on her. One was wielding a basic sword while the other was wielding a basic spear.



When she saw those weapons being drawn on her, the nonsensical thought of killing the guards flashed through her mind. She shook her head; killing these guards would be the pinnacle of stupidity!

"Can you grant me access to Inkling Village?" she asked. She had to get in legally.

"The entry fee is currently 2 Bronzium," the sword-wielding guard said.

Hearing this, Jisha would have raised an eyebrow.

"That's a bit steep, isn't it?" she asked. It was only a Village; the cost to merely enter should have been a bit lower.

"Indeed, it is a bit pricey. However, there has been an influx of unusual migrants. It was the Village Elder's order, nothing we can do about it right now," the guard replied.

"Hmm... Alright."

\*>-2 Bronzium\*

Jisha paid the entry fee. She wanted to ask for a discount, but 2 Bronzium to her wasn't much.

\*And these unusual migrants are probably just players. The NPCs here must have gotten quite spooked when players first appeared.\*

Since the NPCs behaved pretty much like humans, policies enacted within settlements had a "human" element. Raising the entry fee after a new wave of people tried to enter the city was only logical. Only when the NPCs recognized players as a normal occurrence would things go back to normal... for the most part.

"Young lady, what's your name? We need to issue you a visitor's pass."

"Ah."

The guard reminded her that her name couldn't currently be seen, so she undid one of the effects of the Nightwalker.

"Hmm... That's a fancy name concealment method you've got there. Well, here's your visa, miss Fae Sol. You can stay a maximum of 7 days inside."

\*>+1 Visa (Inkling Village)\*

"Enjoy your stay, young lady. Our streets are pretty safe, but make sure to find a place to stay once it gets dark."

\*They're kind, aren't they?\*

Jisha smiled warmly at the guards.

"Thank you, kind sirs. I will definitely enjoy my time here."

"Open the gates!" the guards simultaneously said.

The several-metron-tall gates slowly and creakily opened from the inside.

And with a kind wave at the guards, Jisha strolled inside.

### **36 - Village Benefits**

When one stepped into a Village for the first time, they would notice some obvious differences from Hamlets. Aside from the obvious fact that Hamlets didn't appear to be guarded, Hamlets didn't have residential areas. Most of the businesses in Hamlets thrived from tourism and the fact they were frontier outposts, and this "tourism" would only increase as more and more players entered the game. Even though this place was simply called a "Village", a residential and "downtown" area were clearly defined.

This place seemed more like an organic settlement rather than a collection of NPCs.

\*Now for a couple of things I came here to do...\*

Since Villages were larger than Hamlets and had larger NPC populations, the number of specialized professions among NPCs was slightly higher than that of Hamlets. While Hamlets only really had basic amenities, Villages offered a small bit of luxuries as well as more advanced necessities.

Jisha strolled into the "downtown" area of the Village. Foot traffic was a bit more dense than Hamlets as pedestrians and NPCs with tamed monsters roamed the streets. The player population appeared to be a bit greater than Hamlets as well.

But how was this the case? Unless one were a beta player or had insider information, they would be roaming randomly in the wilderness until they came across a settlement. In fact, most players were still in this category despite the fact that the developers leaked a map with basic information before the game's release.

This was due to the simple fact that Villages were less common than Hamlets. Players who spawned in Hamlets would eventually find their way to the nearest Village, and multiple Hamlets funneled into a single Village. For example, those who spawned in Uval or Covan would both eventually end up in Inkling Village.

\*First order of business is inventory expansion. Then we'll get some more ammo and basic frontier exploration gear.\*

By default, players could only carry 12 different types of items before their inventory was full. But, the shop Jisha headed into, dubbed "Mark's Backpacks", offered multiple options for inventory expansion.

"Welcome to Mark's Backpacks. Is there anything we can help you find today?" asked the NPC who was just inside the doorway.

"I'll be fine, thanks. I know what I'm getting," Jisha said as she refused help.

This was another difference between Villages and Hamlets as well; Village shops seemed to be more well-employed. Mark's Backpacks could even afford to have an employee greet customers!

The store wasn't that big, but the upgrade sizes surprised her. Strangely enough, a mere Village had excellent options!

All sorts of backpacks were hung up on the walls and displayed on shelves. The look of the store was a bit more modern than those of Hamlet frontier shops; one might even see a store with a layout like this in real life.

And on those shelves and walls lay a colorful assortment of wares.

\*>Name: Miniature Green Backpack\*

\*>+5 Inventory Slots\*

\*>Name: Miniature Orange Backpack\*

\*>+6 Inventory Slots\*

\*>Name: Miniature Cyan Backpack\*

\*>+7 Inventory Slots\*

Though the deals on these items were superb, Jisha wasn't going to waste a single Copper. She was going to find the best option available. The further back she headed into the shop, the pricier and grander the backpacks became. Finally, at the back wall, the best available items presented themselves.

\*>Name: Orange Backpack\*

\*>+15 Inventory Slots\*

\*>Name: Cyan Backpack\*

\*>+16 Inventory Slots\*

The "Cyan Backpack" seemed to be the largest option in the store, so Jisha naturally wanted to purchase it.

Just like shopping in real life, she took the item off the wall and headed to the counter to pay.

"That'll be 100 Bronzium," said the clerk behind the counter.

Jisha easily paid with 1 Silverium and headed out the door.

\*It's incredibly cheap!\*

And though most of her net worth was down the drain, she wasn't worried in the slightest.

Items that added inventory space, like backpacks, didn't actually have to be worn by avatars. And if you wanted to add more inventory slots to your account, the price would go up exponentially. So the 16 slots Jisha had just gained for a mere Silverium was a very good bargain.

When venturing in the wild, you never knew if you would come across anything valuable. If you didn't have room to store it, you could only admire it...

\*Next up, frontier shopping.\*

And even though this was a Village, it would still have a frontier shop that looked almost similar to that of the Hamlet's. Jisha easily found one due to its signature logo and headed inside. And after several minutes of browsing, she purchased everything she needed.

\*>Name: Advanced Waypoint Marker\*

It wasn't much, but this item was the main purpose of visiting a Village's frontier shop. If you paired it with a map, it would mark its location in one's current position. On top of being helpful for navigation, you could also teleport back to it if you were within a certain distance. This, along with the "sleeping bag", was a basic necessity for any explorer.

Placing a sleeping bag would set your respawn point; if you were to die in the wild, you would simply respawn there instead of in the nearest Safe Zone. However, Jisha wasn't going to die. If she, a former Tier 9 player, died in this low-leveled area, she was better off quitting Synergy forever!

\*Now, the "fun" starts...\*

The only thing left to do after frontier shopping was actually heading into the frontier. Grinding, exploring, gathering, etc... Almost everything one needed to do in order to advance themselves was accomplished in the frontier. To an ordinary player, this experience was thrilling like no other. However, to Jisha, grinding low-level mobs would be incredibly boring. However, there wasn't any better way to level up at the moment.

\*Hopefully I can stumble across something that'll give me a ton of XP...\*

---

\*>Quaterniana: I've spotted a player with a name and level concealment method; they've just entered from the eastern gate. I couldn't get a good look at finer details, but it's likely a female avatar.\*

\*>Stein: Continue following them for now. Keep me updated.\*

"Yana just sent me some news. There's a chance we've found the target. But keep up the good work, we're doing well."

"Yes, sir."

Stein led his team members through the sparse forest. The members of Asunder followed behind him and took out various mobs with ease.

\*>+10 Copper\*

\*>+12 Copper\*

\*>+12 Copper\*

...

This party was not only individually skilled but also cohesive as a group. The beginner-level ordinary mobs didn't pose a threat in the slightest to Stein and his cadres.

\*>System Message: Level up!\*

...

\*>Name: Stein\*

\*>Level: 6\*

\*>Name: Arcadia Black\*

\*>Level: 5\*

\*>Name: Cargo Biscuit\*

\*>Level: 5\*

...

The members of the club guild Asunder had all reached level 5 at the very least. They hadn't wasted a moment since logging in; these ten individuals had been grinding for XP since minute 1. There was a good chance that they were among the highest-leveled players in the game right now.

"Hm... Looks like there's some level 7s. They must have gotten lucky," Stein complained as he checked the global leaderboard. He was certain he'd done everything he possibly could have to secure as much XP as possible, but there were always some anomalies in the gaming world.

"Ah, someone hit level 8. Oh, well."

Especially since Synergy had just been released and not much was known about it yet, players who did well early on were likely to fall off in the later stages of the game. With a bit of luck, it was possible for anyone to reach a "high" level in the early game. And since this leaderboard was global, all players on planet Etnos were competing for the top spot. The Northeast was but a small region...

If one thought about it like this, Stein and his crew were doing incredibly well. He couldn't do anything about others in some distant land leveling up rapidly. He could only try his best.

However, there was something nagging him at the back of his mind.

\*That player... What level is she?\*

Over an hour ago, Dharr, who was stationed in the Covan Hamlet, sent him information about the player he'd kept in mind since the incident in Uval.

And what he saw was...

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Level: 7\*

If he didn't see this information for himself, there was no chance he'd believe it. However, it wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

"Hitting level 7 within the first two hours of gameplay isn't... impossible. It just requires an unreal amount of luck..." Stein muttered to himself.

However, something that seemed impossible to him was the battle footage he had seen from the Uval Hamlet. In a fight against 7 players with no skills and rudimentary weapons, Fae Sol had emerged victorious. And it wasn't even close. He watched the battle footage again and again, but he failed to understand how it was possible.

"What level of combat is it? 8th degree? Could it even be... 9th degree?"

Those who hadn't played Virtual Martial Arts wouldn't understand, but a 9th degree black belt was the highest achievable rank. Stein, who played the game regularly, was ranked at 4th degree. With his knowledge, he could tell that the team of 7's coordination was also roughly around a 3rd to 4th degree black belt level, though their individual skills were lacking.

They were roughly in the top 0.5% of players, yet they were still crushed. Knowing this, it wasn't unlikely for Fae Sol to have the skills of an 8th or 9th degree black belt.

With that skill, she would easily top the leaderboards, especially given her insane luck.

The problem was... Fae Sol never appeared no matter how much he checked! She obviously chose to hide herself, so it was impossible to determine her current level.

"And that madman Brookie left us for her..."

The feral dog that would only obey pure strength had become as tame as a puppy in front of Fae Sol. Stein had heard all about it from Dharr, who wouldn't stop complaining. Brookie was Asunder's most valuable asset, and he was gone in an instant. It was for this reason that Stein had placed a kill order on her!

"Why? Alacai won't forgive him."

For some reason, Brookie determined that following Fae Sol was more worthwhile than being faithful to his home country, the Alacai Covenant. In fact, Asunder was an undercover experiment sponsored by the Covenant itself. Even by Northeastern standards, Alacai had extreme militarism and harsh punishments for lawbreakers. Leaving Asunder just like that was treasonous and punishable by death!

Since this was the case, Stein wasn't going to report the matter right away. However, he couldn't contact Brookie within Synergy anymore...

"Gonna have to ask him in the morning..."

As Stein muttered to himself, he and his crew kept sweeping through the mobs in the area. And after several more minutes, he received another message.

\*>Quaterniana: I've confirmed that the player is indeed a female avatar. She's just walked out of the frontier shop and is most likely headed out to solo grind.\*

\*>Stein: Good work. Keep me updated on her whereabouts.\*

From Ivonna to Dharr, Stein had a general idea of Fae Sol's location since the very beginning of the game. Stein needed Brookie back, and there wasn't any other way to do it than to kill Fae Sol and make her submit. That was the Alacai way - it always worked.

And even though the opponent this time was strong, Stein was confident in his victory.

Stein was a 4th degree black belt, and the other 9 members he was power leveling with were all at least 3rd degree black belts. This number might not be enough to take down a transcendental grandmaster, but there were more than 10 people in Asunder. And everyone was at least a 1st degree black belt.

\*Well, everyone except those four...\*

All he had to do was send messages to everyone.



\*>Stein: All members of Asunder: Come to Inkling Village as quickly as possible.\*

He had to get to the bottom of this; he and Fae Sol were fated to meet!

### **37 - April Fools Chapter**

### **38 - Goals Aligned**

Inkling Village was much larger than either of the hamlets Jisha had visited thus far; it took her almost 10 minutes of sprinting simply to reach the eastern border. The eastern gate appeared to be guarded more heavily than its western counterpart; this was because the eastern border was deemed more dangerous, if not the most dangerous, border of the Village. After all, this was the side that faced the center of the continent. Mobs, terrain, and other conditions would naturally be more dangerous on this side.

Exiting the Village was much simpler than entering it since Jisha already owned a "visa" that allowed simple passage through the gates. With another smile and wave at the border guards, she stepped foot into the frontier once more.

The wilderness between Villages and Towns was more arduous than the one between Hamlets and Villages; this was only natural. The serene, lush plains near Uval would never be the standard again. If one came across lush plains in the late game, it was either a massive blessing or a severe curse.

As Jisha ran through the forest, the density of trees began to thicken. And with the terrain increasing in difficulty, the number of mobs attacking her increased as well. Compared to facing less than one mob per minute out of Uval, the several mobs per minute around Inkling was definitely a change of pace. However, Jisha only needed several shots at most to dispatch each of the Common and Uncommon mobs in the area.

