

瀬尾つかさ
TSUKASA SEO



スカイ・ワールド

Story to the End of Blue Expanse

SKYWORLD #01



ファンタジア文庫

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▽:P:P:P

Name: Alice Class: ???



▽PLAYER

Name: Kasumi Class: Light Warrior



▽PLAYER

Name: Jun Class: Magic Swordsman



▽PLAYER

Name: Eri Class: White Magician

Chapter 1: Altaria Island**Part 1**

Junichiro Mikimori knew that he had a poor sense of direction. On the day of his high school entrance exams more than a year ago, he wandered around an unfamiliar part of town, searching for the high school itself. He continued to relive that traumatic experience in his dreams even to this day.

Because of this, when he set out on his journey, he frequently checked his map to make sure he knew where he was. This was especially true in the forest, which was rampant with trees where he had no choice but to follow an unreliable animal trail.

Since the spell Long Walk amplified one's walking speed to that of running, discerning distances could be difficult. He stopped many times to check his surroundings. Despite it being daytime, visibility was low due to the tall trees and unrestrained undergrowth.

"Am I lost?"

He gestured on his academic W-LD tablet to make the equipment window appear. These liquid crystal panels, which were only 7 inches thick, were once able to connect to the Internet almost anywhere, including but not limited to in school and public spaces.

Now, this tablet had a completely different purpose. On its screen, “Jun”, his avatar, was displayed. With the height of a second year high school student and a skinny body, it looked just like Junichiro himself, even replicating his positioning and mean-looking facial expressions.

However, some things differed. First of all, his avatar’s clothing did not match his own. His avatar had leather and iron armor on, while Junichiro himself was wearing his high school uniform.

There was another difference: the hair color. His avatar had ashen gray hair, while he actually had black hair.

The screen was just like an equipment window in a game. And it was just that, simply a very ordinary game screen, until three months ago.

Now, it was different. Junichiro opened the map by tapping on his tablet screen and sighed upon noticing a bright dot. After confirming his location and taking a look at his surroundings, he lifted his head in order to orient himself, as he became unable to ascertain the right way to go when the road disappeared.

“It’s just as I thought. I went the wrong way...”

He realized that he should have checked his map periodically. The superior tier item, Map, would record information about the nearby terrain and surroundings just by him walking around randomly.

That information would then be displayed on the screen. Before he knew it, the animal path disappeared, and he was at a loss for which direction to head in.

If this were just an ordinary MMO, the system of mapping out the world by hand would be considered out of date and excessive. However, that would only make sense if...

He surveyed his surroundings. Dense and overgrown vegetation was everywhere. Insects were buzzing and birds were singing. Upon taking a breath, the clear air, along with the scent of decaying nature, would fill your lungs. The best of it all was that you could touch the nearby tree trunks with your hand, feeling the rough bark and sometimes the damp moss.

Is this really just a game?

Smacking his lips, he shook his head.

"I suppose I have no choice. I'll stop being stingy and use my Wing Boots."

The equipment window reappeared and he tapped the image of his avatar's feet. His footwear changed from his usual high defense boots to boots with white feathers on their heels.

"Yes! Now then..."

“Awaken!” Jun muttered, and almost instantaneously, his body, along with his school uniform, became covered in white light. It remained that way for a moment, and when the light finally dissipated, his clothing and physical appearance had changed to that of the avatar shown on his tablet.

At that moment, the high school student, Junichiro Mikimori became the adventurer, Jun.

“Footwear effect, activate!”

After he uttered those words, the feathers on his shoes started fluttering up and down as if they had been caught in a strong wind. Then—

Jun’s body gently floated up. Wing Boots, as one might derive from their name, bestowed the power of flight upon their wearer, albeit with a limitation: after every use, the boots had to be given five days to recharge before they could be used again.

Jun, turning his body in the process, rose up into the sky. Some birds perching in nearby tree branches flew off in surprise at the sight of a flying human. In just a moment, he was above the trees. He slowly gazed around at his surroundings.

He looked towards the deep forest that appeared to stretch out endlessly in every direction. He noticed a series of steep mountains in the distance. Southwest of those mountains was what appeared to be the town of Gazar.

Jun continued rising. When he became unable to distinguish the trees from one another, he looked down once again.

There, he had an unrestricted view of an oval shaped island. It floated in the skies above an endless sea.

It was Altaria Island. Jun was now hovering above that island, which appeared to be approximately half the size of Shikoku¹...

He diverted his glance towards the clear skies. As expected, there were countless other islands there. Their sizes varied immensely. Some were small islands that one could easily explore in just one hour. Some were larger than even Hokkaido². The islands were all floating at different heights. They were truly a magnificent sight to behold.

“No doubt about it. This is definitely Sky World.”

Sky World.

That was once just the name of a game. Now, it was the name of the world that Jun and many others had come to live in.

¹ The smallest of the four main islands in the Japanese archipelago.

² The largest of the four main islands in the Japanese archipelago.

*

That's right. Sky World was once just the proper noun for the name of the world in the free online game that he had played on his tablet.

In online games called MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), many players connected to the same server and experienced the same world in real-time. Each player played as his or her own game character and took on roles such as magicians and warriors. Some players formed groups and competed against other groups in large-scale competitions.

Sky World was one of those MMORPGs. In the fantasy world Sky World, countless islands floated in the sky. Science and magic coexisted. Adventurers could travel from island to island on airships. Strangely, the game servers were officially launched before the testing phases were even publicized...

Its high degree of perfection, deep gameplay mechanics and ease of use atypical to games designed for tablets attracted many players within a very short period of time.

Many schools using W-LD tablets did not allow software that had not been approved as secure by a special agency to be installed. This software somehow managed to fulfill the approval requirements. The game was constantly praised for its seemingly limitless diversity of players. The parent teacher association, however, made it out to be a hindrance to students' studies.

That never actually became a problem.

No, that paled in comparison to what had actually occurred.

One day, some players woke up and found themselves in a completely different world.

They had woken up in the land of Sky World.

Exactly what had happened to their bodies was still unknown.

People guessed that these tens of thousands of people were sent to this new world.

This world was exactly the same as Sky World, the game.

It was obvious that this world was not merely virtual since it seemed too realistic to be just a fantasy.

The anniversary of the beginning of Sky World came to be known as the Birthday.

It was now three months after the first Birthday.

The players had yet to discover the purpose of this survival game.

Part 2

Kasumi Yukasaki's close friends often teased her, saying, "You're such a 'Yamato Nadeshiko'¹". There was an element of truth to what they said. Her long black hair² was certainly enviable. She always got embarrassed when she heard, "You're so ladylike; you're beautiful!"

Her friends sometimes added other remarks. "Your breasts are too large. Your traditional Japanese clothes do not match them," they said. She just wanted them to leave her alone.

Kasumi was brought up by her old-fashioned grandmother.

Her family consisted of a long line of doctors beginning from the Meiji era³. Her father and mother managed a hospital together. Because of this, they were always busy and often came home very late, so Kasumi's grandmother took on the duty of raising her.

She raised Kasumi strictly, sending Kasumi to an all-girls boarding school to complete high school. That boarding school in the mountains felt like a maximum-security prison.

¹ Yamato Nadeshiko refers to women who embody the traditional virtues of classical Japan.

² Long black hair is one of the characteristics of Yamato Nadeshikos.

³ The Meiji era lasted from 1868 – 1912.

“Never forget about gratitude, and that the feeling after doing a good deed is the reward itself.” Kasumi did not forget her grandmother’s wise words. For this reason, she was not content to merely receive help without returning the favor after being recruited by a local guild.

A large lizard’s sharp claws slashed her leather armor. Kasumi was hit in her chest. An “Oof” escaped her lips as her light purple hair flew around.

“Harmful Status Effect: Paralysis” appeared on the status window at the bottom of her field of vision.

“I can’t believe it!”

Kasumi, biting her lips, noticed the harmful status effect and looked up, glaring at the monster that had attacked her, a Honey Lizard. Honey Lizards were giant lizards approximately the size of a large dog. Their favorite food was honey and, because of that, they commonly dropped high grade Honey. Honey was not sold in stores since it was a general-purpose material used in alchemy. If she could defeat the Honey Lizard, she could help out everybody in her guild. This was why she had spent two hours trekking from the town to the forest. She wanted with all her heart to help out even if she was only capable of just a little bit.

“No use being scared now.”

She wielded her short-sword and, with the aid of motion tracking technology, demonstrated a high level of proficiency in swordsmanship by landing a hit on the

Honey Lizard's arm. She squinted at the HP bar displayed above the monster. It had gone down since she last looked at it. Then, she switched to automatic attack mode. Short-swords could chain together five attacks at most. The first four strikes would be normal sword strikes. However, the fifth strike would be a jump attack. The Honey Lizard bit at Kasumi's feet, but her HP only went down by a little bit. Kasumi and the Honey Lizard continued taking turns going at each other.

Kasumi's Paralysis status effect had a small chance of preventing her from being able to take any action. In spite of this, Kasumi decided that she would continue chain attacking. If the effects of Paralysis activated, the Honey Lizard would surely be able to claw her.

Even so, she expected to win the battle, barring any outside influences.

Suddenly, she got hit in the back. She screamed, "Ow!"

Another Honey Lizard had attacked her from behind.

"Are these Honey Lizards working together!?"

When a Honey Lizard saw one of its kin in a battle, even from far away, it would immediately switch to hostile mode. This had become a two-on-one battle.

"At this rate... I'll lose. What can I do? I can still run away. Am I going to die?"

In Sky World, death did not mean the end for an adventurer. An adventurer would just lose one third of his tablet battery and come back to life at his most recent home point. For Kasumi, she would simply respawn at her guild hall back at Gazar.

However, she would be naked. The weapon she wielded, the armor she wore, and everything else she carried in her bag would be put into a box and left on the ground where she died. Kasumi looked down in shame. This was how things worked in Sky World. In a way, it was rather cruel.

The two monsters targeting her landed hits on her. Kasumi's HP bar now glowed red as a danger sign. Kasumi closed her eyes tightly, aware of her impending death.

"Quick! Roll!"

Kasumi heard a boy's voice from above the trees.

Kasumi rolled as she was told. Opening her eyes to find that she had landed in a pile of dirt, she quickly moved and just barely managed to evade the Honey Lizard's claw attack.

A human being appeared, slowly descending from the sky.

It was a boy wearing black leather armor and wielding a huge two-handed sword almost as large as he was. As he descended, he swung his sword downwards, slicing one of the Honey Lizards' heads in half.

“Ah!”

“Hi there!”

The boy glared at Kasumi with his menacing eyes.

“Don't be an idiot. There's still one more. Get up!”

Kasumi stood up. There was another Honey Lizard charging at her. Kasumi hastily readied her sword.

“Hey, do you want to die?! Come here!”

“Got it!”

The boy was right. She would die if she took just one more hit. Kasumi sprinted to the boy and hid behind him. The boy, quickly muttered “All right!” with a mean expression in his eyes. She looked up at his face and he smiled.

“Stay there for a sec. Don’t move!”

Right after saying that, the boy stepped out and charged the lizards with his humongous sword.

A bead of black light appeared from the tip of the sword and traced the sword’s motion. With just one hit, he cut 20% off the HP bar of the previously unhurt Honey Lizard.

He was fighting with a magic-imbued sword.

“You’re a magic swordsman, right?”

Unlike her class, the light warrior, the magic swordsman class, being an offensive class, imbued their swords with magic in order to increase their damage output. At that moment, the boy’s attack was actually more than double that of any light warrior.

“You’re awesome!”

He dodged the Honey Lizard’s claw strike effortlessly and retaliated, driving the edge of his sword into the monster’s belly.

Before long, the second Honey Lizard fell to the ground.



When Jun first saw Kasumi being attacked by the two monsters, he was lazily descending into the forest with his Wing Boots. While descending from the skies, he was able to get a good look at the situation, and saw another Honey Lizard sneaking up on her while she was already frantically fighting the other Honey Lizard.

“I guess I should help out.”

Shrugging lightly, Jun came to the rescue and arrived in the nick of time.

Then—

Jun landed, looking at Kasumi and noticing her light purple hair.

She wielded a Short-Sword, a low level alchemized item in her right hand. She had a Small Buckler, possibly bought from a NPC store in her left. She wore beginner leather armor.

It was fairly obvious that she was a newbie. He was confused. Players had been stuck in Sky World for three months now. From the looks of it, one would have thought that she had just started playing.

He couldn't believe it.

“I want to know something. How long have you been in Sky World?”

“Just a while. My friend Sakuya recommended it to me.”

Jun almost took a spit-take. That’s impossible! Shaking his head, he forced a smile. There was no way someone like her could be carelessly wandering here.

“Break Down!”

Jun became covered in light. In just a moment, both his armor and the huge sword he was wielding disappeared. In their place was Jun’s school uniform. Jun’s hair returned to its original black hue. The girl, upon seeing this, also shouted, “Break Down!” Her long hair became enveloped in light, and it changed color from light purple to jet-black. Her eye color also changed from teal into obsidian black. At the same time, her light warrior armor was replaced with a blazer and a skirt. While she did take a few creative liberties in designing her avatar, she was unlike other girls who made far more drastic changes. Perhaps she didn’t quite understand how to change her avatar’s appearance.

“I’m Kasumi Yukasaki. Thanks so much for saving my life! I owe you one.”

She lowered her head and kept quiet. Jun also stated his name. This verbal name exchange seemed a little peculiar given that their names were clearly displayed above their HP bars.

“I was actually on my way to Gazar. Unfortunately, the road I was taking faded away halfway through and I got lost.”

“My home point is in Gazar. If you don’t mind, I could guide you there.”

“Really? I guess I’m counting on you then.”

Jun nodded and Kasumi looked up at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Uh... I’m sorry.”

Jun thought to himself, “Huh?” and tilted his head in confusion. Upon seeing that, Kasumi became even more nervous.

“Your face is scary. Did I anger you?”

“Nope. This is just how I look.”

Jun hastily turned away.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“No... It’s my fault for being rude.”

Kasumi bowed her head and Jun gave a forced smile.

“Pick that item up. It’ll disappear soon.”

“Okay.”

Kasumi, after thanking Jun again, bent down to pick up the high quality Honey. The privilege of picking up drops was generally given to whomever had the biggest role in killing the monster.

“But... Jun-sama⁴, you were the only reason that I was able to win the battle.”

“What? ‘Jun-sama’?”

Jun swung his hands around with a blank look on his face. He was blushing.

“Uh... I’m not very used to talking to guys. Was I being rude?”

⁴ ‘-sama’ is a highly polite honorific which is somewhat equivalent to ‘Lord’

“No, you weren’t. My bad. When you used ‘-sama’, it made me think of roleplaying⁵.”

“Role... What?”

“Never mind that. Just ‘Jun’ is fine. You don’t need to add any honorifics. It makes me feel uneasy. If you really have to, just use ‘-san’⁶.”

“Oh. Got it. Then... Jun-san.”

A little embarrassed, Kasumi held out the Honey towards Jun.

“This is for you, Jun-san.”

“I don’t need it. It seems like you do, though. So it’s better if you keep it.”

“Thank you very much!”

“Do you have any HP recovery items?”

⁵ Specifically, Jun is referring to master/servant roleplaying (and even more specifically, maid cosplaying), as ‘-sama’ is often used by subordinates to refer to their lieges.

⁶ ‘-san’ is used as a common honorific and is somewhat equivalent to ‘Mister’.

“Like potions?”

“Don’t waste any of your consumables. Hold on a sec.”

Jun took out a 30-centimeter long wand and muttered a command word while tapping Kasumi’s shoulder with it.

The wand shined brightly. A portion of Kasumi’s HP was instantly restored.

“Thank you healing me. Are you OK with using that on me though?”

“This Healing Wand has infinite uses. It’s nice not having to worry about running out of healing items.”

Consumable items often came with restrictions. Some items would disappear after one use. Others could be used multiple times. Others could be used once every few hours.

The highest tiered consumable items could be used infinitely without any restrictions.

“That kind of thing would be really convenient. I’d definitely want to buy one.”

“They aren't sold in shops. It's a quest item, so they are bound.”

“Bound... Huh?”

“Bound items are usually given as rewards for completing NPC requests or achievements. It is impossible to trade them.”

Jun started telling Kasumi about why he was headed to Gazar.

He came from a town in the north of this island. He had come to Altaria alone. At this point, the only quests that he hadn't completed on this island were in Gazar.

“You've finished all the other quests?”

“Yeah, the magic swordsman's spell Long Walk helped a lot.”

Long Walk was very helpful for those classes who could use it. It could make battles go two times faster, shortening the amount of time needed to complete quests.

“After all, this is only the eighth island ring. Even though there may be some hidden quests, they will probably be revealed after I complete the quests in Gazar.”

Quest completion rate was calculated separately for every island. When all normal quests were completed, it would be easy to tell if there were any other quests remaining.

“Say, do you know anything about the other island rings?”

“I have gone as far in as the fifth ring.”

“Amazing! I haven’t even managed to leave the eighth one yet.”

“So you aren’t from this island, huh?”

“I fell from an airship and got stranded on this island.”

“And because of that, you can’t leave?”

Kasumi nodded.

“What about your guild?”

“At the moment, I’m part of a guild. Our base is located in Gazar. If you would be so kind, please help make a name for our guild by joining!”

“Sounds like a pain.”

“If we had veterans like you, Jun-san, I’m sure that the guild leader would be very happy.”

“I’m hardly a veteran. Nobody’s even been here for more than three months and a week.”

“That may be true... But Jun-san, you have a lot more knowledge and experience compared to other people.”

Jun sighed.

“I get what you mean... But the fact is that I don’t stay in the same place for very long.”

Kasumi smiled softly. It was a very innocent smile.

Part 3

Jun's eyes always looked sleepy. Others often called him 'sleepyhead'. In fact, he actually was sleepy most of the time. Since he often stayed up very late playing games, it was inevitable. He often slept during classes.

However, that did not mean that his grades were bad. He had promised his parents from the start that he would maintain good grades lest his games be confiscated. He was able to study very efficiently on his own.

He loved the word "efficiency". "Efficiency" is when one used his time as effectively as possible. Of course, any extra time could be used for hobbies, which in Jun's case was gaming.

In Jun's eyes, that was a wonderful concept.

Upon entering the inn at Gazar, Jun sat down on his plain bed near the only door in the room. The furniture in the tiny room was pretty worn out. The door was furnished with an iron lattice. After confirming that the rooms adjacent to his were empty—

"Is anyone there?" he called out towards an empty part of his room.

"I am here."

Having given that curt reply, a girl appeared.

The girl appeared to be of elementary school age and was wearing a gothic Lolita outfit. She had silver hair, as if she were suffering from albinism, and gold eyes. Oddly enough, he couldn't see her name because the text was too bright and her status window appeared transparent. Jun was unfazed by the girl's sudden appearance. He glanced over at her.

“Do you have anything to do with that person?”

“Who?”

The girl tilted her head.

“A girl from earlier. If I remember correctly, her name was—”

“Kasumi Yukasaki. She registered under her real name.”

“It seems like she had never played a game like this.”

“She was invited to install Sky World by her friend. The first party distributor of Sky World installed it on over 2000 tablets. By copying the software onto their friends' tablets, the game was spread by the players themselves.”

The quick and widespread propagation of Sky World was slightly peculiar.

The software was not distributed online nor were they distributed in stores. It was not even advertised very heavily in magazines or on websites. The developing company had promotional staff install the software onto the 2000 or so tablets by themselves. Sky World was popularized by only word of mouth.

“Are you only looking for players who were among those initial 2000?”

“I cannot answer that question,” the girl responded stoically.

“Ok. I’ll change the question. Why did you visit me?”

The girl stared at him blankly. She rarely showed emotion. She was searching for the words to say... Or perhaps she was communicating with someone located elsewhere.

“That person.”

“Who is ‘that person’?”

The girl shook her head silently. Jun, with a bitter expression on his face, decided to try a different question.

“Is it only me?”

“Hmm? Are you suspicious of what I’m saying?”

“Frankly speaking, I have no choice but to believe what you say. However, I won’t go so far as to say I trust you completely. It seems like you’re keeping a lot of information from me.”

The girl moved her eyebrows. She seemed uncomfortable. Jun watched her unchanging face without wavering.

“OK. For starters, are you a human?”

“I cannot answer that question.”

“In this world, are there still any humans?”

“I cannot answer that question.”

“When will this game end?”

“It will be clear when a player reaches the innermost island, Aion.”

“So... Is that the ‘End of the Blue Sky’?”

Jun looked up at the filthy ceiling.

The sky was on the other side of the ceiling, where countless islands floated.

Countless floating islands. That was the way things should be in Sky World. It was said that there are thousands of islands. This island, Altaria, was located on the lowest ring of islands.

The first island ring was at the very top, at the furthestmost areas of the sky.

There was only one island, Aion that could float at such a height.

In the lore of Sky World, adventurers who reached that legendary island could find anything they desired. All of their wishes would come true.

“That’s a suspicious story.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think of it.”

“However, that’s the quest you showed me, right?”

The girl nodded.

“If that’s the case, then I will definitely finish it.”

“Then you ought to hurry up to the first ring.”

The girl’s remained expressionless. However, she still seemed a little dissatisfied.

“My quest list isn’t complete yet. How upsetting.”

Jun, keeping his intentions hidden, answered with a smile on his face.

“Once I made it to this island, I managed to find lots of information about Altaria from the quest descriptions. Having read that, I decided that I would complete all of them.”

“You’re such an eccentric questophile.”

“I’d prefer you not say that. You’re making me feel awkward.”

“You brought this upon yourself.”

The girl shook her head and disappeared.

Only her faint, sweet scent remained.

Part 4

Junichiro Mikimori's Sky World PC (Player Character) was named "Jun".

Many players' had character names which were based on their real names. This was especially true in the case of Sky World, as most preferred to register on their academic tablets.

However, Junichiro was a gamer. He never really liked the idea of characters being the same entities as the players controlling them. 'Jun' was, by no means, the same being as Junichiro Mikimori. Sticking to this belief, Jun always immersed himself into his characters, as if they were his real self.

It had been three months since the Birthday.

Even now, Jun still couldn't decide whether he would be 'Jun' or Junichiro Mikimori.

Beginning from the day after he arrived at Gazar, Jun began his actual mission.

He met with the residents in order to gather information about possible quests.

Even when Sky World had still been an MMORPG, NPCs (Non-Player Characters; in other words, people who were not controlled by a human) and players engaged in natural discourse. Because each NPC had a unique AI, it was difficult to tell players and NPCs apart.

For example, the girls selling fruit in the market would greet customers differently each time. Occasionally, they'd hand out apples for free. Sometimes, they even made jokes. Every once in a while, they caught colds and closed down their stores temporarily.

After the Birthday, everybody living in the game was human, or at least Jun thought they were.

However, they sometimes did act in a very systematic manner.

When that happened, it meant that they had a quest to give.

Quests, a key feature of MMORPGs, were requests or commissions given by NPCs.

"Deliver this letter to the chief of another town" is an example of a typical quest.

A player doing that quest would receive the letter from the quest giver and head over to said town. There, he or she would locate the chief's residence and hand the letter over to the chief. After that, the player would receive experience points and/or reward items.

These types of quests are called system quests. They were very common in games.

There were many system quests in Sky World.

One could even go as far as to say that there were an infinite number of them. Each island had more than a hundred, and there were thousands of islands.

In Sky World, most system quests could be started at a Society of Adventurers' Office. Priests of the God of Adventure handed adventurers stone-like gems called Quest Stones. Adventurers could usually complete these Quest Stone missions rather easily. The reward for these missions differed every time.

Quest reward items were extremely varied; they were randomly generated. Sometimes, it'd just be a few measly coins. Other times, it could be a rare and powerful equipment item that was never sold by NPCs. The infinite use Healing Wand that Jun used on Kasumi yesterday was one of these rare rewards.

“I would like you to defeat the King of the Giants living in the nearby cave.”

The priests, with their solid white robes, all looked the same.

Actually, some were old and some were young. With each passing day, different ones with different personalities would show up. As far as Jun was concerned, this was a good thing.

Jun, upon receiving the Quest Stone which said "Savage Giant King," called out towards the inner part of the church.

"Wait! Give me another."

"Huh?"

Unintentionally, he bumped into one of the priests.

"Going back and forth to turn in and receive quests one by one is a pain. So far I have completed 80 quests in the three towns on this island, and my quest completion rate here is a little over 70%. Aren't there about 30 quests to receive here? Just give me all of the ones I am eligible for now."

When system requests were completed, quest completion rates went up. In Sky World, requests that affect one's quest completion rate were as a whole referred to as quests.

"This is your first time setting foot in this church. You still don't have enough Affinity with us..."

"I understand that Affinity with the church is expected... But... Anyways, in which city do I have not enough Affinity?"

"Give me a moment."

The priest closed his eyes and recited a short prayer.

Shortly after that, he nodded his head with an unpleasant expression on his face.

"There are twelve more quests that you can receive."

"So I lack Affinity for the rest of the quests, right? Well, I guess that's fine. Can I have those twelve quests then?"

"What an ambitious adventurer."

The priest then continued by briefing Jun on each of the quests.

"There's no need to waste time explaining each and every one of them to me."

"Quests are trials given by the God of Adventure. Of course I would need to explain them in detail."

"And explanations are good and all, but I prefer figuring quests out on my own."

"Huh?"

"I do quests because they're fun."

The priest's jaw dropped.

"Increasing my quest completion rate is like collecting figures or trophies. Clearing quests makes me happy."

"Hmm... That's an interesting take on things."

"Well said. I guess you could finish all of the quests in the cave at once without having to go back and forth."

"Uh... What about those other quests?"

"We'll talk about that when we meet again, OK?"

Jun left the church somewhat upset.

*

Most quests (approximately 80% of them) consisted of killing a monster and retrieving one of its drops.

Areas in which monsters often spawn include dungeons such as caves and ruins.

In Sky World, monsters did not have parents nor did they attempt to reproduce. They simply appeared.

In general, monsters could not stray too far away from their spawn points. Even so, monsters occasionally spawned near towns. Sometimes, they spawned in big groups near people. Quests calling for the elimination of those groups of monsters were very important for keeping them under control.

However, when a certain amount of time elapsed, they would simply respawn.

Because of this, their respective quests would also be reissued when that happened.

Only one adventurer could take on these types of quests at once. This meant that no other adventurers would be able to interfere. Jun liked that rule. It meant that he would be able to aim for 100% quest completion on this island without too many problems.

"What a weak monster."

In Limestone Cave, which was an area designated as a dungeon, Jun took out some Reptilians all by himself.

Attracted by a floating ball of light, the monsters came running in one by one. However, the Limestone Cave was not very large. It was, at most, two or three body lengths wide. Luckily, these monsters could not take many hits from a magic swordsman, the class with the highest raw attacking ability, before falling.

He defeated those monsters without getting hit more than a few times.

