

Chapter 12: Recruitment Drive: Cute Only

A Day Later

“So this is a NerveGear, huh?” I muttered, holding the black helmet in my hands.

“Yep! It has crap security, so I should be able to come with you once we full dive,” Cortana said proudly, puffing up her chest. “While decently impressive for the 21st century, it was no match for me. Compared to the tech from our first world, hacking the servers was a piece of cake.”

“Hahaha, well, you can’t really compare the technology from this era to what was available in the 26th century. You might as well be *the* AI,” I said in amusement, pulling her into a hug she gladly returned.

“You better believe it. Since being given new life by you, my abilities have only increased~” Cortana preened, clearly enjoying the praise.

“The only question now is—do you want to be my party member, or do you want to play the role of assistant/fairy like you used to in the past?” I asked, looking down at her curiously.

“Hmm... I’m not much of a physical fighter, and my abilities would be better served making sure we’re not tracked by the Cardinal System,” Cortana said after thinking about it for a moment.

Shrugging, I nodded. “Sounds good to me. Now how about we get this show started?”

I pulled away from the embrace, grinning, and walked over to the bed before lying down and placing the NerveGear on my head.

“Huhuhu... impatient as ever, huh?” Cortana giggled as she disappeared in a flash of data, transferring her consciousness into the NerveGear.

Thanks to the Cyber Shroud she possessed, her capabilities with anything technological had reached unprecedented levels. Hacking anything in this era was child’s play for her.

“Let’s cause some chaos!” I exclaimed with a smirk. “But more importantly, let’s have some fun fucking with Kayaba. Hopefully to the point that he goes insane.”

“Well, I’m ready whenever you are,” Cortana said telepathically, her voice brimming with excitement.

“Yosh... Link Start!”

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Aincrad — Floor 1, Town of Beginnings — Nov 17, 2022

Materializing in an alleyway away from prying eyes, I stood still for a moment, getting used to my new avatar. Unlike in the Overlord world, this one felt much more masterfully crafted—I could feel the wind against my face and the cobblestone streets beneath my feet.

Finally opening my eyes, I grinned as the Town of Beginnings came into view.

“Hmm... it feels a bit weird being back in virtual reality. How’re you doing, Cortana?” I groaned and stretched my virtual body.

A moment later, in a flash of blue light, Cortana materialized—taking the form of a pixie with delicate wings sprouting from her back, dressed in a fitting white dress.

“Doing fine,” Cortana said, glancing down at her body and getting familiar with it. “I took the liberty of using a model from that ALO game coming out in the near future.”

“Good choice,” I said with an appreciative nod, eyeing her curvy figure and the slightly revealing dress.

Noticing my gaze, Cortana smirked and struck a pose for me. “I’m glad you like it~”

“Course I do,” I said with a smile, then looked at our surroundings and walked out of the alley with Cortana sitting comfortably on my shoulder.

“First order of business is buying a bunch of spare weapons and power-leveling so hard that I end up bullying the First Floor Boss in less than a month,” I muttered to my companion, not caring in the slightest if I was overheard. A few nearby players gave us curious looks—which we ignored completely.

“Leave that to me,” Cortana replied confidently. “With my ability to access every quest in this game, and your absurd leveling speed thanks to all the OP Template Stackings you’ve purchased in the past, I calculate you’ll reach at least level 20 before then.”

“Perfect. All we need now is money... Hmm, I wonder...” I muttered as I pulled up the game’s HUD.

Then, a second HUD appeared—my Company HUD.

I scrolled over to the currency section, withdrew a couple million, and grinned as my SAO balance instantly reflected the same amount.

“Oh yeah... we are officially cheaters now. Hmhmhm.” I smirked, beyond amused at the sheer achievement.

Like they say—*if you're not cheating, you're not trying.*

Money was always one of the core requirements in every RPG—whether it was for better armor, stronger weapons, or necessary items like health and mana potions. And just like that, I had bypassed that entire grind.

“Hahahaha! I've officially become the thing I hated most back when I played RPGs. A fucking whale,” I said, laughing and shaking my head. “Oh well, I'm evil, so it's practically expected of me.”

“I wouldn't really call that cheating,” Cortana said, trying to sound comforting. “More like... using all your resources to your advantage.”

Her massive, excited grin gave her away, though. She found it just as amusing as I did.

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A Week Later

This is fun.

There's nothing quite like slaughtering your way through hordes of monsters without worrying about death—unlike the rest of the poor bastards stuck in this death game.

Turns out we had highly overestimated how difficult leveling would be with all my stacked cheats. In just one week of nonstop grinding in the Labyrinth, I'd already hit level 20.