\*>+7 Copper\*

\*>+14 Copper\*

\*>+8 Copper\*

...

And this time, she wasn't conservative with her ammo. She'd stocked up on some cheap slingshot pellets; the Golden Slingshot's generous Attack Damage easily made up for the cheap pellets' mediocre quality.

Her experience bar steadily climbed.

95%...

96%...

97%...

98%...

99%...

\*>System Message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Class: Slingshotter\*

\*>Level: 7 -> 8 (+1)\*

\*>HP: 111 -> 113 (+2)\*

\*>MP: 111 -> 113 (+2)\*

\*>AD: 11 -> 11 (+0) + 50\*

\*>AP: 55 -> 56 (+1)\*

\*>AS: 1 - 0.5\*

\*>AR: 0\*

\*>MR: 0\*

Every time Jisha saw this notification, her heart would flutter with excitement. In the future she was from, seeing this notification was a rarity. She wasn't used to seeing it happen so often.

\*Gotta relish this feeling... It'll only get less common from here.\*

In the end game, even leveling up once a week was a spectacular feat.

Jisha sighed when she contemplated this. The changes the world went through in the coming decade were so radical that this current existence seemed nearly unrecognizable.

\*>+16 Copper\*

\*>+9 Copper\*

\*>+14 Copper\*

...

Grinding low-level mobs was easier than breathing for Jisha, so she had ample time to contemplate her existence.

It was easy to forget things that happened in the past; reliving it in the moment was a completely different experience than simply reminiscing.

The world didn't feel the same. The game didn't feel the same. Even her body was quite different. "Piloting" her current body felt restricting and awkward.

Why was she sent back in the first place? How was it possible? In the current era, or rather, 11 years later, it was common knowledge that time travel wasn't possible. After all, the simple act of traveling back in time could create paradoxes and impossible events. Even in the pre-Synergy era, it was a widely accepted theory.

The only way these paradoxes could be resolved was the worldline theory. It stated that traveling back in time and altering outcomes created a separate timeline that could not affect the original. In this way, paradoxes within the same world were prevented.

However, not long ago, or rather, around 10 years in the future, the worldline theory was debunked by top-level elemental explorers. Jisha didn't understand the details, but this was the nail in the coffin. It was hard proof that traveling to the past was not possible.

Yet Jisha was here. Unless this was still an extremely vivid dream or afterlife scenario, Jisha truly had been sent back to the past. This meant that one of the fundamentals she thought she knew about the world was either false or not completely explained.

The fact that spirits couldn't interact with high-level technology and the fact that time travel wasn't possible - these two statements couldn't coexist.

A paradox.

\*I shouldn't be thinking about this stuff. I'm not a scientist. But what else can I do right now...\*

\*>System Message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Class: Slingshotter\*

\*>Level: 8 -> 9 (+1)\*

\*>...\*

\*Let's go!\*

Another system notification gave Jisha an endorphin rush. To her, leveling up was almost like a drug. It was an addicting feeling. Though she had utmost control over her body and mind as to not be swayed by worldly pleasures, leveling up was an exception.

She understood the dangers of these addictions; there would be many examples of those who succumbed to Synergy's newfound wonderlands. Yet no matter how hard she'd tried, the feeling of leveling up was as addicting as ever.

What if, one day, she was unable to control herself from this desire? The mere thought shook her to her core.

\*These thoughts are the only excitement I have right now. Gotta keep them in check before I go insane. But there's nothing else to do! Hopefully I find some people or a dungeon or... literally anything!\*

---

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Stein\*

\*>Class: Neophyte Battle Magus\*

\*>Level: 6 -> 7 (+1)\*

\*>...\*

According to his party window, it seemed like most of his crew was now around level 7. Asunder was making good progress raising their experience levels.

\*What's the leaderboard looking like?\*

\*>Global Level Leaderboard:\*

\*>1. Daisy Chain - 8\*

\*>2. Cross King - 8\*

\*>3. Swarm - 8\*

\*>4. Rogue Bandit - 8\*

\*>5. Hutian Crest - 8\*

\*>...\*

\*Hmm... Not bad.\*

They were only a level behind the leaders. This was nearly the best-case scenario, but Asunder wasn't going to stop grinding. Anything could happen in the early game - luck could easily boost one to the top of the ranks. However, if one put in steady, arduous effort, they could trail slightly behind even with bad luck.

"Keep looking around. There's bound to be an instance around here."

But luck wasn't something Stein was willing to bet on. As a beta player, he knew there was an instance dungeon in the area. As far as he could tell, the terrain near the players' spawn location was identical to the beta. He was going to use this knowledge to try to get even further ahead.

\*>Arcadia Black: I've found it.\*

\*>Stein: Good! Decide among yourselves which three of you will be joining us in this dungeon. Max party size is 5 players. The rest of you can enter as a separate party.\*

One of his underlings found the dungeon before he did; this was the way. Delegating menial tasks to less skilled individuals was the optimal form of yielding output from an organization.

Once three more members of Asunder were gathered, the five of them got a clearer view of the dungeon entrance. Even from this distance, its splendor visibly contrasted its surroundings.

When one thought of a "dungeon", they would most likely assume it was an enclosed space. However, this was not the case for many beginner-level dungeons in Synergy. Though it resembled an instance dungeon similar to other MMORPGs, the entrance of this "dungeon" was merely a wooden gate with particles of white light emanating from its passage.



Due to its size - as it was easily at least 10 metron wide and even taller than that - and its grandeur, it was simple to spot it even from a large distance. As far as Stein knew, these dungeon entrances were indestructible, so players wouldn't be able to sabotage others' chances of reaping its rewards.

"Alright, is everyone ready?"

Once Stein confirmed his crew was ready to venture inside, he turned towards the entrance. But to his surprise, a rippling animation appeared in the gate's passage; this was an indicator that another party was exiting the dungeon.

\*So someone got here before us, huh?\*

\*>Stein: Everyone, move in. Remain on standby!\*

One message to the group signaled a clear command. Prepare to engage!

Stein knew that killing many players in the frontier resulted in a karma realignment to "evil", but the exact number was unknown. It was safe to say that engaging in combat with 5 players would have no adverse consequences.

The group closed in on the gate with bated breath.

A second later, a player emerged from the gate.

\*He's stepping out by himself? That's...\*

In addition to the dungeon entry points being indestructible, it was also impossible to camp outside the gate and ambush the players leaving it. After completing a dungeon, the system would most often teleport the dungeoneers to a safe location in the vicinity of its entrance.

This meant that the players leaving the gate were fully prepared to deal with the so-called "ambush" waiting for them outside.

However, only one player emerged from the gate. This was highly unusual. If one were a beta player, they would know that leaving a dungeon through its main entrance alone was essentially suicide; there was a high likelihood of other players lying in wait outside. Because of this, many parties would vigorously appear from main entrance as a team fully prepared for battle.

One player leaving the gate in a leisurely manner suggested his lack of knowledge of this tactic.

\*Is he not a beta player? That's impossible. There's no other way he'd make it to this dungeon before us. And... level 8? That's an even faster leveling progression than us! Maybe some unforeseen circumstance kicked him out?\*

Whatever the reason was, this battle was heavily skewed in Asunder's favor.

\*>Stein: Ranged units, engage!\*

As they hadn't approached melee range yet, only the ranged players were allowed to attack.

A flurry of projectiles poured forth, and all of them were aimed at the lone player.

And these weren't paltry offensive efforts, either.

Everyone in Stein's group was twice-evolved. There were six possible classes to choose from at level 5, and Stein's group had at least one of each.

Slingshot pellets, throwing pellets, and basic element-less magic attacks assaulted the lone player.

Stein's group wasn't stupid. The culmination of these attacks could easily slaughter a single player with no movement options. The projectiles covered all spaces nearby. No matter how this player moved, he would be killed.

\*... Thought so.\*

But it was clear that the lone player wasn't stupid, either. Somewhere along the way, he must have acquired a powerful defensive item. A protective energy radiated from him, and all attacks were nullified. No one was surprised by this outcome. Asunder prepared to launch another round of attacks, but...

"Wait! I have a proposal for you!"

\*>Stein: ... Halt the offense.\*

"As you can see, I just used a powerful item to block your attacks. It's on cooldown now, so I really will die if you attack me again! Please hear me out!"

\*Is this guy crazy?\*

It was an inane risk. At this point, it was clear that this player had no immediate way to counterattack. Judging by his getup, this player appeared to be of the Fracasier class: a melee class that excelled in quick but relatively weaker attacks.

It was also possible that he was buying time, but Stein, who was flummoxed at this development, decided to humor the lone player.

Stein stepped forward to distinguish himself as the leader.

"So? Don't waste our time."

He wasn't being unreasonable with this statement; this subsection of Asunder existed to level up as quickly as possible. Stein wasn't bluffing; he really would kill this guy if he took too long.

"Okay, okay. I promise I'm not buying time for allies to come. I swear on the Goddess."

"..."

"Ugh. You probably don't believe me... Anyway, the proposal is simple. Did you hear of what happened in the Uval Hamlet only a couple of minutes after the game's launch?"

\*>Arcadia Black: Hahaha! This is interesting.\*

"... Elaborate."

Of course, Stein likely knew what this player was referring to. But he wanted to be 100% sure.

"There is a 'War Zone' in the starter hamlet of Uval, and it immediately became a PvP hotspot. Seven players, likely skilled at VMA and/or martial arts in real life, were trampling everyone. A few large groups attempted to take them down, but they prevailed."

"Hmm."

"No one was brave enough to step into the Uval Cemetery after that. Massive groups going into the War Zone was probably going to end up in a free-for-all battle anyway. It was clear that everyone was scared of these seven players... and of each other."

"What do you have to do with those seven players?"

"Well, nothing. The thing is, if those seven sounded impressive, they were defeated."

"Even though you said no one wanted to enter this 'War Zone'?"

"Yeah. No one. Except one player. One versus seven, and she won!"

"So what?"

"... So what??? 1v7 with only sticks and pellets? Are you telling me you don't realize how crazy that is? I thought it was impossible. I was SO SURE that it was impossible, and I'm never wrong about this kind of stuff. After seeing the battle with my own eyes, I left right away. I couldn't face anyone after that. And I'm going to find a way to kill her!"

"... You were proved wrong, and you want her dead. You want to kill that player because your stupid pride is tattered?"

"... Say what you want. But this my proposal to you. You guys are probably a little skilled if you came out this far already. Help me kill Fae Sol!"

"Hahaha..."

Stein laughed and the rest of Asunder awkwardly looked at each other. What a coincidence this was!

"What's in it for us?"

Of course, Stein could have immediately accepted. After all, their goals were aligned. But this player didn't know that. To take the risk of offering this proposal, it was likely he could offer some form of compensation. And Stein wanted to hear what it was.

"I have the location of a dungeon that's not too far away that didn't exist in the beta. And it looks to be pretty tough. There's no doubt that it'll offer some great rewards."

"Oh?"

Stein was genuinely intrigued.

"But what if you're wrong?"

Stein's taunt visibly frustrated the lone player even through Synergy's not-quite-perfect facial features.

"I'm not wrong. She's the only one who's made a fool out of me. I'm gonna kill her!"

It was likely he was being honest about his situation. He didn't look like the type of person that could swindle others, but the looks of a virtual avatar didn't betray anything. It was quite the old-school tactic for people to set up an innocent-looking VR avatar to conduct scams.

But beyond surface-level looks, Stein could genuinely feel the frustration exuding from this player's soul. Unless he was an A-list actor, this situation was real.

"Alright, sounds reasonable to me. It's your lucky day; I'm an org leader and soon-to-be guild leader of Asunder. The proposition of your reward is greatly tempting, and we have the manpower to grant your wish. If you are willing to join one of our parties, this will go much more smoothly."

"Deal!"

Stein smiled.

"Welcome to Asunder, even if it's as a temporary member."

"... Thanks, uh... Stein."

"It's our pleasure. We're looking forward to working with you... Castle."

## 39 - Confluence

\*Well... This is interesting.\*

As Jisha continued her dash through the forest, the layout of the terrain piqued her curiosity. To a new player, there was nothing substantially different from the forest thus far, but to trained eyes, a clear path seemed to be carved through the air.

To her, everything from the towering tree limbs to the shrubs on the ground seemed to be pointing in a single direction.

\*A mana anomaly this early in the game? Does this mean that mana triangulation is already possible?\*

Mana triangulation came in several forms; the one currently present was a type of navigation. In the future, it would be discovered that "mana" was an omnipresent substance in Synergy. Like quantum fields, it was one of the fundamental fabrics of this virtual world.

\*And it'll remain virtual for quite a while.\*

Since it was a fundamental fabric of the universe, clumps of it could form all sorts of phenomena like how atoms could bond and form molecules.

Before the true nature of mana was discovered, these phenomena were referred to as "mana anomalies", and they came in a myriad of forms.

The one she was witnessing now must have been something akin to a "life force", as all plant life seemed to be expectantly facing an energy source.



This was a highly unusual discovery; in other words, it was akin to "life force" for a front runner!

\*I can't \*not\* check it out now.\*

Jisha sprinted towards this newfound discovery.

\*Navigation tools... Are still in check.\*

Her map seemed to be intact - a good sign.

Mana abnormalities in the atmosphere, sometimes known as "subsystems", could sometimes alter the state of being of physical objects. When venturing into one, it was of utmost importance that one's health and sanity were still in check.