As soon as the last monster disappeared, the Quest Stone in Jun's bag began to shine.

"Yes! I'm done!"

Jun took the shining rock out of his bag. It was a stone approximately the size of a fingernail. In just a moment, it would transform. While he watched attentively, the Quest Stone changed into an azure ring.

"Hmm... A stat point increase ring."

Jun swiped his left hand in the air, his tablet appeared, and the ring's stats appeared on its screen.

"+2 STR. I don't need that. I'll sell it."

With that thought Jun remembered the face of the girl he had met yesterday.

No matter how he looked at it, she could only be a newbie. She didn't seem to have an understanding of how the gameplay worked.

Jun shook his head. Yesterday, he just happened to bump into her when she needed assistance. Helping others out was just proper adventurer manners.

However, there was no obligation to offer additional help after the initial incident.

"I'll think about that later. Anyways, the next quest is... 'Retrieve the Demon Beast's drink'."

Apparently, there was supposed to be a fountain deep inside this cave spewing out water full of monster attracting energy.

That water was necessary for a separate quest. He had found out about this when he was asking the town's citizens for quest information. He could kill two birds with one stone by completing both that quest and the monster-killing quest at the same time.

"Hmm... I wonder if I could gather some herbs too. I'll try looking around for some."

He had already maxed out his gathering skill for times like this when he would want to gather some herbs. Jun could now use his tablet to find out the name and characteristics of any herb almost 100% of the time.

Because of his focus on efficiency, he was able to complete many quests simultaneously.

"I'm so busy."

The amount of quests that he had not yet completed had been steadily decreasing.

"So very busy..."

Smiling, Jun continued searching throughout the dim cave.

Part 5

That evening...

Jun returned to Gazar in high spirits. He had managed to complete nine quests in just one day.

He saw two girls standing in front of the city gates. One of them was the girl Jun had helped out yesterday, Kasumi Yukasaki. The other girl was wearing a school uniform different from Kasumi's. She was short with twin-tails, cocoa brown hair, and crimson red eyes.

Kasumi recognized Jun. The other girl stared at him.

"Are you Jun?"

"Uh huh?"

"I am Eri Inui, but you can just call me Eri. I need to talk to you."

Eri puffed out her chest and lifted her chin haughtily.

She seemed a bit arrogant. Jun looked at Kasumi.

"Uh... Sorry... Jun-san, right?"

"Kasumi, there's no need for to apologize in this situation! Hey, Jun, are you listening to me?"

"I don't particularly want to."

"At least show me your face."

"I refuse."

The girl's words were piercing. Jun wanted to calmly walk between the two girls and enter the town.

"HOLD ON!"

She grabbed him by his left shoulder and forcibly turned him around.

Jun scowled at her.

"Don't ignore me! I'm talking to Y - O - U! We need to talk."

"I don't understand why we have to."

"But we do!"

"Pardon me. You're being troublesome."

Today had been a well-paced day. At this rate, he could complete all of the quests in this town before his Wing Boots recharged. He didn't have time for trivial things like this.

"Fine!"

The short girl snorted and let go of Jun's shoulder.

"Alright... If you understand, then it's all good."

"If you don't listen to me, I'll cause even more trouble."

"Hmm?"

"I know which inn you're staying at. I'll continue pestering you over there. I won't stop until you kneel on the ground and beg."

"Ugh... Wait, that can't be allowed."

"Well, I have the highest Affinity level in this city. This city is my ally."

Having only just arrived in the city, Jun knew that he could not compete with her level of Affinity.

(This girl...)

Jun glared at her.

She clearly knew the mechanics of Sky World much better than Kasumi.

"Understood. I'll listen to you over a meal."

"Why, it's nice of you to be so obedient."

Eri grinned with her hands on her waist. Jun glared at her.

In Sky World, at least for Jun, nourishment was not a big issue.

This was because food and drinks could be easily summoned with magic.

Magic users could summon food items like water or bread, but they tasted dull and flavorless, and they disappeared in a few hours if left uneaten, so it was only natural for adventurers to want to go to restaurants and eat nice food, such as warm soup and fresh vegetable salads. In any case, if people had some extra money lying around, they would often be tempted to spend it on nice food.

While eating at the inn's bar, Jun listened to what the two girls had to say. The food there was certainly not gourmet, but it wasn't so bad as to be inedible. Exhausted from the day of adventuring, Jun actually thought that the food there was quite nice.

Jun cut a potato with his knife and fork and plopped it onto his plate.

Kasumi used her fork and knife to elegantly cut up some mutton. Eri, clanking her utensils, ate the meat that Kasumi cut up while waiting for Jun's response.

"Advisor?"

"Yes. In our guild, there aren't any veterans like you. As you know, there aren't many adventurers on this island. Nobody comes from elsewhere."

"Regular airship service happens about once every five months."

"Yeah, it left right after the Birthday, so the next one will be here in two months. The truth of the matter is that Kasumi wants to quickly get to another island. So I want you to help out."

(In a very selfish way.)

Jun sighed. He wouldn't gain anything for helping them.

"Even you will need to leave this island someday. As it stands, that'll be in two months. However, if we cooperate, we can leave earlier."

"I can leave whenever I want."

"What? How?"

"Because of my Wing Boots. They can go all the way up to the seventh island ring, although they wouldn't be able to reach much higher than that."

To show that he was not lying, Jun took out his tablet and showed them the Magic Item section of his inventory.

"Wow! What are these?! How did you get all this?!"

"Two of them were from quests I completed on the eighth island ring, and one is from a quest I completed on the seventh island ring. Some are also from quests on the sixth island ring. I came to this island for a dispatch quest. I also sold a lot of my stuff."

"You're an intense quest geek!"

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You..."

"Anyways, there should be a way for us to escape this island without using the regular airship service."

"We just need to get a personal airship."

"From a quest?"

Jun stood up, excited.

"No. It's a treasure."

"Really? If that's the case, it's not worth worrying about."

Jun sat back down.

"Hold on! Don't you care about anything other than quests?"

"I certainly do."

"You see..."

"Err... Hey, Eri, let's leave."

Kasumi, who remained silent up until now, started to speak.

"Let's not trouble Jun-san anymore..."

"Kasumi, I'm thinking of the best for both you and me."

"If you have her best interests in mind, it would be great if you helped out."

"It's hopeless! A monster that even the entire guild can't take down is camping in front of the key items."

"That has nothing to do with quests."

"Huh?"

"If you aren't interested, we'll try our best anyway!"

"OK. OK."

Eri got up and shook her head. She glared at Jun, who was still calmly eating, one last time.

"Our whole guild will be at Homana Cemetery to defeat the Dread Sphinx tomorrow at noon. We'll challenge ourselves by attempting to beat it. Come and take a look if you're interested."

Eri got up, threw a silver coin onto the table, grabbed Kasumi's hand, and tried to leave the room.

"Wait a sec."

Kasumi pulled herself away from Eri and returned to Jun's table.

"Uh... Jun-san. Is it OK if I ask you one thing?"

"What?"

"Jun-san... You seem to be... Enjoying this... Is that true?"

While cutting some bread, Jun lifted his head. He did not know what to say.

Kasumi stared at Jun without moving a muscle. She smiled.

"Hmm... You aren't having much fun, huh?"

"Yeah..."

Kasumi nodded gently.

"Sakuya's a friend of mine who has been looking after me recently. She's surely very disappointed with me right now."

Kasumi kept staring at Jun.

"I want to go back to where everybody else is."

Jun fixed his eyes on the motionless Kasumi. A beam of light reflected off her obsidian hair and entered Jun's eyes.

He averted his eyes.

"Oh! Thank you so much for helping me out yesterday!"

After glancing back at Kasumi one last time, Jun returned to eating his meal quietly.

Part 6

The next day, on a whim, Jun went to watch the Homana Graveyard from a nearby hill.

Homana Graveyard, which was only an hour away using the skill Long Walk, was an ancient ruin in the forest that had a moss-covered sphinx looking as if it came straight from Egypt.

Yesterday, Jun had visited these ruins for a quest. As he approached the ruins, the Sphinx came to life and asked him a question.

"Beest thou the rightful successor of the Margrave of Gudonay?"

The Margrave of Gudonay was an ancient civilization.

People of that era fought many wars. The Margrave of Gudonay created a barrier around Altaria to protect the island. By being able to avoid going to war with others, Altaria prospered.

However, times were changing. Airships rarely came to Altaria due to the remnants of the barrier. Now, in the era of aviation, Altaria's growth and cultural exchange had stagnated while ties between other more prosperous islands had strengthened.

Quests were now the backbone of Altaria.

Jun responded "no" to the Sphinx's question and continued on his way as his quest only required him to make contact with a fairy hidden in the vicinity of the graveyard. Jun, having received the Blessing of Delicious Bread from the twenty inch tall fairy and having successfully created an Ultimate Fluffy Bread Roll, was able to increase his maximum cooking level as a bonus. His max cooking level was raised from 100, which was what it was before, to 105.

"This will definitely make me stronger. Soon, when I reach the max level, in order to further increase my max cooking level, I'll have to do some special quests. Even people who aren't that good at games, like Kasumi, ought to try capping out their skill levels."

Since skills like cooking were originally not very popular (but now, they were indispensable to adventurers), very few people had found the quests required to increase the maximum levels of those skills.

"Nobody taught cooks how to do their jobs."

Since there were still quests that he could not clear, Jun did not think too much about leveling up his cooking skill. Rather, remembering the faces of some acquaintances of his who genuinely enjoyed cooking, Jun thought about what he would do after leaving the island. Information about these life skill max level increase quests would be quite valuable, but adventurers often helped each other complete quests. People believed that those who receive assistance ought to

return the favor someday. Relationships between people became more important than even money and skills.

Noon.

Jun climbed up a hill to look down at the Homana Cemetery in his default schoolboy clothing while considering all of that. There were also other players who sported fashion similar to Jun's casual clothing. When those people met, they were able to communicate easily. People who dressed up in clothing reminiscent of the world they came from, such as school uniforms, appeared far more friendly and approachable than people wearing clunky armor and holding weapons.

That was the reason Eri and Kasumi had approached Jun in their school uniforms earlier.

He heard the clanging of weapons. From the top of the hill, Jun looked around for the Sphinx. He immediately saw the five-meter tall Sphinx. In an open plain near the hill, a fierce battle was taking place.

About 20 adventurers were attacking the huge Sphinx, which was larger than even a tank.

All of them were women.

"So it was a guild of only girls... What a waste of time coming to meet them."

He guessed that they had purposefully withheld that fact from him. Generally, this type of guild had a strong sense of togetherness.

Jun noticed Kasumi and Eri in the crowd. Kasumi was on the front lines, while Eri was in the back casting support magic.

"So Eri Inui is a white magician huh."

Sky World was a MMORPG with a class system.

At the start of the game, players chose classes. Classes could not be changed at any point in the game. Players picked a class from the fifteen adventurer classes and played as those classes their entire Sky World lives.

Different classes had significantly different abilities. Adventurers of different classes that complement each other's strengths and weaknesses usually came together to form parties. Parties were made up of five or six people who adventured together.

Ideally, a single party would have a good balance between the different roles: attackers, tanks, and healers.

For example, Kasumi's class, the light warrior, was classified as a tank. Its raw attack power was not very high, but it could attract enemy attacks. Attacker type

classes used all of their power to deal damage, and healers were tasked with the responsibility of keeping everybody in the party alive.

Eri's class, the white magician, specialized in healing magic. Out of the six classes that could use healing magic, the white magician used it with the most facility and effectiveness. With a single cast of the spell Maximum Heal, a white magician could heal people all the way up to their maximum health points. Other spells healed over time, increased maximum health, or even brought people back to life after being killed. White magicians were essential for parties and guilds.

Naturally, attackers, like magic swordsmen, could deal damage reliably and consistently.

Since this island was located on the lowest island ring, the eighth, Jun wandered around as a solo player. As long as he stayed away from the few exceptionally strong monsters, he could comfortably beat any monster on this island.

One of those exceptionally strong monsters was the Dread Sphinx that Kasumi and Eri's guild was fighting right now.

Some monsters were categorized as raid level monsters.

If solo players could fight normal level monsters on their own, they would not be able to fight so-called party level monsters. At an even higher level than the party level monsters were raid level monsters that had to be fought by multiple parties of players in order to have a chance at victory.

One of the Sphinx's hits on a heavy warrior, one of the most robust classes, managed to wipe out about 20% of her health. Even with fifteen people attacking simultaneously, the Dread Sphinx still had more than 80% of its health remaining.

Eri, though trying her best to keep everybody's health up, was unable to keep up with the damage dealt, and the heavy warrior's health was already at a critical level.

"They're going to lose," Jun predicted while watching from the top of the hill. Having received many strong attacks from the Dread Sphinx, the heavy warrior's health dropped to zero.

The rear guard continued healing the Dread Sphinx's new targets. Classes with low defense, such as white magicians, stood no chance against the Dread Sphinx's deadly attacks. They would drop dead within seconds of being targeted.

At this point, victory or defeat would be determined by the ability for the healers to keep up with the damage dealt.

Finally, Kasumi too was targeted. Now lacking their primary healer, the rest of the guild fell in just 15 seconds.

The Dread Sphinx's health bar was still more than half full.

With a sigh, he looked away from Eri's dead body. Even though he knew that Eri was not actually dead, he still wasn't comfortable staring at a dead body.

The girls would have returned to their home points. In Sky World, death was not absolute. Adventurers just revived with a small stat penalty and a 1/3 battery reduction of their tablet.

Leaving the tablet alone for a day would cause it to gain 1% battery. Dying three times in a row would bring it down to 0%.

As for what happens when it went down to 0%...

There was a person who tried doing just that. After his final death, he did not return to his home point. He disappeared, leaving his equipment on the ground.

Nobody knew what happened to him. He could have returned to the real world, or... He could have 'died' for real.

However, the kind of death the girls' just experienced was not that dangerous. Their home point was safe. It was a designated sanctuary, so monsters could not attack it.

Jun wanted to leave the battlefield.

"No. Wait up."

Suddenly, he realized something. Some time ago, near the top of the hill, he saw a stone with the mark of a bind point. Around it were dozens of brand new cloaks, as if set up there in advance for a mass revival.

Turning around, he saw a line of naked women.

"Oh..."

In Sky World, dead characters revived at their home points naked.

Back when it was still a MMORPG, they would revive with a piece of cloth on them. Now that Sky World had become reality, they did not revive with anything.

Jun and the girls' eyes met.



"WAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!"

After a short silence, the girls let out a piercing shriek.

"You're the worst! I'll sue you for harassment!" the guild leader, a girl in glasses, called out.

She appeared to be a college student. Although she was just a college student, she obviously had the most adult-like body out of all of the guild members. Seeing her shouting hysterically, Jun questioned her maturity.

Calming down, the girls wrapped themselves in blankets. It was not possible to change clothing immediately after death. Many of the girls shot icy glares at Jun.

Then, Jun was interrogated by the older girl wearing glasses about why he was there at all and whether he, having found out that the girls had set their home point to that stone, was trying to sneak a peek. She spoke with a very condescending tone. Jun cringed.

"Leader, you're mistaken, I told him to come here!"

It was Eri, hastily forcing herself through.

Holding onto her cloak with one hand, she was accompanied by Kasumi. They explained what had happened the previous day to the girl wearing glasses.

Having now heard their story, the girl known as "Leader" seemed to cool down.

"I understand. I did hear about a male adventurer coming to town recently..."

She glared at Jun.

"Were you just watching us get destroyed from the hilltop?"

"Yup, I was. What of it?"

"If we had set our home points at Gazar, it would take a full hour for us to get back here. In that time, you could have stolen our hard work out on the battlefield."

In Sky World, like in several other MMOs, PKers (player killers) existed. However, since battles were not condoned in towns, the mechanics of the game allowed only one item to be stolen. Characters who committed the act of player-killing got marked as Player Killers in their status window. The mark lasted 3 days.

It was often not worth doing.

However, looting was a different issue. Players who died in the midst of a battle with a monster could have their equipment stolen. Very little evidence would remain. Guilds performing raids had to consider this, and they would usually have somebody on guard near the battlefield.

They probably didn't think that far ahead. All of the guild members had taken part in the battle.

However, Jun was certainly not a fan of stealing.

"Stealing such crappy equipment probably wouldn't do you any good anyway."

Jun, taking offense at that remark, spat on the ground. He glared back at the guild leader.

"Stop being so presumptuous. I have enough money. I'm not interested in your newbie equipment. You'll only need to worry about thieves when it comes to rarity 7 or higher equipment."

Rarity was an indicator of equipment's grade. Rarity 1, the most common equipment could be purchased in NPC stores. The highest known rarity was 9. Here, on the 8th ring, the highest equipment rarity that could be found was 5.

"...Well then, you're clearly trying to steal our drops."

"You may say that, but you didn't even get close to defeating the Dread Sphinx."

Jun knew that they were doing pretty well until their heavy warrior died. However, the heavy warrior's death was another issue altogether. The fact of the matter was that they could not handle all of the damage dealt. In other words, they lacked tactics and strategy. The guild members were not cooperating to the best of their ability.

"How about I speak in simpler terms. You're an incompetent leader."

Jun glared at her.

"I can't see any reason for you to be guild leader other than the fact that you are older than the rest of them. Even if all of you teamed up, I would still be stronger."

"Are you trying to make a fool out of us?"

"Huh?!"

Eri interrupted the conversation.

She was sneering. Jun glanced at Eri.

"We happened to witness Jun's ultra-strong magic swordsman powers and he probably would be stronger than the rest of us combined."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Well, why don't you just prove your strength to the rest of us?"

Eri looked up at Jun and laughed.

Jun nodded. He felt a little bit uneasy.

"Show me that you can defeat the Dread Sphinx."

"Of course I can! What a bigmouth. I'll show you..."

"Hold on!" Kasumi called out hastily.

"Eri, that's absurd! As strong as Jun-san is, he is still only one person, and just one person would never be able to defeat such a monster..."

The newbie girl, repeatedly making 'X's with her arms, was extremely flustered.

Eri, made weird facial expressions in order to attract Jun's attention.

“Our princess here has a point. Are you OK with this?”

"Of course I am. I do have one condition, though. Eri, seeing as this was all your idea, I want you to help out a bit."

"That's fine. However, since I am weak, as you can see, I can only buff or help out with healing."

"That's alright. It won't target you until I am defeated. The chances of that happening are very low."

"You can't run away if you're too weak. I'll die."

"If I die two times in one day, I'll really be in trouble. I won't be able to die any more times after that."

Dying three times within a short period of time meant that your tablet's battery would go down to 0%.

People whose battery life was zero could never again revive.

Nobody knew what happened after that. They would most likely disappear completely from Sky World, never to return again. It would be impossible to get in touch with them.

"Are you sure that you still want to do this?"

"I understand the risk. I'll do it."

Her hands on her hips, Eri grinned fearlessly.

Jun nodded and turned towards Kasumi and the others.

"Ok. Let's go!"

They left the dumbfounded guild members there and set off.

Part 7

Soon, Eri and Jun arrived at the now-empty battlefield. The adventurers' corpses had already disappeared, their equipment scattered throughout the ground.

"The monster spawns here. Make sure your equipment is ready and be on guard."

"Hold on a sec. Don't look this way."

"Don't worry about it."

Eri threw a rock that she had picked up at Jun, causing him to shut his mouth.

She reequipped her battle armor. The rest of the guild went to a safe place to watch the battle. Jun and Eri ignored them and started to walk away.

"Yesterday, you were pretending to be weak, right?"

"That's just how I am."

Jun sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

"You're a veteran, right?"

"Not really. I've been going back and forth between MMOs for about three years."

"The other guild members are pretty much just novices. Why don't you lead them?"

"Leading people is a pain. Besides, I'm the youngest one here."

This was what Jun felt uncomfortable about.

It was very easy to differentiate somebody who was very skilled from someone who was still not quite there yet by watching how they fought. In that guild, Eri was the only one who could be considered skilled.

Unfortunately, healers were difficult to play well. Moreover, along with having to work especially hard as the sole healer, Eri had to juggle the well-being of both the tank and the attackers.

"How old are you?"

"I'm in my third year of middle school."

"Hmm... Two years younger than me. I'm in my second year of high school."

"Kasumi is also a second year high school student. Shiroko-san, our guild leader is a third year university student."

"Sounds like a lot of trouble."

"I had to pretend to be weak. I can take this opportunity to show them all my real ability."

"Is that all?"

"Well..."

"Anyways, let's see you in action!"

Soon, they reached the end of the forest and saw the pyramid.

Near the pyramid stood the Dread Sphinx, completely alert. Its health had recovered all the way up to 80%.

"Its HP must have been regenerated after that battle. Are you going to lure it anywhere?"

Leading the monster to a place which makes killing it as easy as possible was called "luring".

"No, we can fight it here."

"Okay~ I'll buff you. Which ones do you want?"

Jun told her that he wanted buffs which increased his HP, defense and attack speed.

"Attack speed buffs... Huh. That makes sense."

"You don't have any?"

"Of course not. I'm a white magician, so I wouldn't have any offensive buffs."

"I wish somebody told me that earlier."

"Everybody tried their best to use their own class' abilities. However, they were rather unskillful when it came to using their abilities, so they did not go very far. Because of that, I couldn't use my own abilities to their full potential."

"So that's why you wanted to show them."

"Yeah. I want them to know about my true power. Because adventurers hardly come to this island from outside, and because we all started here, we really know next to nothing about the outside world."

Start points in Sky World were scattered on approximately 50 or so islands on the eighth island ring. However, copies of the game had the same start point as the original. Since it was advantageous to invite friends to Sky World, a lot of consideration was put into making sure that each friend ended up at the same start points. At the beginning, communities played only amongst themselves. Eventually, adventurers from different islands began intermingling. One negative aspect of this system was the lack of support for female gamers who were unaccustomed to MMORPGs, resulting in insular situations like that of the adventurers on this island.

After Eri finished buffing him, Jun chanted "Awaken." His body became covered in light as his hair color changed from black to grey. When the light disappeared, Jun was wearing leather armor and wielding a large sword.

Standing on his own in front of the Dread Sphinx, he readied his heavy greatsword.

The Dread Sphinx glanced at Jun and stood up slowly.

"Beest thou the rightful successor of the Margrave of Gudonay?"

Jun swung his great-sword down towards his feet as a big lion monster rushed over.

The monster's HP dropped significantly and its name changed color from green to red.

The Dread Sphinx went into combat mode.

"How foolish. You'll pay for that mistake with death."

The raid level monster rushed towards Jun. He quickly got out of the way.

Back when Sky World was just an MMORPG, battling on the front lines was fairly simple.

It just involved getting close to the monster. Players could simply attack randomly and make no effort to dodge. If they were lucky, and if their evasion stat was high enough, they could avoid taking damage.

Whichever side was still standing by the end would win the battle.

That system was very simple and repetitive.

In fact, involving things like actual skill and cooperation would create a much more thrilling battle.

However...

That only applied when Sky World was just an MMORPG.

When Sky World became reality, everything changed. Enemies moved in real time and it became necessary for Jun and other adventurers to be cognizant of their situation and react accordingly.

Even so, the automatic combat system was sometimes still effective.

If your attack power was higher than your enemy's, the enemy could be defeated.

This support system was the best way for newbies to fight.

In fact, the front line of Eri's guild all fought with this system. The automatic combat system allowed them to bring the Dread Sphinx's HP down to 40%. Afterwards, if they could just keep their DPS (Damage Per Second) consistently high, it would have been possible for them to defeat the Dread Sphinx.

However, this was not just a matter of damage.

They obviously did not read up on common techniques used by gamers.

"Really? You can avoid their attacks!?"

The girls who came along with Jun to watch the battle stood still in awe.

Even when he noticed their chatter, Jun concentrated intensely on observing the Dread Sphinx's movements.

The monster had huge muscles, which allowed it to jump and kick. However, it was not fast enough to best Jun. The Sphinx's foot landed on the area where Jun had been standing a moment ago.

It let out a thunderous roar and the sand around it flew up.

"You're just dodging? Why!? If I remember correctly, you're a light warrior, right?"

"Nope. I'm a magic swordsman. Magic swordsmen are somewhat low on evasion..."

That was obvious. Jun did not use the automatic combat system. He watched the Dread Sphinx's movements and moved in tandem with them in order to dodge the strikes to the best of his ability.

The giant four legged monster chased after the running Jun. Then, when it finally took a break from attacking Jun, Jun dived under it. He took one swipe at it with his magic-enhanced great-sword, and immediately ran away.

Its HP only went down by a bit.

The Dread Sphinx's standard attack had four parts. He had already figured the first two parts out by watching the earlier battle involving Eri and Kasumi's guild.

After the third part, there was a long pause.

In addition to that standard attack pattern, there were also two other attack patterns. If one did not guard well, its fast spinning tail attack could deal a lot of damage.

Because of how dangerous this battle was, Jun was very appreciative of Eri's presence, despite her being limited to casting weak healing spells in order to prevent the Dread Sphinx from targeting her.

"If it continues like this, we'll win!" he thought, remaining calm.

Once he figured out the pattern in the Dread Sphinx's movements, he'd be able to fight to the best of his ability. It was just like in shooting games or in action games. For gamers, concentrating on the enemy's movements and combining that with past experience was the key to success.

So far, Jun managed to fight the Dread Sphinx without getting hit once.

Even his strongest attack could only take out 1% of its HP.

However, the Dread Sphinx could not recover its HP. Jun took this into account when he decided to challenge it.

"Hey~"

While casting a recovery spell, Eri smiled.

"If it healed, what would you do?"

"If that were the case, I would certainly have no chance."

If the Dread Sphinx had recovery spells, he would have given up all hope. However, defeating it could still be doable if he outlasted its mana.

"That was just a joke. Calm down."

"Quit being facetious."

As a matter of fact, Jun thought that such a trap would most likely not exist.

Sky World was an MMORPG. At least that was once the case. Thus, the developers had once designed everything in Sky World, from the monsters to the ruins.

Jun could appreciate their ideas to a certain extent.

All gamers could appreciate game developers. Gamers moved around from place to place to explore their world designs. Jun was good at that.

After all, this was only the eighth island ring. Developers would never place such devilish traps in the newbie zone.

Of course, it was possible that the developers of Sky World could have used this viewpoint to their advantage and created surprises for the players.

However, Sky World's developers did not seem like such evil people. This was only Jun's stubborn intuition speaking, but his intuition was often right on the mark.

Earlier, Jun had watched the girls' guild steadily whack away at the Dread Sphinx.

When Jun finally managed to get the Dread Sphinx down to 30% HP, its movements suddenly changed. Its eyes began to glow and its movements became sharper and sharper.

His intuition told him, correctly, that those changes were the direct result of its HP decreasing.

"I see... Its attacks get stronger and stronger."