Naturally, I'd gone with swords as my main combat style—always been a fan. I leveled up One-Handed Sword as much as I could, but I didn't stop there. I branched out into every major melee skill I could find: Blade Throwing, Katana, Mace, Martial Arts, One-Handed Dagger, One-Handed Spear... if it involved slicing, smashing, or stabbing, I was training it.

Eventually, I planned to master all of them—to max out every weapon category worth using. Normally, that would be insane. No sane player could juggle that many weapon trees without falling behind those who specialized.

But I wasn't just any player.

I was a cheating cheat with enough perks to rewrite the rules. And with the tools at my disposal, it wasn't just possible—it was inevitable.

Still, even I had my limits. Power leveling for days on end lost its appeal after a while. Which was why we decided to take a small break... and focus on my *other* reason for being in this game.

"U-Umm... are you sure it's okay for me to party with you, Lucan-sama?" a soft voice asked from my left.

I turned and met the gaze of a beautiful girl with white hair, golden eyes, and a shy expression. She wore a black outfit with green and gold accents, and a one-handed sword rested at her side.

Lux. Or rather, Hiyori Kashiwazaka, her name in the real world.

I'd found her fumbling her way through a mob pack in the Labyrinth—clearly struggling. I cleaned up the monsters without breaking a sweat and casually invited her to team up. She agreed right away.

Not that I had any doubts she would. Lux was a bit of a pushover. That was exactly why she ended up in Laughing Coffin in canon—easily manipulated, lacking direction.

Well, that and the fact she was already bound to me without even realizing it. Somewhere deep down, her instincts told her she could trust me.

"First of all," I said, rolling my eyes as we walked through Tolbana, where I was currently staying, "we've been over this. Just call me Lucan."

Her lips parted, like she wanted to apologize again, but I cut her off.

"And second—yes, I'm sure. You're cute. I don't mind teaching you a thing or two, even protecting you if it comes down to it," I said with a shrug.

No shame. Just facts.

People always liked to pretend the world was fair, but in truth? Beautiful or cute people always got treated better. It was a universal truth—and I had no problem taking advantage of it.

“C-Cute?! M-Me!?”

And there she went—off into fantasy land again. Second time today.

The first had been back in the Labyrinth when we introduced ourselves. She’d asked why I helped her.

I told her: *Because you’re cute.*

Worked like a charm.

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Shortly After — Tolbana Inn

Before too long, we arrived at the inn I was staying at. I invited Lux to join me for a meal, and—still blushing—she shyly accepted.

As we sat and ordered, I kept my gaze fixed on her. Lux tried to meet it, but faltered after a second, turning her head with a nervous flush.

“First order of business is getting you some new gear,” I said, glancing down at her common clothes. They looked nice enough on her, but stat-wise? Total trash. “After that, we’ll see if we can find one more person to join our party before heading back to the Labyrinth and power-leveling you properly.”

“U-Umm... I don’t have much money for armor,” Lux muttered, eyes lowered in embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll handle it,” I replied with a casual wave of my hand, as if it were already a done deal.

“B-But that’s—”

I raised an eyebrow—just slightly.

She caught the look and instantly went quiet, nodding shyly, another blush creeping onto her face.

"Thank you..." she whispered.

I nodded in satisfaction. She was starting to get it.

Deciding to reward her progress, I gave her a break from the teasing and kept quiet as we waited for the food to arrive. At the same time, I reached out telepathically.

"How's it going, Cortana?"

Cortana had been busy all day trying to locate the AI known as Yui—still a hidden system connected to the Cardinal System. With her Cyber Shroud, Cortana could interact with digital entities, making this mission possible. Once Yui was captured, I'd give her a physical body and disconnect her from Cardinal entirely.

"I found her," Cortana replied with satisfaction. Her voice in my head made me grin—just enough to earn a curious look from Lux, which I waved away casually.

"Give me a few hours, and you'll get to say hello to a rather cute AI."

"That's my girl," I replied, pleased.

Moments later, our food arrived.

I focused again on the here and now—enjoying a calm afternoon meal with a cute girl.

"Have you played games before, Lucan?" Lux suddenly asked, her voice timid. She nearly added an honorific to my name but managed to catch herself in time.

"Yep," I replied, nodding. "You could say I'm a bit of an expert."

She blinked, then leaned forward slightly, voice lower. "Aren't you... afraid of d-dying?"

I laughed—loud and genuine.

"Of course not."

What a ridiculous question.

I was literally Death. What the hell were a bunch of code-generated monsters and rusty swords going to do to me?