Jisha was always aware of the state of her body; she didn't need to focus to confirm that she was still completely fine.

In addition to this, Tier 0 players could not truly interact with mana, so any "mana storms" could not affect her anyway.

The next step was to check navigational options. If maps, compasses, or other navigational tools were altered, one should immediately leave the area unless there was a 100% chance they knew what they were doing.

Sometimes, the space within a subsystem didn't follow the laws of physics of the outside world. It was possible to become trapped in one, as sometimes one's sense of direction, or even the very concept of direction itself, became distorted.

Fortunately, it didn't seem like this "mana anomaly" was the home of such a "subsystem". And even if it was, Jisha was confident that she could still make her way around an early-game subsystem without any tool assistance.

But the farther she traveled towards what seemed to be the center of this anomaly, the more something seemed off.

\*Ugh, I can't exactly tell what's going on, though...\*

It was just a gut feeling. Since she was currently Tier 0, she shouldn't be able to detect any mana in the atmosphere. But the strange feeling wouldn't subside.

Everything still looked... relatively normal. The biome was the same. The forest was still quite simple to traverse through; the trees and shrubbery weren't out of the ordinary for a level ~10 area. Monsters' attack patterns were still geared towards absolute beginners.

\*Maybe... Hm... It's still too early to come to any conclusions.\*

As she ran, she continued to observe.

\*Is the mana getting denser?\*

This is what she wanted to conclude, however, as a Tier 0 player, it was impossible to know for sure. Jisha could only determine the properties of atmospheric mana from the behavior of her surroundings. It was like how current scientists could not directly observe dark matter but only determine its properties by how it interacted with light matter.

However, if mana was truly getting denser in this direction, there was bound to be a point of interest in the area.

And after several more minutes of running, said point of interest was revealed.

It was the entrance of a cave. It wasn't a large entrance; it was roughly only 10 metron in width. But...

\*A dungeon?\*

Yes, this cave entrance happened to be the entrance of an instance dungeon. The faint white particles floating around the air was a telltale sign.

Dungeons were special spaces. While in them, contact with the Synergy mainland was reduced. If you were in a dungeon, you would not be able to physically interact with a player in Synergy's Frontier.

Of course, this was natural. At the later levels, the reason for this became increasingly obvious. Why should you be able to be sniped to death by random players if you were trying your hardest to finish a boss fight with a raid party?

\*It looks fairly ordinary...\*

Though it looked inconspicuous, there was no way a dungeon in a mana-dense location was ordinary... especially since they were still in the infancy stages of the game.

It was highly likely to be more dangerous than an ordinary dungeon. It should be a risky endeavor to explore such a dungeon, especially since Jisha was currently not in a party.

However...

\*There's gotta be something special in here.\*

Abiding by the front-runner's mantra, Jisha headed inside.

---

"... You're saying that you were planning to kill her this whole time??"

"Of course. Surprised?"

Castle was furious. He'd just been scammed out of top-tier information. As mechanically gifted as he was, he was still a bit naïve when it came to interactions like these. The worst part was, there was nowhere for him to vent his frustration.

He thought he had a perfect plan and persuaded a clan to do his bidding, but in the end, he was the one who was wrung dry...

If his offer had been an item, he could at least yell at them to "give it back", albeit futilely. However, how could he just tell them to "forget the information" he had told them?

He almost completely lost his mind; he considered leaving this party and beating everyone up, but he knew that was impossible. It would be a 1v10. It was an impossible fight to win. But even the concept of "impossible fights" was driving him mad at the moment as a certain player appeared in his mind...

"Ahhhhhhh! F\*ck all of you!"

Castle swung his arms rambunctiously at his party members. Friendly fire wasn't permitted in the same party, but the simple act of punching someone with a VR avatar was cathartic.

"Yeah, yeah. Where's the dungeon?" Stein asked, ignoring Castle's tantrum.

This question immediately abated Castle's heated mood.

"Uh, it should be near this cave..."

Currently, Castle was just as confused as Asunder was. He was certain that he had seen the entrance of an instance dungeon in this area. And not just any dungeon - it appeared to be something that didn't exist in the beta.

Castle had claimed the dungeon was "tough", but this was only to sweeten the deal with Asunder. He had no idea if this dungeon would benevolently dispense rewards or not. But now, the dungeon was gone!

Well, it wasn't *\*completely\** gone.

The cave entrance still existed.

However, the telltale white particles that indicated a dungeon's entrance were nowhere to be seen.

What could this mean?

*\*Shit, shit, shit! I'm so screwed!\**

Castle's mind was racing a mile a minute. Stein had already told him about Asunder's current influence in the game. It was an organization that spanned across multiple starter hamlets and would likely be a dominant force in Orchid Town.

Since their current reach was so extensive, Castle was sure he'd be hunted down and killed back to level 0 if Asunder assumed he was lying to them.

*\*>Stein: What's the situation?\**

*\*>Arcadia Black: Nothing. Just forest.\**

*\*>Cargo Biscuit: Same here, nothing to note.\**

*\*>Stein: Keep looking.\**

\*How do I get out of here?\*

He was safe for now. But at the current rate, his doom was inevitable. He couldn't just run off, either. He'd be killed quickly.

\*>Name: Jade Charm\*

\*>...\*

\*>Cooldown: 39 minutes, 12 seconds.\*

The item he'd used earlier wasn't going to be any help, either. It was an item with a powerful ability, but its drawback was its high cooldown.

\*There's no way I'm gonna last 39 minutes. Someone, help...\*

As if the heavens heard his plea, a message appeared in the group chat that drew Stein's attention.

\*>Quaterniana: ...\*

\*>Stein: Yana, status?\*

\*>Quaterniana: I've lost her.\*

\*>Stein: ...\*

Apparently, "Yana" was a player they'd stationed in the Village to keep an eye out for a certain suspicious player. She was tasked with reporting this player's whereabouts, but a problem had clearly arisen.

\*>Stein: Well, that was to be expected. Where was the last place you saw her?\*

\*>Quaterniana: She left via the eastern gate and continued due east. Her mob grinding speed is unprecedentedly quick. I tried to capture a recording, but the file was unplayable. After about 5 minutes of sprinting, her heading shifted to vector three-zero-zero, and this was the last time I saw her. I've tried scouring the area to no avail.\*

When he saw this message, Castle had an ominous premonition.

"That's..."

"Hm? Spit it out," Stein demanded. "You're not off the hook here. It's quite obvious this cave isn't a dungeon entrance. You're not lying about this, are you?"

"Ah! Not at all. It's just... Doesn't that heading point straight at us?"

Stein looked at Castle with incredulity.

"Perhaps?"



Since there wasn't an exact coordinate system in the game yet, positions could only be estimated like this. It was clear that Castle's sense of direction was astute, and even Stein seemed impressed by this ability.

But before they could continue that train of thought, they heard footsteps quickly approaching.

"Tch... On guard, everyone," Stein said.

\*Ok, this is it.\*

While everyone else was distracted by the source of the footsteps, Castle was prepared to make a run for it. To not raise any suspicions, he pretended like he was following orders as well.

He was expecting a fight to break out and was going to flee in the midst of chaos... but the source of the footsteps left him sorely disappointed.

"... Yana?" Stein asked.

"So you were around here as well?" the player called Quaterniana responded.

Castle was dumbfounded. His chance to escape vanished.

"Castle, you're in luck," Stein suddenly said.

"Huh?"

"Even if you've lied about the location of the dungeon, your girlfriend is probably around here. We'll let you off for now."

"Girlfriend? Who..."

When Castle figured out who Stein was referring to, he nearly passed out from anger.

"SHE'S NOT MY GIRLFRIEND!!!!"

Castle threw a tantrum once again.

"... Yeah, you're probably as young as you look..." Stein sighed.

But as he was flailing around, something in the air caught Castle's eye. He immediately stopped screaming and turned to look.

"Wait a second..."

His change in tone was so abrupt everyone turned to hear what he had to say.

As Castle walked within 50 metron of the cave's entrance, a menu popped up on his HUD.

"This is...!"

It was information about an instance dungeon nearby. Castle was overwhelmed with relief; this cave had been a dungeon's entrance all along! He was saved. However...

"Dungeon's in progress?" Stein asked. "You didn't bring your friends to clear it before we could, did you?"

When Castle heard this, he immediately started shaking again.

"N... No. Why would I do something like that?"

Castle wasn't skilled at reading people. If he were a bit more astute, he would realize that Stein was only messing with him. From Stein's perspective, Castle was a young kid who only had gaming on his mind. He was too pure to be able to deceive others.

But from Castle's view, he was currently on the chopping block! He was about to come up with another excuse, but Stein just sighed.

"Calm down, kid. You weren't lying, but someone got here before us. There's nothing else for us to do now but hope the raid party comes out from the entrance."

Castle almost passed out from relief. And soon afterwards, the menu indicated the dungeon had been cleared.

"Get ready," Stein commanded.

If they were lucky, they could engage the raid party as soon as they exited the dungeon from this location.

They moved in to surround the entrance of the cave.

And just as they were about to complete their encirclement, they noticed space ripple in front of them.

From this ripple emerged only a single player.

Typically, a dungeon raid party would have more than one player. Even two players was a very small number of players to attempt to raid a dungeon with.

This player was wearing some form of level and name concealment, so it was impossible to discern their identity.

Or, it would have been if these items were common among the populace.

If one was known to be the only player in the area with a level and name concealment method, ironically, the concealment method became a method of identification instead.

And when Stein determined this player's identity, he was confident that there was no one else in this raid party.

"Rejoice, Castle. You've helped us a great deal. Even though we don't get to explore this dungeon, we can both accomplish our shared goal here, can't we?"

Castle was currently trembling in a combination of rage and excitement. He couldn't wait to fight this player who'd made a fool of him earlier!

Stein, who noticed his excitement, gave the command.

"Everyone, engage!"

#### **40-42 - First Instance (1-3)**

(1)

When she passed through the dungeon entrance, physical connection to the outside world was cut off. She was in her own space - her own "instance", if you will.

This dungeon, unsurprisingly, took place inside of a cave. She thought this dungeon looked fairly ordinary, but there was bound to be something unusual about this place.

\*...\*

There was nothing to do but walk forward.

The cave slowly grew wider the further she progressed. And eventually, it started to slope downwards.

It didn't take her long to realize something was wrong.

\*Ah, I don't have a light source.\*

The light from outside the cave still illuminated the pathway so far, but the further the cave descended, the less light entered. Eventually, it would be completely dark.

\*This might actually be a problem.\*

If she didn't have a light source, it didn't matter how good of a player she was. If an attack was silent, it would be impossible to react to it.

\*Ah... The struggles of the early game...\*

Jisha was used to a Tier 9 body and mind, one that was way more advanced than her current state. Since Tier 9 players were well into the range of superhumans, they would have no problem traversing a cave in a level 10 area even if it was pitch black.

However, she was currently at Tier 0. It was as if there were shackles on her senses - they were close to that of an ordinary human.

While a normal player would undoubtedly be struck by attacks with their sight taken away, Jisha's experience would help her identify attacks with sound. It was highly unlikely that any monsters in a level 10, or even 20 or 30, area would strike silently.

But... experience? How could she simply hear attacks and know how to respond to them?

Let's say there are two people sitting next to each other on a park bench. Both of them are fairly ordinary people. They aren't superhumans, nor are they Olympic gold medalists. However, one of them plays guitar in a band for fun, and one of them is an avid birdwatcher.

The ambience of the birds flying around in the park may seem like gibberish to the band member, but the birdwatcher would be able to identify each one of their calls clearly.

Likewise, a band playing music in the park would just sound like "music" to the birdwatcher, but the guitar player would be able to identify individual chords and techniques of the guitarist.

It wasn't different physiques or brainpower that allowed them to recognize these things. It was simply experience.

\*My saving grace right now is that the cave floor is flat...\*

However, experience could only take her so far. If the floor and ceiling of the cave were covered in stalactites and stalagmites, travel would be incredibly difficult if not impossible... much less reacting to and dodging attacks.

She was still Tier 0. She couldn't use anything crazy like echolocation. Even the most renowned scientists could only measure a sample with the precision of the instrument they were using.

At this point, the cave had turned completely dark - no light from the outside reached this far down.

The depths of a cave were among the darkest places one could ever visit.

It was a place where, regardless of whether your eyes were open or closed, what you saw wouldn't change.

Even traditional night vision abilities were useless here. Even at night, there were still trace amounts of light on the surface. Those with night vision could detect even these faintest amounts of light and see as if it were normal.

However, if there was no light... you couldn't see your fingers in front of you no matter how close to your face they were.

Vigilant. Jisha had to remain ever so vigilant.

In this pitch black world where one of her senses was completely eliminated, the other four seemed to become amplified.

\*Well, only two are important right now.\*

The air still smelled normal. If Jisha died from a deadly gas pocket this early in the game, she would cry. And taste... well... unless there were some salt crystals lying around or something, it wouldn't help much.

But she was straining her hearing as much as possible at the moment.

And feel was important, too. How was the ground shaped underneath her feet? It still seemed to be sloping downwards without an ending in sight.

\*Well, nothing's in sight right now... I've gotta find the wall.\*

Another use for feel - the cave wall.



After reorienting herself a bit, she came across a wall on her right.

This served several purposes.

