

Prologue

“Naotsugu, pay attention to the right!”

“Right, leave it to me!”

Naotsugu replied to Shiroe’s warning with a yell, raised his silver shield and downed the Triffid.

“My lord!”

In a blow, Akatsuki quickly restrained the green twisted ivy reaching out from the left, and right after that, she lowered her body and got into a position to protect Shiroe.

This place was the Herbarium of Small Stone.

It was a small zone but as it held ancient entertainment facilities, it was different from the ruins around it. There were great variations in its terrain and combat was difficult.

“Then again, isn’t this a little too many?”

“Their numbers increase whenever Naotsugu cracks a dirty joke.”

“So it’s my fault?”

Without replying to Naotsugu’s retort, Shiroe cast a bluish-white magic arrow and fired it at the Briar Weasels. Mind Bolt was a basic attack magic of the Enchanter, an arrow of mental energy that struck a single enemy.

While Shiroe was looking at the rodent-like creature that was roughly a meter in height as it shrieked and jumped about, an icon appeared in his mind.

The icon had turned pale to represent its recast time, and it was slowly recovering like an hourglass. Until the icon regained its luster, that spell was unusable. However, there were close to 30 other skills that Shiroe could use.

“Rush them! Akatsuki, attack their left flank!”

“Roger that!”

“Leave it to me!”

Furthermore, even if all of his skills were unusable, Shiroe currently had two comrades with him.

“Haa, let’s do it! Shield Smash!”

The silver armored warrior, quickly advancing down the moss-covered path and sweeping his shield sideways and mowing enemies down, was Naotsugu. He was a tall guy with short hair and jovial-looking eyes, and was a friend of Shiroe’s from the olden times.

His class was Guardian. Among the 3 warrior classes that could single-handedly draw in and tank the enemies' assault, they boasted the greatest defensive abilities and, in Elder Tales, the nickname of the Unbreakable Shield.

“.....Too slow!”

A young girl with a swallow-like impression made a quick dash into the gap that appeared from Naotsugu's assault. A strange creature that looked like a burst rugby ball with glass-like fangs growing from it attacked but she had cut it down with the short sword she prepared, just as she ran past it.

The petite girl with her black hair fluttering in the winds was Akatsuki.

She, who would called Shiroe "My lord" without hesitation, was also Shiroe's friend.

Her class was the Assassin. It was a resourceful class that wielded one-hit-kill skills. It boasted of having the strongest physical attack among the 12 classes.

Though Shiroe viewed the movements of those two in fascination, he hurriedly advanced forward.

Shiroe's class was the Enchanter.

Amongst the three magician classes, it was a 100% support class type, specializing in support magic and battle status magic. Common for a magician class, its defense wasn't something reliable. Leaving out Naotsugu's reliable full-plated armor, it couldn't even equip Adventurer's leather armors like the one Akatsuki was wearing.

Under the huge white-gown-looking mantle of his, there was nothing more than a rather ordinary tunic shirt and a pair of trousers.

Shiroe, who was the rear support that lacked any defensive ability, could not be left alone on the battlefield, he needed to take the opponent's area of effect magic into account, while keeping in mind that being overly close to the front lines is dangerous as well, so the best method is to be wary of ambushes of the rear, while maintaining a set distance from Naotsugu and Akatsuki.

Needless to say, the Herbarium of Small Stone was not a field-zone of a high difficulty.

The monsters that appear were only Triffids, Briar Weasels, and Venom Moths that were only around Level 50.

Shiroe and the other two were all Level 90 Adventurers.

In the world of the MMORPG Elder Tales, they practically held the highest class of power. Even if Shiroe's defense was low, he wouldn't receive much damage with that much of a level gap.

Furthermore, although Naotsugu was up against a large number of opponents, even if it was just ten or twenty Triffids, for any of the three, they were opponents of a level where they can be taken care of single-handedly.

(Even so, the current situation.....)

Till now, the three of them all had carefree looks on their faces, chatting and bickering, but Naotsugu and Akatsuki both had serious expressions right now.

Battles were terrifying.

Even if one had a strong body, even if one casts magic or uses a sword skill, when facing a monster, fear still lingered about.

Both feet on the ground, hands firmly gripping his staff, they were all part of his body. The wind that blew past his cheeks, the piercing howls of the monsters, the adrenaline that was pumping through his blood vessels, was all that Shiroe is experiencing at present.

Tooth and claw that suddenly appeared in their faces, flames or attacks of acid assaulted them. Needing to dodge or intercept these attacks at the front-lines, were a lot harder than they thought. In order to conquer this handicap, they have no choice but to accumulate combat experience, this was the conclusion the three of them have come up with.

“Watch your right!”

“I got it!”

Despite a serious look on his face, Naotsugu still swiftly looked in the direction that Shiroe had warned him from, swinging the longsword in his right hand. Although that strike did not make a critical hit, it was sufficient to restrict the movements of the Briar Weasel.

The weasel extended its green briar, glaring with its crimson eyes as it chirped two or three times, pulling back by curling its body into a ball.

The attack just now had proven their suspicions.

They were all Level 90 Adventurers, originally if they met these monsters that were around Level 48, it would be impossible for a situation where there would be an “Attack Failure”.

This proves that the cooperation between the two was still insufficient.

Despite being Level 90 Adventurers, they were still unable to sufficiently wield their skills to their best abilities yet.

“Nightmare Sphere!”

That's why they have to carry out their roles the best they can. Shiroe who has arrived at this conclusion executed an area of effect skill. Nightmare Sphere was an area of effect attack magic that the Enchanter possessed.

Although it was an offensive skill, the damage that it actually causes was actually very little.

The Enchanter class is not versed in offensive magic from the start, compared to other classes of the same level, the attack magic that one can dish out by himself is very weak, this was a fact known to everyone. The skill that Shiroe used, traced out an unreliable arc, landing right in the middle of the weasels and the moving plants and violently exploded, it seems that it did not cause much damage to the opponents, this was the best proof.

Even though they are monsters who had levels half of his, he was still unable to defeat them in one strike, only able to use attack of such low damage, this was the trait possessed by an Enchanter.

As such, the Enchanter is a class that is not popular in Elder Tales.

As players, they are ruthless when playing games. In a world where language and communication is restricted, numbers was something that was absolute. Despite being in a game universe and precisely because it was a game universe, it caused this world to be a caste society that was even more heartless and strict than the real world.

The classes that were "highly popular" and the outcast classes had a very large evaluation gap.

However, even though it wasn't popular with normal players, Shiroe was not unhappy with his own class. It would be great if he had some special ability that he could use, but despite lacking in that, he was still able to find a way to enjoy playing this class. This was Shiroe's playing style and the truth of it was, Shiroe never once felt troubled when he played this class.

Furthermore, Shiroe liked the Enchanter class.

Inclusive of this troublesome trait, its weak abilities as well as its hidden versatility, Shiroe was interested in all of them. The class that was "useless if he was left alone", it was completely different from Shiroe's own shortcomings, Shiroe liked that particular point very much.

The Nightmare Sphere that was cast by Shiroe, releases a colourless mental wave in its area of effect, the multiple enemies caught in its area were all affected by the wave, they seemed to have suffered grave mental trauma, resulting in a huge drop in movement speed.

It was the status ailment of movement speed reduction.

Nightmare Sphere was a skill that had short effect duration but it was capable of inflicting a crippling effect on its target.

"Yeah! I can fight better like this!"

“Thank you, my lord.”

The two cried out with elated voices. The monsters that the three were currently embroiled with were Triffids and Briar Weasels, although they look menacing and hideous, the height of the two monsters were only around a meter high.

Once their movement speed dropped, they would only need to step in boldly, and let their attacks hit.

“Alright! I got one!”

“Same here!”

“Not bad, Shrimp!”

“Don’t call me a shrimp, Idiot Naotsugu!”

The two teammates, were originally people who would engage in negative thinking.

Naotsugu’s positive thinking was exceptional, although Akatsuki was usually silent, she was not behind Naotsugu in that field of thinking as well.

As long as an opportunity was provided and ample support was given, they would be able to repeatedly defeat monsters. Shiroe only needed to provide rear support for the two, if the two had monsters left over that they had missed, he would only need to use magic to restrain as well as provide a final blow.

Lowering the movement speed of the opponent was something that would turn the tables to one’s advantage. Since that point was understood, Shiroe would know what he should do, that would mean using Nightmare Sphere or Astral Bind related restraining type magic to restrict the enemies’, completely taking on the role of supporting the front lines.

Thinking closely, it was not that big of a deal at all, it was a basic battle strategy that had been repeated countless times.

(At the very least, we can’t continue struggling with these low level opponents; I still haven’t tested a new formation yet.)

Shiroe pondered over such thoughts.

“Take that!”

“Haa!”

A sharp yell sounded out. Naotsugu and Akatsuki were seasoned players with tons of experience.

As long as there was an opportunity, then they would become partners that focused on teamwork who got along remarkably well. His preconceived doubts vanished.

“It’s over like that?”

Naotsugu swung his one handed sword in a large arc, wiping the blood off his sword before returning it to its sheath.

Coming back to his senses, the battle was already over.

Shiroe nodded his head in reply in response to Naotsugu’s question, dispelling the magic that he had been readying.

“We defeated a lot of monsters already.”

“There seems to be no more indications of any enemies in the surroundings, maybe it’d be best to stay alert for a while—I’m sorry, but can you two help with the loot?”

Shiroe called out while beginning to observe the surroundings.

The warning indication in his mind changed from red to a calming blue, indicating that battle mode has been deactivated.

Naotsugu and Akatsuki started to loot the monsters that they had felled, they probably were going to strip the weasels of their fur.

This was survival instinct that had been honed from the past few weeks.

It was fortunate that the sun was still high in the sky.

There shouldn’t be any abrupt incidents that may happen. Shiroe withdrew a water bottle from his magic bag at his hip and took a sip, pricking his ears for any sign of trouble. (Really now, in the end the one that keeps thinking negative thoughts is me.)

Shiroe let out a long sigh.

Looking down, it was the edge of his white cloak, made from tough cloth that was suitable for outdoor activities, long pants that seemed to be of high quality. If he had remembered correctly, the shoes that he was currently wearing were made from the Thunder Elk’s leather, boots that were soft and comfortable.

As for what he was carrying, it was a staff.

Staff of the Wise Owl—it was a rare item that was able to raise the magical power and his casting speed, it was Shiroe’s treasure.

Around two metres long, it was longer than Shiroe’s height.

His appearance gave him a sort of mysterious air. Shiroe thought that such a design looked great, the word "great" was not the feeling that he'd use in the real world, but the feeling that one would feel inside the virtual world.

After that day where the incident coined as The Catastrophe happened, everything around Shiroe and the others had totally changed.

It wasn't as grandiose nor as sweet like the heroic epics, but full of sarcasm, muddled, stress-laden and tough—— another "Reality".

The "Reality" mentioned, were the monsters that Shiroe and his friends had just fought against; it was the reason why Shiroe was paying attention to any movement around him, it was the ruins that was shrouded in greenery; it was the teammates who wielded their weapons and skinned their prey.

A cold wind blew through the forest, bringing a chill with it.

As well as leaving behind the fear of battle under his skin.

All of this, was currently the "Reality" that Shiroe was living in.

Shiroe and his friends, seemed to have been confined in the world that was supposed to be just a game, Elder Tales. After The Catastrophe happened, everything changed.

(However, if we can do battle like this, we can earn money as long as we fight, we have a bed waiting for us when we go back. Furthermore, since I can meet Naotsugu and Akatsuki because of this, in many different levels, this can said to be the most fortunate turn of events.)

Shiroe repeatedly sighed, forcibly changing his gloomy thinking into something more positive.

The scene of the day of The Catastrophe happened flashed in his head, the scene of countless players holing up in Akihabara. Shiroe did not wish to be like them as they fell into the swamp of despair.

Shiroe observed his surroundings as he recounted the chain of events that happened the day The Catastrophe occurred.

Chapter 1: Catastrophe

Part 1

There was a tree stump a few meters in height like he guessed. He went around that stump and made a turn at the 2-story building that was where he remembered it.

Green moss spread out throughout the land, and the asphalt that was once there in the past would merely appear in some places here and there. Shiroe dashed through the ruins where buildings were standing close to each other and were coiled around or perhaps pierced by giant ancient trees.

He was running through this scenery that was the first time he saw and yet somewhat familiar.

There were silhouettes of people curled up on the streets.

These should be Adventurers in the same situation as Shiroe.

Their moans and screams made Shiroe forcibly suppress the fear that gradually rose up to his throat.

That was what could be called as putting on a show.

"What is happening..."

"I-I'm... Strange, what's this!?"

"So-Someone get out here! Hey, game master! Are you listening!"

The screams coming from them sounded like those of dying animals.

That excessively miserable screams had brought back a tiny amount of composure in Shiroe. To not scream like that. Just that thought alone was keeping Shiroe going now.

(I can move my body as I like. ...It's uncomfortable because the size of my limbs seems to be slightly different... Thankfully not by much.)

What spread before his eyes was the city of Akiba.

Many abandoned buildings were intertwined with ivies reaching out full of vigor from the asphalt here and there, and blended in with ancient trees that received the blessings of the spirits. This was the hometown of many players. He currently felt nostalgia because this was the largest city of the Japanese server of Elder Tales that he was familiar with.

"Akiba? Ridiculous! Have I gone nuts?! Someone, someone, answer me!"

A man cowering nearby shouted. Everyone was like a citizen of a Middle Ages fantasy world, wearing full-clothed clothing or perhaps armor.

That was expected.

Elder Tales was the world's largest class of massive online game with a motif based on a world of swords and magic.

But that should had *just been a game*.

The wind brushing onto Shiroe's cheeks was just cold, moist and was refreshing like being in the middle of a thick forest.

The air was different from the dry and somewhat prickly air in Tokyo where Shiroe stayed in. The winds blended with the smell of greenery was telling Shiroe that this place wasn't the world he was familiar with.

Shiroe shook his head and thought back.

He was playing Elder Tales.

He remembered facing his desk at home and enjoying the game displayed on his LCD monitor.

Elder Tales was a actually long-running title, boasting of even a 20 year history. Of course, its contents and game engine were replaced with the latest version by frequent software updates but the factors of its abundance of data and its deep game traditions accumulated from its long operation were the things winning the popularity of its users.

Today should had been the day to commemorate the release of the 12th expansion pack of Elder Tales. The data he had downloaded beforehand would be lifted from its restriction and would bring about new items, new zones, new monsters and battles, and above all else the raise of the level cap to the world of Elder Tales.

Today was also the very day the expansion pack was brought live, so there should be a great number of players connected to the game world. Shiroe didn't have a sound way of investigating that but the fact that many of his friends were connected was confirmed from his Friend List.

Shiroe was a veteran player in Elder Tales.

He started this game when he was in middle school, and had been playing it for 8 years.

There were over 100,000 players in Japan alone. And, the number of fans worldwide exceeded 20,000,000. This massive online game had continued to mesmerize Shiroe for a truly long time.

Speaking of Shiroe, he had, of course, been looking forward to this expansion pack, however, he felt awkward about being frolic about it like a newbie, so he decided to pass time like usual. He should have been practicing hunting at a beginner area with a pair of twins he had been looking after recently, as well as giving some advice and explaining about items.

But his memory was cut abruptly there.

Shiroe remembered seeing some sort of demo.

Words of shining flames in a black scene.

There was the sky filled with sticky darkness like asphalt scrolling quickly, and a white moon that cut out that blackness.

However, that was it.

And now, Shiroe was running in Akiba, as his own pair of legs that had turned real kicked off the ground.

A rhythmical sound like of a xylophone being played rang in his ears.

This familiar chime was an alert notifying him of an incoming telepathic call.

Shiroe concentrated on his forehead in a way like he was squinting his eyes and selected a menu that appeared in his mind. After being sent flying to this game world and letting go of the panic felt at first, these were the controls Shiroe had picked up quickly.

"You here yet Shiroe?"

"I'm almost there!"

Shiroe listened to the voice of his dear old friend, as he made another right turn at an abandoned building that was on the verge of collapse.

There was a humid smell carried by the gentle breeze, and the clear sound of him cutting through the top of the trees. And then, there was the dazzling light.

This brightness was something one couldn't experience except for witnessing it in early summer.

Under the cool winds, rather than feeling the heat of the sunrays, the sun rays carried with them just nothing but bursting amount of white radiance. Pure—overwhelming intensity of light.

The city was illuminated by the light of early summer. The ancient giant trees and buildings cast deep black shadows on the main streets covered in black soil and asphalt. That contrast was beautiful.

The scene that was spreading out before Shiroe's eyes was something he had seen countless of countless times, the hometown of the game world, the city of Akiba.

However, that scene had an overwhelming sense of realism that was impossible for a game and it was enveloping Shiroe completely.

Shiroe was sprinting in this scenery with his very own legs.

Every step he took, he felt wet moss crushed by his sole and slipperiness. He felt his heart strongly pumping his blood to every nook and cranny of his body, which was heating up from the exercise.

This was something he couldn't doubt, this was reality.

The city was, indeed as Shiroe remembered it, the city of Akiba.

The crumbling ruins, the repeatedly extended Barrack bars and the old trees which had spread their roots on the roads were all swallowed by a green forest while co-existing. This was the game setting of the holy ground of the ancients. This was Akiba.

Within Free City League Eastal, east of Arching Archipelago Yamato, it was the hometown of the players, and the core city of the Japanese server in Elder Tales.

He ran through the center of the street and made a turn at a corner of a 3-story inn-cum-bar.

The crumbling ruins were buildings made of concrete. Suftek, Yashica Yama Electronics, Kulta Tower etc, various buildings and famous places gave the impression of the real world's Akihabara and they were reconstructed as ruins of an old era in Elder Tales.

The legacies of the old era were sleeping here and there in this world. They could be giant underground ruins or towers that pierced the skies but this city of Akiba was also a legacy itself.

As if clinging on, buildings made of logs were extending the giant concrete structures that were on the verge of being rubble, and all of that were embraced within the bosom of the ancient trees. It was a miraculous scenery.

After Shiroe arrived, Naotsugu who was sitting on concrete debris stood up and received him.

The lights shone in from holes without window frames in the wall, illuminating the 2 of them better than any game engine could manage.

Naotsugu looked pale, but he still laughed heartily and slapped his sheath.

His height was a bit more than 180cm with a strong body, wearing a dull but horribly strong steel armor. Naotsugu had a shield on his back and looked like an ancient hero warrior in his get up.

"Hi Shiroe!"

"Naotsugu, eh... good morning."

Shiroe didn't know how to react when he heard Naotsugu's greeting, and fell back on this plain cold greeting.

Elder Tales had a standard voice chat system, players were able to communicate while playing the game like chatting on the phone by using a microphone and speakers. Some players didn't like to use voice chat and insisted on text messages, but Shiroe and Naotsugu were not like that.

That's why Shiroe remembered and was very familiar with Naotsugu's voice.

Naotsugu Hasegawa.

If anyone asked Shiroe who was the most reliable person in the game, he would be among the first few choices that came to mind.

Online gaming is playing a game through the internet, Elder Tale was a 'Massively Multiplayer Online' or 'Massively Multiuser Online' type of game. Several hundred or thousands of player would be connected to the same game space to play this game. In other words, this type of game allowed players to know many other players, to work together or compete with each other.

Shiroe had played Elder Tales for many long years, so he knew a lot of people in the game.

But the people you know in the game remained in the game. Different people might have different playing styles and opinions, but most people would not reveal their real identity in the game world.

With the increase in online crimes after the year 2000, protecting your personal data was common sense for the online community.

But that didn't mean you couldn't make real friends.

Naotsugu knew Shiroe's real name... meaning Shiroe gave him his contact details and was one of the few players that had met with him offline as well.

Shiroe let out a sigh of relief when he heard Naotsugu's voice.

They might have met in person before, but they had spent much more time conversing through the game screen. Naotsugu spent countless nights with Shiroe in the Debauchery Tea Party, visiting countless border zones, experiencing countless battles together, he was one of the players in Elder Tales Shiroe was great friends with.

They had chatted about so many things under the skies.

They even discussed their boring feelings, not like a friend he only met in a game at all.

For Shiroe, this cheerful and reliable voice was the symbol of Naotsugu.

"What is this situation? Did Elder Tales evolve to this level while I wasn't playing? To be honest, this is too real for me, this is not possible with just improving the level of particle effects and rendering machines right? Is this a joke?"

Naotsugu pouts as he asked Shiroe.

His cheerful and chatty voice sounded a bit depressed.

"This is nerve wrecking."

Shiroe vaguely nodded and raised the magic staff in his hand.

(Come on, this is a magic staff, magic staff.)

This was a commonly seen item in fantasy games and was about Shiroe's shoulder in height. This was made by grinding and bending a long and slender tree branch and reinforcing with metal... just like a magic staff used by mages.

The only place you could find this was in a role playing store.

He probably noticed Shiroe's silent reproach.

Naotsugu bent his head to check himself out.

Naotsugu was wearing steel armor that seemed to weigh dozens of kilograms, he had a shield on his back and a sword with an elegant hilt on his waist. Naotsugu's appearance looked like a warrior in a fantasy setting.

"Eh, I look like a role player myself."

"That's right."

Even though it was not sounds of joy, the two of them looked at each other and laughed.

"Now that you mention you... look the same."

"You too."

The two of them observed each other's appearance.

Shiroe and Naotsugu were basically game characters in Elder Tales.

The characters in the game were originally constructed using 3D models, a far cry from the real world. But the two of them existed for real in this world, everything was as detailed as reality.

But if you looked closely, this was not turning the game into reality. As a game, the characters of Elder Tales were designed for both male and female.

Since it's a monthly subscription game, there were very few players who intentionally choose ugly appearances. To meet the demand of the players, the market would use beautiful 3D models.

But Naotsugu was not just turning his stylish character in Elder Tales into reality. Shiroe had seen him in real life several times, and he looked exactly like Shiroe remembered.

"Naotsugu, your face looks very similar to your real face alright?"

That scar that ran through his brow for his game character was gone, Naotsugu's face had his own bright eyes and the corner of his eyes were slightly drooping. His adult face has a boyish grin on his lips.

"You too Shiroe, scholarly man with glasses and nasty beady eyes."

There were friends who described Shiroe this way, and his features seemed to be reflected on this body. As Shiroe thought about this, he gave this standard answer he used countless times:

"Can you just ignore that?"

"What is the current situation? Tell me if you know anything, 'black heart glasses'."

"I personally want to tell you, but I don't know anything."

Shiroe and Naotsugu kicked away the shattered debris and sat down. Shiroe didn't have any information to explain the current situation.

Compared to the suburban area Shiroe woke up in, this was closer to the center of Akiba. If you listened carefully, you could hear the buzz of the city from here.

"Firstly, this is not a dream."

"Yeah."

Shiroe nodded and agreed to Naotsugu's inquiry.

When he regained conscious, he was in a familiar place... that doesn't exist in the real world, which seemed like the game he was playing. Elder Tales was a fantasy game with the world of sword and sorcery as its backdrop. Players could create their characters, Adventurers, and travel through the world from their characters view.

The body that Shiroe was controlling like his own, was a character he controlled in the game 'Shiroe'.

But the appearance of this character seemed to reflect the real face of Shiroe.

"Have you seen the status screen?"

"I have."

Since Elder Tales was a game, the strength, stamina and all sorts of abilities were represented in the form of numbers. All sorts of commands in the game were input through the menu.

There were no such game related screens anywhere you looked in this world. If you focused on your forehead region, the world would present a translucent status screen indicating all sorts of values and graphs. By controlling the cursor with your mind, you could perform all sorts of action. Both of them realized this about half an hour after waking up.

And they discovered the telepathy function. This was a function to contact your friends that were online in the game. In the Elder Tales world, this function was similar to a cell phone, allowing players to contact their friends from far away.

They could only contact people registered on their friend list.

Focusing on their forehead and browsing their friend list desperately with rusty controls, Shiroe was shocked and shouted when he discovered that Naotsugu was online.

Naotsugu was surprised when Shiroe contacted him through telepathy, but he quickly agreed to meet up at the ruins nearby.

"..."

"..."

The silence hung between them as both of them thought about what to say. But the answer was obvious, Shiroe had a better grasp of the situation than Naotsugu. From what Shiroe knows, Naotsugu hadn't logged into Elder Tales in the past 2 years.

Shiroe told Naotsugu everything he knew.

Even though it was everything, he didn't talk about much.

If it was about things that happened when Naotsugu wasn't around for 2 years, they could talk all day. But the reason and background of why they were involved in this perplexing event, Shiroe had no clue.

What he could confirm was this: He installed the expansion pack 'Novasphere Pioneers'. Shiroe was playing with beginners just outside of the city when this incident happened. This looked the same as Elder Tales starting point Akiba, and they seem to be in the game world. They have the same body as their characters and retained all the items and equipment they had in the game.

(Now that I think about it, how are the twins doing? I need to check on them later.)

But Shiroe didn't know why this was happening.

As Shiroe narrated, Naotsugu listened carefully. When unfamiliar terms popped up he would ask about them, but he didn't interject with his own opinions.

Shiroe didn't like noise. He was fine with lively and festive atmospheres, but he disliked chaotic hustle and bustle.

Naotsugu was cheerful and mischievous, but he was smart enough to listen to others.

Their characters differed but they hit it off well, maybe they both had the generosity to compromise with each other.

"I see, eh, alternate world... an alternate world has sucked us in, fantasy has become reality..."

"So Naotsugu, why are you here? Making a comeback?"

Naotsugu replied:

"Yeah, I heard about the new expansion pack, and things at work was calming down so I logged in to take a look..."

...Come back.

(So Naotsugu was coming back. So Naotsugu was planning on coming back...)

Shiroe thought.

He recalled that Naotsugu was 2 years his senior.

Shiroe met Naotsugu 4 years ago.

Shiroe was already a veteran player in Elder Tales then. It was normal for a middle school student to play with computers in that era, but Shiroe was one of the few homely type. Put simply, even if he went out, his heart was still at home... a kid who was still lonely in the crowd.

Even after moving on to high school and college, he maintained this form of entertainment, touring the virtual world everyday.

Elder Tales already has a special place among online games back then. If you wanted to play a challenging game with incredible content, it had to be Elder Tales, this was the view of the game amongst the players.

For instance, Elder Tales had a grand vision, the 'half gaia project'. It might sound ridiculous, but the goal of the project was to recreate earth at half it's scale.

The starting city for Japanese server was Akiba, corresponding to Tokyo in the Japan archipelago. North American servers had the 'Big apple' and 'South Angel' as starting cities. Japan and American servers were just convenient names to refer to. The online world was made up of many different servers connected to each other, so it was theoretically possible to head for other continents or even the end of the world. Hence, one of the selling point of Elder Tales was the ability of players to travel to other servers, something normal MMO could not emulate.

The half gaia project was a long term goal, the current gaia was not a perfect rendition of the real world.

In Elder Tales, the world was divided into many zones, each with it's own territory and boundaries.

Like the vast sea of trees in Mount Fuji was a zone where ferocious monsters lurked, the dungeon Shinshuku metro complex was a stage for adventure and Akiba city was a non-combat zone.

Going deeper, a room in a hotel was also a small room. Some zones could be traded, if you accumulated enough in-game coins, you could be a land or home owner.

All zones were connected in their own ways. Open plains for example didn't have boundary demarcation, so players wouldn't be able to tell which zone they were actually in.

When they moved across zones, they wouldn't even notice.

Some zones had obvious demarcations. Like some buildings and rooms were individual zones that were connected elsewhere through a door.

From what Shiroe knew, the Japanese server was managing tens of thousands of zones.

With a scale like this, the developing company had to outsource to other major gaming companies, and knowledgeable veteran players like Shiroe were convenient reliable existences.

Shiroe had been invited by many guilds during his long tenure in the game, and had joined a guild temporarily thinking of it as a trial.

Guilds were the most common way for players to form a group in Elder Tales.

After entering a guild, players could access the guild account in the bank and use the guild warehouse to manage their equipment easily as well as other convenient services. The guild members keep in touch with each other so it's easy to form raid parties.

So most players in Elder Tales joined a guild since it was convenient and had many benefits.

Since Shiroe liked to research the game contents, even getting news from foreign servers, his knowledge was better than other players that had the same years of experience. From this perspective, Shiroe was someone who could contributed greatly to whichever guild he joined.

No player could grasp the details of all the zones perfectly, Shiroe was also not a genius of that level. But things like main routes, the connection between zones, the transport device known as

the fairy rings, knowing these could shorten your transportation time greatly. What you can buy at which zone or where you can hunt for a specific monster, this knowledge needed to be accumulated slowly over time.

Countless zones, endless varieties of items and monsters, missions known as quests, all kinds of ancient lore and knowledge... including anything else the developers could think of, the culmination of all these was Elder Tales.

But Shiroe could not get used to relationships that included elements of convenience and benefits. He had mellowed out now, but the Shiroe back then was much more stubborn and naive... And was an embarrassing neat freak.

Even if Shiroe didn't make requests of others much, he didn't know how to decline others.

He didn't decline but his feelings didn't accept it either.

There were all sorts of people in the game world. As long as there were people, there would be both pure and impure relationships. For Shiroe who was in middle school, this might have been too shocking for him.

Shiroe noticed that he was being used like a walking encyclopedia, along with his high level character, he was dragged around like an all-purpose tool to fight for the convenience of others.

Shiroe couldn't adjust to this type of relationship or reject them tactfully, so he choose to leave the guild and mingle with others in temporary raid parties by himself.

Before Shiroe realized it, he had become a famous solo player with both deep knowledge and high level characters. As Shiroe's fame grows, he fell deeper into solitude.

Naotsugu met Shiroe when Shiroe was starting to get stronger and traveling alone having given up on guilds. Shiroe was starting to grow numb to the feeling of solitude.

Shiroe and Naotsugu met in the Debauchery Tea Party.

Debauchery Tea Party was not a guild.

Debauchery Tea Party was just the Debauchery Tea Party, there was no other way to describe it.

It was just a group of players who 'just' happened to congregate there.

Even though they 'just' happened to be there, but there were 'always' there and 'ready' to go.

... That's the place Shiroe belonged to.

The guilds they joined were different.

Their characters were not the same.

They had nothing in common.

They just gathered in the ruined building. Some times in the plains, other times on the hills where you could see the stars.

This group went on adventures.

Elder Tales was a sword and sorcery style fantasy world, set thousands of years into the future. This was the setting the players bought into.