Magic swordsmen, because of their extremely high attack power, typically had low defense. At best, they could only wear simple leather armor. Because of their inability to wear more advanced armor and shields, their defense was even inferior to that of Eri, a white magician. Magic swordsmen were definitely not cut out for withstanding enemies' attacks head on.

"Hmm, this is unpleasant. Eri, heal me please!"

"That's impossible. If I heal any more than what I am doing now, the Dread Sphinx will target me. I'm really weak. I'll die in just one hit."

Eri shook her head heartlessly. She was correct. The healer's well-being always came first.

Trusting the front line battlers and not getting too much Enmity from monsters were the most important things a healer should do.

Either way, this was Jun's battle.

"Guess that can't be helped."

Jun's HP was at only a little bit more than 50%. His MP was at 70%.

He had a trump card. Jun calmly assessed the situation and made a decision.

He could avoid the Dread Sphinx's attacks until it stopped attacking for a little while. Then, he could begin casting a spell. When it resumed its attacks, he would unleash the spell on it.

"Quick Stun!"

A white bullet shot out from the tip of his sword and was absorbed by the Dread Sphinx's chest. It did zero damage. However, the Dread Sphinx stopped moving.

Unlike paralysis effects, stuns instantly stopped their target in its tracks. They were one of the only means by which magic swordsmen could defend themselves. Even if it could only stop the enemy for one or two seconds, it could open up many options and even turn the tide of a battle.

However, stuns were rarely usable against group level or raid level monsters.

His Enmity, the level of hatred a monster has for a character, was increasing at a rapid rate. Monsters targeted characters based on whoever had the highest Enmity. If attackers, low in defense, got targeted, the healer's burden would increase immensely. However, since there was only one attacker, Eri was able to handle it.

"Heal, please!"

As he expected, Eri synchronized with Jun's actions and let out healing incantation after healing incantation. Jun's HP recovered before his eyes. At the same time, Jun charged in for an attack. The Dread Sphinx's health went down by a large percentage.

There were cheers among the onlookers.

Despite it being an appropriate time to use Quick Stun once again, Jun continued attacking without pause.

By the time he had started to slow down, Jun's MP had decreased significantly. Magic swordsmen did not have very high MP, and Quick Stun used up quite a lot of it. He could not keep this strategy up for long.

However, by that point, the Dread Sphinx's had only 10% HP remaining.

If Jun's MP had run out, the Dread Sphinx would have pounded on the ground and blinded Jun with the clouds of sand that would emerge from such an impact.

"Jun has defeated the Dread Sphinx" appeared in the log window near the corner of his field of vision.

Cheers and exclamations of disbelief flooded the area.

"So you were able to do it."

Eri smiled.

Jun, with a strained smile, was panting heavily.

"You did it! You won! You won!"

Kasumi, her face full of excitement and ecstasy, gave Jun a big hug.

"I'm so impressed---impressed! Jun-san, you're amazing! Wow!"

Kasumi stuttered from the excitement.

"Yipes!"

They collapsed onto each other.

Jun, stuck under Kasumi, groaned. Kasumi had a sweet sweat-laced scent and her skin was soft. Her voluptuous breasts squashed Jun.

"...I'm... So sorry... Uh... Are you OK?"

"Uh, sure, yeah."

Trying to push her aside, he realized that his arms and legs felt powerless. The stiff-bodied Jun thought that the situation could cause a misunderstanding. Kasumi, all teared up in her eyes, shook his body, saying, "Are you OK?"

"Kasumiiii. He can't move his body, right?"

"Yeah! This is a big problem!"



In Sky World, light warriors were far stronger than high school students in real life. Kasumi picked up the still-unable-to-move Jun with her two hands.

"Wait up!"

Jun, being carried like a little baby by the slim Kasumi, blushed and shook his head.

"Jun-san, please don't move because I'm taking you to the bind point right now. Eri, can you cast some healing spells?"

"Okie. I'm happy we succeeded, Jun."

"You seem to be enjoying yourself."

"Of course. Either way, we have plenty of time to pick up the drops. But this is my first time taking out a raid level monster..."

"The item pickup time limit for raid level monsters' drops is 24 hours."

"Well, please watch over him well."

"Hmm, let's go, Jun-san."

Jun, being held by a pointlessly enthusiastic Kasumi, was taken up to the top of the hill. On the way there, the girls from the guild squealed "Eek! Eek!", but he tried as hard as possible to ignore them.

Part 8

The guild that Eri and Kasumi were in was called the "Crimson Scarf Knight Association."

They were the only guild that operated on Altaria.

In the beginning, there were other adventurers who spawned on Altaria's single start point. However, most of them got airship tickets and flew away to the rest of the world.

That happened back when Sky World was just an MMORPG.

In those days, the airship came once roughly every six days.

Back when Sky World was an MMORPG, one hour in the real world was equivalent to one day in Sky World. Time moved 24 times faster.

Now, the airship's next planned arrival on this island was in two months.

"I can't wait that long..."

Jun checked the items that dropped from the Dread Sphinx's corpse back at his room in the inn. Sitting cross-legged on his bed, he went through and cast identification spells on each and every one of them.

Standing nearby with her hands on her hips and a serious face, Kasumi said, "I 'fell' from the outside world. I have companions there. I need to go back."

She described her story to Jun. One month earlier, she and her friends were flying together in an airship in the skies above this island when a battle event occurred. Due to the monsters' attacks, she was pushed off the airship.

Then, something fortunate... Or rather, unfortunate happened. Because of a floating spell, her body slowly fluttered down like a feather, taking no damage upon hitting the ground.

The place where she fell, however, was coincidentally the location of a bind point. As soon as her feet touched the ground on this island, she was at the bind point, and she was automatically bound to the island.

Shortly afterwards, she even tried dying to get off the island, but she would revive at that bind point every time.

"Sakuya... Was it? Have you tried contacting her and the others?"

"Unfortunately, I left the bag with my communication stone in my cabin on the airship..."

Communication stones, in simpler terms, were devices which function as communication devices among players. They were sold in magic shops as a pair of round stones. By giving one of the stones to somebody else, you could use the other one to communicate with the holder of the other stone. This was similar to a "Message" command used between friends in MMORPGs.

In other words, not only could Kasumi not escape from this island, but she could not even communicate with her friends.

"So you miss them a lot, huh? Have they not tried to help you yet?"

"No, but I'm still waiting for the chain quest cooldown to end, since I want to get that done before I leave."

"The Fuelfai Campaign?"

"Yeah. Do you know about it?"

"I haven't done it yet, but I've heard the name passed around here and there. Don't you have to go to 17 islands over the course of one month? If I remember correctly, the reward is a passport required to take the airship up to the fourth island ring."

"Because I already failed it once, I can't try it again for another 3 months. I promised them I would do it."

It had barely been three months since players were taken to this world.

On the other hand, three months was a long time. Three months from now, who knew what the players would be doing? What would become of this world? Not a single person knew.

"However, most likely, everybody has been worrying. Until I escape this island, I'll be worrying everybody. I don't want to be a burden to them."

"So that's why you were trying to get the Honey on your own."

"Yeah... But in the end, I just caused trouble for you."

"That was just one battle which I happened to pass by. You helped me get information about the town. Uh, as for your friends... Are they aiming to reach the first island ring?"

Aion was on the first island ring.

It was said that those who made it there could have a wish of theirs granted.

Three months ago, people unwilling to stay in Sky World tried numerous different methods to return to the real world.

None of their attempts succeeded.

Their last and only hope was a rumor circulating among players about Aion.

"We want to return to the real world. If that method has even a slight chance of working, we'll try to do it. We swore to each other. So..."

"So you don't want to be a burden to them, nor do you want to worry them."

"Correct."

They had decided that they will definitely return to their own world.

Kasumi went on to talk about the real reason she came into Jun's room.

"Please, Jun-san."

She lowered her head and kneeled on the floor.

"Can you make me, Kasumi Yukasaki, your pupil?"

Bewildered, Jun scratched the back of his head.

Chapter 2: The Quest**Part 1**

Back in the real world, Eri Inui had no friends.

Well, some people may have thought of her as a friend, but she felt like she had none.

Coined by shy people who were not very good at making friends, "riajuu" was an Internet slang word for young people who were happy with their lives and lived them to their fullest, such as normal high school students who spoke with their friends, got into relationships, and were active members of their communities.

On the outside, Eri was one of those "riajuu", or at least she was very good at pretending to be one.

Deceiving others came naturally to her. She talked to her classmates in school, responded to text messages, and made harmless friendships. Eri knew she was good at that.

The only place where she could express her true self was on the Internet. In online games, even if she was hated for voicing her real opinions or if she was the target of harassment, any friendship she had would end if she just stopped playing the game.

She felt like she could not be herself anywhere but on the Internet.

One of her friends from another MMORPG invited Eri to join Sky World. An MMO whose client was only spread by word of mouth was very suspicious, but after checking out the client on many different Internet services to make sure that it was not a malicious file like a worm or a Trojan, she tried starting the client.

The day after Eri first connected to Sky World was the Birthday.

That day, Eri, who was tucked tightly in bed, opened her eyes, looked around, and found herself alone in a different world.

Fortunately, she was invited into the guild called the Crimson Scarf Knight Association.

Shiroko, the leader of that guild, treated her nicely, and Eri thought that her scent was like that of somebody she knew in real life. She said, "Let's relax and make friends with each other on this island." In other words, it seemed like she just wanted to build up a close-knit community.

"Relax[ing]" was one of the guild's main selling points. In reality, Shiroko only wanted to be in a position of authority. She could not let her guard down around anybody like Eri.

The only exception to that was one month ago when a beautiful young girl, Kasumi Yukasaki, who did not know much about this world, "fell from the sky".

Eri remembered how they first met pretty well. Eri and the rest of her guild were busy near the bind stone in the forest preparing for the raid.

"Well, until the next airship comes, let's be friends!"

Kasumi shook her head quietly.

"Please allow me to look for ways to get off the island without waiting for the regularly scheduled airship."

There were no other ways. Soon, Shiroko realized what Kasumi was really trying to say. She would not spend any time slacking off. She was the type of person who, even if there were just a tiny possibility, would devote all of her energy towards doing whatever she had in mind.

Before long, she discovered a way to leave the island. There was an empty airship hidden somewhere, but it would be very difficult to reach it.

Shiroko took care of Kasumi, but did not really want to help her achieve her goal of escaping from the island. Doing something like that could result in the collapse of Shiroko's "insular community". Her paradise would come to an end.

Because of that, Shiroko did not really try to take Kasumi to the empty airship.

Kasumi Yukasaki did not pick up on that. She desperately wanted to help out. Conflicted, Eri wondered about her.

Then, a lone boy showed up. He killed the Dread Sphinx on his own. This development could very possibly pose a threat to Shiroko's plan.

She still didn't know whether he could be trusted...

Eri prepared herself for the worst.

Part 2

Shiroko lost her temper in the inn bar.

While drinking with her members, she started verbally abusing Jun. The girls who, at noon, had been praising Jun's expertise in killing the raid level monster alone had now forgotten about the matter completely. They were now fawning over Shiroko.

While listening to the others bad-mouthing Jun, Eri, sitting at the counter, brought out the clock app on her tablet.

It had already been three hours since Kasumi had gone to visit Jun. She was pretty clever. Shiroko had yet to notice her absence. As far as the narrow-minded guild leader was concerned, Jun had undermined her authority in front of her members. She saw him as her nemesis. If she found out that Kasumi had become that nemesis' apprentice...

She would definitely never forgive Kasumi. Kasumi would be expelled from the guild.

She's really reaching her limit...

Eri awaited a chance to get off the island.

She thought that now would be her only chance. For that reason, she was taking advantage of Kasumi.

When Eri first met Kasumi, Kasumi was asking Shiroko "Please help me." Kasumi was pure, honest, and unfazed by her previous failures. She continued trying her best to accomplish her objective. She was full of energy. For these reasons, Eri manipulated Kasumi with her words.

Aren't I unpleasant?

It seemed like Jun would pick up on her manipulation. That magic swordsman boy was "enjoying himself" in this world. Eri did not know how much he would sympathize with her reasoning behind it.

Kasumi's communication stone started vibrating in Eri's hand.

Communication stones, about the size of a fingertip, came in many different colors. Sold in sets of two, they were items that facilitated communication between companions. In Sky World, they were used in a manner similar to cell phones.

Eri left the noisy bar and listened to what Kasumi was saying.

"Yeah... Phew, he's helping you out... Yup, you're just going on quests together, right? You can just watch him from behind and gradually pick up on his techniques."

'Uh... Eri-chan, Jun-san said you should come with us... Is that fine with you?'

"He noticed what I did... Huh."

'Eri-chan, that was only a little push.'

"Well, either way, I did do that... Ok, I'll go."

They did not intend to stay in such a rotten guild for much longer.

"I'll go tell him. Thanks!"

Now, Kasumi understood. Eri was the one who pushed her onto Jun.

Even after finding out about that, she did not change her mind about anything.

Part 3

Jun lay down on his plain bed and stared at the dirty ceiling.

It was already two hours past sunset. A small piece of magic augite rolled around on the nearby table, lighting up the room. Magic augite used the power of Mana to create artificial light. In Sky World, adventurers used them as light sources.

Residents of fantasy worlds all sleep at the same time. Entire inns quiet down all at once. Because of that, when a girl in black Lolita clothing appeared, Jun immediately knew what was going on and quickly got off of his bed.

"There's something I want to ask you."

"Did you have to come at night? You could've come earlier. I will do what I want to do. Even though you were the one who brought me here, I came of my own will."

"That, I can understand."

Jun and the girl made eye contact. Jun, being stared at by the girl's golden eyes, opened his mouth. He did not know her intentions nor the organization to which she belonged.

"I installed Sky World on your tablet."

"Right. That was right after rumors started spreading about the sudden disappearance of Sky World players."

"Unlike many other players, you actually wanted to come to this world."

"Correct. I came here of my own will."

"You had a task to do. However, all you have done in these three months was to work on completing your quests. You haven't made any progress on your real objective."

"That's just what I decided to do. That was supposed to be part of our agreement from the start. You may have led me here, but I will do what I want to do."

"Are you helping Kasumi Yukasaki?"

"Are you unhappy about that?"

After a short silence, the girl slowly shook her head.

"I will not object to your decisions."

"If that's the case, what did you want to ask me?"

"The reason for which you took Kasumi Yukasaki as your apprentice."

The day after the players of Sky World all disappeared was the fated day. Jun, on his way home from school, heard her call his name.

He still did not know her real intentions.

Because of this, Jun was confused as to what he should do. There was no reason for him to reveal his true reasoning.

"It's just gamer etiquette to treat newbies nicely."

"Is that all?"

"This is surely a game world. That being the case, it would only be natural to follow gamer etiquette here."

"Do you really think that this world is just a game?"

Jun sighed.

If all of the residents of the town, workers in the inn, and soldiers were just AIs, their AIs would have to be extremely powerful.

That was not all. If all of the minutiae like the texture of the dirt or the scent of the forest were just created from virtual reality, it would require an immense amount of computational power. There were no computers in the world with enough computational power to replicate even a tiny fraction of this world.

For these reasons, Jun knew that this world could not be virtual reality. It had to be reality. Having spent 3 months in Sky World, Jun knew that to be the truth.

Knowing this, Jun shook his head and smiled.

"I guess it has to be real. The creators of this world were surely mad to do such a thing."

The girl, as if searching for something within him, stared intensely at Jun.

Jun sighed and shrugged.

The girl tilted her head adorably.

"What should I do? Do you want me to undress here?"



"Don't play innocent. After I came to Sky World, did anybody else come? It seems like other people came randomly too. Why did they come?"

"I don't know... Really. I did not invite them to Sky World. I only invited you."

"So you're following me around 24/7, watching me, and reporting back to your superiors?"

This was just a conjecture. Aside from her, Jun had never seen any of the members of this "organization".

"Is Kasumi Yukasaki being my apprentice an inconvenience to you?"

"I would like to know why you were being so indecisive about it."

"Okay. If I reteach her everything from the basics, it would take a lot of time. I would be stuck on this island for a long time. Nevertheless, it would not help me at all in reaching Aion."

There was just one thing he knew. That black clothed girl wanted Jun to go to Aion. She had let that piece of information slip a while ago.

"...Hold on. Come here."

Jun invited her to come near his bed. She suddenly appeared in front of him and gently extended her arm. Jun felt her soft skin.

Her sweet scent tickled Jun's nostrils. A little bit of the fragrance of perfume drifted around the room. Jun didn't really know much about things like make-up or perfume.

"Is your libido strong right now?"

"I don't know what you're thinking about. I just wanted somebody to talk to. I wouldn't want you to hate me anyway."

"Well, what do you want to know about me? If I can say it, I will."

"Hmm, what about your current status, your intentions, or the intentions of the organization you're affiliated with?"

The girl shook her head silently.

"Hmph. Okay. What can you say then?"

He didn't really expect an answer. This conversation was sounding very much like previous ones, in which she would refuse to disclose any information at all. However...

"Alice," she murmured.

"From now on, I would like you to call me Alice."

"Alice... Anything else?"

"I like sweet things. I like to put lots of honey and milk into my black tea."

"Really? I've heard about quests that reward tea. Next time, I'll get you some."

She smiled happily.

"Thank you."

"When you smile, you're cute."

"Cute...? Me?"

"Is that strange to you?"

Alice quickly went back to her previous emotionless self.

That conversation must have struck a chord in her, causing her to revert to her icy disguise.

Jun shrugged, thinking, "Well, that's alright."

"I got a quest."

Confused, Alice tilted her head.

"That's the reason I'm working with Kasumi Yukasaki... The system was set up that way. Adventurers are supposed to do quests. If it's worth doing, I don't particularly care who the quest giver is."

"Well... who's the quest giver?"

"I'm going to go up against her tomorrow in person."

Jun laughed fearlessly.

"Or perhaps I should say I gotta teach her a lesson."

Part 4

The next morning, Jun and Eri were at the top of a small hill very close to town.

From there, they had an unhindered view of the stone wall surrounding the town. On the right, there was a forest. Across from that, past the grass plains, was the southern tip of the island. Because Altaria was on the 8th and lowest island ring, there was no lower end of the world in view. Falling off would surely lead to death.

Kasumi, as she was told to, was killing weak monsters nearby to collect a certain number of their drops. She would not come back for quite some time.

"Say, isn't there something you need to say to me?"

"Hmm, this seems like a nice place to confess one's love. Could it be that you've fallen in love with me?"

"Eri Inui, can you respond seriously?"

"Humph, you refer to Kasumi with '-san'. But not me."

Her hands on her waist, Eri looked up at Jun.

"Well, fine...Thanks... For helping Kasumi."

"I just wanted an apology from you."

"I refuse to say such a thing."

"...Stop it."

Jun glared at her scornfully, and she ultimately shrugged her shoulders, saying, "Okay, okay. Fine."

"Sorry, Jun. I used you."

"You're pretty mean, huh."

"I know. I feel really terrible about using you and Kasumi, especially how I took advantage of Kasumi's innocence and naïveté. That was really nasty of me."

That morning, Eri, along with Kasumi, showed up in front of the inn. The first thing that came out of her mouth was, "We quit!"

"I thought that Shiroko would soon find out about the thing between you and Kasumi. Since she seemed so mean-spirited towards Kasumi, we made our move and left."

At that time, Eri seemed really happy. She was laughing her heart out.

However, Kasumi seemed a bit upset. She was, no doubt, immensely shocked by the sudden change of character the guild leader who had treated her so nicely up to then showed.

"So you quit with her... Well done."

"I feel really bad for her. I don't think that girl's ever been hurt so much before."

Jun unconsciously smiled bitterly upon hearing Eri refer to a girl two years her senior as "that girl".

"Is something the matter?"

"Nah, I was just thinking about how you two make an interesting pair."

"Really, huh? ...Well, OK, I'm pretty awkward, ya know?"

"If you know that about yourself, why don't you at least try to show some sincerity?"

Jun glared at her again, and Eri puffed out her cheeks.

"What?"

"You already manipulated Kasumi-san with your words. Putting that aside for now, don't ever betray her."

"I know, I know."

"Stay with her until the end."

"Yeah, yeah. But if you abandon her..."

Eri stared at Jun.

"Jun, did you decide to help her just because of what happened earlier?"

"I took that into account too. Like Kasumi, you want to leave this island too, right? Your white magician healing abilities are very valuable in combat, and the same can be said of your familiarity with this area. There are some quests that I'm not sure how to get. I'd like you to help me find them."

"Oh, leave that to me. I'll help you as much as I can."

"So, what do you know about the raid level monster that's guarding the personal airship?"

"Hmm, honestly, we only discovered it recently. It's a huge golem in front of a hidden cave on a mountain."

"Personal airships must be really rare, huh."

"It's unlike other quest items. If somebody takes one, nobody else can ever get that specific one again. At least, that's how it was said to work back when Sky World was still just an online game."

"How did you find out about that golem?"

"Some of us were fascinated by the golem, and we had a group looking around temples for it. However, when we found the personal airship in the innermost hall of one of them, the golem teleported right in front of the group we had sent. Many of them died. Retrieving their equipment was really troublesome."

"Compared to the Sphinx from yesterday, how strong is that golem?"

"The golem is far, far stronger."

Well, Jun already figured that would be the case. The Dread Sphinx already had him at the limit of his abilities. That could have been Eri's test to see whether he could possibly take on the Golem.

"Honestly, I don't think even you, Jun, would stand a chance on your own. Take for instance the trump card you pulled yesterday. You wouldn't be able to dodge its attacks nearly as well, nor deal much damage on it, since its health is more than two times higher than that of the Dread Sphinx. It even has incredible regeneration abilities."

"Do you actually think we would be able to do it together?"

"It's up to you to come up with a plan."

Jun glared at Eri. That sounded a little absurd.

"Well, anyways, in the other games I played, I never really joined any raiding guilds. Whenever I did join raids though, I always looked up guides online."

"Well, isn't that what normal players do?"

"Are you not a normal player?"

"Well, I was one of the people writing those online guides."

"Wow. You're such an online game addict."

"That aside, can you tell me about Kasumi's online gaming background?"

"She grew up in a strict household, so she could never watch TV, let alone play games online. She said that when she started high school, she began to live alone, but she was already extremely busy with her studies and so could not find time for any hobbies. She only tried Sky World because one of her close friends strongly recommended it to her."

"She really lived such a sheltered life, huh."

"She wants to get off of this island as soon as possible so she won't worry her."

"I wonder how much that 'close friend' of hers is actually worrying about her..."

"We haven't really considered that yet."

"Anyways, I don't have much spare time either. I only have two weeks. If we can't accomplish our goal within those two weeks, I'll have to leave the island myself. Is that okay?"

"Well, I won't stop you. If that happens, I'll wait with Kasumi for the next regular service airship to come. Don't worry about us. I'll keep a close watch on Kasumi's tablet battery. I'll never allow it to get to a dangerously low level."

Luckily, she already knew his biggest concern.

"Yeah, Jun, you're not a bad person. You won't need to worry about Kasumi or me."

"But, haven't I created a rift between you two and the guild? You'll still have to deal with the remnants of that."

"I'll make sure Kasumi stays alert."

"You really are the worst type of person, huh."

"I acknowledge that myself."

Eri looked offended, and scowled.

"You're pretty bad tempered."

"Call me a tsundere¹. Call me moe². I'm fine with either."

However, she probably was just trying to hide her true anger. Jun thought that this girl was really skilled at manipulation.

¹ A character that seems to be hostile early on, but gradually becomes friendlier.

² A quality of a character characterized by her "cuteness".

Part 5

The items Kasumi was collecting could all be used for repeatable quests. By completing quests in town, one's reputation with the residents will gradually increase. Higher reputation could result in one being able to take on new quests, lower prices in shops, and some special privileges with residents.

Until now, Kasumi had not completed many quests. She said she always gave up her drops to her guild. She never really thought much of the concept of completing quests.

In Sky World, there were six classes with healing abilities. Among them was the white magician, which specialized in recovery magic. Although they were indispensable to raid groups, such powerful healing was unnecessary for casual monster farming groups. Those casual groups preferred other healing type classes, as despite having lower healing power, they possessed higher damage output and support abilities.

However, white magicians did not face any problems finding groups. They were still very useful in groups wanting to fight elite monsters or area bosses.

Normally, white magicians were in very high demand.

"Well, Kasumi-san, Eri's been accompanying you all this time, right?"

"Yeah, except for during that raid though. Whenever we were in town, she was always with me."

"If that's the case, then you should be pretty familiar with her healing magic. Kasumi-san, bring Eri with you to kill some more of those weak monsters."

There were still two hours until noon. In that time, Jun could complete two quests using information he had received from Eri.

"Use this weapon."

Jun handed Kasumi a short-sword.

Kasumi stared at it.

"I've never used a short-sword before."

"Then this is a great opportunity for you to increase your secondary weapon skill. This short-sword is rarity 6. Put more simply, its attack power is higher than that of your current red-sword."

Generally speaking, in MMORPGs like Sky World, secondary weapons were very important. In the midst of battle, it was not very difficult to make a mistake and drop a primary weapon.

It was also not very efficient to swing around enormous swords or axes when fighting against weak little monsters. For these reasons, most adventurers found it very useful to have a short-sword or a small hatchet at hand when traveling.

However, those were not the only reasons Jun decided to give Kasumi the short-sword.

"One more thing. Turn off automatic combat. Alright?"

"Understood! ...Uh, I just have to kill that monster, right?"

"Yeah, that's all. Eri, if it gets too dangerous, help out. With you here, she shouldn't be in any danger of dying."

"Of course. I won't screw up. I won't let Kasumi die no matter what."

Over the course of one day, tablets gained approximately 1% battery. It would take a whole month to offset a single death.

Kasumi and Eri had already died once the day before. Three deaths was seen as synonymous with real death. After dying once more, the two of them would be in a very dangerous situation. They would have to stay in a safe area until their battery lives returned to a safe level.

"You two better be careful. Eri, make sure you take care of Kasumi."

"I will. I will."

Jun bid farewell to the two of them and began to leave the hill with a smile on his face.

Kasumi engaged a human-sized Slug Beetle in battle. It would be a very close fight.

Once she turned off automatic combat, just as she had expected, her attacks became completely inaccurate. In real life, Kasumi had never learned anything about fighting. She was just an ordinary high school girl. Without the system's assistance, she found it difficult even to swing her weapon.

Kasumi was taking a lot of damage, and Eri was frantically casting healing spell upon healing spell on her, trying to keep her alive. The Slug Beetle was still mostly unhurt. Eri, continuing to cast healing spells on Kasumi, understood the severity of the situation at hand and began attacking it herself.

"Come here! Oof! Uh, Jun...?"

"Hey! Eri, stop attacking. Only intervene if you have no other choice."

"Argh! Meanie!"

A short while later, after having seen the two of them struggle, Jun headed back towards the town.

Then, he worked on finishing quests before coming back around noon.

Part 6

By the time Jun returned to the hill two hours later, Kasumi was completely exhausted. In spite of that, she continued to fight with all of her might.