1. Navigation. By aligning yourself with a wall, you wouldn't lose your way. Since the wall was on Jisha's right, if she ever needed to turn around for any reason, she could follow the same wall that was now on her left.

2. Reducing attack angles. Since one side of her was blocked by a wall, she would not have to worry about being attacked from that side.

\*There better not be any traps... This is kind of a gamble, but it's my best option right now.\*

Whether she was walking down the middle of the cave or along the wall, the likelihood of activating a trap was practically the same. It was important to take any advantage one was given, no matter how small.

\*Step\*

\*Step\*

\*Step\*

These quiet footsteps were the only thing Jisha could hear. And the ground below her feet, along with the cave wall, were the only things she could feel.

The only things that entered her world were her footsteps and the rough texture on her right fingertips.

Nothing else existed.

But this wasn't the case for much longer.

\*...!\*

The loud screech of a monster echoed through the cave.

From its high-pitched sound, one could assume its size was small.

\*Likely some variation of a bat monster.\*

There was no way to be certain since Jisha couldn't see. But, since they were some of the only animals in the real world that could use echolocation, it was an educated guess especially in the early game.

Without sight, there had to be another way to detect your surroundings, especially if you lived there.

\*Let's hope that screech was its echolocation method...\*

Of course, bats used ultrasound to echolocate. This may as well be silent to humans as its frequency exceeded human hearing by several times.

But, since low-level monsters would not attack silently, this screech was likely a warning that it was going to attack.

\*... I can't tell where it is. I really didn't expect something like this from the early game.\*

The screech echoed throughout the cave. Though Jisha could tell the general direction of the monster, she couldn't pinpoint it due to the extreme reverberation of the cave.

\*... I have to take a hit.\*

There was no other way to analyze where it would come from. And for the first time today...

\*-36\*

\*...!\*

Jisha took damage from a natural mob.

It was a lot more damage than she was expecting to take. As a level 9 player, she only had around 110 HP. Yet this mob shaved away over a third of it in one hit...

\*Alright.\*

But that hit gave her the information she needed to eliminate the threat.

The monster screeched again. And this time, now that she was familiar with the sound, Jisha had a much easier time locating it.

\*Wait... 1... 2!\*

It took two and a half seconds from the first screech for the monster to land a hit.

So, precisely two seconds after the second screech, Jisha fired her slingshot in the direction of the screech.

\*-72\*

It was a hit! But...

\*... It didn't die?\*

This was a bit surprising. The only mob that hadn't been one-shot by the Golden Slingshot thus far was the boss of the Corrupted Land. Any regular mobs in the area were easily killed with one pellet.

On top of that, the slingshot didn't do as much damage as it had been doing previously. This monster's defenses were higher than expected, too.

\*Is this really a level 10 dungeon?\*

If this was a natural mob of the area, then it was impossible for this to be a level 10 dungeon. Its difficulty was likely 10 to 20 levels higher...

Fortunately, the Golden Slingshot was still a lethal weapon.

\*-138\*

\*>+31 Copper\*

After another screech, Jisha landed a critical hit. The monster died as confirmed by the coins that appeared in her Coin Pouch.

\*So this is this a level 31 dungeon?\*

This "bat" was a level 31 common monster.

Though this level difference seemed quite large, the reality was that stat differences below level 100 were fairly small. So, even a 22 level difference wasn't the end of the world.

Tier 0 "common" mobs would drop Copper equivalent to their level. "Uncommon" mobs would drop Copper equivalent to 1.5 times their level.

And it was highly unlikely it was anything of a higher rarity due to it being the first mob she encountered here...

\*What did it drop?\*

To find its loot, Jisha hesitantly stepped away from the wall.

She didn't want to spend too long away from the wall as she didn't want to risk getting lost. If she accidentally wandered through a mazelike cave system... Well, it would be game over.

\*>+1 Winged Cave Dweller's Larynx\*

\*>Name: Winged Cave Dweller's Larynx\*

\*>Type: Mutator\*

\*>Description: \*High-pitched screeching\*\*

\*>Rating: Tier 0, Epic\*

\*>Ability:\*

\*>Echolocation (Toggle, No cooldown): While enabled, emits an ultrasound pulse every 5 seconds allowing the user to see with sound rather than light.\*

\*Huh.\*

When she read the description for this item, she was a bit surprised.

Though it wasn't unheard of for a Common monster to drop an Epic item, it was still rare. The probability varied throughout the world, but... the rule of thumb was around one in a thousand...

On top of that, it was a "Mutator" type, which was rare in and of itself. Only about one in fifty items were of the Mutator type, and this was a conservative estimate. It was likely to be even less than that.

So the odds of receiving this item here and now were...

\*A one-in-fifty-thousand drop?\*

And there was one more thing.

It was another item that was extremely convenient for her circumstances.

Jisha couldn't help but wonder if the system's drop rates were suddenly rigged in her favor.

\*Well, I'm not complaining!\*

With gratitude, Jisha equipped the Mutator item.

Mutator items were a bit dangerous. They were not stored in the inventory or armor slots but rather on the body itself. Once applied, they could not be removed. They permanently changed a player's physique. Because of this, using too many mutators could either change your race class or completely destabilize your character.

The reason Jisha didn't hesitate to use this one, though, was because it was a Tier 0 item.

After every tier, a player's physique would receive something akin to a reset. After a tier evolution, all mutators would be reset along with a myriad of other changes.

The only mutators she truly had to worry about were the ones after Tier 9, but that was still years away.

\*Time to try this thing out... Let's toggle the ability on.\*

A pulse radiated with Jisha at the center, and the reflection of this pulse loaded a wave of information in her brain. The information she received was akin to a snapshot of the cave with only the outlines of objects visible.

In other words, she was now seeing the game with no color at 0.2 frames per second...

Her eyebrows twitched in annoyance when she drew this analogy, but... it was better than being completely blind.

With this ability, she would have absolutely no trouble anymore dealing with small fry monsters. Another bonus was that she didn't need to stick to the wall anymore.

After a deep breath, Jisha picked up her pace and began to run through the dungeon.

(2)

\*>+31 Copper\*



\*>+31 Copper\*

...

With the newfound ability, the bat monsters were no longer of concern. For several minutes, these were the only monsters that showed up. Their density began to increase, but it wasn't anything Jisha couldn't handle.

Before long, the cave surfaces slowly began to transform.

Until now, the floor was as smooth as a footpath. But now, the dreaded stalagmites began to show up. Though they were fairly small, they still would have spelled trouble for a completely blind person.

\*This ability really was as convenient as it could possibly be.\*

Jisha would have been in serious trouble without that lucky drop. She was confident that she could handle anything the early game threw at her, but a Tier 0 physique was far worse than she remembered...

\*And this is a dungeon I can't just leave. Seriously, why is there a level 31 dungeon in a level 10 area?\*

As Jisha made excuses in her head, she noticed something above her.

One of the pulses of ultrasound reflected back a crack in the ceiling.

\*Classic.\*

It was obviously a trap.

\*RUMBLE\*

The cave began to shake. Not even a second later, the cracks in the ceiling began to expand, and a section of the cave crumbled inwards.

With a couple of casual steps backwards, Jisha easily avoided the cave-in that would have lethally crushed any Tier 0 player.

She continued as if nothing happened.

\*Well... I guess this trap would have been a bit difficult to spot with traditional vision methods.\*

In Jisha's eyes, this large imperfection in the ceiling was as blatant as a gigantic literal red flag. However, what if it were a normal party using a dim light source such as a lantern or a torch?

When the light of a lantern dimmed as it spread outwards, the ceiling would be a bit difficult to see.

The cave ceiling was quite high. Though Jisha had definitely descended at least 100 metron downwards, the cave ceiling had remained relatively parallel to the ground. In other words, the ceiling was nearly 100 metron high...

But even then.

Most Northeasterners didn't have the luxury of travel. For a normal person, this would be their first time setting foot in a cave like this. And since Synergy was realistic, they would truly feel like they were there.

Imagine an environment you visited for the first time. It would be impossible to discern every flaw about the place while fending off monsters you had never seen before. However, Jisha had seen everything. Nearly nothing could escape her eyes...

\*Please forget about my overestimation of the Tier 0 physique... But... having seen so much of the world... is that a blessing or a curse?\*

Jisha continued slaughtering mobs at a breakneck speed. She continued as if it were an ordinary jog.

Monsters? Obstacles? Traps? None of them needed more than a quick glance.

\*Haha...\*

She didn't know what to feel in this moment.

"Exploring" the game in this second life was not as magical as it was the first time around.

Of course, it hadn't been long since this second life even started, but...

\*I'm going to be here for a long time... Will I ever feel that sense of wonder again?\*

---

"Wooooooooow! Jish, look! What's that?"

"Uh... A hole in a rock?"

Two girls were wandering through a forest when they came across a cave. Though they were both in the upper class of the Northeast, they still hadn't seen a variety of landscapes in person. Though they had travelled a bit, the monotonous landscape that was their continent wasn't all that interesting...

And for better or for worse, the Northeastern continent was separated from the rest of the world by a large ocean's distance. While the rest of the human population was on several landmasses separated only by relatively smaller oceans, the Northeast might as well have been its own planet.

All of the interesting sights were almost literally a world away.

But with VR, a new world was brought directly to them.

Lush green forests.

Towering red and sand-colored rock formations.

And now, a cave system.

It was a stark contrast to their snow-white reality.

The two girls spent a long time marveling at their surroundings.

The sun was warm. The sky was crystal blue.

But then, a quick draft of cold air emanated from a nearby cave.

"Pfft, \*obviously\* it's a hole in a rock. It's called a cave. We gotta check it out!"

"Uh..."

The avatar labeled Synycal jumped up and down in excitement while the avatar labeled Fae Sol simply stood there with an indiscernible expression.

"Jish, you're such an airhead. What is even happening in that head of yours?"

"I could say the same about you, Syn."

One had a flaming passion while the other had a cool temperament. Their personalities couldn't be more different, but they were best friends.

"Well, whatever. Let's go!"

Synycal began forcefully dragging Fae Sol towards the cave.

"W-w-w-w-waaaaait I never said I wanted-"

"Too late! I already forgot about your fear of the dark! Just like you forgot to meet me in the Erian Hamlet! This is what you get for making me wait \*days\* to meet up with you!"

...

"AAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAHT GET ME OUT OF HEEEEERE!!!!!!!"

Almost as quickly as they went in, they ran out of the cave screaming.

Scary monsters!

Scary noises!

The dark!

All of these new things were overwhelming for the two girls. And as much as Synycal didn't want to admit... she was also a bit afraid of the dark.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

"Whyyyyy...."

The two of them collapsed in the grass... safe from harm.

They hadn't even run for very long, but the adrenaline of the spooky situation left them trembling.

"... Let's go again!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?"

---

\*Am I crying?\*

Jisha wiped a tear from her eye as she continued through the dungeon. She remembered something from seemingly countless years ago.

Fear. Excitement. Wonder.

None of those emotions existed in her anymore.

When you knew everything, there was nothing left to discover.

The only thing left was to go through the motions.

"Haha..."

Was this truly living? Did she have any emotions that differed from a dead person?

\*>+31 Copper\*

\*>+31 Copper\*

...

Like a machine, money and worthless items continuously piled into Jisha's inventory and Coin Pouch.

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Level: 9 -> 10 (+1)\*

\*>...\*

And unsurprisingly, these monsters allowed her to break through to level 10.



Before long, the monotony finally came to an end.

\*Is that... light?\*

The sense that had been useless until now finally picked something up.

Obviously, it wasn't sunlight. That couldn't reach this far down. Nor was it blue.

When she approached it, the identity of the light source became obvious.

\*Mana crystals?\*

In a smaller tunnel that branched off from the main path, mana was gathered here in one of its purest forms. And these particular crystals were radiating so much energy that they were glowing.

These were valuable items and were likely the source of the mana anomaly in the forest. Unfortunately, Jisha currently didn't have any way to harvest them.

She once again cursed her Tier 0 physique.

\*I'll just have to come back here later.\*

As she made a mental note to herself about these valuable items, she headed farther and farther down the dimly lit tunnel. And as she progressed, the light gradually grew less and less dim.

\*...\*

Jisha now *\*really\** wished she had a higher-leveled character. The mana crystals now lit up the cave as if there were fluorescent lighting throughout.

*\*I wonder what's going on here...\**

Eventually she came across a room that was clearly artificial.

Its shape was that of an ordinary rectangular prism. The previously jagged walls and floors were smoothed and finished, giving it a sleek shine.

In one corner there were stone urns, in another was a hefty oak desk, and one of the walls had a something that looked like an elevator door.

*\*Why is this here?\**

Usually, the technological level of places in Synergy corresponded to their level. For example, in the game's infancy when everyone was below level 10, there was no modern technology. In fact, even things of the historic Industrial Age were not present.

Wooden and/or mud huts and wells of water were commonplace... and these dated back to maybe even before the Ancient Middle Ages.

Of course, there were outlier scenarios like this one. This elevator door screamed "Industrial Age" at a glance.

When Jisha approached it, she realized it was locked and had to be opened with a code via keypad.

She immediately knew what to do. Just like with any classic video game with a locked doorway, a key would be hidden somewhere nearby.

Sometimes this key was just an ordinary physical object. Other times, it was a code. And often times, one had to complete a puzzle to access it.