According to the legend of Elder Tales, there was a massive war on earth, shattering the old world... And reconstructed by the gods miraculously into this one.

This was a common mythical setting seen in fantasy games.

Orcs, goblins, trolls, giants, chimera and hydra, these common mythical monsters roamed the lands.

Most players found joy in battling. Gaining EXP and leveling up after defeating monsters, looting powerful and rare treasures, this was the common way to play Elder Tales.

But this was just grinding and farming, not real adventures. Repeatedly fighting and adventures were different things, Shiroe learned this for the first time in the Debauchery Tea Party.

And he could always see 'her' in the Debauchery Tea Party, as well as companions who were helping 'her'. Shiroe was also a companion there too.

The people Shiroe met in the Debauchery Tea Party might be the first friends he met in Elder Tales. Naotsugu was one of them.

Part 2

"Since you were coming back, that means your job was stabilizing?"

"Yeah, it is more or less stable. Aye, this has been a hectic year."

The Debauchery Tea Party went on for 2 years, which was the most fulfilling and joyful period in Shiroe's time in Elder Tales. But after some incidents, the Debauchery Tea Party which created many legends came to an end.

One of the reasons was Naotsugu taking a break away from the game.

During the winter of that year, Naotsugu wasn't able to go online for a period of time because of his busy work schedule. Several people also left the game at that point due to personal reasons.

The Debauchery Tea Party was not a guild.

Since it was not a guild, they did not have any obligatory relationships. Although everyone was all grown up and wouldn't say it due to embarrassment, but this group... treasured their friendship very much.

It was not decided by anyone, the Debauchery Tea Party just went on a indefinite hiatus. They thought about inviting new friends to carry on the congregation, but that would be a different adventure and story.

Although the Debauchery Tea Party ceasing to function made them sad, no one hung their head in regret. They enjoyed many more adventures than most people, that was reward enough.

"Work was finally on track and going sort of smoothly right now. What really sucks was that there are no cute girls there."

"That doesn't matter right?"

Shiroe brushes off Naotsugu's complaints.

Naotsugu could be described as a 'hero'. [\[1\]](#)

Shiroe thought Naotsugu has more courage than him. It might be recklessness in some situations, but Shiroe had never seen Naotsugu stop being a chatterbox no matter what happened.

"What's with your eyes? Closet pervert look?"

"I'm not a closet anything."

"Yes you are. There are 2 type of men in this world, open perverts who admit it and closet pervert who don't. I am an open pervert who likes panties, Shiroe is a closet pervert who definitely like panties."

The ridiculous theory made Shiroe pout.

But Shiroe wasn't angry.

Naotsugu had always been sensitive about others and his words were meant to lighten the mood. Even if his dirty jokes might trouble others; Shiroe was a healthy man, so he was also interested in the opposite sex. He knew that he could take this level of joke and conversation.

"I also like... Ah, although I like girls, but I still have standards."

"I know personality is important, but you can still be attracted by their appearances."

"... You might be right, but we don't need to stoop so low right?"

"Yeah."

Naotsugu gave a big sigh.

Shiroe nodded, he understood Naotsugu's point.

"Even if work had calmed down, there was no need to take a vacation in the virtual world. And with things like this, can we really go back?"

Naotsugu said jokingly.

All the other players trapped in this world should be asking the same thing. Naotsugu expressing this suffocating problem in such a joking manner showed his mental tenacity and his concern for Shiroe.

"I was thinking, maybe a new god just took over, and has a delusional fantasy." [\[2\]](#)

"It is so cruel to trap us this way. Really, the whole world has turned upside down, is this some type of festival?"

"Yeah, let's not have any expectations that we can go back anytime soon."

"Your world of accepting this situation also seems ruthless."

"Only suicidal people will show mercy when they know what is going on."

"As expected of the tactician of the Tea Party."

Naotsugu replied condescendingly, then shook his head and said with a serious expression.

"Right, no expectations for now. So going by the fantasy novel settings, we need to survive by our own from now on?"

He was not happy about this, but Shiroe nodded and agreed with Naotsugu's questions. According to Shiroe's memory, he had done everything as usual, living normally, taking baths, logging in to Elder Tales, fighting monsters with the beginner twins, before his consciousness was cut off.

Everything he did was about the same as usual, but he was forcefully trapped in this situation.

It might be due to some external factors or some mistake he made, but there was no way for Shiroe to find out.

There might be some way out of this situation and alternate world, but Shiroe didn't know how at this instance.

In other words, be it searching for a way back or going back to the old world by some unknown external mechanism, they needed to live in this world before that happened.

"We might wake up in our old world if we die here, but I wouldn't recommend doing that. Acting like that would be the same as borrowing a billion dollars from loan sharks because you think the earth might explode!"

"Doesn't seem like a wise choice. If dying here meant dying for real, that would be a waste."

"That's right."

"But tactician Shiroe, it shouldn't be a problem if we just want to survive right?"

"Is it?"

"We are level 90 right? It might be bad if we needed to challenge a difficult zone, but it shouldn't be hard just living on right? We have money, we have equipment... My equipment is a bit outdated, but it is still serviceable, so there shouldn't be any problem right?"

Elder Tales was a RPG that used level systems, both Shiroe and Naotsugu were at level 90, the previous level cap in this world.

But this was not something worth mentioning, about half the players were level 90.

Elder Tales had a long history and similar to other online games, it has went through hundreds of updates, adding all sorts of game elements.

Although Shiroe didn't experience that period, but the level cap when Elder Tales just started was 50. The players enjoyed the Elder Tales world and would grind their characters to the level cap, and request for more adventures from the developers.

To meet these demands, the developers pushed out an expansion pack. It had new enemies, dungeons and adventures, as well as a higher level cap for the heroes to become stronger. There had been several level cap revisions since then, the latest one was 90.

The cap of level 90 came with the 'Sacred Heart' expansion 3 years ago. The official announcement for the 'Novasphere Pioneers' expansion pack included an increased level cap to 100.

This meant the players would have time to grow their Adventurer's avatar.

Before the release of the new expansion pack, half the players were already at the level cap and there was nothing strange about it.

"... I don't think this is it."

"Why?"

Naotsugu was not discouraged even when facing such a situation.

Shiroe admired Naotsugu's optimism. Shiroe didn't have his mental strength.

Shiroe was filled with unease. His heart analyzed the situation as if it were driven by this sense of unease.

"We came to this alternate world... though we do not know if this is simply a game world, but we were sucked into this situation... That is already a strange matter."

"Yeah? Eh, that is not wrong... Hmmm?"

"Simply put, I think 'It is impossible to stumble into an alternate world by normal logic. Since something extraordinary happened, we can not take anything for granted. So we might get hurt if we take it for granted that we will be fine.'"

Shiroe's words stunned Naotsugu for a while, and he replied with a resisting expression.

"Your syllogism sounds really nasty." [\[3\]](#)

"My point is that we can't ignore this too."

"You have a point, but..."

Naotsugu clenched and unclenched his fist repeatedly, maybe he was doubting the reliability of his level 90 body.

"I want to make another thing clear, you might have missed it because of the uproar... But the new expansion pack should be in effect now."

"Novasphere pioneers right?"

"Yeah, this means there will be new equipment, monsters, quest and more zones as well right? They might have remodeled some areas too."

"Now that you mention it... that is absolutely right."

Shiroe shifted his gaze away from Naotsugu and continued:

"Magic seems to work here. Choosing the magic from the menu is dangerous and slow in a live battle, but if we set it on the hotkey, we can cast spell after a short cast time, I have confirmed this."

"Yeah, I tried that too, all the skills I learned can be executed."

"But that doesn't mean we can win battles."

"Is that so?"

"How tall are you Naotsugu? I mean in real life."

"183cm, same as my game character."

Naotsugu rubbed the top of his head.

"I see, so there should be no strange sensation for you. There is several cm difference between me and my character's height, so it feels a bit off. Eh, something like wearing shoes with thick soles... If the length of the limbs are different, this sensation is even more obvious. There are some differences between this body and our real body, this is not the body we are familiar with. Even if we can use swords or magic, how accustomed we are to fighting is an unknown."

"Ah, you are right, that is a bunch of troublesome problems."

"... Another important matter is the difficulty in checking the status screen."

Naotsugu had a surprised face as Shiroe carried on.

"We can see the status screen by focusing on our forehead. If we form a party, we should be able to see each other's HP, but to do that in live battle will be hard. I'm still fine, but for Naotsugu who is on the frontline, it will be difficult to keep track of the status screen while fighting the enemies in front of you."

"You mean it is difficult to fight?"

"I think it is better to keep this in mind."

He did not explain it to Naotsugu, but the field of vision was crucial as well. You could make your point of view wider if you were playing from the monitor and see things from a wider angle. But currently, they could only see at an angle of 120 degrees in front of them.

Take Trolls and Giants as examples, fighting these huge foes would create blind spots that weren't there before... There are tons of problems in terms of battles.

"Anything else?"

"Also..."

"What is it, is it hard to say?"

Shiroe was surprised by his own troubled sigh.

Frankly, the issues with battles and the difference in game environment were trivial. It could be troublesome and more challenging, but Shiroe thought this was something they could overcome.

The things he wanted to say made Shiroe's heart heavy, he had been buying time by talking about unimportant things to prepare himself.

"What is it, famous tactician?"

Although Naotsugu called him that, Shiroe was not fit to be a tactician.

Shiroe would voice out his thoughts because it was Naotsugu, but Shiroe was used to thinking about all sorts of things by himself.

Because of his attention to minute details, the Debauchery Tea Party gave him the nickname of 'tactician'. He had a way with words, so he took on the duty of planning and coordinating battles.

"...The Japanese server of Elder Tales has 1,200,000 registered characters with 100,000 consistent players."

"Hmmm? That is correct."

For players like Shiroe, such numbers were common sense.

"Today is the release of the new expansion pack, so there are more people online than usual. From the ratio of the people who are online on my friend list, I estimate about 30,000 people are

online. At this point, this should be correct... This alternate world is accommodating 30,000 Japanese, I am not sure about the North American, Europe or China server though."

Naotsugu nodded in agreement.

"So there are 30,000 people here..."

Shiroe didn't use the word players intentionally.

"We have no laws or government."

Part 3

Naotsugu headed towards the city with Shiroe.

They tried to discuss further, but they lacked information to talk about so they couldn't conclude anything. They needed to focus on getting information for now.

This was common sense while playing Elder Tales but they were not sure if it was applicable now.

To play it safe, Naotsugu and Shiroe formed a party.

Parties are a way for people to interact, it meant a battle team. Unlike guilds, parties were temporary groups allowing you to check each others HP and status if you were in it together. They could tell each others distance and direction when in the same zone.

Akiba was a non-combat zone.

If you fought here, no matter if your opponent was a NPC or a normal player, the city guards would rush over in an instance and send the guilty party to jail. If the perpetrator attacked the guard, they would be executed on site.

There were many characters not controlled by players in Elder Tales. They were the NPCs in the game system, known in this world as People of the land.

They mostly worked as shopkeepers selling all sorts of things, or helped with administrative such as guild registration. They also acted like pedestrians in the streets, interacting with players by providing information or quests.

Since all the guards were higher than level 100, the players were unable to resist them.

Monsters wouldn't appear in the city. According to common sense in Elder Tales, this was one of the safe regions in this world.

It was like summer once they exited the abandoned building, the humid wind blowing across the whole city. The smell of mud was in the air and the grass and leaves swayed with the wind.

This scenery was too natural, making the idea 'we are in a game' vaporize from his mind. The presence of this world detected by his senses was too strong, the feeling of being in an alternate world was getting more firm, this was nothing like a game.

Making a turn at the avenue, they reached a major road with 4 lanes. At the corner was a high tech building made with composite materials, looking like a memorial. Head straight along the Akiba main road junction and you would reach the city square in front of the metro. Every building was either collapsed or covered in vines, slowly being replaced by giant ancient trees.

This was not like the Akiba in the real world, a high tech city made with glass and steel.

The colorful signboards and flashy decorations were broken, either slanting or broken in half, hanging off the giant silver leaf trees growing besides it.

The roads had been completely eroded by mud and glimpses of the asphalt surface could only be seen on the major roads. The alleys were covered with mud and moss just like a trail in a natural park.

The hybrid cars that had been abandoned since ancient times was enveloped by grass and was now the habitat of small animals.

This might be a sad sight, but it was still beautiful, like a painting in a way. It was not a polished kind of beauty, but the abandoned buildings decorated with the many colors of nature was full of life and vitality.

The players and NPCs occupied these ruins as their home and set up stalls and shops on the road side, giving it a feeling of a bazaar. This was the same as Shiroe's home town in Elder Tales.

If it was the usual Elder Tales, there would be many players gathered in front of the city square and people would set up shop and sell things to other players. Others would kill time here by waiting for comrades to go out for raids, it was a place full of life.

But this place was full of confusion, chaos and a complicated sense of frustration now.

He could see at least a few hundred players here.

Everyone must be here hoping for some form of savior.

The game officials might appear in this place and explain the incident by announcing 'this concludes this event, isn't it impressive everyone?'... They must have gathered here hoping for something like that.

Even the players bearing such whimsical hope were letting down their guards and conversing with others. The noise volume that he could hear was lower than he expected from such a crowd.

They gathered in clusters all over the place and some threw worried glances around, some would sob while others would vent by cursing out loud.

They may have realized unconsciously that anything might happen. But the crowd had no intention of doing anything about it, which annoyed Shiroe.

(Do they plan to sit here forever... Really, wah, I met someone's gaze.)

Shiroe moved his sight away in surprise.

A pair of sorrowful eyes looked at him pleading for help.

Shiroe didn't think he was mentally weak, but he didn't want to test himself in these muddy eyes.

And...

(... This is irritating.)

Just squatting there like they are paralyzed.

Not doing anything yet still complaining, this irritated Shiroe. He could empathize with them, but the sight of a few hundred players looking crestfallen was not good for their psychological health.

Shiroe was able to take action after overcoming his initial dejection by chance, and he got a hold of his emotions after meeting Naotsugu. He was no different than the players sitting there waiting to be saved, and Shiroe understood that. Maybe that was the reason the feeling of irritation was so much stronger for him.

"Shiroe? Isn't that Shiroe?"

That came from a female voice. It was not too loud, but in this quiet and depressed atmosphere, the cheerful bell like voice attracted a lot of attention.

Shiroe turned and looked for the source in surprise.

"Maryele, Maryele, that was too loud, this... this is too prominent!"

"It is like a funeral procession here, what is the problem with that?"

Shiroe was pulled by Maryele's hand. The woman who ignored Shiroe's words and kept on talking was a female player Maryele known as sister Marie. ^[4]

"You came at the right time, I was just looking for you."

"... Eh, may I ask, why are you looking for me?"

"Woo wah, What a beautiful lady. Where were you hiding this hot chick? You panties pervert."

"Please don't use the word panties now Naotsugu."

The three of them left the city square slowly and entered an inconspicuous alley. They didn't leave because they did anything wrong, but the atmosphere in the city square might give them tummy aches. And they were talking to Maryele who was more famous than Shiroe, so they had to be aware of their surroundings as well.

"What an impatient boy you are Shiroe, bringing me to a place like this."

"That's not what I want."

"So Shiroe made a girlfriend, that was quick."

"That's not it. Sorry sorry. Ah, this is Naotsugu."

"I am Naotsugu, friend of Shiroe... How may I address you?"

"I am Maryele, you can call me Marie or sister Marie. Wow wow! Naotsugu is handsome too! You guys are a combo?" ^[5]

Naotsugu laughed gently. Although Shiroe was observing her and trying to see if she had any hidden meaning behind this, but there were no signs of malicious intent in her smiling face. She was hard to deal with because she meant what she said.

Maryele, who was smiling so warmly despite the situation that they were in, was a Cleric.

There are 12 classes in Elder Tales, all the players... meaning all the Adventurers had to choose one of these classes to begin their adventure. Among the 3 healer classes, Cleric had the strongest healing abilities.

Healers helped survivability but were weak in attack, a class suitable for adventuring with parties but not acting alone. The principle of the healer class was to assist others, players who choose this class were usually introverts, but Maryele was an exception.

Wearing a long white robe for healers and a head of long green hair, she was an elf which usually has a cute appearance. She looked just like she did in Elder Tales. Because it was a game world, all the players were hunks and beauties, but some players just had the charms to attract the goodwill of others.

In Elder Tales which has voice chat function, this was even more obvious. Maryele who was from Osaka, has a cheerful voice and helpful nature, a lot of players knew her. Instead of being popular with the opposite sex, she was popular with everyone because of her forthright style.

Maryele would not act like a spoiled girl and was admired by people of both genders. Shiroe was a veteran player so he knew a lot of people. But Maryele was different from Shiroe, a player who enjoyed helping others and had a wide network of friends.

She was the guild master of the Crescent Moon Alliance which had about a dozen or so members. She would hold parties in the pub in Akiba frequently, so she was well known in Elder Tales.

"You have such a gloomy expression."

"...Eh, that's still okay."

Do I look so gloomy? Shiroe worried.

Having a long face was normal in this situation, but he thought about how his facial features in the real world would reflect on the body of this world.

In the real world, Shiroe had been described as having 'nasty eyes'. He didn't use contacts to avoid looking even more scary.

In the Elder Tales that had become reality, hearing others call him gloomy made Shiroe think they had discovered his nasty eyes feature from the real world, so he was a bit frantic.

(But Maryele is also...)

Looking at Maryele, you could see that there were some differences between her and the typical forest elves.

"Anyway, I also don't want to be gloomy and I can understand how you feel. I have had enough, this is so ridiculous that I am feeling psychotic."

Bright hazel eyes, the contours of a elf with a hint of nobility, the slightly thick brows a big mouth that was smiling warmly. You could tell from her face that she was kind and warm, just how Maryele would look like.

He had never seen Maryele in person before, but Shiroe could feel that 'Ahah, this is indeed Maryele'.

"What kind of look is this? Hmmp, you must be thinking this is not my style right?"

Maryele touched Shiroe's forehead gently with her finger.

"My joking nature is my hobby, but the jokes I am making now is escapism. I am really troubled right now."

"Is she always like this Shiroe?"

"Yeah, she is always like this."

"But she is pretending right now?"

"I can't tell the difference."

Maryele's words surprised Naotsugu, but Naotsugu was beginning to understand her personality. Maryele laughed loudly at Naotsugu's reservations towards her, but she stopped and sighed under the stares of Shiroe and Naotsugu.

"Aye, hmmm... The situation is bad."

"Yes... want to exchange information?"

"That's fine, where should we start.. No, I remember, hmmm, let's be careful and talk at my place. Would you mind Naotsugu?"

Maryele invited them to her guild hall.

They could relax there, so the trio went around the Fullerger hotel and headed towards the guild building.

The guild building was a facility available in all cities, and they usually housed other facilities, forming a multipurpose mega structure.

For Akiba, the guild building itself was a zone with several NPCs working at the lobby. They were the staff of this guild building, you could form a guild by going to them. Players could join or withdraw from a guild by talking to them and going through the administrative process.

There was also a branch of the bank there. Everyone in this game world had a bank account used to deposit cash or valuable items.

There was also another important function for the guild building, the rental of guild halls. Guild halls were independent mid-sized zones, ranging from 3 to 10 rooms of living space that doubled as an office.

Some zones were open for sale in Elder Tales and players could buy and own them. They could set permissions for the purchased zone to allow the entry of specific players and design the interior of the zone as they liked, so many players also bought a small to medium sized area as their residence.

Although it was purchased, they needed to pay maintenance fee apart from the indicated price. The upkeep fee is 0.2% of the sale price per month, so only players with a certain amount of wealth would dare to buy it.

That's how guild halls came about, a zone that was specially made for guilds to rent. A guild that had a large enough scale would rent a guild hall in the guild building. This way, the items, ingredients or crafted items could be stored here, it also allowed members to gather and interact.

Crescent Moon Alliance was such a guild, having their own personal space in this guild building.

Shiroe and Naotsugu walked up the stairs to the 2nd floor of the guild building.

Going through a set of double doors, Shiroe and Naotsugu registered as visitors and entered the guild hall of Crescent Moon Alliance.

The guild halls in Akiba guild building had a basic retro design. Even though it was a basic design, it was just because of the floor and wallpaper that gave off this feeling.

You could decorate the zone you rented or bought anyway you wanted to. The guild hall of Crescent Moon Alliance had been cleaned thoroughly by its members, making it a comfortable place.

The walls were wooden veneer, giving it a warm familial feeling.

"We won't disturb other people here right?"

Maryele walked further into the guild hall as she said this.

Part 4

"Come in. Ah, don't need to hold back, take a seat. Please take a seat too Naotsugu."

After entering a room deep within the guild hall, Maryele pounced on a couch full of pink pillows and gestured for Shiroe and Naotsugu to sit.

"This is quite a feminine room."

"That's right, I am a guild master after all, so my room needs to reflect the dignity of a guild master."

Pink pillows, teddy bears, a princess bed, a painting of a noble looking dog, curtains with yellow laces. These decorations in Shiroe's eyes had nothing to do with the word dignity. Shiroe felt distraught staying in a place like this.

He wouldn't feel this way if it was a screen from a game, but he could feel this atmosphere as he entered this space for real.

He felt restless like an intruder in a private room. Fortunately it was the forthright Maryele, if it was the private room of any other girl, Shiroe would have definitely retreated.

But even if the decor was too flashy, the room of the guild master was very spacious. They also have 5-6 rooms for storage and workspace, a rental for a guild hall like this must be quite high.

(Hmmm, the 40,000 with an upkeep of 80... about this kind of price right?)

Shiroe estimated in secret. This was the first time he was invited into this guild hall.

"How is your side coping with this Maryele?"

"There are 19 people online including me, 18 of us are in Akiba. Everyone is afraid and is staying inside the guild hall... Ah, don't be too concerned, they won't hear us if we are not too noisy."

Maryele should have been prepared for this as she answered Shiroe's query smoothly.

18 in Akiba, meaning 1 of them was in another zone. Shiroe found out after asking, that member was on an errand in another city.

"From what we know, Shibuya, Minami, Susukino and Nakasu are in the same state."

This meant all 5 cities in Akiba's server were in the same situation. Maryele should have confirmed this using her wide network of friends.

"Could it be that..."

"That's right, the inter-city transport gate has stop functioning, we have been isolated."

Maryele answered Naotsugu's queries, this was new information.

Akiba, Shibuya, Minami, Susukino and Nakasu.

These 5 places were the 5 major player cities in the Japanese server. Apart from these 5 cities, there were also many cities populated by stores and NPCs, but in terms of completeness of available services, these 5 cities were top class.

These 5 major cities had been set to be starting cities as the expansion pack increased the game contents. All players in the Japanese servers have to choose one of these 5 cities as their base of operation.

There was also an inter-city transport gate in each of them, so it was possible to move instantaneously between these 5 cities... But they were not functioning right now.

"It means that going to Shibuya is still okay, but other cities will be difficult."

"Even if it is Shibuya, eh, how many was it? We need to go through 7-8 zones to reach it?"

"The shortest distance is 4 zones."

Shiroe replied casually. The inter-city gate being down was a major problem.

Elder Tales that has a fantasy world view uses horses or walking as a primary way of transport for Adventurers. But with the implementation of the half gaia project that created this world at half its scale, traveling this way took too much time. To deal with this issue, the game set up the fairy rings and the inter-city transport gates as an alternative means of travel.

The inter-city transport gate were set in the player cities, allowing you to teleport instantly to any of the 5 cities. With these gates down, the difficulty of commuting with far away cities had increased rapidly.

Take Susukino for instance, it was situated in Sapporo on the map of Japan, from Akiba... From Tokyo to Susukino, you needed to go through a huge amount of zones, it should take at least a week even in the game.

That was referring to in-game time, but in-game time should be the same as the time of this new reality from the look of things.

"Can you imagine... why did things turn out this way?"

Shiroe and the others could only answer with silence.

Seeing Maryele's dejected expression, Shiroe wished to answer this question, but he didn't have the ability to.

"Cheer up Maryele... Things are serious now, but it could be worse."

"Is that so...?"

Naotsugu continued talking to the depressed Maryele:

"Even though we are trapped in this alternate world, there should be tens of thousand of Japanese here right? Including the hundreds of thousand of players overseas, we have so many people in the same boat as us, so it is not the worse case scenario right? We have a common language, some money on hand, and we can still talk in this room after barging into this world, isn't that the best evidence? I haven't confirm it yet, but our stamina seems to have strengthened according to our character's status, we can use swords and magic. In other words, we have been given the basic ability to survive in this world. Compared to classic fantasy novels where the characters travels to an alternate world, we are much more fortunate, you can even say it is a piece of cake."

Naotsugu encouraged her strongly.

"Are you familiar with such things Naotsugu?"

"I'm quite alright, I've read quite a bit about this when I was still schooling."

Even though it was a pointless question, Shiroe was still impressed by Naotsugu. That made a lot of sense. He was used to seeing things pessimistically, that's why he missed the cheerful part.



"Yeah.... You are right!"

Maryele seemed to be the same.

She looked at Naotsugu with gratitude and hugged him all of a sudden.

"Yeah! You are right! Naotsugu! Impressive! I am so moved, you have saved me!"

"Hold on, hmmm? What's with her?"

Naotsugu struggled under Maryele's embrace, but Maryele ignored him and hugged him tight.

"Maryele? You have visitors?"

A lady wearing spectacles knocked as she enters, she had an awkward expression as she looked at Maryele and Naotsugu.

"Sorry to intrude Miss Henrietta."

"Hello Mr Shiroe.. Should I come back later?"

"I was hoping you could stop her."

"On it. Really... Hey Maryele! Don't act in such a shameful manner!"

The lady entering on Shiroe's request was the Henrietta in charge of the guild's accounts. She pulled Maryele back by her shoulders and lectured her.

"Wah! Henrietta? I heard some great opinions, Naotsugu is right! He gave such a great speech!"

"I'm not asking about this! Now is a crucial period, consider the situation!"

Looking at the blushing and exhausted Naotsugu and the interaction between Maryele and Henrietta, Shiroe laughed.

Henrietta was a core member of the Crescent Moon Alliance and on good terms with Shiroe.

She was a bard in charge of the guild's finances, a competent character. From Shiroe's perspective, he felt close to her since they both wore glasses. But looking at Henrietta in this alternate world, he felt this feeling was just his one sided opinion.

Blonde wavy hair, an oval face and sharp chestnut eyes, she had a beautiful style like a secretary. She was wearing office clothing that showed off her mature and graceful beauty, which suited her very well.

Shiroe was just a college graduate student who liked gaming. When their eyes met, Shiroe felt he could not handle her.

After Henrietta joined in, the 4 of them talked about their experiences so far and summarized their situation... But it had only been half a day, they still didn't really understand what happened.

"What should we do now..."

"I think we should get in touch with our comrades through telepathy to avoid any confusion."

Henrietta made a calm suggestion and Shiroe agreed. Don't think too far ahead, just do what you could for now or you would be swallowed up by the current state of affairs. This was what Shiroe felt.

"That is correct Maryele. Mr Shiroe and Mr Naotsugu both made good points. Fortunately we have a guild hall, so for sleeping at night... It might be a bit of a squeeze, but I think it would be better for everyone to sleep here for now."

"That's right..."

Henrietta and Maryele's conversation made Naotsugu flinch.

"What is it Naotsugu?"

"Nothing, just that this is so sudden, I'm not sure what to do."

Naotsugu denied in a hurry when he heard Shiroe's question. He was always making dirty jokes but seemed so weak to direct attacks.

"Is Naotsugu weak against breasts? Want to touch?"

Naotsugu averted his eyes at Maryele's words, although he still took a peek. Breasts held the hopes and desire of men after all.

(Maryele is a beauty with a big bust after all, I can understand.)

Shiroe agreed in his heart.

Shiroe was also bullied by Maryele when they first met. But Shiroe insisted on putting on the attitude of 'Ah? What about these 2 lumps of fats? It's heavy, please take it away'.

There was no need to emphasize on it, that was just Shiroe trying to be vain.

The Elder Tales then was just a game so that the teasing was just through the conversation, while the screen showed their characters sticking together. Maryele had stopped teasing Shiroe this way recently, she probably got bored of it.

"Why is she acting so bold? It is scary."

"Maryele came from a girls' school, Osaka people will become like that under that kind of environment... Maryele? It doesn't matter since this is a game, but now is a crucial period so restraint yourself!"

Maryele was lectured by Henrietta this way with a dejected expression. She would modestly accept criticism even though she was the guild master, that was Maryele's good point.

Shiroe did not join any guild and didn't trust the guild system, but that didn't mean he disliked players in guilds.

It had been several years since he developed his hate of guilds. He didn't really get over it, but he was able to accept it now.

He had formed parties with Maryele and Henrietta several times, Maryele with her wide network of friends also gave Shiroe a lot of help. If Shiroe was not mistaken, the cheerful Maryele who liked to take care of others would keep her distance from Shiroe who was afraid of personal relationships as a way to show her concern.

(Maryele is mature in a different way from Naotsugu.)

She didn't do it to curry favor from Shiroe or to balance their mutual beneficial relationship. The blessings that came along with Maryele's personality and kind nature, she did not just give it to Shiroe, but to all those around her. Shiroe thought so.

(But this type of skinship... is troubling. Ah, right, Naotsugu is similar to me, that's why they hit it off so well...)

The Crescent Moon Alliance members probably gathered here out of their admiration for Maryele. It was a heavy responsibility to take care of almost 20 guild members.

Since Maryele was a trustworthy and kind player, Shiroe decided to explain in detail everything he had considered.

As Shiroe explained Maryele paid special attention about the issues with battles and pointed out questions. She frowned when she heard about the number of people in the server and the conflict the players might get into.

"I see... you are right. After listening to you I think that is very possible. Apart from violent incidents, they might be scams and pranks as well..."

Unlike Shiroe who only needed to look after himself, Maryele needed to protect all her comrades, and she was also a woman as well.

"That's right! Listen to him lady! Don't do that again, you need to have some common sense, having a small brain is not good!"

"Woo! You are right! My breasts are big but my brain is small! But we just met, do you need to be so ruthless Naotsugu? Naotsugu is annoying, idiot idiot!"

"Nope, Mr Naotsugu has a point. You need to correct this habit you have of hugging people since high school."

"These things don't matter right? Henrietta, your real name is Umeko anyway!"

"Ehh! I told you not to use that!"

