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スカイ・ワールド

Story to the End of Blue Expanse
SKYWORLD #02

DRAGON COMICS AGE

Sky World

vol.2

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Prologue

Arasia Island was a small island on the eighth ring. One could make his or her way around it in a single day.

Though airships passed by Arasia Island's only settlement once daily, adventurers rarely visited the small village. Because of that, the islanders knew the ones who did well.

The eldest lady of the village said, "Kasumi-dono, it's been a long time. It's been a month since Sakuya-dono last came." She smiled, further wrinkling her already wrinkly face.

When lost, some adventurers would stay on this island and leave a message. They would set up a camp here for a little while.

The calendar popularly used in Sky World split up years into twelve months each, months into thirty days each, and days into twenty-four hours each.

"Sakuya-dono told me. She and the others are all doing well. They are going to the fourth island ring. As soon as she finished what she wanted to do, she wanted to let you know where she would be waiting. Anyways, that's the message she left."

After Jun's group left Altaria Island, they headed towards this island next on their airship.

"I'm happy to hear that Sakuya-chan and the others are safe. I really am." Having heard that message, Kasumi was delighted. "If Sakuya-chan contacts you again, please tell her not to worry and that even if it takes some time, I will definitely make it up to the fourth island ring with these guys."

Chapter 1: Raid

Part 1

Sky World.

It once used to be nothing more than a free online tablet RPG.

It was a part of the so-called MMORPG genre (massively multiplayer online role-playing games). In this type of game, many players connect to a single server, experiencing the same world in real time.

Sky World once used to be nothing more than another one of those games. It was a fantasy world, with countless islands floating in the sky.

But suddenly, one day, this virtual world became reality.

The Sky World players found themselves physically in the game's universe. Nobody knew what had happened to their bodies. The rumor had it that tens of thousands of people had been sent to this world.

It was a carbon copy of the one from the game. But there was no way that the world could have purely been digital. It was far too realistic.

Just one week after Sky World went live, the Birthday occurred. Actually, 133 days have passed since then. The goal of this survival game, however, had yet to be found.

Part 2

The Sky World universe consisted of countless islands, floating in the sky above a vast sea.

They came together into eight distinct rings, stacked vertically.

A little more than a month earlier, a magic swordsman named Jun met two girls on Altaria Island, which lies on the eighth ring, the one closest to the sea. The two girls were Kasumi, a light warrior, and Eri, a white magician. Having left their old guild, they sought an opportunity to escape from the secluded Altaria Island.

Kasumi's goal was to meet up with Sakuya, her close friend from whom she'd been separated. But Sakuya was likely already ages away, up on an island in the fourth ring somewhere.

She was actually an offline friend of Jun's with a nickname Kai. Jun had first stepped into Sky World in order to look for her. As a result, helping Kasumi turned out to be the easiest way for Jun to reach his goal.

When Jun went to recover a key to an airship, the only way off the island, Sayuka suddenly showed up. She came to attack Jun in an effort to prevent him from gaining the airship, reasoning that she didn't want Kasumi involved in the brutal battles that awaited them on the upper rings.

Jun just managed to eke out a win. He had everyone board the airship, hiding the fight from Kasumi. The trio set off from the island into the vast universe of Sky World.

Three weeks had passed. The group finally landed on Lao Thai, an island on the seventh ring.

Part 3

Four great beasts lived on Lao Thai, one for each cardinal direction. They were said to have protected the island since long, long ago. They were Azure Dragon, Vermillion Bird, Black Tortoise, and White Tiger [1]. Everybody on the island revered and feared these four guardian deities borrowed from Chinese mythology.

However, adventures didn't particularly care about the story behind those creatures. They were motivated by their greed and acted accordingly. If the monsters could be killed, adventurers would hunt them down. If they had good drops, then they would become an even better target.

These people were known as gamers. At least, that's how Jun explained it. They were the ones who had come to Sky World.

However, this did not apply to everybody.

Kasumi pushed her way through the crowd to make it to Jun. "Is it okay to kill creatures whose purpose is to protect people?" She asked, frowning.

She made a doubtful face when Jun arranged a meeting with a heavy warrior. Jun smiled bitterly like her, and quickly ended his conversation with the other adventurer. He turned around and faced her.

"Even when the four great beasts are killed, they will revive in just one day. Their quick respawn time is one of their special characteristics. The developers of Sky World surely wanted them to be used to get some raid experience."

Kasumi didn't appear to be convinced, though. She felt there had to be more to it and continued frowning. It wasn't just a system. She did not think that this world was just a game.

Kasumi Yukasaki needed a completely different approach to understand this.

"Ah, so it's like that. Let me remind you of the quest for the four great beasts. The great beasts are testing adventurers' skill. They want to test adventurers' wit, resourcefulness, and communication. Finally, the Vermillion Bird tests raw power and cooperative ability. The four great beasts and the quest want to help weak and inexperienced newbies become full-fledged adventurers."

Jun looked left and right. Fifty people had gathered in front of the Vermillion Bird's cave. It was a loose group of adventurers who had answered Jun's call for assistance. People referred to such groups as adventurer militias. This particular adventurer militia was preparing to fight the Vermillion Bird, with Jun at its head.

"As the final test, the Vermillion Bird calls for someone to assemble a group in order to be defeated."

In actuality, nobody among the group of adventurers thought that. They came there just to clear the quest or for raid drops like an HP-up ring.

However, as far as Kasumi was concerned, Jun's explanation was much more important than quest rewards or rare items. Nodding seriously, she said, "Understood. Let's go get Vermillion God-san's approval," and returned to her own group.

"What a cute girl."

Turning around and staring blankly, she saw a seemingly out of place young girl, a secluded young woman in a black dress. Her knee-long blond hair swayed with the wind like stalks of rice in autumn. She looked up at Jun with her blue eyes, as if she were blaming him for something.

"Jun's girlfriend-san, this is the first time I've seen her."

"It's not like that," Jun said, as he shook his head, taking a breath while avoiding eye contact. Though adventurers in Sky World could freely edit the color of their hair, this girl said that she was born with that hair. Probably. Another thing that set her aside from other players was her gaze, which could enchant other people like a charm spell.

"Yukaria, over there."

"I'm just buffing. Is it really okay if we don't fight against the weak mobs?"

"They'll mostly have been killed by the time they get to you. The newbies need experience."

"You're pretty calm for your time leading a raid."

"That's because I'm a coward. I can have my peace of mind because I have

tricks up my sleeve.”

“Well then, let’s see how you handle this.”



Yukaria laughed mischievously and went back to the fifth group.

“Who was that just now?” Eri looked up. She had been busy exchanging information on her tablet with some other adventurers but it seemed like she had been listening the whole time. “Is she a noblewoman roleplayer?”

“Yukaria is her character’s name, but her real name is Shido Erishia-Murasaki. ... She goes back and forth between Japan and America every six months. Her hair and eye colors are her natural ones.”

“Huh? A real halfie? And her age?”

“She’s the same age as me. Before I met you guys, I often grouped with her. Though since she had a fixed group of five people, sometimes I thought that I was intruding on them.”

“A fixed group... So that’s why they were all put together in the back.”

“I rely on them as damage mitigators. If, for some reason, there is a disruption somewhere, they’ll deal with it. They can take care of the potentially overwhelming amount of weak spawns.”

“Is it okay to put Kasumi in such an important position?”

This time, Kasumi Yukasaki had been given the most important role of a tank in the weak monster sweeping group. She would quickly take aggro from the relentless waves of weak monsters around the Vermillion Bird so that they would not get close to the main group. The success of the entire raid depended on that role.

The weaker monsters would usually respawn every two minutes but with a maximum of 16 each time. In response to this, Jun designated four groups to defeat them. Since one group consisted of five members, half of the team ended up being assigned to do this.

“I know that you want Kasumi to get more experience, but aren’t you moving a bit too quickly? It hasn’t even been a whole month since you guys came to this island.”

“Since her battery is now completely charged, it’s fine if she dies once. This is a good time for this.”

Under Jun's guidance, Kasumi was absorbing all sorts of skills like a sponge. She was now an expert at being a tank and was not always shy about it anymore.

Jun thought that the time to take the next step had come. This raid would be the final test in Kasumi's training.

"So basically, I want to complete all of the quests on this island."

There were quests that required completing a raid to be cleared. The four sacred beasts quest was one of these.

"Is that really what you're here for?"

"Of course it is."

Jun shook his body. Clearing the quests. Getting 100% completion on every single island. Jun thought these were the most magnificent things ever. That they were his ultimate pleasure.

"You questmaniac..."

"Stop praising me. I'm getting embarrassed."

"I'm not praising you! Oh whatever. I'm going to my own group."

"Do your best! I'm counting on you as the main healer!"

"I wonder if I'm good enough. Seems like there are people better than me here," Eri said, grunting and forcing her way through the crowd.

(She could be the main healer for any guild.)

Jun thought of her much more highly than she did of herself. She could cast heals in the weirdest of times. In this month, even though they had been all over doing quests, he had not seen her mess up a single time.

"Are you praising Eri-san?" It was a tall and thin boy. A silver medallion symbolizing his proficiency in black magic hung over his chest.

"She's annoying. ... Isao-san, how is the situation over there?"

"I was telling them not to use summoning magic to play around with fireworks. There are around twenty raid newbies. I'm splitting them into groups evenly like you said."

“What about potions?”

“I limited the access to them for the newbies. It’s even dangerous for those who have done raids before. It’s good that we summoned a shopkeeper in advance.”

When they were separated from the group, adventurers buying potions had to be careful. They had to keep records about nearby signs, the prices for different types of potions, and the amount that would be needed for the raid. Sometimes, adventurers would forget to buy potions, and those people would then hurry back to the shopkeepers.

“Even if you say that, the hi-potions and anti-corrosives will definitely come in handy in this battle.”

“You sure are helpful, Isao-san.”

Isao knew Lao Thai well. However, as an alchemist, he was not much of an adventurer. Since he had increased his alchemy skill level cap a couple of times and made it to level 120, it wouldn’t have been too far-fetched to call him the best alchemist in Sky World.

This time, he was taking part in the raid as the deputy leader. He and Jun were old friends.

“Don’t you remember? Even in other games, whenever it was like this and you were leading, I took care of this stuff... Even though our groups were pretty loosely formed, we ended up on par with the best guilds on the server.”

“That was a year ago.”

“No, at that time I was still working.”

“Did something happen at work?”

“The company went bankrupt. I felt like the guild I was in at that time could make it to the top, so by mistake... In the end, things settled down. It was about that time that I started playing Sky World... That’s how it was.”

Isao laughed brightly. It seemed that it was hard for him to talk about.

“Anyway, four months have passed. Even when I got other jobs, I would always get fired during the trial periods. I had to make my living as an alchemist

in this world.”

“I’m counting on ya!”

“Leave it to me. It’s a request from none other than Jun-san... Have you been with Kai-san?”

“Ah... I haven’t been able to get in touch with him.”

That was a lie. Jun was taking great care to keep the communication stone that he had gotten from Kai/Sakuya’s dead body safe. However, he had been determined to not tell anybody about what happened.

“I see. If you see him, you’ll definitely tell me, right? Together, you two were an unrivaled pair.”

“Uh... It might be possible that he’s using a different name here.”

After all, names on the internet were just means of identification. Jun and Isao both registered in Sky World under the same names as before, but even if they didn’t, they could easily identify each other since they had met once before in an offline meeting. However, situations like that were rare.

“Isao-san, you’re experienced in this raid, right? Is there something we should watch out for?”

“I guess I am. The boss is stubborn, but it’s not like it’s very strong. If we just take care of the monster spawns...”

Isao casually changed the subject.

After all, preparing the raid group took only twenty minutes.

Translator’s/Editor’s Notes:

[1] – Azure Dragon – ruler of the east, Vermillion Bird – ruler of the south, Black Tortoise – ruler of the north, and White Tiger – ruler of the west.

Part 4

The sacred beast, Vermillion Bird, had colorful feathers like a peacock, and when it spread out its wings, it spanned 10 meters from tip to tip. Though it wouldn't be able to fly in the cave, it could shoot its feathers like missiles. The feathers regenerated, and could corrode weapons and armor. Without a well thought-out plan, its attacks could be very dangerous.

However, this time, Jun had the raid members use anti-corrosives. In this situation, overly specific explanations paid off.

He got OKs from all of the group leaders to proceed. Without a moment's delay, Jun gave instructions to enter the cave.

Inside was waiting the Vermillion Bird. Once it noticed the adventurers, it began asking a question in a calm, female voice.

"Do you have the courage to take on this test?"

If the adventurers said no at this point, the Vermillion bird would disappear for ten minutes. In that time, other quests could be completed in the cave. However, these fifty well-buffed adventurers were not about to do so.

"We accept your challenge," said the heavy warrior in the front.

The Vermillion Bird's name turned red. It went into active mode.

"If that's the case, show me your strength!"

It spread its wings and the fight began.

The fifty adventurers scattered all at once. Guard monsters spawned all around the large cave. They were dressed up in colorful armor as if they had come straight out of a movie about the Three Kingdoms [1]. However, they were centaurs, a horse-man hybrid, and they were more than three meters wide.

They were called Vermillion Bird Guardians. Their high attack powers posed a serious threat to the group attacking the Vermillion Bird itself, so the support groups' ability to keep them at bay would determine the outcome of the battle.

The four weaker monster killing groups took the Vermillion Bird Guardians'

aggro and pulled them towards the corner of the area. At the same time, the main group's heavy warrior clashed with the Vermillion Bird.

The main group had three white magicians, led by Eri. Their job was to make sure to heal the heavy warrior. When the heavy warrior took enough enmity from the Vermillion Bird, the attackers began their onslaught of close- and long-range attacks, arrows flying from afar. However, the Vermillion Bird was a high level raid monster with a lot of HP. Its health bar was only slowly going down.

As expected, it became a long and drawn out battle.

Translator's/Editor's Notes:

[1] – A Chinese historical period around 250 AD, where three states, Wu, Shu and Wei, competed for supremacy over China. There's a Chinese TV series of the same name, also a Hong Kong movie, and the era seems to be overall a popular theme in local movie industry. An example of an armor in such a movie could be found [here](#). The period is also marked by the emergence of armored cavalry in the area. Just google or wiki it if you want more info.

Part 5

“Jun, you’re a skillful leader, just as I expected.”

Yukaria watched the battle intently while listening to her tablet from an empty area. The group in charge of killing the weak monsters was steadily taking out Vermillion Bird Guardians. At this rate, victory would surely be theirs.

“The real battle starts when it goes into enraged mode.”

A male knight was sitting next to Yukaria. As tanks, knights differed from light warriors, another tank class, in that they did not have taunt, though they had stuns, recovery spells, and other white magician-esque magic.

“Carelessness will not be tolerated. When the boss’ HP goes below 50%, monster respawn speed will double. When that happens, how will you handle it?”

“That’s where we come in.”

A girl in a black dress slapped the knight. She was married to him, but also played a summoner, an attacking class.

“But I want the raid to be a bit more challenging. We don’t want you to want to retire.”

“This is Jun’s first time leading a raid. Let’s hope the stars are aligned in our favor and pray for success.”

“Even if you say things like that... Murakami, you still are stressed out, right?”

“Yeah... right.”

Yukari laughed ambiguously.

(Retirement, huh.)

Two of her teammates were going to retire after this raid and live a happy married life. They had said that they had been planning on opening a store in Payang. The rest of the team really should have been wishing them good luck...

“Let’s think about how Murakami feels here.”

“Yeah... sorry Murakami. Seems like you’re always the one in this position.”

The male light warrior and the female druid seemed uncomfortable.

“Please don’t think too much of it.”

Trying to stop the commotion, Yukari smiled sweetly. “You two have finally become such good friends with us, I’m relieved. Really.”

That’s how she really felt. That happiness came from the bottom of her heart. However...

“It’s really wonderful how you guys have been so blessed by both sides.”

Their five person group had ended up being divided into two lesser ones of two people, and Yukaria ended up as the odd one out.