Kasumi, with her back bent and short-sword ready, evaded an attack from a Rabbit Wolf. Then, she retaliated and landed a perfect hit. Even though light warriors had automatic evasion, she needed to time her attacks on her own. She had improved faster than he thought.

"Eri, you taught her all this?"

Eri frowned.

"I don't like how you do things."

"Someone who manipulates people shouldn't be saying that."

"Well, that was... Whatever."

Eri, knowing that she had lost that one, groaned.

The battle ended. Kasumi remained unhurt for the most part. After picking up the fur that the monster dropped, she ran towards Jun.

Wiping her sweat off her forehead, Kasumi exclaimed happily, "Jun-sensei! I'm getting the hang of it! I get why you told me not to use the automatic fighting mode now."

"Yeah..."

Kasumi glanced at Eri. Eri, forcing a smile, shook her head.

"I just gave her a few pointers."

"Eri, shush. Kasumi-san, can you tell me what you think about it, in your own words?"

"Automatic combat is a lot weaker than manually fighting. I also ended up taking less damage fighting manually."

"Anything else?"

"When I watched the enemy myself, I found that I had a lot more time to dodge... Uh, I honestly couldn't have done this without Eri. She helped me fully understand how it works."

Jun looked at Kasumi who was sitting on the grass.

"I figured this out too. Jun-san, you were able to beat the Dread Sphinx by understanding the timing of its attacks and dodging them accordingly."

"If you got that, then you're doing really well."

Dodging enemies attacks "by yourself". Attacking "by yourself". These actions, impossible on a mere tablet MMORPG, could, in this world, be performed with one's own four limbs.

"Well, if I had challenged the Dread Sphinx without any prior knowledge, I surely would've lost. While you guys were fighting it, I was watching the whole time from afar, and observing its movement patterns. Because of you guys, I was able to grasp most of them."

Eri glared at Jun. During the Crimson Scarf Knight Association's battle with the Dread Sphinx, the guild members did not manage their Enmity very well. Their main tank, unable to keep the Dread Sphinx's attention on her, allowed it to trample over those who were fighting from the rear.

"You were spying on us!"

"Well, Eri, you were the one who told me to watch, right?"

"Bleh. I guess I did..."

"Well, I'm happy that we were able to be of some assistance to you, Jun-san."

Shiroko, being the leader of the Crimson Scarf Knight Association, would have been even more furious if she found out about that. She already hated Jun. To her, Jun was an outsider who threatened her firm grasp on her guild.

Eri burst into laughter. Kasumi, not understanding what had happened, looked at her blankly.

"Kasumi-san, you're such an unassertive little girl."

"Oh, thank you."

Kasumi smiled shyly.

"You're the closest thing to a saint this world has to offer."

Eri laughed heartily and started rolling around on the grass.

"Huh?"

"Look, she's laughing at you. Why don't you kick her?"

"What? Why?"

Now done laughing, Eri got up and wiped the tears of laughter off her face.

"Eri, you laugh at people way too much."

"Heh. It's been a long time since I've gotten such a good chuckle from Kasumi."

"Am I really that funny to you?"

"Kasumi, you're fine."

Eri slapped the still confused Kasumi on her shoulder and looked towards Jun, smiling.

"Well, you knew this already, but she really is a sheltered girl."

"Then don't make fun of her. Remember, she *is* older than you."

"In online games, age doesn't mean anything."

That reasoning was certainly not unfounded. In games like Sky World, what really mattered were things like knowledge and intelligence. Class and skill levels were also more important than one's age in real life.

However, etiquette was one incredibly important thing to have for the facilitation of good communication...

"Well, from someone else's perspective, I seem like quite the mature girl. I'm only so informal with you two."

"Anyway, for the time being, let's get back to what we were originally talking about. There's also another reason why the automatic combat system is not good. Kasumi-san, since you're a light warrior, it won't do you any good."

"Since I'm a light warrior?"

"In groups, everybody has their own role to play."

Kasumi nodded, listening carefully.

"Light warriors are tanks. The role of the tank in a group is to attract the attention of enemies. This way, the healers can juggle the party's safety much more easily, and the attackers can attack to their heart's content."

That response sounded like it came straight out of a textbook. Light warriors had special attacks that greatly increased their enemies' Enmity towards them. Because of those, tanking came rather naturally to them.

"But why must they be the ones to attract the enemies' attention?"

"For starters, if the healers or attackers were hit, they would take a lot of damage."

"Eri, I give that answer 50 points."

"Ok, ok, Professor Jun."

"During the Crimson Scarf Knight Association's raid, their main tank was a heavy warrior. Now, why was she chosen to be the tank? Why not Kasumi-san?"

"Because heavy warriors are the best class to be tanks in raids... Isn't that common sense?"

"Why has that become common sense?"

"Well, raid level monsters have really strong attacks. It's really hard to dodge their attacks, so if they only attacked a single person with high defense, like a heavy warrior, it would be easier on us healers since we would only have to focus our healing on one person, and not as much as well, because their high defense lowers the amount of damage taken. Because of that, heavy warriors with strong defense-oriented armor became very well-established as effective tanks."

Eri just figured out why Jun was not satisfied with her earlier answer, and so she tried her best to provide as clear and as explanatory of an answer as she could to Kasumi.

"So, during the Crimson Scarf Knight Association's raid, was it not possible for Kasumi to serve as a tank?"

"Her inexperience was also taken into consideration. However, now, Kasumi would probably be able to do so."

"Right."

Eri glanced quickly at Kasumi and shook her head.

"Even now, that's still a bit unreasonable. Kasumi's defense stat is still extremely low. She needs better equipment."

Her combat skill was almost maxed. She would need to figure out how to do the skill limit increase quest, then get better equipment.

Kasumi looked sad. She hung her head in shame.

"Well, were you able to get all that about the role of the tank in a group?"

"...Hmm, well, because attackers do a lot of damage to monsters, it's important to manage Enmity and prevent them from being attacked. Just taking the monster's attacks and not trying to evade would help make that easier."

"Correct. However, if I did not avoid the attacks myself, I wouldn't have been able to pull off any attack combos. Luckily, because magic swordsmen's fire attacks are pretty strong, I was able to get enough Enmity to keep the Dread Sphinx off of you."

"Even though you dodged a lot of its attacks, my healing still didn't fully account for all the damage you ended up taking. I think the Enmity I got healing you ended up being pretty close to yours."

"Well, you were the only healer I had. The Dread Sphinx concentrated all of its attacks on me. Couldn't all of the healers in your guild have gathered around and healed me?"

"Hmm, I hadn't considered that."

Eri clapped her hands together.

"That could have been possible. Our guild's healers would have been able to keep you healed just because there were so many... Well, you were pretty good. You thought outside of the box and didn't fight conventionally."

"I'm one of the people who helped create those 'conventional fighting tactics'. Anyone who plays an MMO early on contributes the establishment of conventions."

"Wow, such an addict..."

"I'm not quite at that level yet. I still had to deal with schoolwork and such. I only played games after I had completed all of my work. There were many people who were logged in and playing 24/7."

Obsessive MMORPG players started becoming a problem at the beginning of the 21st century. Neglecting their jobs and studies to play games, such players had become quite plentiful.

"Well... If you're comparing yourself to those kinds of people..."

"They completely blow my kind of people's statistics out of the water... Oh look, we've gone off on yet another tangent. Back to our topic: managing enemies with strong attacks. How would one go about doing it?"

"It's certainly important to have multiple healers on a single tank. But if what you said is true, anyone could have thought of that and made that a now commonly followed convention."

"That convention in particular probably isn't always the best thing to do anymore. Actually, the story behind that is pretty interesting."

"Huh?"

"In the early days of Sky World, like almost every MMO, there were monsters that people were thought were impossible to kill. Tanks had a powerful attack called Heaven's Inferno that could only be cast once every 4 seconds. In those days, even though the best recovery magic could fully heal somebody, such spells took upwards of 10 seconds to cast."

"Wow, imagine Maximum Heal taking 10 seconds... That's a huge setback."

"On the other hand, that spell didn't generate much Enmity."

Sky World's current strongest healing spell, which could completely fill up one's HP, generated an extremely high amount of Enmity. Just using it once would attract the enemy. Trying to get it off the caster at that point was nearly impossible.

"So, in short, tanks had to be able to withstand 10 full seconds of damage no matter the enemy. Nevertheless, it was hard to even survive for 4 seconds to use Heaven's Inferno against those monsters. Because of that, players weren't really satisfied, so they had five recovery magic users use their strongest healing spell at staggered intervals. This way, they could fully heal the tank every two seconds, improving his survivability fivefold. Using that tactic allowed them to finally defeat those difficult monsters. Players cheated the system this way."

That tactic was now known as chain healing. The basic idea was used many times, and many improvements were made here and there, and now, it had become an established tactic that everybody knew about and used.

"It's said that this was the basis on which our current raid system was founded. Whether that's true or not, I don't know for sure."

"I never knew that was how this incredibly common tactic came to be."

"That's where it began. Before long, healers just kept on timing their heals in this way. Eventually, the developers got together and decided to nerf it."

"Ah, so that's why experienced players thought that way. The only reason I could find groups easily was because they wanted white magicians."

"By the way, words like bottler¹ and diaper-men were first used a while after that... Actually, let's stop talking about this."

He glanced at Kasumi, and then stared blankly, not knowing what to say.

Jun and Eri made eye contact. They smiled at each other.

"Sorry. Anyways, back on topic, if your HP can recover faster than damage is dealt to you, you'll eventually win. That's the most important thing to know about fighting raid level monsters. Yesterday, I was able to avoid most of the Dread Sphinx's attacks... As a matter of fact, Kasumi-san, that should be your goal too."

"Welp, my goal, huh."

"Yep. Not relying on the light warrior's automatic evasion and avoiding the attacks yourself to the best of your ability. Because light warriors generally wear lightweight armor, they can be quite agile. You should try to get used to moving around rhythmically."

"Do you think I can do that?"

"You won't be able to leave this island unless you can. You'd have to wait quietly for the scheduled airship."

¹ People who play games so much that in order to avoid wasting time going to the bathroom, they keep a plastic bottle nearby to pee in.

Kasumi, seemingly ashamed, remained silent.

After a little while, Kasumi, with great conviction, declared, "I can do it! Please continue to train me."

Jun nodded, thinking to himself, "All right!"

"Then we'll start practicing after lunch. First, we'll work on learning the attack patterns of all the monsters in this meadow. You'll be able to defeat any monster here without taking any damage at all."

"I'll give it my all!"

Kasumi, bowing sincerely, did not notice Eri looking unhappy beside her.

Training in the afternoon was a lot harder than in the morning, but Kasumi was still able to keep up with it.

Her memory proved to be surprisingly good.

"Remember to plan out every one of your movements."

She became able to fully understand the attacks of a single monster after 30 minutes.

She was now able to both strike effectively without too much effort, and swiftly avoid the attacks of the same Rabbit Wolves that she struggled immensely with earlier.

However, she seemed a bit worn out from exerting herself too much. After her last fight, she was so tired that she couldn't move anymore.

Jun, carrying Kasumi who felt very embarrassed that she had to be carried all the way back to town, was also pretty worn out. Smirking, Eri said, "Hmm, I wonder how your boobs feel..."

Showing off her chest, Eri said, "Ahh. Even when Sky World was still an MMO, I didn't really like my avatar. It was a near perfect replica of my real self. Look at me... I look like I don't have any boobs at all! I'd like some big breasts too..."

Jun instinctively turned away. Eri grinned and shoved herself in his face.

"Hey~ What's wrong, mista?"

"Calling me 'mista' makes me feel weird."



"Okay then. What do you think about Kasumi's boobs?"

With all her might, Eri exhaled onto Jun's shoulder.

Jun frowned. He noticed that his cheeks had started becoming flushed. Noticing his agitation, Eri continued trying to annoy him.

"Well, you're a boy. Don't they look like big melons to you?"

"You're a perv."

"Excuse me. Let's calm down. Anyways, which do you prefer, small breasts or huge breasts?"

"I don't really care, so long as the person's friendly."

"You've got bad taste," Eri said with her hands raised high, scolding Jun.

"God... We've just formed this group. Can we not make things so awkward?"

"I'm just preparing you for your future harem."

"...Seriously speaking, that guild had a lot of problems with opposite-sex relations."

"Ah, yeah. Jun, you get opposite-sex relations, right?"

"They're troublesome, and I'm not very good at managing them."

"Hmm. Anyways, you're just trying to get off the island, right?"

"Right. I am. Is that bad?"

"...What is your goal?"

"Doesn't everybody just want to make their way to Aion? Upon reaching there, they might just be able to escape this world."

"Everybody outside this island, maybe. Not us on this island though."

"...Well, honestly, I'm a bit scared of being stuck here forever."

"Do you have something else on your mind besides getting to Aion?"

Jun stared at Eri. That statement reminded him of the girl who 'chose' him.

That couldn't be right. If Eri and Alice were one and the same, then she would have been looking much more scrupulously for ways to get off the island.

"I have friends."

"In this world?"

"They don't have communication stones."

"They don't? Even if we went searching everywhere, I doubt we'd able to find them then."

"Hmm... Well, either way, we can't afford to waste time."

Eri shook her head, and quietly uttered "I'm sorry."

"What? Isn't this a bit late for that?"

"I didn't know that you had something important to do yourself. It's my fault that you're stuck here right now."

"It certainly is."

Jun smiled. His opinion of Eri had improved.

However, Eri still seemed like she was making fun of him. He glanced at her.

"Anyway, Eri, how many times did you end up helping Kasumi this morning?"

"Uh... Are you going to punish me if I did?"

"How many times?"

"...Three times. Hey, is the punishment going to be something perverted?"

"Just keep quiet for three hours, starting now."

"What!?"

"I'll add to it. Four hours."

"Agh!"

Eri flailed her arms around violently in defiance.

Jun grinned. He was happy with how things turned out.

Part 7

Night. After Kasumi and Eri had gone off to sleep in a room next to Jun's.

Jun, leaving the inn alone, went out for a walk in the now-empty town.

He had already finished the nighttime quests. He had also already found out which areas were dangerous and which were not. He had the extra time to walk around and did not need to carry a weapon openly.

"Boobs."

It was Alice.

Jun stopped walking and turned around.

Alice appeared out of nowhere, standing in the shadow of a building.

"Do you like big boobs?"

"What did you say?"

"Do you prefer bigger ones over smaller ones?"

"You're acting a little weird today, huh."

"Jealous."

"You're talking like Eri... Alice, were you following me all day?"

"Not really. Just a bit."

"You usually don't like being around me. Can I ask you one thing?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Can you find some information about the Crimson Scarf Knight Association? I'd prefer if they weren't doing anything big."

"Got it. I'll be careful."

That was unexpected. This was the first time she accepted one of Jun's requests.

"...I really don't understand you."

"Aren't girls with many secrets just fascinating?"

"Did you also bring Eri into this world? I think some of her personality rubbed off onto you."

"I did not. The person who copied Sky World for her disappeared before the Birthday"

"Is he in Sky World?"

"Maybe. Feeling alone here, she looked for a way to get off this island. She saw your arrival as the perfect opportunity to do so."

"Is it okay to give me such personal information?"

"She has no interest in seeing the 'End of the Blue Sky'."

Jun felt stuck. She always changed the topic whenever it came to something like that. He didn't know what she knew, nor did he know what she was hiding.

"I don't really know what you mean by 'seeing the End of the Blue Sky'."

Alice remained silent.

Jun sighed, shook his head, and thought to himself, "Whatever."

"Anyways, I'll count on you for information about the Crimson Scarf Knight Association."

Alice nodded, and just like how she had appeared, she disappeared into the darkness.

Jun shrugged and looked up at the sky.

The two moons looked beautiful.

The twin full moons shone with pale bluish-white light, almost as if they were competing with each other.

Right. This is a different world.

A different world resembling Sky World, the game.

Seeing the moons always reminded Jun of one thing: the day when he first set foot in this new world.

Part 8

The circumstances behind Jun's arrival in Sky World differed from those of the other players.

He came to Sky World in a special way. The girl who called herself Alice brought him here. They made an agreement. He came voluntarily.

Because of that, Jun was not sure about what exactly happened during the Birthday. Before that day, he hadn't even played the game.

That was approximately three months ago.

Jun, turning on his computer as usual, found a message in his inbox. It was sent by a good friend whom he played MMORPGs with, an online friend.

They had never met in real life. However, they were quite close on online bulletin boards and online games, and occasionally talked about their real life situations.

Jun trusted Kai, that friend, much more than even his classmates in school. Kai always looked for interesting things to do. Whenever Kai found a new, interesting game, Jun never doubted his judgement.

When the new school term began, Jun stopped hearing from Kai. All of a sudden, Kai sent an email to him.

It was a very short mail.

All it said was, "Have you heard of 'Sky World'? Come see the end of the blue sky. If you're interested, join!"

Jun didn't quite know what Kai was talking about.

Kai was a troublemaker. He loved stirring things up. He was the kind of person who was always cheerful, but he was also very good at managing crises. He had the uncanny ability to sense when something was close to a breaking point and had stepped away from many a situation to prevent them from becoming serious. Thanks to him, Jun had been dragged into many problematic situations, but he had also ended up helping Jun out a great deal when it came to other situations.

Jun didn't respond to his email. He regretted never getting his real name or where he lived.

However, he was interested in the contents of the email. He wasn't quite sure what to expect from a guy who seemed like he could disappear again at any moment.

"Seeing the end of the blue sky, huh."

Jun blamed himself. Why had he not installed Sky World after reading that email? Any MMO player would have been interested. Why didn't he do anything? Why didn't he have faith in Kai? Why didn't he act?

Kai always mentioned that trait of his.

"Jun. You have to take fate into your own hands. I really believe in that. Life is a series of choices."

His family situation was complicated. Jun picked up on that. The troublemaking personality that he showed online was just a way for him to let out his stress.

"Hey, if you were never good at anything you did, and were always depressed, and it seemed like you were stuck in a bog, would you give up? Or would you continue struggling until the bitter end? I would do the latter. If a chance arose, I would jump at it, no matter who or what was involved. How could I let a good opportunity go by? I don't need a reason to make a decision."

He would definitely do whatever he could to take even just one step out of that bog.

That was surely why he sent that email.

If that was the case, by ignoring his email, Jun had let go of a long-awaited opportunity from Kai. Jun wouldn't be able to take that step with him.

When he met Alice, that regret kept coming back to him.

But then, at that time, he did not even know her name.

"Are you interested in seeing the end of the blue sky?"

The sudden appearance of that gothic Lolita girl with silver hair and golden eyes was accompanied by those words.

Together, Alice and Jun went into a karaoke box. There, she installed Sky World onto his tablet...

Then, Jun experienced a momentary lapse of awareness.

Soon after, still wearing his school uniform as he had been when they entered the karaoke box, he found himself standing in an unknown middle-age-esque town.

In the beginning, he didn't know whether or not that was Sky World. It all seemed too real. The lukewarm meadow breeze blowing through his hair, the fresh scent of grass, and everything else seemed to be real.

No, it actually was real.

It was another world, just as real as his own, called Sky World...

Jun set foot onto the ground. He had yet to choose his class, and all of his skill levels were at zero.

Soon, the nearby Alice said, "With a special phrase, 'Awaken!', you can become the adventurer shown on your equipment window."

It seemed she would be his guide in place of a tutorial.

Following what she said, Jun uttered the phrase and his body became covered in radiant light. In just a short while, his school uniform turned into leather armor. A dagger was stuck into a sheath on his waist. His underwear turned into coarse linen cloth. It did not feel stiff at all. Jun got used to it pretty quickly.

"First of all, imagine a cursor in the corner of your head. If you concentrate hard enough, your HP bar and message window will appear."

His first attempt was unsuccessful, but after a few minutes, he became able to see the game-like icon and window as if it were virtual reality.

He learned about things like calling up his tablet, using skills, and battling with automatic combat mode from Alice.

"You can change your hair color and your eye color. Just ask a magician in town."

"Aside from those two things, is nothing else changeable?"

"Your face is mostly based on your real life face."

"On me, specifically, Junichiro Mikimori?"

One of this world's puzzles was solved. Or maybe it had deepened. Jun shook his head in relief.

The first time he saw a monster nearby, he was terrified. Large Rats, just ordinary weak monsters in other games, disgusted him with their repulsive scent and movements.

"Once you've completed the tutorial battle, you can choose your class at any time."

Doing as Alice said, Jun gestured for his tablet to appear. On the screen was Jun's current stats. All of his stats were at 5. He had only the basic combat and vocational skills. His class was displayed as "Hero Candidate."

He checked Kai's email about Sky World again. Then, he looked up some beginner websites, and learned the basics of everything. That was useful.

If he had played the actual game himself, he might have ended up choosing the white magician for its buffs, or the summoner for the many different creatures it could summon.

Once the battle ended, he felt lightheaded.

"I'll choose the magic swordsman."

"Once you choose a class, you can never choose another."

"No problem. I'm following my intuition."

Magic swordsmen were attackers. Choosing a front-line attacking class was very common among newbies. Inevitably, the number of front-line attackers became very high. Whenever a group started recruiting, they would be overwhelmed with join requests from front-line attackers.

Actually, magic swordsmen were magic warriors who could use the forbidden black magic. Their chuunibyout¹ attack names made them very popular, making them the third most common class. The most common was the white magician, and the second was the heavy warrior. Because those classes were able to find groups easily, they were very popular among veterans.

"Archers are common among westerners. Say, have you watched any movies?"

"Sky World's players are, for the most part, Japanese."

"Seems that way. The W-LD brand is only used in Japanese educational institutions."

"But archers are easy to use in the beginning. They don't have to fight hand to hand against scary monsters."

"That's true for the early part of the game. They aren't too terribly special after that though. Classes like the heavy warrior, which has limited mobility, and the white magician, which cannot really do much on their own, are much harder to play as in the beginning... But things like the black magicians' teleport spell and the summoner's summons make them seem kind of cool. In any case, it's nothing like fighting in a Scope Dog². Players here actually go on real adventures."

¹ lit. second year middle school sickness; characterized by using excessively grandiose names for ordinary things and believing that one has hidden abilities (magical or non-magical)

² A very bulky armored suit from Armored Trooper Votoms.

Right. Jun chose the magic swordsman because of its capacity to go solo, and because they were said to have a promising end-game. He weighed the pros and cons, and ended up deciding on that.

For starters, magic swordsmen were good at survival. Since he was afraid of dying and losing battery, Jun, as much as he did not want to, spent a bit more than a month doing nothing productive. Next, magic swordsmen were very good at traveling alone on foot. That would be a great help for completing quests. And the last reason...

"This is not a game world. You can't rely on automatically avoiding monsters' attacks. You have to do it yourself."

In the middle of his first battle, he was somewhat able to move along to the rhythm of the Large Rat's movements. However, he still swung his short-sword around rather randomly, so only some of his hits connected.

Putting two and two together, Jun reasoned, "People who practiced martial arts would probably be able to fight monsters regardless of their class. Even if they didn't have a sword or a staff, couldn't they still strike pretty hard at even the biggest of monsters?"

"I haven't tried, so I wouldn't know."

"If you think they can't, but don't know for certain... Shouldn't you try it out?"

If they could avoid the enemy's attacks themselves, players could use their creativity to make up for the magic swordsman's main weak point: defense. Before choosing his class, he thought about it one more time. Studying the enemy's attack patterns, and avoiding their attacks based on them could really be effective. He decided to test it out.

"Is this what the developers wanted?"

Alice did not respond.

"I won't be banned for abusing any bugs, right?"

"You won't."

"Great."

Satisfied with the results of his test, Jun opened up his tablet and chose the magic swordsman as his class. He heard a fanfare in his head and saw a system message confirming his decision.

"By the way, what's a Scope Dog?"

Alice looked curious.

That day, Jun, as if in a trance, continued fighting near the town.

Magic swordsmen started with only one spell, one that could create water and bread. That was all that was needed to survive. The food wasn't very tasty, but at least he would not have to worry about finding food or drink. As for a place to live, there was a safe zone nearby with a small hut in which he could stay. Alice had taught him that safe zones had barriers which prevented monsters from passing through. She said there were no other players on the island. He could do whatever he want there. Jun took his time perfecting his battle strategy.

Then... Before he knew it, the sun set and the moons began to rise.

Looking up at the sky, Jun finally noticed.

There were two moons.

Both about the size of Earth's moon, they shined with a pale radiance.

He thought they were beautiful.

He felt uneasy, not knowing what would become of him in the future.

However, he was happy.

Kai. I can surely catch up to you. One day, I'll find you.

Having taken his first step towards that ambition, he could never allow himself to stop.

Part 9

The day after Jun teamed up with Kasumi Yukasaki and Eri Inui.

Jun, on his way down the stairs, smelled an exceptionally savory breakfast.

Kasumi had borrowed the kitchen and was cooking.

"Hey Kasumi, do you remember what you were doing on the Birthday?"

Eri grinned widely at him.

"Hmm... I think I was learning how to cook in a world which does not even have gas ranges... Everybody was sighing, stumped about how to go about making delicious and healthy food."

"...Such a saint..."

"How passionate!"

Jun and Eri exchanged glances and smiled. They saw how much fun Kasumi was having from how she was humming.

Kasumi's cooking was incredibly delicious.

The dressing, gently slathered onto the salad, was made according to her own original recipe. She baked bread, churned milk into butter to be used as spread, and used some Altaria Berries to make a sweet jam. Jun took a deep breath, enamored with Kasumi's wonderful cooking.

"You've surely been cooking for a long time."

"I guess... Anybody want seconds?"

Jun's group had reserved the barroom.

Since Kasumi and Eri had muscle aches in the morning, they ended up using the inn as a classroom.

In any case, no other guests were in the barroom. They sat in a circle.

"Before we start, I'd like to take a look at your status window. Can you show me your tablet?"

"Humph, so you can know our dirty secrets?"

"Eri, we're trying to make the most of our time. Enough with that."

"I'm just kidding! Please take a look at my status window."

When he received Eri's tablet, Jun examined her items. Earlier, she hadn't been carrying anything of much value. Compared to that of people on other islands, her defense was awfully low.

"It's kind of shabby, right?"

"That's just cause you're a white magician fighting alone. Support personnel have to stay with their groups... Hmm. Hold on a sec."

Jun tapped his tablet and his infinite capacity bag appeared. Items stored inside would not drop even on death. Items could be withdrawn from and deposited into it.

However, it could only be used in safe places such as inside an inn. Consequently, players adventuring outside of these safe areas had to acknowledge the risks and limit themselves to carrying necessary items.

"...How's this?"

Jun opened his bag and took out a few items. Some were quest rewards. Others were monster drops. Some were even items that he just happened to be lucky enough to find lying randomly on the ground. Even though they were much better suited for other classes, Jun had kept them with him all this time for some reason.

"Hmm... That should be good. Hey, uh, Jun... This item's rarity is 7."