From the way they interacted, Henrietta and Maryele knew each other in real life. He was not sure how much of this serious topic went into their heads. Shiroe's head started to hurt.

"Really, let's ignore this dumb broad... So we can't solve our current situation any time soon..."

"I think it would be better not to have such expectations."

Shiroe answered Henrietta's question.

"Isn't there something we can do about it..."

Maryele frowned as she said this, unable to accept that. Although he empathized with her, but Shiroe had already thought about that. That's why they were collating information now.

The information on hand was too limited.

Among all the things they could do, Shiroe and Naotsugu prioritized gathering data, but that was not what everyone else would do.

Maryele was not like Shiroe and Naotsugu, she had to protect a lot of people as a guild master. But at the same time, she had more ways to handle things.

Guilds might be a common entity, but their structures varied.

The goals, activities and scale differed for each guilds, it was a organization that could be very different from each other.

In terms of contents of activities, an example would be battle guilds. One form of entertainment in Elder Tales was fighting, these type of guilds were made to support the members in battles, their activities were raiding either in the open world or dungeons. Adventurers joined these guilds as it was convenient for them to form parties and fight as a team. Since the members know each other, they would be more inclined to invite each other to form parties, and their team work would also be better.

Akiba was the biggest city with the most number of players in the Japanese server, the famous battle guilds were the Black Sword Knights, Honesty, D.D.D and the West Wind Brigade.

Another type were production guilds. Apart from the battle abilities of the Elder Tales main classes, there were also all kinds of subclasses. Players who choose a production subclass which could forge items were known as artisans. The levels of the main class and subclass were separated. You could train both at the same time, but there were some who relied solely on the subclass skills to enjoy the joys of running a business quietly in the city.

These type of players would join production guilds which could have a very grand scale. As guilds had the ability to provide ingredients in bulk as well as warehouse usage, they enjoyed more advantages the more people they had. Famous production guilds in Akiba were Oceanic systems and The Rodrick Firm.

Maryele's Crescent Moon Alliance was a small scale adventure support guild. These guilds supported both battles and production, a guild that helped each other and their members to achieve their goal. As they don't specialize in any domain, so their members don't stand to gain much benefit, but the selling point was the warmth and peaceful atmosphere. Most small guilds belong to the adventurer support style.

In this group of guilds, Crescent Moon Alliance enjoyed quite a bit of fame.

They were not as famous or influential as major battle guilds, their income and scale paled in comparison to production guilds, but their support for mid level players and their flexibility in doing things received a good evaluation by the other players.

"Anyway, I think we should protect ourselves."

"Correct. From what I see, there are a lot of girls in this guild right?"

Henrietta nodded at Shiroe and Naotsugu's points. Although battles were restricted in the city zones, there was no telling what might happen. There were also no ways to confirm the battle restrictions were still in effect.

(We need to find out about this later too.)

Shiroe added a new page to his mental note.

"Also, I think you should recall all the items you put out for sale."

"Hmmm? Market? Why?"

"Ahah, because..."

The market here referred to the services provided by NPCs in major cities. Players could deposit their goods with specific NPCs and set a price to sell them.

Although the players usually traded among themselves, but if they have any excess crafted products or ingredients, the market was a convenient feature.

"Crescent Moon Alliance should have a lot of resources right? I think the members also deposited a lot of items to sell at the market. Even if it is still early, the price might change drastically, the items might have some new effects or new ways of using them. If you can spare the cash, I think it is better not to sell the items you have on hand."

"Yeah, understood, you are right."

"Also, we can't check things online anymore."

Maryele and Henrietta nodded their heads seriously.

When Elder Tales was still a game, Shiroe and the rest were in front of a monitor and could surf the net as they played the game, which was the usual way of playing this game.

Elder Tales was a huge and unbelievably complex game, the amount of information in the game world could not be grasp by any single player.

The trusty tool supporting these players were the online guides.

The maps and features of each zone, how to get to a specific area, what monsters would appear, items, where could you meet which NPC and so on.

Browsing for this information as you played was the common way to play Elder Tales.

Although the online guides were not perfect, it would still contain popular zones or effective ways to grind.

They would also note places that you should stay away from.

"We came this time to exchange information, and information will be important from now on. Everybody remembers that today is the update of the expansion pack right?"

"The Novasphere pioneers correct?"

"Yes, not only new zones, we will also need information... for old zones as well as the city. Right now we can't check online even if we run into any minute problems."

"That's right..."

The 4 of them then proceeded to draw a map centered around Akiba based on what they still remember.

Even though there were tens of thousand of zones in the Japanese server, they also included all the hotel rooms, small ruins and the personal space rented out to players like this guild hall.

The 'field zones' including the forest, hills, the desolated suburbs and relics, as well as the relative fewer 'dungeon zones' that included the underground metro or gigantic building structures. But such zones still numbered in the thousands, even Shiroe couldn't be sure he remembered all of them clearly.

But Shiroe was still a 8 year veteran player, his knowledge of Elder Tales surpassed other players. Naotsugu was on hiatus for a while, but he still had deep knowledge on the zones in the early eras. The 2 of them compared their recollections with Maryele and Henrietta and drew a serviceable but imperfect map of how the zones were connected.

Writing the the zones and linking them with lines, Shiroe's group listed out hundreds of zone-names surrounding Akiba zone.

Although they didn't know the necessity of investigating all the zones, but this was better than nothing.

"Thank you Shiroe and Naotsugu."

"I have been in your care all this while after all."

"This is nothing to worry about."

"You have been a big help, I know Shiroe is a good kid."

Maryele gave Shiroe a smile like a sunflower as she said this.

(Maryele's smile... deserves full marks. Whether I'm tired or frustrated, it is still full marks... I hope I can be the same as her.)

"I can't leave Maryele alone after all."

Although Shiroe thought he had done his best, but his words were unable to express his feelings.

"What? Even Shiroe is saying this, I am finished. I am fated to be a brainless dumb woman, what should I do Henrietta?"

"Start by restraining your playful nature?"

Shiroe averted his gaze in a hurry.

"Want to touch my breasts? Do you want to?"

Maryele tried tempting Naotsugu after seeing Shiroe ignore her. Naotsugu knocked her head without a word.

"You, you hit me?"

Shiroe thought Maryele's action was a way for her to conceal her embarrassment, but Naotsugu seemed to be doing the same thing in hindsight. It was interesting to see Naotsugu stop her.

"Don't you have the ability to reflect on your actions, you panties girl!"

"Don't say panties! And what is with you Naotsugu? Are my breasts so bad? Are you treating me like a grandma?"

"I don't know for sure, but you are not at grandma level yet, we should be about the same age right?"

Naotsugu whispered his birth year to Henrietta who nodded her head.

"Maryele is 3 years older than you."

"So I am at the grandma level after all... an inferior product left on the shelf, that's why Naotsugu is turning into a bad boy and acting rebellious against me? My poor breasts, already treated like wrinkled puddings..."

Maryele swung her legs on the couch to express her dissatisfaction.

(She is still obsessed over this in this kind of situation, Maryele deserves my respect in another sense.)

She had this kind of energy the first day she was stuck here, it must be Maryele's nature. Shiroe was speechless.

But Naotsugu patted her head seeing Maryele throwing a tantrum. Although it looked like someone soothing a big dog, but Maryele was starting to calm down.

"It is about time to go, we have stayed quite a while... We will observe the situation outside some more."

After making his intent known to the disgruntled Maryele and Henrietta who had a serious face, Shiroe stood up.

"Yeah, we should go... sorry for intruding!"

It had been half a day since this tragedy happened, some people might have pull themselves together and battled with monsters once or twice.

Shiroe and Naotsugu bid farewell to the two still sitting on the couch.

"I apologize for my poor hospitality."

Maryele said politely as she stopped swinging her legs and stood up and said while looking straight at Shiroe and Naotsugu:

"Shiroe and Naotsugu... that, it might not be the right time to say this, but would you consider for your own convenience... Would you like to join us... that is to join the Crescent Moon Alliance?"

Maryele said this hesitantly unlike her nature.

"It is nothing important, I know that you don't feel comfortable staying in a guild Shiroe, but in the current state of affairs, I think it would be helpful to join a guild. I think Naotsugu is also not in a guild... So I want to try asking."

Her troubled expression evolved into a face that wanted to convince them.

From her voice, she didn't want to strengthen her guild by making use of Shiroe and Naotsugu, but out of her pure kindness.

"Our guild is very relaxed and won't tie you down alright? We won't do anything that irritates Shiroe. The young ones here also challenged dungeons together with Shiroe before right? Like the underground of Shinshuku or Nakasu commercial building. I don't know why Shiroe has not joined any guild yet, but I feel that our Crescent Moon Alliance... is a comfortable place to reside in. What do both of you think...?"

Maryele was not sure how to interpret Shiroe's silence and added these words while gesturing with her hands. Her smooth green hair swaying on her white healer robes, it looked like her way of showing concern in Shiroe's eyes.

"..."

Naotsugu looked at Shiroe in silence.

These eyes were saying 'it is up to you'. To stay here or continue to roam freely, that was up to you to decide. Naotsugu expressed this to Shiroe.

Shiroe was not in middle school anymore.

Even though he still had misgivings for being used like a piece of equipment, he was able to let it go. But a feeling he was unable to describe in words was hindering Shiroe's decision.

"Sorry Maryele, but I can't yet."

"So that's how it is... yeah, it can't be helped then."

Maryele had an expression of regret for an instance but smiled as usual straight after. Her smile was as cheerful as a sunflower, giving Shiroe a sensation of salvation.

If they could go back to the original world, if they received the miracles of god or due to some coincidence...

If Shiroe walked pass her in the streets, he was confident he would know it was Maryele.

Her healer robes, that full head of smooth hair, these were all equipment for the 3D models of elder Tales. But Maryele's smile belonged to Maryele alone, no one else could emulate her.

It was not a smile the game engine could recreate anyway.

"Just tell us if you need anything, we will be happy to help."

"That's right, just find me if you need a reliable guardian."

"Yeah. Shiroe, Naotsugu, thank you both. Contact me if you need anything as well."

Shiroe waved goodbye to both of them and hoped to be as strong as Maryele himself.

Chapter 2: Small Assassin

Part 1

...4 days later.

It has been 4 days since they drifted ridiculously into an alternate world.

After bidding farewell to Maryele, Shiroe and Naotsugu had been traveling all over Akiba scavenging for information.

And naturally there were new facts discovered everyday.

The most simple thing they understood was they would still get hungry.

Shiroe already noticed something was wrong when they said their goodbyes with Maryele. But their feelings of nervousness and fear over their current situation overwhelmed this feeling, so they kept searching for information till their legs were numb. Night fell without Shiroe and Naotsugu realizing that feeling was hunger.

But they lost to hunger in the end and headed to the market to purchase food just before dawn. Shiroe and Naotsugu brought their food to the abandoned building where they met earlier to enjoy their unhealthy 'supper and breakfast'... It concluded in a painful experience.

Shiroe brought roasted chicken with orange and tomato sauce, chocolate cake and green tea. Naotsugu purchased seafood pizza, mashed potato with bacon, Caesar salad and an orange juice.

It sounded extravagant, but both of them were level 90 players, wealthy enough to buy as many of these player crafted meals in the market as they wished. It looked like a bright, fresh, luxurious and sumptuous meal.

But the food all tasted the same.

Using Naotsugu's unassuming words, they tasted like 'crackers that are bloated after being soaked in water without any salty flavor'. Shiroe had no choice but to agree with this review.

The beverages had different colors, but they all tasted like tap water.

It was not so disgusting that you would spit it out and it shouldn't be poisonous. You felt full after eating so it was indeed food, but it was an experience Shiroe and Naotsugu could do without.

They were not sure how to react since it was not disgusting enough to make you curse and swear. You would sulk as you ate more of it, like the hope in your heart was starting to fade away, it was disgusting in this pathetic way.

They confirmed something else about the variety of food they brought.

All the food they ate was crafted by players with the NPCs selling them on their behalf.

Apart from the main classes, Elder Tales also had countless subclasses. The food was made using the cooking ability of a chef, one of the subclasses. [\[6\]](#)

Subclasses were independent of main classes, so in Elder Tales, there could be samurai chefs or sorcerer chefs.

These chefs could create the food Shiroe and Naotsugu ate according to their chef level, but the cooking in Elder Tales was very simple.

Stand beside a cooking facility, choose the ingredients from the game menu and input the use command. The food ingredients could be gathered from different areas, you could get meat from monsters sometimes or pick it up from dungeons. There were also seeds you could plant in the field too.

Basic ingredients were sold by NPCs and could be purchased from other players in the market as well.

Anyway, you could choose from the list of food you wished to create by using the use command on the ingredients. After selecting your desired dish, you need to wait 10 seconds before the ingredients vanished and were replaced by the finished product.

Does the problem lie with this simplified process?

This was the deduction Shiroe and Naotsugu made.

They also confirmed the ingredients themselves had taste the previous day.

Oranges and apples were tender and juicy, freshly caught fish smelled as usual, the salt and sugar purchased from NPCs tasted salty and sweet respectively.

But the product made using these materials all tasted like 'tasteless soggy crackers'.

This process was enforced in this game world and they couldn't do anything to change that. They could not temper with the ingredients as well, if they tried to boil them, the ingredients turned into a weird paste.

With no other choice, Shiroe and Naotsugu bought salt along with their food, sprinkling the food with salt as they ate. It was still a helpless meal, but at least it was better than chewing wax.

Since you needed to eat, you would also need to use the bathroom which was also a necessary action which was confirmed rather quickly. Since they were guys, Shiroe and Naotsugu had no problem if they were fine with doing it outdoors.

But they did wish there was toilet paper.

Shiroe heard Naotsugu mumble 'the girls have it hard', but he pretended not to hear it.

There were many things that couldn't be helped no matter how hard Shiroe thought.

They found out they could not do without sleep.

Shiroe had great stamina unlike the real world. His level 90 body had high physical stats even as a mage class, and these numbers were reflected on his body.

But fatigue and sleepiness were two different things, Shiroe and Naotsugu grew drowsy after moving for a period of time.

Shiroe and Naotsugu checked in once they reach the hotel, renting a zone to use as their residence. They didn't use this function when Elder Tales was just a game, they would just find any random alley in Akiba if they wanted to log off. They would disappear from the game world if they were not playing. But this obvious thing for players was no longer applicable for them.

Since they were still in the game when they were sleeping, they would need a physical place to rest... And they didn't return to their original world when they woke up.

Speaking of returning to their original world, they have confirmed one other thing.

You can revive if you die in this Elder Tale world. The players who die in this world will respawn in the cathedral after some time.

If the game mechanics still apply, players will lose part of their EXP and gold when they die, but Shiroe and Naotsugu haven't experienced this yet so they can't tell for sure.

Since they can revive after dying, that means they won't disappear if they die in this game world. It sounds like good news from this angle, but that also means their hope of going back to their world if they die is also gone.

Eating and dying.

From these two essential concepts of survival, they can conclude no matter how conservative, this is a contradicting and twisted world.

At a glance, this world seems to be a faithful replication of Elder Tales. Shiroe and Naotsugu who retain their abilities and wealth from the game are living in this game world where monsters roam freely. But a game is a game and cannot be replicated in an alternate world. Compared to the real world that obeys the laws without contradiction, Shiroe feel this world is imperfect and full of loopholes.

The best example for this is food. Grilled fish made from fish and salt doesn't taste like salt or fish, just something that look like grilled fish but taste like soggy crackers.

But if you sprinkle salt on grilled fish, it actually has the taste of salt. Sprinkling salt makes food salty, but food crafted with salt doesn't have that taste.

Shiroe and Naotsugu tried grilling fresh fish with a heat source such as a campfire, but no matter what they do, it doesn't become the grilled fish they are familiar with, but turns into mysterious black paste instead.

The same with sleep and using the bathroom.

These are functions unnecessary for games.

But in this Elder Tales world that became reality, they can get drowsy and really need to sleep.

There is something wrong with this world no matter how you think about it.

Since it is a world, there should be a set of laws. But whether it operates like Elder Tales or the strange physics associated with alternate worlds, they are unable to tell.

It might be bizarre combination of both, turning this world into a chaotic mystery.

A lot of things were confirmed by the 4th day.

On the 2nd day in the alternate world.

Shiroe and Naotsugu decided to go into the field zones in Akiba. They head to the adjacent zone that is just beside the area outside the city gate, the Archives tower forest.

Since it is close to the starter city of Akiba, Archives tower forest has low difficulty. The zones surrounding all the five major cities are usually suitable for low level players to train. High level monsters lurk in zones like the deep hills that are far away from the city zone. This is common knowledge in Elder Tales.

This is a typical ruins field zone with monsters about level 20 roaming around. Similar to the abandoned buildings in Akiba, they are covered in vines and parasitic plants.

As its name suggests, Archives tower forest is a zone with many bookshops, libraries and a research lab that is connected to several dungeon zones. The enemies are weak, their drop item includes 'secret level skill scrolls', so it is popular among novice adventurers.

The enemy monsters are only about level 20.

Shiroe and Naotsugu are level 90 players with good equipment and vast experience, they won't gain any EXP no matter how many such monsters they defeat because of the difference in levels. They only came to the novice zone to experience battle in Elder Tales in a relatively safe environment.

The battle is not proceeding as they expected.

It isn't because of the strong enemies. The goblins and grey wolves fall with a scratch from Naotsugu's sword. Even Shiroe who is an enchanter class with the weakest attack in the game can kill them with one shot.

That is the extent of their level difference.

But being able to defeat enemies doesn't mean you'll have a easy time fighting them. When Shiroe sees the grey wolves and the goblins attacking with rusted blood splattered axes for the first time, Shiroe was terrified and almost collapsed from his feet giving out.

His breathing was 10 times faster than normal. Even though he takes in lots of air, he feels suffocated which narrows his field of vision. The enemy attacks will not harm him... If Shiroe didn't convince himself that way, he would probably have fled by now.

And he confirms this after some time.

The level 90 Shiroe has at least 8000 HP while Naotsugu who uses the guardian class which has the strongest defense, has over 13000 HP. The goblin's attack can only deal single digit damage.

Even if they howl fiercely and swing their axe with all their might, it feels painless like a grade schooler's punch.

Shiroe and Naotsugu cool down after ascertaining this fact.

They didn't get hurt after regaining their composure, but the fighting remains difficult.

The laws of physics of the real world they took for granted are twisted together weirdly with the rules of Elder Tales. They can see these effects everywhere they look.

When fighting in a party in Elder Tales like Shiroe and Naotsugu, you take note of your allies' HP through the status screen and choose the appropriate tactics and coordinate with each other almost subconsciously.

Will other enemies approach while you are fighting the enemies in front of you?

Will the enemy link up with more monsters or call for reinforcement?

Which enemy is the priority target?

Which foe can you keep at bay for now and take out later?

Various details like this are important elements that will affect the battle.

But it is hard to even confirm each other's HP in this environment. The HP values will be displayed if they focus on their forehead, but fighting in a dangerous place with debris all over while keeping track of these numbers in their mind is next to impossible.

Shiroe can still spare some time to observe the battle field as a mage. But the guardian Naotsugu has to engage the enemy on the front line to protect his allies and will lose the ability to grasp his surroundings, fighting almost blindly.

"This is harder than I thought."

Naotsugu sighs as he eat a meat bun for lunch. The enemies are weak so there is no need to be too concerned with HP. But this won't do when fighting foes of the same level.

It taste like soggy crackers even though it's appearance is a meat bun. Shiroe and Naotsugu review the details of the battle while eating the tasteless food they have grown tired of.

The two of them have no martial arts background.

For amateurs like them, they have no idea how to handle the emotions and fear during fights, and are seriously doubting they can simply get used to them through live battles.

But in the back of their mind they know they will face major problems later if they are frightened by level 20 minions. Elder Tales is a fantasy adventure game that derives most of its

entertainment from battling monsters. If this is a world affected by Elder Tales or is the world of Elder Tales itself, getting used to battle is a necessity to survive here.

Fortunately their bodies are stronger than expected.

Their high level keeps them from getting tired, and they can regain their vigor after resting a few minutes if they do get tired from traveling or battling. Shiroe and Naotsugu spends most of their days out in the field and the evening in the pub or visiting people they knew. They converse with players in the same boat as them and gathers any news.

Akiba appears peaceful on the surface during these four days.

There are no major commotion Shiroe fear would happen.

Maybe after confirming the abundance of bland food and their ability to respawn allows them to regain the most basic sense of security.

But there are still some incidences that cannot be ignored.

Firstly, the volume of goods on sale have dropped.

Most players have come to the same conclusion as Shiroe and withdrawn their merchandise.

The goods left for sale on the market belongs to the players who weren't logged in, but even those sold out over time.

There are rumors of major guilds cutting off supplies, the items that are sold out are starting to gain popularity. There are many players with production subclasses but they have stopped working in reaction to the situation.

Another effect is the recruitment campaigns of the guilds. Or the players without guilds sourcing for one.

Humans are creatures that finds solace in numbers. Many carefree players without a guild decide to join one after experiencing this event.

You can tell which players join which guild by checking their status through the status screen. But it is hard to find out all this information when you are in the game.

So Shiroe can only estimate based on the ratio of the players he sees, but he does feel a sharp drop in solo players.

Shiroe and Naotsugu who are both level 90 receive many invitations just walking the streets.

But the two of them declined all offers.

Ignoring Shiroe, Naotsugu has no reason to reject them. When Shiroe queried him, Naotsugu replies with a smile:

"Getting to know companions is the result, not the reason. You need to move forward fearlessly and make friends through the process of battles, that should be the way."

Debauchery Tea Party is not a guild, just a coalition of players. For the 2 of them with a history in such a group, guild is just an unimportant title.

And the 2 of them don't think joining a guild provides any safety when facing such a critical and confusing incident.

But most people think differently from Shiroe and Naotsugu and see guilds as something they can depend on.

The twins Shiroe was accompanying the day of the incident seem to have joined a guild as well. He only saw them on the streets in passing, but they seemed to be safe allowing Shiroe to breathe a sigh of relief.

Players without a guild want to join one for the feeling of security. Lots of guilds start recruiting campaigns in response to such demands. Some guilds canvass for players without a guild, but there are other examples of several small guilds merging or famous major guilds headhunting specific players.

Shiroe doesn't get why the guilds wants to expands until Maryele explains it. It has something to do with the comfort of staying in Akiba.

After that incident, some players thinks they have barged into an alternate world, which Shiroe feels is reasonable.

But the players feel much more frustrated over this ridiculous state of affairs than Shiroe expected. These emotions gathers together in the form of a guild and forms a consensus of 'If you are not with us, you are against us'.

They can trust their guild mates but not others. This is the natural defensive reaction when living in such a hostile environment.

But this atmosphere is too strong making frictions between guilds obvious. They won't be attacked since Akiba is a non-combat zone. If there are any attempts to fight, steal or kidnap anyone, the guards will instantly appears to arrest the player in violation.

But harsh words and harassment will not be judged as combat actions. There are many ways to get around the loophole of combat actions to harass others, even more so for players trapped in this world.

Small guilds are often the victims of such harassment. Maryele tries to conceal her troubled face with a smile when talking about this.

Shiroe found out some important information regarding zones as he is discussing this topic with Maryele. He casually opens the status screen and notices an unfamiliar tab below the tab related to guilds.

It is unfamiliar, but he has seen this before.

This tab displays information of the zone you are in, detailing 'Japanese server/ Akiba/ City area - No monsters/ Battle restricted zone/ Entry Restriction (None)/ Exit Restriction (None)'.

Shiroe, Maryele and Naotsugu are talking in a small alley, this provides a summary of this zone and Akiba city which has no problems.

The issue is the next line.

'This zone is not owned by any person or guild, sale price is 700 million gold, monthly maintenance fee is 1.2 million, purchase? (Yes/ No)'

... This line is displayed when you are buying small abandoned buildings, hotel rooms or a guild hall like Crescent Moon Alliance.

But Akiba city is now a tradable asset even though it requires an astronomical amount of money.

Naotsugu and Maryele thought Shiroe was joking when he point this out, but they are dumbstruck when they check it out themselves.

Shiroe is a high level veteran player and is more wealthy than others. Shiroe has about 50,000 gold in assets in the bank. So he is certain 700 million is not something a single player can come up with.

But if a major guild pools all their resources... even though that is impossible... it is possible for them to gather this amount of cash.

Assuming someone succeeds in buying the streets of Akiba, the buyer will be able to set the entry and exit restriction here, including any people or guilds the buyer hates... they can be barred from entering this city.

The members of Crescent Moon Alliance spreads out to investigate under Maryele's instruction, and they found out this purchase line is displayed in almost all the zones.

In other words, be it city, field or dungeons, all the zones are open for sale right now, the exceptions are places that already have an owner... For instance a zone like Crescent Moon Alliance's guild hall. In this situation, the owner will have a different option to turn their ownership in to a land deed item.

The forth day after that incident.

The expansion campaign of the major guilds is no longer just a tactic to increase the guild's size in the eyes of Shiroe's group.

Part 2

Shiroe and Naotsugu left their hotel and headed for the market on the morning of the 5th day to buy food for the day. Naotsugu looked downcast as he dragged his feet on their way there.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I feel disheartened thinking about the nasty food we have been eating."

Shiroe could empathize with Naotsugu. Shiroe didn't think he was a gourmet and his diet in the real world was nothing to be proud of. But he realized now how good his meals were in the real world.

(The fried chicken of the fast food chain... was so tasty. Packs of ramen that cost 68 yen or yakisoba bread were great too. They were really an amazing delicacy.)

And also red tea, coffee and sodas.

All the beverages tasted like tap water here which was really unbearable. These beverages were made with ingredients that included well water anyway.

Well water tasted like tap water too. So it tasted like tap water because of their tongues, they were all just normal water.

They were still water after adding things inside which felt like a scam to them.

"... I guess we can only eat that."

"Well, you are right. But I think we can get better food even in prison. I saw it once on a TV special about Abashiri prison before, the food looked nice."

"Yeah."

Now that Naotsugu mentioned it, Shiroe felt the same way.

Shiroe studied in public school before going to high school. The lunch provided by the school might not be great cuisines, but it was much better than the soggy crackers in this world.

"I am wondering about something."

"Wondering about what?"

"Is this a torture chamber where god forces us to eat bland food all day?"

(How could that be...)

Shiroe thought, but it couldn't be denied after considering carefully. It might sound ridiculous, but they were in a ridiculous situation right now, so they couldn't take anything lightly like a joke.

"If that is true, this god has a good sense in torturing."

"I know right. Forcing us to eat poisonous food that makes you puke blood is some kind of hell right? It has the feeling of devils force feeding you."

Shiroe seemed to recall a level of hell in Buddhism which seemed to have this sort of punishment.

"But the current situation is different. This stuff should have nutritious value and no poison. The taste is bland but you can still eat it. Just eating a meal should be fine. But there is nothing else, it will always be this taste and our morale will drop deeper and deeper... This is a high end level of harassment right?"

"That's why I say this is a good sense of torture... But his taste in torture is irritating."

Just as Shiroe and Naotsugu were chatting leisurely about this.

Plock

A pebble fell besides his feet on the asphalt road following this sound.

Shiroe looked up and saw a three story building on the verge of collapse that used to be a shop house. At the entrance was a tall man.

"It's Mr Akatsuki."

Black hair and dark clothes with fine facial features, the man did not remove the mask covering his mouth as he acknowledged Shiroe with his eyes.

"An acquaintance?"

"Yeah, this is Mr Akatsuki, an assassin."

Shiroe walked towards Akatsuki as he introduced him to Naotsugu.

Shiroe met the extremely silent Akatsuki a year ago.

He insisted on communicating through text messages in this age where voice chat was prevalent, but it helped to create the atmosphere of an assassin.

There were many players who focused on role playing like Akatsuki. Shiroe saw them as players who placed emphasis on the atmosphere of the game.

When Elder Tales was just a game, Akatsuki didn't act like a 'player controlling the character Akatsuki', but as a 'resident of Elder Tales' known as Akatsuki, basing all his words and actions on this.

It was rude to call this playing pretend since this was another way to enjoy the game so no one else could criticize.

Shiroe thought Akatsuki was a competent player. Silent but didn't bother others or curry for favors, the opposite of Maryele in a sense.

He would carry out his duties perfectly in a party and didn't forget to care for his allies. Care meant more than words of encouragement, such a player was valuable in this time and age.

An important thing was the lack of awkwardness in his silence.

A quiet atmosphere could make you feel uneasy, but Shiroe felt a sense of kinship in some ways and was not uncomfortable fighting alongside him. Shiroe felt they were not totally silent, but were communicating without words.

Take their teamwork in minute supporting actions for instance.

Any small interactions during the rest between battles was a 'conversation' of care and concern.

Shiroe's impression of him was a professional assassin when adventuring together.

"What is it Mr Akatsuki?"

Akatsuki gestured with his chin and entered the run down building. It didn't appear to be a separate zone, just a backdrop in the field zone.

They entered the dimly lit ruins on Akatsuki's invitation.

"What is he like Shiroe?"

"Akatsuki is a role player who is very competent in the game. He probably is depressed by this situation too."

Naotsugu asked quietly and Shiroe replied in an equally soft tone.

They couldn't see Akatsuki any more, he probably headed to the very back of the building. This seemed a bit too rushed from Akatsuki's usual demeanor.

He could smell wet sands. The morning sun shone through the gaps of the partially destroyed walls and the small windows illuminating the room.

This was indeed a shop, and was some sort of restaurant. It was a vast and chaotic space with furniture scattered all over.

Akatsuki turned around and looked at Naotsugu part troubled and part accusatory.

"Mr Akatsuki, he is Naotsugu, a guardian and my reliable old friend that can be trusted."

"I am Naotsugu, nice to meet you! Whether you are an open pervert or a closet pervert, let's get along well!"

Shiroe introduced Naotsugu to Akatsuki after seeing his gaze.

Naotsugu greeted with his overly familiar style. Even though Shiroe thought he shouldn't talk like this to someone he just met, but Akatsuki seemed too melancholic to bother with the crude Naotsugu.

(Was Akatsuki so tense before...)

Shiroe thought about this in the suffocating silence.

(I remember he was a quiet but flexible player who liked battling...)

"I have been looking for you."

Akatsuki said in a barely audible feminine voice after a short silence.

"You have business with me?"

He still seemed deeply troubled. He took a few deep breathes before steeling himself and asked:

"I want you to sell me an 'appearance reset potion'."