This was something most people with video game experience instinctively knew.

And so, she checked the wooden desk that was not far away from her.

On top of the desk was a small stack of paper. As this could have some hints for the code, Jisha naturally read it.

\*The Search For Purer Energy Sources... huh?\*

It almost read like a scientific paper. Most people's eyes would glaze over in boredom, but Jisha skimmed through it as if it were a history recap.

Though there was scientific terminology used in the paper, it wasn't the result of research or an experiment or anything of the like. It was simply an article that held hope for the future.

\*"At first it was simply human effort alongside tame natural phenomena. Then, as we tamed them, horses, oxen, and other large animals did the heavy lifting for us. Then, the introduction of simple machines. And later, steam power. Then, the generation of electricity which allowed us to store power. Then, nuclear fission. And now, the application of fusion.\*"

\*"As society makes technological advancements, the amount of energy they need increases exponentially. The further and further we go, the more efficient we need to be at harvesting energy.\*

...

\*"Is the chase of antimatter worth it, or is there some unknown, untapped, energy source humanity has yet to discover?\*"

There were no clues for a code, but reading this made Jisha a bit nostalgic.

She was reminded she now lived in the pre-Synergy era.

One without the existence of "mana".

Yes, in the future, this "unknown, untapped" energy source would be discovered. And people would go crazy over it.

She stared at the mana crystals around her again and sighed.

\*How something so simple can plunge the world into chaos...\*

After reminiscing briefly, she moved on to the desk drawers. Maybe there was something in there.

Unsurprisingly, there were many other sheets of paper in these drawers. But all of them read the same thing.

"\*REDACTED\*"

"\*XX\*"

It didn't seem helpful at first glance, but Jisha kept it in mind regardless. You never knew when some seemingly useless information could end up being a necessity for clearing the dungeon.

Now, the only other thing left in the room was the stone urns.

These urns were fairly tall. They were almost as tall as Jisha's current avatar. This, along with the fact that they were made of solid stone, meant that they were impossible to lift. It also meant that she couldn't reach inside and take out whatever was in them.

She then tried pushing them over. Just because you couldn't lift something didn't mean you couldn't tip it over! But...

\*No luck.\*

It was as if they were bolted to the ground; they wouldn't budge.

She then took out her Golden Slingshot and fired a pellet at the urns. By shattering them, whatever was inside would naturally come out.

However, even that did nothing. These urns were too solid.

\*I only have one more option, then.\*

If a physical attack didn't work, then a magical attack might. Some materials were ridiculously resistant against physical damage but were weak against magic. Perhaps this stone was of a similar nature.

But... Fae Sol was of the Slingshotter class. She didn't have any magical abilities at her disposal.

However, she did possess an item that could deal magical attacks.

\*>Name: Magical Oaken Dagger\*

\*...\*

Though damage dealt with this item would be halved as it didn't match her class, it still dealt a bit of magic damage.

And using it, Jisha sliced at the urns.

On the surface, this seemed ridiculous. How could wood slice through stone?

However, mana made the impossible possible.

With one clean slice, the top halves of all four urns cleanly slid off revealing the inside.

Each urn held a massive 6-sided die. Each die only had one number written on all sides.

Two of them read "1", and two of them read "0".

This was all the information she needed.

Jisha walked up to the keypad and entered a four digit code.

These numbers, along with "XX" that was written on the sheets of paper, meant that the code was most likely...

\*One, zero, one, zero.\*

The door slowly slid open. It was a success.

Past the doorway was a staircase that led down into the darkness.

There was only one thing to do.

\*Well... let's see what's down there.\*

\*Tap, tap, tap\*

Jisha's light footsteps echoed through the stairwell as she descended the steel steps. It was likely they were solid inside.

The lighting inside this small hallway was incredibly poor. Since the staircase didn't travel along a straight line, the previously well-lit room was no longer visible.

Mana crystals were jutting out from the walls at erratic intervals. It was likely that these were just naturally-occurring crystals and whoever constructed the tunnel decided to use them as lightning..

\*So were they just stingy, or...? Seriously, a couple extra lights around here wouldn't help.\*

The mana crystals were spaced so far apart that Jisha was relying on the echolocation skill more than her eyesight at the moment.

She'd never turned it off; it was still proving quite useful. She would have definitely run into a wall or two without it.

The staircase was winding downwards with no pattern, either.

\*... Did the constructor just dig in whichever direction the subterrain was softest?\*

It was inconvenient to travel through, but it was optimal for the construction cost... Jisha decided she couldn't really fault them for it.



Down, down, down...

The monotony of darkness shrouded her again.

---

\*Are you kidding me? It's one of these?\*

Jisha's eyebrows twitched in frustration as she approached the end of the staircase.

She was sure she'd traveled several hundred metron downwards. This took her at least 10 minutes. Now, she'd arrived in an empty room with a singular steel crate in the middle.

The only lighting in the room came from some mana crystals that were neatly laid around said crate.

The description of "suspicious" was an understatement.

It was so clearly a trap that Jisha felt like a prank had been played on her.

The most frustrating thing was... it was impossible to tell whether a path in a dungeon would lead to a dead end unless someone scouted it.

Many Synergy players wanted to be front runners, but no front runner wanted to encounter a dead end. Sometimes, it was a punishment worse than death...

\*... Now what?\*

Climbing the staircase would take another 10 minutes.

Jisha closed her eyes and massaged her eyebrows to calm down.

\*Well, f\*ck it.\*

She made up her mind pretty quickly.

It was a tendency that had never gone away despite the years she'd lived; if there was a piece of candy in front of her, she would spare no effort to snatch it.

Of course, over time, she was able to restrain this habit.

But here, in the beginning of the game where the world was simple, she felt like she could go a bit wild.

The 10 minutes she'd spent to get down here would turn into 20 wasted minutes if she returned empty handed. Was she really going to let a level 31 dungeon treat her like this?

\*This isn't like earlier, okay? I've learned from my mistake!\*

Jisha approached the crate and flung it open. It was already unlocked.

... Actually, there was a very small chance that this "trap" wasn't a trap. Sometimes, simply by appearing like a trap, chests that were completely safe to open would be overlooked. It was like how a harmless bug's bright colors - its mimicry - would warn predators that it was "dangerous".

When she took the items...

Nothing happened.

\*...\*

But... the only items inside were a few rudimentary stamina potions...

\*There's no way. One of these has gotta be something interesting, right?\*

It was possible to get surprise-attacked by some delayed mechanism, so Jisha remained alert.

However, no matter how much she looked, the only information that was returned to her was that of the most basic stamina potion in the game...

She kicked the crate in frustration. It didn't budge.

After calming down, she scanned the room again.

Even now, no traps had activated.

\*So these are probably the real treasures of this room.\*

The mana crystals were beautifully refined into the shape of cubes and lay around the crate in a neat circle. And there were 10 of them! These were the only mana crystals she had seen thus far that were actually collectable.

With no hesitation, Jisha snatched one of the crystals off the ground.

And when she did...

She heard a door slide shut behind her.

\*... Yeah...\*

This was something she fully expected, but she was confident that she could survive any traps the dungeon threw at her.

She waited.

Vigilantly... ever so vigilantly.

But, even after waiting for a bit... nothing happened.

\*Hm...\*

Jisha relaxed a bit when she confirmed that no trap existed.

\*There has to be something going on here.\*

She looked around again and noticed that the mana crystal she'd taken had been lying on some sort of mechanism.

\*Oh...\*

She put the mana crystal back on top of this mechanism, and the door opened.

\*Oh.....\*

When she realized the nature of the trap, she nearly fell to the ground out of exasperation.

This... was the most feared type of trap in the entire game!

The rumored "worse-than-death" punishment!

But... nothing was happening. How was it worse than death?

Well...

These mana crystals were insanely valuable at her current level.

It was obvious that anyone would want to take them.

But, if you tried to take them, you would break the mana circuit that was holding the door open.

So, you had a few options.

1. Leave.

This was a tragic option. It seemed like it was possible to smuggle the stamina potions out of the room, though, so it wasn't a complete loss.

2. Take the crystals and wait for someone to rescue you.

There were a couple of problems with this one.

Since this was an instance dungeon, Jisha was in a space that was isolated from the mainland. It was impossible for someone to come rescue her since she entered the dungeon alone.

And since the door was made of steel, it was unlikely any level 31 player could break through it, much less a level 10 player... (a/n: retconned last chapter, she levelled up to 10)

Now, this was where the sadism began.

There was indeed a third option.

3. Take the crystals and try to break out.

Though the door was made of steel, the rest of the room was just rock.

Jisha knew for a fact that this rock was actually softer than the steel the door was made of. This was because it was the same type of stone as the urns she'd sliced earlier.

Since the rock was weak to magic, it was possible to use spells to dig a tunnel.

But... a tunnel to where?

This secret room was hundreds of meters underground. Unless one could just swim through the terrain, reaching the surface would be an extremely laborious task.

Spells cost mana. Mana would deplete. And the destructive power of spells at level 31 was... well, let's just say that they wouldn't be mining efficiently.

The good news was that one's mana would naturally regenerate over time.

Stamina, on the other hand, would not regenerate naturally. If you ran out of consumables, you would just starve to death in this cave.

However, the crate contained many stamina potions.

If you thought this far, it was clear that the creator of the dungeon was saying, "just try to break out!"

But as mentioned earlier... break out to where?

With the absurd supply of stamina potions and the small rate at which it decreased in the low levels, you could stay in here almost endlessly.

It was logical for someone to try to break out for at least a little while.

And this is where it was worse than death especially for a front runner.

If one spent more time in this cave than they realized, they would fall behind in levels.

If you died once, you would simply lose one level and respawn in some nearby settlement. Though it would take some effort, reclaiming a lost level wasn't difficult.

And this was only in the wild. In an instance dungeon, punishment was usually even more lenient.

However, by digging around endlessly in this cave, how many levels have you effectively lost by not leveling up? A determined person might even sacrifice 10 levels...

Of course, it was possible to transport the crystals outside using some sort of warp magic, but that was simply overkill. 10 magic crystals were valuable, but that was only in the early game. Using this sort of magic here was like using 1 Gold to buy 1 Copper - not worth it!



So, breaking out was the only option.

Jisha collected all of the crystals and put them in her inventory. Then, she began thoroughly inspecting the room for any clues.

The first thing she did was inspect the door. She concluded that this was a blast-resistant and magic-resistant metal.

As expected, it wouldn't be possible for her to break through this door with any of her current methods.

She then began inspecting the walls.

This was another form of mana triangulation.

Since the walls were weak to magic, it was possible that the properties of it would vary greatly in areas where mana was denser.

She took the magic dagger and began poking the walls in various places.

\*Tck, tck, tck...\*

The sound of a sharp object hitting a rock resounded through the room.

\*Not here... not here... Ah, here.\*

Instead of a sharp sound, Jisha encountered a section of the wall that crumbled even with a soft poke.

For a few minutes, she dug through this weak rock with the dagger.

Even though this tool wasn't optimal for digging, the rock was so weak here that she eventually managed to make a small hole.

The preparations were nearly complete.

\*Heh heh...\*

Jisha suppressed the urge to giggle when she thought of this plan.

Why was the door blast-resistant? The tunnels were constructed of the same material as well. What was the reason for this?

Well... depending on the density, mana crystals were explosive. They were bundles of energy, after all. Disturbing them too much would force them to release this energy.

And if you "disturbed" them quickly enough...

Jisha ruefully glanced at five of the mana crystals she had just collected... and placed them in the small hole in the wall.

This was likely the only way to break out of this cave. It was quite the clever trap; it was possible to take the crystals out of the room, but to do so, you had to sacrifice several of them in the process.

At the end of the day, it was still a profit of five crystals.

A good percentage of the player population hoarded too many useless consumables. These players wouldn't even think of sacrificing some of the treasure they were working so hard to get. Here, that was a fatal mistake.

Jisha retreated behind the crate and equipped her Golden Slingshot.

\*Goodbye, little ones...\*

She took aim and fired!

She watched on in excitement as the pellet approached the mana crystals in the wall.

As if it were a baseball through a window, the pellet shattered the first crystal.

And when it did...

Jisha immediately took cover behind the steel crate.

\*BOOM\*

\*BOOM\*

\*BOOM\*

\*...\*

The explosions were loud. Deafening, even.

But Jisha attentively listened to each one with a smile on her face.

This wasn't the real world - she wouldn't suffer hearing loss from a virtual explosion. On top of this, the system mitigated the pain she would have normally felt.

\*BOOM\*

\*BOOM\*

\*BOOM\*

...

The explosions didn't stop.

The five crystals had long exploded by now, so how was this happening?

Since the area Jisha had dug out was weaker rock, it was likely that mana was denser in that area. The source of this mana was none other than mana crystals! In other words, there was likely a vein of mana crystals in this area.

The rest didn't need to be said.

\*Haha... It's a success.\*

Jisha poked her head above the crate to witness the pretty flashing lights of the mana explosions. Cool people weren't supposed to look at explosions, obviously, but who cared about that?

There was something satisfying about blowing something up.

Was it the destruction it caused? Was it the flashing lights? Was it the fact that something that took so much effort to prepare was gone in an instant?

She wasn't sure.

\*I didn't think I was going to be like this...\*

The pretty lights, the pieces of candy... her childish tendencies were on full display in this dungeon.