"There aren't any rare items until the 5th island ring. If you take a few items from this island and use them in conjunction with each other, you should be able to double your defense. If you're lucky enough to get an item with Enmity reduction, it'll make healing much easier."

"Thanks so much... But... This is making me feel like a beggar."

"If you really feel indebted to me, why don't you return the favor and become my slave?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm your servant. Do you have any orders, master?"

"Anyways, Kasumi-san. Here's some equipment that can help increase monsters' Enmity for you."

"You're ignoring me! I offered to do your dirty work!"

"You should never run away or allow the back lines to be targeted. From now on, you should start getting used to being very careful."

"OK! I'll try my best!"

Kasumi then handed over her tablet and Jun assessed her stats.

"Humph... You're using a weird skin."

When battling in MMORPGs, one had to manage many little pieces of information and act accordingly. For that reason, if a player found the game interface even a little uncomfortable or confusing, it was common for that player to use a different skin to help present the information more clearly or in a more manageable way. Jun used his own customized skin.

"Uh, Sakuya-chan said that I should use this one..."

"Your friend, huh. I get it. It could make the information much more organized. Lemme take a look at the source code..."

After a cursory look-through, Jun's jaw dropped.

"Yep. It does make information more organized and easier to understand."

"Huh?"

"Even Eri doesn't have this skin. She's only using a default skin. The icons on her screen are too big, and the damage window isn't very well organized. You probably haven't noticed this, but this skin is far superior in many ways. This makes me wonder about the kind of person that close friend of yours is..."

"Oh, I get it... Uh, how does one transfer a skin?"

"Just have your tablets facing each other and use infrared data transfer. The file's not too big... Hey, is it OK if I play around with it a little?"

Knowing how defenseless Kasumi was, Eri hastily shouted, "Hey! Wait! Don't ever tell your password to anybody else!", and snatched Kasumi's tablet away from Jun.

"Jun, I'm disappointed in you! How could you be trying to dig through this young lady's secrets!?"

"What? Wait! I was just going to return her tablet so she could type in her password herself."

"Okay. I understand... Kasumiiiiii~"

Kasumi didn't really understand what was happening, and looked around in confusion.

"Uh... Did I do something I shouldn't have?"

"You so did!"

Eri thrust her index finger out at Kasumi and said, "Just listen to me." Kasumi had been tilting her head sideways, confused since the start of the commotion.

Kasumi kneeled down, and Eri, her arms on her hips, explained the basic principles of keeping personal information private.

"...For starters, don't tell anybody else your password. If your password includes your real name or your birthday, change it immediately. In this world, if somebody who knows your password manages to get his hands on your tablet, your life could be threatened!"

"Right. I understand... But Eri-chan and Jun-chan would never do anything like that."

"You never know. Boys can be ferocious and bloodthirsty."

"I think it's more likely for Eri to be the one messing around with it."

"Maybe with other people I would. If I knew

"You little..."

"I don't think you should be saying things like that."

"...The two of you get along pretty well, huh."

Kasumi laughed at their back-and-forth.

Eri made eye contact with Jun and chuckled.

Jun thought, "That's right. We're nothing but three acquaintances on this island. Could we possibly become good friends?"

Once they made it off the island...

He glanced at Kasumi. What would she do? What will happen to the relationship between the three of us?

And if what she said was true...

Part 10

There was something Jun had been hiding from Alice.

The real reason he accepted Kasumi's request and stayed on the island to train her.

"My close friend, Sakuya-chan, is a very interesting person."

The day Jun killed the Dread Sphinx, Kasumi visited Jun in the inn, and after having knelt down to ask for Jun's assistance, smiled exuberantly.

"She always said, 'You can't wait to make it past this wall. You have to take fate into your own hands. Whenever a chance arises, you have to jump at it, no matter what. You can't let a good chance go—'"

Those words...

No doubt about it. That player had to have been...

That's Kai!

Jun shivered.

Those words... There's no doubt about it. It has to be Kai! He's in Sky World after all!

He had been looking for Kai this whole time. He was getting a bit disappointed about the lack of any clues indicating his whereabouts.

Now, Jun was that much closer to finding Kai.

"I thought meeting you, Jun-san, would be a good opportunity. I know I may be a bother to you... But... Please... Help this powerless me."

After saying this, Kasumi bowed her head once more.

Behind her, Jun saw a vision of Kai.

He now knew how to go about in achieving his goal... *Hisquest.*

He just had to help Kasumi Yukasaki get off this island.

Chapter 3: Team Battle**Part 1**

Jun and the others left a cave and found themselves in a valley completely shrouded in fog.

There was a huge valley surrounded by many steep mountains in the middle of Altaria.

"The townspeople call this place... The 'Valley of Death'. However, since there aren't any quests out here, it never became very well known among players."

Jun said, "Makes sense." and nodded. That was why he hadn't heard about this place yet.

It had been a whole week since the three of them formed a group together. Kasumi's training was going at a pretty good pace. Jun suggested that she familiarize herself with the monsters around here, and so, they journeyed to this mountain chain.

Even with Eri's group speed buff, Running, it took them more than a day to make it this far. Since it was right in the middle of Altaria, even a remote place like this could be seen from all three towns on the island.

"Once we get out of this valley, there should be a path that will take us straight up the back of Dalvori Mountain. But there's a steep and dangerous cliff along the way. There's a temple on top of it. The airship is right under that temple."

"So, there's a golem protecting the temple?"

"It's called the Veil Guardian. When our guild's heavy warrior was hit by it, it did double the Dread Sphinx's damage."

"How fast does it attack?"

"At about the same speed as the Dread Sphinx."

"How's its movement speed?"

"I think it's a little bit faster than a normal character."

"Uh... If we used Running, like earlier, or Jun-san's Long Walk, could we run away from it?"

"Running and Long Walk are both common movement spells with fixed durations. While being targeted by an aggressive enemy, they can't be used. Items and spells which allow flight are also rendered ineffective. That blocks out all modes of increased movement speed."

Kasumi listened attentively to Eri's explanation.

"That sounds a bit mean to me."

Jun smiled wryly and shook his head.

"However, kiting is effective against boss monsters."

"Kiting? What's that?"

Kasumi tilted her head in confusion.

Jun and Eri made eye contact.

"Great Teacher Jun, why don't you explain? Since I'm a healer, I don't really have a firm grasp on that kind of thing."

"Kiting is a basic technique used by back-line fighters."

It seemed like Eri would not help out. Jun sighed.

"It's a tactic most commonly done by increasing one's movement speed or slowing down that of the monster, and then constantly avoiding the monster's attacks while dealing damage from far away. Using damage over time spells, like poison, can make this technique more effective."

"That sounds cowardly to me."

"Call it cowardly all you like, but it is a valid technique to win battles, allowing one to earn experience points and items in the process. Because of the potential rewards for relatively less effort, many players try to do it."

However, in Sky World, gaining experience points was not the only purpose of fighting monsters. The skill system was quite multifaceted. By striking monsters with weapons, successfully dodging monsters' attacks, and receiving blows from monsters, players could increase their weapon, evasion, and defense skills respectively. Using magic at the right time would also result in skill level increases. Everything had a purpose.

"Kiting takes up a lot of time, but the risk is low. However, nearby players can find it bothersome, so people usually do it where there are very few people. It's a question of the individual players' ethics."

"But, players bragging about things like 'self-responsibility' do it in newbie zones too."

"Because of people like that who treat newbies badly and are able to kill monsters that they are not supposed to be able to, many developers have officially disallowed kiting. In Sky World, by restricting the power of movement speed increase spells used by allies, the developers were able to prevent the overuse of kiting. Enemies on which spells like Slow are not effective can therefore only be dealt with after great preparation."

Right after he said that, Jun looked at Eri.

"During Sky World's early days, was it customary to PK people kiting near towns?"

"I don't know. I only installed Sky World a little bit before the Birthday. However, I think that might have been possible, given that it was such a looked down upon and hated tactic."

"Huh... But, in any case, we don't do that kind of stuff."

"Both Kasumi-san and I are front-line fighters, and Eri is a white magician with very few attack spells. We need to take that into account when looking for viable battle strategies. In order for kiting to be practical, players have to leave immediately when other players come around."

"I see. I get it! We need to make sure we don't attract people doing weird things."

Kasumi nodded meekly.

"...Are you getting it mixed up with molesters? ...This girl..."

"It is a real danger. This isn't an unreasonable way to interpret it."

Jun and Eri exchanged glances and smiled wryly at each other.

Part 2

While going up the slope, they saw a large open space on the mountain. It was lush with vegetation amidst the reddish soil.

Ahead of this school campus sized open space was the temple they had been looking for.

Well, their primary goal was to be able to take out the Veil Guardian.

However, Jun was going to take it out himself. Ten days had not yet passed since the other two died. A second death would mean getting dangerously close to disappearing. They weren't about to take on such an immense risk.

"I'll go pull the Veil Guardian and fight it. You two should go watch from a safe location. Don't, under any circumstances, get any Enmity. If either of you die, our plan will have failed. I'll give up on you two and leave the island alone."

"Even if you didn't say that, I wouldn't even— So, whether we win or not is irrelevant, right?"

"You're making me feel awkward. Shush."

"You're annoying, you dummy... Look, Kasumi's also cheering you on."

"Uh... Please try your best!"

Hearing Kasumi's encouragement and seeing her cheer by pumping her fists in the air, Jun turned towards her.

At least he had some of Eri's buffs to help him out. A few buff icons were in the bottom left corner of Jun's field of vision.

After familiarizing himself with the open space a bit, Jun fixed his eyes onto the temple.

They had come here the whole way on one road. On the left hand side of the three-meter wide road was a huge wall, and on the right hand side, a cliff. By taking that road, they had made it all the way around the mountain.

Losing your footing here meant falling all the way back to the beginning head first.

This was the temple on the furthestmost tip that everybody had forgotten.

The stairs were decorated, on both sides, with gigantic pterodactyl-like statues, made by the Great Liu, with their wings spread, as if they were about to take flight. Because it was said to have been created at a nearby location by the God of the Sky, there was surely some good reason for the temple to be in such a remote place...

"...This is a pretty annoying place to have this– This stinks."

Still walking along the road with no end in sight, Jun couldn't help but utter spitefully.

After slowly inching through the wide open space, they finally made it to the front of the temple.

A huge steel statue rested at the top, about twenty stairs up. It was about 50 meters tall. It had some metal armor, which was a bit rusted, typical of a medieval knight, a large sword, and a giant shield. It was completely motionless.

Jun, squinting, saw its name, Veil Guardian, appear above its head in green. It was not in active mode yet. However, if they got any closer...

"First of all, let's establish how far we can be without it detecting us."

Not wielding his two-handed great-sword, Jun went up the stairs, one step at a time. The golem, which seemed almost like an enormous robot, appeared bigger and bigger.

When he was almost halfway up the stairs, the statue began to slowly raise its sword. Its name became red. It noticed Jun, who to the golem, was trespassing, and went into active mode.

"It's here!"

Jun turned back and went down the stairs as if he was rolling down them. The stairs did nothing to boost his mobility. At any rate, even if he lost, at least he would have been able to gather a very important piece of information.

The steel knight statue chased him, making a huge ruckus in the process.

When Jun made it back halfway through the earlier open area, he turned around quickly.

He glared at the Veil Guardian.

"Well, let's have at it!"

This was a new enemy. One that he had not seen before. It was a fierce enemy, and it was right in front of him. He was excited. It was a challenge. In games, Jun had always loved the prospect of new and unknown challenges.

Jun happily decided to challenge the Veil Guardian.

The Veil Guardian looked back at him, moving casually. It could swing a longsword two times the size of Jun with ease.

It would not be easy to approach during the interval between its attacks. It could block weak attacks with its shield and take no damage.

Furthermore, even though it was slow, it could use regeneration. The idea of frantically attacking just to have all damage done recovered again was very disheartening.

"This guy's a nasty fellow..."

Even if he tried avoiding its attacks, his health would still slowly decrease since he would be taking damage while it would remain unhurt.

In spite of that, he was able to figure out his enemy's attack pattern. It had a main three hit attack, and a three hit attack during which it would use its shield to push. Then, when the monster spins its backside around, it would be very difficult to avoid that spinning attack...

Suddenly, his HP went down to 50%.

"I won't be able to hold out for very long."

Although he had considered the prospect of losing, he had a feeling inside him that he might still have a chance. His misgivings dispelled, he smacked his lips, and felt refreshed.

"It can't be helped. Lemme quickly get some more attack data!"

He tried using one of his spells. It wasn't the best of circumstances for it. It was possible that the monster could have had full resistance to it.

Earlier, when Eri and Kasumi's guild members were fighting, he managed to get information on the Dread Sphynx. Just as he had feared, that information was of no use here. Of course, that was natural, as this was a golem he was fighting. Quick Stun, which was useful on normal monsters, was now unusable. Even though it was a spell that could not be used on regular raid monsters, as far as Jun was concerned, that was good news.

Since he did not have information on the golem's weak points, Jun had to try everything.

First, he tried enchanting his weapon with flame magic. It wasn't very effective.

He tried ice next. That wasn't useful either.

Then he tried lightning. His enemy flinched... This was it!

"It's weak point is lightning attacks!"

Using the strongest lightning attacks he had, he continued striking the golem until his MP bar became empty. He continued to avoid his enemy's fierce attacks. While that wasn't terribly effective, its regeneration was not able to keep up with his damage. He was able to take off more than 10% of its HP.

But now, Jun had no more MP.

His HP bar was at 20%, and it was flashing red as a warning sign.

[Dangerously low HP. Dangerously low HP. Dangerously low HP.]

That yellow warning message was a very unpleasant sight.

"Well, I was able to get a lot of information. It's fine if I die now..."

Jun quickly glanced at Kasumi and Eri. They were heeding his advice, staying outside the enemy's attack range and watching the battle carefully.

Eri was folding her arms and grinning, as if the situation at hand was not dire at all, and Kasumi, staring with her arms together as if she were praying, was witnessing how the battle was going.

"Yes!"

Grinning broadly, Jun began fleeing from the Veil Guardian.

"Hey you, what are you doing?!"

"Shush. I'm trying to make sure I don't die."

Later, when Jun looked back at the Veil Guardian, he ran straight towards the cliff. Three more steps left. Two more steps. One more. Zero.

Jun jumped.

Jun's body went into the air high above the ground.

The golem, confused, stood still.

Seeing the golem's face, Jun continued falling all the way down.

When he touched the ground, he took damage which was more than ten times his maximum HP and died instantly.

Part 3

"You idiot! Fool! Stupido! Don't do such moronic things!"

About an hour later.

Though his bind point was the inn room back at Gazar, Jun revived at the bottom of the valley to hear Eri deliver an onslaught of verbal insults. After Jun fell down from the cliff, Eri had used a revival spell. Jun then put on his clothes and stood alert...

For the whole of the next hour, Jun, now alive, ended up being continuously teased by Eri though his communication stone.

Aside from the revival spell that only white magicians could use, there was no other way to bring characters back to life. The spell moved dead characters away from the spot where they died and where their equipment was dropped. They revived with a weakness debuff lasting a certain amount of time, but their tablet's battery life was not lost.

However, if the bind point was far away, it was better than having to run back naked to where the other group members were. That made it easier to rejoin one's party after dying in the depths of a dungeon. This was one reason why white magicians were so welcomed in dungeon groups.

That's right.

With Jun's weakness debuff now wearing off, Kasumi and Eri approached him energetically.

"My heart nearly stopped! You had me in a fluster! Why did you jump off!?"

Kasumi's eyes were all teary. She seemed extremely surprised. Jun smiled wryly.

"Sorry. I wanted to try diving off the cliff."

"You may say that, but you know, that's troublesome for us!"

Eri slapped him violently on his head. It hurt immensely. While pain due to damage from monsters was reduced greatly, pain incurred from normal events like these remained unchanged, so slaps on the head would obviously hurt. Stubbing one's toe on the corner of a desk would also hurt a lot.

"Okay, okay, I get it! We'll be down the mountain in just an hour. This way!"

"We were going to leave after getting all the necessary information anyway. Doesn't that make sense to you?"

"No! Idiot! You had me and Kasumi so incredibly worried!"

"...Worried? You?"

Asking again in a more serious tone, Jun dropped his arm, having pumped his fist up earlier. He held his head and looked up. Eri made a 'hmpf' sound, puffed her cheeks, and turned away. Her cheeks were red.

"I was worried."

Eri then glanced over at Jun and frowned.

"What did you think I would do? That was not what you told us you were going to do. I can't trust you anymore. You're the lowest of the low."

"How should I put this... It was a little prank... Or should I say, childish curiosity...?"

"If you do that next time, I definitely won't forgive you. Never mind me, Kasumi was really crying..."

"Okay... I get it. Next time, I'll tell you in advance."



"And don't jump off like that!"

At the instant he jumped off, Jun felt good, but he understood where Eri was coming from. From then on, he would make sure to be more careful and avoid any potential triggers.

"Uuh, Jun-san. I'm already really scared... I lost all hope..."

Above all, seeing Kasumi, with her eyes overflowing with tears, made him stop smiling over what he thought was just a trivial matter.

"...Uh, I'll think about it."

"I will not allow it!"

Her arms crossed, Eri was looking down arrogantly at Jun, who was sitting on the ground.

"What should I do?"

"Just answer this one thing..."

"...Hmm. Why are you perched up so high on your horse?"

"Because white magicians are proud and great. Call me White Princess-sama."

Eri then went on to thrust her index finger at his nose and started to laugh.

"Can you go calm Kasumi down?"

"Aah..."

He looked up at Kasumi. He still was unable to get up because of the weakness debuff. This was the second time he had died since coming to Sky World. The first time was because he just didn't feel like trying...

During the battle with the Dread Sphinx, Eri felt that way too, but still helped support him. Jun admired that in her.

"Welp, I'm fine."

Kasumi hurriedly shook her head.

"I told you not to say things like that."

"Uh, like t-t-that?"

Her face completely red, Kasumi flailed her arms around. Eri teased her about it.

Jun shrugged his shoulders, sighing.

Eri was making playthings out of both Jun and Kasumi.

Doesn't she feel bad though?

It felt nostalgic.

It had been a long time since they felt so at ease. That's right. With close friends, just sitting down and talking could become fun.

The memories of times passed...

If they wanted to be together for a longer period of time, then they would create a guild. Everybody would be able to have fun and they'd be unable to pull themselves away from the game.

He remembered the time when he first started playing online games.

But...

Jun shook his head.

It didn't work out though, between that group of good friends.

In the end, it was just Jun and Kai left. The two of them decided amongst themselves that they would move on to a different game. There, they had more fun...

They did that many times.

Kai. Jun's best friend. No, one could say that he was Jun's other half.

One day, he said, "We make the best combination ever!" Those words really came from his heart.

While it may be true that Kai was actually a girl, that would not change their relationship.

"Hey, Kasumi-san. If you leave this island, you're going back to Sakuya-san's guild, right?"

"...Yup! I'd like to be with Sakuya-chan... But I don't think we can adventure together anymore..."

"Because you need to work on the Fuelfai campaign?"

"...Yeah."

"Then I'll help you with that too."

"Hmm?"

"I want to clear it too. Hey, when we get off of the island, your time penalty will have been over."

"Ooh, Jun-sensei, you're really nice, huh."

"Eri, you come too."

"Huh?"

"What? You've been with her all this time. Are you saying that you want to abandon her once you get off?"

"Even if I were saying that, Kasumi has to get back to her group..."

"Sakuya's probably on the 4th island ring by now. What do you think will happen if you don't help her?"

"I get it... Hey, what are you thinking?"

Noticing something, Eri put her hand on her chest.

"Could it be that... You... Want to take advantage of our situation and do something perverted?"

"Nope. I like big boobs, remember?"

"You're an idiot that likes to talk about boobs! Die! Seriously, die! Hey, Kasumi-chan, you should drink more milk to make your boobs bigger."

"Kasumi, don't listen to her! Don't let her powers of persuasion make a fool out of you!"

"Hey! What are you saying?!"

"Don't make a big deal out of it."

Jun realized that he had put his hands, unknowingly, onto his chest, and then Kasumi, her face completely red in embarrassment, hid her own breast with her hands.

"Huuuu. Uh, I... Uh..."

"Wait, it's just a misunderstanding."

Since Kasumi was pretty nervous, Jun instinctively winced. Eri, seeing that, lifted her eyebrow.

"Jun's an old man and a sexual harasser as well! We're just two innocent girls. I knew it!"

"Ah, my bad, my bad. I made a mistake joining up with you."

"Are you done arguing?!"

Eri bared her teeth. Kasumi was getting more and more flustered.

"Hey, wait a moment. Eri-chan. I don't want to make this uncomfortable for anybody. We all know that Eri likes making dirty jokes. Uh..."

"Kasumi, you can't take her side."

Seeing Eri, her eyes firmly fixed onto her, Kasumi said "oof," and stayed still.

"I mean, you are very attractive to Jun..."

"Huh? Uh... That..."

Kasumi started to hide herself. Seeing Jun, Eri glared at him.

Jun looked away.

"You good for nothing brat..."

"Shut up!"

Jun glared back at Eri.

Part 4

At the end of the day, they went a little further away from the mountain and set up camp near the bank of a river. Including the previous day, they had slept there for two nights already.

Traveling by night was dangerous. This was because monsters become stronger at night. Everyone could use magic to summon portable tents. The same applied to magic used to start a fire and magic used to generate cooking utensils.

Back when Sky World was still an MMORPG, players often said 'What good does this new spell do?' when talking about those spells. However, now, players regarded those spells as invaluable and of extreme importance. The white magician's barrier magic which would alert the user of intruders also became rather important.

Kasumi, accustomed to this, sprinkled a few herbs and a bit of bacon she made appear with magic into some water, and let the mixture sizzle on top of the fire. She spent half an hour making the flavoring herself. Suddenly, the fragrant scent of the soup filled the air.

Jun made some bread using his level 105 cooking skill.

Holding out a sack of flour he had taken out from his bag, he recited the command to use the cooking skill. The flour glowed faintly. A few seconds later, freshly made bread appeared in Jun's hands.

"Awesome, Jun-san! We can eat some steamy warm bread! I'm so excited!"

Although Kasumi had praised him from the bottom of her heart, he had just used his cooking skill to make it. Jun thought that making 'yummy bread' in this game was nothing compared to Kasumi's hard work in making her wonderful soup.

As Jun and Kasumi were preparing dinner, Eri was doing random odd jobs here and there, such as washing the wooden bowls and spoons in the nearby river and setting up the tent. As a matter of course, that girl, who had declared earlier, 'I have no cooking ability whatsoever,' could really only do that effectively.

"It's not like summoned water or biscuits aren't yummy, right?"

Jun had not forgotten what she said. When Eri said that at the beginning of the expedition, Kasumi had stared at her motionlessly.

Eri, disturbed by Kasumi's cold attitude, hastily said, "Ah, but if I wanted to... I could cook! For example, I can put cheese between crackers... Or add eggs to rice..." This made the situation even worse for her.

"Eri-chan, *never* set foot in a kitchen, kay?"

Her voice was dry. Furthermore, she had emphasized the word 'never.' Eri drooped her shoulders and nodded, agreeing with her.

Observing the exchange from nearby, Jun decided that he would be sure to be careful whenever talking about cooking with Kasumi.

Soon, the bacon soup and vegetables were ready. Jun and Kasumi could now relax. Jun scraped off the excess food at the bottom of the pot and tried it out as he was doing that. Then, after having washed the cooking utensils, they headed out to bathe in the stream.

After hearing Eri say, 'Take one peek, and I'll player kill you,' Jun started to review the information he had gathered earlier today while fighting against the Veil Guardian. Sitting near the bonfire, he tapped on his tablet keyboard and pondered intensely.

With his current fighting ability, there should be a way for him to succeed. He considered potential plans which would allow him to take out that incredibly strong monster.

Sometimes, he heard what the other two were saying while bathing.

"Hey, hey, Kasumi... How did you get such boobs?"

"How I got them... huh? It just happened... This is embarrassing... My friends always teased me about it... I really haven't gotten anything good out of it..."

"Uuuh, the ones who get big boobs are the real winners, huh..."



"Wah, Eri-chan... please don't touch me there! Hey, wait, aaaaah, Jun-san will hear us!"

"Let him hear then!"

"What are you doing!?"

He shook his head instinctively, hearing the intense splashes, and imagined the scene.

After their hair dried after their bath, their fatigue caught up to them suddenly, making them all drowsy and tired. All of them ended up sleeping together in the same tent.

In the beginning, Jun proposed that they set up two tents. Eri shook her head in response to this idea.

"Then won't we be separated when monsters attack?"

Kasumi whispered into her ear, her head tilted in confusion as to why she, who habitually said 'Boys are wolves,' would have brought that up.

"Eri-chan, uh... I don't like bugs..."

"Huh."

"When you went camping with your school, Eri-chan, while you were sleeping in your tent, did all sorts of creepy-crawlies crawl all over your face?"

"Woah, Kasumi, I wouldn't let that happen to you!"

"But in this world, alarm magic doesn't work on bugs!"

"It does seem like it wouldn't work on things other than monsters and people... Hey, uhh, you're fine if I make a fire, right? But things with legs are too much... Especially while we're sleeping in the middle of the tent... Remember when it was cold? Jun, please sleep at the front of the tent!"

Jun bitterly retorted, "Well, then don't sleep in the middle of the tent!" He also suggested that he sleep in between the two of them.

"...Kasumi-san?"

"Huh? Aren't we all having fun together?"

Jun shook his head and contemplated their mixed gender situation.

They ended up sleeping with their sleeping bags arranged in three lines. Jun was the tallest, he was in the middle. It was fine.

Kasumi and Eri both fell asleep rather quickly. Their snoring could be heard rather soon. That was good too.

Stuck in the middle between the two girls, Jun, rolling back and forth, had his nose tickled by the girls' hair and found their respective fragrances to be very distracting. After clearing his eyes, he ended up thinking about many things. He couldn't sleep.

Thanks to his experience camping the day before, he was sleep deprived.

Today too, walking on the mountain path and fighting with that huge monster must have really exhausted him. The night passed with him being the only one who didn't get much sleep. Looking towards Eri, he noticed that she even seemed to be rolling closer and closer to him.

"Hnnnnnn... Hnnnn..."

Since the only source of illumination in the tent was the moonlight, he could only see her silhouette, and could not even see her face. However, he figured out that she was approaching him, and in a way, he was a bit charmed by her actions.

He quickly turned around... and noticed Kasumi's pair of plump breasts. For some reason, she was moving like an inchworm, the upper half of her body closer to Jun. Her body up to her back was all out of her sleeping bag. Inevitably, her round breasts would get closer and closer to Jun.

She called out to him in her sleep, "Jun...-san."

Jun trembled.

Kasumi squirmed around and something soft and warm grazed Jun's nose. It happened again and again. Jun's breathing intensified and he frantically turned towards the ceiling.