Akatsuki spoke softly but the contents were audible.

But the meaning behind these words took some time to register in Shiroe's mind. Shiroe took some time to think about what he meant.

'Appearance reset potion'.

This was a limited item that was distributed during one of the events in Elder Tales. Shiroe remembered it was a promotional event to attract more players to Elder Tales, and this was the reward item for participating. This promotional event was a combined effort with an Internet broadcast, but the content was very crude, just a mediocre voice actress doing a radio interview to promote her song. It was a failure of an event that the developers wanted to pretend never happened.

Since it was a game with 20 years of history, there were several such events that were beyond the word stupid. The variety of items limited to events were also very wide.

The characters that represented the player in the game were set at the beginning of the game.

Eight races, twelve classes, name, gender, as well as height, body shape, hair style, hair and eye color could all be adjusted. Body shapes were customized using about a dozen figures like chest circumference, leg length, waist, shoulder width. Since your appearance and body shape didn't affect battle abilities, lots of players opted to use their actual appearance in the game.

'Appearance reset potion' allowed you to change the appearance of your character that was set just like its name suggested. As previously explained, appearance didn't affect fighting strength so this was just an item to use for fun. The item was rare since the event was a failure, but it was a good way to change the mood of the game.

At least until now.

"Aka, aka, Akatsuki san, could it be..."

Akatsuki glared at Shiroe.

"You are a girl?"

Akatsuki nodded straightforwardly contrary to her professional hitman look.

Her feminine voice sounded like a girl although she tried her best to conceal it. In this world where conversation with a keyboard was impossible, she was unable to hide her gender anymore.

"That is a surprise."

Naotsugu standing besides Shiroe was also stiff from the shock.

Part 3

Shiroe retrieved the 'Appearance reset potion' from the bank warehouse and returned to the crumbling building. Akatsuki breathed a sigh of relief as she received the orange potion.

"Please wait for a moment."

Akatsuki said before disappearing into the depths of the shop.

But she didn't go to another room. Akatsuki seemed to have left her belongings behind the screen that separated the kitchen.

(How careless, she is not living here right?)

Shiroe thought, but this was not the mood to throw a punchline.

"Hey... Are you fine...?"

"Don't worry about... Hnng!"

"What happened?"

"This potion causes a lot of pain."

Akatsuki drank the potion immediately, he could see orange light the same color as the potion shining through the screen. Akatsuki seemed to be in agony as she replied worrying Shiroe, but his face turned white the next moment.

He could hear the sound of several disposable chopsticks snapped in 2 by brute force. A scream so horrible that you didn't want to know how it was made came from behind the screen.

(Wait a minute, hey!)

"Uu tsu... Gu tsu..."

Shiroe wanted to go check on her out of concern but his legs seemed to be nailed to the ground. Listening to the moans of Akatsuki confirmed that she was a woman, definitely a young girl.

Even though her moans continued, Shiroe dared not open the screen to avoid seeing her naked.

No wonder Akatsuki didn't use voice chat.

Everyone would know she was a girl if she did and it was an inconvenience for her to role play as an assassin too.

Shiroe finally realized this.

"She has lots of troubles too."

Naotsugu brushed off the dust on a stool and sighed after saying that. Shiroe was surprised too.

But this was a possible scenario. With the prevalent use of voice chat in online games, players using different genders was uncommon but not unheard of.

In terms of online games, Elder Tales was a traditional and complicated game suitable for hard core players. Although there were no differences in the enjoyment of the game for either sexes, but according to the articles Shiroe saw in magazines, girls preferred to play casual games.

According to Shiroe's rough gauge, the ratio of men to women in Elder Tales was 7 to 3.

Akatsuki had an in depth understanding of the game mechanics and liked to battle, so Shiroe had never suspected she was a lady.

"It's fine now... you have my gratitude."

A young girl about 150cm in height with long flowing hair walked out from behind the screen. As he imagined from listening to her voice, she was a beautiful young lady.

Her clothing was loose since her height shrank by 30cm, she looked like a child wearing her father's work clothes. Her white ankles and slender fingers were visible from the pants and sleeves she rolled up, giving off a cute feeling like a small animal.

"Wah, she's hot, the real deal."

Naotsugu said softly with his mouth slightly open.

Shiroe felt the same.

The basic appearance and hair style in this world seemed to follow the settings of Elder Tales. But from his recent observations, the players inherited their facial features from the real world.

Shiroe was a half alv in this world, a mix race of human and the ancient alv race, the basic body settings were skinny and strong sense of curiosity. Shiroe had confirmed through the mirror in the hotel that his facial features really reflected his real world counterpart. His nasty beady eyes stared right back at him from the mirror, making him a bit depressed.

The same theory could be applied to Akatsuki. Akatsuki was human unlike Shiroe.

Her face was definitely that of a beautiful young girl.

She had big black eyes, a white oval face and brows that looked like they were drawn with a brush. Since the face in this world reflected her real self, then she must be a pretty... No, a traditional beautiful young lady.

But Akatsuki's new body was really petite, shorter than Shiroe's shoulders, maybe not even 150cm.

Players could modify their character in detail... including the body and face of the adventurer. The character Akatsuki created was quite tall, more than 30cm taller than the current Akatsuki.

Shiroe felt really out of place while walking with just a few centimeters in height difference, Akatsuki must have felt a dozen times worse than Shiroe did.

"It must have been hard for you."

Shiroe was stiff from shock, he didn't think Akatsuki would be such a beauty.

The one breaking this tense atmosphere was Naotsugu.

"I retract my earlier statement. You cannot be a open pervert or a closet pervert since you are not a guy. You are the one that is wearing panties so know your place!"

He might be right, but he was really pushing it. Akatsuki didn't get what he was saying and made a perplexed expression.

"Mr Shiroe, is there something wrong with his head?"

"That's not it... There are many things wrong with him as a person."

"Why is that!"

"In any case, he's messed up."

Akatsuki said after glancing at Naotsugu.

Maybe it's because she was finally free from the voice chat restriction, Akatsuki was much more willing to converse with others compared to the time Shiroe met her in the game. But her quiet nature didn't change Shiroe's impression of her.

(No, I'm still unaccustomed to her cute voice.)

"You say messed up! How can I not make any dirty jokes as an upright man of society? This is my sublime obligation. But a girl like you wouldn't understand even if I explain..."

Naotsugu puffed out his chest proudly. Akatsuki gave him a look and snorted.

"But you look unwell, take this."

Naotsugu tossed a canteen full of well water over.

Since all beverages were just like normal water, Shiroe and Naotsugu gave up and brought canteens recently. They filled them up with the cheapest beverage, well water.

"Thank you for your concern."

Akatsuki looked surprised, unable to determine whether Naotsugu was a weirdo or a kind and caring person. But Akatsuki took the bottle and finished the relatively full canteen, she seemed to be really thirsty.

The three of them relaxed, settled into their most comfortable positions and chatted amongst each other in the slightly humid shop.

Akatsuki had not been eating well these past five days and had been hiding in this building to avoid others.

Shiroe didn't understand why she did this, but agreed when she gave her reasons.

Her body was dramatically different from her real self, so she felt uncomfortable just walking. She would be fine just walking leisurely on the streets, but she would be in trouble if she met any issues.

And the chance of a problem occurring was really high.

She couldn't communicate with text messages in this world, so she would need to speak, be it shopping or contacting her acquaintances. She could still use pen and paper to converse, but that would just make her look suspicious.

There was no penalty if she talked, she would just be a man with a girly voice. But an imposing tall assassin talking with a female voice was out of place and would definitely attract the attention of others along with trouble. Akatsuki's deduction was probably right.

"I recalled Mr Shiroe mentioned that you had an 'Appearance reset potion' when we partied together, if I had this... I should be able to break free from my predicament."

"I see."

Naotsugu continued.

"I guess you should have played the game using this shrimp like body in the first place."

"Don't call me a shrimp."

She glared sharply at Naotsugu.

Akatsuki had strong eyes. She was like this before drinking the potion, but after reverting to her original body, Shiroe felt her eyes were full of determination and imposing spirit strong enough to drill through boulders.

"Isn't a shrimp just a shrimp?"

"Messed up people have no right to say that."

Naotsugu ignored her glare and continued to tease her.

But apart from teasing, Naotsugu also took out food and drinks from his bag for Akatsuki. His casual way of showing his kindness really fitted Naotsugu's way of doing things. Akatsuki also

understood this and stopped brooding over this topic. She was just uncomfortable since this was the first time she met someone like Naotsugu.

"Games are fun because you can do things you couldn't in real life, right? It is the same for fantasy or science fiction worlds. Changing my height was one such leisure of mine."

Akatsuki pouted and answered a bit begrudgingly.

She did have a point.

"Ah you are right, that can't be helped."

Naotsugu said sympathetically and peeked at Akatsuki.

"..."

"Yeah, this can't be helped, it is not Akatsuki's fault. I am with Akatsuki, everyone has the right to dream."

Naotsugu gave a thumbs up with a smile as if he understood everything. Akatsuki jumped and kned Naotsugu in the face the very next moment.

"Don't use your knee! Your knee!"

"Mr Shiroe, is it all right if I knee this strange man in the face?"

"Ask before you do it!"

Shiroe laughed happily at their interaction.

And the two of them were not really on bad terms which made it funnier.

Naotsugu complained 'he just wanted her to be a good kid', Akatsuki requested 'please deal with this weirdo'. After laughing for a while, Shiroe restrained his snickers and asked Akatsuki:

"Do you feel better after reverting to your original body?"

Akatsuki considered the question for a moment and replied with a serious expression.

"The body of a man is cool and the attack distance is long... But I am deeply troubled."

"Is it? What trouble?"

Naotsugu asked.

They just met but they were already acting like old friends. Shiroe recalled that Akatsuki was the type that was cautious in personal relationships, but maybe she let down her guard because of Naotsugu's nature.

"That... going to the bathroom is troubling."

Akatsuki looked at the floor and answered vaguely.

(It will be sexual harassment if you carry on Naotsugu!)

"Ah, so you had a penis then!"

(Don't add insult to injury Naotsugu!)

"Ah, that, let's talk about something else! Did you adjust your character to be closer to your real size?"

Shiroe changed the topic awkwardly to aid the hapless and blushing Akatsuki by raising this question. She was short for a female.

"Yeah, correct."

Akatsuki adjusted her baggy clothes and answered with a serious expression.

(She is acting this way to conceal her embarrassment after hearing Naotsugu's sexually harassing words...)

But Shiroe felt this girl was more serious in her ways than normal and would tend to stare straight at the person or thing she was looking at.

Akatsuki had a habit of staring at things without ever averting her gaze, which was probably how she acted in the real world.

It gave off the impression this petite girl would always do her best at whatever task she took on.

"With the height issue resolved, walking should be easier now right?"

"I am grateful for your help."

Akatsuki thanked him curtly.

Her surly manner of speaking, abrupted actions and habit of staring.

This combination overlapped with the silent and professional warrior Shiroe knew. Although their appearance differed, but a sincere and serious demeanor seemed like Akatsuki's nature.

Shiroe felt the petite young girl in front of him was slowly merging with the 'Akatsuki' he knew.

"How much do I owe you? Can I pay with my entire fortune?"

Akatsuki stared as usual at Shiroe with her focused eyes and said these shocking words.

"I only have about 30,000... forgive my lack of funds."

"No need, don't worry about this."

"That won't do. That potion was an event limited item, a rare treasure that cannot be found again. It must be priceless, 30,000 shouldn't be enough."

That was right in theory.

Even though it was just gathering dust in the warehouse, but it wasn't surprising to charge a big premium on it now.

"..."

"..."

But was this really an item worth a fortune? Shiroe doubted it. It was a useless item until now anyway.

"That, ah... can you just treat it as a free gift?"

"I don't want anyone saying I wouldn't repay a favor."

From Shiroe's perspective, these pair of pleading and glaring eyes were making him uncomfortable. Akatsuki was a beautiful young girl, so her looks had strong destructive powers.

"If you are so concerned, just use your panties... Fu wah!"

Akatsuki once against elegantly kned Naotsugu in the face. The angle was just right even though Naotsugu was sitting down on a pile of debris this time.

"Miss Akatsuki has good reflexes."

"Hold on, hey, closet pervert, whose side are you on!"

"Mr Shiroe, is it all right if I knee this strange man in the face?"

"Didn't I say to ask before you do it!"

Akatsuki's action of pointing at Naotsugu and asking for permission was cute and mischievous, Shiroe couldn't help smiling at that.

"Eh, forget it. Let's not talk about the price of the potion for now. Hey, Akatsuki."

"Don't forget to use 'Miss'."

"These trivial things don't matter shrimp."

"Don't call me shrimp. And this is an important matter, if I accept Mr Shiroe's limited items without repaying him, I will be shamed forever."

Akatsuki refused to budge.

Naotsugu looked at the pouting Akatsuki and turned to Shiroe, shifting his gaze between them and said:

"No, the things you are talking about are unimportant. Anyhow, why don't you stay a while with us Akatsuki?"

"...Ah?"

This seemed to surprise Akatsuki.

She seemed to freeze for a moment.

"Tactician, explain."

Naotsugu said his piece and dumped the rest on Shiroe as though it was Shiroe's duty.

He said something that was not discussed ahead of time... Although Shiroe thought this way, he still agreed with Naotsugu's proposal.

"... Yeah, I think this is a good idea."

But 'thinking this idea is good' was not equal to 'this idea is easy to explain'. Naotsugu said this out of good will, but it felt like a penalty game forcing Shiroe to hit on a girl, making Shiroe feel embarrassed.

"... I don't want to say this, but Miss Akatsuki is a petite girl and after reverting back to your original body, that... ah, your appearance and voice might... get you into issues easily. The important thing is Miss Akatsuki is not in a guild. Do you have any plans to join one?"

"I am not used to guilds since assassins are lone wolves."

Shiroe's words made Akatsuki frown.

"I thought so. We are both free adventurers, freedom panties festival."

"... Shut up pervert."

"If you have plans to join a guild then its fine... But people will bother you if you are not in one right? The big guilds want to increase their battle powers so they will invite anyone they see. They will put in even more effort to scout if it is a female player."

"Is that so...?"

"To secure a base and exchange information... I think it will be good to have some connections."

Akatsuki nodded in agreement.

(Miss Akatsuki is not good with socializing with others.)

Shiroe didn't think of himself as a very sociable person, but Akatsuki had a cold atmosphere around her. When Elder Tales was still a game, Akatsuki showed her kindness through wordless actions. Although Akatsuki was quiet, she didn't really hate being with others, but very few players realized that.

From what Shiroe knew, the combat specialist Akatsuki knew very few people and he was the one she worked with most often.

Dealing with things this way in a game was fine. Since it's just a game, it was okay to enjoy the game anyway you wanted if it doesn't bother others.

But this world was no longer a game.

Since Akatsuki was such a beauty, her nonchalant attitude could spark off some serious problems.

(I am not sure how deep Naotsugu thought about this... in a sense, being in a team together is a good thing, but...)

"Isn't this great? Assassins are great at taking out people right? While we are engaging the monsters, she can sneak behind them and deliver a killing blow, a beautiful combo dealing out justice to the bad guys festival!"

Naotsugu said with a grin.

(This is correct in terms of teamwork... But what is this festival thing he keeps mentioning?)

"Eh, would you mind Mr Shiroe?"

"We'd be happy to have you. No matter what obstacles we face, it will be safer with the 3 of us working together."

"I see, then as a ninja. I shall revere you as my lord."

Shiroe's words made Akatsuki hesitate a while but she nodded, looking with her unique piercing eyes that seem to be forever focused.

(Ninja? Lord? Isn't Akatsuki an assassin?)

Although he had some doubts, it still sounded like a good idea to Shiroe.

"My lord has saved me from the dire fate of being transformed into a man, thus I must work to repay you. This is what requiting a debt means, as your ninja I will protect you from now on."

Akatsuki said these words with shifty eyes that were not like her. Naotsugu was not bothered by the bruises on his nose and grinned widely at Shiroe.

"So that settles it, we are a team now. Welcome to the party shrimp."

"Shut up idiot."

"We are a unique three man team, please treat me well."

The trio hit each other's canteens in the messy shophouse, toasting the formation of their team.

Part 4

A few days after Akatsuki joined the team.

Their area of operations gradually shifted to the field zone near Akiba.

There were several reasons for doing this, one of them was the difficulty level of the battles they faced in Archives tower forest.

The basic structure and tactics of battles followed that of Elder Tales faithfully. But there were major difference in terms of fighting techniques and skills.

Elements that were not important when playing the game... Like the angle you swung the sword or raised your shield, the terrain around your feet, how to get into position, there were now many more details to consider when fighting. Teamwork and field of vision were also major concerns, and most importantly the mental obstacle of fear was hard to break through.

Shiroe's first thought when practicing outside with Naotsugu was 'this is going to be hard'. But after going through several field trips, his view changed into 'this is harder than I imagined'.

Since Akatsuki was a frontline melee class, it would be better for her to get use to this early. They were in a party for now, but they didn't know how long this alliance would last, so all of them agreed that they should get used to the basics of fighting during their time together.

Another thing was the existence of the Crescent Moon Alliance.

After their initial visit, they dropped by the guild quite often to exchange information.

Unlike Shiroe's party, Crescent Moon Alliance had some production players. Although Shiroe had a production subclass as a high level scribe, Crescent Moon Alliance had a greater variety of craftsmen.

They knew more people in the city and had better efficiency in collecting information than Shiroe's group.

Since they were trading information, it would be better to investigate the field zones and train at the same time. This was the other reason.

To ensure their minimum level of safety, there were also other people in Akiba who were taking actions like Shiroe's group. But most of the people in Akiba were just spending their days idling around, unable to accept this new reality even after a week had passed. There might be someone... Maybe god or game masters who would save them? The players held on to this hope.

(If they do not hang on to this hope, their heart might just crumble.)

Shiroe could empathize with them, he was just not optimistic enough to believe in this hope.

If this was just a prank and help did arrive, that would be great and Shiroe would be relieved. His life in college may not be that wonderful, but it was the world he was familiar with and grew up in, he would definitely want to return.

Even if this was an event orchestrated by the officials, it was an undeniable fact that they could be trapped here forever. Someone who was extremely cautious would not bet on the possibility of rescue and live his days so fruitlessly.

Akiba was the biggest server in Japan and the starting city for new players. The major cities might differ slightly, but the zones surrounding them only had low level monsters, a safe area suitable for beginners to explore.

Shiroe's decided to investigate each of these zones and gradually work their way to high level areas. If you just considered their level, Shiroe, Naotsugu and Akatsuki were all level 90.

Even if they took hits in the low level zones, they would not suffer much damage. The enemies would not attack recklessly once they understood how powerful Shiroe's group was.

In this sense, it was possible to avoid battles. But Shiroe's group wanted to fight all kinds of monsters whenever possible.

The enemies' attack were not damaging, but they would still involuntarily flinch when facing the strikes of various monsters. Their harsh breathing, suffocating stench of blood and malicious intent definitely couldn't be felt through your computer screen.

Even if they were low level monsters, the fear of battle was enough to make Shiroe's group back away.

They were low level foes that wouldn't yield any EXP, but Shiroe's party still fought them several times to study ways to handle fighting and to get used to the feel of the battles.

Their battle formation usually had Naotsugu take the lead.

When Naotsugu charged within striking distance of the enemies, it signalled the beginning of the fight.

The guardian Naotsugu used his heavy armor and shield techniques to fend off the monster's attack. 'Taunting shout' was one of the basic skill of guardians with the effect of enraging the enemies. The taunted monsters would then focus on Naotsugu, keeping Shiroe and Akatsuki safe from attacks.

As they expected, it was hard to check the status screen when fighting fiercely on the front lines. When Elder Tales was just a game, you just needed to select a monster to attack and your character would keep attacking it. The character would also evade the enemy's blows with a

fixed rate, there was no need to worry about parrying the attack with your sword or blocking with your shield.

You just needed to click the skill button to activate it.

But you needed to keep your eyes on the movements of enemy in front of you when fighting in this alternate world and keep attacking with your weapon repeatedly.

Your vision would narrow when facing the approaching monsters and you wouldn't be able to see the movements of all the enemies.

Shiroe's group designed several formations and battle codes after several discussions. Their conclusion was to let Shiroe who was away from the front line to monitor the whole battle field and give instructions, which was the safest bet.

Shiroe needed to support with magic while keeping abreast of the surrounding situations and his allies' status.

Most of the enchanter's spell were mediocre. Keen edge was one of the few spells enchanter could cast that was very helpful. The effect was increasing an allies' weapon attack by 30% for a few hours, there was no need to recast it during battles.

There were other spells that could be used, but their usage was largely dependent on the situation. Shiroe's main duty was to watch the surroundings and manage his allies' condition.

Akatsuki had grown familiar to Shiroe and Naotsugu as teammates after many practice sessions.

Assassins were one of the three weapon-based classes and had the highest attack power among the twelve classes.

They differed from the warrior classes which were proficient in intercepting the enemies' attack on the front line. Contrary to that, weapon-based classes did not have their toughness in defense or the skills to lure enemies.

Simply put, the duty of weapon-based classes were to finish off the enemies lured in by the warrior classes. In this class based on weapons, assassins specialized in killing off enemies speedily. The 'assassination' skill used by assassins could cause almost 10,000 damage in an instant.

Akatsuki dashed agilely through the battle field.

Her petite body had amazing speed, you would have trouble tracking her movements as she rushed towards the enemies. This was 'hide walk', a skill of the assassins allowing them to traverse to their opponents blind spot and increased the success rate of the next attack.

Her running figure with her black hair flowing behind her was as smooth as a liquid, so beautiful it was mesmerizing.

Naotsugu blocked the fangs of the enemy with his shield and jumped back with the flow, Akatsuki would swing her blade with haste striking their flanks to stop further attacks on Naotsugu.

The cooperation of the front and rear guards was a tactic that oversaw the whole battle field; The teamwork of 2 vanguards was directly related to the fight itself.

That was why there was a need to repeatedly fight enemies, so they would know each others modus operanti by instinct.

Shiroe on the other hand was in charge of confirming their status, re-positioning them to keep the enemies off balance. He would occasionally cast enchanter spells to trick or limit the movement of the enemies, moving the battle to their advantage.

After a week of practice, Shiroe's team was able to handle level 50 enemies.

Chapter 3: Battle of Roka

Part 1

"We looted a lot this round, we're making a killing out here!"

Naotsugu swung his skinning knife to shake off the blood before sheathing it. Shiroe nodded in agreement as he put down his staff to cancel the spells he had prepared.

(I am feeling melancholic again after recollecting various things.)

Shiroe shrugged with a sigh. This is really a headache. There are so many things troubling him since arriving in this world that he forgot what he was brooding about sometimes.

(I hope this doesn't become my catch phrase.)

"What is it my lord?"

Akatsuki had finished packing and was by Shiroe's side before he knew it. Shiroe was unable to calm his emotions in front of her shiny black eyes akin to obsidian that looked at him from a low angle.

"Let's go back." Shiroe said with a smile to change the topic.

Shiroe's group was in a place called 'pebbles herb garden', a relatively small field zone about 1 km² in size.

It was already evening, the wind was starting to turn chilly and the sounds of birds chirping was all around them.

This zone was close to both Akiba and Shibuya, a place suitable for one day training trips. The monster level was a bit high for a place so near the city.

"Let's hurry back then."

"Roger."

After listening to Shiroe, the girl in black, Akatsuki replied seriously without emotion as usual as she fastened her pack.

The defeated corpses of truffles and brier weasels lay all around them, and would disappear in a shower of light particles after some time.

Truffles were a type of mobile plant with a flower bud the size of rugby ball on top of it. The bud would peel back in 3 parts, revealing the sharp teeth inside, a horrifying creature.

Brier weasels on the other hand let vines grow on its body. It was faster than a cat and could attack with its vine, an agile monster.

The levels of the monsters were 48 and 52 respectively.

Their levels were quite high in the world of Elder Tales, but they were 40 levels below Shiroe's team, so they wouldn't gain any EXP from them.

After days of training, Shiroe's party suspected this world faithfully followed the settings of Elder Tales. They had not confirmed this yet, but they probably needed to defeat monsters at least 5 levels below them, or in other words enemies level 85 and above in this case to gain EXP.

It would be a very tough fight if they took on level 85 monsters now. They might be able to handle one, but not if they were attacked by a group.

"You doing fine?"

"I took some potions so I'm good. My defence is like an iron wall, iron festival!"

Naotsugu responded with a grin while knocking on his armour. His grey gauntlets made a clear dull sound as it hit his breastplate.

According to Naotsugu, you felt less pain from enemy attacks than real life. You didn't feel half dead even when your health bar was halved and only felt a bit sore and warm from the wounds all over your body.

Naotsugu described the worst pain as stubbing your toe on the corner of a cabinet.

(That would be painful enough to make me cry 3 times.)

Shiroe frowned at his description but Naotsugu continued laughing heartily.

(Even if it is this way for now, there is no telling if it will remain like this.)

Shiroe remained on guard as he thinks.

(The low level enemies have weak attacks, so there is no rush to make snap judgements or ensuring a retreat path. But we will take more damage as the monster level increases... Even an excellent guardian like Naotsugu won't be able to handle it as easily as he does now. We need to think of other possibilities...)

Among the 12 classes, the one with the highest HP and defence combination on the frontline was the guardian. If there were attacks Naotsugu couldn't withstand, it would be impossible for any other class to do so.

(We will need a healer after all... But I don't want to increase the number of teammates if we take efficiency into consideration. I doubt our teamwork would be good if we invited anyone with such motives. We will just be sent back to town if we do get wiped out, but...)

The miracle of revival existed in this world.

Even if they died in battle, they would respawn in the cathedral, Shiroe's group knew this.

But they still refrained from pushing themselves too hard even with their revival guaranteed. Death was still an unacceptable taboo for them.

(Being able to come back to life after we die is really suspicious.)

"My lord...?"

"Hey Shiroe, hurry up!"

After acting together for several days, they had made greater progress in both personal relations and teamwork than Shiroe expected. The members of this team had fitted really well to this new dynamic despite their history of working alone.

As they got used to life as a group, their individual characteristics were magnified too. In this team roster, Shiroe naturally became the guy who was responsible for worrying about things.

(I have been playing the part of tactician since my tea party days anyway.)

Shiroe got lost in his thoughts easily.

He had also noticed this bad habit, but it was not something you could change that easily even if you knew about it. It was okay to be the guy responsible for worrying, but I don't want to be the guy who spoils the mood, Shiroe thought.

"Let's withdraw then... Need me to shine a light?"

Shiroe asked as he prepared his magic light spell.

"Lord Shiroe, please wait."

"There is no need to address me as lord. We are comrades, can't you just call me Shiroe?"

"Then please address me as Akatsuki too."

Akatsuki stared at Shiroe as she spoke after brushing aside Shiroe's request.

(How should I describe Akatsuki's gaze, hmmm...)

Akatsuki was a beautiful young lady no matter how you looked at her.

And because of that, Shiroe found it hard to withstand Akatsuki's gaze. He doesn't hate it, but it made Shiroe uncomfortable.

Shiroe was a typical homely online gamer who was bad at socializing with others. He didn't have much experience dealing with girls.

(No matter what excuse I use, the bottom line is... I am shy and I don't know how to react... this is something that can't be helped right? Yes, I understand, I really do...)

"My lord."

Akatsuki said as she took a step forward, akin to kicking a man while he was down. Akatsuki had to look up at him due to their height difference, which made Shiroe feel a little sorry about that.

"Erm... what is it? What's so funny Naotsugu?"

Naotsugu was looking at Shiroe and Akatsuki with a smile on his face. After snapping at Naotsugu, he asked Akatsuki to continue.

"I will be scouting ahead on our way back."

"Why?"

"Practice. Assassins have dark vision, sneak and silent move, I want to see how it feels using them in this world. This forest is the perfect place to practice."

Akatsuki looked at the dark areas of the forest as she fastened her sword with her black waist cloth, making her preparations as she informed them of her intention.

(Moving alone...)

Shiroe gave his permission after considering for a while.

This zone didn't seem to have monsters stronger than the 2 types they fought, Akatsuki should be able to take on any single monsters or run away if there were too many enemies.

Akatsuki wanted to confirm her skills so she would be ready when she needed to use them. Shiroe understood her concerns, knowing the limits of your ability was crucial to surviving in this world.

"Be careful. Let's meet by the south gate. We'll stay illuminated using magic light as we go, you can use that to find us."

"I understand. I can find you if we are in the same zone."

If you form a party and were in the same zone, you could find your allies through the direction and distance displayed on your screen. It shouldn't take long for them to meet.

"See you later then shrimp Akatsuki."

"Be quiet stupid Naotsugu."

Akatsuki retorted and she was gone the next instance as if she had merged with the forest.

"That shrimp is good."

"I couldn't even hear the leaves rustle."

Naotsugu whistled.

Shiroe shrugged and chanted the spell for magic light and the tip of his staff glowed like a lamp. In the dimly lit forest basked in the fading orange light of the evening sun, the magic light gave off a gentle and soothing light.

"Let's be on our way."

"Okay tactician, let's march towards our goal of panties!"

Shiroe and Naotsugu headed for the east gate under the illumination of the light.

Step by step.

The trail was full of grass that looked like ribbons with dew and pebbles covered in moss. Shiroe and Naotsugu walked on this path advancing through the Regency forest.

(This is like walking in Yakushima island or the Amazon forest that I saw on web-TV... Even if the others say this is an alternate world, I still find it hard to believe.)

They could hear the pleasant sounds of insects faintly.

The duo waded through the undergrowth. They had to rely on Naotsugu's sword to bash a way through as they moved through the forest in the night.

"So Akatsuki's subclass is tracker."

Naotsugu's words reminded Shiroe of an earlier conversation.

The sneak and silent move skills that Akatsuki mentioned were tracker skills. Tracker was one of the many subclasses in Elder Tales, letting you learn skills to track or avoid being tracked in turn.

The feature common to all subclasses in Elder Tales was the provision of skills that were not directly related to combat. It was also independent from the 12 main class that were battle focused, so you could learn any subclass if you met the requirements.

There were 2 main types of subclasses.

One type was production subclasses like chef, tailor, blacksmith and carpenters. Players with such subclasses could craft all sorts of items using the appropriate ingredients and facilities.