Was it because her physical body had reverted to that of a child?

\*It is a bit refreshing, though.\*

In the recent past, she hadn't been allowed to act like this. But now, she could chalk it up to her being "young".

Jisha watched as the explosions continued and chained upwards creating a convenient slope to climb.

It was enjoyable to watch, but explosions in a cave were always dangerous.

\*RUMBLE\*

\*RUMBLE\*

...

\*Here it comes.\*

A cave-in was beginning. There was only one way out!

Jisha booked it through the tunnel as the dust particles that were falling in the room turned into pebbles which turned into large rocks... which turned into the entire ceiling collapsing.

A "time trial" had begun!

It was a popular game concept.

How far could you run before the disaster that was chasing you caught up?

\*This'll be good practice.\*

This was by far the most extreme terrain Jisha had attempted to speed through in her Tier 0 body. It was the perfect opportunity to completely familiarize herself with it.

She climbed through the tunnel avoiding sharp rocks that jutted inwards on all sides.

The further she ran, the less friendly the tunnel became.

The tunnel that she could comfortably run through shrank considerably.

Eventually, it became as small as a crawl space.

Crawling through a space deep underground. Rock right above your back and right below your stomach. A cave-in was imminent. Stopping meant that you would be crushed to death.

Even a cat would be claustrophobic!

But Jisha calmly weaved through the obstacles. It wasn't a perfect run, but it was undoubtedly fast enough to outrun the cave-in.

With a combination of the weak light from several untouched mana crystals and echolocation, finding proper footing was not a problem.

She didn't have the grip or forearm strength of a rock climber, but the rocks she needed to climb weren't vertical.

Her hands and fingers immediately latched on to the optimal holds.

And memorizing this path allowed her feet to push off those same holds.

The crawl space grew smaller and smaller. Eventually, there was barely any room to move at all. Was there an accessible exit, or would she be stuck here? Jisha wondered if she'd messed up.

But soon after, she spotted a literal light at the end of the tunnel.

Unfortunately, it wasn't sunlight.

She popped out of the tiny hole in the wall and smoothly executed a parkour roll on the ground.

\*Hm...\*

She was still in the cave. There were... a lot of mana crystals here. And unsurprisingly, none of them were harvestable.

\*This is probably the bottom of the other section... Well, now that I've seen this, it looks like I chose the right path in the end.\*



If she spent her time to travel to the bottom of a cave with treasures that said "look, but don't touch," it would have been even more frustrating.

She didn't have any time to admire this crystal formation. The cave was still destroying itself.

Jisha continued up the only pathway that existed. It was obvious that this wasn't meant for human travels. One could only travel quickly through this terrain if they had a combined experience of spelunking, rock climbing, and parkour.

An ordinary player would have been crushed in the tunnel long ago.

Jisha had to get a bit creative with her exit approach.

When the ground was too jagged, she found footholds on the walls.

When it appeared to be suitable, she was able to parkour across several rock formations along the ground.

And if there was a shortcut that could be crawled through, she took it without hesitation.

Fortunately, there were no monsters around. They undoubtedly realized something was wrong and likely escaped.

Upwards, upwards, and upwards, the climb continued.

The farther up she went, the easier it became, and the faster she was able to progress to the exit.

Before long, she finally reached the fork in the road where she'd originally branched off. At this point, it was as simple as running a footrace on pavement.

No more obstacles were in the way.

There was another light at the end of the tunnel. And this time, it was sunlight!

Jisha slowed to a stroll, stretched her virtual body and yawned as if she hadn't nearly failed just earlier.

\*That was a good workout.\*

The cave-in was nowhere in sight. She'd outrun it by a mile. But...

\*Hm?\*

For some reason, she was allowed to leave even though she hadn't received a dungeon clear notification...

\*What was the clear condition, then?\*

At the end of the day, it didn't really matter since she'd made a profit of five mana crystals. Though she was curious about the true clear condition, a steady rumbling emanated from deep within the cave. She wouldn't be able to go back in there if she wanted.

\*Well, whatever.\*

Jisha nonchalantly walked out of the cave, and the system presented her with several dungeon exit options.

She decided to simply exit where she'd entered.

By selecting this option, a portal to an exact replica of the cave entrance in Synergy's mainland appeared. By stepping back into the mainland, this "instance" ceased to exist.

When she stepped out of the cave, she wanted to reminisce about the time she'd first exited a cave with her best friend.

Out of breath. Adrenaline pumping. And the ridiculous decision to go back in.

Of course, this decision got them killed.

"Rejoice, Castle. Everyone, engage!"

But... a tiny inconvenience shattered this daydream.

### **43 - vs Stein**

\*Let's see... 3, 6, 9, 12 players, huh? They really don't waste any time.\*

Jisha was a bit annoyed when she was "ambushed" by these players, but when she realized Stein and Castle were in the mix, she perked up a bit.

She'd heard of Stein from Brookie and the four friends who claimed to be from the guild "Asunder"; he was supposedly the leader.

And Castle, well... He'd just disappeared after Jisha's War Zone battle.

\*That kid... Why did he ignore my guild invitation? I'll have to give him a stern lecture about ignoring girls' messages!\*

Jisha narrowed her eyes and observed the projectiles headed her way.

Out of six projectiles, four were physical while two were magical.

\*Six ranged units... They're perfectly balanced. Are they here specifically for me?\*

This situation was unlikely to be coincidental. She wasn't surprised that the news of the "Uval Spawn Battle", as it would eventually be called, had spread to nearby players.

Guild leaders, especially those of front-running guilds, were keen on picking up important and unusual information about pretty much anything. That battle footage could be considered as both...

By inspecting their levels, it was likely that Asunder was also a guild that focused on exploring the edge of Synergy.

The current leaders of the leveling scoreboard were level 9, and the players in front of her were level 7 or 8. They weren't far behind, which meant that they were most likely twice-evolved.

At level 5, six additional classes were available to players.

From the melee side, there were Fracasiers, Batonistas, and Neophyte Battle Magi.

On the ranged side, there were Pitchers, Slingshotters, and Neophyte Mages.

Of the 12 players, there seemed to be 2 of each type.

These 12 players had a poor encirclement since Jisha was located at the cave entrance. She had ample room to retreat backwards, but that would unlikely be unnecessary.

Despite this, their attacks were well-coordinated.

Though the melees weren't in range yet, the six projectiles covered all her escape options and left little space to dodge.

That's right - *\*little\** space... not *\*no\** space. Though any ordinary opponent would likely have been hit, Jisha was anything but ordinary.

Simply by abusing the darkness of the cave's shadows, the ranged attacks weren't as precise as they could have been.

She weaved through the attacks, raised her weapon, and counterattacked.

---

\*>Quaterniana: Pitcher downed!\*

\*Damn...\*

Fae Sol, or what was assumed to be Fae Sol since the name and level were concealed, seamlessly waltzed through the hail of bullets and fired a counterattack to boot.

Stein nearly doubted his eyes. His evaluation of Fae Sol increased by a notch.

Originally, he thought he could overwhelm her with sheer numbers. After all, 12 was more than 7. On top of that, each of their individual skills was higher than that of the 7 in the Uval Cemetery.

However, he quickly realized he was mistaken. Stein was a versatile commander - he quickly adapted to this situation.

\*>Stein: Mage unit, take cover behind melees. Pitch unit, stay at mid range. Sling unit, keep your distance!\*

Most classes in Synergy had two fundamental ways of attacking. One was basic attacks, and the other was "skills" or "spells".

Unlike skills, which consumed mana and/or stamina, basic attacks did not.

Since basic attacks generally had a far lesser cooldown than skills, he wanted to abuse the Pitcher and Slingshotter classes, which primarily used basic attacks, to create an undodgeable "zerg rush" of projectiles.

Even with all this, Stein wasn't sure if it would be enough to take out their opponent. So...

\*>Stein: Melees, close in.\*

All 12 players converged on a point!

Stein's formation change was most optimal in a boss fight. He placed each unit at their most effective ranges from the singular target.

However, there may have been a small flaw with this plan.

Fae Sol was a player, not a boss.

Unlike bosses, which one could usually attack fairly mindlessly, fighting another player usually required a lot of brain power.

\*This is all I can hope for, though...\*

This was unknown territory for Stein and Asunder. Never had they fought a single player with a raid party! As this was a new experience, it was impossible to tell whether this strategy would be effective.

It was known that Fae Sol was of the Slingshotter class which was known to be a "glass cannon". They could deal high amounts of damage but were fragile on defense.

Early in the game, this fact wasn't apparent via stats. But Stein was well aware of a Slingshotter's weakness - it had a very low attack speed!

In other words, Slingshotter was a class that focused on basic attacks, yet they had a high cooldown. This, paired with their high damage per shot, made them extremely deadly at long range.

If he could overwhelm Fae Sol with melee units at close range, it would be impossible for her to fire fast enough to retaliate.

Stein noticed Fae Sol begin to retreat backwards.

\*As expected... she's playing to her class's strengths.\*

If he let her stay at a distance, they'd only be picked off one by one. Stein had seen her accuracy in the battle in Uval. It wouldn't matter how many numbers he had on his side if none of them could reach her - they would lose!

Fae Sol raised her golden weapon again to fire.

When the melee units saw this, some of them used a dash, sprint, or some other skill that allowed them to move a short distance rapidly.

This type of ability, known as a "gap-closer", was something all melee units possessed. After all, if they didn't, it would be impossible for them to catch up with a retreating ranged unit.



But this type of skill could also be used to dodge.

Ordinarily, using a gap-closer to dodge a basic attack was the height of foolishness. But after witnessing the basic attack one-hit-KO a teammate, they couldn't help themselves.

They tried to predict where the pellet would head and dashed out of the way, but they immediately realized that they had wasted their gap-closing ability!

\*-152\*

\*>Quaterniana: Pitcher downed.\*

\*>Stein: What?\*

None of the melees that were charging at Fae Sol were the intended target. Instead, from a ridiculous range, Fae Sol sniped another Pitcher off Synergy's surface.

\*Why?\*

Stein couldn't understand why she'd gone for a risky shot instead of landing a guaranteed hit on a melee that was posing more of a threat. But there wasn't any time to think about that now.

\*>Stein: Melees, use everything you have to close in. Ranged units, don't let up!\*

Melees who hadn't used a gap-closer charged forward. In the time Fae Sol's basic attacks were on cooldown, they had to make a significant move. If they couldn't...

\*We'll actually lose?\*

This unsettling thought arose in Stein's head.

---

\*They're good.\*

Though Jisha was thinking this, this battle was a walk in the park for her. Even with a Tier 0 physique, the pace of this battle was abhorrently slow for her.

After experiencing the superhuman worlds of higher tiers, everything that was happening at the lower levels was at a snail's pace.

Yes, they were only "good" for beginner Synergy players but nothing more.

Jisha raised her weapon and fired at the backline once again.

\*-133\*

With that, an enemy Slingshotter was killed.

\*9 to go, huh.\*

Though Jisha felt like she could do almost anything here and still come on top, she didn't want to accidentally "throw" the battle.

Since the ranged units were the only threat at the moment, it was best to take care of them first.

Pitchers had rapid attack speed which made dodging their shots extremely annoying. Thus, she took care of them immediately.

The slingshot users, who were theoretically deadly at long range, weren't much of a problem. Unsurprisingly, they both wielded the Wooden Slingshot. If even Jisha had never heard of a Golden Slingshot until this lifetime, it was nearly impossible that anyone here had, much less have acquired one.

Slingshots were only deadly at long range if the attacks connected. Unfortunately, slingshots were extremely difficult to use. The only reason Jisha was one-shotting everyone like it was nothing was because she'd used the weapon countless times before.

The only true danger came from the "Targeted Sling" ability. This was essentially a system-assisted basic attack. It was guaranteed to be accurate.

But not only could it be dodged like any other basic attack, its cooldown was a whopping 10 seconds.

In other words, newbie Slingshotters were simply decorative...

\*Hmm...\*

She observed the melee units drawing nearer. They still weren't at a range to be a threat, so Jisha glanced at the three remaining ranged units.

At this moment, Jisha noticed the Mages in the backline finish casting their spells.

\*I see...\*

Neophyte Mages had two "high-damage" spells. One was a laser-like beam that dealt high damage to a single target. The other was an "area-of-effect", or AoE, spell that appeared on the ground and dealt damage to everything in it.

Of course, before the spells took effect, there was an indicator of where they were cast. If this didn't exist, it would be impossible for new players to dodge them, and the class would be "broken" beyond belief.

So when Jisha saw the circles on the ground along with the Slingshotter's attack (lol) patterns, she immediately knew what their strategy was.

\*Not bad. Guess I'll play along!\*

---

\*She fell for it?\*

Never would Stein have expected this strategy to work on Fae Sol.

This was a basic tactic known as "zoning". It was basically forcing an opponent to dodge into a trap. In this case, the Slingshotter basic attacks along with the Mage AoE spells would zone Fae Sol straight into the melees.

In this situation, every move Fae Sol attempted would be a losing one. If she were to retreat backwards, she would take a lot of damage from the AoE spells. If she were to stay in place, she would be pelted by slingshot ammunition. If she were to move forward, she would enter the embrace of the melee units that were charging at her. And since she was still inside the cave's entrance, there was little room to dodge to the sides.