"This is bad... This is really bad..."

Jun closed his eyes. He would stand strong against this, the most brutal trial of today.

It was getting very late at night.

The following morning, Jun stayed in his sleeping bag late, and was thus continuously teased by Eri.

Part 5

Kasumi Yukasaki did not like hurting people's feelings.

Although this was a game, she did not like fighting against monsters from the very beginning. Even now, she could feel the pain of monsters near death as they breathed laboriously, shuddered in fear of death, and stared unblinkingly at her in her heart.

She believed she wasn't cut out for a world like Sky World. She didn't think she could get used to such brutality in fighting games even if she spent her whole life trying.

But at the same time, she thought that this world was wonderful.

She was thrilled to have the opportunity just to travel with friends. This was the first time she had such a feeling. Her heart did not even beat as fast when she was with Sakuya.

It was Jun. The boy who appeared out of nowhere to aid Kasumi. Though a tad brusque... He was a nice guy who helped out the troubled Kasumi.

Why did her heart pound so hard when he appeared? Not knowing what to do, she put on a smile. It was fun walking alongside him. She smiled unknowingly, and when he heard him referred to as 'disgusting,' she was utterly shocked.

She felt a bit sulky when she saw how much fun he and Eri were having just talking to each other. It pained her.

Why was that? Eri was a very important friend to her. It was just a case of one of her friends getting along with another of her friends. It was not like the two of them were leaving her out intentionally.

I've become such a shallow person, huh.

Since she herself thought that she had become a disagreeable person, she didn't think too much of the matter. Surely she was just confused. Her grandmother taught her that thinking about bad things was not good and that if one had their heart in the right place, happiness would be sure to follow.

At least, for now, she was happy.

She had thought she wanted Jun and Eri, two of her most important friends, to be together.

"Isn't that just something like a luxury?"

Kasumi sat atop the hill near the town of Gazar.

Today, everybody was left to their own devices to do what they wanted. Eri was leveling up her skills in the meadow. Jun was finishing up his remaining quests. Kasumi, having nothing to do, sat there alone, daydreaming.

From there, she could see the edge of the island.

Past the meadow, abruptly ending at that point, was the endless blue sky.

That was the southern edge of the island. The ground ended there.

Normally, she would not be conscious of this, but now, she saw the floating island of Altaria in a different light.

Walking all around the island would not help her find a way off.

The only option would be to board an airship, be it the regularly scheduled one, or the personal one. This was the way Sky World, with its countless islands, worked. The only way to travel between islands is by airship.

"Would it be bad if I wanted the three of us to stay together forever?"

Kasumi stared motionlessly at the cliff at the end of the island.

If Jun managed to get his hands on an airship, he would be helping her again. That would make her very happy. Eri would have also cooperated in doing so. However, Kasumi would then be heading off to rejoin Sakuya.

She knew that. Jun had his own things to do. He was just taking a break to help Kasumi out a little bit.

One day, Jun and Kasumi's paths would diverge.

Thinking about the day that would happen, Kasumi felt gloomy, and it showed through her facial expressions. She held her chest tightly. She felt bad. She wanted to cry out. She couldn't bear it.

It was normal for her to not be in contact with her parents. Her grandmother was very strict. Although she was brought up with lots of affection and she was always fawned on, she went to high school on her own.

Only after that was she able to become friends with Sakuya.

That was the same with Jun. Just like Sakuya, she did not feel anything particular for him on first sight. However, she felt just a little bit different around Jun than when she was with Sakuya.

Kasumi could not think about the nature of her feelings for him.

Just now, she didn't feel like she could be around Jun. She sincerely believed that.

She let out a big sigh.

"I wonder what Jun-san thinks about me..."

She accidentally said that out loud. Looking around, she saw nobody. Believing that, she wanted to speak out her thoughts.

Shortly afterwards, she heard a young girl's voice.

"He's a lazy, good-for-nothing buffoon."

Surprised, Kasumi jumped to her feet and uttered, "What?"

Before she knew it, a short girl was standing next to her. She seemed around 12 years old. Despite looked graceful, she was standing motionlessly, gazing far off into the distance.

"Jun's a lazy, good-for-nothing buffoon."

"Huh? *Huhh???*"

"Have you not noticed how lazy and incompetent he is?"

Kasumi tilted her head, thinking that the girl was one of the town's residents. Even a NPC would leave town once in a while. They acted naturally, just like any normal living human would. No, they were human. Though her former guild members didn't believe it, they were real human residents of this world. Although they did live considerably different lives, they were still able to do things like revive each other.

Many people said that this world couldn't possibly be real.

However, Kasumi was steadfast in her belief that it was. This was reality. They couldn't possibly be dreaming. She knew that in towns, ordinary people walked alongside each other, and by no means did they conduct themselves in a manner typical of AIs.

Therefore, it made perfect sense for her to engage in regular conversations with residents of the town. Many of the other guild members ridiculed her for this.

"Uh... Young lady, what relationship do you have with Jun-san?"

"Alice."

"Excuse my impoliteness. I am Kasumi Yukasaki. You may call me Kasumi."

Alice, as she introduced herself, nodded gently, saying "Okay."

"Jun is a lazy, good-for-nothing buffoon."

"Alice-san, don't you think you shouldn't speak badly of others?"

"...But Eri said that."

"You shouldn't imitate bad things that other people do either."

Bending over, she made eye contact with Alice and chastised her with her finger.

After staring at her finger for a little bit, Alice nodded her head.

"Calling somebody a 'lazy, good-for-nothing buffoon'...is bad?"

"Uh... I don't think those words are used in a nice way..."

"Jun is a bad person?"

"Jun-san is a wonderful gentleman. He's kind. He's brave. He's overflowing with chivalry, helping those weaker than him."

"...Who?"

Alice turned left and right, and shook her head.

Before long, she got tired of it and raised her face, staring intently at Kasumi.

"I have a question."

"Sure, what is it, Alice-chan?"

"...'-chan'?"

"Ah, I'm sorry. Was that too much of me to use such a familiar honorific with you during our first meeting¹?"

"No, no. '-chan' is okay... Call me that some more."

"Alice-chan."

Alice smiled happily. She seemed very pleased with that.

¹ -chan is an honorific generally used with small kids. It is also considered informal, so would not necessarily be appropriate for use on a stranger (although this restriction is less important with -chan than with other honorifics like -kun).

"One more time."

"Alice-chan."

She looked so happy.

"Y-You're cute, Alice-chan."

Alice then pulled her expression off her face, and after a short while appearing as if she was in a trance, she returned to how she was earlier with a sudden "Hah."

"I have a question."

"Yes?"

"Kasumi, would you risk your life for Jun?"

"Yes."

Kasumi responded, holding up her hair.

"So you would allow your battery to be depleted for him?"

"No problem. Jun-san is important to me."

Alice puffed out her cheeks.

"...How unexpected. You didn't even hesitate."

"Uh... Is there something wrong?"

"No. Actually, that is good."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Kasumi smiled. Eri sometimes called that a special move: 'Holy Saint's Smile.' Alice said, "Ooh," and her cheeks turned red.

"What destructive power!"

"That's nice to know."

"Buuu... Well, okay. Kasumi, I have information for you."

"Yes?"

"The Crimson Scarf Knight Association is going to MPK Jun."

"Em pee kay, huh?"

Kasumi tilted her head. While surprised by her old guild's name, she didn't know what they had to do with Jun.

Alice placed her hand on her eyebrows and said, "Oops, I messed up. That's a technical term." Then, after preparing herself, she raised her head once again.

"The Crimson Scarf Knight Association wants to have Jun killed."

Kasumi's face stiffened.

"Currently, Jun is questing on his own. He has to get to the exit of the cave. If it continues like this, Jun will die."

"Where?!"

Alice remained silent. She presented Kasumi a rolled-up scroll. It was a map. The path to Jun's location was shown on the map. It was the quickest route, provided she did not get lost along the way. Kasumi looked down and began sprinting.

"Contact Eri. She's nearby."

Alice's voice hit her like a brick. That was right. She could take out Eri's communication stone while running.

Part 6

Junichiro Mikimori was used to being treated negatively in games.

Having been through so many MMOs, he would sometimes meet people who badmouthed him. Petty disagreements in a guild and getting stuck in the affairs and feelings of other people often gave birth to misunderstandings that spread around like ripples in water, resulting in him being hated for almost nothing.

He was fed up with getting attached to things.

It was easy to deal with that in games. He could completely end such situations by just uninstalling the game or leaving the group. That's what Jun had done thus far. After all, interpersonal relationships made in games were just weak connections. They would not become true relationships.

Aside from Kai. They were in contact through emails and text messages.

He thought that was fine. Jun believed that the possibility of making a single close friend was always more valuable than the danger of making a hundred enemies.

Jun ignored his enemies.

PK (Player Killing) was a term used to describe the situation when somebody or something kills a player character. It generally took on the meaning of a player character killing another player character.

In MMORPGs, there were usually a few people in the same area.

Some starting-up MMOs advertised themselves with 'You can kill people you don't like!' Players were attracted to the MMO by that sales pitch.

However, before long, the management started regarding PKing without limits as a bad practice.

The PKers were, basically, weak people who were no more than bullies.

Class, level, equipment, player skill. It was these differences that determined the outcome of battles between players.

Players who were very well-accustomed to games had been able one-sidedly exploit the more inexperienced players. This could not be publicly known. It would cause fewer players to join, and in turn, cause the game itself to fade into obscurity. A constant influx of new players was vital for games to sustain themselves.

Aside from that, there were also other reasons for which PKing was becoming increasingly regulated.

However, since players could not fight in hand-to-hand combat, some thought of fighting using indirect means.

There were some loopholes in the system. Players could get the attention of a strong monster, bring it to a player that they did not like, and then allow the monster to attack that player when the monster, upon losing Enmity with one player, naturally went for the next closest player. This became the technique known as MPK.

MPK was prohibited in most games due to it being cowardly and unfair. In many MMOs, when somebody was caught performing an MPK, he would be punished. It was such an atrocious deed that people had their characters deleted and whole accounts banned for it.

But now, in Sky World, it was up to individual players to maintain ethical standards.

There were no GMs (Game Masters) to stop inconsiderate players.

Because there were few disadvantages to such unscrupulous behavior, people continued to do so.

From a cave shrine deep in the forest, mummies were dispersing evil magic into the nearby town. By killing these mummies, Jun completed yet another quest without much effort. Though the quest reward item was not all that valuable, by completing that quest, his quest completion rate for Gazar crossed the 90% mark.

Although it took a little more time than planned, Jun thought it would be all right since Kasumi and Eri were training.

Leaving the cave in high spirits, Jun was attacked by a monster whose name turned red. It was a ferocious bear, a Hug Bear. Its hitpoints had already been decreased.

"...Did someone else do this?"

The Hug Bear collapsed onto the ground, supporting Jun's conjecture. Around the same time, two more monsters ambushed him.

Even if I deal with those monsters now, more monsters would come and attack.

He had already killed a lot of them. Jun thought about it hazily. He was getting worn out by the successive fights, which caused his judgment to start faltering.

Since he didn't have any time to use any recovery items, his HP bar was already down to 50%.

"...This is really testing my endurance."

By chance, Jun had seen somebody in the process of pulling monsters to him some time ago. It was a female magic swordsman who had been flattering the Crimson Scarf Knight Association's leader.

Looking at her felt awkward, so Jun turned away, and she turned around and ran off. From how she walked, Jun thought that she seemed a little shaky and uncertain.

It did not seem like everyone in the Crimson Scarf Knight Association were like that. It could at most be four or five of them.

That was what he thought before Alice had agreed to collect information for him.

By sneaking into their guild hall a couple of times, Alice was able to gather information about the irregular nature of the girls' guild. According to that information, the leader was quite the tyrant. The subject of Kasumi and Eri's expulsion served as an impetus for factions to pop up. It appeared they were now on the verge of a schism.

The disagreements led to more disagreements, and the leader, feeling isolated, lost her temper more and more often. Now, the leader did not let anybody near her aside from a few of her followers.

You reap what you sow.

Refusal. Denial. Resistance. Distrust.

Simply put, these emotions created a spiral of negativity.

Jun had seen many guilds break down because of that.

It was sad. However, since the guild continued accepting members past its limit, trouble would soon follow no matter what happened. As that group, which was till yesterday still very close-knit and functional, was able to collapse over the course of a single night, Jun wanted to find out more about them.

For this reason, it seemed the leader of the Crimson Scarf Knight Association, with her pent up unease and distrust, was trying to focus everything on Jun.

"It didn't build up over time, you idiot! This is all your fault!"

Jun mustered whatever remaining strength he had and turned around to see even more monsters appear in front of him.

Part 7

When Kasumi contacted her, Eri was in the midst of doing a quest and had been, coincidentally, near the forest.

Though she made it into the forest quickly, she didn't get a response from Jun, probably because he was in the middle of a battle. It would be rather difficult for her to locate him.

When she found Jun, his health had been whittled down all the way to 10%.

On the small path in the dense forest, Jun was fighting two boar-like monsters.

Bumper Boars. They had pretty high damage.

If she cast a strong healing spell on Jun at this moment, she would end up getting a lot of Enmity. The monsters would surely charge right at her. She would take a lot of damage. But...

I know!

As soon as she was close enough to cast a spell, Eri cast Maximum Heal without hesitation. Almost immediately, Jun's health filled up.

That spell, able to fully heal even a heavy warrior, the class with the most health, was the white magician's most powerful spell. However, using that spell increased Enmity immensely.

Monsters prioritized players who had high Enmity.

It was such a dangerous spell that using it in fights with raid class monsters like the Dread Sphinx was akin to committing suicide.

Just as she expected, the two giant boars came charging at her. Seeing Jun's surprised expression, Eri stuck out her tongue at him.

"You stuuupido. You blockhead. Getting into a situation like this..."

She said it. She said it.

After smiling widely, she squinted and quickly glanced at the icon displayed in the lower right corner of his field of vision.

Okay, let's go.

After getting the attention of the large boars, Eri jumped.

Her body danced high up in the air. She grabbed onto a tree branch several meters up. After getting a firm grip and turning around halfway, she landed casually on top of the branch.

That didn't stop the still energized boars. They ran around on the path, looking up at her.

"Hehe. How was that?"

Looking down at Jun from up in the tree, she grinned. Earlier, Eri had cast a jump-strengthening spell in preparation.

"Even if it doesn't seem that way, I'm actually pretty good at gymnastics."

"Hey, don't scare me like that."

"It wasn't all about you. I wanted to test out a loophole in the system."

The big boars kept on charging back and forth.

"Look. The enemies—"

"I know..."

The boars stayed under the tree where Eri had landed.

Jun, standing in front of the tree, prepared his great-sword. He imbued some magic into it.

Right after Jun went after one of the Bumper Boars, the boar was chopped in half with just one slash.

The remaining one, rendered immobile, died by Jun's regular attack combo.

Part 8

A little while later.

In a forest clearing, Jun and Eri were surrounded by five members of the Crimson Scarf Knight Association.

Despite trying to take the shortest way out of the forest, they had been ambushed.

The guild's four front line fighters approached them from each cardinal direction to surround the two. Shiroko, who was a black magician and had her arms folded followed closely behind them.

"Because of you traitors, I had to deal with a lot of problems... Eri, I never really liked you even when you were still in the guild."

Shiroko looked rather unsightly.

"Since this is a good opportunity, I'll allow you to think it through and try to send a comeback my way. I'll make sure that you won't be able to leave the inn without cowering in fear."

"This isn't a joke. I'm gonna leave the island... This is definitely a good opportunity. If we defeat you here, soon, you'll end up not being able to leave the town for fear of us standing in your way..."

"Hey... But we're still full of vigor. The two of us will face off against you five. We should be able to win."

Jun shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't be so unconfident. Jun, you'll win."

"Still, it'll be difficult with five enemies."

"Didn't you say that you were stronger than all of the Crimson Scarf Knight Association's members combined?"

"You're bringing that up now of all things..."

With a smile, Eri responded, "Prove that you meant what you said."

There wasn't any chance of winning here. However, that was what she thought when struggling with those monsters as well. Right now though, she thought they could win if she continued supporting Jun with Maximum Heal...

"Don't even cast any spells. Eri, it'll all fall in place. The front line fighters have knockback gauntlets."

Eri smacked her lips.

Magicians were weak in hand-to-hand combat even when the conditions favored them. White magicians wore better armor than other back line fighters, but moving or being moved while casting a spell would interrupt the incantation.

This kind of unexpected forced movement could be caused by some monsters which possessed what was known as knockback capabilities. Knockback gauntlets allowed the person who equipped them to cause more knockback upon attacking. Regardless of the damage dealt from an attack, it would stop any spell incantation.

Knockback gauntlets were a relatively low rarity quest reward and therefore rather easy to obtain.

However, many items taking up the gauntlet slot increased damage output. Normally, front line fighters would prefer to have increased damage instead of increased knockback effects. Since knockback gauntlets did not have defense boosts, tanks would not wear them either.

Basically, normal group battles and raids prioritized increasing everybody's damage. In that case, knockback gauntlets would only be a hindrance. Eri recalled that the Crimson Scarf Knight Association didn't have many of them.

However, as for preparing them specifically for the purpose of PKing—

"Haven't you thought of just collecting items through quests?"

"In any case, it was you who started that thing with Kasumi. If you kneel down and apologize right now, I'll let you and Kasumi rejoin the guild."

"This isn't a joke."

Eri, with a sarcastic smile, grabbed Jun's arm.

"Hey!"

"Don't abandon your darlings, Kasumi and I."

"...You..."

With just her eyes, Eri told Jun, who had glared at her without knowing what she was planning, what to do.

Sure enough, somehow, Jun understood what she was trying to say.

Jun shook his head bitterly and looked up at Shiroko.

"Hmm, just what are you trying to do? Are you saying that you'll be in Sky World the whole time? For now, everything's okay. Three more months is fine too. I'm even okay with it for another half a year. But, one year? Two years? Are you trying to say that you're going to live out your entire lifespan in Sky World?"

"Eventually, somebody's going to do something about it. Until then, we should sit tight. In the meantime, it would be great if we could all become friends. But even then, you'll do as you please to tear up our relationships. That I can't allow. You've already done too much and the guild ended up all jumbled and disorganized."

With a teasing attitude, Eri said, "Hasn't everybody gotten tired of mindlessly following you, Shiroko-san?"

"They're all annoying and in a state of hysteria. I don't know why they're doing that."

"...Right. In the end, you're just doing as you please. You show no remorse."

"Nope. Never."

"Well then... Fine."

Suddenly, Shiroko raised her hand.

The front line fighters, standing in different positions, prepared their weapons.

They charged. Eri whispered, "Sorry" to Jun.

"You have to work hard for just a bit longer."

"Nope, it's fine."

Jun separated himself from Eri and readied his great-sword...

He slashed at the front line fighter on his left. At the same time, Eri rolled to a location close to him.

The front line fighter near Jun and Eri was a magic swordsman, like Jun.

However, her weapon was not a great-sword like Jun's, but a long-spear.

When Jun swept his great-sword at the Crimson Scarf Knight Association magic swordsman's spear, she turned and met his attack with one of her own just by shifting her body weight. Eri, her body close to the ground after having rolled near Jun the moment before, got up in a thicket of bushes...

"Kasumi!"

"Hai!"

A figure jumped out from the bushes.

It was Kasumi wielding her short-sword.

The two of them, through their communication using their stones, knew that Kasumi was approaching them. It was for this reason that Eri had dared to go to such an open space, risking falling into a trap. She had prolonged their conversation in order to buy time for Kasumi to arrive. Then, while their enemies were still startled by this turn of events, Kasumi rushed out as their trump card.

"This is a three against five battle!"

"Let's go!"

Kasumi fiercely slashed at the other three front line fighters. She cut them up, shielding herself after every hit with her short-sword. Turning her shield towards the spear-wielder, she defeated her with a bandit warrior's axe.

"Hey, her movements are—"

Kasumi made quick work of the three female warriors who had been watching in shock with her quick movements and sharp blade.

Kasumi was using a rarity 6 quest reward, Noble Blade, as her short-sword, replacing her previous rarity 2 red sword. This was her first time using it. Though it was a high-grade item that could not be obtained on this island, it was not just the weapon change that allowed her to overwhelm her three opponents.

Kasumi, you did well. You've gone far.

Those were the fruits of that one week of training.

Through analyzing all her opponent's movements, her own movements became much more precise and accurate. Since she was no longer relying on the system to make these judgments for her, she managed to discover loopholes in the system.

Just to be sure, Jun drove each and every fault of automatic combat into Kasumi's head. At the time, Eri thought that there was no point in doing so—

However, Kasumi Yukasaki had a very impressive memory.

She could memorize complex attack patterns in just one try. More than that, she could also remember the appropriate counterstrategies very quickly after being taught them. She could do it all rather naturally, and always persevered in her training.

Eri thought that she was obedient.

Since she was very obedient, innocent, diligent, and energetic, she could absorb all of the techniques and information Jun taught her.

Now, Kasumi's ability blossomed.

In the face of a three to one numerical disadvantage, Kasumi did not even yield a single iota against the Crimson Scarf Knight Association's elite members she despised, getting in her zone as she zipped around freely.

"Shoot! What an idiot!"

Shiroko hastily began an attack spell incantation.

"I won't let you!"

However, Eri's spellcasting was faster than Shiroko's.

Stun. The white magician's Stun, despite taking a fair bit of time to cast, was more effective than the magic swordsman's Quick Stun. Its reach was excellent, and it was efficient MP-wise. It was the more suitable of the two to restrain enemies. Though it did have a weakness in that it attracted more Enmity, Enmity played no role in player-to-player combat.

Shiroko's spell casting was interrupted by Eri's spell.

Smacking her lips, the leader of the Crimson Scarf Knight Association scowled at Eri.

"We fellow back line fighters should get along well."

Smiling cheerfully, Eri began casting Stun once again.

Part 9

Jun had picked the magic swordsman class because, with the exception of defense, its stats were all very well balanced and stayed that way at high levels. In particular, its firepower was quite spectacular.

That's what went through Jun's mind as he saw a female magic swordsman in front of him.

There was not a class that depended on ability as much as the magic swordsman.

"You're too weak."

Jun heard from Eri that the magic swordsman from the Crimson Scarf Knight Association, being Shiroko's close friend, was the disagreeable second-in-command of the guild. Thanks to that, she would have had priority in receiving equipment, and she was able to put together a complete set of good equipment.

Her equipment was definitely top-notch for someone who has only been on an island in the eighth island ring. Her specialty, the long-spear, if mastered, would allow for more stable fighting than Jun's great-sword. Though its damage would not be quite as high as that of the great-sword, but since she was able to steadily attack from long distances, it would decrease her chances of being hit. Certainly, even though her battles took longer to complete, her companions would have much less to worry about.

Furthermore, if their stats and actual ability were the same, and she took all of the necessary precautions, it would be a close match, and one that would take a long time too. If that was how it was, Jun's team, inferior in number, would probably lose.

However, Jun, with only a few successful hits, was able to reduce her health down to 50%.

"What?! You're troublesome! Shut up and be killed already!"

His opponent was lunging recklessly with her spear.

Though he used a great-sword at the moment, in the beginning, Jun had practiced using all of the weapons a magic swordsman could use. He had even maxed out his long spear skill level, reaching level 100.

He understood her attacks better than those of any other class. The magic swordsman's long spear attacks worked like this: the first attack would be directed upwards, the second downwards, then from the third onwards the strikes went from right to left. The intervals between attacks differed from those of other classes; the time between the second and third attacks was very short. Jun dodged the second attacks in the sequence by first moving left then to the right. By doing that, he was able to create a pause before the third attack.

"You're doing the same thing over and over again!"

Imbuing magic into his sword, he struck with all his might during the moment she was defenseless.

Her HP decreased immensely.

"What?!!!! We're supposed to be about the same strength! ...I know! You're cheating! You have unfair equipment! Because of that you–"

"Even if what you just said were true, I wouldn't need to use it against you."

He attacked again. Now flustered, she swung her spear all over, relying on its range to hold Jun back–

In that case, Jun would not have any opportunities to land an attack. As he kept on attacking, her attacks became weaker as her posture faltered. His second and third hits were both near-perfect shots. Her HP was already very low.

"Ah, ahhhhhh!"

The female magic swordsman tried casting Quick Stun in hopes of being able to use the extra time to recollect herself–

"Thoughtlessly using magic won't work."

Jun rushed in, twisting his body in order to strike her on the shoulder. The female magic swordsman took a few steps back, and cried out, "Waah!"

"Hey, what is this?! You...! For magic swordsmen... Moving like that is..."

After he came to Sky World, Jun learnt judo from some experts mainly through observation, thinking that it was something that could be of use as reference in the future. In just a short period of time, he learned about proper footwork and the way to use his body weight in movements. That proved very useful.

Particularly in battles against other players, he was able to use it to greatly augment his own battle ability.

"It's over!"

After Jun caught up with the female magic swordsman, who had turned away with full knowledge of what was going to happen to her, he killed her with one merciless swipe.

His opponent's health reached zero.

"Ahhhhhh!"

The female magic swordsman, screaming her last words, fell to the ground at that very spot. Soon afterwards, her body disappeared, leaving only equipment on the ground.

"Well..."

He had just PKed somebody.

In a game that was so close to the real world, the resulting feeling of guilt was stronger than expected. Jun frowned, then lifted his head. Eri was still engaged in a long distance battle with Shiroko. Kasumi was faring rather well against her three opponents. However, she was not unscratched.

He did not want them to experience those feelings of guilt.

Thinking that, he resolved to take them all out himself.

"Kasumi-san, you fought well. Lemme lend you a hand!"

"All right! Go ahead, Jun-san!"

Jun sliced and killed the remaining three front line fighters of the Crimson Scarf Knight Association.

A few minutes later, Jun's group surrounded Shiroko.

"Honestly, I never actually thought you guys were weak. Shiroko-san, you guys are pretty good at this stuff."

"Eri, you're a sadist."

Jun, dragging himself exhaustedly, approached Shiroko. The flustered Shiroko was right in front of a large tree trunk.

"My guild was living peacefully! You guys were the ones who crushed it all!"

"Wrong."

Jun shook his head, rejecting what she had said. He had come to see many guilds fall apart and subsequently fade into obscurity. He knew all too well the process by which many tight-knit communities collapsed.

"You were the only one who thought it was all peaceful. In any guild, there is always discontent and unrest. You only pretended not to notice. You neglected it and allowed it to grow. As it builds up, everything will come crashing down and crumble to ruins with just a little impetus. That's all it was."

No, Jun thought as he smiled bitterly. It applied to him too. He wasn't anything like a leader. Jun didn't have the positive traits Kai had, such as charisma and the ability to make decisions and remain steadfast with them. Given Junichiro Mikimori's own traits, such as sarcasm, the best he could be was a sub-leader.