It couldn’t have been helped. Those boys and girls had lived together for three months. They entered relationships with each other, this was natural even if they deepened their friendships.

However, Yukaria was a bit lonely, as if she had been left to eat alone.

(I guess it can’t be helped)

She sighed inaudibly.

“We made it down to 50%,” murmured the female druid, lifting her face from her tablet.

The Vermillion Bird shrieked. Just now, the rate at which Vermillion Bird Guardians were respawning went up. As soon as the groups in charge of killing them managed to pull one of them, another appeared elsewhere.

“Does it seem like we can do it?”

“Yeah... Somehow, we will.”

The summoner closed her eyes. She let her familiar loose into the space. She was gathering information with its eyes.

“This is bad. The newbies are getting confused.”

Sensing the danger, Jun hurried on over to Yukaria’s group.

“You four, go to the inner left side. As for you, Yukaria, go hold the monsters flooding the main group back.”

“Understood. I’m not healing?”

“See Eri about that.”

“Basically, she’s the main healer then?”

“So that the Vermillion Bird will stay on the main group. I asked her to do it.”

Jun rushed off to somewhere else.

Though they were still keeping things in order, if it broke down, it would be very difficult to regroup. That was how raids worked. But they stood firmly in that critical moment.

“Well, I’m going. Murasaki, don’t overdo it.”

“Of course. Ah, tensions are rising. I’ll shoot at the Vermillion Bird Guardians.”

“... You have to do it skillfully, or else you’ll pull all of them.”

While Yukaria left the group and went towards the Vermillion Bird, she shouted “Wake Up”. Her body became covered in light and her eye-popping red dress turned into simple leather armor. She had guns in both of her hands.

Gunslinger. When in a reliable group, gunslinger could utilize its abilities extremely effectively, which made it stand out from the other classes.

(So, what will I do? After this...)

Part 6

As Kasumi was new to normal raids, she did not initially show much promise.

Neither Jun nor Eri was by Kasumi's side now. The two friends who fought together with her were replaced by a new group, with people she had never seen before. They worked as a group for the first time today and their female druid could not match Eri's ability in healing.

Jun told her not to do anything unnecessary.

"But this is fun."

When the battle started, Kasumi would have to run around. While heavy warriors were essential for raids, light warriors differed in that they had to think fast and make decisions on a situational basis. She was supposed to do just that. That was what Jun had told her.

"Always keep track of the entire battlefield. No matter where you are, make sure to do your job. Fight with this mindset."

She thought that would be difficult. Jun always wanted her to improve herself. Sometimes, he would have her do extremely difficult tasks, but even if she had only been able to complete a third or a half of them, he would praise her.

(One day, I will be everything Jun wants me to be.)

She wanted to surprise him. She wanted for him to need her. That's what she wished for. For this reason, Kasumi overstretched herself. She kept on giving it her all.

"The sub-tank is going over to the left, Kasumi-chan, head on over to the right!"

"Got it! Should I pull some more?"

"Get them to the center! Can you keep them on you? If even the littlest thing happens..."

"I have their movement patterns memorized!"

"Huh, already? ... Okay, please go ahead!"

The druid gave out the instructions as the leader of the group. Druids were a different kind of healers from white magicians. While their instant heals couldn't compare to white magicians', they had much more cost efficient regeneration over time spells, and their buffs were unrivaled. Kasumi's always-buffed status made it so that her HP and defense had never before been as high.

Moving away from her group, Kasumi led the Vermillion Bird Guardians into the center of the cave and began stalling for time. This long into the battle, she had been able to remember their attack patterns. Continuing to avoid the centaur type monsters' violent spear swings, she increased her enmity with taunts and her shortsword.

"Sorry, Kasumi-chan! Can you handle one more?"

"Sure Send it here please!"

Either way, in the grand scheme of things, the battle was taking a turn for the worse for the whole raid group. Jun had told her in advance about a plan B for use in such situations.

"Either way, whether things simply don't work out or something unpredictable happens, only sixteen Vermillion Bird Guardians can exist in the battlefield at any given time. So no matter what, if it's going down the drain, the sixteen Vermillion Bird Guardians can be parked [1] without killing them. Then everybody else can rush to the Vermillion Bird and bring it down."

It seemed that, one way or another, Jun would switch from the slower damage output caused by having two separated groups and to using the parking technique. Though controllers like bards and skullswords could frantically keep the Vermillion Bird Guardians from moving, as they were higher tiered monsters with particularly high magic resistance, they could repel magic quite well. Such monsters were not easily controlled when struggling.

Though her role did not grant her much opportunity to think about unrelated things, she noticed a girl in a dress by Jun's side. That gunslinger, Yukaria, who was now wearing leather armor and wielding guns in both of her hands, parked three Vermillion Bird Guardians all by herself with her bind, snare, and hatebuster bullets.

” Wow, the effects of gunslingers’ bullets last only a short while. I know they’re hard to resist, but still... she really is something.”

Her teammate, a druid, sighed in wonder.

“I’m getting high on this! Haha, I’m going to splash lots of white sticky stuff all over you!” [2]

When her bullets hit the Vermillion Bird Guardians’ feet, thin spiderweb-like strings would cover the point of impact and coil around them. The Vermillion Bird Guardians, unable to get themselves unstuck, would squirm desperately. These were the gunslinger’s snare bullets.

“She’s so good. The bullets would only do a little bit of damage if she shot directly at them. True, this way the monsters charge back in rage, but she has no problem avoiding their attacks, with such small steps nonetheless... And then more snare bullets. Brilliant.”

Stuck in the spider webs, the Vermillion Bird Guardians stopped moving.

“Since they’re so hot, they stick.”

“...That’s a bit weird.”

The druid’s final claim went beyond the range of normal.

“Ah, aaaah.”

“But, wow, Jun-kun really trusts you.”

(Someone Jun-kun trusts...)

For some reason, she felt a huge pain in her chest.

While Kasumi pulled two Vermillion Bird Guardians, she asked herself whether she could do it. Biting down on her lips, she nodded firmly. She could do it. She could do it well. So...

“It’s no use, they’re still coming!”

“Over here! I can take one more!”

The puller hesitated after hearing Kasumi.

“Just a little bit more and we’ll win! We’ll hold them back!”

“Got it!”

The Vermillion Bird’s HP was down to 20%. Everybody was holding out. The raid group lifted from their earlier state of confusion.

The third Vermillion Bird Guardian was being pulled. As Kasumi took aggro with a taunt, she led it around by taking steps in a circle.

She could do it. Kasumi believed. Fully buffed, light warriors’ bodies felt as light as feathers. Even if she did not taunt those three monsters as much as she had, continuing to take aggro like this...

“Sorry.”

Turning around to see another group yelling, she saw four more Vermillion Bird Guardians. They approached the other group, which had been running around. Due to that, the Vermillion Bird Guardians kept attacking them.

Kasumi ran away from them immediately. Just avoiding an attack by a very small space, she rolled onto the hard ground. She avoided everything. Then...

As she got up, she felt the shock of the situation at hand. Up until now, the Vermillion Bird Guardians that she had on her were kicking at her. The druid who was supposed to be healing her did not know what to do. It was bad. If she healed Kasumi now, she would take aggro from all of them.

If that happened... Kasumi bit down on her lip hard and started running towards the entrance to the cave. Four Vermillion Bird Guardians followed in her path.

“Kasumi-chan, it’s no use!”

It was the druid. No, this was fine. She did it on a moment’s judgement. The Vermillion Bird’s HP only had 10% left. When a boss died, the continuously respawning monsters would also disappear.

So, if she took on four of them herself...

Kasumi tumbled around, getting hit hard on her back. The Vermillion Bird Guardians surrounded her at the entrance. Her HP started plummeting...

It became zero.

As she lost consciousness, she witnessed the Vermillion Bird fall to the cave ground with a loud roar.

Translator's/Editor's Notes:

[1] – Parking is a technique in which a player keeps a monster or a group of monsters stuck in one spot, something like a stunlock.

[2] – I feel the need to emphasize this – I DO NOT have anything to do with this sentence, Thomas B. Aulis: it's what it literally said >:

Part 7

The raid group emerged victorious.

Four dead. The weak monster killing group lost many of its members . The newbie healers had panicked, and things went downhill from there. The front lines had collapsed in a single moment. Without Kasumi's sacrifice , it would have surely gone to ruin. Everybody recognized that.

If there were more raid plans, certainly they would contact each other. They would work together again.

The Vermillion Bird raid ended in a success with those words.

In Sky World, death was not the ultimate end.

Somebody who died would lose about 40% of his or her tablet battery and then respawn at his or her bind point. When the tablet battery became completely depleted, the dead person would go somewhere . It is said that when that happens, the person does not revive. Nobody knew what would happen after that.

Fortunately, Kasumi's tablet had already been charged up to 100%. 'Complete death' would not come for another two deaths. Furthermore, each day, tablets recharge about 1%.

When Kasumi revived and the battle was over, she was scolded by Jun and Eri.

"Okay, Kasumi-san? The moment when you thought you could handle more was when you went wrong. You're a tank, not a controller. You should know that you shouldn't try to hold down more than one monster at once ."

"Basically, when you don't let your healer heal you by running away, your healer will have lots of problems. Any heals will be life threatening to your healer. It's irresponsible ."

She had nothing at all to say. Kneeling on the floor of her inn room, Kasumi apologized earnestly. Since she was cognizant of her act of arrogance and pride, she accepted the lecture without a word .

"... Nonetheless, the truth of the matter is that we won because of you.

Thanks, Kasumi-san. Thanks to you, my first time leading has ended in a success.”

“Right.”

“But next time we do this, I’ll really get angry.”

“That’s not unreasonable.”

“Well, okay. Here, take this,” Jun said as he handed over a set of gauntlets.

Gauntlets of Valor, rarity 8. If she remembered correctly, it was one of the items that the Vermillion Bird dropped. It had high defense power and was visually appealing, but since it also had the rare effect of drastically increasing the effectiveness of taunts, it was a very in-demand item.

“The person who won it in the dice roll wanted you to have it.”

“But...”

“He said it was because you were the reason we won . Take it.”

“Giving this to me... isn’t it a very valuable item?”

“Shouldn’t you try to become a very valuable tank?”

“Really, huh. Don’t I have to be stronger?”

She looked at Jun and Eri. The two of them smiled.

The unpleasant feeling in her heart dispersed .

She was happy. Just seeing Jun and Eri’s smiling faces made her happy. They were the best teammates. If she stayed with them, she felt like she could do anything.

“Kasumiii, what are you smiling for?”

“I’m not.”

“No, you are. Honestly though, you were in the wrong.”

“I guess...”

“...well it’s not like the world is ending.”

Eri laughed wryly. It seemed like she was teasing Kasumi. The room became

enveloped in laughter.

If things remained like this forever, she would have been okay with it. Kasumi thought that from the bottom of her heart.

Part 8

The island of Lao Thai followed a Chinese theme. However, that did not mean that it was an exact copy of China. It only had a very strong Chinese vibe.

The city of Payang lay on the southern tip of the island.

Countless tower-like buildings filled the large city. With a population of fifty thousand, this was a place for the over three thousand adventurers who had lost their way in Sky World. Many airships were anchored at the airport, and trade with other islands flourished. People, goods, and information were exchanged for money. Many more adventurers came to this island for this convenience.

Jun heard from Alice that there were about sixty thousand players roaming Sky World. About five percent of those players came together in Payang.

It was a bustling city. Many people were moving down the streets at all times. Many establishments, not just shops for ordinary people, serviced adventurers around here. Only on this island was an auction system established..

Furthermore, the presence of so many people meant that trouble could also sprout up more easily...

“Hey, wait! Don’t be violent!”

Jun heard that as he entered a hidden alleyway. It came from a shop nearby. “Second-Hand Store” was written on the quaint little stone building’s front sign.

The term/concept of the “second-hand shop” was said to have been first used by Yuuji Horii, developer of the famous RPG, Dragon Quest. Considering that those shops traded in all sorts of items, not restricted to just weapons or armor, and that anybody would instantly recognize the name of that game, the store became fairly well known.

In other words, it was a shop selling miscellaneous items that served people who knew of Dragon Quest, namely all the adventurers who went in.

“Trouble in that store?” Jun thought to himself as he tilted his head. “The shopkeeper was...”

Jun opened the door. Stuff had been scattered all over the place. A big man

twisted a short young girl's arm from across the counter. Though the young girl struggled violently, she would not let go of the bag in her left hand.

"I told you to give that to me! I said I would pay as much as you wanted!"

"No! This is for other customers! Please leave already!"

The two of them, frantically struggling with each other, did not notice Jun's entry. That came in handy, as Jun could quietly observe the situation. When he squinted, he could see their character names floating above their heads. The girl's name was... Ryuka. Even if Jun had not met her before, he would have known that she was one of the owners of the store. The other, pushy guy was...

Zakka. His guild was called the Illusionary Brigade. It was a large guild of over fifty members. Even though they were known as diehards who were willing to PK, causing such a racket in the center of town...

"Hey, stop it."

The man turned around, still holding Ryuka's arm.

"Stay out of this!. Shut up."

"I'll call the guards."

Ordinary people in Sky World were no match for those kinds of people who wouldn't easily give in. However, when such adventurers acted violently in town, the city government would deal with them by force.

In most games, it was forbidden for towns to become battlefields. In some of them, whenever somebody acted violently, strong guards would come and defeat the perpetrator.

In Sky World, Knight Golems, took on this role as city guards. As soon as they catch wind of a disallowed act being committed in the middle of the street, they would rush in and subjugate those involved.

This man would have been killed by the Knight Golems. He let go of the girl, and then, with a stern look from Jun, left the store.

Jun peeked his head out the door and waited until Zakka disappeared into the crowd of people out in the main street. Afterwards, he sighed and closed the door.

“Ah, thank you. You have my gratitude, Jun.”

Ryuka got up and brushed the dust off of her skirt.

“What happened?”

“He came in saying that he would buy me out... that he would buy everything in the store. When I said that I couldn’t do it in anticipation of other customers, he responded with violence...”

As if she was remembering what had happened, the short girl shivered. She was scared. Such violent situations were bound to make her feel that way.

“I’m an elementary schooler, so I guess he might have just been teasing me.”

“Does that have anything to do with it? That guy was vicious.”

Instructional tablets were given out to a few elementary school students as well. Consequentially, there were a few of them who ended up in Sky World.

Ryuka’s situation was complicated. Her younger brother wanted to play some games, and so he installed Sky World on her tablet.

“It’s my fault for having given my password to my little brother,” Ryuka said, as she smiled bitterly. “Well, my little brother was the one who was playing games, but the one who came to this world was me. I’m actually a bit happy about that. He’s still only four years old. If he was the one thrown into this world, surely he would have no idea what to do.”

Ryuka was her brother’s name, and was reserved for boys. It was probably used somewhere in Dragon Quest.

Her real name was Momoko Tamashiro. She didn’t enjoy this world and wanted to return home soon. She told Jun she had spent her first week in here crying and hoping for just that.

Though many people had wanted to install Sky World, that same feeling was probably widespread. Even now, there were many players in the city who would confine themselves inside. Sometimes, they fought monsters just outside the city, just to earn enough money to survive. Their ability to adventure was comparable to that of any ordinary person. They had lived their lives in comfort, indulging themselves in whatever they could possibly want.

If somebody made it to Aion on the first island ring, these days trapped here would end.

Believing in that, they would hide themselves until the storm would come to end. Jun thought that in their case, that was probably the one best choice. They had been dragged to this world against their will. It was not fair to expect them to be as active as Jun, who had come to this world voluntarily.

On the other hand, some of them got back on their feet. Being a shopkeeper was a childhood dream of Ryuka's. In this world, she felt she could realize her dreams.

Though she seemed like she actually wanted to set up a fancy toy store, keeping in mind the principle of supply and demand, she settled on selling general goods.

"That reminds me... Where's Genta-san?"