Stein was a bit surprised that Fae Sol chose the "worst" option - dodging forwards and leaving the cave. There was no way for a Slingshotter to win at melee range. At least if she'd dodged backwards, she'd have taken damage but would have still remained at a distance. However, she was entering the range of 6 melee units... including the two most skilled of the group, Castle and Stein.

Yes, Stein was about to face this menace head-to-head. During an engagement, Stein would not be able to command his subordinates through chat; it was impossible to focus on two things at once. He and his five allies would have to focus on wordless communication.

The two parties were now less than 5 metron away from each other. Stein and the other Neophyte Battle Magus in his party would be the first ones to engage. Out of these melee classes, they had the longest range.

In addition to basic attacks, the Neophyte Battle Magus had two skills: "Mana Punch" and "Mana Palm Strike".

\*>Stein: Cargo!\*

The other Magus in the group, Cargo Biscuit, understood Stein's command. As they were both experienced players who had worked together many times in the past, one word was usually enough to convey intentions.

Cargo Biscuit charged his Mana Palm Strike and threw it out. As this was currently the longest-ranged "melee" attack, it was used to engage. This, along with the Pitcher and Mage basic attacks that weren't letting up, forced Fae Sol to move even closer to the melee group.

All this time, Fae Sol had taken 0 HP of damage. Though this fact unnerved Stein, he knew that was about to change.

Fae Sol raised her weapon once again.

Stein and the others braced for impact.

Even though they were at this close of a range, a Slingshotter could still fire. In a strange way, it made them even more deadly, since even a complete noob was unlikely to miss from this close.

\*-320\*

And as if she were showing off, she fired a perfect vital strike.

A Fracasier, one who had wasted their gap-closing ability earlier, was dead.

Fae Sol's attack was now on cooldown. Everyone was in melee range. Everyone knew what to do.

The instant she fired, Castle used a skill which allowed him to attack with a flurry of punches.

"I've got you now!"

This skill was the manifestation of Castle's rage. He was only taking revenge for the humiliation he suffered earlier. The punches relentlessly rained down.

"You won't embarrass me again...?"

But... none of them connected.

Castle was flabbergasted.

He didn't understand how.

Slingshotters didn't have any movement abilities. Nor did they have any defensive abilities. The only thing they could do was fire basic attacks. Their only skill was a "targeted attack" which was nothing more than an enhancement to basic attacks.

She'd just fired, which meant that she should have no cards left to play.

When he looked at how his attack was blocked, he saw that Fae Sol was no longer holding a slingshot.

He looked up with a bizarre expression... only to see the brightest of smiles on a beautiful avatar.

## 44 - Why I'm Called the Gun Swap Goddess

\*-0\*

\*-0\*

\*-0\*

\*-0\*

\*-0\*

It wasn't just Castle. Stein, Cargo Biscuit, Quaterniana... Everyone was confused as to what happened. Castle used a Fracasier skill which threw out 5 quick punches. This should have caused a massive amount of damage to an undefended target. However, "-0" repeatedly floated in the air.

"What?"

Fae Sol was holding a dagger.

This was so unexpected that even those in the middle of attacking abruptly stopped.

And in that brief moment...



\*-177\*

\*>Quaterniana: Slingshotter downed...\*

Fae Sol swapped back to a slingshot and fired.

The melees recognized that the slingshot was on cooldown. However...

\*-0\*

\*-0\*

\*-0\*

...

What should have been an opening wasn't there!

\*-152\*

\*>Quaterniana: Mage downed. I don't want to get targeted. I'm retreating.\*

\*What's happening?\*

Stein felt dizzy. Not only was the opponent in front of him still unharmed, she had also simultaneously picked off their entire backline...

\*... while in melee combat?\*

It didn't make any sense.

"How are you doing thaaaaaaaaat?!"

It wasn't certain whether he was referring to accurate slingshot snipes or the dagger-parried attacks, but he tried flailing some basic attacks in Fae Sol's general direction. However, these rage-induced attacks without any thought behind them could not do any damage.

"Haha... You want to know?"

A relaxed girl's voice contrasted the tense atmosphere.

"Watch carefully!"

As much as they didn't want to fall for the enemy's tricks, Stein, Castle, and the 3 other melees couldn't help but obey that voice.

They were too curious. But as the saying goes... curiosity killed... a melee unit in this instance.

\*-189\*

Since Quaterniana, the final Mage, had retreated, Fae Sol targeted a nearby player. But Stein wasn't paying attention to that. What he was more curious about was how it was happening!

His observation wasn't in vain.

In an instant, just as the slingshot was off cooldown... Fae Sol un-equipped the dagger and equipped the slingshot. She fired the slingshot and un-equipped it, and re-equipped the dagger. And using that dagger, she was parrying any attacks she couldn't dodge...

\*That's possible?\*

It was akin to "animation cancelling" in various other games, but it seemed slightly different. Stein wasn't 100% sure, but this was how he interpreted Fae Sol's series of actions:

1. Fire slingshot.
2. Slingshot goes on cooldown.
3. Unequip slingshot, equip dagger.
4. Use dagger while slingshot is on cooldown.
5. Swap back to slingshot.

The problem was, though a slingshot's basic attack cooldown was long... it was still a basic attack. They had a far lesser cooldown than skills. In other words, this "swapping" process was happening very quickly. Not only that, but the user needed to weave the moves of differing weapons together so they could flow well...

When he saw this, he knew for a fact that they wouldn't be able to win.

\*Is that playstyle... even feasible?\*

It wasn't anything Stein had seen before. This wasn't surprising - as a beta player, he only had a couple weeks' worth of experience in the game. This wasn't nearly enough time to see everything the game had to offer.

But even if he had played the game for years, it wouldn't be anything he'd see. After all, there was only one player in the game that had truly mastered this playstyle - the Gun Swap Goddess.

Stein considered the experience that would be necessary to play like that.

If you picked a class, you had to spend your hours to learn how it worked.

If your class required precision, you had to practice.

If your class required planning, you had to practice.

As of now, no player had shown a level of slingshot prowess remotely near Fae Sol's.

Stein suspected that this player was a slingshot master in real life.

It was an odd venture in the modern era, but there was no other explanation for the precision she displayed.

However, now... she was a master dagger wielder? How?

One thing that was widely known by beta testers was that martial arts in the real world and VMA could be applied in Synergy.

A majority of the population did not have martial arts experience in the modern era. It wasn't that martial artists were uncommon. It was just that one was far more likely to encounter a person who didn't know martial arts. And many of these people were the ones playing Synergy.

Martial arts masters were busy focusing on their own body and technique. They didn't have time for "children's games" like Synergy.

Why was a master slingshot and dagger user playing?

"It's interesting, right?"

As if she read his mind, Fae Sol postulated this question.

As of now, she'd stopped using the slingshot and was only using the dagger.

If she used the slingshot, the fight would have long been over.

Stein was naturally intrigued by this question.

"It is... How is it possible for you to play like this?"

"Hm..."

\*-33\*

\*-0\*

\*-28\*

\*-0\*

...

As Fae Sol considered the answer to this question, the intense melee didn't stop.

Stein and Cargo Biscuit.

These were the two most skilled fighters of the advance party.

As militants of Alacai, they were undoubtedly in an upper echelon of martial artists.

Castle wasn't at their level, but he was undoubtedly a young talent who simply lacked experience.

Yet these three players couldn't land a single hit on their opponent...

\*>Stein: We're forfeiting.\*

\*>Quaterniana: ...\*

It was a tough pill to swallow, but the outcome of the battle was already obvious.

"We surrender," Stein said as he threw his hands up in the air. He didn't care anymore about the fight. "Just tell us how you can play like that..."

Fae Sol seemed to accept their surrender and disengaged. She put a finger to her chin and tilted her head as if she were deep in thought.

"You thought I was a ranged player, right?" she asked.

"Of course we did! You want to catch us off guard with cheap tricks?" Castle fumed.

"Haha... cheap tricks? Do you want to fight me again?" she responded as she punched the air in front of her.

Castle had nothing to say to that. He prided himself on his gaming skill, and he'd lost this battle. In a battle, there was no such thing as "cheap tricks". There was only victory and defeat. Whatever method was used... as long as victory was the result, it didn't matter. He knew this better than most.

Castle clenched his fist as he stared at the ground.

"Well... that deception is definitely one reason," Fae Sol continued.

"... What else could there be?" Stein inquired.

"Hrm... Why did you choose the Battle Magus class?"

"Because it seemed like the class I'd enjoy the most."

"And you, Castle, why did you pick Fracasier?"

"Uh... I like tank classes, and this eventually evolves into them."

"Good. Now... Stein. What if there wasn't a class you enjoyed?"

"I wouldn't play."

"And if you were forced to play? What would you do?"



\*Forced to play? Why?\*

Though this seemed like an odd question, Stein still gave a response.

"I would hope to find an evolved class eventually that I enjoyed."

"Naturally. Now this is a question for both of you... If you never found a class you enjoyed and you didn't know what you wanted to play in the future... What would you do?"

Stein and Castle looked at each other. Neither could respond.

"Sounds complicated, but I'd figure something out."

Cargo Biscuit, who still didn't really understand what was happening, gave this response.

When she heard this, Fae Sol gave a slight smile.

"Yeah. Figure something out. Easy, right?"

These words dripped with sarcasm.

Asunder grimaced.

"Haha... I know it sounds like I'm joking, but that's something I'd do, too," she continued as she looked to the sky. "Why are we forced to play the classes we're given?"

"Hmph. There's no choice. That's just how the game works," Castle said. "There seems to be enough classes to choose from. Even in the beta there were lots, and there are probably a lot more later in the game. There's gotta be something for everyone."

"That might be true, but do we have to do what they tell us to? Why can't I have my own class?"

"... I don't get it. You're not a developer, right? So there's no way to make your own class."

"You're right." Fae Sol looked back to Castle with a piercing gaze. "In the traditional sense, I can't 'create' my own class. But with the tools I'm given, I can forge my own path. I don't have to travel a road that's already been built. Of course, forging a new path is much more difficult than walking on one that's already made... But isn't that a price to pay for such a freedom?"

"That's what feels the best. Freedom. With my playstyle... it feels like I've blazed my own trail and broken free from the developers' shackles."

"... That's stupid."

"... That's crazy."

Clearly, neither Castle nor Stein agreed.

What was the point of creating a more difficult path whose outcome was uncertain when many diverse paths were already in place?

It was like trying to exist outside of the known world. It simply wasn't possible.

But there wasn't anything Asunder could do to stop this... "madwoman", so to speak.

"Are you done asking questions?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's it. I don't agree with anything you said, but with what you have, it's no wonder Brookie's taken a liking to you..." Stein mused.

"Good."

"Wait..."

Stein panicked as he saw Fae Sol draw her slingshot again.

"What are you doing?? Didn't you hear this guy say we surrender? We won't bother you anymore," Castle said.

Fae Sol sighed.

"Haah... Let me tell you one thing. I blaze my own trail, for better or for worse. It also means I have my own set of morals. If you've given up... If you've surrendered... Why should I care?"

\*... Shit. She's absolutely mad.\*

It was clear that Fae Sol intended to finish them off now.

Stein, Castle, Cargo Biscuit, and even Quaterniana prepared for a second battle. However, no matter what they did... the result would be the same.

\*-299\*

Cargo Biscuit was downed by a slingshot pellet.

\*-0\*

\*-0\*

\*-0\*

...

Any attempts at a counterattack were either dodged or parried by the wooden dagger.

Asunder was truly out of options. They could not engage in melee combat; no attacks connected. They could not run; they'd simply be shot down.

The golden glint appeared in her hands once again as a harbinger of demise.

The only thing they could do was struggle with all their might as the Reaper's scythe inevitably passed over them.

"Castle, join the Sun Dragons, will you? I saw you haven't declined my invitation. Big sis will always welcome you with open arms!"

"I-"

\*-302\*

Castle was downed.

Stein was the only melee remaining.

He charged.

He noticed Fae Sol unequipped her slingshot and was fully expecting to be met with a dagger, but...

\*-7\*

\*What?\*

Stein's attack connected. Fae Sol hadn't swapped to her dagger. She'd swapped to... nothing.

"I'll finish this with some good old-fashioned hand-to-hand combat. Show me what you've got, hm?"

Stein could only laugh when he heard this. Hand-to-hand combat was his forte. It was why he'd picked the Battle Magus class - many of its attacks were simply martial arts moves enhanced by magic. However, something told him that even in this category, he was outclassed.

\*-23\*

\*-6\*

\*-19\*

\*-2\*

...

Damage was exchanged between the two of them, but in no way was it even. Simply by looking at the damage numbers, it was easy to tell whose was whose.

Stein truly didn't know what to say.

As an experienced fighter, he'd fought against some of the world's toughest. Both in real life and in virtual simulations, he had a lot of experience.

He'd witnessed the peak of the 9th degree of Virtual Martial Arts. And even though they would eventually lose, he knew that he could at least land a couple of hits on them if he worked together with two others. But...

\*This goes even beyond that... Is it an AI?\*

"Who are you?" he couldn't help but ask.

"... They called me the 'Gun Swap Goddess'," Fae Sol, the "goddess", replied.

\*Goddess, huh?\*

A master of the slingshot.

A master of the dagger.

A master of hand-to-hand combat.

Was this a real human being?