"If you lose here, you'll be close to death. Until we leave the island, you should be very afraid of leaving town."

His eyes firmly fixed on Shiroko, Jun raised his great-sword.

Part 10

Late at night. Having left the inn alone, Jun was walking along the main street, relying only on the moonlight for illumination.

Catching a silver glow in the corner of his eye, he stood still.

Just as he expected, it was Alice, emerging from a building's shadow.

"I heard from Kasumi about you calling her to help. Thank you."

Alice shook her head gently and fixed her gaze on Jun.

"Why didn't you contact the two of them with your communication stone? Was it because you didn't want to involve them?"

"It was my fight. It wasn't right for me to call them."

"Kasumi didn't think that way."

"How do you know?"

"I asked her."

"Oh, did you just give her too much information?"

"Are you being lazy?"

Alice tilted her head adorably. She did it on purpose. Frowning, she raised the corners of her mouth proudly.

"You..."

She made a fist and disappeared again into the shadow of the building.

"Make a decision quickly. Will you choose to restrain yourself, or whether you choose freedom?"

Only her voice, carried by the wind, reached Jun.

"So... Are you going to go to the End of the Blue Sky?"

"...What do you know?"

Biting down hard, Jun kept an eye on the darkness into which Alice disappeared.

Chapter 4: The Duel

Part 1

A few days later.

It was afternoon, during the week that Jun had designated for this second attempt.

The three of them were back at the Valley of Death.

"Today, we'll take a shot at the Veil Guardian. When we defeat it, we'll get the personal use airship. If we do not succeed, this group will be disbanded."

Kasumi and Eri nodded tensely in response to those words.

Their camp was neatly set up nearby.

They had decided on a plan. They would fight with great care. They would strike when they should.

"Hey... Can we do this?"

"Regardless of whether we are able to do it, we're still doing it."

"Okay, okay."

Kasumi's teeth chattered due to nervousness. Jun smiled bitterly. Even though they still had an hour of climbing to do, they were already anxious.

"Kasumi-san, are you bad at test-taking?"

"Huh? No, I'm not. I can collect myself before tests. I've always been a high scorer, and I've been praised a lot for it."

Her innocent response made even Jun smile brightly.

"Well, we should remember what happened last time. The environment and such will always be the same, so we should prepare for that."

"The environment will be the same every time huh... But without Jun-san..."

"I'll stay here on alert. It's fine, you can do it."

Jun put his hand on Kasumi's shoulder.

"I believe in you... Let's leave this island together."

"Ah, uh... I..."

Kasumi gazed at Jun dizzily and hugged him tightly.

"Got it! I'll do it! Lemme have at it!"

"Let's go and succeed using our plan!"

"Yeah!"

Nodding, he smiled.

"Together... Jun-san and us doing stuff together... Huh."

She began walking towards the mountain, stumbling with each step.

Eri, watching that, muttered, "So..."

Jun glanced at her.

"You know that you're manipulating Kasumi now, right?"

"I thought I was just relieving her of her anxiety."

"So you're saying that you'll take responsibility?"

"I'll keep my promise."

Eri punched Jun in the chest.

"Hey..."

"I'm gonna hit you."

"...Don't say it if you're already doing it."

Eri let out a big sigh and let her shoulders droop.

"You really are a good-for-nothing guy."

"Give me a break!"

"I basically know what you want... You want to continue with a group of close friends, right?"

Jun bit down on his lip firmly and glared at Eri.

"What do you know?"

"It's common in online games. This, I understand. It's the same for me too. In any MMO, people tend to meet with others and form groups to play together... Though such a group can be called many different things, like guilds and clans. Hey, individual members of teams feel great. They feel as though they are breathing the same air as their comrades and are able to completely forget about things like school, family, or bad events when doing so."

Jun looked at Eri, surprised.

Eri smiled.

"It's the same for us. We really felt lonely. Wasn't that why we started playing online games, looking for ways to connect with others? At least that's how it was in my case. Surely that applies to you too, Jun."

She shook her head. She laughed, poking fun at herself.

"However, close groups will eventually break up. If somebody leaves due to real life situations, or if somebody loses interest in the game... Hmm, those aren't the biggest reasons. That would be... That, for various reasons, the interpersonal relationships between members broke down.

Among those reasons, the biggest is love. That stuff about who likes whom, who confessed to whom, and who got rejected by whom... Feelings like hate, jealousy, and regret, which may seem comparatively insignificant, can cause things to be strained between members of even the closest groups. Like in the real world, it would become less comfortable... Err, the virtual world would become the real world. Though they were just supposed to be our avatars, before we know it, people start going out in real life too... The fun times would end. Everybody would go back to the real world."

Jun remained silent.

No, he was unable to say anything.

In front of his eyes, Eri, a girl who was younger than him was able to display such maturity with this issue that even he was not able to organize in his own head.

"But..."

She continued to speak. She pointed at Jun, her body shaking courageously.

"I thought I finally understood you, Jun. I was mistaken. I'm irritated with your attitude. I'll get angry. I think you've been looking down on me."

"What do you mean—"

Just as he said that, Eri, without hesitating, stuck her head out.

She frowned and inflated her cheeks...

Instinctively, Jun shut his eyes.

At the next moment, Eri and Jun were standing face to face.

"Believe in me."

Hearing those words whispered into his ear, Jun jumped in surprise.

"Please believe in me. Our friendship won't break. I won't let it break, no matter what the situation is. Yeah, I won't break it myself. It's okay with you and your huge influence on Kasumi. After I punched you, you comforted Kasumi, but you're still holding her hand, dragging her wherever you go. I'll help you until you can be just like her friends from before. If you accept her, I'll give you my blessing. Even if I laugh while hitting you, I'll still stay with you. I'll punch you when you start flirting, but I won't leave. That is what I won't do."

"So you're saying that either way, you'll end up hitting me."

"Yeah, since you do irritate me."

"That's irrational."

"Is it, now?"

Eri's face hinted at her irrationality. Jun gently raised his eyelashes.

Eri was smiling.

Behind them was Kasumi, standing, who looked angry, like a fierce deity.

"...Eri-chan, can I inquire about what you're doing?"

"Huh? ...Uh, Kasumi?"

"Hey, Eri-chan, what are you trying to do, getting so close to Jun-san's face?"

Kasumi smiled sweetly.

Her eyes didn't match her smile. Her mouth stiffened.

"Hey, Eri. I think what you're doing is about to cause a crisis among our group..."

"Sorry. I'm really sorry..."

Kasumi grabbed Jun's shoulder as Eri was bowing down to apologize.

At this rate, the naughty girl will be talked sternly to by the Kasumi, the nice young lady'.

After Kasumi let go of him, Jun shrugged.

He looked up at the blue sky.

With a sigh, he said, "Guess I don't have a choice."

"It's always you, Kai. You always let me stay close to you."

Kai was always the group leader. Jun always wanted to be comfortable when holding a position of authority.

However, Kai wasn't here right now.



Though he felt like he was on the right track, meeting up with him... No, her would still take some time.

Having taken the first step towards his goal, today's battle strategy had to succeed.

"I wanna see you."

Jun accidentally said that out loud.

Part 2

Their plan for defeating the Veil Guardian was simple.

A few days earlier, during a strategy meeting in the bar on the first floor of their inn, Jun presented his plan.

"Even if I attack using up all of my MP, the Veil Guardian would only lose 10% of its HP. From watching my damage in the battle log, I can surmise that it has roughly 600,000 HP. As a reference, the Dread Sphinx's health was only 200,000."

It really was three times that of the Dread Sphinx.

"Aside from that, its firepower is nearly double that of the Dread Sphinx. It also has regeneration abilities. If I were the only attacker, defeating it would be impossible."

"Well, what are we going to do then?"

Kasumi, sitting in the chair opposite Jun with the desk between them, looked tense.

Smiling brightly, Jun looked to Eri next, who sat right next to Kasumi.

Eri glared at Jun and said, "Just come out and say it already without being so arrogant about it."

"We need to deal damage by some other means."

In MMORPGs, there were many ways to reduce a monsters' HP other than attacking, which were originally disallowed.

However, now wasn't the time to consider those matters. There wasn't anyone to enforce such rules. This fact was obvious from the MPK attempt earlier.

"So, following on from that thought, we'll push the Veil Guardian off the cliff."

"Pushing it off? How would we even do that...?"

"As a matter of fact, I thought of this idea back when the Crimson Scarf Knight Association assailed me."

Jun placed his tablet on the round table and pointed at one item's icon.

"Ah... Hmm... I see."

Eri clapped her hands together.

However, Kasumi tilted her head.

"Using the knockback gauntlets... Right?"

"Yeah. Kasumi-san, with this on, you'll have strong knockback when you attack the Veil Guardian repeatedly. You'll be able to push it off the cliff one hit at a time."

"I don't know for certain, but some special monsters might not take damage from the environment such as from falls, lava, etc. and so cannot be dealt with safely. No matter how high a fall it is, these monsters would always keep the final 10% of their HP. If that happens, many inconveniences will arise, such as that possibility of nobody being able to complete quests in the area."

"So, Jun-san... In other words..."

"Yeah, I'll be on standby in the valley, ready to use all my strength to take the Veil Guardian out after it falls. If it's at 10%, I'll have to be stingy with my magic and go for the kill, knowing full well that it will take all of my strength."

Jun nodded intently.

With a smile on her face, Eri said, "What a cunning plan. Now, you won't be able to escape without facing consequences."

Part 3

While walking along the mountain path, Eri lectured Kasumi.

"You see, offence is important. You won't get anywhere with just defense. You have to push hard, you know."

Kasumi nodded at Eri's words. She occasionally got so engrossed in what Eri had to say that she almost fell off the cliff to her left.

"What I'm getting at is, does Jun seem like the type of guy who would confess his love himself?"

"Ah... Hmm... Uh..."

"He doesn't. He most definitely won't. Even if you wait, it won't mean anything... Kasumi, you like Jun, right?"

"I... think I like Jun... Probably..."

When she thought of him, her heart ached. Just before they separated, her heart was beating rapidly. It excited her. It was obvious from the look on her face.

Surely she was falling in love.

...And she realized that this was the first time Eri mentioned it.

"Eri-chan, you've got quite the discerning eye."

"Nah, actually, I've noticed it for quite a long time now."

"Huuuuuuuhhhh!?"

Eri responded, scratching her head, "Are you really that surprised?"

Kasumi stared at her admiringly.

"Should I pray to the gods of love?"

"Stop. Pardon me, I don't have any experience going out with anybody yet."

"But, you're so well-versed on this topic..."

"I'm just a young woman that knows a bit here and there about this stuff. Besides, aren't you older than me?"

"Eri-chan, wasn't it you who said that age is irrelevant in Sky World?"

"Nice job remembering something from that long ago... It does matter in games. You and Jun are still two years older than I am! How am I, a middle schooler, supposed to talk to you about these things?!"

Kasumi giggled and watched Eri attentively. Her unintentional emotional outburst was accompanied with hand waving.

"Eri-chan, your vigor and positivity are quite enviable."

"I'm not being positive at all! Sheesh, it'll get awkward if you're gonna be like this. I don't know what'll happen to the fragile balance keeping our group afloat."

"Hey, I'm not someone with a lot of friends like you, Eri-chan..."

"Ah, you may have a lot of friends, but you don't have anybody like Jun."

Eri sighed. This time, she looked a bit depressed. She was a person with intense emotions. Eri's control over her emotions which allowed her to be able to either freely express them or act stoically at will was quite admirable...

Come to think of it, Sakuya-chan was also the kind of person to have intense emotions. Kasumi missed that friend of hers whom she had been separated from.

Kasumi looked up at the blue sky, thinking of where she could be at that moment.

Sakuya-chan, wait for me. I'll be off this island soon. I'm coming with some new companions to meet you.

"...Right, Kasumi, you have friends."

She herself did not know what kind of face she was making. Eri smiled, seeming a bit lonely.

"I'm jealous. You've been better at making friends than me all along."

Kasumi shook her head slowly.

"I also think of you, Eri-chan, as an important friend... Even though you might use what I just said to make fun of me. I want to leave the island with both you and Jun-san. I want the three of us, all together, to go meet up with Sakuya-chan."

Then she prayed, first for the three of them, then for Sakuya's group. For everybody.

She wanted to clear this game together with everybody else.

That was Kasumi's current modest... Or rather, outrageous wish.

Eri responded, turning away, "...Mmm, thank you."

Her cheeks were flushed. She was definitely feeling embarrassed.

Kasumi giggled.

It would be okay. Surely, her wish would come true. She believed in it.

However, a wish could only come true with a lot of effort and faith.

Just wishing for something to come true would not result in anything happening. Taking action, making progress. Only those things could make a wish come true. She would need to be motivated by someone...

That person was no other than Eri Inui, who was right in front of her.

Part 4

Eri buffed Kasumi with spells that increased her HP, her physical defense, her agility, and her wind attribute as a countermeasure against the Veil Guardian's spinning whirlwind attack. The strategy this time did not require dealing a lot of damage. All she had to do was to quickly, and reliably, push the Veil Guardian off the edge of the cliff.

In order to accomplish that feat, they spent the past few days constantly practicing.

"But, that's just your intuition."

Eri slapped Kasumi on her shoulder and laughed, trying to make her feel more at ease.

"Even if we fail, that Jun will find one reason or another for us to continue being together on the island."

"He would... Huh?"

"So you shouldn't be too tense about it."

Kasumi nodded cheerfully and said "Yeah." Despite feeling very anxious about it, Eri's genuine friendliness made her happy.

Turning her back towards Eri, who was to stand guard at the entrance, Kasumi approached the nearby temple.

At the top of the steps to the temple, there was a giant steel creature, approximately 5 meters tall.

Clad with heavy medieval knight-esque armor and holding a sword and shield, it stood guard, motionlessly—

When Kasumi was halfway up the stairs to the temple, it slowly started moving.

"Come here, Kasumi!"

Turning around, she realized that Eri had made it to the center of the open space and was gesturing to her with her hands. Kasumi turned her back on the creature and started running towards Eri.

The steel creature, taking swipes at the ground, seemed to be coming towards her from behind.

She looked behind her.

Before long, the Veil Guardian, a giant steel knight with a red name, was right behind Kasumi.

"Avoid it!"

Before hearing Eri's scream, Kasumi rolled diagonally. Her heavy steel sword moved with her. The sword grazed the floor and scooped out a lot of sand and dirt, scattering dust everywhere.

"So fast!"

Although Jun was watching her fight from a distance, it felt very different from when he was actually close to her. Moving agilely, as if its giant body weighed nothing, the Veil Guardian moved around her—

With clouds of dust blurring her vision, Kasumi lost track of her enemy's movements in an instant.

"Go to the right!"

Believing Eri, she jumped towards the right without hesitation.

In the next instant, the Veil Guardian's thick sword cracked the ground where Kasumi had been into two pieces. Kasumi looked behind her while rolling.

The valley was right behind her.

She had been chased up to the cliff edge before she knew it.

She shivered. If it continued like this, she would be the one who would be pushed off the cliff.

The creature began a far stronger upward slash than she expected...

It made sense. After all, this guy was a raid level monster. They were real monsters, and were only supposed to be fought with organized groups of many people.

This was impossible. Kasumi's heart was enveloped in the darkness of hopelessness. They couldn't win. She couldn't possibly fight such a monster. Even running away would be very difficult, not to mention landing hits...

"Hey, you... Get off Kasumi!"

Eri cast a stun spell. Though it wasn't very strong, for a brief moment, it was able to stop the Veil Guardian. The attack was interrupted.

–Now!

Kasumi jumped. Readying her short-sword, she increased her speed by lowering her body.

Right, she wasn't alone.

Eri was covering her. Jun was there too. In those two weeks, Kasumi had trained under him. Now, those movements that she learned were so deeply ingrained in her that performing them had become second nature.

"The Veil Guardian's standard attack pattern consists of a vertical swipe, followed by horizontal swipes. Though the time in between each strike is very short, the horizontal strikes are always from right to left... Since its huge shield is such a hindrance, it can't do it any other way."

Jun's teachings flooded Kasumi's mind.

The Veil Guardian, which was coming closer and closer to Kasumi, began its vertical swipe. She had replayed this attack pattern over and over in her head. Kasumi avoided it and turned sideways in order to roll.

Jun had said earlier, "This time, when it moves near your shield, you should lunge at it and push it with your shield. Avoiding its attack will be very difficult. However, since you'll be in that position, it's quite possible."

The thought flashed through Kasumi's mind before she moved. If she did not execute it perfectly, it would fail and she will be the one getting pushed off.

However, if she did not give it her all, she would only be able to overpower the monster back a bit.

Kasumi kept her right leg firm and bent towards the left using her body weight. Kicking the ground with her left foot to gather momentum, she propelled herself towards the giant steel monster.

At that moment, the Veil Guardian's posture was severely weakened. While thrusting out her left foot and moving in order to push her enemy with her shield, she fell forward. Her center of gravity shifted from her left foot to her right foot.

Timing—

Kasumi had set her trap. The moment her opponent became unable to do anything, she would take the chance to go for it.

She turned around quickly.

"When it turns the other way, it will use a spin attack. It will turn like a spinning top. A whirlwind will start from the golem's center. Since its range is very large, it's unavoidable. Though its damage is high, there will also be a long break during which it's vulnerable."

Thus, her only chance was now. The moment when it shifted its body weight imperfectly towards its right leg.

"Now!"

Kasumi turned on automatic combat mode and began her combo attack.

The short-sword's combo attack consisted of five consecutive attacks. A horizontal slice, a stab, a vertical slice, a stab, and then finally, a jump slice.

Among these five, the first four were very quick and easy to perform. No other class could attack more quickly than the light warrior. What she needed now was not attack power, but knockback.

"So, light warriors are the best for pushing the Veil Guardian off the cliff. This strategy, Kasumi-san, only you can execute."

This was something that only she could do.

Kasumi calmly unleashed her consecutive attacks. Horizontal slice, stab, vertical slice, stab. All four of those attacks connected and hit the Veil Guardian on its right leg. The giant steel creature's body shook and with the knockback, it was pushed towards the cliff.

However, the chain broke there. The last attack, the jump slice, did not connect since there was a big break before that attack.

Then, the Veil Guardian's body started turning mightily. Kasumi's body was hit by the whirlwind. With that, the Veil Guardian turned towards Kasumi.

"The whirlwind does wind damage. It'll hurt quite a bit. However, Eri's defense buffs can help to reduce it to a certain extent. As long as you have a plan to counter it, it won't be fatal."

"Kasumi, I'm coming!"

Eri timed her healing spells well. Kasumi's HP was being healed just as it was being reduced.

The Veil Warrior, on the verge of being pushed over the cliff, started moving its sword around.

"If you push him towards the edge just a little bit more... He wouldn't be able to take a single step. Though it might seem scary, just take some hits with your shield."

Kasumi looked up at the gigantic monster. It seemed that she would be completely chopped up with just one hit. She nearly froze from fear. But—

I will... I will believe in Jun-san!

Holding her light shield above her head, she took the bigger-than-her steel creature's hits head on. There was a loud thud with each hit. Her arm became numb.

Her HP bar dropped to 40% rapidly.

Even though she was defending, she took so much damage. Its attack power was surely astonishing...

–Take that!

Right, this is... a game.

Keeping what Jun said in mind, she realized that right now, she was a light warrior. No matter how strong the hits were, she could bear them with plenty of defense and preparedness.

After taking one more hit, she would have a chance to counterattack.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Kasumi, screaming loudly, started attacking again. Automatic combat mode, on. Initiate combo attack.

The first four attacks pushed the Veil Guardian closer and closer towards the edge.

"Kasumi, I'll heal you!"

Eri sent some small heals her way. Since it was imperative to keep the back line's Enmity lower so that the monster would not start attacking them, she couldn't use stronger spells. In spite of that, she was still able to heal almost 20% HP with one spell.

By all rights, Kasumi was using attacks that would provoke her target to attack her, so the Veil Guardian's Enmity for her had to be increasing. However, now, every little moment was valuable. Her knockback gauntlets' special ability, which was unusable in towns among other places, needed some time to activate. She would have to let another attack through.

The Veil Guardian attacked. She blocked with her shield. This attack hurt more than the previous ones. Her HP went down to 30%.

However, Kasumi ignored the yellow warning message and countered fiercely.

Being healed by Eri, Kasumi's HP recovered to 50% during her counterattack.

She then took another three of its longsword attacks with her shield.

Her HP bar was almost completely empty.

Eri cried out, "Kasumi!"

But—

Kasumi responded with a smile on her face, "It's fine."

At the last moment, Jun taught her to be mentally prepared.

"When things are getting difficult, smile. Smile widely."

Those words echoed in her head.

Thus, Kasumi smiled. She smiled, with sweat on her face, the blood effect being shown, and dust all around in the air.

Then, she took a step.

Automatic combat mode on. Initiate combo attack.

She began her attacks.

Horizontal slice, stab—

The Veil Guardian stepped back with each attack. Slowly moving backwards, the giant steel monster was only a little bit from being pushed off the cliff.

The Veil Guardian's stance weakened.

The third attack, the vertical slice, hit it in the right place.

It brandished its sword.

"It's not working!"

At once, Kasumi turned automatic combat off and took a step. She dodged one of the Veil Guardian's hits. Its next attack was the horizontal swipe. However, if she ended up avoiding that attack, she would be allowing her opponent to advance. So—

Once again, she turned automatic combat mode on and began the combo sequence.

The horizontal slice was blocked by its shield. She didn't care. Now, her opponent's legs were halfway off of the cliff.

One attack later. With just that one attack, the monster fell off the cliff.

At the same time...

Ah, I'm going to die

Kasumi laughed.

Even if she died, she had won already...

Kasumi and the Veil Guardian, taking hits from each other, pushed each other back and forth.

Kasumi's back was facing the open area.

The Veil Guardian's body began falling slowly. Its legs moved uncontrollably.

While watching the steel figure disappear as it continued to fall, Kasumi closed her eyes with a sense of satisfaction...

I won.

Many thoughts flooded her mind.

Thud. She fell onto the ground.

She groaned.

Opening her eyes, she muttered, "Huh? I didn't die... What?" Slanting her head, she looked at her HP bar. She still had more than half of her HP left.

She looked at the log.

[Eri cast a spell on Kasumi. HP recovering.]

She heard a voice nearby, "That Maximum Heal was just in time."

When she lifted her head, she saw a smiling Eri.

"Maximum Heal was not allowed..."

"But."

Considering the spell's cast time, Eri had to have started to cast the spell before she and the Veil Guardian hit each other for the final time. If Kasumi had decided to play it safe, the Veil Guardian would be charging at Eri right about now.

Even so, she cast the spell.

"I guessed that you were going to do what you did. So, I, obligated to protect you unconditionally as the healer, decided to heal you."

Kasumi thought, "Oh."

Surely, Eri, who was smiling joyfully under the blue sky, believed in her.

If not for that, she would not be alive now.

I... I met somebody who believes in me, Sakuya-chan.

She suddenly remembered something Sakuya said.

When Sakuya was still with her...

She said, "Kasumi, it's okay for you to rely on me as much as you need. So, say whatever you want to say. However, I'm disappointed. When you don't open your mouth, I don't know what you want. I think that's bringing us to our limit."

That was weird. Kasumi tilted her head. Wasn't it obvious? If she didn't open her mouth, she wouldn't be able to communicate anything. Wasn't that just something that could be taken for granted?

However, Sakuya smiled bitterly and shook her head.

"It is. Even if you don't say anything, your friends will still be thinking about you. There are friendships like that. Ones involving knowing what the other person is thinking: even if one person does not verbalize it, the other will end up understanding. That's the kind of friendship I'm talking about."

If there ever was a time when she had found friends like that, it would be now.

With a lonely smile, Sakuya said, "Should an opportunity to make one of those friendships arise, jump at it and get a firm grip on them. Never let go of them."

At that time, Kasumi did not know at all why she looked so lonely. They had just come to Sky World.

Now, she thought she might know.

Surely Kasumi was somebody with whom she could share her innermost feelings.

However, she ended up letting go of her. Then, that person ended up drifting away from her.

That was why.

After getting up, Kasumi hugged Eri tightly.

"What!? Huh!? What was that for!?"

"I won't let you go, Eri-chan. I'll definitely never let you leave me."

"Huh!? What do you mean!? I was never going to do that anyway!"

Kasumi smiled.

Sakuya-chan, I'm fine. I found somebody who I can treasure.

She wanted to bring Eri and Jun to Sakuya.

Imagining Sakuya's face when that happens, Kasumi chuckled.



Part 5

Jun wasn't able to see much by looking up at the top of the mountain from the valley due to the fog.

Jun could only guess whether Kasumi and Eri were faring well. Since Eri last contacted him with her communication stone right before the battle, Jun had no choice but to stand alert near the place where the monster would fall.

Right about now, Jun was wondering if his plan was succeeding or whether the two of them had died tragically in battle.

Jun, being the worrywart he was, felt uneasy.

However... The wait would be soon over.

Just as he thought he saw a gigantic black mass fall from overhead, he heard a loud 'thud', accompanied by the shaking of the ground.

A red-named giant slowly stood up in the resulting cloud of dust.

The Veil Guardian.

Its HP had indeed gone all the way down to 10%.

The giant monster, tasked with the protection of the forgotten temple, emerged from the center of the dust cloud and looked over its surroundings.

If it moved towards where Kasumi and Eri were, he wouldn't be able to catch up. While it was bumbling about, Jun drew his sword and charged towards the Veil Guardian.

"Yaaaaaaaaa!"

Imbuing lightning magic onto his sword, he began attacking. He stopped caring about defending himself. At any rate, he had to get higher Enmity than Kasumi and Eri as soon as possible. Luckily, monsters' Enmity decreased with its distance from the character. It was right next to Jun, so he had the advantage over Eri and Kasumi, who were on top of the faraway cliff.

While swinging his sword mindlessly, profound thoughts gradually began to flood his mind.

Looking up at the steel giant, whose whole body had begun crumbling, he smiled.

Kasumi, you did it!

That was right. She had succeeded.

That beginner girl was able to successfully execute a rather difficult strategy.

It wasn't the work of a miracle. It wasn't just luck either.

It was simply the result of laying bricks one at a time in order to pave the road to victory.

It was nothing else but that. Jun too was astonished by her concentration and perseverance, and by how quickly she was able to progress.

One could say it was almost as if she were reborn.

Jun had only shown her a path.

She trusted Jun. She was determined to display her trust.

The result was this out-of-place situation.

Though the monster was supposed to be defeated only by raid groups with dozens of members, a group of just three people had managed to bring it to the verge of death.

Jun opened his mouth fearlessly, "I can't screw up now!"

Jun's fierce attacks whittled at the Veil Guardian's HP. A short while later, it had only 5% left.

On one hand, his enemy's regeneration capabilities were strong. Though he was doing fine with the magic imbued into his sword for now, if his MP ran out, its regeneration would more than cover the damage he could deal.