If Ryuka were to have attempted to set up the store herself, it would have been far too difficult. She and Genta jointly owned the shop. She had said that Genta had been her class' homeroom teacher. Coincidentally, they were reunited in this world, but...

"Sensei is in charge of stock. Isao-san bought out all of our hi-potions and anti-corrosives. Yesterday, there was a big raid going on..."

"Ah, so the people in my raid were the ones who bought it."

"It was your raid?"

Sitting down on a chair that she gave him and drinking the tea she brewed herself, Jun told her all about yesterday's raid. That there were fifty members all together, and that the raid nearly collapsed. He also did not neglect to mention the fact that Kasumi saved them all.

"The first time I came here, I was still just a newbie." Furthermore, Kasumi was a second year high school student like Jun, while Ryuka was a sixth year elementary school student. "I've come out well."

Leaning on the shelf across from Jun, Ryuka looked into the distance. Having now settled down, she acted more dignified than Genta, who was prone to

carelessness. She resembled her grandmother, probably because she raised her.

“... I bet you think I’ve taken after my grandmother now, right.”

“I get what you mean.”

“Jun, you still can’t handle ladies.” She inflated her cheeks. She pouted in a way that only someone her age could. “Speaking of which, what are you here for today?”

“Oh, I wanted to get rid of some stuff. Maybe I’ll find a good buy or two along the way.”

“Thanks for being a regular here, but we won’t spend too much on stuff from this island.”

“That’s how it is everywhere. It’s annoying to bring something to another island. Though you’ve amassed a lot of stuff, don’t make concessions for me. It’s terrible to seem pushy towards an acquaintance.”

“If you say that, I’ll price things without reservation.”

Ryuka took out her tablet and gestured with her left hand. She showed Jun her item window.

“How are these?”

Ryuka used a custom skin for her item window. Prices were displayed next to their corresponding items. It was a perfect skin for a merchant.

She, like other players in Sky World, had an unlimited capacity bag. All of the items in the store were in there.

Sure enough, this time, the items that Ryuka showed Jun were of all different types. Though there weren’t any super good items that amazed him, the skin was very easy to use and convenient. He ended up wanting some things.

Unexpectedly, he noticed words above the item list saying, “For the thickheaded magic swordsman who knows nothing about girls”.

“Hey, what’s that?”

“Oh, excuse me. I forgot to replace that. It should say, ‘Jun’.”

“You did that on purpose... hey, could it be that you made a list for each of your regulars?”

“Not all of them. But I do for some of the most frequent ones. It’s important to keep track of peculiarities of certain people.”

Only this shopkeeper would go to this much trouble.

“If you’d like, I can show you the list I usually show first-time customers.”

“That’s fine. You’re great at doing business.”

“It’s thanks to you that I’m doing so well.” She smiled sweetly.

(With all the things she takes into account, she can’t possibly be an elementary school student.)

Though he thought that Genta could have suggested this...

“Sensei is bad at doing business. It was worrisome.”

She sighed while talking badly about her homeroom teacher. Jun threw out his previous idea as soon as he heard that.

“Anyway, this accessory has all resistances except fire. I have fire. I’d be happy if you had an anti-poison or anti-paralysis ring. Also... do you have any healing items without a use limit?”

“If you want that, I’ll make it half the price. But Jun, you should already have an unlimited healing wand.”

“I was thinking I’d give it to Kasumi-san.”

“As a present, huh? I wonder if she’s cute. Shall I wrap it up for you? You’ll need a ribbon.”

“Please no unnecessary assumptions.”

“Oh, sounds like you’re going out with her. Though I don’t know whether you’re suitable for her.”

She tilted her head curiously.

Part 9

Jun actually understood Kasumi pretty well.

He thought that there was no point overthinking that girl's actions. Over the past month, the three of them travelled throughout the island of Lao Thai. They experienced many exciting things. He figured Kasumi Yukasaki and Eri Inui appreciated the city a lot.

In spite of that, the person stuck in Jun's mind was...

"Kai. What are you thinking about?"

These things went through Jun's head as he made his way through the congested main road after leaving the second-hand shop.

Kai took Kasumi Yukasaki for an impediment, but Jun did not agree.

When faced with an enemy, Kasumi would do everything she could to succeed. Moreover, she herself wanted to catch up to Sakuya.

However, he didn't know whether it was really okay to bring her up to the fourth ring.

Over the course of this month, he had trained her to become a full-fledged adventurer. But what about her heart? Sakuya said that she was sure that she would not be able to take on the battles that would come. What could Jun do?

What would be waiting at the absolute end of Sky World?

"Seeing the end of the blue sky, huh."

He still couldn't figure out what Alice meant by that.

The sun had begun to set. It was time to go back to his room...

"Oh, it's Jun," someone spoke up from the corner of the street.

He turned around to find Yukaria standing next to him. Her face was flushed and her breath smelled like alcohol. Hiiiiiiii, Jun, it looks like there are four of you!"

"You're drunk."

"I'm drunk?"

Jun had a lot he wanted to say, like how it was still daytime and that she was still a minor... but before he could scold her, she grabbed his shoulder.

“I’ve got you!”

“Calm down.”

“Hey, come with me.”

“Where?”

“The bar!”

Yukaria raised her fist. It didn’t seem like he could escape. Jun sighed.

Later that night, Jun returned to the inn with a very drunk Yukaria on his back. Though it was the middle of the night, the main street of Payan was brightly lit with magic streetlights, where bards were singing. Payan didn’t sleep.

When Kasumi and Eri saw Jun carry the drunken Yukaria into his room, they cringed.

“Ack! It reeks of alcohol!”

“Jun-san, did you go drinking?”

“I’m sober. This one here drank so much that she’s out cold.”

After Jun laid Yukaria to bed and put down her heavy stuff, he sighed.

“Hey, Jun-san, what do you plan on doing to that drunkard?” asked, Eri as she raised her eyebrows and glared at him.

“If I were going to do something to her, I wouldn’t have brought her here.”

“So what’s up then?”

“When I found her, she was already drunk...”

Jun glanced down at Yukaria on the bed. Listening to her grumbles, he figured out her situation. He didn’t know whether it would be good or bad of him to tell the others himself.

“Congratulations... congratulations...” Yukaria murmured as tears poured like raindrops down her face. “I’m not sad at all. I’m not...”

“How did this happen? It’s about someone from the group during the raid

yesterday... right? They got along pretty well.”

“That group broke up. It’s complicated, but I suppose you want to know about it, right?”

“In three phrases.”

“Marriage, retirement, four people split into two groups.”

“Ooookay, okay. I understand. I get it.” Eri sighed, and uttered, “This kind of thing is quite normal.”

“Well, that’s why she went drinking. She would have gone either way, so it couldn’t have been helped. I’ll cut her some slack for today.”

Jun quickly explained the situation to Kasumi, who was standing there with her head tilted in confusion.

That Yukaria’s four group members, two couples, were going to get married at the same time. That they had already stopped going on adventures. That basically, with their retirement, the group would disband. That Yukaria ended up being left on her own.

“It still makes sense to congratulate them.”

“Which makes it all the worse. Normally, one would definitely be very happy for them. However, for her, that must have felt terrible. ... That’s how it is for a close group to break up.”

“If it were just a group in a game, it would have been okay. But for us now, this is reality.”

“She already had to part with her close friends and coworkers. Jun-san and Eri-chan, if you two were to get married...” As she said that, Kasumi looked at Jun and then at Eri, and started bawling.

“Ughh, what am I going to do?” She ended up imagining it vividly.

“Hey, Kasumi, don’t cry! Just don’t! I would never marry something like that!”

“Don’t point fingers. And don’t call people ‘something’.”

“Whaaat?”

Yukaria was half awake, rubbing her eyes. As her eyes focused, she looked at

Jun.

“Hey, are you okay?”

She bent forward, off of the bed, and grabbed Jun, who had moved closer to her.

“Agh!”

“Juuuuuun, marry meeeeeeeee!”

“Ahhhhh, whaaaaaaaaaaat are you doing!?” Kasumi screamed with her hands on her cheeks.

“Juuuuuuuun... You smell gooooooooood.... Let’s do it.....”

Jun stayed still. In addition to his lack of experience with drinking alcohol, he did not have much experience dealing with women, as seen by his title back at the shop. His heart throbbed, and he blushed. Extremely confused, words couldn’t come out of his mouth. She pushed her big soft breasts onto Jun’s chest.

“Juuuuuuuuuuuuuuun, I...”

“Ah, ah, uh...”

Jun gulped. He felt as if that gulp was so loud that it echoed through the large room. By the time he was able to get back to normal, Kasumi’s face was completely pale and she had been swinging her arms around. Standing still, Eri had her hand on her mouth. Her cheeks were also red.

“Y-y-you guys, calm down.”

“You calm down,” Eri said, as she lightly slapped Jun on his forehead. Coming to his senses, he pushed Yukaria away from him.

“You’re such a coward...”

He remembered that in times like this, she would need something to grab onto or else she wouldn’t sleep. He gave her a pillow and she hugged it tightly. After she lay down, she began snoring.

Jun took a huge breath and looked towards Kasumi.

“The alcohol is just making her babble away nonsensically.”

“Got... it. Doesn’t... matter... to me.”

She didn’t seem like she didn’t mind it, as a huge tear formed in the corner of her eye. She bit down on her lips hard. However, pointing that out would have made the situation worse.

“Hey, Jun. So where are you going to sleep today?”

Eri puffed out her cheeks and glared at Jun.

“Ah, okay. I’ll get another room. Don’t worry about it.”

After glancing one more time at Yukaria, who was still saying “Juuuuun” in her sleep, he left the room with the two girls glaring at him.

Part 10

Morning the next day. Jun and the gang had been eating breakfast on the first floor of the inn when Yukaria, with her hand on her temple, came down.

“Owwwwwwwwwwww, my head hurts....”

Yukaria looked over to see them staring at her silently. “What’s wrong?” She said, as if she didn’t know why she was greeted with such chilling vibes.

Eri met Jun’s gaze and she smiled bitterly back at him. Seeing the situation, Jun shrugged lightly.

“Uh... yesterday, did.. something happen to me?”

“Since you got drunk, don’t you think *you* are guilty of something?”

“...I’m so sorry.”

All of the color disappeared from Yukaria’s cheeks, leaving her ghastly pale, as she curled up into a ball, squatting on the floor. Her headache and nausea suddenly spiked in intensity.

“Ughhhhhh...”

“Okay, Yukaria, sit over there.”

“Ah, okay. ...Don’t mind if I do. Let’s eat!”

This was an appetite brought upon by a hangover. Yukaria heartily swallowed up more food than two normal people could. She especially loved the meats. Though she had an air of refinement to her actions, she devoured all kinds of them, from ham all the way to bacon. She even had a whole fatty steak. The thought of doing that at breakfast made Jun’s stomach uncomfortable.

“Even though you have European blood, that really is amazing,” Eri muttered, with awe in her face.

“Thanks for the meal. It surprised me that this inn would have such magnificent food.”

“Thank you very much for your compliments. I made it.”

“Kasumi, you did? You’re wonderful. I utterly respect you.”

Yukaria stood up and bowed her head towards Kasumi. The effects of the hangover chimed in again, and she groaned, in pain as she pressed her hands onto her forehead.

“What an interesting person,” said Kasumi, smiling. “Yukaria-san, are you always like this?”

“She always feels like this. She was the youngest in the group, so she’s used to being spoiled.”

“Jun, that was impolite. ...Well, it’s true that I was the one who didn’t fall in love. ...So when everybody else got married, I...” Taking her seat, she sunk into her thoughts.

“...Huh?” Dropping his shoulders, Jun breathed a giant sigh. Eri glared at him.

“Jun, that wasn’t nice.”

“I don’t think I did anything wrong.”

“Jun, you make girls cry. What a cruel person.”

“You too are quite cruel. You’re not here just to lash out at me! Hey... Kasumi-san, Eri, what do you think?”

“I... think it’s okay.”

“As the healer, I’m in favor. As a gunslinger, she’s quite reliable. But for now, can we hear Yukaria’s opinion?”

“Ah, is that so?” said Jun, as he turned around to face Yukaria, who still had her hand on her forehead. “Yukaria, wanna join our group?”

The three of them all looked at Yukaria together. Noticing their glances, she lifted her head. After a little while, she turned to Jun, who had his finger near his mouth.

“Uh, well, I’m really happy that you asked me that.”

“I’m not saying this out of pity. As you see, we currently do not have a controller. If you join us, our party will become much stronger.”

“I know, but...”

“Uh... if you’re not satisfied with us, don’t hesitate to say it,” Kasumi said.

“That’s not it. Look here...” said Yukaria, shaking her head hastily.

“Sorry, what are you saying?” Facing the water given to her by Yukaria, Eri tilted her head doubtfully.

“Well, I’m a young maiden, of course, so I shouldn’t decide carelessly. I’m a shy maiden girl, but I would be lonely being left out from the harem group of you two. Just as I thought, I should present my body to Jun here...”

“W-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat are you saying?!” Eri’s face turned red, as if she were a lobster, and she shook her head furiously. She looked at Jun. “Y-y-y-y-you and this guy...”

“Calm down.”

Though he too was disturbed, Jun tried to calm Eri down. Yukaria wanted him to panic. He understood this quickly. However, that only added to Eri’s unrest.

“H-h-hey, calm down!” He looked at Yukaria and raised his fist in the air. “P-please wait! Yukaria-san is just trying to create a misunderstanding...”

“Then undo that misunderstanding!”

“Is it really just a misunderstanding?” said Yukaria, who was tilting her head with her index finger on her mouth.

“It is! Eri-chan and I aren’t like that!” Kasumi, now pale, shook her head fervently.

“Well. So that means you still haven’t...”

“N-n-n-n-noooooooooo! We absolutely positively haven’t!” Eri shrieked.

Part 11

A few minutes later, when everybody settled down and reseated themselves, they drank some tea brewed for them by the shopkeeper.

“Hey, Jun. Did you really make a pass at her?” Yukaria pretended to be surprised yet again.

“You were there, so you should know.”

“I’m just trying to make sure.”

“Sheesh. How should I interpret your actions?”

“Shall we go over it in detail?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“You’re really a good-for-nothing shy kiddo.”

Yukaria seemed happy to tease him. Jun smiled wryly in response.

“That’s how you are. You two should realize the misunderstanding and change your mindset now.”

“Ugh, I’ve been ridiculed in such a way... this is truly a failure of a lifetime.” Eri, while shaking her head, collapsed onto the table. “Well, we were deceived because we didn’t know much about her personality yet. By nature, I’m a monk type! Fine, please continue!”

“Well, well, someone’s a sore loser.”

“Shut up, you idiooooot! Dammit! Daaamn it!!!” Soaking the table with her tears, Eri drew circles with her finger. “Ughh, I know that you’re not the bad one here, and I’m okay!”

“Uh, uhh, I think it’s fine too.” For some reason, Kasumi’s face turned bright red as she fidgeted restlessly.

“Well... so that means you’re suitable for our team.”

“How optimistic. ...But that’s besides the point.” Putting on a serious look, she looked at the three of them one by one. “This is a serious answer, but for the time being, why don’t we think of me as a provisional member.”

“Then we’ll have a test. Is that okay? I, as the healer, really want you to join us.” With those words, Eri lifted her face, and stared at Yukaria’s chest. “I also want those boobs of yours.”

“Eri’s still just a middle schooler. So, how about after this?”

“By the way, Yukaria-san, how was middle school?”

“Recently, I haven’t thought much about the years past.”

Eri dropped her shoulders disappointedly while Yukaria avoided her gaze. “Well, aren’t those boobs lovely...”

“I’m a girl going through puberty. You know, Jun really loves boobs.”

“Hey, Yukaria! That’s enough...”

“Gee, Jun, you did before.”

“Just as I thought, you should be kicked out.”

“...What a comeback.”

Jun looked over at Kasumi and then at Yukaria with an annoyed expression on his face.

“Putting that aside, this is what we’re going to do. ...Yukaria, let’s all get along from now on.”