It was easy to learn a production subclass, you just needed to buy an instruction manual from NPCs and you could start accumulating EXP. The EXP for a subclass was separate from the battle EXP so it was tedious to level it up. But it didn't require any special quest or items, anyone could grind it to high levels if you were determined enough, and you didn't need your comrades' help to do this.

Shiroe was a scribe, which was also a production subclass. He could duplicate magic tomes, maps and all sorts of documents using paper and ink.

Being nobles, merchants and rose garden princesses belonged to the other type, which was the role playing subclasses.

Unlike production subclasses, they couldn't craft items, but they could learn some special skills and rare techniques. They could also get rare equipment in some situations.

Tracker was a role playing subclass, it had the ability to track other players or foes, erase their presence and move in the dark.

Shiroe wasn't very familiar with the tracker subclass. The 12 main classes that dictated combat were designed by the creators of Elder Tales, a large American corporation. The strength of each class would be balanced for each update and more subclasses would be added. The outsourced company in each country, such as Fuji entertainment in Japan, may create a subclass unique to its server.

Shiroe remembered about 50 subclasses from memory, but with exclusive subclasses created in other servers, it was hard to guess their number.

Powerful subclasses were popular and famous, so Shiroe knew about them and had a rough idea of their features. But even a veteran player like Shiroe wouldn't know about some obscure subclasses.

Out of the countless subclasses, trackers were sort of well known.

It had useful abilities, but it was not something a player would need often, so it was in the middle in terms of popularity. Players not as hardcore as Shiroe might not have heard it, but it was more famous than sailors or janitors.

"She is really dedicated to her role playing."

Naotsugu grinned to express his agreement.

(A tracker assassin, she is obsessed with ninjas. I can see why she would call herself one.)

Akatsuki style of giving her all made Shiroe and Naotsugu smile. Role playing always gave the impression of playing pretend, but Akatsuki's serious approach to it made the act feel real.

"What do you think of our shrimp girl Shiroe?"

"... Very active on the front lines with a high level of focus."

Shiroe replied to Naotsugu's vague question after a moment of consideration.

Naotsugu was asking Shiroe for his opinion on Akatsuki.

Shiroe had a good impression of Akatsuki, but he was acting indifferent because of he felt embarrassed about praising her.

"Enough about me, what about you Naotsugu? Has your burden increased?"

"The burden has decreased. Compared to just the 2 of us, we're clearing the monsters way faster. Some minions are dealt with before I can even turn to face them. She may be a shrimp, but she is a strong shrimp."

Naotsugu replied to Shiroe as he led the way.

Naotsugu was kind and cheerful, a type that was very sociable. He made crude jokes sometimes, but Shiroe felt he did this intentionally to ease the mood.

But Naotsugu wouldn't mince his words when talking about battles. He might be polite about it, but he would not lie.

From what Shiroe remembered about Naotsugu's criticisms of other players, he gave almost full marks to Akatsuki.

"But she mentioned her reach was shorter and her attacks had less weight after she adjusted her appearance right?"

"I was never a shrimp so I won't know about her reach, but with her speed and agility, that shouldn't be important correct? Why don't you try taking a knee in the face from her. It is really instantaneous, my eyes can't keep up even if I want to block it."

"I would rather not."

Naotsugu rubbed his nose as he recalled the pain and said:

"As to her attack dropping because of her weight, it should be true since she said so herself huh? According to the settings, your attack is not affected by gender, and having more weight in your punches may not increase your attack power. But this is just what she felt, so there is no other way to tell. If her attack power really has decreased, then she will be fine with Shiroe's support spells backing her up."

Naotsugu said as he plied away a leaf with thorns.

(About that... He is right.)

Shiroe was an Enchanter, one of the 3 Mage classes. Each of the warrior, weapon-based, healer and Mage categories had 3 classes each forming a total of 12 class. The Enchanter was one of these twelve.

Among the Mage classes, Enchanter was the best at support, setting up the battle stage and crowd control. It had a variety of support spells.

'Keen edge' was one such support spell that increased weapon attacks.

Every time an ally hits the enemy, 'thorn bind hostage' could deal additional damage with its curse vines.

Attacking the psyche of the enemy to numb its senses with 'mind shock'.

Enchanter was a special class that contributed to victory by boosting its allies' power and controlling the flow of battle.

"Yeah... You are right," Shiroe replied shyly.

Enchanter was the least popular class in Elder Tales and had a bad reputation among players.

Shiroe had no obligation towards anyone and chose this class out of personal preference. No matter what others said, he was confident of the Enchanter's abilities and its deep potential. Shiroe also knew that an Enchanter could not work alone.

This class needed a party, and the effectiveness of an Enchanter widely depended on how good their teamwork was.

This had nothing to do with the stats of the player; how well you worked with others could not be measured numerically.

Because Shiroe understood this, he felt embarrassed when others told him 'that will be fine' or 'things will work out if we do it together'.

For Enchanters...

If their existence in the team was acknowledged, it meant the player's character and personal relationships were working well.

"Shiroe..."

"Yeah?"

"I think you are holding back too much sometimes."

"Hmm?"

Naotsugu said as he bashed through the vegetation. This change in topic was too big and Shiroe was unable to keep up.

"... For example panties?"

"How did this turn into a question?"

"The mysterious triangle region of cute girls are always questioning the world, you should understand that, you locked closet pervert!"

"How perverted am I in this setting of yours?"

Shiroe at this moment was unable to understand Naotsugu's concern, and could only chase after his back.

The Shiroe right now was just a normal Enchanter.

Part 2

They moved to a neighboring zone after linking up with Akatsuki.

"Let's hurry, I miss our hotel."

Although he was tired from the battles, Naotsugu was in a cheerful mood as he chatted with his teammates.

This region was known as the Kanda channel, a ruin based on the Marunouchi metro in the real world. It was the nest of demihumans like goblins and beast men now.

The enemies in this region were only about level 30, no longer a threat to Shiroe and the others. With such a level gap, the monsters would hesitate to attack them.

With the sky totally dark, Shiroe, Naotsugu and Akatsuki regretted spending too much time in the imperial forest.

Since monsters wouldn't attack them recklessly, they could just make camp in some ruins, caves or under trees. But they were still traveling with their magic light shining, moving on the roads with abandoned cars and trucks scattered all around.

Akatsuki insisted that sleeping on a proper bed was more comfortable.

They have furs and fangs looted from monsters in their bag they needed to trade for cash anyway, so they needed to go back to the city.

Naotsugu who was in the lead would turn back every now and then to confirm his party mates' statuses.

(Both of them show no signs of fatigue, our level 90 bodies have considerable stamina after all.)

Naotsugu sighed in relief secretly after looking at their steadfast footsteps.

Unlike the 2 of them, Naotsugu was a typical warrior. Warriors had outstanding strength, stamina and agility.

Even Naotsugu was surprised he could fight for hours wearing 40-50 kg armor.

Even if he exhausted his energy, he just needed to rest for a few minutes to slowly recover his strength. He was confident of lifting 300kg in terms of his explosive power, his stamina seemed boundless.

But it was different for the others. Shiroe was a pure intellect class, Akatsuki was incredibly fast, but she was a lightly armoured fighter. They might claimed 'there is no problem with stamina, we are level 90 too' but Naotsugu felt he needed to accommodate them for this part.

But there was no need to worry for tonight.

With the bright moonlight and magic illumination, the relatively smooth asphalt road with a few debris and potholes was easy to traverse.

"The goblins are not attacking us."

"We are level 90, of course they are not."

"I like the goblin with the skull on his head. Their arrogant demeanor is cute and weird."

(Akatsuki is talking nonsense with a straight face...)

Akatsuki should be referring to goblin shamen. They led their kinsmen minions with their ice and fire spells. They may look funny when they arrogantly give commands, but they were definitely not cute.

"You like those type of monsters, shrimp?"

Naotsugu asked again to be certain. Akatsuki replied curtly:

"They are cute and die so easily."

They needed to be killed since they were enemies, but Naotsugu couldn't understand what was so cute about them.

"Most magic type monsters look arrogant, but their armour is as thin as paper and their HP is extremely low. It would be fine if they stayed at the back, but goblin shamen will walk nonchalantly to the front lines and are easy to take down. I just need to use 'hide shadow' to sneak up beside them and I can slit their throat with my blade. The way their body collapses like a puppet with its strings cut is so addictive."

As she was not sure how to interpret Naotsugu's query, she shared her thoughts with the others casually.

(... Wah, if you put it like that, wouldn't Shiroe be troubled?)

Shifting his gaze to the side, Naotsugu could see that Shiroe was shocked to hear that. It was natural for mages to have low defences so Shiroe didn't need to be so sad. Naotsugu also knew Akatsuki doesn't mean to hurt Shiroe.

But even so, Shiroe still looked depressed with Akatsuki acting so casually matter of fact.

Naotsugu wanted to sigh looking at the two of them.

(Shiroe is smart, but he tends to overthink things and is too concerned with trivial matters... He is shouldering a large burden. Why is our tactician frightened to this extent?)

Naotsugu thought Shiroe was holding back too much.

If someone asked him what was Shiroe holding back about, Naotsugu wouldn't be able to answer, this was just how he felt.

Naotsugu felt the same way back when the two of them were in the Debauchery Tea Party. Shiroe wanted to do things by himself too much, which Naotsugu thought was Shiroe's good point.

But the duty of a guardian was to protect his allies.

It left a bitter taste in his mouth if his teammates didn't rely on him, as if his duty had been stripped from him. Naotsugu thought Shiroe should at least rely on Naotsugu for things he was good at.

"Hold on, our mage is reliable during critical junctures right?"

"Hmm? The armour of my lord is thin as paper too... That's fine, I will protect him as his ninja."

She didn't notice his depression as she kicked Shiroe again while he was down. Naotsugu thought they were interacting like children... But Naotsugu was thinking the same about Shiroe too.

On the whole, this was a quiet night as they chatted on their way back.

They could see the elongated shadows of the goblins sneaking around in the moonlight. But when Naotsugu looked at them, they would scatter.

"This is a zone adjacent to Akiba with only low level monsters lurking around. If there were high level monsters, the beginners would be wiped out."

Shiroe said.

It had been more than 10 days since they were trapped in this world, and no new players had shown up since.

What was his body doing in the real world? Did all the players disappear? Or were they all in a coma? Naotsugu and the others had no way to tell.

(It may be hard to imagine but our real selves may each still be living their lives as normal. That means we have no way of going back, abandoned babies sales festival. If it is like some light novel setting where the world forgets we ever existed at all, it will be depressing too...)

Contrary to the way he acted, Naotsugu was thinking about this as a fan of fantasy novels. But at this point in time, they couldn't tell.

It might be 'it is just 10 days' or 'it has already been 10 days', everyone had different interpretation about this. But the three of them had been forced to grow accustomed to this world.

This was the additional of alternate world physics on top of Elder Tales setting. In this world twisted by these two factors, there were still some rules and accompanying logic.

Even if all the food was tasteless, even if strange effects existed, they still followed a set of laws. They often felt frustrated by these effects that defy common sense, but they had to try understanding this logic and live in this world.

They had to live in the world they were in, be it the game world or real world.

(Since we can't find the way back, this is the only world for us now. We can't do anything about it being the game or real world... It is not too bad after you get used to swinging swords and adventuring... Although I put on a brave face and told Maryele 'this is far from the worst case scenario', but I just wanted to say this more than anyone else.)

It was a good thing for Naotsugu to get used to this so quickly. He had nothing against the world he was from, but if someone asked if he would risk his life to go back, his answer would be 'I don't know'.

(I don't have a girlfriend who will show me panties and I haven't seen my parents in 2 years... I have gotten used to work, but there was nothing very satisfying about it.)

From Nukere passing through Kudanshita, they were just a couple of zones away from Akiba.

They were not going by the Archive Tower forest today, opting to go via the slope of Ochanomizu. As they passed by the gentle slope of Roka Charity Hospital, Naotsugu was

reminded of home. In the Japanese garden on the right side of the road, stood a large tree with plenty of branches wearing its leaves like a jacket.

The moon could be glimpsed through the leaves. The shadows of the leaves jerked unnaturally, making Naotsugu and the others scatter away from the tree hastily.

(...!)

Naotsugu dashed at full speed into the darkness and bashed at the bushes with his shield.

A yell could be heard from the dark.

He could feel Shiroe's presence behind him more than a dozen meters away.

Even as Naotsugu focused on his forehead, he did not let down his guard and scanned his surroundings.

(There are 1, 2... 3? 4?)

Even though this was within expectations, he still feel his throat drying up when facing it. This tension was totally different then fighting monsters.

Suddenly, he heard the sounds of chains being dragged on the ground.

(Uu, too late!)

Naotsugu did not check his back as he attempted to jump, but snake like chains had entangled his ankles. This was not real chains with a physical form, but a magical binding spell that seemed almost real that binded their foes.

Naotsugu lost his balance in the air, his movements sealed by magic. At this moment, a silent and colourless magic wave came from behind.

Dispel magic.

It should be Shiroe who was casting this.

The snake-like chain binding Naotsugu's ankles was disintegrated by Shiroe's dispel.

(You're always so quick with support! Well, what do we do Tactician?)

The excitement of battle rose in his heart, Shiroe was right behind him giving his full support. Naotsugu's confidence lifted his spirits.

"Naotsugu, straight line formation. Our Enemies are PKers, I have visual contact on 4. I'll determine their location... There!"

Shiroe shouted on the road covered by the shadows of the trees in the middle of the night.

A greenish white bolt shot out of his staff. Mind bolt was the basic attack spell of Enchanters, it would strike at a single opponents causing some damage.

It had less attack power compared to summoners and sorcerers of the same level. But as the basic attack of the Enchanters, Shiroe had many chances to use it.

Shiroe complained about his low attack power often, but Naotsugu thought this was no big deal. Instead of powerful spells that often missed, simple spells at the right time were much better.

"Enemy sighted!"

Shiroe's spell was performing as he expected.

The light of the spell only shone for a fraction of a second, but it was enough to see the foes hidden in the darkness.

Naotsugu retreated as per Shiroe instructions about half way between the darkness and Shiroe. He was right on the line dividing the 2 way road.

After confirming the enemies position, Naotsugu could attack them.

But instead he intentionally retreated to his position in the formation.

In a line formation, the distance between the front and back was crucial. If they were too far apart, the rear would be open to attacks.

"They have guts, turning to PKing... They miss their mummies so much they have turned into animals? Thinking they can celebrate victory by ambushing us, don't make me laugh."

Naotsugu turned the passion in his heart into words.

The enemies were not monsters.

Naotsugu despised this act of theirs the most.

PK means 'player kill' or 'player killer', instead of fighting monsters, a player hunts other players.

Akiba was designated as a non combat zone, which meant other zones might not have such a designation and battles were allowed.

In Elder Tales, players battling other players was an officially recognised way of playing.

But due to factors in Elder Tales such as the low success rate, high risk and cultural aversion of the Japanese... Japanese players were very law abiding and hated violence among players... PKing was not popular there.

The mini-map in Elder Tales showed all players, monsters and NPC around them, the chance for PKing to work was very low.

High level players would have an innate evasion rate without the need for players to input any command, lowering the probability of PKing working even further.

... Simply put, sneak attacks were not effective.

PKing was not banned in Elder Tales, but griefing, which meant harassing players and causing undue distress, was. Although PK itself was not griefing, targeting specific players or abusing them with words were actions that might be judged as griefing. The official might then deal out a warning or the ban hammer.

But griefing was very much dependent on personal opinion and prejudice. Even a proper PK might be viewed as harassment if the victim was a lady, resulting in the perpetrator being locked out of his account.

That's why PKing was a high risk action.

But things were different in this alternate world.

They couldn't view the mini map on their screen anymore, and even high level players could be ambushed if they were not conscious of the incoming attack.

Unless the player was a real life martial artist, no one could keep their guard up all the time.

Griefing reports could only be done after the officials reviewed the records. When Elder Tales was still a game, order was maintained through the Game Masters 'hand of god'. But such convenient saviours didn't exist in this world anymore.

... The chance of a sneak attack working increased, the risk of being reported was gone.

And PKing gave lots of benefits.

After defeating other players, they could be stripped them of all their gold and some items. Although some items could not be dropped, half the saleable items in your bag would be lost, spread around your corpse.

There were more cons than pros back then, but that had been reversed.

This was the reason why PKing was becoming a regular occurrence in Elder Tales.

Part 3

(We made it pass the sneak attack phase... Their advantage are numbers, terrain and preparation. Our advantage are...)

Shiroe's staff shines as he go through the spells he can use. He doesn't have to choose the spells using the game menu, his common spells have already been prepared on his hotkeys.

Before Shiroe raise his staff to cast any spells, several players showed themselves.

The dry debris of the asphalt road cracks loudly in the quiet night.

4 shadows emerged from the darkness.

One dressed like a fighter, 2 as bandits, one like a healer.

Their levels and numbers are high, their footsteps steady.

"Leave everything you are carrying and we won't kill you."

The warrior says these cliché words in a disparaging tone.

Shiroe laugh bitterly when he hear this.

(If they are talking like that, they have read too much manga.)

They are already used to hunting monsters, but battling other players is a different thing. Unlike the monsters moving by animal instincts, this induce the fear of unpredictability. And humans are not dense enough to be ignorant of malicious intents of the enemies.

Monsters also have killing intent, but PK has the malicious intent of profiting off the effort of others.

Shiroe's palms are sweating before he realized.

But the cliché line washes away the tension, and Shiroe is grateful for it.

"Guardian and a Mage right? You want to put up a hopeless fight? We have 4 on our side alright?"

The man dressed like a bandit who seems to be the leader says. The 2 long sword on his waist hints his class to be a swashbuckler. Out of the 12 classes, only the swashbuckler and samurai can equip 2 weapons without the use of special items and putting in minimal effort.

"What should we do Naotsugu?"

"Kill them. Pick out the bones, chop them into mince meat and kill them again. These guys attack people for fun, they can't complain if someone else kills them."

The reliable voice of Naotsugu revitalize the strength in Shiroe's legs.

(Breathing normal, sense of balance is intact... Emotions are calm, I can do this. This is something we expected... Just a matter of time before we face this road.)

Shiroe mumbles to himself. He is already prepared to fight, but wants to drag the conversation a bit longer if possible.

"Naotsugu hates PK after all... Actually, I'm willing to give them the money."

The PK group sneers at Shiroe's words.

They took half a step forward, showing their ugly threatening attitude. Shiroe averts his eyes from the pressure even though he expected this.

(That must be it... They are looking down at us, thinking we will fork over the cash if they apply a bit more pressure.)

Shiroe feels he has split into 2, one of him has trembling legs from fear, the other is thinking calmly and clearly. He can also feel his pulse beating warmly by his ears, a sensation he had several times during the tea party.

Shiroe is not good in handling Akatsuki, but he doesn't hate her.

Shiroe hates fighting, but he is good at it.

"If they can beat us."

"Well said Shiroe."

The PK group is either surprised by their conversation or angered by their insolence. Their faces turns red as they draw their weapons while cursing.

The red 'battle mode' warning on the status screen has been flashing in the corner of his eyes since the sneak attack.

Shiroe took half a step back with his left foot and prays his voice will be steady as he give his command.

"Target the warrior on the left, draw the others attention too!"

"I will handle the tank, go take out the Mage!"

The sound of Shiroe command and the bandit leader's roar sound out at the same time.

Naotsugu takes a step forward and slam his shield at the warrior. His opponent is wielding a katana, meaning he is a samurai.

The bandit with long hair flanks Naotsugu on his leader's command, attempting to reach Shiroe with a leap. But this is one of the developments Shiroe anticipated.

Shiroe cast his spell in an instant.

Astral bind.

Similar to the magic that bound Naotsugu, it restricts the movements of the enemies.

When the defensibly weak mage adventures alone, this spell can restrict the movements of monsters. This is followed by range attack from a safe distance, a basic battle strategy.

The spells of mages might differ in details, but they have many common spells, including binding spells.

But binding spells have no other effects.

The long hair bandit is left with no choice other to turns and attack Naotsugu who is right besides him. He attacks with his daggers that is almost the length of a short sword. Binding spells restricts the opponent's long range movement, but it doesn't deprive them of all freedom. It is similar to leasing a dog with a chain to a pole, they can still move around within this short range. The binding spell last only for a short while.

"Let's change, I leave this to you!"

"I'm on it!"

Under the sparks of the clashing weapons, the leader makes a simple feint and attempts to break through Naotsugu's defense line.

Their strategy at the start should be for the leader to engage Naotsugu, leaving the others to take down Shiroe. But seeing his subordinate bounded, he decides to change the strategy by going for Shiroe himself.

His judgement to adjust his plans on the fly is commendable. His flanking action making use of the feint is fast.

(...But that is not enough to match Naotsugu's experience.)

"Anchor howl!"

Naotsugu lowers his center of gravity and shouts fiercely.

This howl that shakes the air is a skill of the guardian.

The bandit leader that should have slipped pass Naotsugu flinches his body as he turns to face Naotsugu with his swords raised on relex.

He loses strength in his legs and he is unable to look away from Naotsugu. Cold sweat breaks out all over his body, the long hair bandit and samurai is suffering the same sense of fear with their eyes wide open.

They will lose their lives if they don't stare at Naotsugu. That's the horrifying feeling the 3 of them felt from Naotsugu.

Naotsugu is a guardian who protects their comrades. They are known as tank because they are the shield absorbing the opponent's attack.

But having high defense and HP is not enough to act as a tank. Monsters like goblins and Orcs might possess similar intelligence to humans, the players might encounter dark elves or cultist as well, this is the world of Elder Tales.

The opponents ignoring the tank and going for the healer and mage behind is common too.

Guardians are built around the policy of protecting their allies, so they don't just have high HP and defense.

Anchor howl is a skill guardian cast with his fighting spirit, foes who hear this howl will not be able to ignore Naotsugu. The moment they try, they will be hit by a powerful counterattack. This skill grants guardians additional attacks if their enemy's attention lapses.

The skills to focus all the enemies attention on themselves is one of the reason why guardians are known as fortress among the warrior class.

"Tch! Don't be scared! We are going 3 on 1, he will go down no matter how tough he is, take him first!"

The bandit leader encourage his men despite the fear he is feeling.

The swashbuckler is forced to switch tactics again, locking on to Naotsugu and searching for his weak points with his double sword dancing like a snake.

The rogue Samurai, double sword leader and the long hair bandit are determined to take out Naotsugu first.

It is not wrong to do that.

"Damn it! You are just tough like a turtle, nothing impressive!"

The enemy screams hysterically as they attack in a flurry.

"Your swords won't break through my armor!"

Naotsugu's bold and cheery statement makes them double up on their attacks.

Shiroe checks Naotsugu's status as he listen to the sharp clash of metals.

This group has the skills to back up their words with good courage and teamwork. Naotsugu's HP dwindles under their relentless attacks.

Even Naotsugu won't last another 30 seconds.

(That is, if they can keep up the attack for 30 seconds...!)

Shiroe grins, he is not going to give them this amount of time.

Drawing a symbol with the tip of his staff takes 1.5 seconds. Shiroe creates a buzzing lightning ball and shoots it at the samurai. This is a damage over time spell 'electric fuzz', persistently causing low damage to an opponent over 10-20 seconds.

"Ha! You are an enchanter? What's that spell? You can't even kill a dog with this!"

The samurai just snort in annoyance despite being hit. The tennis ball size lightning sphere is loud and bright, but it's damage is so low it doesn't hurt.

Enchanter's spell on the whole lacks attack power, but damage over time magic can spread its power over a period of time. It's total damage exceeds mind bolt, but each wave of damage is insignificant.

The feeling of scratching an itch matches the low damage of the spell, just a harmless prank to the samurai.

(It is weak, but...)

The taunts goes to and fro, Shiroe didn't react to the samurai's sneer since he knows the features of his spells. He cast the same 'electric fuzz' on the bandit leader and long hair bandit next.

The 2 weapon based class have less HP than the samurai from warrior class. But this low damage magic is painless to them.

"Hahahaha! What were you trying to accomplish with that spell? Are you a greenhorn following this chum?"

The greenish white sparks shines like a shorted wire or some misshapen fireworks. The 3 PKs redouble their effort on attacking Naotsugu.

(... Alright then, let's get rid of one.)

The anger, carelessness and sneer of the enemy.

Absorbing these emotions like data and preparing in a deep breathe, Shiroe takes 2 step forward ready to act. He wields his staff as he chants, using his magic with the hotkey.

He cast 'thorn bind hostage' after chanting for 2 seconds. 5 shiny rings fly towards the samurai and morph into 5 vines entangling him.

"What is this? Ah!"

Naotsugu slash at the samurai, a lightning ball seems to explode in the darkness. The samurai screams as he back away on reflex from the impact.

Thorn bind hostage is a trap attack spells frequently used by Shiroe. Unlike single target or wide area attacks, it has a more complicated activation requirement. It also need to be cast on the enemy before hand.

Enemies who are affected by the spell will suffer about 1000 points of additional damage when attacked by the enchanter's allies.

The numbers of vines and the damage it cause differs by level. Shiroe's thorn bind hostage is secret skill level, even a warrior class will lose half his HP if all 5 vines are triggered.

"Calm down, this is a damn trap spell, dispel it healer! Concentrate on healing our samurai! We have double their numbers, there is no way we can lose!"

Unlike the shocked samurai, the bandit leader is still in control. Healers plays a critical role in the Elder Tales setting.

With a powerful healer using high level spells, damage of several allies about the same level can be restored completely.

If the healing is consistent, Shiroe's thorn bind hostage is nothing to worry about.

The bandit leader has a plan of taking on sorcerer who has more powerful attacks than an enchanter, so he remains confident in this battle.

Naotsugu slashes again.

Every swing activates the shockwave damage from the vines. Every time the samurai tries to take up a stance, the sword strike and the vine explosion throw him off balance again.

"Ha, this is nothing, your flank is open!"

The long hair bandit slashes at Naotsugu's right flank with his machete. Naotsugu who is immobile after his attack can't avoid this attack.

"This battle will be decided on the presence of healers! Don't underestimate us chums! Hahahaha! Cry on your way to the cathedral!"

Naotsugu's attack is strengthened by Shiroe's magic, dealing damage above a normal warrior class. The secret skill level spell is also one of the few enchanters skill that can cause heavy damage. But that won't be enough to out perform the healing spells of a healer about the same level. The laughter of the bandit leader came from this confidence.

"That is the correct analysis."

"If your healer is doing his job!"

Naotsugu lower his body to half his height in an instance and slash at the Samurai's knee.

This blow is like a giant praying mantis striking, throwing the samurai to the ground.

He did not fly off with the blow or spray blood all over the place. The samurai is fighting fiercely one second and drop motionless on the floor the next second, cutting off the bandit leader's laughter.

"W... What is happening, what did you do! Paralysis? Hey healer! Stop fooling around heal him!"

The bandit leader yells as Naotsugu swing his sword and says:

"You annoying fellow, stop sprouting ugly minion speeches in this beautiful night."

"You! What did you say?"

(That is faster than I imagined, what a reliable pro technique.)

Shiroe looks to the vast forest on the right of the courtyard.

Everyone is standing on the road full of bright greenish white light and can't see deep into the bushes of the courtyard.

It Shiroe knows his companion is inside that bush.

"Fuck it! Enough! Hey sorcerer! Summoner! Use everything you got to burn them into crisp!"

The bandit leader decides to show his hidden cards and throw in his reserve forces.

(So there are 2 other mages. They might be able to kill us if they join the fray. Even though the samurai fell, it is still 5 on 2 so he is confident they will lose.)

Shiroe deduce the thinking of the bandit leader.

But even the reserve forces are within Shiroe's expectation.

(They used a binding spell on Naotsugu right from the start, but only a warrior, 2 bandits and a healer turn up. They have already let the cat out of the bag at that point in time.)

Shiroe already knows they are holding a Mage in reserve standing by in the dense forest.

(Mages has low HP and defence but they left them alone in the forest without a bodyguard. Which means...)

"Hey hurry up! Kill these bastards!"

The bandit leader shouts in a panic while pointing his sword at Naotsugu. But the tip of his sword is more than a meter away from Naotsugu.

Shiroe and Naotsugu's tactics and weird atmosphere has depleted the morale of the PKs.

"Seems like we won."

"You are right my lord."

A small figure appears from behind the broad leaved tree.

Akatsuki with her usual serious expression drags 2 Mage with her and dumps them on the road. The beautiful young girl less than 150cm in height throwing the PKs like trash made the bandit leader lose his composure.

"What, what, what are you doing? Why didn't you report in? Healer, healer! Didn't I tell you to manage our HP! Did you, did you betray us..."

"That's why I said you are annoying."

The bandit leader's speech annoys Naotsugu too much and he knocks the leader with his shield. The leader lose his balance from this sudden attack and fell on his butt.

"It is better to trust your teammates. Your healer has been sleeping since the start of the battle."

Shiroe's cruel announcement can be heard on the whole road.

This is the spell 'astral Hypnos'.

The binding spell that is one of the two invaluable weapons of an enchanter alongside 'keen edge'. A magic that force any target to fall asleep, a stoppage spell. It only last a dozen or so second no matter how you extend it.

The target will wake up when attacked, so it is a prank magic in a sense, used to buy some time.

Battle is a way of stripping each other of the ability to fight. The goal is to kill off the other party. Just putting the opponent to sleep won't win you the fight, it is a spell that won't affect the fight directly.

That is why enchanters are seen as a 2nd rated class.

"Do not underestimate my lord's magic"

"!"

The road has returned to silence all of a sudden.

The lightning balls have stop sparkling after it's duration ran out. Both bandits are sitting on the ground while the healer is sleeping soundly. Shiroe's group looks down at them.

"You underestimate the sparkles of the lightning balls, ignoring it because of its low damage. But having bright lights near your eyes obscures your vision of the forest's dark areas. You won't see the situation in the forest or realize your healer is sleeping. You only think about fighting, your team work is full of loopholes. It is easy to assassinate your reserves."

After Akatsuki finished, Naotsugu swing down his sword as if he is looking forward to it. The long hair bandit who lost his fighting spirit screams like a high pitch whistle and dies.

"We, will revive even after dying, we haven't lost yet!"

The bandit leader is still acting tough, but he can't move with Akatsuki's blade on his throat.

Akatsuki ask Shiroe with her eyes.

She is asking for permission to proceed.

Shiroe gives a long sigh.

Tying him up, robbing him of everything and then interrogate him is possible. But Shiroe's nature is not suitable for interrogation, so he can't really do that.

(We can also let him go, but... Even if we do that...)