That was the power of an upper level raid-class monster.

It was absurd to challenge it. In order to make this absurd feat possible, he had to figure out a way to maximize his damage. He did everything he could. So—

The Veil Guardian's HP went down to 4%.

He didn't care. Even if it only had 1 HP left, he would fight his best.

Three percent. Two percent.

He only had a little bit of MP left.

"This is bad."

Jun smacked his lips.

Though he already noticed a while ago, somehow, Jun's HP was low, and the Veil Guardian's regeneration power seemed to strengthen.

"Just as one would expect of an upper level raid-class monster."

Jun's team took that fact lightly.

He shook his head.

"But... If I make a mistake this far in..."

I wouldn't be able to face them...

Jun stopped the Veil Guardian by casting Quick Stun.

For a moment, he was able to get a considerable distance away. His target, the Veil Guardian, stared straight at him. As the stun wore off, it charged fiercely at Jun.

He muttered a command, "Commence secret technique!"

He activated a special spell that he had set up in advance. His normally green HP bar glowed red, and pale light enveloped his body. Jun lifted his sword high up in the air.

The light gathered onto the sword.

"—Harsh Lightning!"

He swung his now shining sword downwards at the Veil Guardian, who had been getting closer.

The light intensified.

The Veil Guardian's body became enveloped in the same pale light.

As it only had a little HP left, Jun was able to finish the Veil Guardian off with just one attack.

[The Veil Guardian has been vanquished!]

The log entry appeared, quietly notifying him of his success.

Part 6

The earth shook as the Veil Guardian's massive body fell to the ground.

Jun, watching intently, inhaled deeply.

Though it was a difficult battle, Jun's team finally succeeded. It was over.

He then picked up the key item from the Veil Guardian's remains. If he reactivated the currently inactive airship in the innermost parts of the forgotten temple...

Jun's search on this island would be over. He, Kasumi, and Eri would be able to fly off into the vast sky. However...

Clap. Clap. Clap.

The sound of clapping echoed in the valley.

After looking up, Jun saw a figure slowly approaching from the entrance to the valley.

Who was it? Jun's body stiffened. Was it a member of the Crimson Scarf Knight Association? No, the stubbornness of some of their members had already led to their deaths twice; they wouldn't have the nerve to leave the town. They would have come to an agreement about that.

That being the case... Who could it possibly be?

There was one other possible explanation.

Strictly, adventurers and NPCs were not the only people on this island.

Well, those girls might have been the only humans but...

Maybe Alice's people?

Jun quickly took out his healing rod and healed himself. At the same time, he drank some recovery potions. He left the items from the Veil Guardian on the floor for later. At any rate, now...

"Hey, Jun, don't be so wary of me," the figure said.

It was the voice of a young woman. She seemed a bit taller than average.

Suddenly, a strong wind blew. The fog that had been covering the entire area cleared, revealing the approaching figure.

It was a girl with long black hair, carrying a gigantic great-sword, and wearing light armor. Her eyes looked friendly, like those of a cat, and Jun thought she was cute. However, at the same time, he felt nerve-chilling vibes from her. Those vibes made her look like the cat straight out of Alice in Wonderland.

Jun had felt that before.

He had a hunch. She... Or rather, he...

"Kai... No, Sakuya, how should I address you?"

"Whichever way is easiest for you. After all, names are just sounds. No matter what name I use, you'll be somewhere, doing something... That's 'cause you're my close friend, Junichiro Mikimori."

She smiled, and her name showed up on a projection screen.

Sakuya. Magic swordsman.

Then, next to her class, a red PK icon lit up.

She had recently killed another player.



"Surely, during this meeting, we should be saying something like 'Long time no see' or maybe even 'Nice to meet you' if you were confused, but..." Sakuya opened her mouth and laughed sarcastically. "Either way... I'll say something. Yo, Jun! ...I've come to stand in the way of your quests."

Jun shrugged, sighing. She always talked nonsensically.

That was right. Kai/Sakuya. When he was with him/her, Jun always became involved in unreasonable things. Though, this time...

"Aren't you being awfully irrational, Sakuya?"

"You prefer to call me by that name? Well then... I suppose an explanation is in order."

"I got your message and came here. I just thought you could give me a little bit more information."

A communication stone shook from inside his bag. It was probably Kasumi.

"Somebody's calling you? You should pick up."

"As soon as I take my eyes off you, I'll be attacked, so I can't."

"You seem like you have trust issues."

"Didn't we often do surprise attacks back when we hung out?"

"Well, if morality doesn't extend to companions... I'm not trying to look like I'm betraying your trust."

The communication stone kept ringing. Kasumi and Eri must have been worried.

Sakuya took a big, exaggerated breath.

"I don't want to meet up with Kasumi."

"So that's why. I get it."

Jun took out the communication stone and connected to Kasumi.

Calming Kasumi down, who had been worrying almost to the point of crying, Jun explained that he just hadn't been paying attention and that everything had worked out.

"Go to the temple from earlier. I'll be there as soon as I get the key."

He accidentally glanced at Sakuya. She had her hands on her hips and an assertive expression on her face.

Jun put the communication stone he had finished using back into his bag and glared at her.

"Is it okay to say such things? After this, I'll take the key item from the monster that you just killed from you."

"Do you want the airship?"

"Nah, my party already has one. We just don't want you guys to get it."

"Why not?"

Jun shook his head in disapproval. His opponent would be Kai, Jun's close friend. Because of that, he should just act like normal.

Jun grinned and teased her.

"I told Kasumi not to come here because I didn't want her to see your dead body. I will defeat you."

"Do you think you can? Isn't your MP at zero? In addition to that, you've already used your secret power."

"You know about secret powers?"

"Well, I also have a secret technique book. You've seen Kasumi's skin, right? There should be a secret power slot there."

Now that she mentioned it, Jun remembered that when he looked at Kasumi's tablet, he did see something like that.

At the instant he saw the code for that skin, he noticed some of Kai's own coding peculiarities, and so, he believed that it was Kai's work.

"...When you clear all of the quests on a particular island, you get a special move specific to your class. However, you can only use it once per hour, and it is easy to get your companions caught up in them accidentally. They are hard to use in situations other than in one on one battles. This is the first time I knew somebody else who had it. Your questmania really worked in your favor."

"It still didn't seem like there was anybody who had completed all of Altaria's quests... This isolated island doesn't have many quests calling for interisland travel."

"Seems that way. Because of that, the developers hid the book of secret techniques on this island... It seems like a way to balance the system."

"Honestly, I wanted to keep it that way. It could cause problems."

She said, detachedly, "I'm terrible, doing things like being an obstacle to you who has been working hard for the sake of his companions."

That was the usual.

This was the usual Kai. She talked in the same way and said the same things as Jun remembered. Though Jun didn't expect her to be such an amazing girl, as far as he was concerned, it didn't matter, because she was his online friend.

"By the way, did concealing my gender make you uneasy?"

"Even if I asked, you could have lied about it. It doesn't matter if you're a boy or a girl. That doesn't change the fact that you're Kai."

Sakuya frowned cutely.

"That's not interesting. You're mean, Jun-san."

"Then visit her instead... Why did you keep Kasumi with you?"

"I thought that I would be able to protect her. Sometimes, I wanted to try being the knight protecting the helpless princess."

"But even now, she still trusts you."

"I know. That's why I took away her wings. I'm not giving you the airship. I don't want you guys to obtain the wings of freedom."

"Do you know what you're saying?"

She opened her mouth and smiled sarcastically, looking lonely.

"...I don't want her to see gruesome things like murder. There are still a few people I'm killing. Of course it's not the type of 'killing' that one can revive from. I need to give them complete 'death', the type that comes from dying three times and losing all battery."

Sakuya looked up at the blue sky.

From this island on the eighth island ring, one could only see the islands close by. There were landmasses much further away, beyond the clouds.

"I can't live if I don't do that on the higher islands."

Even Jun had only made it up to the fifth island ring.

Jun didn't remember Kai as such a bloodthirsty person. Actually, was that even true? The world Sakuya was in, Sky World, which Jun had come to and seen, still seemed a bit different from the real world.

"What's up there?"

"Who knows? After all, I'm a guest here. However, I want to make it to Aion. I'll have to eliminate anybody who stands in my way... Kasumi was a hindrance to my doing so."

Sakuya frowned a bit as she said 'hindrance'.

She wasn't being honest. Jun sighed. What she just said actually meant something along the lines of "Since it turned out to be bloodier than I originally thought, I didn't want to tarnish Kasumi Yukasaki's purity."

That was Kai-like. Kai was very indirect. Just from word choice, she was always misunderstood. However, Jun knew. She had a sensitive heart, so he was able to sympathize with that 'companion' of his.

"You care about her so much."

"That's 'cause she's my friend... She's been an important friend since I first entered high school. Probably my first in real life. Together with online friends, she would be second next to you."

With just those words, Jun finally understood why that girl invited Kasumi to Sky World.

He let his guard down. While not paying attention, he leaned over. He always hoped that Kai thought of him that way.

"Kai, I thought you had a lot of friends."

"If by that you mean superficial relationships, I do."

Jun understood that she was just like Eri. One way or another, those kinds of people naturally attract each other.

"Hey, that can come in handy."

"Sheesh... So, what's your response?"

"So if I'm not mistaken, you want me to protect Kasumi, and while I'm doing that, you'll enjoy yourself adventuring on the higher islands. You want me to babysit a troublesome child while you yourself go out and have fun."

"What a harsh way to put it... To be frank though, you're right. Will you do it?"

"Did you think I would accept those conditions?"

"There's another option, if you really won't do that. You can leave Kasumi alone and come with me."

"If you know that I'd never agree, don't even try." Jun, shocked, glared at Sakuya. "Why don't you think about your companions' feelings a bit more?"

"No, I want you to yell at me after being separated for so long. Hey look, I'm a masochist."

"I'm not going to get angry at you. If I get even a little bit angry, I won't be able to get along with you anymore."

"So you're the type of guy who likes to neglect others."

"I'm not."

"I don't want you to drive Kasumi crazy. She is important to me. But she definitely will not be able to survive in the higher islands... Actually, I don't want to see anybody being driven to suicide. I thought it was good that I sent her down to this island so early," Sakuya said, clearly.

Jun nodded. Just as he had suspected, Kasumi Yukasaki's fall had been intentional.

He had thought that there was something fishy about the whole situation from the start. Just coincidentally, a monster event occurred on an airship in flight over Altaria, an island that would be very difficult to escape from, and that the place where Kasumi happened to land was a bind point...

There were too many perfectly aligned events for them to have happened purely by chance. Much less that Kai was involved.

"However..." Jun thought. Because of that, he glared at Sakuya. "Even so... She tried so hard to try and reunite with you."

"I know."

"Even now, if we couldn't get the airship, she wasn't planning on giving up. She would have gotten on the regularly scheduled airship ride."

"So, I'm going to end this once and for all. Just to be sure, I came here."

"Be happy that you've met up with your good friend!"

"But Jun, you aren't listening to me."

Jun smiled bitterly. He thought to himself, "Did Kai really understand?"

The conversation seemed to be heading in one direction.

Normally, they would have first tried to find a compromise. However, in this case, they knew each other too well, and so they knew that they would have to fight it out before they could arrive at a solution.

Even so, they did not stop talking. In the midst of their chattering, profound thoughts flooded both of their minds.

"If your proposal is decent, I will listen to you. However, if it involves betraying my companions, I won't. It would be better to fight."

"So, you've decided to fight a cute little girl? What an unpleasant guy."

"I've always been the one to hold you back."

"That's right. When you weren't there, the online persona 'Kai' was able to run amok and wreak all sorts of havoc."

"Don't make it sound like it's somebody else doing it. Even now, it's still you who's doing all those things."

"Yeah. But, there was no one to hold me back the whole time."

She smiled. Kai/Sakuya smiled boldly and disrespectfully.

Jun didn't know what she had done in this world. Nor did he know what her thoughts were about going to Aion. Nor the dangers that would await him in this world that he had come to live in. He didn't know that kind of stuff. There was only one thing that was important to him.

Whenever Kai ran amok, it was Junichiro Mikimori's duty to stop him.

"So, let's have at it," Sakuya stopped smiling and drew her great-sword.

"Wait, there's still something I want to ask you."

"Sorry, but there's not much I can tell you. By all means, if you want to know, you can come with us to the heavens. However, you'll have to leave Kasumi on this island."

"It's about your last mail. Why did you—"

Sakuya shook her head silently.

He had no choice. Jun prepared his weapon.

Sakuya moved away and started to cast a spell. It was elementary level attack spell. When it hit Jun, he only took a little bit of damage.

Both of their names turned red, marking them as if they were hostile monsters.

"I want the honor of defeating you, Jun."

"So that's all you want?"

"It's something like a punishment."

"Don't say things like that."

"I really like you a lot."

Jun shook his head, "What an unexpected meeting." As if breaking off their long-held friendship, he responded to her challenge. "I too want to know about the truth of this world. In order to do that... I'll force my way through right here."

Jun kicked at the ground. He lowered himself and facing Sakuya, he charged.

"That's fine. In any case, we can't help but to fight this one battle... As for my real intentions, I really wanted to see you give your all in a battle." Sakuya shook her head and lifted her great-sword. "Even though you have a handicap... I'm not going easy on you."

Then, what would become a fierce and intense battle began.

Part 7

Even before the battle started, Jun knew that he was in an unfavorable situation.

He was exhausted from the tough battle with the Veil Guardian.

Though his HP had since recovered, his MP was all but depleted, and he had already used his most powerful trump card, the great-sword secret technique.

This was in stark contrast to Sakuya, who seemed to have made all sorts of preparations. She even had access to secret techniques, as he had learned from their earlier exchange.

They were both magic swordsmen who specialized in using great-swords.

Even if their equipment was pretty much the same, no matter how much he hit Sakuya in her weak points, the outcome of the battle had basically been decided already... But...

They had clashed swords before. They had roughly the same skill level.

In Sky World, which was not an MMORPG but an extension of real life, the best movements were found to be the most efficient ones, like those of craftsmen.

"You really do things by the book, copying my movements and all."

As their swords made contact, Sakuya responded, "Sorry. You and I wrote those books. It seems like we ended up making the same manuals in different places."

They both knew that considering what was important, Kai/Sakuya and Jun were about equal in ability to sense each other's weaknesses. They had both chosen to be magic swordsmen, done similar research, and looked for the best methods for everything...

They moved in sync, mirroring one another.

Sparks flew as they their swords clashed.

"We really get along."

"That's 'cause we both came up with the same theories through our investigations in games. It was inevitable that this would happen. It's not that surprising."

Even though she was a girl, she was by no means weaker than Jun.

Sakuya's hits were just as strong as his.

Jun was counterattacking precisely and dealing damage back at her.

However, unlike Sakuya who was able to imbue magic into her sword, Jun could no longer do that.

Well aware of this, Sakuya cast a movement-stopping stun spell. The difference in HP between the two had been increasing gradually.

"It's true, I wanted to fight with you evenly."

"That's a lie. Isn't it your personal motto to never lose a battle?"

"But *you're* my opponent."

Even if they kept dealing damage to each other, or if the blood effect was activated, it wouldn't mean that either of them was mentally weakened. He wanted to feel some pain.

He wanted to feel the pain of being hurt by a close friend.

He wanted to experience the agony of being killed by a close friend.

However, he lifted his head and looked at Sakuya. Now, he glared at her. Her HP was double that of his, and she was biting down on her lips so hard that they had started to bleed.

"If it's too hard for you, just give up."

"I won't. If I drop my sword here, I'll surely regret it in the future."

Sparks flew as the two great-sword wielders continued to fight. Jun, without magic imbued into his sword, took damage that would be impossible to bounce back from.

"Ughhh..."

"When I came to this island, I chanced upon some information. Hearing your name, I was surprised. Then I found out that you had been with Kasumi. That was an even bigger shock. But at the same time, I felt annoyed. If you and Kasumi became good friends, I would be the odd one out... I thought that was cunning of you."

"But you willingly betrayed her!"

"Yeah, yeah, I did. I had to do what I had to do. Even if it meant throwing away everything, I had to make my way to Aion. So because of that... I cast you away. I cast Kasumi away. For that one reason, I'm here..."

Sakuya used Quick Stun on Jun. Jun's movement stopped for a while.

In that time, she moved away with Backstep.

Was this the last hit?

She lifted her great-sword.

"I'm going to... Kill you. ——Secret technique, activate!"

Her sword flared up in flames.

The swirl of fire enveloped Sakuya's whole body. It flared intensely while Jun remained rooted to the ground. The whirlwind intensified.

"Glowing Inferno!"

The raging flames left her sword and went after Jun...

At that moment, when Jun couldn't wait any longer, he grinned and opened his mouth.

Jun shouted the command, "—Change, lance mode!"

The speech recognition system, used in place of manually clicking on the item icon on the tablet, had endless practical uses in Sky World...

It was the best way to surprise an enemy.

Jun's giant great-sword became engulfed in light. Its edge became thin and its handle lengthened. When the light went out, Jun was holding a long-spear, another one of the magic swordsman's weapon choices.

It was called 'Shape Shifter'.

Jun obtained that weapon by chance, as a rare fifth level quest reward. It wasn't very well known and it did not raise attack or defense power by much, however, ever since Jun got it, the weapon had become his favorite.

He thought that its ability would come in handy when used in conjunction with a command to switch weapons.

Until this battle, he had never needed it.

He smiled bitterly as many feelings flooded his mind.

Why would I, who had originally specialized in great-swords, have such a weapon as my favorite...?

"Secret technique, activate!"

Jun muttered those words silently.

Another action slot activated. His HP bar, normally green, glowed red once more, and Jun's whole body became covered in white light. Jun took a ready position and pointed the tip of his spear towards Sakuya.

Until a few days ago, Jun had not received the secret technique for great-swords. However, he had possessed the long-spear's secret technique.

"Holy Wings Blast."

A pure white light flew out of the tip of the long-spear and grew into the shape of a swan's wings. The wings turned around in front of the scorching hot hellfire that was approaching. The shining silver light, while turning round and round, collided with the whirlpool of flames...

The area exploded.

Then...

Part 8

Sakuya, thinking that Jun could not be trusted, watched the ground before her intently.

Secret techniques could only be used once per hour.

This was one of Sky World's restrictions. It would take a long time before Jun could use it again. So, when Sakuya used hers, she was certain that victory was in her hands.

However...

Jun unleashed a second secret technique within that short one-hour time span.

The reason was simple. He had switched weapons to a long spear.

In Sky World, one could assign different settings to each weapon type in the option window. Players who kept convenience in mind took measures to change weapons using macros.

Jun tapped into that system.

Originally, each weapon type had its own secret technique.

Great-swords and long-spears' settings would then have to be set with their own secret techniques, so that their cooldowns were separate from each other.

Normally, that wasn't a cause for concern. Not a lot of people used more than one type of weapon, and usually, it was necessary for them to open up the tablet window in order to change weapons. The chaos of battle didn't allow for that.

For that reason, Sakuya was under the impression that Jun couldn't have had any more secret techniques.

"I guess I was wrong."

Sakuya smiled bitterly. She was a bit upset.

However... That still only evened the playing field.

After she released the flames and the rays of intense light of her secret technique, immense amounts of energy swirled around in the space between both of them. Jun, on the other side of the inferno, was wounded all over. Sakuya had twice as much HP as he had. Furthermore, she still had more than half of her MP. Even without the secret technique, the odds were in her favor...

Just after thinking that, she realized her mistake.

Jun was a questaholic. In these three months, he had definitely completed the quests of many islands. If he had two secret techniques, then...

"Change. Axe mode!"

Jun's voice echoed loudly.

Sakuya smiled. She was happy. This was the Jun she was expecting. The boy who always exceeded expectations and surprised everybody, including Sakuya herself. At any given time, Jun was a step ahead of her. He was an irreplaceable friend... One who undermined the established customs and thought outside the box.

Sakuya had definitely expected this. Even though Jun had a handicap, he was going to end up winning.

It was a miracle.

He saw it coming. He wanted, with all of his heart, for her to make a mistake with her brashness...

"I'm really an idiot, huh," she said as she smiled.

As the swirl of flames and light disappeared, she smiled, watching Jun who had his eyes fixed onto her. He held his favorite weapon in his hands, which currently took the form of an axe.

There were magic swordsmen who preferred axes over great-swords and long-spears. Since axes were said to be hard to use, Jun surely shouldn't have been too good at using them, but...

If he was only going to use its special attack though, that wouldn't matter.

"Secret technique, activate!"

Jun lifted his axe towards the sky.

The air whirled around the handle of the axe and the area became enveloped in darkness.

"——Black Whirlwind Nightmare!"

The jet black whirlwind was getting closer and closer to Sakuya. Though she had made intensive preparations, she still couldn't avoid the situation playing out this way.

"It's... my loss."

Sakuya lowered her sword and quietly closed her eyes.

She shrieked from the sensation of being chopped up by the wind.

Part 9

Jun fixed his line of sight on Sakuya, who had now turned into a silent corpse.

The fact that most of her stuff was bound surprised him. About now, she would most likely be reviving on a different island with most of her stuff intact.

"...So she's used to dying... She really ought to leave a better present for her killer."

There was only one item that he managed to salvage from her dead body. It was a communication stone.

"What a crappy reward."

Communication stones usually existed in pairs. That meant that she had purposely left it there for him...

"So, I can communicate with her whenever I want now?"

Sakuya probably held the corresponding stone. Jun smiled bitterly and put the stone away.

He turned back. Either way, he didn't want to continue looking at a dead body.

Sakuya was already gone.

Jun left and kept going further and further away. He looked up at the sky. Before he knew it, the fog had cleared and the blue sky appeared above him.

He muttered, "Wait up! I'll catch up with you soon. When that happens, let's fight once more."

He laughed fearlessly.

Then, he picked up the item the Veil Guardian dropped.

He put on his Wing Boots and flew up into the sky.

He flew, in one breath, back to his trusty companions.

Part 10

On that very day,

Jun, Kasumi, and Eri

Left Altaria.

Epilogue

Part 1

Sakuya, having revived at a bind point in the middle of a remote forest, smiled as she saw the black clothed girl who had been waiting for her.

"Alice. How disappointing. I failed. I couldn't fulfill your request."

However, Alice shook her head slowly, and touched the large towel covering Sakuya's naked body as if to comfort her.

"No problem. Junichiro Mikimori knows about you. That's the motivation he lacked. You gave him that."

"I see. So you're saying that it would have been fine either way. That you would benefit no matter what happened."

"I said that I would give you compensation. You're fine with just information?"

Sakuya grinned, took Alice's hand, and hugged her. In that position, she stroked her silver hair.

"Ooooooh. Ooooooh."

"Your hair is really beautiful. It feels great."

"Hey, wait a sec, let me give you your reward. Using force is mean. Let's calm down and negotiate..."

"Your cheeks really are silky smooth. Though I hate your organization, you really are cute. Jun doesn't deserve you. You should be mine."

"Hold up –'m not interested in girls..."

Sakuya deftly held her down with one hand and stroked her hair with her other. Alice struggled loudly.

"Sorry. I just really love cute things. I'm straight, so please calm down."

"I can't! Wait, if you don't listen, I'll delete the information... okay?"

Alice's disarray was clearly reflected in her tone of voice. She got completely exhausted and Sakuya had to lay her down on a bed. Sakuya then got up and put on her clothes.

"Yeah, don't trouble yourself by deleting the information. My companions would get mad at me. I guess I've got no choice. Please forgive me this time."

"...Perv."

"And you can continue glaring at me like that... Well, let's change the topic. So about that information..." Sakuya smiled fearlessly. "Please tell me. Where's the piece of the puzzle that we've yet to find?"

Part 2

On Lao Thai, an island on the seventh island ring.

Jun thought that the city of Payang, where short Lao Thai people resembling Chinese immigrants lived, may have been modeled after Shanghai or Hong Kong. It was a lively port.

Its harbor was an airport where many airships anchored, and a place where even more of them littered the skies. The town of Payang itself was full of tall, layered pagodas.

100,000 people lived in that town, of which more than 3000 were adventurers.

From the moment they landed in this lively city on the seventh island ring, Kasumi wandered dizzily, as if in a trance, in the airport lobby.

Because she was too absent-minded, she had already been pickpocketed three times. Normally, adventurers would store their items and money in safes. But then, Kasumi did not have any useful storage items like that. She really was defenseless.

Jun smiled bitterly and left the lobby, both him and Eri pulling Kasumi by her hands.

Though there were a lot of tall spires in the city, it felt very spacious. The congestion was almost just like that of Shinjuku and Shibuya¹.

"Seems almost like Rome."

"The city center doesn't even end there." Eri smiled. "It's like I'm dreaming. I just didn't know that there was a place with so many people in this world."

"It's even more so in the eighth island ring, 'cause most adventurers decided to settle down there. Here, the adventurer grouping service is very strong, and there are many player communities here. People even come here to get information. It gets very congested when players gather together in convenient places. If this were a normal MMO, people would freak out... However, here, it makes it seem a little like the real world."

Jun took out a communication stone and began busily calling people. He needed to understand the situation before choosing an inn. He spent nearly one month on Altaria. He didn't know what happened in Sky World during that period. Or how much prices changed. Or which quests were found...

There were a lot of things he had to know and a lot of things he had to do.

"Jun-san, how are you so lively?"

¹ Very congested areas of Tokyo. Comparable to Manhattan.

"I'm the kind that likes drowning in a sea of information."

Eri shrugged and sighed. Jun glared at her, as if saying "Don't say a word", then put his hands on his hips and smiled.

"Hey, what are you gonna do? Since our one death penalty still hasn't fully elapsed, are we going to hang out here and rest for a while?"

"Don't say silly things." Removing the communication stone from his ear, Jun shook his head. "First of all, I'm going to fill up my quest list for this island. I'll set aside whatever I can't do by myself for later."

"Yuck. Are we going to be running errands for you?"

"Get yourselves well equipped. I hope that's okay with you, Kasumi-san."

"Yes, you can count on me, Jun-san."

Kasumi looked at Jun.

In the end, Jun never told them about what had happened with Sakuya. Though it seemed like Eri knew something was up, she kept her mouth shut for now.

He would have to tell them about it eventually. However, that time had yet to come.

Kasumi Yukasaki. He wanted to make her strong. Even if it was just her character, or her individual person, he wanted to show Sakuya and surprise her.

After all this, thought Jun.

Sakuya. He wanted to surprise that cheeky and haughty best friend of his.

That was the most recent and biggest quest that Junichiro Mikimori had chosen to undertake.

Afterword

Adventuring. And having fun while adventuring.

That is what appeals to me (Tsukasa Seo) about Sky World.

I'll be happy if you enjoy this world and Jun and company's adventures.

I started a blog. Please come play if you want.

URL: <http://blog.livedoor.jp/heylyalai/>¹

¹ Tsukasa Seo's blog (in Japanese)

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