“Same for you. Though I don’t like being a controller in rough, unorganized groups, gunslingers really can’t do anything on their own.”

“What do you mean by that?” Kasumi tilted her head.

“Controllers are just like that. They are only effective in groups...”

“Hold up. I haven’t really explained the concept of controllers to Kasumi.”

“Then shall I do the honors?” Yukaria offered her hand.

“Yes, please do!”



“For starters, there are fifteen classes in Sky World, which are separated into five different roles, one of which being the attacker. There are front line and rear line attackers, with three classes in each category. Kasumi, can you tell me the other roles?”

“Yes. Tank, healer, and also, controller, right?”

“Right. You, a light warrior, are a tank. Eri, a white magician, is a healer, and Jun, a magic swordsman, is a front line attacker. Gunslinger, my class, is a controller. Though there are also three classes that are controllers, gunslingers can deal a bit more damage than the others. Though it’s not as much as Jun can do, they can deal more damage than you, Kasumi.”

Having given that brief introduction, Yukaria proceeded to talk about the main topic of this discourse.

“So, just like how tanks protect their teammates, healers heal the wounded and attackers devote themselves to killing enemies, controllers control

enemies. They are most useful when there are many enemies approaching at once.”

“Many... so like during that raid two days ago?”

“Yes, in those situations it’s even normal for individual groups to take on three or four monsters at a time. When that happens, what do we do?”

“When it gets troublesome, I’ll just take care of it myself.”

“Well, that’s Jun we’re talking about.”

If Jun were alone, he would know all about the enemies’ attack patterns, so he would be able to precisely avoid their attacks all the while attacking them back. In a group, when enmity is involved, it would be much more difficult to hold on to the enemies.

“If I can’t handle it, then we won’t be able to do it.”

“What a doting father...” groaned Yukaria, her hand on her forehead in annoyance.

“If you die, Jun, then we can’t do anything. It takes ten days for the battery to recharge. It’s a long time. The day before yesterday, Kasumi-san already died, so I was thinking we should take extra care for a while,” Eri chimed in.

“...If that’s what you mean, then with my addition to the group, the way you’ve been handling battles will change completely.”

“Yukaria-san, during that raid, you held down so many monsters at the same time,” Kasumi said.

Opening her eyes, Yukaria responded, “How very observant of you.”

“Uh, well, but you were shouting some pretty weird stuff while fighting...”

“When I get excited, I unconsciously blurt out obscene things.”

“That’s a letdown for a beautiful person like you... How did you let that happen to yourself?” Eri put her hand on her forehead, disappointed. “Even so, you’re so much better than at first glance... The bard guy next to me was really amazed.”

“Like then, for example, when four monsters came our way, I stopped three

of them so that the others in the group would only need to deal with one enemy at a time, though that's just our job as controllers. Knowing the proper situations to use sleep bullet, bind bullet, and snare bullet just shows the difference in our skill levels. Though we can't heal or buff like bards and we don't have the defense of skullwords."

Jun followed up on her final comment, "For what it's worth, gunslingers have regular and special bullets that can deal damage. They won't let even a single enemy attack."

Practically speaking, there were many newbies who chose to be gunslingers just because they wanted to be gun-users with lots of damage.

"Uh. Though I would say that when soloing, it's hard to do much with just special effect bullets."

Gunslingers used two types of guns, handguns and assault rifles, both of which had the problem of reloading. Though Yukaria usually used two guns at once, each able to hold up to six bullets, she sacrificed a lot of damage in order to use bullets that inflict abnormal effects.

In groups, just doing what her role entailed was enough.

"When soloing, moving around efficiently is essential, but since gunslingers don't have utility spells like the magic swordsman's Long Walk, it's really hard for us. ...Anyways, any questions?"

Eri raised her hand.

"Please explain, in detail, Jun's love for big boobs."

Kasumi leaned forward. Jun greeted the desk with his face.

Part 12

Just that day, they decided to test the casual link they made. It would take place in the large bamboo forest north of the city, commonly known as the Panda Forest.

“This will be a quest to test our group. Let’s have at it!”

Following Jun’s lead, the party headed towards the bamboo forest. Yukaria still unable to keep balanced due to her hangover, was almost fully reinvigorated by the trees once they left the town.

Watching out for any potential ambushes from behind, they walked in file. Jun in the lead, then Yukaria, Eri, and Kasumi in the back.

“Ooh, since you were walking this much, your headache should have come back. We’ve already forgiven your drunkenness today.”

“This should go without saying, but today, no more drinking.” Jun turned around and glared at Yukaria. She puffed out her cheeks.

“Please don’t say things that make you sound like a teacher. In this world, the average mature person is fourteen, so we should consider that the age of adulthood now. Therefore, even Eri, the youngest among us, should be able to drink alcohol.”

“Hey, Eri?” called Kasumi from the back of the line. Jun strained a smile, thinking that of all people, Kasumi would be the one most opposed to drinking. “Then drink in moderation.”

“Huh, Kasumi?” Eri, startled, turned around, thinking that Yukaria would get scolded strictly like how Jun would.

“Ah, my family house is very old. On New Year’s, when everybody comes together, we drink a lot...”

“Oh, so it’s just like in the countryside. Could it be that you’re actually quite tolerant to alcohol?”

“Kind of. Just as much as I need for socializing.”

“You’re definitely super tolerant.” Seeing Kasumi tilt her head in confusion, Yukaria whispered into Jun’s ears, “If you’re thinking of getting her drunk to try

and take advantage of her, she'll beat you at your own game."

"I would think no such thing!"

Due to her condition, Yukaria took short rests between following Jun.

Small abandoned huts stood all over the bamboo forest. It seemed like they were made as dwellings for mountain men, so monsters should never enter them. They also served as bind points. Usually, the fireplaces inside were burning, and the huts were always tidy, almost as if time had stopped.

As the four of them entered one of the huts and sat down near a fireplace, they relaxed cozily, munching on the scones Kasumi had made earlier.

"Yukaria, have you heard about the mountain men NPCs living in the bamboo forest?"

"My group wasn't really into doing quests... though I did hear something about it from one of my acquaintances, like that the mountain men always remain silent and that they could not take part in any kind of conversation."

"So, the quest trigger didn't really interest you?"

"Maybe so, or maybe it hadn't been implemented yet. Though, in any case, back when this was just an MMO, and from the Birthday up until now, was this even here?"

"They really can't speak?" Kasumi tilted her head. "But, uh... so, what kind of people are they?"

"I know! Their hearts only beat once per year!", Eri jumped in.

"What kind of a mystic sage are you?"

"At any rate, monsters don't come here. And yet we went to all this trouble for Yukaria to be here."

"Well, most people seem to stop and turn back when they reach here. It would be quite disadvantageous to fight large scale monsters here, but I think we'll do great."

"We can't afford to be negligent."

Both Yukaria and Eri were wary of Jun's optimistic view.

“Well, Killer Pandas work in groups. So, Jun, isn’t that why we’ve come?”

Jun shrugged lightly. He couldn’t gamble on something that dangerous without a high chance of success. This bamboo forest was home to monsters known as Killer Pandas.

“Pandas are cuuuuutee. Though I’ve never seen any in zoos before,” Kasumi said, in a carefree manner. “Giant Pandas are similar to bears. They’re omnivores. They could even eat people in certain circumstances.”

“So, they eat meat? Aren’t they supposed to eat bamboo...?”

“I’m not too knowledgeable about it, but if I remember correctly, the ones that eat bamboo only eat it because they live in a place where they can only get bamboo. I’m sure they’re omnivores. Killer Pandas are very much monsters. Though they’re not related to normal pandas, it’s not weird.”

In the world, which came to be known as Sky World, monsters did not need to reproduce in order to increase in number. Wherever mana, the origin of everything, was plentiful in an area, monsters could spawn freely.

“If a player has an attack level of 110, its name would appear white, whereas if that player had an attack level of 115, it would appear blue. That’s is definitely a quest boss.”

In Sky World, the strength of an enemy can be ascertained with special magic search spells or special items. Though doing so has since become the norm, it still depended on the character’s attack skill level. Normally, the attack skill is capped at level 100, but with a quest, the cap can be raised. People recently began talking about a fourth skill cap raising quest, which would move it to 120.

Right now, Jun and Yukaria’s attack levels were 115, while Kasumi and Eri’s were 110. Its name being white with a level of 110 means that it is an equal match for them. If the enemy were stronger, then it would be yellow, red, or purple, in order of increasing difficulty. On the contrary, if the enemy were weaker, then its name would be blue, or if it were considerably weaker, then it would be green.

When front line attackers fought amongst each other, normally, if they were white-named for each other, it would prove to be a very close battle. It would

take about three people to take out one yellow-name and a whole group of six to take out a single red-name.

Of course, there were exceptions to the prevailing view. The difficulty would change depending on the tactics used. So therefore, many only used the colors as approximate guides, as combat power and efficacy was much more dependent on weapon skills, defense skills, and equipment.

“If we were to compare it with monsters of the same type, Killer Pandas have higher than average attack power and agility. To that extent, their health is comparably low... So, since they work together in groups of four or more, how well we can hold them off will determine the course of the battle,” said Yukaria, who was the only one with experience in the bamboo forest. “Though us five of my previous group once challenged this area, we could only win against up to six of them at once. I can make four of them go to sleep... and afterwards, the front line took one monster apiece.”

“Yukaria, how was your group organized?”

“The others were a knight, a light warrior, a summoner, and a druid. It was a setup with high recovery power.”

They had a druid, a buff-focused healing role, and a knight, a tank that gets enmity with stun and healing magic. Summoners are back line attackers, but they can summon monsters based on the situation, some of which can heal.

In short, they were made up of two tanks, one attacker, one healer, and one controller, Yukaria.

“Wow, what a sturdy group...”

“Against strong monsters, damage was sluggish. Though, when Jun helped us out, we were able to make it through dungeons on the fifth ring...”

“Where did you usually adventure?”

“Recently, we’ve been playing around on the sixth ring. There are lots of beautiful views. Since we operated there, maybe that’s how the two couples sprouted up.” Remembering how she was the one left behind, Yukaria dropped her shoulders and sighed. “Marriage... I too...”

“Ugh.” For some reason, Kasumi looked at Jun, half tear-eyed.

“Why me...”

“Jun, shall we get married?” Yukaria fixed her eyes on him.

“Hey, hey...”

“Wa, waaa, waaaaaaa!”

Kasumi’s face flushed as she became flustered. Seeing this development, Yukaria pushed her face closer to Jun. As she neared him, her cleavage opened up. Jun hastily turned his eyes away.

“Jun, what do you think of me?”

“You reek of alcohol. Don’t get any closer.”

“Don’t be so shy.” She smiled, raising her index finger to her mouth. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll stop there. Okay?”

Eri forced her way through. She sighed loudly, putting her hand on the somewhat disappointed Yukaria’s shoulder.

“Flirting within the group is seriously forbidden! Yukaria, you should know!”



“I am so sincerely sorry. I was just merely poking fun.”

“So, don’t do any more teasing.”

““Kay mom!”

“Don’t call me that...”

Eri, the youngest of the group, dropped her shoulders in disappointment.

Part 13

Since they entered the bamboo forest, they had a two hour period of doubled moving speed due to the magic spell known as Running. Right after the third resting period, they encountered a group of Killer Pandas.

Jun's party had been making their way up a hill. The six Killer Pandas suddenly appeared as they reached the top.

"Count: Six!"

They rushed out all at once at Jun, each more than six meters tall.

"Stick to the plan!"

Jun dashed down the hill, almost rolling.

In Sky World, if the enmity of the so called KOS (Kill On Sight, meaning attacking as soon as one enters its field of vision) monsters is not controlled, they can kill whoever they end up targeting in the beginning.

The reason Jun was in the front was not just that he was good at being alert of his surroundings, but also because he excelled at the art of luring monsters.

The six Killer Pandas chased after Jun in a line.

"Well then, die!" exclaimed the excited Yukaria.

She shot at them repeatedly with her two handguns, which slipped out smoothly from her holsters. The two Killer Pandas in the back took the hits in their stomachs and stopped moving. She used sleep bullets. They were very effective against animal-type monsters.

"Wow! Amazing!"

Eri raised her voice in admiration reflexively. With her two guns, she aimed at different targets with each hand, moving in ways that were not originally possible in Sky World. Eri understood that she had mastered that technique on her own.

"Controller classes are very much targeted towards FPS gamers, though..."

"I love things like FPS'!"

The sleep bullets that she had just shot could stop monsters flat in their tracks, almost as if they were put to sleep, for twenty seconds. It wasn't actually putting them to sleep, but the effect was kind of like hypnosis. Because of that, even if someone disturbed the affected monsters with only a small tap, they would jump up and rush out attacking the gunslinger who shot the sleep bullets.

Though, without this kind of paralysis, the other group members would have to deal with multiple enemies at once. However sturdy the tank was, it would be difficult to hold up enmity for multiple monsters. So then, the enmity from healing would exceed the enmity gained by the tank, and all of the monsters would attack the healer. Most of the time, groups began breaking down with their healer getting under attack.

"Jun, this way!"

"Got it, I'm counting on you!"

As the swift Killer Pandas' hits rained down on Jun, he changed course to rush over towards Yukaria. She was glowing a bit, and she began moving in a weird way.

This was the gunslinger's ability.

"Burst Mode!"

Just as she said that, Yukaria pointed her guns at the four Killer Pandas that were chasing Jun. Her bullets hit each of them equally again and again. The now-angered Killer Pandas switched targets and went after her, slipping by Jun in the process.

The bullets in her two guns should have run out from all of those consecutive shots...

Yukaria threw her handguns away. As they fell to the ground and disappeared, two new handguns appeared out of nowhere in her holsters. She quickly drew them out.

That was Burst Mode, a gunslinger's special ability. Usable once every five minutes, for about fifteen seconds, it would allow for immediate reloading just by letting go of the guns. Though it didn't work for revolvers, because it could

create an endless supply of bullets...

“Two more are sleeping~”

Though right now, she had one more sleep bullet loaded, the rest of her bullets were regular ones. Two of the enemies chasing Yukaria began to sleep, and the other two started dealing damage to her. However, Yukaria let go of her guns and swiftly jumped out of their way. New guns again appeared in her holsters.

“This is basically what parking is. The non-damaging light warrior’s taunt works very well with gunslingers.”

“Got it. Uh, I’m probably not as good as the light warrior in your last group though...”

“No matter. Kasumi, you’re very much a technical person.”

Yukaria shot at the Killer Pandas that were about to wake up with new sleep bullets. Even if they could resist the sleep bullets by some chance, the controller could still fulfill his or her objective by using another when the monsters would attack the tank.

While Yukaria and Kasumi were hard at work in battle, Eri buffed Jun.

“Let’s take them out one at a time.” Jun picked the more suitable of the sleeping Killer Pandas, imbued magic into his greatsword, and with all of his strength, slashed down at its stomach. “Eri, I’m counting on you for healing!”

“Yeah, yeaah.”

The amount of enemies they had to fight went down. Jun, while taking his own protection into consideration, began to attack the Killer Panda over and over again. Its HP bar was mostly depleted. In retaliation, the ferociously enraged panda clawed many times at Jun’s chest. With each of its light claw attacks, ten percent of Jun’s HP bar disappeared.

“Heal me on time!”

He said “on time”, and Eri’s timing of healing spells was certainly impeccable. Jun’s HP bar jumped back and forth between fifty percent and eighty percent.

Thanks to his buffs, Jun’s movements were swift and nimble. Without

disregarding the other members of the group, sometimes, he was able to avoid attacks with just some quickly thought-out movements. The monsters jumped around in hot haste, resulting in a rather silly situation, but...

Turning its head around, one Killer Panda opened its mouth and roared, showing off its sharp, shiny fangs. Its saliva dripping, it glared at Jun with its glowing-red eyes.

“...You’re not cute at all.”

Very little remained of the final monster’s HP. Jun, continuing to cast attack spells in sync with others, further lowered the Killer Panda’s HP with fierce strikes like raging fires.