He probably won't be grateful for that.

And he won't take this as a lesson and repent.

He will definitely see it as an insult and bear a grudge. Death is just a ritual in this world anyway. It makes one doubt there is a crime and punishment system like the real world.

Shiroe understands this.

But Shiroe still feels that one must not act without any regards to the law.

(There's no other way.)

Shiroe nods at Akatsuki. She stick the blade into the bandit leader's throat without hesitation. Blood that looks red and dirty in the dark night sprays from his throat.

Akatsuki turns her body to avoid the spray deftly as gold and items drops around the leader.

This ends the attack of the PKs.

Part 4

"So the rumors that security has gone bad are true."

Naotsugu who is picking up the loots comments and Shiroe shrugs in response. They looked at ease before, with the wild bandits, but it was not an easy victory.

There were six enemies after all. Their level is high even though they are not level 90 yet. Naotsugu who uses defensive skills lost half his HP.

If Akatsuki hadn't take out the reserve forces in the darkness... No, if Akatsuki hadn't hidden her presence immediately when they were attacked, understanding what Shiroe meant when he said 'I see four of them' and taken out the ambush party, who knows how the battle would have turned out.

Shiroe, Naotsugu and even Akatsuki still have an ace up their sleeves. But to turn the tide of battle requires a cool head. If they use their ace in a state of panic, they will still lose no matter how good that ace is. By keeping calm and playing their cards at the right time, they can maximize its effectiveness to obtain victory.

There are two reasons why Shiroe's party won. The first is the overconfidence of the PK due to their advantage in numbers. The second is the better team work of Shiroe's group.

"Any other PK hiding around here?"

Akatsuki ask in a gloomy tone while looking towards the cluster of abandoned buildings.

"That should be all of them."

Shiroe answers.

The most important thing about PK is the element of surprise so they need an appropriate place to set up. There is the possibility of their target escaping into the city if they go further ahead, so it is not suitable to PK there.

(We need to stay alert though,, it is getting dangerous out here.)

Shiroe thinks that there is another reason why they won.

Because they know of the news about the deteriorating security in the city.

Shiroe's group also heard rumors of rampant PK roaming around.

They hide around the field zone surrounding Akiba and ambush unsuspecting adventurers under the cover of darkness. The group that they defeated seems to have been experienced in PK to the extent that they were overconfident.

Shiroe's team kept their guard up while moving because they had heard the news and were wary of any shadows lurking in the bushes.

"They are 'Dread pack'? What a cliché name."

That is the guild name of the PK team they defeated, it probably meant they are a group that terrorize others.

"Can't be helped, it would be too much to ask of PK to come up with classy names."

Naotsugu displays the disgust in his heart without reservation and Akatsuki agrees with him.

(Well, I am furious about this too.)

Shiroe sighs.

Naotsugu hates PK, and Shiroe dislikes them too.

There are many reasons to dislike them, but the main reason is Shiroe simply finds them unsightly.

Wanting to profit off other people's hard work is already an unsightly idea. The gold and items you can get through PK will not get you to the top levels, so Shiroe think they are extremely unsightly.

'Taking other's treasure' means they did not step into the high level zone that contain these rewards. Not only do you miss out on exploring unknown places and mysteries, you won't run into treasures you have never seen before as well. You won't be able to stand at the peak of adventures if you rely on PK.

So PK will always be relegated to parasite status, feeding off other people's rewards.

That is what Shiroe thinks.

(...To criticize the personality of players while trapped in an alternate world... Maybe this is something that cannot be helped. Everyone has been pushed to the edge mentally.)

Regrettably, the situation of being on edge is becoming part of our daily lives, that is how this world is.

"I have also heard such rumors."

"Other than that, 'Tidal clan', 'Blue impact' and 'Canossa' are all into PK."

Shiroe answers Akatsuki's comment.

"I can understand people being freaked out, but even so... Shouldn't there be other things for them to do?"

"Like what?"

"Like chatting about panties."

Akatsuki takes a step back.

She turns her head and looks around her before taking another step back.

"Two steps... She took two steps back...?"

Naotsugu is depressed while Shiroe pay his shoulders to cheer him up. Naotsugu tries to describe the wonders of panties, but Akatsuki silence him by saying 'shut up pervert'.

The power relations of the party has gradually been set.

(Other things they should do...)

There is nothing to do, that is the current problem.

You can get by with cheap food if you just want to live.

Even if it is tasteless soggy crackers, there is nothing to complain if it keeps you alive. Countries in south east Asia region, states at war, cities facing famine, there are children starving to death there with their eyes praying for food.

But things wouldn't face such food crisis anytime soon in the future.

Food can be crafted using ingredients in Elder Tales, and the ingredients can in turn be gathered from the field zone. Defeated monsters might drop meat, mushrooms and berries can be pluck from the forest, you can fish in the sea and even cultivate and harvest plants.

He don't know about this world, but Elder Tales has four seasons. It seems to be summer now and food is everywhere out in the field.

So even a beginner who was less than level 10 could get food from the relatively safe field zones.

But the issue lies with the low percentage of players with the chef subclass to craft the food. But quite a number of players have changed their subclass to chef in the past 10 days.

Having nutritious meals is the basics of survival and is a reasonable strategy.

It is the same with clothes.

They can get fur by skinning beasts or make sheets of clothes using silk or hemp. If you are not picky about the stats of the equipment, production players can make one cloth in a few dozen seconds. Daily necessities like shoes can be produced by tailors, blacksmiths or carpenters. Normal sized equipment can be created by these craftsmen, while small and fine products are made by artisans.

As for accommodation, you can spend the night in any abandoned buildings if you are not too concerned with safety or comfort.

A night in a cheap hotel cost 5 gold, but even a level 10 player can get that money by defeating a few goblins. You can also opt to rent a place at a nice hotel for months or purchase a space such as a guild hall as a group. You can buy a room by yourself too, there are many ways to secure a place to sleep.

In other words, just surviving in this alternate world doesn't require you to risk your life or work long hours.

There are no dire situations if you just want to survive.

(But rather than living, this is more like 'not dying'.)

Shiroe thinks this type of noncompetitive environment causes the players to lose their goal in life, meaning they have nothing to do.

This is a very free alternate world.

It might be too liberal.

Naotsugu would probably say 'The objective of living? Things we should do? This should be decided and worked on by ourselves right? Such as discussing or protecting girls. Just like what panties ladies wear should be decided by themselves.' There is nothing wrong with this view and Shiroe doesn't want to object it.

But some might agree while others don't.

If people don't set a goal and work towards it, it is easy for them to be tempted onto the wrong path. There are such people everywhere, like the ones that boast their ego by bullying others.

(It's the same with PK. There are many simple and safe way to live in this world. If you just want to survive, there is no need to earn lots of cash or resort to PK.)

Hence, PK is not a means of staying alive. For instance in poor countries, people might be forced to become robbers to feed themselves. But PK is totally different from that.

But for these people, PK is something they feel they should do. A means to gives them enjoyment apart from just staying alive. This makes Shiroe feel that PK is even more unsightly.

"Wait a minute, wah!"

Naotsugu yells.

"What is it?"

"These guys only have 62 gold combined, just how poor are they?"

"But the items they have are not too bad."

Naotsugu and Akatsuki have accounted for all the drop items and gold. The loot seems pretty disappointing.

"PK carries a high risk, unless they are stupid, they will just bring the bare necessities. The rest of their stuff should be in the bank, what we see here are items they rob from others."

The two of them sigh deeply at Shiroe's comment.

Part 5

It is almost midnight when they reach Akiba.

The streets seem to be full of killing intent.

The city center, such as the metro city square, major road junction and bridge Akiba is filled with stalls as usual. The crowd is substantial there as well, but the darker outskirts of the city and the dim alleys of the ruins have suspicious players. They are wary of others and keep a distance from people when walking the streets.

(Security really is going bad...)

Shiroe's group has been heading to the field zone to hunt monsters these few days.

It is crucial to share your information in the city ever since that terrible event. Issues regarding eating, sleeping the basic mechanism and structures of this world, there are many things they need to confirm.

After gathering these basic data, Shiroe's group decides to find out about the field zones and how much battles have changed.

This is the policy the 3 of them came up with, but it is taking a longer time than expected.

Using magic and skills is vastly different from mastering them. Shiroe and Naotsugu already have this idea, Akatsuki also gain this view point as time passes.

The bigger the difference between using and mastering, the more time it takes to make up the difference through practice. Confirm the features of each skill, research its uses and experiment with it. The amount of data in Elder Tales is enough to make beginners cry, but it is double... No, several times more in this alternate world.

Take 'cross slash' for instance.

This is a basic combo attacks of guardians, striking a foe twice in the shape of a cross. Guardians learn this early since it is a basic skill and has many opportunity to use it. According to Naotsugu, there are 5 ways to activate this skill.

"Slashing from top right to bottom left, then strike up vertically is the basics. But you can also start with top left to bottom right, which suits left handlers better. You can also do a horizontal slice followed by a vertical cut."

That's how it is.

This skill, or rather this basic battle movement, has already been saved inside their body. Based on the 2 fighting class player, Naotsugu and Akatsuki, if you have the will to fight and can see your enemies movement, your body will act automatically.

But you need lots of practice to tie down the delicate movements. There is no telling if practicing like real world martial artist will work but the weapon wielding duo are the same as Shiroe. They have to go through the process of research, experiment, research and adjustment.

For range attack spells, aiming with your staff will raise your accuracy then solely using hotkeys. This is also something Shiroe found out through experimenting.

Apart from finding trivial but crucial things when using skills, it will be hard to use it on the enemy without practicing teamwork as well.

The three of them has roles of tank, hitter and support command, but teamwork is more than just completing your assigned tasks.

Naotsugu needs to find ways to aggro the enemy leaving his allies free to work. Akatsuki also needs to accumulate knowledge and experience, knowing which of Naotsugu's attack will expose the opponent's weak point.

The burden on Shiroe is even heavier.

He needs to know what his comrades can and cannot do to command effectively. He need to know their habits and even breathing to increase the completeness of their formation. He has

countless things to investigate and remember, which will take time for him to master. This is the daily life of Shiroe's party.

Maryele and the Crescent Moon Alliance has also been a great help towards Shiroe's group.

Crescent Moon Alliance is set up with the objective of mutual support. They have few high level players, but they have more manpower as they are a guild, able to send people to farm in the field zone and collating intelligence from the streets at the same time.

The guild is divided into 3 shifts, taking turns to harvest resources in the field, buying materials and getting information on the streets or crafting items with production skills. Doing things in shifts seems more efficient.

As they have agreed, Shiroe's team will be getting data on the level 60 and above zones in exchange for information Maryele's group canvass on the streets. They will also trade high level items in exchange for food and equipment.

They are working hard in the area they are good at and sharing the results.

(Maryele mentioned some people are really stressed out... probably has something to do with PK.)

Shiroe sigh at this deduction because this is 2nd hand information he got from Maryele. But since he experienced PK himself, this should be a fact.

The interior of the metro provides shelter from the rain, making it an excellent place to set up shop. Shiroe's party pass through it and heads for the city square in front of the metro. There should be an open air promenade in the real world here, but it is just a vast area overgrown with moss and grass in this alternate world.

Although the surrounding buildings are desolated, the first floor of everyone of them is a shop. The majority of Akiba's commercial facilities are located here.

Like the market place NPC that helps the players to trade, the blacksmith and tailor teachers that aids the production beginners. Other than teaching the basic skills, they will also provide free access to their furnace and sewing tables.

Most of the items in this world comes from monsters or treasure chest in dungeons, it might also be crafted by production players. To assist the low level players for their adventures, NPC will also sell basic weapons and armors.

The commercial facilities around the city square also have such merchant NPC.

The NPC population in this world is much larger than the game. The players was shocked at first, but got used to it over time.

They didn't do a proper headcount, but it is about 6-10 times more than the game.

The basic services in the city area follows that of the game and is available 24 hours. But the NPC still needs to eat and rest, so the increase in population is probably because of the need to work on shift.

They live according to their own timetable and stay in their residence above their shops. But they don't buy player crafted goods or magic items, so it is hard to judge whether they are involved in this world's economy.

Unlike the game, the actions of these NPC are similar to humans. You might mistake them for players if you didn't check with your status screen.

"Want to buy something? Or eat something?"

Naotsugu ask Akatsuki in a feeble voice.

"Ah, what shall we do my lord?"

Akatsuki ask Shiroe in an indifferent tone. They are not motivated by the prospect of eating and gets gloomy during meal time.

"Yeah... Hold on first, let's make a trip over if Maryele is still awake."

Shiroe decided. Even if the food taste the same in Crescent Moon Alliance, eating at Maryele's place is still better. The atmosphere when eating cannot be underestimated.

They have loots from hunting monsters and fighting the PKs, so they can sell it to Crescent Moon Alliance. It will then be crafted into items and flow back into the market, giving back to the community.

Shiroe opens his menu and telepathy Maryele.

Maryele should still be awake at this time, but her answering speed seems too fast.

"Yo Shiroe, where are you?"

"Back in the city."

Maryele's greeting is the same as always, but it seems a bit more anxious.

"Come over to my guild."

"Is it convenient? Not sleeping yet?"

"I was just thinking of contacting you, anyway just come over."

"Convenient for Naotsugu and Akatsuki to tag along?"

Shiroe introduced Naotsugu and Akatsuki to Maryele when interacting with Crescent Moon Alliance. The trio visits the guild quite often and even joins some members to battle monsters, so they are all familiar faces there.

"Of course, that will be even better. I will wait for you guys."

The call ended. Shiroe felt hectic signs in the background while conversing with Maryele. Seems like Crescent Moon Alliance is still active this late at night.

"What is it Shiroe?"

Naotsugu who sense something different about Shiroe asks casually. Naotsugu shows kindness in these small matters. Shiroe is secretly impressed as he turns to face the 2 and says:

"Let's make a trip to Crescent Moon Alliance, seems something is up."

Part 6

There is an air of panic in the guild hall of Crescent Moon Alliance. The one leading the way is a young healer that gives the impression of a puppy. After ushering the trio into guild master Maryele's room, he turns and leave in a hurry.

Maryele's room is even messier then their last visit. But she manage to squeeze out a place for her guest and prepares tea for them.

Henrietta is still hard at work tidying the office. It is close to midnight, but there is no sense of peace and quiet here.

The youth carrying items, members accounting for weapons. The atmosphere feels uneasy as if they are packing for a journey.

"Sorry for the mess Mr. Shiroe... Hold it. Wah, isn't this Akatsuki!"

Henrietta drops her broom upon seeing Akatsuki and rush over to hug her. Henrietta has a thing for cute little girls, and Akatsuki is just her type. She always act like this ever since they met.

Henrietta is average height for females so Akatsuki is shorter than her by half a head. Akatsuki looks like a black cat annoyed by her master's adoration when Henrietta hug her.

"Welcome back everyone. It's a bit messy here, hope you don't mind."

Maryele glance at Naotsugu and Akatsuki before winking at Shiroe. Shiroe breaths a sigh of relief looking at her mischievous demeanour.

"What happened Maryele?"

"An... anyway, don't rush me, sit, let me serve you water, water that looks like tea hehehehe..."

They sat in response to Maryele's invitation.

Shiroe and Naotsugu sit on the couch while Akatsuki sit on a sofa without backing as Henrietta is still embracing her from behind.

"...Ah... Erm."

Everyone is seated but Maryele still can't find the words to say. Shiroe waited quietly for quite a while before speaking out.

"Going for an expedition?"

"Yeah."

"To where?"

"Hmmm, should I say Ezzo... Anyway, we are going to Susukino."

Susukino is one of the 5 major city in Elder Tales.

A zone under the management of the Japanese server.

Under the half Gaia project, the position and shape is similar, but the distance is half and the area is a quarter.

The virtual Japan in Elder Tales, known as Yamato is divided into 5 states. Real world Hokkaido is Ezzo empire, Shikoku is Fourland dukedom, Kyushu is Ninetails dominion, eastern Japan main island is League of freedom cities Eastal and the western part is holy empire westlande.

There are tens of thousands of players living in Yamato that is equivalent to real world Japan. There are also numerous NPC known as the people of the land living in many cities, towns and countless villages.

5 of these cities are in a league of their own.

Susukino, Shibuya, Akiba, Minami and Nakasu.

As places that can be chosen as starter city, the commercial facilities are excellent and the surrounding area is suitable for beginners with lower level monsters. There are lots of simple quest and there are cathedral for players to respawn should they fall in battle. All these advantage makes these cities a good base of operation.

The 5 cities are also connected by the intercity transport gate so players can move around with ease.

That was before the disaster happened.

The players are gradually referring to this incident as the Catastrophe. Some call this the teleportation, summoning or sliding into alternate worlds. But with the actual situation remains unknown, so Catastrophe is the term most frequently used.

Shiroe thinks the term Catastrophe sounds better than alternate world teleportation. If you use the word teleport or summon, it is almost like giving up the possibility of going back. Shiroe has this concern as well, that's probably why most people chose the term Apocalypse instead.

"Any news of the intercity transport gate getting repaired?"

"No one is repairing, we don't know if it is broken or not."

Maryele's become more cheerful after starting the conversation and explains the situation to Shiroe's group.

"As I mentioned before, Crescent Moon Alliance is a small guild. We have some new members recently, so our numbers are 24 with most of us here in this building. But we have a female member Serara currently in Susukino. She is a cute druid, a level 19 beginner in Crescent Moon Alliance. Eh, this kind of personal data is not important. She is a bit shy and weak in character, but wants to experience running a business and plays Elder Tale to do that, a unique person."

Maryele gaze downwards as she speaks.

"Serara was in Susukino the day the Catastrophe happened. There was a group recruiting players around level 30 for a raid, so Serara decides to join them to train since others in the guild was busy... She was playing around with the raid party in Susukino when the Catastrophe happened. With the intercity transport gate down, Serara was stucked there."

Henrietta added after Maryele and sigh deeply.

"Going over to bring her back?"

Maryele and Henrietta nods when Shiroe ask.

"I am not sure, but has any player went over to Susukino since the Catastrophe?"

Akatsuki ask on behalf of the group.

Shiroe was also thinking about this.

Without the intercity gate, there are only 2 other ways to travel.

Using the fairy rings scattered around the region to teleport to other places, or travel physically zone by zone.

Fairy rings are a teleportation device located in the field zones, a magic circle formed by several boulders.

You can teleport from one fairy ring to another, a teleportation network in the world of Elder Tales.

The connections between fairy rings are affected by the lunar cycle using a complicated formula. If you are familiar with it, you can complete your journey in a very short time. But using it at the wrong time will teleport you to unknown places.

"As far as I know, no one had attempted that. Everyone has no energy to spare as they go through each day and don't have the heart to care about other cities, which is understandable. Using fairy rings without consulting online guides is suicidal. If you want to travel by horse or foot to Susukino, you need to prepare for a journey of 2 weeks with several obstacles along the way. It is not a trip you can make out of simple curiosity."

Maryele analyzed the situation well.

Before the Catastrophe, players are free to roam around the Japanese server, some stronger players even make expedition to Korea or China.

This is because of the intercity transport gate within the 5 major cities and the fairy rings together with online guides providing them with a convenient instant transportation tool.

There is also no concept of camping outdoors when this was just a game. no matter how far you are going, you can just log out at a safe area or use 'call of home' to return to a city.

"Wait a minute, if you use 'call of home'... Ah, I forgot the crucial point."

"That's right, if a player enters a city with a cathedral, the checkpoint for 'call of home' will be updated accordingly. If Serara uses 'call of home', she will just warp to Susukino... She won't return here."

'Call of home' is a instantaneous transport spell every player can use in Elder Tales, warping you to the last of the 5 major city you visited. The casting time is several minutes and can only be used once every 24 hours, not suitable for use during battles. For the game, it is normally used when the player decides to call it a day and returning to the city before logging out.

But the young girl will just return to Susukino after casting this spell, which is her current location. And the intercity transport gate is still not functioning.

You won't know the destination change of the fairy rings without checking the online guides, so it also can't be used.

"Why are you mounting a rescue now?"

Maryele has finally started on the main topic.

Shiroe expects this to be the core question.

"Because..."

"Ah, because, erm... We were planning to bring her back, it is scary to be alone in the northern border correct?"

Henrietta wants to speak but something is holding her back, her arms grips stronger onto Akatsuki. Maryele who interrupted her seems to be carefully choosing her words when explaining.

"... Maryele."

"Don't look at people with your sharp eyes Shiroe, you will not be popular with the ladies this way alright?"

"Maryele."

Maryele seems to be changing the topic, so Shiroe asks her again.

"Eh... yeah, the security in Susukino seems to be worse than here. Ah, forget it, it's not 'seems like' or appears to be'. The security in Susukino is definitely bad... Serara is being harassed by nasty guys."

In this girly room with many pink decor, her words sound foreboding.

The city is a non-combat zone.

Offensive weapons and magic are prohibited, confining or trapping another player character is also banned.

But not all crimes are against the law, and even such crimes can still be carried out. But there are some things that are more nasty than PK for a low level girl.

Things that don't exist in the programming of the game are not restricted by the developers, but it might be possible to carry it out in this alternate world.

"..."

Akatsuki's intimidating silence came from her correctly grasping the meaning behind harass.

"Ah, it's not that bad yet. But Susukino has less than 2000 players, so it is hard to hide in the city with such a low population right? She is also guild member, so we need to rescue her correct? It is embarrassing, but I want to discuss something with you, we have many kids in our guild right? They are all good kids, but not too reliable yet. We need to send our best players out or we won't make it to Ezzo. So while we are away, can you help me... look after the kids here?"

"You don't need to spend all your time here, we have a sorcerer Aizel right? The tall boy with blue hair. He will lead the rest of the children. Maryele, battle team leader Shoryu and myself will do all we can for this expedition. It is a willful request and we are anxious about this too... But Mr. Shiroe, Mr. Naotsugu... Akatsuki-chan, can you take care of this guild for a short while?"

Maryele and Henrietta lowers their head pleading for their assistance.

Shiroe looks at the two ladies bowing before him.

He stopped breathing.

His mind becomes silent.

But it is still noisy.

He wants to stop his blood from flowing if possible.

His mind turns furiously.

His focus calls forth lightning from the darkness.

In the real world, Tokyo and Sapporo is 850km apart, which is 425km under the half Gaia project in this world. Maryele's party will be traveling by horse and foot, some of the roads are still serviceable. But most of the zones consist of uneven plains and hills.

Under the best condition, they can move about 50km per day, but it will be a blessing if they manage half of that every day. No, considering the fact they will be facing monsters, getting 25km will be a challenge.

If they move 20km per day, they will reach in 21 days. A round trip will take a month and a half, Maryele is too optimistic about this.

His body temperature dropped about 3 degrees.

The instincts that supports Shiroe come up with a view.

A view akin to a premonition.

Maryele's journey will fail.

They prepare as well as they can. They are a bit lacking in levels, but they are taking on this challenge with the elites of Crescent Moon Alliance. They will be forming a full party of 6 with an excellent healer coming along.

But Shiroe feels this is an issue beyond the dimension of levels.

Shiroe is an introvert and people says he overthink things.

This usually means delusion thoughts that goes all over the place without boundaries. But Shiroe has a balance scale in his heart as a secret weapon. Shiroe will use this device to ruthlessly measure the strength of his allies.

Shiroe considers the suggestion he can give Maryele.

There are 12.

He analyze each of them.

About half of them are useful.

They can shorten the time needed or improve their chances.

Using the eliminated ideas to think of new proposals, he comes up with 4.

He go through the plausibility of carrying them out.

He strike off half and add in new elements to the remaining proposals and recalibrate them. The path his thinking is taking is like a flash of light leading into the domains of subconscious ness. Shiroe can only feel his thoughts by following the light path.

(But...)

Suggestion? Proposals?

Do they want such things? No, does he have the authority to make push his ideas on them in the first place? He cannot take on the responsibility, do he have the right to hold such expectations?

Calculate... Practicability... Authority... Expectation.

That's right, expectation.

What is he hoping for? What do he want to do?

As his thoughts evolves slowly into words of this extent, Shiroe's consciousness returns to his body. He raise his gaze as if directed by something and sees Naotsugu and Akatsuki nodding their heads in show of support.

"Say it Shiroe."

"Your turn to speak my lord"

If he thinks about it another 5 seconds, Shiroe wouldn't be able to move. He will be lose in his thoughts and responsibility, falling into the trap thinking 'it is arrogant to involve himself in the affairs of another guild'.

But the Shiroe in this moment is like a sailboat pushed forth by the wind of his companions Naotsugu and Akatsuki. He says naturally:

"We will go."

"Hmmm?"

"The best option is for us to go."

"We can't possibly trouble you to do that Shiroe!"

Shiroe decisively ignores Maryele's objection as he turns to face his comrades.

"Of course!" "Leave it to us and my lord."

The 2 comrades answered in this perfect timing. Naotsugu and Akatsuki stand up as if the debate is over.

"We will go for this expedition, Maryele and everyone else will stay here. Asking us to take care of the kids is impossible."

"A ninja does not know the word 'failure'."

Maryele sits on the couch stunned with her mouth open looking at Shiroe. Shiroe is unable to look straight at her.

This is embarrassing. Shiroe regrets saying something so arrogant like 'the best option is for us to go'. There should be a better way to put it right? Maryele is definitely dumbstruck. Shiroe blushes deeply as he think about this.

(She has the look that shows 'what is this child saying?'. What, what am I doing? I'm acting like an arrogant fool!)

He is left with only the embarrassment of acting cool. Shiroe who is seeing stars suppresses his emotions and says with conviction:

"We ride at dawn. Maryele, Henrietta, leave this to us."

Chapter 4: Deep in Palm

Part 1

"Is this really okay?"

Maryele who came to see them off ask yet again.

This is Ueno thieves' realm, a zone where demihumans and bandits roam at night. Right now it is a scene of beauty with the sky slowly turning white through the mist.

The humid morning air surrounds Shiroe's team, Maryele and several Crescent Moon Alliance members who came to bid them farewell.

"Miss Maryele, don't worry about this. That girl is cute right? I won't let any guy touch her before I hit on her myself, hitting on girls expedition festival!"

Naotsugu's word that seems flirty in a sense was rewarded with an elbow by Akatsuki along with the words 'shut up idiot'.

"It will be fine, we are used to camping outdoors and has been training for the past 2 weeks..."

Shiroe reassures Maryele.

The chance of success of the 3 of them is higher than Maryele's party. Even though this is a fact, but his showy action last night was really embarrassing, and Shiroe still hesitates looking directly at Maryele.

"Erm... This is nothing much, but please eat this on your way there. Shiroe-sempai, do your best."

"Akatsuki-chan, this is healing salve made by the guild members, take care on your way there."

Shiroe and Akatsuki accepted the sincere support items prepared by the Crescent Moon Alliance members. Although Shiroe only said a simple word of thanks while Akatsuki nods, but their feelings are successfully conveyed to the Crescent Moon guild members.

"Do take care as well Maryele... especially with the PK."

"Yeah, we will be fine here and will continue to collate data."

"Miss Maryele, take it easy and leave this to us!"

"Ahahaha, be safe Naotsugu alright? Shiroe doesn't need it, so I will let Naotsugu touch them. Look here, this is really soft!"

Maryele smiles to hide her embarrassment and hugs Naotsugu arms with her hefty breast.

"Eh, time out Miss Maryele!"

"What is it, Naotsugu hates this just like Shiroe?"

"That's not it..."

Maryele who is like a bold and candid big sister taking care of others like to pull dirty jokes to hide her embarrassment. She declares her character is unladylike and laughs that everyone ignores her when she pull dirty jokes like this.

(But I think only Maryele considers herself to be unpopular...)

Shiroe glances at Akatsuki and sees her covering her mouth with both hands and mumbling 'idiot, idiot, die pervert Naotsugu'.

"Is it fine? Is this chest worthless?"

"Hold up... If it is thrown in my face, I will be afraid to take up the offer... Ah, really, me helping has nothing to do with this! Didn't I prohibit pulling dirty jokes!"

"It is totally unconvincing when Naotsugu says it."

Akatsuki kicks Naotsugu.

The blow is shielded by the heavy armor of the guardian only leaving a dull thud. Naotsugu uses this chance to break away from Maryele.

"I will let you have my way with my fats when you come back safely... Yeah, *bon voyage*, thank you for doing this, take care of yourself."

After hearing this, it is time to go.

The blushing Naotsugu who broke free from Maryele is already walking down the foggy streets to hide his embarrassment.

"Shiroe, Naotsugu, Akatsuki-chan, please bring Serara home."

Naotsugu turns around with his back to the rising sun and lift his shield up high.

Shiroe waves goodbye while Akatsuki draws her blade half an inch and slams it back into the hilt, making a clear sound.

The trio bid their farewells and start on their journey to the distant north.

Part 2

The morning mist is a temporary scene in the early summer, which turns back into a bright blue sky soon after.

The three of them walk on the half-ruined highway. In ancient times (which is the modern era in the real world) it is known as the grandest highway of the capital. The highway that is like a bridge over land extends far into the north.

Looking back from the capital highway, the zones they have passed through are relatively peaceful. There are more wildlife than monsters out here, you can see herds of deers and bears taking a leisure stroll.

The players believe the world of Elder Tale is set thousands of years into the future of the real world, so much that it is akin to the official setting. According to the Elder Tale lore, there was a war so grand it shatters the world literally. And the world is now rebuilt into its current state by the miracle of the gods. This is a common world building setting seen in fantasy games.

The graphics that improves with each new expansion enchants the players with its beauty. But after the Catastrophe, the scenery they see with their eyes are beyond that of any rendering machines.

The trio have no problem riding even though they have zero experience doing that. Horses are a common mode of transport in the Elder Tale.

All players can ride a horse without any practice. A horse can be purchased or rented a few days from shops. It is normal for mid level players to have their own ride.

Horses were treated like summon creatures when Elder Tale was just a game.

You obtain a flute after buying or renting a horse. You can summon the horse by blowing the flute in any place.

This setting is recreated in this world. Your horse will run to you from far away when you whistle for them, so you won't need to tie down and worry about your horse when raiding dungeons.

Horses are classified as items in the game and will not die, but this has yet to be confirmed in the game. You might lose your horse if you call for them in dangerous places, so Shiroe has not experimented and confirmed this aspect.

Shiroe's group will be traversing through the field zones for this journey. As the name implies, it is an open and vast area in this world.