\*What part of that has a gun? Other than that... Sounds about right. Wonder where this thing came from...\*

And that was the last thing Stein heard before his vision turned gray.

---

Jisha looked at the loot piled up on the ground.

\*It's a decent haul... Can't complain.\*

"Shana...!"

\*It looks like there's one more... But... Shana?\*

"Shana... I'm sorry I failed you..."

\*Who? ... Oh... Interesting.\*

Jisha remembered that Stein referred to Quaterniana as "Yana" a while ago. So that meant...

"Stein is Shana, huh?"

Quaterniana glared at Jisha as if she'd committed a war crime.

Jisha awkwardly scratched her cheek.

\*I guess if this were a real war... it'd be somewhat of a crime.\*



In the meantime, Quaterniana, the final Mage, fired her single-target attack spell. Of course, it didn't hit. Jisha had ample time to ponder Stein's character creation decision.

\*Hm...\*

A woman playing with a male avatar wasn't exactly uncommon. In the Northeast, men were seen as a stronger commanding force. Since militarism was rampant in this continent of Etmos, it was natural that big muscular dudes were seen as someone people should follow.

\*Even Father isn't an exception...\*

Due to this, if a woman wanted to command a force in Synergy, they would often make a male avatar.

It seemed a bit silly and trivial, but this didn't sit right with Jisha.

"Hm... Yana," she said as she pointed her slingshot at Quaterniana.

"...?"

"Tell Stein... no, Shana, to be herself and follow her own path."

\*-319\*

And with that, the battle against Asunder concluded.

## 45 - First Instance (4 - Final)

\*>System message:\*

\*>A player has reached level 10. A system update has been scheduled. The servers will shut down for maintenance in 10 minutes. Please save your progress and log out in a safe area. Servers will resume operation in 18 natural hours.\*

Whether a player was in the Northeast, Southeast, Central, Southwest... This system message was delivered to every Synergy player across Etmos.

\*Ah, there was something like that, wasn't there?\*

Occasionally, when a player hit a milestone, the system would undergo various updates. Usually, with each update, the "realism" of the game would turn up a notch.

A major concept would be introduced that would change players' perception of the game, and with each of these major concepts introduced, the tops of the leaderboards and the groups in power of various areas would always be volatile.

In other words, chaos would ensue.

\*This first update was definitely shocking.\*

Jisha recalled the first time a player hit level 10 in her previous life. When she logged back in the next day and saw the change, she was flabbergasted.

\*"Why would anyone enable this?"... is what I thought. Everyone was so naïve back then...\*

She quickly collected the pieces of loot off the ground. After inspecting them, none of them seemed interesting... besides one.

\*These other things will sell for some cash, but this one...\*

\*>Name: Jade Charm\*

\*>Type: Accessory, Necklace\*

\*>Description: A good luck charm to protect you from harm!\*

\*>Rating: Level 5, Epic\*

\*>Ability:\*

\*>Lacquer: Invulnerability to all attacks below level 15 for 1 second. Cooldown: 13 minutes, 2 seconds.\*

\*... it'll be a nice gift for Syn.\*

It was the protective item that Castle used in his confrontation with Asunder. Though Jisha didn't know this, she could tell it had obviously been used as it was on cooldown.

She knew Syn's favorite color was green, so the jade, along with the magic dagger, would send her over the moon.

Jisha wanted to imagine her best friend's face light up at these gifts, but now wasn't the time.

\*...\*

As was seen, or rather, not seen, earlier, she'd never received a clear notification for the dungeon. And right now, she could tell something was off.

The forest was lush. The clearing was green. The light breeze brushed her cheek. The sun warmly shone down. The sky was a crystal blue.

On the surface, nothing seemed out of place. But after playing Synergy for many years, Jisha's battle sense was unmatched in the current era. She paid as much attention as she possibly could to her surroundings.

\*...\*

10 seconds.

20 seconds.

30 seconds.

Nothing.

\*If only my senses were a little sharper...\*

Jisha sighed ruefully and checked her settings for an option that would not appear until after the update. But to her surprise...

\*What?\*

The setting was already there. She didn't know how this was possible, but she couldn't complain.

She immediately turned this setting to its max value.

When she did, her perception of the world increased by a significant margin.

Now, 1 minute had passed.

And she detected an anomalous movement in the cave behind her.

Slingshot in hand, she carefully approached the source of the suspicious movement.

When she moved forwards enough, she saw it clearly. It was simply standing in the shadows of the cave.

\*... What is that?\*

It wasn't anything she'd seen before. It wasn't like anything she'd seen before.

\*Is my wish for a sense of wonder being granted already?\*

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

This thing was undoubtedly a mob.

But... what kind of mob?

It looked like the silhouette of a player.

Mobs that imitated players weren't uncommon. However, every player had a class, and because of this, every player imitation had one as well.

However, this silhouette did not have one. It simply looked like a regular human.

Moreover, it wasn't an average silhouette. It was incredibly dark.

In a normal shadow, there would at least be some light that passed through it; if a shadow was cast on the ground, you could still see what was under it.

This silhouette reflected absolutely no light. It was so dark that it even seemed to be sucking in the light around it.

This, along with its androgynous shape, made it impossible to glean any information from its appearance.

Jisha attempted a basic appraisal...

\*...?\*

... and was hit by another surprise.

The appraisal revealed nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Usually, when an appraisal failed, it would show something like this:

\*>Name: ???\*

\*>Level: ???\*

But it never did absolutely nothing.

There was only one way to find out what this thing was capable of.

Jisha fired her Golden Slingshot at the "shadow demon", as she would now dub it.

Her shot was on point. The shadow demon didn't move. However...

\*Are you kidding me...\*

The pellet passed harmlessly through the demon.

Though they were rare, there did exist a couple monsters that were simply immune to "ranged" attacks.

And Jisha hated them. She would stop at nothing to eliminate these things.

Now, the shadow demon was provoked. Immediately after being attacked, it dashed towards her.

\*Fast...!\*

It was nothing like anything she'd seen thus far in this life.

Jisha fired another slingshot pellet at the demon. There was a small chance the first attack's failure was a fluke.

\*...\*



Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. The second pellet met the same fate as the first.

Jisha gritted her teeth and swapped to her dagger. She stood her ground and waited for the demon to approach her.

It still showed no signs of how it was going to attack, so she stood in a basic defensive stance.

20 metron...

10 metron...

When it approached the 5 metron mark, the shadow demon unsheathed a dagger from God knows where.

Now, Jisha understood how to respond.

Once the demon lunged with its dagger, she would sidestep and counterattack.

\*And... now!\*

The demon's arm swung at her with incredible speed.

\*-5\*

When Jisha sidestepped, the dagger grazed her neck.

She vividly felt the sharp blade drag across her neck and the blood that slowly oozed from the wound.

\*Yes, this is how it's supposed to be!\*

What was the setting she had enabled earlier?

\*>Pain: 5% -> 100%\*

It was ridiculous. In the current VR market, there was ample regulation against excessive manipulation of the brain. There were several incidents of this "manipulation" causing insanity or worse. They became ideal case studies on what not to do.

Obviously, pain was one of these manipulation methods. No full-dive VR game allowed you to experience excessive pain.

But Synergy blatantly ignored many laws of the world.

Jisha used the momentum of the shadow demon against itself as she plunged the dagger into its chest. The combined momentum of the dagger and demon colliding with other would essentially cause bonus damage.

But when she did, no damage numbers appeared...

This was another surprise. If the attack did no damage, a simple \*-0\* would appear.

No damage numbers would appear only if the attack completely missed.

However, Jisha clearly felt the dagger piercing through flesh.

For a moment, she was stunned with surprise.

And in that moment...

\*...! Again?\*

An event that caused her heart to fill with rage.

For the third time within several hours, Jisha felt a blade plunge into her back.

And with the pain setting at max, nothing was left to the imagination.

The skin. The muscle. A collision with a ribcage. A punctured lung.

The vivid feeling of a foreign object tearing through each one.

\*-92\*

Jisha coughed up blood.

Was she just a punching bag now?

What had she been doing all this time?

Playing Synergy? Treating it like a game? Indulging in her childish desires?

The future of her family was uncertain. Was there any time for this? And it took another literal stab in the back to remember what she was supposed to be doing!

\*Focus!\*

An ordinary person would be completely crippled if they felt this much pain at once, but Jisha was able to compose herself. She wasn't a stranger to pain.

She ripped the dagger out of the shadow demon's stomach and sliced its throat.

Though no damage numbers appeared above its head, it seemed to do the trick.

The shadow demon staggered backwards and collapsed on the ground.

\*>System message: Dungeon clear!\*

\*>System message: Level up!\*

\*>Name: Fae Sol\*

\*>Level: 10 -> 11 (+1)\*

\*...\*

\*Haha... one level? What is this, a kid's participation medal?\*

Jisha, who had nearly lost all of her HP, was fully healed upon leveling up. The dagger that was lodged in her back was ejected like nothing had happened.

She collapsed to the ground in exhaustion. Though her body was fully healed, her mind was racing.

She looked over to where the shadow demon collapsed. The only item it dropped was the dagger it was using.

\*It better be good.\*

Since difficulty in Synergy was appropriately rewarded, Jisha was expecting a good weapon here. She'd only received one level after defeating a tough monster. However...

\*>Name: Reminiscia\*

\*...?\*

No description. No stats. Only a name.

This was also unusual. When an item's description was obscured, it was explicitly shown to be redacted. However, this item simply did not possess the data other items usually did.

Jisha wanted to figure out what was happening, but she'd been hit with too many surprises in succession. She wasn't in a state of mind to think properly.

And besides...

\*>System message:\*

\*>The servers will shut down for maintenance in 10 seconds. Prepare for a force logout.\*

It was time to exit this virtual world.

It would have to wait until tomorrow.

**46**

World Developer's Log S3a

The first suitable shows signs of promise. Ideally, it should be the control group, but I cannot help but guide it along and try to raise it into something exceptional.

What would food be in the modern era if not for GMOs?

What would a suitable candidate be if not for a little help along the way?

Whether the effects are positive or negative have yet to be seen.

But I shall try to keep the assistance to a minimum.

## **47 - Epilogue**

\*>10...\*

\*>9...\*

\*>8...\*

...

\*>3...\*

\*>2...\*

\*>1...\*

\*>Shutting down.\*

With this system message, Synergy shut down for the night. All players were forced to log out.

Some were in their beds. Some were playing in a specialized VR sleeper. And some were just sitting in a random corner of their abode. But at this moment, in the early morning, they were all returned to reality.

The first princess Slyker was no exception.

She awoke with a start. A cold sweat was flowing down her back. Her heart was racing and she was out of breath. She sat up as quickly as possible causing her to feel lightheaded.

She could still vividly feel all three times she was backstabbed.

And the game was different this time around. A new type of monster and item were among the last things she saw before logging out. For what reason, she wasn't sure.

Jisha wrangled her Vbian-02 helmet off her head and stared at it with hatred.

In the near future, many wars would break out.

Life would take a different turn.

She would become distanced from her best friend as well as her other friends from different countries.



In the end, the Slyker family that proudly stood strong and united would disappear.

And it was all this thing's fault.

She resisted the urge to smash this helmet into smithereens.

Unfortunately, that would do nothing but harm herself.

If Synergy existed, you had to play. There was no way around it.

Jisha gritted her teeth and cursed the godforsaken developer of this "game".

"... Is it just a game to you?"

Who was behind it, and what did they stand to gain from it? What were they trying to accomplish?

Whatever the reason was, it was unacceptable.

It wasn't like the Northeast was a peaceful region in the first place, but it, as well the rest of the world, would eventually go into a frenzy.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Synergy would plunge the entire world into turmoil.

\*"The Emperor is dead."\*

\*"Your father isn't the only one."\*

\*"Your mother, your sister..."\*

\*"... it was surprisingly easy to do this ..."\*

\*"I'M SORRY TO DO THIS TO YOU, SWEETHEART."\*

The quotes from before her death swirled around in her head.

She didn't have time to waste. First and foremost, she had to find out who was responsible for their family's sudden downfall.

And if she could do this, there was another lofty goal she wanted to accomplish.

She gripped the VR helmet until her knuckles turned white.

Slyker wasn't the only one to fall in the next age of mankind. Countless countries were wiped off the map and new ones sprung up in their place.

She well understood the plight these families faced. And who was responsible for it?

"... I'm going to find you. And I'm going to make you pay."

---

"Hmm... are you?"

The developer of Synergy heard Princess Slyker's every word.

How? It was simple.

Synergy was a video game. In other words, it was a program that was installed on devices.

In a past age known as the Information Age, malicious software for the purpose of surveillance was invented. It was common knowledge that one should avoid clicking shady links.

Synergy was simply a variation of this. Though it was a game, the fact that it was installed on devices allowed the developer to retrieve massive amounts of data.

Chat logs, battle logs, status logs... logs upon logs were at the developer's fingertips.

And, with this surveillance power, there was no way this developer wouldn't have heard of the Uval Spawn Battle. Naturally, Fae Sol had to be watched. It was too interesting.

But the developer was doubtful of Princess Slyker's claims.

"I wonder if you can. After all, I'm hiding in plain sight."

The developer wrote it off as an arrogant remark. But this personality was what made her so exciting to watch.

"Haha... Fae Sol. Interesting indeed. I hope you will continue to show promise. Don't let me down."

— End of Volume 1 —