The Killer Panda, taking a fatal stab, fell to the ground. Items appeared immediately after, stacked on top of its dead body.

They were peaches. When he squinted, Jun could see the words “Hermit Peach” displayed above the items.

“Well, seems just about right. They should be rare.”

“Hey, they look yummy.”

“Though I don’t mind if you eat them, they can be used in alchemy. Maybe we should take them over to Isao’s place.”

“Maybe we should. Well then, Kasumi, which should we hit next?”

“Ah, okay. Wait on the right hand side please.”

As the Killer Pandas were killed one by one, the controller’s job became easier and easier.

Before long, all of the Killer Pandas had been vanquished. Though in the few hours up until they went back, they had killed over fifty more Killer Pandas, they were only able to obtain three Hermit Peaches. It seemed like that the first one was just the result of being very lucky.

Having completed several quests, Jun and the rest of the group triumphantly set out on their way back.

Part 14

Late that night, Jun was lying down in bed in his room. Sensing a presence, he suddenly woke up from his light sleep.

Next to him was a person. A short girl.

“Is it you, Alice?”

Getting up, Jun grabbed the piece of magic augite and lightly rubbed it. The stone, only about the size of a fingernail, dimly lit up the room.

The silver-haired girl stood motionlessly next to the bed.

“You should have woken me up when you’ve come here.”

“It’s not like I had anything urgent to say,” said Alice, monotonously, as she slowly shook her head.

“Were you watching me sleep? What weird interests you have.”

“Stop praising me. You’re making me feel shy.”

“...Hey, are you really here for no reason?”

“Well actually, I do have something to say.”

“Go ahead.”

“You’ve been on this island for one whole month. That’s a long time.”

“So you’re telling me to hurry up and go higher?”

“You slack off too much.”

“You’re too harsh.” Jun smiled bitterly. “I finished the four sacred beast quest with some other guys, and I wanted to complete all of the quests on the island of Lao Thai. I’ll be done soon.”

“What a perverted quest maniac.”

She sounded serious with her monotonous tone of voice. Thinking about her nonsense, Jun grinned.

Alice gracefully lifted her eyebrow, as if she had felt something disrupt her calm and composed comportment.

“So, is it a lie that you’re going to go and try to overtake Sakuya?”

“Did you see that?”

So far, since the day of the duel with Sakuya, Alice had not yet shown herself. Jun thought that possibly, she herself had been unable to leave Altaria Island, but... with all due respect, it was quite possible that she was part of the management of this game... rather, this world known as Sky World.

“You came here to see the end of the blue sky.”

“I’m not obligated to do so.”

“It’s not an obligation. It’s a privilege.”

“... What are you saying?” Jun was met with a firm stare from Alice. “You won’t answer things that are inconvenient for you, right?”

“Why did you add another person to your group?”

“About Yukaria... She’s not necessarily a full member of the group yet.”

“Isn’t a harem every boy’s dream?”

“Hey...”

“Don’t you want lots of boobies [1]?”

“If I said I liked breasts, would you change your avatar for me?”

Alice shook her head slowly. Jun had a rough idea of how her avatar worked and whether she was actually shocked by what he had said.

(Just as I thought, she can’t hide her thoughts so easily.) “At any rate, our airship hasn’t returned to port yet.”

Their airship was currently lent out. An acquaintance of Jun’s who happened to be a cook was using it to set out on an expedition with about ten people to complete a cooking quest on Altaria Island.

“Preparations will be done very soon. Whether Yukaria will come with us is besides the point.” As he said that, he noticed that there was something else he wanted to ask. “Her friends got married in Sky World. Would children born here be revived in the same way as adventurers after death? When they are born, will they be given tablets?”

As expected, Alice remained still and just stared at Jun.

“Well, I guess I’ll find out one year from now.”

“Are you going to take your merry time?”

“...You really are being influenced by Eri.”

Alice shook her head.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

[1] – There’s a pun here in the original Japanese: *oppai ga ippai*. I can’t leave this out because it’s just too... punny.

Chapter 2: The Curse of the Pyramid

Part 2

The day after the Panda-killing expedition, the inn got very noisy from the morning on.

When Jun went down to the bar, many other adventurers had gathered at the counter. However, Jun's group should have been the only people staying in the inn...

"Kasumi is teaching a cooking class," said the sulking Eri. She had been leaning her elbow on the corner of the table and supporting her chin on top of her hand.

"About Yukaria's previous group mates, they're leaving on their honeymoon today, so Yukaria went to go see them off."

"Ah, alright."

They said that they were going to spend two weeks going on tours for rich people around many different islands for their honeymoon. From an ordinary person's point of view, adventurers are extremely rich. Especially Yukaria's group, which had reached the fifth island ring, plowed their way through numerous dungeons and amassed many rare treasures. They saved up a lot of money selling such rarities. One could say that their assets were comparable to those of royalty.

Though they had invited Yukaria to join them on their trip, she refused, claiming that she would rather not be tortured by having to watch the two couples flirt all day.

"Eri, aren't you going to join the class?"

"I'll be the official taster. After all, Kasumi, I really can't cook. Hmm, is it not fine just to summon bread or hamburgers?"

This was the age of junk food. In addition, hamburger summoning magic was a very reliable spell for summoners.

There were about twenty people attending Kasumi's class. Around seventy percent made up of women, and thirty percent men. More than half of them were Jun's acquaintances. He remembered those faces belonged to commendable adventurers who had increased their max cooking skill level. Just the other day, they had gone to Altaria Island to increase their cooking level caps. They were immensely thankful for letting them borrow Jun's group's airship. Right now, since another team was going to make the journey to Altaria Island, Jun actually made even more acquaintances than these.

And as for those left here...

"There are really a lot of people from that raid, huh?"

"Kasumi got rather famous back then. Since she was such a brave and impressive tank, many guilds invited her to join them."

"I didn't know that."

"Cause nobody's told you. Kasumi refused them immediately. She wouldn't want to be any other than Jun's wife, of course."

"Don't say 'wife'. Even so, not telling me, the leader..."

"Jun, maybe she doesn't trust you?" Jun groaned and scornfully glared at Eri. He made a pitiful face. Eri flapped her arms around hastily. "That was just a joke. I know that Kasumi certainly trusts you one hundred percent."

Jun sighed in relief.

"Okay, let's wrap this up. That was..."

"But I just thought of something. Okay. A boy who, in spite of realizing a girl's feelings for him, continues to behave in an indecisive manner is the worst of the worst!"

"... I just remembered I have some errands to take care of. I'm heading out."

Turning his back to Eri's smirking face, Jun left the inn.

Part 2

As night fell, Jun and the others had a meeting with a guest at the bar on the first floor of the inn.

The small visitor was none other than Ryuka. She worked as the well-known shopkeeper of the second-hand shop in Payang. Eri and Yukaria both knew Ryuka from a while back.

“I think I stumbled upon something that can benefit us all...”

Ryuka initiated the conversation with Jun and the others. Her eyes twinkled as she saw t Kasumi’s delicious cooking. She had a request to ask of Jun’s group. She wanted to investigate the curse of a pyramid.

“A Pyramid? On this island?” Jun tilted his head. “And also, a curse? True, the mummies on islands like Gradia Island are said to attack with curses but...”

“Yes, a curse. Pyramids, among other things, aren’t really Chinese though.” Ryuka lifted her arms sweetly and dangled them like a weeping willow.

“I don’t think that.” Yukaria shook her head. “Pyramids aren’t just structures that exist in Egypt. Even China has ancient tombs that are pyramid-like in structure. Though I’m not sure if there would be any mummies in them.”

“Hey, Ryuka, do you want to experience that curse?” inquired Eri.

“Why would anybody want to go there to be cursed?” shaking her head, Ryuka responded. “For a skill max increase. Through a quest in the pyramid, one can increase his or her appraisal skill max to 110.”

“Appraisal, huh...?”

When it came to improving the odds in battle, be it through alchemical or combat skills, adventurers did not usually care for the max skill level.

The appraisal skill was a comparatively less important skill. Some rewards from killing monsters occasionally had hidden titles or effects. Depending on the situation, these items, sometimes cursed, could be identified using the appraisal skill.

If an adventurer paid gold to an appraisal NPC in town, the item could almost

certainly be identified, no risk involved. The necessary funds, as far as an adventurer was concerned, were not at all large sums.

“Are you going to offer item identification in your shop?”

“We won’t have normal players come and bring us their items for identification. But, if we can promote our shop with it at all, we won’t be people who only seem to be able to run a shop,” Ryuka said calmly, sipping some tea after finishing her meal.

Though Jun was already familiar with it, when he saw such a mature attitude from her, his initial reaction was split into three. He could get upset over her boldness, or be amazed at it, or...

“You’re adorable! Ryuka, you’re an angel!”

“Ryuka-san, you’re lovely! Is it okay if I stroke you gently?”

Yukaria and Kasumi assailed Ryuka’s face from both sides. That was unexpected of the usually meek Kasumi.

“Kasumi, you still sleep with a stuffed toy, right? I have about a hundred of them in my bag, wanna see?” Eri whispered in her ear.

“Teehee, your cheeks are squishy.”

“Your hair is so silky. It feels so nice.”

“Oh, surely Jun too has trained his appraisal skill. I think he’s interested.”

Ryuka calmly looked up at Jun, while Yukaria and Kasumi were still playing with her like a toy. That girl’s presence of mind and composure seemed infallible.



“That pyramid is located in the far north of the island. It’ll probably take a few days to get there.”

“I’m a black magician, so I can teleport us back to the city afterwards. Even so, since we’ll have to be away for multiple days, during that time, Genta-sensei will be tasked with managing the shop.”

“Will Genta-san be okay?”

“If it’s just retrieving the prices by using the system... Worst case scenario, he can just contact me with the communication stone.”

Her former instructor, Genta, was a very good-natured person, so Ryuka said that he was not cut out for business due to that trait.

“If he buys things carelessly or lowers any prices, I said I’d be sure to punish him strictly so... I think it’ll be okay... probably.”

Jun couldn’t help but notice how Genta’s student was treating him.

“I’m interested. I haven’t completed this island’s quest list yet, so there are still many of this kind of secret quests left. I think it’s a great opportunity because I get to go on even more quests! How wonderful! This is great news!”

“Heeey, you shouldn’t get so enthusiastic over it!” retorted Eri, going on to say, “Well, I’m okay with it too.”

“Jun, the second cooking quest group will return in a week.”

“Well, then it’s settled. They’ll collect Altaria Berries.”

Altaria Berries, berries originating on Altaria Island, are the raw materials used in making jam. When Kasumi brought some of the jam to the cooking class earlier, it was very well received.

“I’m happy to work together with Ryuka-san. By all means, let’s do it.”

Jun crossed his shoulders gently and looked at Yukaria. She was still hugging Ryuka, who had her face buried in Yukaria’s chest. She glared at Jun.

“Jun, get your fangs away from this innocent little Ryuka!”

“It’s okay if you’re teasing me, but you’re making Ryuka suffer.”

“Well...”

Ryuka, getting out of Yukaria’s cleavage, looked around, completely exhausted.

Part 3

According to the conversation with Ryuka, the Curse of the Pyramid was the name of a hidden quest in what started out as a tomb for the Emperor of Penglai on the northern part of the island of Lao Thai.

Penglai appeared to have been the ancient name of Lao Thai. About five thousand years earlier, the Penglai dynasty took over many islands in the area.

The last emperor of the Penglai dynasty, just before his death, secluded himself there and performed a ceremony of reincarnation. After some time, he would reincarnate and the Great Penglai Empire would begin anew...

The island of Lao Thai had that backstory.

The Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor stood four days away from the city of Payang with the spell Running. As expected, it was too far away from the town for any quest objects to be nearby. Further north was the cave in which the Black Tortoise of the four sacred beasts dwelled, but the pyramid itself was secluded from everything else by a steep mountain. Moreover, that cave was accessible by means of the teleporter near town.

(So the Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor was isolated completely from everything else, huh?)

When Jun heard Ryuka's story, that was what he thought of first.

Hiding a very important structure in a very inconveniently isolated spot was quite the logical move for the developers. Furthermore, the best possible reward from it was the appraisal skill cap increase, so...

(Perhaps there's something else there?)

Since it harbored so many obstacles, there was quite the possibility that people interested in the few quests found inside or just by idle curiosity would eventually give up.

The island of Lao Thai was designed as a place for newbies to grow and become mid-level players, along as the entrance to the seventh island ring. Maybe that had been reading too deeply into the designers' intentions, but the Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor and other things of the sort felt out of place.

(Something's a bit off here.)

Though, that unnatural vibe meant nothing on its own. If somebody tried to see the whole world, it would make sense that the dynastic tomb was established here. But if it were said that there existed a curse, nobody would want to go near the area.

(I wonder if I'm overthinking this.)

So, Jun, shaking his head, expelled all of his anxieties from his mind.

Part 4

The following morning, Jun and his party, along with Ryuka, departed from the city as a group of five.

There was a steep mountain called Mount Kunlun. Said to house many raid monsters, it was a rather dangerous place. Consequently, in order to avoid it, they took a roundabout route halfway around the island through the west side towards the Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor. With Eri's Running magic, it would take almost four days. On the fourth day, the party would stop and rest for a night near the pyramid, and the day after that, they would explore the pyramid. They would return with the help of Ryuka's black magic return spell to instantly teleport back. That was the schedule.

The Lao Thai housed an active volcano that penetrated the earth in the middle of the island, Kunlun Mountain. The terrain at the center of the island grew very rugged and uneven, but on the edges of the island, it was extremely flat. Moreover, the great visibility meant that even if monsters got near them, they would notice them very quickly.

For this reason, their planned course should turn out quite calm.

During the first day, in order to test their group coordination, they purposely set out for a monster nest. Bomber Bunnies, as those rabbit-like monsters were called, threw peaches that would explode on contact like grenades. Their attack skill was 100, so they were about on par in strength with the party.

As far as Jun's group was concerned, they didn't pose any big challenge in a fight.

Just as they got close to the nest, some of the peach-shaped grenades of the Bomber Bunnies hit the nearby ground in a straight line. That was otherwise known a warning attack to demonstrate their impressive aim.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaah! No!! Don't come here!"

Faced with this, the combat-inexperienced Ryuka stopped, standing on tiptoes. She got startled by the attack, panicked, and suddenly followed up by shooting an area of effect attack, Blast Fireball, into the crowd of Bomber Bunnies. The Bomber Bunnies all instantly targeted Ryuka.

“This is bad, I’ve pulled all of the monsters!”

In order to kill the monsters that stubbornly targetted Ryuka, the rest of the group had to work extremely hard. Afterwards, they tried to avoid battle at all costs.

Part 5

They secured a campsite before night had fallen. That was the trick to having a safe and comfortable trip. Taught by the few experienced campers and former boy scouts, much of the adventurer population had now become pros at camping.

Ryuka, who had rarely left the city, was unable to help set up the conjured tent or gather firewood and stones, and so felt dispirited.

“Don’t worry, it’s okay...” Kasumi received Jun’s instructions and took Ryuka with her to the nearby river to go bathe.

“Aren’t I pitiful?” With water up to her torso, Ryuka sighed. “In battle or in camping, I’m nothing but a burden.”

She was already in her sixth year of elementary school, and hadn’t worried about that stuff before. It was simple.

(I don’t understand.)

Kasumi didn’t like people who encouraged others. Kasumi Yukasaki was, one way or another, the type of person who others always encouraged. She was encouraged by many people, such as Jun and Eri.

Though Jun should have known...

She suddenly realized it.

She hugged Ryuka, who was shivering from the cold river water.

“Let’s do it openly.”

“Huh...”

“Even if we make mistakes, let’s enjoy ourselves. At least, I found it fun to be able to go on a trip with you, Ryuka-san.”

“Huh, but... it’s my fault that everybody’s going to deal with so much dangerous stuff.”

“Even if that happens, it doesn’t mean that we would give up our lives. This is a world where we can come back to life after death. ...Are you scared?”

“...yeah.”

“Well then, let’s enjoy being scared.”