I'd joined this death game purely out of boredom—to blow off steam. Even if, by some miracle, a monster managed to kill my avatar, what would happen? Nothing. I'd wake up back at our temporary residence, log in with a new account, and be right back at it.

Death?

That was *my* domain.

Lux blinked, caught off guard by my answer. She stared at me in silence for a few moments, as if trying to process it. Then, slowly, her expression softened—and a quiet smile appeared on her beautiful face.

"I actually think that's pretty cool of you, Lucan," she murmured. "Everyone I've met so far either looks completely defeated... or acts so serious all the time."

I didn't doubt it.

Unlike most schmucks trapped in this game, I could leave whenever I wanted. Even if I stayed, the NerveGear was utterly useless against me. With all the layers of defense I had in place, it might as well be a toy.

"Whether it's here or in the real world," I said calmly, "you've got to live your life to the fullest. Humans have short lifespans—too short to waste worrying about small things. You gain nothing by stressing over what *might* happen tomorrow... if it means forgetting to live today."

It was more truth than I usually shared. That mindset had shaped me ever since I got this second chance at life. And I had no regrets. Living for myself, doing whatever I pleased—without being chained by society's definitions of good or evil—was the most freeing experience imaginable.

I didn't judge.

I simply *did*.

"Hihhi..." Lux suddenly giggled, snapping me out of my thoughts. I turned toward her as she quickly covered her mouth, cheeks tinged with red. When she saw me looking, she stiffened slightly.

“S-Sorry! I wasn’t laughing at you,” she said hurriedly. “It’s just... I found it kinda funny hearing something like that come from someone who looks my age.”

I chuckled and waved it off.

“It’s fine. No worries—I get it.”

There were only a few things that could actually land someone on my shit list—and that wasn’t one of them.

Betrayal and trying to take what’s mine? Yeah, those would do it.

Oh—and being too smug or arrogant toward me without earning it. I could admit I was a prideful bastard. The Lucifer Template only amplified that part of me.

But a girl laughing at my philosophical musings?

That was just cute.

With the earlier tension replaced by a soft, easygoing atmosphere, we continued our meal in peace—making small talk. Most of it came down to Lux asking me questions about how to improve, sprinkled with bits and pieces of real-life background from both of us.

After finishing up, we hit the town, our goal clear: find someone interesting to join Lux’s training. I had to admit, I kind of missed having minions to boss around. Until I got them back, I’d just have to make do with training up some newbies—and molding them into monsters.

Speaking of newbies...

As we turned a corner, I spotted the unmistakable brown hair and twin pigtails of a girl browsing the vendor stalls. No Pina yet—yep, it was her.

Silica.

She was just wandering the streets, casually checking out the marketplace like a wide-eyed tourist.

“Hey there,” I called out casually, stepping forward with Lux beside me. “The cute girl with the pigtails—wanna join our party?”

“H-Huh!?” Silica spun around in confusion, glancing left and right like she wasn’t sure I was talking to her. “Are you... talking to me?”

“That’s right. I’m talking to you,” I said with a grin, standing relaxed while Lux blushed awkwardly next to me. “So, what do you say?”

My words finally registered, and Silica’s face turned bright red. She raised her hands to her cheeks as the compliment hit her like a crit.

I couldn’t blame her really. My current looks would put all male super models to shame and Silica was always weak when it came to pretty boys.

“U-Umm... a-ah, I-I mean—”

She started stammering, completely overwhelmed and unsure how to respond—but notably, not declining.

Deciding to help her out, Lux took a step forward.

“H-Hello there. Nice to meet you. I’m Lux, and this is Lucan. Please excuse him—he’s a bit forward—but he’s actually a good person, and we’d be really happy if you joined our party.”

It took a second for Lux’s words to click. Silica looked back and forth between us, still confused but now flustered for a whole new reason.

“O-Oh! Please don’t worry—I wasn’t offended or anything!” she exclaimed, waving her hands wildly... only to blush even harder when she realized how that sounded.

“I-I mean... are you sure you want to party with me? I’m not very good, and I’m still level 1...”

“No big deal,” I said, shrugging and thumbing toward Lux beside me. “She’s not very high-level either. I’ll train both of you up.”

Silica seemed a little more at ease after hearing that. The worry in her expression softened, though she still fidgeted in place.

“I-I guess I don’t mind... but why do you want *me* in your party?”

“Because you’re very cute,” I said with a casual smile.

The blush returned full force.

Needless to say, she joined—after she calmed down enough to stop looking like a cute tomato.

The only thing left to do now was use the time until they found the Floor Boss to make Lux and Silica into complete monsters.

That and recreating the scenes from the hospital too, which was probably more important.