This world basically consist of interconnected field zones. There are some buildings in good condition that are considered as individual zones, but ruins and abandoned buildings are usually part of the field zone's background.

One of the feature of field zones is its vague boundaries.

Enclosed zones are connected to others by doors, cave entrances and stairs. But field zones have no clear entry points to move between neighboring zones.

You will cross over to the adjacent zone by walking over the zone boundary. So being in which zone is not a concern when traveling over open land.

You can check which zones you are in by opening the status screen if you wish.

The highway the trio is traveling on is in a state of disrepair, debris and collapsed sections are every where.

They have to traverse some parts by horse. The trees engulf so much of a section that it is practically a forest. They had no choice but to go through the dense undergrowth instead.

They decided to rest just a short while past noon.

The flyover highway merges with a wide road after rounding a complicated curve in the sky. The asphalt under their feet is alarmingly weak, it would be dangerous to go this way any further.

"Let's take a lunch break?"

Naotsugu who is leading the way sighs deeply at Shiroe's suggestion.

"It's nice that riding the horse is automatic, but my butt still hurts."

"That's right."

Shiroe nods in agreement while Akatsuki stares with a questioning look asking "Does it?".

The height difference between Shiroe and Akatsuki is about 30cm, Shiroe estimates her weight to be about half of his. Being so much lighter will place less burden on her lower body while riding.

"I wonder how far we went."

"It's only been half a day, you are too hasty stupid Naotsugu."

Naotsugu remains nonchalant despite Akatsuki's words. They are used to this type of interaction, a way of bickering and playing around.

Shiroe leads them down the slope made of the collapsed sections and debris of the highway. This is probably a residential area in ancient times, but only the remnants of telephone poles are left, a wasteland without any trees.

On the reddish undulating ground, they found a boulder suitable to be used as a table to rest.

They lay a cloth on the surface of the rock and place food, canteens, maps and tools on top. This is a map of Japan labelled with names of zones Shiroe still remembered.

"Where did you find that? That's a really nice map."

The map was really detailed and worthy of praise.

It is about 1 meter square in size when fully opened, with a drawing of an archipelago similar to Japan... the zones under the jurisdiction of the Japan server of Elder Tale.

The map is drawn with 4 colors labeling rivers, forest and even villages, not something an amateur can draw.

"My subclass is scribe, this is a map I copied off the Akiba library."

"I see... Nice job my lord."

"Well, Where are we?"

Naotsugu asked as he opens his canteen.

"We should be around here."

Shiroe points to the north of Tokyo, very near to Akiba.

"We didn't go very far yet."

"Oh well, it's only been half a day... we'll make better time flying in the afternoon."

"Roger."

Naotsugu chats with Shiroe as they start digging into a basket of soggy crackers that looks like chicken sandwich.

Akatsuki usually keep out of such conversations. Shiroe recently thinks she acts this way because she trust them totally, not because she is disinterested. Since she didn't ask any questions, that means she understand the contents of the conversation.

The horse graze on the dry brown grass as the trio have their meals. They run off into the distance after some time. The horses will leave by themselves a short while after you dismount.

They will be back when they blow their flute, so the three are not concerned about them.

"... Will it always be like this?"

Akatsuki says as she take small bites out of her chicken sandwich.

She looks far off into the distance, straight at the depths of the untamed lands. She has filtered the contents of her mumbling and you will miss it if you don't pay attention.

But Shiroe can empathize with her.

This world has recreated the settings of Elder Tale wonderfully, but Elder Tale is a game, not a journey to experience an alternate world. There are sleep or pain in Elder Tale, and this world is not a game.

It inherited the setting and logs of Elder Tales, but Shiroe believes they should treat this as a totally different alternate world. Since the first day of the Catastrophe, Shiroe feels a deep sense of unease, telling himself it would be a big mistake to mistake this world for Elder Tales.

(Everyone forgot about something important and wants to move on without confirming it. But no one knows what is really happening. Even if this is really related to Elder Tale, this is still an alternate world... That's why every body is acting so strangely.)

Security didn't really turn bad.

Saying security is turning bad seems to imply security was good before, which is not true. If you treat this as an alternate world independent from Elder Tale, then security did not exist in this world in the first place.

The non-combat zones are the only place that are close to being safe. This seems to be a shallow sign to prove that the Elder Tale's settings still exist.

But this restriction is not the same as laws.

There are no security in the first place, so it couldn't have deteriorated.

This is a lawless world.

Akatsuki understands this point.

But she still talks softly to herself even though she understands.

Is her emotions wavering in the depths of her serious eyes?

(I can't tell...)

Shiroe can't see through Akatsuki's thoughts.

It might be unease, homesickness or even despair. But if you search in Shiroe's heart, he thinks you will find frustration.

This is the reflection of his heart.

The irritation that things turn out this way. The subject when she says 'will it always be like this' means to this world, but it can also refer to 'us'.

(Is this the best we can do? Are we being looked down on? We are killing each other, racketing, crying and despairing over trivial things. Are we being treated like brats?)

This is a question for himself. Will we immediately turn to backstabbing villains when thrown on a lawless plain?

Shiroe answers firmly because he understand this:

"No it won't."

He will not fall into despair so easily.

Like the rotten fruits falling to the ground, the world is following this natural order and turning cunning, cheap and unsightly. It is moving away from nobility and gallantry which is a bad thing. Shiroe doesn't accept this natural evolution of the situation.

"That will be too boring."

Naotsugu comments curtly.

"..."

Akatsuki looks towards the horizon.

Shiroe decided to take over Maryele's quest by himself because their chance of success is higher than Crescent Moon Alliance's team based on their levels and familiarity with battles.

This is just one of the reasons.

But this reason is more of a 'want', not a 'need'.

Crescent Moon Alliance is an independent guild no matter how good their relations are. Shiroe's party has no obligation to spend so much time risking countless danger to do this on their behalf.

This is something that is normally impossible.

Maryele requested Shiroe to occasionally drop by and look after her guild because she understood this. She probably thought it was the limit she can ask of Shiroe as a good friend. This is a deduction made from common sense, Maryele is not wrong.

Naotsugu and Akatsuki also know they have no moral duty to aid Maryele's comrades.

But Shiroe wants to take on this quest.

Logic and calculations are important, he even held his breath when thinking through this mission. But his will is mainly driven by a sense of frustration. Shiroe was also surprised to have unearthed such strong emotions. And Shiroe was glad that his companions felt the same without putting it into words.

... That is too boring.

... Too unsightly.

(Although such embarrassing words were uttered...)

The wind brushes his cheeks that heats up when he recall this event. He can feel joy, unease and bliss within his undulating emotions.

It is a sense of resistance, he wants to resist this unsightly world.

If that is the case, he shouldn't hold anything back.

To do the best within his abilities.

To work hard in this environment of his.

As Shiroe is distracted with such thoughts, Naotsugu taps his back.

"You will help if your family is sobbing right? That is common sense. Even if those guys are unsightly, we have no reason to dance to their tune."

Shiroe doesn't want to accept that he has drifted into an unsightly, dull and boring world beyond redemption. There must be something cool and flashy like the Debauchery Tea Party out there.

It is embarrassing to express it in words so Shiroe tries not to think about it. But he can feel that quest like this is the answer.

These are the 'things they should be doing'.

"Really, harassing a girl like this is unromantic. You need to do it more like this! Try to grab their attention."

Naotsugu's speech throws the whole atmosphere off.

"Well, what types of girls do you like Naotsugu?"

Akatsuki gives Naotsugu a condescending look while Shiroe resists joining this conversation. These puberty thoughts are extremely awkward for Shiroe.

"My range is wide, like maids and nurses. Nah, it has to be my junior right? After joining the workforce, the clean and pure juniors joining my company look so blindingly bright. They will even call me *sempai*, that is very important!"

"The basics are important! Teamwork is built on the fundamentals of practice!"

Shiroe doesn't really understand what Naotsugu is implying, but he decides to answer Naotsugu loudly with conviction. Akatsuki's glares pokes painfully at him.

"You are absolutely right, teamwork, tactics and terrain are all important. Getting angry at guys when their panties are seen while climbing the stairs. They are the one exposing and blame us, that is really the strongest."

(That is not being strong, just a nasty excuse right?)

Even if that is what Shiroe thinks, he won't express it to Akatsuki. She nags at him anyway, saying "Ignoring idiot Naotsugu, my lord needs to act like a properly. Stupid lord."

Part 3

...Akatsuki is giving them the cold shoulder after that conversation. She was stopped by Shiroe when she was about to summon her horse after lunch. Akatsuki is puzzled as Shiroe takes out a bamboo flute with elegant carvings.

It looks like a piece of art even though it is just a horse summon flute. Naotsugu has the same flute in his hand.

"What is that my lord?"

Shiroe smiles at Akatsuki's question and blow the flute while facing the sky. The sound harmonize with Naotsugu's flute and is carried across the plains by the wind.

"Could this be..."

A high pitch cry interrupts Akatsuki. 2 huge shadows draws near with the deep sound of wings flapping. The creature as big as a carriage circle 2 rounds above Shiroe's party before landing strongly, bowing their head at Shiroe and Naotsugu's feet?

"Those are griffons!"

The mythical beast standing before them are griffons. It has the head, forelegs and wings of an eagle along with the body of a lion. It's battle prowess differs by variety and age, but is mostly on par with chimeras.

"Well, yeah."

Shiroe rubs the neck of the griffon a couple of times and takes some raw meat from his bag. He brought these from the market at a cheap price since they are ingredients that can be hunted easily in the wild.

"You didn't really think we are going by horse to the far north, did you? We would get old by the time we reach."

Naotsugu teases Akatsuki.

"Why did you summon these monsters... we're riding them?"

"Yes, we are riding them. What is it Miss Akatsuki?"

"It's Akatsuki."

Akatsuki makes a strong request when she hears Shiroe. Even though he has been addressing Akatsuki this way all the while, she still wants Shiroe to call her by her name.

"Akatsuki... You'll ride behind me. Okay?"

"That's fine, however..."

Akatsuki watches the griffon fearfully from afar. Naotsugu prepares the saddles on his griffon expertly while Shiroe feeds his griffon while scratching its ears.

"I have heard of summon flutes like those... That they're only given to players who've won the Hades Breath raid on the fields of Death."

"Yeah, a long time ago..."

Shiroe answers Akatsuki.

This is one of the legacy of the debauchery tea party that is gradually forgotten by the masses. Shiroe and Naotsugu obtain this flute from the deepest part of the spirit king's grave. They fought a fierce battle with the four horsemen of the king in front of the magic alter that desecrates the secrets of life.

The spirit king attempts to steal the underground energy of the elf mountain to gain eternal life. The 'King of winged beast' who fought alongside them to stop the spirit king's plan present these flutes as a symbol of their friendship.

"Why do you have these flutes?"

"It is a great party trick to surprise people with, right?"

Naotsugu answered Akatsuki this time.

(This is sort of embarrassing.)

They didn't mean to hide it, but taking these flute out is still kind of awkward for Shiroe and Naotsugu. 'Griffon flute' is a rare item that make other envious. Make no matter how precious it is, it still serves mainly as a memento.

"Bind the sheath of your sword tighter, same with your bag. Keep everything that might be blown off by the wind."

Shiroe extend his hand out to the hesitant Akatsuki.

After hesitating a while, Akatsuki reaches for Shiroe's hand. But she noticed something and starts to blush.

As Shiroe is starting to feel awkward, Akatsuki muster up her courage and grabs his hand.

Shiroe pulls Akatsuki up with just the strength in his arm. He is not sure if she jumped or her weight is light, the feather light feeling surprises Shiroe.

"All set?"

"Yes my lord, no problem."

Akatsuki fidgeting figure behind him makes Shiroe look back uneasily.

"Sit tight and hold on firmly. Hold on strongly if you are afraid. Wait, don't grab my stomach!"

Naotsugu who has been holding back burst out in laughter looking at Shiroe and Akatsuki's interactions. Ignoring their accusatory eyes, he pat his griffon's neck.

"I'll go first!"

Naotsugu sentence was followed by a gust of wind, Naotsugu and his griffon becomes a shadow in the sky the next instance.

"Really... You ready Akatsuki? Let's go!"

It feels like being thrown into the sky or falling head down into the ground far below. Akatsuki endures this feeling as she holds on to Shiroe's slender back.

Shiroe back is lean like a old scholar. Akatsuki buries her face in it, hiding her eyes from the surrounding view. But she regains her composure to look around after a moment.

"It's a great view."

Shiroe is deeply concerned about Akatsuki who is grabbing his back tightly and tells her softly. Akatsuki is too small in stature after all. The young girl who is only about Shiroe's shoulder or even chest height might fly off with the wind, which worries Shiroe.

Instead of sitting behind, she would be more stable in the front. But doing it this way might scare off Akatsuki in another way.

(Another problem will be where I can hold on to Akatsuki.)

After analyzing in his head, the answer would be to grab the reins with his right hand and holding Akatsuki by the belly or chest with his left hand. But he will be risking touching sensitive parts of her body, which makes him bleed cold sweat. It will be fine if Naotsugu laughs at him, but being pushed off the griffon in mid flight would be bad.

"You doing okay?"

"Yeah... This is amazing, it's like we're floating in the sky my lord."

The griffon tears through the air.

It is not flapping its wings, simply gliding steadily in the wind.

The air current is split to either side like the flow of the river, alternating between rising and falling. The griffon might have the instincts of the birds, choosing the suitable currents and climbing up the stairs in the sky.

Naotsugu's griffon is flying besides them like the blue jewel in the sky, shimmering in the sun.

"Isn't this great!"

Instead of flaunting, his words feels more like the pure joy of flying. Akatsuki who usually treats him like childish companion can't help but smile when she sees his grin. It is a rare smile, just like a blossoming flower.

"It's amazing... This is amazing, the sky is so blue and clear."

Shiroe with his eyes in front smiles warmly.

It's true.

Flying through the skies is a unique sense of happiness.

Part 4

"...No signs of the enemies ahead."

"Let's advance."

Shiroe answers with a gesture after hearing Akatsuki report.

This is the tunnels of Palm, which passes under teardrop mountain. It has been 15 hours since they entered the dungeon.

Referencing the map Shiroe drew from memory, they have traveled about 20km in a beeline.

Shiroe visited this place when Elder Tale was still a game, but he did not know this place was so vast.

It has been 3 days since they set off from Akiba.

The trip has been smooth and peaceful.

The griffon is 3 times faster than a horse in terms of speed, but the ability to ignore obstacles means it is 10 times faster overall.

The ability of the griffon has been nerfed, so it can only travel 4 hours a day. But they still manage to complete a 2 weeks journey by horse in 3 days.

But their speedy travel reaches a bottleneck.

They already anticipated this and they confirmed teardrop mountain is a nest for iron tail wyverns when they arrived. Wyverns are a type of demi-dragons, it is similar to dragons without forelegs and the ability to use magic. It is considered the scrub of dragons.

But they are still tough enemies.

Dragons has the highest stamina, defense, speed and attack among monsters. Some possess immense intellect and can cast spells. Just like most fantasy stories, dragons are amongst the strongest enemies adventurers can face.

Even a scrub like wyverns are still a type of dragons.

They cannot use magic, but their tails are as strong as steel and their razor like wings make them as fast as griffons.

Shiroe's party are top class player and can take on a single wyvern on the ground easily.

But they might get overwhelmed if a group of wyverns attack them in the sky.

Teardrop Mountains has been the nest of wyverns since the early days of Elder Tale, so Shiroe is already mentally prepared for these and not fly recklessly here.

If they fight without any plan in the sky, they might be able to fend off a few wyverns, but will eventually fall from their waves of attacks.

There are no such things like a graceful retreat for aerial battles.

The losers are doomed to fall hundreds of meters to their death.

Shiroe's team hiding on the ground to avoid this trap have 4 options. They can go the long way by the sea route or bash through the forest in the mountains. They can also advance through Palm's tunnel under Teardrop mountain made from ancient sewage systems. The last option would be to climb the mountain directly.

Shiroe's group decides to challenge the tunnel after a discussion.

After considering many factors, this route offers the best combination of speed and safety.

After going through the forest and entering the tunnels through a work site ruins, they have traveled in Palm for 15 hours. The vast tunnels are built with grey concrete walls, stretching endlessly under the illumination of magic light.

Similar to large sewage systems in the real world, there are narrow pathways that connects 2 major sections. There will be dry and clean smelling square rooms popping up every now and then which seems redundant.

The intent of the designer and traces of the users have been lost under years of dust and debris. The deep cavern with slow flowing water are now ruled by the ratmen.

Ratmen.

They are low in class among the many demihumans in this world. Their appearance is a cross between rat headed men and rats standing on their hind legs. They are about the height of middle

schoolers, but it is hard to tell their shape with all its fur. It is covered all over in wet looking fur and can use simple tools.

Rat men are no threat at all for high level players like Shiroe. The ability of each unit varies, but most of them are weaker than goblins or beast men.

But the ratmen has 2 troubling weapons, their numbers and plague.

Just like real world rats, ratmen have powerful reproductive abilities, living in small confined areas in large numbers.

Shiroe's group has already stumbled across rooms several square meters in size with 20 something ratmen nesting inside.

Normal creatures will run away if they instinctively feel the enemies to be much stronger than them. It is the same with ratmen who can sense that Shiroe's group are powerful.

Shiroe's group did not have any proper battles on their journey so far, proving this point. The objective of this quest is to save the girl named Serara, so Shiroe cut down on unnecessary exploration and battles as they rush to her. The monsters avoiding them is a good thing for this mission.

But for the numerous ratmen trapped in a confined space with no escape route, things will be different.

The ratmen will attack in this situation even if Shiroe's group wants to give way to them. A cornered rat will fight desperately.

Shiroe's party know they will win, but fighting a large group of ratmen waste a lot of time and is a burden on your mental health.

Another issue is the plague debuff.

Ratmen is a medium for disease spread just like the Middle Ages. Elder Tale recreated this aspect by giving ratmen the ability to infect players with the plague debuff that causes persistent damage over time.

The ratmen in the tunnel is about level 40.

The harm level of the plague are determined by the level of the ratmen, which is around 40 for this case. This can be easily handled by a mid level healer, but Shiroe's party doesn't have any right now.

They purchased 'preventive potions' at the market and already took them, but they cannot be used to cure any plague status. With their large level difference and low chance of getting infected, it is better to be safe than sorry.

"This room looks safe... How about it Shiroe?"

"Yeah... You are right, let's take a break. Please stay near the entrance Naotsugu I will make a routine call to Maryele. As for Akatsuki..."

"I will scout ahead."

Akatsuki melts into the shadows without waiting for a reply.

Their roles within the team have been set. Shiroe and Naotsugu detest the idea of a petite girl like Akatsuki scouting alone in the beginning.

But Akatsuki is proficient at this, and her pride pushes her to contribute to the team.

The two of them accept this reluctantly after understanding Akatsuki's view.

Scouting is Akatsuki's strong point, so this division of work makes sense. This serious girl plays her part with utmost dedication.

Naotsugu drags a metal box from the pile of junk and sit on it, hugging his sword while guarding the entrance. He will be ready if any enemy shows up.

After confirming this, Shiroe uses the menu in his mind to call Maryele telepathically. Shiroe has been contacting Maryele about this time daily after starting the journey. Maryele understands this and picks up quickly.

"Thanks for the hard work Shiroe, how are things?"

"Everything is fine here, we made camp and rest shortly after contacting you yesterday. We entered Palm's tunnel this morning."

"You are in the depths of Palm right now?"

"Yes."

"That is too fast, you are scaring big sister here!"

"Yes."

Maryele's kind greetings give Shiroe a warm feeling.

He wanted to reply in a kinder way, but that is beyond him. Shiroe continues to answer politely as he thought about this.

Maryele didn't know Shiroe is traveling in a special way... by griffon. The usual means of travel in this world is by summoning horses.

Another way to traverse the land is by trained 'battle boars'. There are news of players in the Chinese server using giant wolves as their ride.

Summoners can conjure several mounts such as unicorns to ride, but only high level summoners are able to summon flying mounts. Normal players would not be able to imagine enchanters, warriors and weapon based classes owning flying mounts.

"To be frank, we would probably cover about a quarter of your journey if we take on this quest, I am grateful for your help."

"Uh, that aside... How are things on your side?"

"We are in touch with Serara via telepathy."

This is one of the reason for periodic contact.

Shiroe is heading to Ezzo empire to save Serara, but he can't contact her telepathically.

You can only contact players on your friend list by telepathy. And you can only add them to the list when they are right in front of you.

In other words, Shiroe's group has no means to contact Serara through telepathy.

"The situation remains unchanged?"

"Yeah, she says she is hiding with that nice guy I mentioned and that she is okay for now."

I see, that's good to hear. There is still good players there, seems like Susukino is not beyond redemption."

"Yeah."

Serara is targeted by a group of nasty players, forcing her to join their guild through intimidation. She was even confined for a period of time and was almost assaulted sexually. But she managed to get away and is hiding somewhere in Susukino.

The size of Susukino is on par with Akiba, but there are only about 2000 players there, 1/8 that of Akiba. This makes each player more prominent.

Take buying food for instance, you can't merge with the crowd and do that, so it will be several times harder to remain undetected. Shiroe is worried Serara can't cover her tracks with such a low urban population.

But Serara seems to have found a player willing to aid her.

Shiroe doesn't know the details, but Serara only managed to escape from the nasty guild Brigandia with the help of this kind player.

With a player the enemy knows nothing of, there will be no problems buying supplies. With this, the chance of Serara avoiding detection before help arrives is high. With the low population, there will be more ruins and abandoned buildings for her to hide in.

Shiroe breathe a sigh of relief when he thought of this.

"We can't confirm further plans before leaving the dungeons, so I will contact you again after passing through Palm. Teardrop Mountains is the biggest obstacle after all..."

"How do you plan to cross the straits?"

"I will figure it out once I get there."

Shiroe avoids the question even though he already decided to fly over. Owning a griffon means conquering 'dead spirit field' raid. Raids are the pinnacle challenge in Elder Tale, only a few major guilds are able to complete them. They are then rewarded with the rare item griffon summon flute.

For some people, guildless people like Shiroe owning this rare item is unacceptable.

Maryele the guild master of Crescent Moon Alliance knows lots of people unlike Shiroe. At the very least, all her members knows about Shiroe's quest to rescue Serara.

Although Maryele accepts Shiroe's aid with her usual smile, it is hard to say this is the same for the other guild members. Shiroe is worried that the public's perception of him will change if news spreads out.

"You will definitely make it, Shiroe."

Maryele's hesitant words made Shiroe smile.

(Maryele is definitely pushing herself. She is so tough.)

"We have no serious problems, didn't even fight much at all."

"Roger!"

"Well then, I will contact you later."

"Great! I will pray to the goddess Yurola on your behalf, say hi to Naotsugu and Akatsuki for me, Henrietta misses her."

Maryele ends the call mentioning the goddess Yurola which priests talk about in this alternate world.

(So far so good...)

"How is the situation my lord?"

"...!"

He didn't notice Akatsuki is back when he was focusing on the telepathy call. Shiroe turns and see Naotsugu taking big bites out of his meal.

"Akiba is the same, Serara is hiding in the urban part of Susukino. No issues so far, let's proceed as planned."

"Affirmative."

Akatsuki takes out a large water canteen from her back after answering. The canteens are all the same size, but it looks bigger in Akatsuki's hands.

Shiroe opens his bag and offer some oranges to Akatsuki. In this world where food has no taste, unprocessed ingredients like fruits are precious delicacy that retains their flavour.

Shiroe and the others are using a Bag of Holding, an excellent item that can be loaded up to 200kg. Apart from the bag itself, it can negate the weight of all the items inside it.

This is a well known item in Elder Tale, and it's quality determines the weight and type of items it can carry. Almost all the players have one because of its convenience.

With this bag, you can carry on fighting in the dungeons even if you are loaded with lots of treasures. You won't be flustered by cumbersome camping equipment, a necessity item in this world.

"Can you tell me what you saw? I want to cross reference it with my map."

"Understood."

Akatsuki peels the orange expertly with a knife as she makes her report. The main path is wide enough for two trucks to drive through side by side so they won't lose their way, but there are loads of side paths that branches out.

They can reach their goal by following the main route, but it is better to make a detour sometimes to avoid the nest of the ratmen. Akatsuki's scouting reports are invaluable for this.

Shiroe draws new deviating paths on his map as he listens to Akatsuki.

"Does it look something like this."

"Yeah, that should be fairly accurate... You really are good at cartography my lord."

Akatsuki leans over to inspect Shiroe's map and is impressed.

"This is just like CAD, and my subclass is also a scribe."

"What is CAD?"

"Designs you make on a computer. I do it at my university as an engineering student."

"So you are a college student my lord?"

"But I am graduating soon." Shiroe nods in reply. His memories of the real world seems so distant and unreal now.

"I see, so you are about my age."

"Hmmm?" "No way!"

Shiroe and Naotsugu retorts at the same time.

"Is it that surprising?"

He feel bad for Akatsuki who is asking so calmly, but Shiroe was sure Akatsuki is 3-4 years younger than him.

"Are you kidding us shrimp? Based on your height you- Puwahh!"

A knee lands on Naotsugu face cuts off his sentence.

"May I kick this stupid Naotsugu my lord?"

"Didn't I tell you to ask before doing it?"

Ignoring the comedy duo, Shiroe is bleeding cold sweats in his heart. He didn't say it out, but Shiroe has been judging Akatsuki's age based on her height.

"Idiot Naotsugu is always nitpicking about height issues."

"It would be sadder talking about bre- Puwahh!"

She used her left knee this time. Akatsuki jumped almost 2 meters, flipped backwards and landed gracefully like a cat.

"...Akatsuki? Please don't murder Naotsugu."

"Since it is my lord's request..."

Akatsuki left Naotsugu while sulking. Shiroe didn't say his thoughts about her age out loud, but he still helps Naotsugu.

"Did you also think I was a child my lord?"

Shiroe endures the pressure of Akatsuki's glare and comment softly.

"I am not concerned about height... or age issues. This is troubling..."

Shiroe did think Akatsuki was younger, but he didn't treat her like a kid.

This is a world where survival skills are crucial.

A place where you need to trade blows with ratmen in giant tunnels like this. You will die if you don't meet the minimum requirement, even if you are a child.

It is the same even in this world without death.

Shiroe recalls the twins he knew recently.

On that day, Shiroe was still with the twins up til the moment the Catastrophe hits. They got separated when Shiroe rushes back to Akiba.

Shiroe saw the twins join some guild from afar once, but he still worries about their current status.

Shiroe decides to meet them when he return to Akiba.

"What are you thinking about my lord?"

"Hmmm? Nothing really."

"That isn't true. Whenever you are thinking, your brow furrows."

"Ah..."

He objects Akatsuki on reflex, but she has totally seen through Shiroe. Being seen through is embarrassing enough, but Akatsuki continues 'right here you know? Just like the wrinkles of an old man', which makes Shiroe uneasy.

"Hey, what are you laughing at Naotsugu?"

"Because... Wahahaha!"

Shiroe kicks Naotsugu in the shin.

But Naotsugu's legs are wrap in armour, so Shiroe's toes hurt from the impact.

The 3 of them moves out after bickering for a while. It is always dark in the tunnels, threatening to crush the trio with its weight.

In the cold humid air unique to such underground dungeons, only the smiles of the three offer some warmth.

Part 5

The first light of dawn bathes ridge of the mountains in purple light as they came out of the tunnel.

Shiroe's group who have been spending long hours underground stretch their backs in the cool and fragrant breeze.

They did not need to bend their backs to traverse the caverns, but the billion tons of rocks over their head gives them overwhelming pressure.

The sky right now is still dark as the summer sun slowly rises.

"The wind is cold."

Akatsuki jump onto a boulder which give her a view of the forest and the ocean as she speaks.

"But it feels great. We are finally through the tough part"

Shiroe follows them up the boulder.

The wind is indeed icy, but the scenery is grandiose. The dark green forest is glowing beautifully from the rose colored light.

As the clouds moves off with the wind, this rose colored light makes the ocean shimmers like a sea of gold.

"Beautiful."

"Amazing."

Shiroe's companions explains everything with these simple words.

Speaking of which, this is the first time.

(We are the first to see this scene. In this alternate world, no other players has traveled to Susukino from Akiba yet. We are the pioneers. When Elder Tale was a game, lots of players passed by here at dawn. But, we are the first ones here. Being the first means...)

... The best part of adventuring is experiencing new things. It makes you so tense with anticipation you can't stand still.

Hmmm? What? Don't lose control of your bladder? What's the big deal, this is a happy moment. Are you unhappy? You are happy right? Just look at this gorgeous view, totally worth the effort! Hahahaha!

Shiroe remembers 'her' words.

'She' has no basis for her overflowing confidence. 'Her' character is built on willfulness, bluffs and bold words.

But 'she' always knows the correct answer.

If it was 'her', she will treat this scenery as a medal and wear it proudly.

"We're the first ones here."

Shiroe says to his friends with this emotion in his heart.

"We're the first adventurers in this world to see this."

For the first time, Shiroe accept this to be an alternate world with his words.

The gorgeous view in front of them confirm this fact stronger than anything else. Something that is impossible to see in a game. Technology that recreates real life in the virtual world cannot display this flowing wind, chilly air, the sound of the trees and the dawn that is changing every micro second.

After coming to this world, even if everyone around them falls into a panic or players disrupt security due to lack of goals, Shiroe still maintains a certain degree of calm.

He will go to the suburbs, investigate the zones, experiment with spells while battling and find out what he can or cannot do in this world even if it is tedious.

(... I didn't know I was so adaptable. Naotsugu's humor helps me forget my hardships. Akatsuki makes everyday more lively, saving the sanity in my heart...)

But that is not all. Shiroe finally understands this now.

The ruins under the ancient trees looks so beautiful after coming to this world, telling him this is indeed an alternate world.

(This is an alternate world, we are adventurers.)

Akatsuki looks at Shiroe with surprise for an instant. She then nods with understanding the next moment. Naotsugu gives a manly grin and takes a deep breathe.

"That's right, I've never seen anything so amazing, even in Elder Tale."

"It's our first prize for victory."

The 2 of them cherish the scene in front of them with longing eyes before acknowledging Shiroe.

And in reply, Shiroe faces the sky to the east and blows his griffon summon flute.

Chapter 5: Escape

Part 1

Serara is hiding in a composite room made of insulation materials. The 2LDK (2 bedroom, Living room, Dining room and Kitchen) is situated inside an abandoned building.