“Enjoying... being scared? But that’s...”

“At first, I too didn’t really understand how I could do that. I wasn’t able to enjoy myself. But then, I met Jun-san... He was having fun no matter what he did in this world. He was traveling alone, and yet he was so lively.”

She remembered. She remembered the time when Jun gave up some of his own time to train Kasumi.

Jun said that understanding and appreciation lead to enjoyment. That was certain; the shortest route to joy was learning about the rules of the world, the way things were organized, and the nature of existence.

At first, she didn’t understand what any of that meant.

He also said to keep in mind monsters’ movement patterns when fighting, and that by acting with that in mind, one could always respond to enemies’ attacks. As she was thinking about these things almost as if she was daydreaming... she realized.

She realized that she had fallen into a daze.

Kasumi Yukasaki seriously, and sincerely, wanted to take on the world. She felt like she wanted to reel in the unknown. She shivered in light of this new breakthrough.

(— —This is fun.)

She realized that she already felt that way for a while now.

“Let’s be excited. Surely you can do that, Ryuka-san.”

“But... I’m a coward. My cowardice led me to seclude myself in the shop. In the secondhand shop, I’m known as important and clever, even as an elementary school student.”

“Ryuka-san, you *are* clever. But it’s fine to be a silly fool sometimes. It’s fun.”

“Well if you can say that, Kasumi, I think you’re really strong.”

Kasumi smiled bitterly. She was not strong at all. She knew that. “It’s just that

everybody is supporting me.” Jun and Eri, and possibly Sakuya, who was somewhere far away, were always supporting her, so she was able to feel so happy. “Ryuka-san, there are lots of people out there like Genta-san who are supporting you too.”

“Genta-sensei...right, maybe I really am being supported everywhere.”

She pondered over why.

Part 6

Even while camping, Kasumi made the food herself. Since she kept pre-prepared ingredients in her bag, she could always heat it later over a small fire.

Unable to conjure up anything other than bread, Jun made use of his cooking skill to summon fresh baked goods out of flour. Though raising the cooking skill would not result in tastier bread, it allowed access to new recipes. Jun's cooking skill level, exceeding the original max for the skill, allowed him to make small pastries.

"Kasumi's cooking still tastes better than pastries," said Eri, who sadly, did not approve of the new recipe.

Besides, recently, Eri had some extra time and instead of using it to annoy anybody she raised her fishing level, so she could fish in freshwater rivers. Today she caught three chicken grunts, a type of perch, and Jun filleted them with his cooking skill.

"Amazing. This is so much better than what Genta-sensei makes."

"It really is magnificent. My former group was no match for this brilliant cooking."

Bread, soup, and salad were set up on the wooden table. Ryuka and Yukaria were flabbergasted by Jun's group's normal meal.

"By the way, I have a question. Yukaria, speaking of your group, what kind of stuff did you guys eat while on trips?"

"We can always live on just bread and water, right?"

"Aah, your group... Next time, buy a fishing rod!"

Upon discovering that Yukaria's group was full of people who did not understand the value of good food, Eri took Yukaria's hand.

Jun thought that generally, people who did not care much about cooking had huge appetites.

Actually, it was obvious that Eri and Yukaria's appetites were weird. Each eating more than Jun and Kasumi combined, those two girls scarfed down huge

portions. Their appetites were so great that Ryuka's eyes rounded as she saw all of the food spread out on the table get devoured in just a moment between the two of them.

"That was delicious! Great work on the meal!"

"Ugh, I can't eat anymore..."

Yukaria and Eri both hit their stomachs and rolled onto the ground. They really resembled each other.

"We ate so much. I didn't think that we'd need more than two pieces of bread."

"We're growing girls!"

"Ri-right! We walked a looot today."

"Yes, we did. When you take a trip, I think it's okay to eat a lot."

"We even get snacks. Kasumi's the best."

Today they took a break and had a light meal every two hours. Though they took Ryuka's travelling inexperience into consideration, they would still take a break every three hours or so. Kasumi was very big on replenishing calories. It seemed like it came from Sakuya.

"While traveling, there's a lot of mental strain. But there was a time, when I wasn't paying attention, that I ended up falling to the ground as if my internal battery had been drained. Since we can't have that happen again, we need to take care to constantly replenish our energy."

Kasumi told them that earlier.

(Where in the world did she learn that?)

At that time, Jun had smiled bitterly, though he did incorporate her suggestion into their plans. He thought that Sakuya too probably wanted to eat her sweets.

"Anyways, Jun. Are we really all going to sleep in a single tent?" Yukaria, seeing the large tent, glanced at Jun and glared at him.

Jun shrugged lightly. "We don't have to. I can put up another tent by myself

right now. Actually, I think we should do that. Especially since Ryuka's with us this time."

"Ah, I'm fine! Actually, uhh... if we all sleep together, we can enjoy ourselves more. Kasumi taught me this..." She looked at Kasumi with a grin on her face. It was a saintly smile.

Jun sighed. "Yukaria, what do you want to do?"

"If you all say so, I don't mind. But Jun, you're the biggest threat."

"Then I'll sleep next to Jun!" Ryuka raised her hand quickly. Everybody looked at her. "Huh, what happened?"

"...Ryuka-chan, you're a friend, so believe me, he's the biggest enemy to us..."

"Well, as long as it's not near the entrance, I can sleep anywhere," said Eri. After making sure that Kasumi and Yukaria were washing the tableware, she moved closer to Ryuka's ear and said, "Ryuka, stay alert. Jun is definitely a lolicon... Ouch!"

Jun had kicked Eri's leg from under the table. She pressed on her knee and glared at Jun, teary-eyed.

"Don't feed her improper things."

"Well then. Though you don't reach your hand even a little bit to Kasumi... hey, could it be that since there aren't any other boys here, you're going for..."

"Don't tell little kids things that they don't need to know! I'm quite normal! Well... what, Ryuka?"

Ryuka, who had just come near him, pulled at Jun's sleeve earnestly.

"I'm fine. I won't mind it even if you're gay, Jun. I won't tell anybody, I promise."

Her eyes were very gentle, as if she were trying to console him. Jun looked up at the sky.

Part 7

The group lay down in a row in their sleeping bags.

Shortly after, snores and soft breaths filled the tent. Ryuka, who was next to Jun, slipped into the realm of dreams in just a few seconds. She had surely been worn out by all that walking, something she was not used to.

“Jun, are you awake?” asked Yukaria, who was in the middle of the tent.

Kasumi and Eri appeared to have already drifted off.

“What?”

“I don’t think I’m saying this because of how my previous group broke up, but... it’s not good to put things off.” Jun remained silent while Yukaria took an exaggerated sigh. “I understand the feeling of wanting to avoid situations that have been complicated by people in love. It’s really nothing but trouble. But, even if you run away from every such situation, the comfortable status quo will one day... collapse. Jun, back when you were with my old group, you said that yourself. That you wanted to form a nice and cozy group. And if you were able to adventure forever with one of those warm groups... surely coming to this world would have been worth it...”

He had a feeling that he had indeed said those things to Yukaria before. It had been just immature speech. Hearing his own words come out from her mouth after all that time couldn’t help but embarrass him.

“Eri and Kasumi are both good kids. Can you trust them more?”

“I do trust them.”

“These are your own feelings.”

“Hey, doesn’t this make you feel awkward?”

“I like lengthy, sloppy, hard-to-understand, and, while I’m at it, pervy things..”

“Forgive me for causing all of this confusion.”

Jun shook his head.

(My mind is all jumbled up...)

There were things that he couldn't say to anybody.

That only Jun had come to this world in a different way from the others.
About Alice.

About Kai/Sakuya. About their battle. That she had entrusted Kasumi to him.

And also, about the meaning of 'the end of the blue sky'.

The future wasn't far away.

It had already been decided that one day, he would have to leave the current comfortable lifestyle and try to make it to the end of the end. That life-and-death journey would surely become very emotionally straining.

If he consulted Eri and Kasumi, they would definitely follow him. He was a bit conceited in thinking so.

However, though he was prepared to bear the burdens of that outcome, Jun had yet to...

"I don't know what you're hiding. It's something that you can't tell anybody, right?" Yukaria saw right through Jun's innermost troubles. "Earlier, I heard you're looking for somebody."

"Yeah," responded Jun.

"Have you met up with that person?" Jun smiled bitterly. Yukaria was quite sharp. "You two didn't see eye-to-eye on something?"

"Kind of."

"Before you collapse from all that stress, why don't you tell those two?"

"...Uhh."

"They're waiting for you."

He probably realized this. It would be quite difficult to say. Kasumi and Eri were both smart. It wouldn't have been strange if they sensed something like that coming.

Even so, they trusted Jun. Jun used that trust as a stepping stone for his own intentions.

“Aren’t I cruel?”

“You should watch out for anybody stabbing you from behind.”

Part 8

Running was a spell that allowed a group to move twice as fast. With movement speed increasing spells from rear line classes like black magicians, white magicians, druids, and oracles, a group could continue moving quickly for a very long time, unless a member of the group took any aggro. Though summoners also possessed a spell with the same effect, other support classes only had a few movement increase spells at their disposal, such as Marathon Song for bards and Polymorph, an ability of druids.

Jun's group sped up their progress by Running. From afar, it looked as if they were speeding through.

It took them almost four days to reach the Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor from the southern tip of the city of Payang.

"First of all, why is there even an appraisal skill quest in a pyramid?" Eri tilted her head, perplexed, as they sprinted through the grasslands. "There should be other hidden quests."

The phrase "hidden quest" encompassed two meanings. One consisted in a quest that an adventurer could not receive easily because it was hidden on the island somewhere unreachable by normal means. Those quests were still shown in the quest list though, thus confirming their existence.

The other meaning was for a quest that was not shown on the quest list. These were quests that were not known until they were completed.

The quest Jun's group had in mind now was a quest of the latter variety, at least until a flag got triggered. If nobody had reached the maximum level for the appraisal skill, the quest would not have even been discovered.

"Could it be that this isn't the only appraisal skill cap increase quest?" wondered Jun.

The quest had an aura of mystery about it. It appeared magnificent. Jun trembled in excitement.

"Jun, you're crazy..."

"Somebody is bad-tempered."

Yukaria and Eri's eyes met each other with scowls.

"Leave me alone. Hey, Ryuka, do you have any other information about the quest?"

"From what I heard, the ghost of the emperor should appear."

"G-ghost?!" Kasumi raised her voice hysterically.

"Even if we say it's a ghost, at best, it's just some monster that looks like a spirit." Eri chuckled, calming Kasumi down. Ryuka even nodded her head in agreement.

"It's probably something like that. The ghost of Penglai seems like it'd approach you with something like 'Grant my wish' ..."

"So the quest involves granting one of the ghost's requests?"

Chain quests commonly had a lot of monster extermination quests in a row. Hidden quests shouldn't have been too different.

"The people who discovered this quest brought the ghost of Penglai to the middle of the pyramid. If that's how it happened the ghost could disappear at any time. Their message said that if we investigate quickly, we might be able to unlock a higher appraisal skill cap."

"So there's a flag somewhere in the pyramid that can be triggered by bringing an NPC to it... There sure is a lot I don't know."

"Uh, I'm sorry that you guys are coming with me for all this investigating."

"No need to be sorry. We'll definitely have fun in the process!" Jun made his hand firmly into a fist. "A mysterious quest... an unidentified flag... an unknown maze... I'm going to get a nosebleed."

"You sure are a quest-maniac. Once you get like this, there's nothing we can say to stop you. Ryuka, please be wary of this weirdo."

"There's no problem with that. Any weirdo that can be of use to me is a good weirdo." Ryuka giggled. She was very excited about what would soon happen.

Undeveloped wastelands spanned across the northern parts of the island of Lao Thai. The monsters were all the more powerful. Back when Jun's group had

only consisted of three people, they surely would not have been able to survive long there. Either way, since they didn't have any quests nearby, they traveled the area trying not to attract any monsters...

Since they avoided any monster attacks, they proceeded with their trip as planned. On the fifth morning, Jun's group finally made it to the pyramid situated at the bottom of a deep valley on the edge of the wasteland.

At first glance, the structure, as big as any of the hills around there, was drowning in weeds. They couldn't miss the fact that the area around the exquisite gates was all mossy.

Jun fiddled with his tablet in front of the gate. If this pyramid dated to the age of the ancient Penglai empire, the appraisal skill quest would be there. It had to be the Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor. For the time being, Jun explained how the appraisal skill worked.

"Having the appraisal skill is definitely useful."

"But raising skill levels is a pain," Yukaria said, echoing the popular opinion among adventurers.

"How long does it take to get a skill to level 100?" Kasumi inquired. Jun and Ryuka exchanged glances and tilted their heads thinking about how to answer.

"Hmm, maybe like 100 hours?"

"Yeah, sounds about right."

"A h-hundred hours... I've definitely spent more time on it than that," muttered Eri, chiming in.

"Me too..." added Yukaria.

It would only take twenty days if I were to appraise items for five hours each day before sleeping.

Adventurers could manage with holding back and only sleeping three hours a night, only being a little bit tired during the day. Perhaps they would keep on wondering whether that really was possible.

"By the way, Jun, your cooking and alchemy skills are also at level 100 right? Was the time well spent?"

“I’ve maxed out gathering, sewing, handicraft, and gemworking. But I haven’t done smithing yet.”

Skilling was difficult. It required a lot of monetary investment. Jun remembered. He had to buy tons of expensive jewels and use them up very quickly. It was hell. He never wanted to experience that again. At any rate, expensive diamonds disappeared, one by one.

After he finished leveling up gemworking, he earned a considerable amount of money making enchanted gemstones for other adventurers.

“...Just as I thought. Jun, you’re a nutjob.”

“It’s natural. Nothing special about that. Everybody does it.”

“I don’t do it. I don’t.” Eri shook her hand back and forth, shocked.

“Really? But the time spent really isn’t that bad. You can use other skills while waiting for each skill’s cooldown to elapse. Besides, there’s no end to the knowledge you can get out of it. If you’re the type that can’t focus his or her energy just for that, then you really are a huge procrastinator.”

“That type’s also the kind that can’t stay holed up in a library... Your willingness is quite weird. In addition, in order to just get your alchemy skills to 100, you need your own private area to work...”

“Alchemy is necessary to complete a lot of quests. Won’t you be annoyed if you trigger the flags for those quests that you can’t even do?”

Though he was insisting strongly on his point of view, the prospects were not looking up. Kasumi and Ryuka stared motionlessly at Jun.

“My, my, you guys aren’t very cultured at all.”

“...If I responded to that with a witty retort, you’d be upset.” Eri groaned as she placed her hand on her eyebrows.

Part 9

Caves and ruins were commonly known as Dungeons.

The word dungeon, which originally represented an underground prison, evolved to mean what it does now through a largely unknown transformation. In MMORPGs, dungeon areas differed from regular fields in many ways.

First of all, the difference showed in monsters, and traps were rather common... in other words, dungeons had to be dealt with differently.

“Kasumi-san, this is your first time taking part in a bonafide dungeon raid, right?” inquired Jun, looking up at the pyramid that looked like a slightly elevated hill.

“Back when I was with Sakuya, we went through a maze on the eighth island ring.”

“Dungeons on the eighth ring, with a few exceptions, don’t really have any elaborate traps. And, the monsters are weak there. There’s a steep curve between dungeons on the eighth ring, and those of higher rings. If it were just us three, like how we were in regular fields, dungeons would be quite scary.”

“Can Jun-san even be scared of anything?” Ryuka tilted her head.

“If it were just me, I definitely wouldn’t be. If I had to complete a dungeon for a quest, I would just join another party and do it that way. Honestly speaking, a party with six people would be great.”

“Now that I think of it, Sakuya-chan also made sure we had six people. What’s up with that number?”

“Ah, is that your question?”

“I wonder why that could be the case,” said Ryuka, who apparently also did not know.

“Alright, I’ll explain quickly. So basically, Sky World’s system has no restriction on the number of people in a group. According to the system though, groups are just an umbrella term for allies. Understand?”

“Yep. If I’m not mistaken, even if allies accidentally get hit by area of affect

attacks, they would take damage. And afterwards, any enemies that the group of allies killed could easily take back control of the area.”

“Right. Though, when Sky World was still just an MMO, targeting was quite easy, and there were many other conveniences... basically, groups allowed for the differentiation between friend and foe.” Jun continued, “However, in practice, players usually split up into smaller groups of six.”

“The biggest reason for having six person groups was that spells and skills that affected multiple people were all limited to a maximum of six people.”

“Area buffs and movement spells, right?” responded Ryuka. She, being a black magician, had many of such spells.

“The most salient point for black magicians is definitely the use of the Teleport spell. If there was only one black magician in a team of seven or more people, somebody would be left behind after casting the spell.”

“That’s not useful at all for escaping.”

“Some time ago, Ryuka set her bind point to the one near the entrance to these ruins. If necessary, she could use Group Teleport to retreat back to that bind point.”

“Right. When going into an unexplored dungeon, I want us to be as prepared as possible. However, if we have to flee, we have to be quick. So, in order to fully take advantage of wizardry, six person teams widely became the norm for the smallest fighting unit.”

“Though if it’s us five, I think we can synergize rather well.”

“We have a tank, a front line attacker, a rear line attacker, a healer, and a controller, including somebody who can allow us to escape in case of emergency, and we at least have the most basic buffs. White magicians are also the most desirable healing class for dungeon runs. Though I would prefer to have a sub-healer too for some peace of mind but... we’re not carefully selecting people from within a guild, so this is pretty much on-point.”

In Sky World, there were fifteen classes, each with its own traits, specialties, and weaknesses. The idea of forming teams was that their different respective capabilities could fill in for another’s weaknesses.

“So, I think I can safely say that we should be able to successfully clear this dungeon. But then... the problem is how we go about doing it.” Jun took a few steps down and looked up at the peak of the hill. “... Hey, I just thought of this, but doesn’t this pyramid seem a little bit suspicious?”

“Suspicious?” Eri repeated his word.

“There’s probably another way in from behind.”

“Jun, you sure like saying that.”

“Well, this *is* a royal tomb. With such a welcoming entrance... I think this could only be a trap. If it were me, I would have definitely made this to be a dummy entrance.”

“Jun, your triumphant look makes me reluctant to take your side...” Eri dropped her shoulders and shook her head. “I understand... Perhaps even the pyramids in Egypt had dummy entrances. I’ve heard stories of them.”

“Luckily, it seems like there aren’t any monsters nearby. Let’s disperse and search for other entrances. If you see anything, shout to let us know.”

Then, Jun activated his Wing Boots and flew into the sky.

Searching from high up in the sky could help gather more information from a different point of view.

Part 10

It didn't take long until they located the hidden entrance. Not only that, they found a whole three of them.

"Whoever designed this must have been a real lover of everything hidden." Eri was stunned.

"... Well, I didn't anticipate this development," moaned Jun, scratching his head.

After Jun had opened his paint application on his tablet and transmitted his automatically generated maps to the others using infrared, the gang sat in a circle and thought about it deeply.

"Whoever made this map of the pyramid definitely did not do it the normal way."

"This doesn't seem like the job of somebody being paid by the hour. But maps in Sky World always got me worked up."

"Do you know where in the pyramid we'll meet the ghost?" asked Ryuka who was deep in thought with her hand on her mouth. "Hmm... surely before we fall into a pit... So, if we go in here..."

"These three rear entrances are dummy ones," Eri said, as she frowned at Jun. Skepticism filled the air.

"Ryuka, is it okay even if we don't take the shortest route there?"

"Yeah. Having some of Jun's favorite food is good enough for me."

"Let's try going in through the entrance near the top of the pyramid."

"What's the purpose of doing that?" asked Eri.

"It's my intuition," Jun responded with a smile on his face.

Though the hidden entrance was very small, the passageway inside was more than three meters wide and its ceiling about four meters high. It allowed them to easily keep their weapons ready. Since the walls were well illuminated, it was bright enough that they could see each other's faces.

"I'm going to go check out what's in front of us. Eri, invisibility magic, please."

“Please, be careful. I won’t make any jokes about the gate being a one way door.”

“From here, we’ll keep in contact by communication stone.”

Jun, turning invisible thanks to Eri’s magic, quietly set off towards the inner part of the pyramid. The invisibility spell, usable by many spellcasters, would allow its target to disappear for a set amount of time. It was immensely effective against monsters that only relied on their sense of sight, as one could go up close to them without risking detection. However, for monsters that used their senses of smell or hearing, there was a limit to its efficacy. As soon as the invisible adventurer took any aggro, the spell would instantly end. It wasn’t very useful for anything other than reconnaissance.

Furthermore, in cities, such magic was prohibited. In inns and in public bathhouses, barriers would automatically dispel invisibility. It came in naturally to counteract unscrupulous breaches of privacy.

The passageway led to a staircase. Jun carefully walked down them. The stairs, which surely had not been used for a long time, had overgrown with moss and fungus. They were very slippery.

At the bottom of the stairs, there was a fork in the road.

The wind is blowing...

The gentle breeze brushing his face came from the left.

Jun stayed vigilant of his surroundings and entered the dungeon.

A few minutes later, when Jun returned to the rest of the group, Kasumi and Ryuka took huge breaths of relief.

Eri frowned, groaning, “You’re soooooooo sloooooooooow.”

“We were worried sick.”

“Sorry. Unfortunately, I don’t have good news.”

Jun wirelessly copied the automatically generated map from his reconnaissance efforts to the others. They pinned their eyes onto their tablet screens.

“...Wow, it’s a headache-inducing maze!”

“Honestly, I got a bit lost myself. I never really had any sense of direction.”

“So why was somebody without any sense of direction in charge of scouting?”

“Considering what might happen if enemies attacked, it was best for me to go. And also... Yukaria would have frozen up, ran away, and forgotten everything.”

“I’ll have you know, I’m just bad with dark places. Besides, the monsters in a place like this would be undead ones. Sleep Bullet wouldn’t work on them. I’d have to hit them with my hands.”

Undead. It referred to a dead body that could move. In Sky World, monsters like zombies and skeletons were collectively referred to as undead monsters.

Undead monsters differed a lot from regular ones. First of all, they were completely immune to certain status effects, such as paralysis and sleep. On the other hand, white magicians’ special anti-undead attacks would work very effectively against them. This was switched for regular monsters.

“There weren’t any undead monsters.”

“So you’re saying there were other types of monsters?” Eri asked.

“Just Puppet Dolls, or moving doll-like creatures. They’re like golems.”

“Either way, Sleep Bullet still won’t work on them.”

Yukaria dropped her shoulders slowly. Neither dolls nor golems were susceptible to sleep or paralysis.

“Well, it isn’t as spacious as the passageway. Only two or three bodies could stand side by side there, and only if they were particularly small. Except for when the battle becomes close ranged, if Kasumi-san and I are in the front, we should manage.”

Unlike in an open field, dungeons had the physical limitation of walls. Though one would not need to worry about being surrounded by large armies of monsters, the lack of room to orchestrate traps was vexing. Jun’s specialty, tactics that required good placement and movement would not work here.

“Let’s destroy all of the monsters in the mapped areas. We can take up our positions at the place where the road splits and take them out one by one. Kasumi-san and Ryuka, please gradually get used to the dungeon.”

In order to be able to investigate the area, the dungeon must have first been cleared. In Sky World, monsters in remote dungeons wouldn’t respawn sooner than in a few hours a few hours, so once they have been all killed once, the area could be safely searched.

Puppet Dolls were wooden dolls with spherical joints that gave off the impression of golem type monsters. Each only one meter tall, they were about as big as a small child. Though, several of them could attack at once, sometimes up to ten of them.

However, they didn’t seem to have any special attacks, so they just recklessly attacked by slamming their hands, instead of with sticks or bludgeons. Their attack skill level was 100, so they were green even to Ryuka. Basically, they were just little minion monsters that weren’t very strong.

It took about an hour to clear the Puppet Dolls area.

“It’s fine no matter how many Puppet Dolls there are. Kasumi-san, can you protect Ryuka? I’m counting on you.”

“Ye-yes! Please leave it to me!” Elated upon hearing Jun’s words, Kasumi nodded, bracing herself. Cheerfully taking Ryuka along with her, she disappeared into the interior passage. “Jun, we won’t die!”

“You scoundrel. You’re the worst!”

Yukaria and Eri’s jeering slammed Jun. He left, almost as if to escape them.

Part 11

Jun had said “I’m counting on you” to her.

That excited her tremendously.

As Kasumi inspected the ceiling, walls, and floor of the area, she had a huge smile on her face, unable to hold back her delight. Ryuka, having steadily watched her, sighed and said, “You’re such a little girl in love.”

“He-he-heeey, what are you talking about?!”

“Jun, you like him, don’t you?”

“... Yes.”

“That’s why you’re acting weird.”

“But... I, uh, am always being dragged around...”

“I don’t think so. Though I haven’t come on many adventures yet, Kasumi, I think you’re a really good light warrior. You don’t seem at all like a newbie to MMOs.” Ryuka glanced up at Kasumi. As if she noticed something in her facial expression, she smiled brightly.

“I respect you a lot, being able to like Jun this much.”

“He saved me.”

“On Altaria, right? I heard from Jun himself. But he also said that you work very hard and that he definitely wouldn’t have been able to have done it without your help.”

“I... just tried to do what Jun-san said. Though even now, I still can’t do everything myself.”

Some time ago, that was the case. She thought that in the future, she herself would be the one sent to do reconnaissance. Surely if she got attacked by strong monsters, she would have been able to endure the attacks until she returned to the rest of the group. Either way, Jun didn’t have any option other than Kasumi. That was sad.

“You aren’t enjoying yourself, right?” asked Ryuka. Kasumi couldn’t utter a response. “God. Kasumi, and even after you came clean with this... you’re

pitiful.”

“I am... I’m sorry.”

“H-hey, don’t just agree with me like that!” For some reason, she panicked. Ryuka, who had apologetically curled up into a ball, smiled cutely. “Ugh, I’m not that good at cheering people up.”

“I didn’t know. Ryuka-san, I thought you were more calm and composed.”

“Lots of people say that I am for my age. Though I’m not. I just don’t show many facial expressions. In reality, I’m bad at getting angry or laughing out loud.”

“Like just now, when you suddenly panicked?”

“That was... I was just really surprised. That you would respond like that, though I think that I incited it... this is difficult.” Ryuka put her hand on her face and sighed. “Since sensei is usually one to agree obediently like that.”

“Genta-san...”

“Guess it can’t be helped. Kasumi, last time you cheered me up. This time, it’s my turn to return the favor.”

“Uh, uhh. It’s fine if you don’t do so much.”

“No, this is about my honor as a merchant. I’ll do whatever I can.” Ryuka made her hand firmly into a fist. “Well, as it stands, I’m a young girl with some knowledge about relationships. I at least know the basics of love.”

At that moment, Ryuka seemed like Eri.

While they had been chatting, Kasumi and Ryuka managed to fully investigate the area.

According to Jun, they should have been watchful of signs of hollow areas when hitting the floor and walls with sticks. If the hit sounded hollow, it was possible that there was a secret passageway behind.

“I’m thinking about other patterns of traps, but I don’t know much about hidden passages.”

In accordance with what Jun had said, the two of them walked around hitting

the walls, floor, and ceiling with three-meter-long sticks.

It was quite tedious. However, it was a task they couldn't afford to neglect.

Kasumi completely forgot that they were in a dungeon. Ryuka most likely also did too.

"When you hit with the stick, first hit the floor, then the wall, and then finally, the ceiling. That's the order in which it should be done. Only when you confirm the floor to be secure can you advance."

They did not abide by what Jun told them to do.

Just as Kasumi took a step, she noticed immediately.

I haven't tapped this part of the floor yet!

She was too late. Instead of feeling a hard stone floor, her body sank into the ground.

The floor disappeared.

"Kasumi!"

She was too late in realizing that it was a pit trap. Ryuka shrieked and grabbed Kasumi. Kasumi fell, and along with her went Ryuka.

Part 12

They found themselves in darkness, aching all over. After their moans quieted down, they began to move.

“Kasumi, I hope you’re okay.” Ryuka’s voice echoed over their heads. “Wait a moment. Lemmie get some light.”

The fragment of magic augite that she held in her hand illuminated the vicinity.

There appeared to be a stone wall nearby. Kasumi stood up after confirming that she had not suffered any injuries.

“Good thing you’re okay even though you were under me.” Ryuka took out one of her communication stones and frowned. “None of my communication stones are connecting.”

Kasumi hastily checked her own to no avail. It seemed like they were in a special zone in which communication stones were rendered ineffective.

However, would they be able to keep going without contact to Jun or the others? That aside...

“Ryuka-san, let’s try teleporting.”

“Hmm, okay.”

Ryuka nodded and performed a group teleportation spell. A light green circle appeared below their feet...

Then, the spell’s light disappeared.

“... So, it seems teleporting doesn’t work here either.”

“What about a different spell?”

They found spells that didn’t affect movement seemed to work. Communication and movement spells were all that were unusable.

“At any rate, I think they’ll realize we’re missing,” Ryuka said, unfazed by their situation.

“Then we should probably wait here...” After thinking about it a bit, Kasumi

shook her head. “Let’s try going further in. I’ll put important things like communication stones into my magic pouch. So, worst case scenario, even if we die, we will still be able to keep in contact with Jun-san and the others.”

The magic pouch was a bound item which Kasumi got as soon as they made it to this island. On death, an adventurer retained whatever was stored within it.

When Kasumi was journeying with Sakuya’s team, she did not possess a magic pouch. For that reason, she couldn’t contact her fellow teammates when she fell to Altaria Island.

“Ryuka-san, wait here please. I think it’s best if only I risk dying.”

“Don’t be so stubborn. Besides, wasn’t all this *my* request?”

When Kasumi started walking away, Ryuka followed behind her.

“If I go in, maybe we’d be able to teleport out.”

That was quite plausible. Kasumi couldn’t refuse her after that reasoning.

The two of them trod a dark passage relying on only their piece of augite to light the way.

Shortly afterwards, the end of the narrow passage opened before them.

They entered a large, mysterious room with a very high ceiling. In the center of the room, there stood a stone coffin at the top of a platform few meters tall. Systematically arranged candlesticks, hung on the sides of the stairs leading to it.

Just as Ryuka and Kasumi stepped foot into the center of the room, the candles lit up all at once.

“Ah!”

Ryuka and Kasumi grabbed tightly onto each other.

Ahh, me, get a grip!

Kasumi let go of Ryuka’s hand and took a step forward.

The floor shook violently.

“Eek, eeeeeeeek!” Hugging Ryuka firmly, she staggered ahead. “E-earthquake... Ryuka-san, are you okay?”

“It can’t be... I’ve never heard of earthquakes in Sky World.”

Ryuka calmed Kasumi, who was overwhelmed with surprise, down.

When they looked up at the coffin in the center of the room, its heavy lid appeared to slowly open.

“This is... aaaaaaah!”

They couldn’t stop shivering. Their legs turned to jelly. Ryuka too, shivered unknowingly.

From all they could see, nothing had touched the coffin.

A stink filled the air. Gray smoke which had begun to pour out of the coffin gradually enveloped the entire room...

“It hath come!” The sound of a deep male voice echoed through the room. “The time hath come! My voice shall be released! My grief! My sorrow! As will my wrath!”

A humanlike figure slowly emerged from the stone coffin.

Its glowing red eyes scowled at Kasumi from their sunken eye sockets.

“Cross thyself!” shouted the figure.

“Kasumi!”

Just as Ryuka called out her name, Kasumi’s HP bar completely depleted.

“Ryuka!”

While she was losing consciousness, she knew that Ryuka would suffer the same fate soon...

Right before she slipped away, she saw the system message window.

Penglai Emperor’s Death Call has been activated.

That was what was written. Death Call. That was most likely an attack.