The civilization of the old world has been lost after the world falls apart, you can only see the architectural relics of it's culture scattered around the world. Serara as a player knows this world is recreated in the image of modern Japan, Susukino is based on one of the cities of Sapporo. You can see hints of the real world city everywhere.

Susukino which is an urbanized place in the world has many big buildings. They have all been reinforced with cold steel as part of the Elder Tales setting, looking more like a fortress.

It's angular design gives it a retro machine empire feel, this is the design motif of Hokkaido... or Ezzo Empire's settings in game.

The buildings strengthened by screws, braces, nuts and bolts are able to withstand the wind and snow, but not the cold. That's why the people of Susukino will construct an additional insulation house within the buildings, a place that is warm and suitable to live in.

This is highly inefficient if you take into account the population and the area available. It wouldn't work in Japan, but is possible in the world of Elder Tales.

These insulation houses is the hiding place of Serara, a rental from the person who helped her.

She has been cleaning this home separated into rooms by screen doors all day.

She didn't do it because she likes to clean or the place was dirty. She just has nothing else to do. In this place with no TV or internet, it is hard to kill time.

Serara's is a housekeeper. This subclass has the ability to clean zones, arrange items and manage consumerable and storage items. These skills aid in keeping a place clean and tidy.

(...Why did I pick such a minor, useless subclass?)

Serara sighs for the countless time but she did not stop cleaning.

In Elder Tales, the main class are chosen when creating your character and cannot be changed. But if you are fine with giving up all your subclass EXP, you can change subclass easily.

Serara main class is druid, a type of healer.

Serara wanted to experience the feeling of doing business in this complicated game, that's why she started playing.

There are many players just like her. Interacting with other players and earning cash by doing business offers a unique sense of fun, it is one of the ways to enjoy Elder Tales.

But most players who wants to focus on business will choose merchant or accountant as a subclass. These subclass provide additional benefits when trading, allowing you to get some discount when dealing with NPC.

Another choice would be production classes. Crafting all sorts of items to sell is a proper way to play.

But according to the beginners guide Serara read online, you need to have certain levels of stats and clear some quest before you can choose accountant or merchant as a subclass. You will need to have some capital on hand to get raw materials if you choose to go the production subclass route.

So she is saving up money while raising the level of her druid main class, and repick her subclass after saving some money. Raising her main class will only help in buying or farming for items after all... Serara decided to choose the simplest subclass to use in the meantime with this thought in mind.

Simply put, Serara became a housekeeper through elimination process.

(Boohoo... If I knew it would be like this, I should have chosen a crafting subclass, such as artisan or tailor...)

Serara minds wanders as she cleans the table.

The composite room made from insulation parts has a country style interior.

It is not really a style, just that the things are made from wood. The floor is laid with wood that has beautiful grain patterns, the walls are built with logs while planks covered the ceiling.

According to the game setting, Ezzo Empire is a treasure trove of natural resources, leading the Japanese server with its forestry and mining industries.

The wooden floors and reddish tables are all unique products of Ezzo Empire, it will shine if you clean it thoroughly.

In the wooden cabin style composite house, the plain girl with her long hair tied in a bunch... Serara is working hard. Her flannel shirt and denim pants, along with her long hair and face without make up, gives the impression of clean and tidiness. She is not utterly beautiful, but looks like a newly wed wife from afar.

(Eh, I'm so bored, I just keep leveling up...)

Serara sighs as she opens the window, her housekeeper EXP is increasing today too. The EXP for main class and subclass are independent. Subclass are much simpler in design than main class, you will level up if you accumulate 10 EXP, the limit should be either level 90 or 100.

Serara's housekeeper's level was 42 yesterday, but it is 44 now. Recently, her subclass rises 3 levels everyday, an incredible speed. She might max out her subclass while hiding in Susukino.

(I don't want to be a NEET grinding level, that would be so sad...)

She has been doing laundry and house chores the whole day, of course her level will increase. But maybe she is not a maid, but a housewife? This thought rises in Serara's mind. This might be a fine title to have for a girl her age, but the feeling of embarrassment is more prominent.

(No way! No way! Maybe I am a maiden waiting for my kitty-husband to come home!)

Serara starts polishing the table wares to hide her embarrassment.

This way of killing time won't trouble others and looks very peaceful from the side.

"Miss Serara, I'm home nya."

The door opens and an amazing man returns.

This zone is an independent space with monthly rental fees, so only players authorized by the owner can enter. The man entering the house is a werecat.

His slender figure and green corduroy jackets makes him look like a middle age rifleman from drawing books. His long limbs accentuate his skinny figure. His round head has a pair of triangular ears on top like a mischievous cat from fairy tails. The whiskers on either side of his face makes him look majestic and cute.

He is Nyanta.

A demihuman with cats features from the 8 races available for the players to choose, werocats.

"Welcome back Mr Nyanta."

Serara bows.

"How was the town?"

Nyanta tilts his head slightly and gives a vague smile. His slit like eyes makes her feel at ease, but Serara is unable to see other minute change in expression.

"Same as always. it wasn't good, it wasn't bad."

Serara expression sinks at his words. Nyanta said it wasn't bad, but since it didn't improve, it means the situation is still atrocious.

Susukino's security continues to deteriorate. With the small population, they cannot maintain order spontaneously and is becoming a dog eat dog world.

The main reason for this development is the guild Brigandia. It has a nasty reputation since the Elder Tales days, a congregation of notorious people expelled from Akiba and Nakasu.

Prioritizing profits, their aggressive style turns them into a real group of bandits after the Apocalypse.

PK is normal for them, and they might not be satisfied with half the items they get from their victims. They will use intimidation and harassment to extort more money from other players.

They are nasty to both players and NPC.

For many reasons, there is no point for players to mistreat NPC. Take the city guards for instance, their battle prowess and levels are high and can fend off normal players with ease.

The NPC in field zones like merchant caravans, farmers and citizens providing information for the players has low fighting strength but no wealth to speak of.

And these NPC will also provide crucial hints to quests, so normal players won't attack them.

But this group has no qualms bullying the NPC and ignores the settings of the NPC having nothing valuable on them... They treat the NPC as a merchandise and start trading them as slaves.

Players are able to employ NPC in the world of Elder Tales. They are hired for various reasons, but the most common would be to take care of their residence. In Elder Tales where you can purchase a home, talents that manages and cleans your place has a fixed demand in the market.

Be it renting or buying a zone, the monthly maintenance fee will go up if you don't clean your place periodically.

Some NPC with special abilities might not be able to fight on the battlefield, but can serve well in activities such as guild events. It is common to employ NPC.

One of the reason Serara's subclass housekeeper is unpopular is due the job being outsourced to NPC.

If you hire a NPC maid, you can keep a small mansion clean by only paying 800 gold a month. It is understandable for the housekeeper subclass to lose popularity.

Elder Tales is just a well made online RPG. Only the select few NPC like maids, harvester and assistant has unique skills to help the players, you cannot employ other normal NPC.

Their appearance uses the same base models as players, but their communication ability is limited to simple computer artificial intelligence. They can say predetermined lines or converse with you through a few select options. They are simply not worth the effort to attack.

But all sorts of common sense are overturned after the Apocalypse.

The game becomes reality, daily lives becomes a nightmare.

There are many obvious changes after the Apocalypse, with the biggest being the changes of the NPC. They have an actual soul and body in this world.

Their conversational skills and actions are no different from players.

Unless they have special settings, their battle prowess are miles behind players. But if you don't confirm through the status screen, it is hard to tell players and NPC apart.

Another major difference in the number of NPC.

NPC is more human like and increase in population. The evil guild Brigandia treats this 2 facts as ripe fruits to be harvested. The actions of selling people as a tool of entertainment starts in this world.

This is not a profitable business model in Susukino with only 2000 people. It is just actions that mocks the economy instead of making money.

Even the low class action of capturing NPC for sale is just a way to kill time.

Just like the evolution of other foolish ideas, these actions gradually goes out of hand. They shift their focus from tormenting and oppressing people from NPC to female players like Serara.

Serara turns pale as she thought about this. Her vision dims as though a veil is covering her head and her temperature drops.

If the man in front of her did not come to her rescue, she will definitely be in deep trouble.

"Now, now, don't think so hard about it Miss Serara. If you let it bother you, you'll turn old easily nya."

Nyanta waves his hand in front of Serara as he speaks.

"Don't think too much about it, eat some fruits nya... here, eat this."

Serara nods as Nyanta offer her an apple.

The fragrance from the red fruit makes Serara relax.

"This house is so clean. I'm sure you'll be a great wife someday nya."

"That isn't true. Really."

Nyanta sits on a chair by the dining table and comments casually. His words makes Serara's temperature rise.

Nyanta refers to himself as an old man.

From the feeling of his voice, Nyanta is much older than Serara. Serara who is in her 2nd year of high school will not be surprised if Nyanta is twice her age.

But even so, Serara don't think Nyanta is as old as he says. Serara shares this thought with him once and Nyanta replies the credit goes to the well designed characters in the game. But Serara doesn't think so.

(Mr Nyanta must surely be... a handsome middle aged gentleman. Cool, wise, mature and cheerful.)

Even if this is a game with amazing character designs, Serara feels appearance doesn't really matters when they are playing together. And after the Apocalypse, Serara is very certain of Nyanta's character since they are living under the same roof (due to emergency situations).

Nyanta gives the feeling of a dependable and mature man. He isn't intimidating and Serara feels a sense of security when she is with Nyanta. His silver triangular ears are charming like a noble cat, his slender figure is so cool.

(Mr Nyanta is so in shape, I look kind of fat being next to him... I am a little overweight...)

Objectively speaking, Serara has a normal build of a woman. But such stunted thoughts form when she looks at Nyanta.

Nyanta has muscles all over his body, but it feels like he is made from pencils.

"How are those people who are coming for you doing nya?"

Nyanta arrange the items he purchased on the dining table and ask. Crescent moon alliance, the guild Serara belongs to have already sent a 3 man team from Akiba to Susukino for her. Serara and Nyanta both knew about this and is their common topic.

Nyanta is impressed by the movement speed of this team. Although they can't contact the team directly, but Crescent moon alliance's guild master Marielle will contact Serara several times daily, so Serara knows their approximate position.

"Yes, they are doing fine, they'll probably arrive before noon tomorrow."

Serara reports.

She can't stay here anymore when help arrives, and have to go back to Akiba.

What plans do Nyanta have? Serara is afraid to ask.

Nyanta only aided her out of kindness, so Serara is not sure how much she can ask of him. She is unable to repay him for all Nyanta has done. But when Serara brought this up, he will dismiss it with a laugh saying 'helping the young ones are the obligation and joy of the elderly'.

(Even though I am happy he said that... But he only treat me like a child after all...)

"Please bear with this a little while longer. Miss Serara must feel uncomfortable being confined in such a small house, so just endure it a bit more. Relax, help is definitely coming."

Nyanta's smile makes Serara miss her chance to ask again.

Part 2

Another day pass.

Shiroe's group set up their base dozens of minutes away from Susukino for surveillance as scheduled.

Susukino is a city zone located in Ezzo Empire. Ezzo Empire is equivalent to Sapporo in the old world and is set as a field zone.

It is a fortress city with farming zones, many NPC resides here.

To be safe, Shiroe found a inconspicuous collapsed house in the suburbs to use as their base, observing the entrance into Susukino.

"There is no need to be on guard right now my lord."

"But there is a fishy atmosphere, this place is lifeless."

Shiroe nods in agreement with both their assessment and takes out a piece of paper from his pocket. It is a rough sketch of Susukino.

"Susukino has one major road... something like this. The uptown area is in the east, the central square is to the east of this place, as for us..." Shiroe draws an arrow. "... we are going in from the west."

"Can't we meet up outside the city?"

"That's a bad idea shrimp."

"Is that so pervert Naotsugu?"

They refuse to back down, calling each other shrimp and pervert. Shiroe only soothe them this one time as he explains.

"Our respawn point is in Akiba since that is the last city we visit. If we meet up outside and are wiped out in a fight, we would respawn in the Akiba cathedral after some time... but Miss Serara would respawn at the Susukino cathedral. So if we meet up outside and gets wiped out, we will return to Akiba while Miss Serara stays at Susukino. We will need to start all over, which I want to avoid."

"I understand."

Akatsuki nods while Naotsugu have a smug 'I told you so' look on his face.

"Next up is our formation. Miss A... Akatsuki, I would like you to hide yourself with 'sneak' and 'silent move' please."

"No 'please' my lord."

"Eh, I understand... Naotsugu, me and Akatsuki who is hiding her presence will enter the city normally and head to the meeting point, an abandoned building. Akatsuki will find a hiding place with a vantage view of the whole building. Contact me if you see anything."

The serious girl with black hair nods with a serious expression.

"Naotsugu will guard the entrance, try to find a spot that overlooks both the road and the interior of the building. Wait there and be prepared for any emergencies inside. I will go straight into the building, meet up with Miss Serara and escort out to Naotsugu as fast as possible."

"Okay. Eh, what about the third party assisting Serara?"

"I have not ascertain his identity yet, but I hope he will leave Susukino together with us. We will leave his decision to go to Akiba til later."

Shiroe thinks for a moment before continuing:

"It is highly possible Serara is on the friend list of a Brigandia guild member."

Unlike it's name suggest, you do not need approval before adding someone to your friend list. You can determine whether a person on your friend list is online, you can also check to see if they are in the same zone as you.

"If that is the case, they'll locate her and send pursuit the minute she leaves her hiding spot. The best case will be to leave Susukino before that happens. They probably won't find us if we are 2 or 3 zones away."

Serara is currently hiding in an independent zone of a building. Put simply, Serara won't be detected by people who adds her to their friend list if she hides there.

But if she leaves and goes into the Susukino city zone, they will notice her presence. The group will need to go through the Susukino city zone in order to return to Akiba.

Shiroe has already planned for this on his journey here and explained it in detail to the others. His meticulous formation is play it safe, but Shiroe don't think anything will actually go wrong.

But everything depends on how unscrupulous the problem guilds really are. Unlike handling monsters, you can't simply attempt the quest again after getting wiped out.

(There are tons of bad scenarios. This is the reason people say I think too much and is an introvert.)

It won't be a problem if his worries turn out to be for nothing. Shiroe nods at Naotsugu and Akatsuki as he thinks about this.

"If we are fast, we can say goodbye to Susukino in an hour."

"I support my lords battle plans."

After tying down the hand signals for actions and the meeting points in case of emergencies, the trio heads for Susukino.

The entrance is designed to look like a reinforced castle gate. Angular braces bolts the gate at all angles, giving it an intimidating look.

The young Ezzo Empire is built by the human emperor Aru Radiruga. In the settings of the Japanese server, it is a strong and warlike nation. Weapons are hung all over the cities and the colorful standards gives off a military atmosphere.

(This is different from Akiba. I visited when it was a game, but seeing it like this is totally different from what I remember...)

The decor, atmosphere and details of the city that is only the background in the game is a fresh experience for Shiroe right now. Naotsugu feels the same as he looks around with interest while wrapped in his thick wool cloak.

The long road leading into the city zone.

The NPC walking in the streets are lifeless and the occasional players they saw have gloomy expressions.

"The atmosphere is terrible, I wouldn't want to live here."

"Yeah."

Naotsugu whispers and Shiroe replies in the same low volume. He sympathize with them, but the feeling of frustration in his heart burns stronger.

He felt this sensation during his journey here, but he is losing control of it right now. He felt irritated and his temperature rises with his unhappy feelings.

Although he wants to do something to improve the situation, he do not have any practical means or ability.

The wary Shiroe looks behind him every now and then. But he can't feel Akatsuki's presence or where she is. She must be nearby, but to erase her presence so completely makes Shiroe feel uneasy.

After traveling a distance, he sees an abandoned building with the broken sign saying 'Karaoke', the landmark building Marielle mentioned. Shiroe signals with his hand and enters the building with Naotsugu.

There steel braces reinforcing the cracks in the concrete walls everywhere. The buildings looks more structurally sound than Akiba.

Naotsugu turns right right after entering the lobby and found a security guard post. Shiroe listens intently for any sound as he moves deeper into the building, up the stairs to the 2nd floor.

After contacting Marielle by telepathy, Shiroe is told 'she will be reaching soon'. Things has been going as planned so far, putting Shiroe at ease. It has been 6 minutes since he entered Susukino city.

"Umm, hello!"

Shiroe turns around casually when he hears 2 sets of footsteps approaching. A young girl wearing leather armour with rounded silhouette unique to healers greets him. She tie her long hair in a low ponytail and looks up at Shiroe with guilty eyes. This along with her panicky demeanour reminds Shiroe of a small animal poking its head out of the forest.

Shiroe smiles.

"I am Serara from Crescent moon alliance, thank you for coming."

"Nya."

"Wait, is that you Chief?"

Even though it is rude to Serara who is bowing her head in thanks, Shiroe can't help retorting loudly.

"Hey, I was thinking who he might be, isn't this Shiroe? That explains how you arrived so quickly."

This is the man known as 'chief' or 'cat sage' in the debauchery tea party, the swashbuckler with cat ears... Nyanta.

Part 3

Nyanta is a player that gives off a unique air during his days in the debauchery tea party. He is steady, cool and has a kind nature.

He can also be described as a sunbathing cat. Anyway, he is the one rare sensible person restraining the playful group that tends to go out of control.

Nyanta refers to himself as an old man and behaves like one with his steadfast maturity.

With voice chat being the main way of communicating in Elder Tales, it is possible to guess someone's age through their voice.

The self proclaimed old man Nyanta sounds younger than 50, should be a bit older than 40, and is 30 plus of age at best.

Online gaming is a culture of the young.

There is no surprise in finding players older than 30, but you will be hard pressed to see any over 40. Nyanta probably calls himself an old man through this relative difference in age, which differs from how Shiroe sees it.

For this case, an adult has nothing to do with biological age.

Others think of Nyanta as an adult because of his character and experience.

The adult in this case doesn't mean someone who can't read the atmosphere and disrupt everybody's playing time. It refers to a person who always have your back and gives you advice when you consult them.

Nyanta will help any comrade that comes to him for advice, but he will not overdo it with his aid. They will pull themselves together after hearing his warm voice and work hard on their issue. This is the reason Nyanta is loved and respected by the younger players.

His nickname of chief and cat sage is an expression of the good will by other players.

Debauchery tea party is not a guild, it is just a group of players.

Many players there are not in any guild, but some belongs to one. But big guilds with strict rules frowns on their members being on such close terms with outsiders.

This is not because of discrimination (although it could be), it is just concern with manpower flowing out. For instance, rather than letting the high level members mentor beginners without guilds or from other guilds, it would be better to teach the beginners in your own guild. Guilds are meant for mutual support after all.

From this perspective, debauchery tea party regulars are either from small guilds or not in one.

Nyanta belongs to the guild 'cat food'.

But Shiroe has never seen any other players from 'cat food' it should be an obscure mini guild.

When Shiroe ask Nyanta how his guild is doing, Nyanta replies 'I love sitting on the porch, but the house was getting old. Something like that nya' with a smile.

Although Nyanta is the adviser for the debauchery tea party, he is not a man with high authority or status. Shiroe can sense that Nyanta is concerned about how the trend of the tea party will affect him.

Nyanta maintains a calm and playful demeanor, but he definitely likes the festive events of the tea party right? He probably wants to enjoy himself among the 'young ones'... That's how Shiroe feels.

"Ah, sorry about that Miss Serara, please call me Shiroe. I actually knows this sage."

"That's right miss Serara, this is Shiroe, a smart and competent young man nya. The plan is sure to work with him here nya."

"I see you still meow all the time chief."

Shiroe gives a teasing smile.

Making fun of Nyanta's meowing has been a joy of Shiroe since the tea party days.

"What are you talking about Shiroe Nya? This is the correct way for cat people to speak, a wonderful way to end a sentence nya." <TL: Nyanta uses the english word 'wonderful', relevant to next sentence.>

"Is it 'wan' or 'nya', just stick to one okay?" <TL: cats goes nya, dogs goes wan.>

The light hearted chat between the Shiroe and Nyanta surprises Serara. She calms herself and ask.

"You know each other?"

"We were very close Nya. Shiroe used to check me for fleas."

"I did not."

Serara can only nod with a stunned expression.

"Since Shiroe is here... who are the other 2 Nya?"

"Naotsugu is here, the other is a girl named Akatsuki, a level 90 assassin. We have gone through 10 days and 160 training sessions, she is good."

"Then Naotsugu is here too nya, and a new friend?... This is excellent nya. Shiroe is finally at this phase mya."

Nyanta who always squints his eyes into a slit while smiling looks at Shiroe with a deep smile.

"Chief Nyanta... What happened to 'cat rice'?"

"The house couldn't handle the bad weather and half the house caved in. Perhaps it is a sign from above, telling me to relocate to Akiba."

"That... Ah, wait a minute."

Nyanta's answer sounds more grandiose than sad. Just when Shiroe was about to ask further, a soothing ringtone sounds in his ears.

"A menacing group led by a monk is approaching the building. They have 3 weapon-based class and 2 healers, probably in the same party. They are planning to surround you, will reach in about 2 minutes."

The concise words brings up the sketch of Susukino in Shiroe's mind

"Our allies detected a party of 6 led by a monk approaching, any idea who they are?"

"That is!"

That should be the guild master of 'brigandia' Demikas nya. He is a level 90 monk, so are his teammates Nya... He is the mastermind behind all this, the enemy nya."

Nyanta use the term enemy clearly.

He never address any player this way in the game before, this clear up any doubts Shiroe has.

"Is there a back door here? We will fight our way through if there is a need."

Part 4

"This way nya."

"You doing okay Miss Serara?"

"Of course!"

Serara chase after Nyanta leading the way with the rescue team member Shiroe behind her.

(So he is Nyanta's friend... He looks hard to get along with, but seems very smart.)

Serara judges based in Shiroe's sharp eyes.

Peeking behind, she can see Shiroe watching the vicinity while talking through telepathy. His feet are steady and fast, definitely experienced in this.

Brigandia members has started combing through the areas they find suspicious.

They probably found Serara's whereabouts through the friend list.

That's what Serara concludes.

It will only be a matter of them before they are found. The layout of Susukino is very simple, all roads are laid out in a grid like a chess board. No matter what route they take, they will be surrounded if the enemies have sufficient numbers.

Shiroe and Nyanta decides to force their way through even though they know this.

They say this is a necessary gamble to return to Akiba.

Shiroe should be contacting Naotsugu and Akatsuki who is not here. The three of them moves fast but steadily towards the main road that leads west.

The city gate is full of Brigandia members as expected.

"Fighting is prohibited in the streets of Susukino... What do they want?"

"They will let us through the first time."

Shiroe mentions the enemies will give way, but that is just this one time. They will wait until Shiroe's group is outside and attack. That is brigandia's plan, Serara is sure Shiroe and Nyanta understand this too.

"That's how it is nya."

Nyanta didn't ask Shiroe further about his bad premonition out of concern for Serara.

But the kind attitude of Nyanta differs from his time with Serara. She doesn't know what is different, but it gives her the chills.

"What... Should I do...?"

Serara's voice is trembling. Demikas grab her wrist once, Serara loses her courage just recalling his muscular arms and disgusting smile.

"About that..."

Shiroe looks far ahead, you can see his expression fading from his profile. Shiroe who looks more unapproachable with his temperature seemingly dropping scares Serara.

"If they're letting us leave, then we just go. That makes things easier."

"... Eh?"

Serara stares in surprise at Shiroe's words.

Battle is allowed after leaving the city zone.

There will be a fight if they are caught. Brigandia have enough members to guard all the roads out of the city.

Nyanta, Shiroe and her would be murdered.

Serara predicts.

No matter how experienced Shiroe and Nyanta is, regardless of how high level their allies might be, there are still only 5 of them. And that includes Serara who is below level 30.

Serara feels there is no way they can win their foes in PK. The difference in numbers is too large.

"To escape cleanly, we need to create an opening. They will pursue us indefinitely if we are in close range. They definitely know someone is assisting Miss Serara, or she wouldn't be able to get food all this time. They also know we are few in numbers, so Brigandia probably plans to surround and PK us a short distance outside the non combat city zone. Their priority probably will be your confederate Nyanta. That will destroy your will and put you under their control. I am almost certain of that."

Shiroe's pure analysis sounds like a bystanders viewpoint.

"They might kill us? How can you say that?"

"Now now, don't get so upset Miss Serara. Just leave this to Shiroe and you will be fine."

Nyanta says calmly ignoring Serara's panic and unease. Nyanta already informed Shiroe the details of brigandia's members and strengths, but Serara still don't get why the 2 of them are so nonchalant in the face of imminent danger.

"Chief Nyanta?"

"What is it nya?"

"If you went 1 on 1 with their leader..."

"A foolish question nya."

Nyanta nods at Shiroe's query, scaring Serara with his spirit. She heard from experienced players that PK is different from fighting monsters, this is the same in the alternate world.

Unlike the limited variety of attacks monsters uses base on their instinct, there is no way to tell what other players might do. The tension of battle is several times stronger, even the most battle hardened players could make mistakes... That is what Henrietta told Serara.

"Let's do it this way. We will leave the city, Brigandia will PK us at a place where we can't flee into the city. We will defeat their leader and make our escape."

(What an absurd plan!)

Serara turns pale.

This is not a plan, it is just going with Brigandia's flow right? This is a suicidal move in a sense. Serara can't put her thoughts into words even though she wants to.

"No problems nya. You are still the same Shiroe I knew nya."

More incredibly, Nyanta actually agrees with Shiroe. Serara turns around in surprise as Nyanta opens his right eye while replying.

"It's been a while since my last hearty meal, watch closely Miss Serara nya. Don't worry I won't let those ruffians touch you nya."

Seeing Nyanta like this, Serara swear in her heart to endure whatever fear she might face.

Part 5

That was how things progressed to this stage.

It is going just as Shiroe planned.

Serara's group walk through the gates under the disdain look of brigandia's members. About ten of people cut off their retreat route, shadowing them from behind.

They will be attacked a short distance from the city. Even Serara who usually has nothing to do with murderous intents can feel the twisted air, unable to differentiate between malicious and kindness. Her trembling shoulders are the best evidence.

(It must be hard on her to trust me.)

Shiroe who is aware of Serara's worries thinks. She is right in a sense.

Brigandia is powerful force, it is understandable for her doubt the possibility of victory.

The tense air gets stronger with each step they takes.

As they get further away from the safety of the city, brigandia's men starts to close in and encircle Shiroe's group.

"Here should be fine."

Shiroe says softly before raising his voice and ask:

"Which of you is Brigandia's Demikas?"

This statement causes a stir among the surrounding players. They did not expect such an open challenge.

"Now, Shiroe, asking something so loudly is rude nya. I know which one he is, he is the excessively huge guy standing over yonder nya. Hey, Demikas!"

The man who appears as if on cue from Nyanta is the guild master of Brigandia, Demikas.

His light armour that looks like chest plate covers his muscular body. He is equipped with a weapon on his hands akin to tiger claws.

Since he is based off the 3d in game model, this man should be quite handsome. But his expression right reflects the evil in his heart.

"So you two are the flies that has been bothering Serara?"

"That will just be me nya. And it's not a fly, but a cat nya." Nyanta teases without a care in the world.

Unlike the content of his speech, Nyanta uses a mature and charming tone, so it is not too intimidating.

But he follow up with some spunk.

"... Recklessness is the way of the young nya, and tolerance is the beauty of adulthood. But there is such a thing as going too far."

"What are you saying mongrel?"

"What I'm going to say is the main point, listen carefully nya. Demikas, you have crossed the line. Since you planned to PK, this will save some time. Reigning in children who strays too far beyond the line is also the obligations of the elders. Come on, I will fight you one on one nya."

(Although it is rare for the Chief to taunt someone, but it can't be helped since Brigandia are acting like criminals.)

Shiroe checks the numbers of enemies using the menu in his head as he thinks.

"Hah! Ridiculous, why should I fight you on your terms? Didn't you see my 10 buddies over here?"

"Sorry to interrupt Mr Demikas, but it doesn't have to be you. I'd prefer the one in gray robes, isn't that an artifact drop from the Fire Lizard's cave? You seem stronger, so we will be okay

with you instead of the monk. It would be more satisfying for both of us if the strongest fighters settle things. Let's challenge this mage Chief Nyanta."

"You heard of of me, Londark of Gray Steel and still dare to say this?"

"You are right nya... Let us finish this nya."

Deviating from the plan surprised Serara, Shiroe has already switch his target to the male mage besides Demikas. Nyanta seems to support this, making the Brigandia members confused.

Some of them look at the mage Londark, others watch Demikas for his reaction. Even Shiroe's party can see the divide between the 2 groups.

(They are not united. That is expected since they are a coalition formed at the spur of the moment. The mage Londark is the number 2 man in the guild and the tactician of Demikas. Demikas, I understand how much control you have over your members.)

Shiroe feels a flame flickering under his calm emotions.

Shiroe is not adept with dealing with others. You can say he hate mingling with idiots, but it doesn't mean he can't do it.

He is a pacifist towards other players and do not wish to fight them.

But he can battle if there is a need.

It is more than that.

Shiroe knows what is coming next.

His emotion is like the sea in the dark night, an urge to destroy fueled by his frustration.

'Eat a hearty meal'.

That's how Nyanta describes it. Keeping his warm and sunny, and replacing it with a cold grin that reveals his cat fangs.

Shiroe has a similar fang in his heart.

If you have the guts to wield a sword, you have to bear the resolve to die by a sword. Shiroe agrees to this concept subconsciously. There is no need for mercy.

"Mr Londark of Gray Steel right? You have a nick name, we will prefer to fight you... Chief Nyanta here will be your opponent. Let's duke this out, we won't run away."

"Let's begin, judging from your equipment you are a top class mage nya? Deciding things with a match should be your style nya? We can ignore the cowardly meatball here who is too scared to fight himself."

Nyanta's insult is the last straw. Demikas who is infuriated by this walk towards Nyanta with anger, tension and a sneer.

"Very well, I will fight you. A reckless bastard like you, I will use my fist and send you to... Heaven!"

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ TL: Maybe bro fits better.
2. ↑ TL: Chuunibyou
3. ↑ TL Note: Mamare likes deep words. Syllogism means conclusion/proposition
4. ↑ TL: Marie-nee!
5. ↑ TL: wow is pronounced woah
6. ↑ TL: there are countless subclasses