The Penglai Emperor, huh?

This message was the last thing Kasumi saw.

Quest: The Resurrection of the Penglai Emperor has begun “The Penglai

Emperor's... resurrection."

She didn't have enough time to process its meaning before her consciousness was swallowed up by the darkness.

Part 13

Kasumi awoke in her inn room back at Payang. Kasumi and Eri had kept the room reserved for the duration of their trip. Since she awoke naked, it came in as obvious that she had died.

Her pouch shook nearby. It was a communication stone.

Kasumi took out the vibrating stone out of her pouch. It was Ryuka's. She remembered that the girl must have died right after she herself did. Her bind point should have been a safe zone near the pyramid.

"Kasumi! There's trouble!" yelled Ryuka, who was usually calm and composed. "Look at your quest list! Quick!"

Still a bit confused, Kasumi took out her tablet and did as she was told. When she saw the text displayed on the screen, she gulped loudly.

Quest: The Resurrection of the Penglai Emperor has begun

Appease the wrath of the Penglai Emperor who will resurrect in less than ten days. If this quest is failed, you will die.

Death. Once she saw that word, she bit her lip.

"Kasumi, what's your battery at right now?..."

"A little less than 30% left. In these ten days, I won't be able to revive safely."

In Sky World, death was not final. When adventurers lost all of their HP, they would revive at their bind point.

Each death reduced the battery on their tablets by 40%. It took one day for the battery to charge 1%. And when an adventurer's battery became fully depleted...

Revival would not take place. The deceased adventurer would disappear. Nobody knew where.

"Kasumi...san" All of the color in Ryuka's face was sucked out. Somehow, she managed to utter, "It's okay."

Chapter 3: Raid Guild

Part 1

Kasumi Yukasaki had a dream.

It was a horrible one at that. She was alone in a dark and empty room. The whole time, she heard Jun's dissatisfied voice. Eri was laughing. She wanted to see them and hold their hands. The dense, uncomfortable atmosphere rendered her unable to move. She felt her body weigh her down like lead.

How could this happen?

Then she realized. Kasumi Yukasaki had... passed through death's door a third time.

When she got up from her bed, a distraught Eri welcomed her. Watching her patiently, as soon as she noticed that Kasumi had awoken, Eri got out of the way and began laughing for some reason.

"U-uuh, don't think I'm making fun of you or anything," blurted out Eri.

"Don't worry... please don't. Thank you."

Kasumi dropped her head. The rays of the morning sun had begun to seep into the room through an opening in the window. On a normal day, she would have begun preparing breakfast by now.

"Sorry, I slept in late. I'll head down to the kitchen right now..."

"It's fine. It's fine. Kasumi, you seem tired. Why don't you rest a bit?"

There was a knock at the door. Jun's voice soon followed through the wall.

"I have something to talk about. Since you two seem to be awake, this is a good time to do it. Come down to the first floor."

Part 2

Jun entered this world about five months ago. Though he wasn't absorbed in cooking like Kasumi had been, it did manage to satisfy his hunger for adventure, earning him small bursts of pleasure through trial and error.

Spreading some freshly baked bread with butter, adding lettuce and cheese in between two slices and then lightly sprinkling some salt and pepper on top, he made simple sandwiches. If he had the time, he liked to heat up some sausage over a fire too, but for now, all that mattered was preparing something substantial enough to fill up their stomachs.

"While we eat, I want to ask you a few questions."

In the bar on the first floor of the inn where they had been staying, there were ten tables. That morning, Jun's group took up one corner of it. Five people sat together at the table, Jun, Kasumi, Eri, Yukaria, and Ryuka.

"First, let's get things straight. Kasumi and Ryuka, yesterday, you two have received a quest from an NPC you believe to be the Penglai Emperor. And then you two were killed. By an attack called 'Death Call'."

"Now that I think of it, by the time he called out my name, my HP had already dropped all the way to zero."

"Mine too."

What Kasumi and Ryuka described seemed typical of an impact attack.

Until now, Jun had never heard anything about a monster with an instant death attack.

He did not imagine such a monster of the legends could exist.

It was the gods. Sky World's lore said so. The great gods could manipulate humans simply by calling out their names. With only a point of a finger, they could stop hearts. They were just that absolute in power.

They rarely interfered with the people of the physical world. The minstrels sang of tales that once, in an era long gone, the gods could be seen in the skies, but that they all left for another world.

“The Penglai Emperor NPC had to have been a god. Believe me. I think that you two were killed to inform you of that fact. There are lots of people who would behave rashly towards raid monsters.”

“But hey, if that were the case, why would the Penglai Emperor disappear in the first place?”

Yesterday, after Kasumi and Ryuka died, they scrambled to contact the others with their communication stones. If they could use them, Teleport should have been usable too.

Though their things stayed with their dead bodies, they first and foremost wanted to tell the others about the Penglai Emperor.

All that they could find was a single antique book that had fallen from the coffin.

“I don’t know if that book’s for the item identification skill. So what is it? Jun, can you get it identified at an NPC in the city?”

Jun had gone to an appraisal NPC acquaintance of his last night. Though the book was in terrible condition, he succeeded. The result was...

“I just know the name of the item. It’s ‘The Penglai Emperor’s Prophecy’.”

“So it’s something like that... Hey, does that mean you were able to read it?”

“Well, after mulling over it for a night, I realized that I had forgotten the most fundamental details,” Jun said, handing the book over to Kasumi.

“Kasumi-san, try opening it.”

Yesterday, when they tried opening the book, all they could find inside were indecipherable words. Sky World had its own languages. Since it was not Japanese, players were pained by their curiosity to understand how to read and write them. With a high enough linguistics skill level, they could read other local languages.

However, the language in which this book was written was one that was not covered by that skill. Yesterday, the group split up to cover the town and find adventurers who had maxed out the linguistics skill. Though it was possible that it was a language that could only be understood with a linguistics level higher

than the currently discovered maximum... which had yet to be discovered since few players were purposefully searching those out.

Sure enough...

"I can read it," Kasumi said. The others looked at her, astonished. "Ryuka, how about you?"

"Uh... hmm." Ryuka hastily looked at the text of the prophecy from the side. "Seems like I can read it too."

They all dropped their shoulders in exhaustion.

"Aren't we such idiots? We should have known that only characters who have the quest could read it..." chimed in Yukaria.

"God. I should've realized sooner. This makes so much sense."

Since it was related to a quest, it frustrated him. Moreover, Jun was annoyed that he hadn't been able to get that quest. Putting that aside...

"We only have nine more days... sorry, Kasumi. We wasted some time."

That was true. In nine days, the quest time limit would elapse. If it wasn't completed by then, Kasumi would incur the quest penalty and die. Her battery would fall to zero percent. She would die for the third time.

"Well.. uh. After dying for the third time, do you know what happens? Could it be that maybe the player would be sent back to the real world?" Eri wondered.

Jun nodded his head, "Perhaps that may be the case. Stay optimistic! Kasumi-san, we'll definitely help you through it."

"Of course we will!"

As a matter of fact, Jun knew something that the others didn't.

Soon after he came to this world, he went around visiting various people. On the very day of the Birthday, some people decided to commit suicide immediately, and those people who died three times in just the morning were no longer around, for some reason or another.

That's what happened. All of them. Though he didn't keep records, tens, maybe even hundreds, of people took their own lives that day.

Jun knew. They did not go home to the world from which they came.

Because Junichiro Mikimori only came to this world after they had killed themselves, the afternoon of that day. Up until then, in the real world, if there had been any news on the disappeared players, it would have made headlines.

Eri's optimistic explanation had no chance of being true. So...

Jun looked carefully at Kasumi's face. Though she more or less looked pale, she remained calm.

She had nine days left. Though that didn't mean that she wasn't scared. Earlier, while she was going down the stairs, she hesitated a lot. That was the proof. If she fell from the stairs, she would have taken fall damage. As of now, to her, losing health was akin to dying. The way she expressed her fright was strange.

"Anyways, what's written inside?"

Hearing Eri, Kasumi read the book aloud.

Jun hastily took out his tablet to take notes.

Five thousand years ago, the Penglai Emperor was a great man. He created a giant empire and sent out his soldiers in search of immortality. Many soldiers made it to other islands, but died of exhaustion. However, a few returned with a clue as to perpetual youth and longevity.

One of them brought a certain mountain man back to the emperor with him.

The mountain man said that his people were just ordinary humans who had decided to isolate themselves in search of the truth of the world. They were unaffected by the tides of time, impervious to disease, and lived off the mist for sustenance.

"However, that is not to say that we, the mountain men, never die. If the emperor's wishes are for eternal life, your majesty should go capture an immortal bird. With the blood of an adult immortal bird, your majesty can be resurrected numerous times."

The emperor did all he could to capture an immortal bird. However, it was just a little chick. They found that it would need five thousand more years to

mature.

“Until that day comes, I shall enter a deep slumber. In five millennia, I shall awaken, and when that happens, the Penglai Empire shall be restored.”

And with that, the Penglai Emperor went to sleep.

Before long, the Penglai Empire crumbled and became forgotten in all but myths.

“That story sounds like it came out of a book by Osamu Tezuka [1]!”

“The legend of the fire bird is quite famous.”

“Though, normally, people who desire immortality like this get punished for the very thought...” Eri, well-cultured in manga, tilted her head. “We couldn’t read this story earlier, right? For the time being, that ‘immortal bird’ should be the Phoenix of Kunlun.”

Kunlun Mountain was home to many raid monsters. The Phoenix was a popular monster among them. With appropriate preparation, the Phoenix was said to be just a bit stronger than the Vermillion Bird, but it respawned much more quickly.

Generally speaking, raid monsters respawned every week. Though the Vermillion Bird could be fought once per day, in order to be able to fight them, adventurers had to band together and complete a long series of quests.

The Phoenix respawned every six hours, four times faster than that of the already special Vermillion Bird, living up to its reputation as the immortal bird. In spite of that, for a monster on the seventh island ring that could be farmed easily, it was not very popular.

“Maybe it’s for the quest. Or maybe it’s a quest that just needs an item to be picked up,” said Jun. “But then, if we just obtain its blood, the quest should complete...”

“Worst case scenario, we have to bring it back down into that room under the pyramid. But Ryuka’s bind point is still right in front of the pyramid. If we just get the item, we can teleport to the pyramid right after, and go into the pitfall... shouldn’t be *too* hard. The problem is, what item does this ‘The Resurrection of

the Penglai Emperor' quest need?"

"There's the Phoenix's drop, Phoenix Blood," Ryuka said. That shop manager knew the drops of monsters on this island the best out of the five of them. "Each kill should get us one."

"Maybe it's a crafting material for an elixir?"

Elixirs were a type of consumable potions that healed a considerable amount of health. However, since the materials were expensive and difficult to get, raid guilds seldom made use of them.

"So Jun, you know it?"

"I trained my alchemy skill as quickly as possible. I remember a few recipes here and there," he responded confidently, then turning to Ryuka.

"The Phoenix Blood is a material used for the creation of Elixirs. However, Elixirs have many recipes. Phoenix Blood can't be effectively substituted out for any other materials. Well, if you're making it normally, it's easier to make it using different materials."

"Just as expected from Ryuka... on the other hand, Jun, you're a waste of time," Yukaria stared viciously at him.

Jun glared back and said, "You're really annoying." Though...

"Well then. It shouldn't be too hard, especially given the fact that it is an unpopular common drop, and the Phoenix respawns quickly," Eri said, cheerfully, leaning on the back of her chair.

Similarly, Kasumi, who had stiffened from the mental strain, loosened up her body too, and let out a large sigh of relief.

Jun also sighed... and noticed that Ryuka looked pale.

"Hey, Ryuka. Do you have any in storage?"

"Uh... no. I sold all that I had." Ryuka looked at Jun, as if she had something else to say. "Jun, remember a little while before, when you helped us out?"

"Hmm... with that violent adventurer?"

Come to think of it, that guy, a member of the Illusionary Brigade, for some

reason wanted to buy everything from Ryuka. His name was Zakka.

“That guy wanted a Phoenix Blood.”

Jun frowned. That was weird. Something seemed off to him.

Realizing their situation, Eri and Kasumi’s smiling faces stiffened again.

“Last night, I got Genta-sensei’s trade records from the time when we were gone, but it seems somebody else bought out our entire inventory. By some odd coincidence, it was another member of the Illusionary Brigade.”

“Yukaria.”

“Hold on, gimme a sec.” With the help of a communication stone, Yukaria quickly asked one of her acquaintances to stand watch for raid notices at the bulletin board in the town center. “Yeah... yeah, is that so...”

During the call, her face turned stern.

“Huh, I’ll check again. This whole week, the Illusionary Brigade has been setting up camp.”

There’s definitely something fishy going on here...

Jun groaned quietly.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

[1] – Arguably the most famous Japanese mangaka. Creator of works including Astro Boy and Black Jack.

Part 3

Camping.

In MMORPGs, the term, “camping” referred to staying in the same place and killing a monster over and over again each time it respawned. When performed against raid monsters, camping could last up to two weeks, or sometimes even longer.

Of course, having an entire guild stay in the same place for a long time could incite tensions with other groups of people. In games where PKing was allowed, this could provoke entire wars.

In Sky World, PKing was unregulated outside of towns.

“At any rate, it’s strange,” moaned Jun, as he munched on the bread he baked himself.

After they managed to confirm that the Illusionary Brigade was camping the Phoenix, the group reconvened for lunch in the bar and shared whatever information they had learned.

It had become clear that the Illusionary Brigade was out in a frenzy collecting Phoenix Blood.

“It’s not just my shop. They’ve scoured the whole city, just to look for Phoenix Blood.” Ryuka had gotten in touch with other shopkeepers. “I heard that they, whoever they were, were buying them out at any cost. Even if they were overpriced tenfold, they’d swoop in and make the purchase without hesitating. In the auctions too. As soon as the Phoenix Bloods were placed on display, they would pay the buyout price. Now, nobody in the whole city has any Phoenix Blood. And even with all that the Illusionary Brigade has bought, they’re still camping Phoenixes...”

“It’s indisputable among everybody I know. They’re definitely camping Phoenixes,” Yukaria chimed in. “Though a few guilds have gone into negotiations with the Illusionary Brigade, they respond with, ‘We’re not in the mood to stop at this moment,’ persistently... They won’t even tell us why they’re engaging in such activities. Those guys are just stubborn, even when threatened with weapons.”

“Brute force will always reign supreme,” interjected Eri.

From the start, the Illusionary Brigade was known as a menacing force. They were famous for their coerciveness in negotiations with their incredibly large 500-person-strong guild. Though now, it seemed that they had shifted their focus to the fourth island ring...

“Hey, on just this island, it seems like there’s about a hundred Illusionary Brigade members,” continued Eri. She had amassed some information of their members from other adventurers. “Over the course of about two months, there were many newcomers to this lower island. Though my contacts heard a lot about them... there’s not much that they know in detail. The Illusionary Brigade has many strict rules and regulations. As soon as you join, you have to sever ties with any player not affiliated with the guild. You aren’t even allowed non-guild-issued communication stones, let alone ones for former friends. It’s like an army.”

“Well, that’s ‘cause raid guilds often resemble armies in nature. Disallowing communications is just a precaution against spies.”

Jun had joined raid guilds before in other MMOs. He had even been at the center of such guilds, along with Kai as the leader. There was a time when they had been the best in the server. In the end, Kai lost interest and neglected his responsibilities...

He disbanded a group with just a single “well, I’ve had enough”.

Though that seemed typical of Kai, he managed to earn the ire of many a player. Jun was always swept along with his whims.

Even Kai had a weakness. His feelings were always deep towards people he considered friends. Bringing Kasumi to Sky World was very like him. First doing so on a whim, later regretting it, and then recklessly pushing her away. However this was just the way his strong wishes to protect her manifested themselves.

Jun understood Kai/Sakuya’s thoughts, but could not approve. The result of their differing views was a duel to the death. It happened more than a month ago.

If I can't get Kasumi through this... I'll never be able to face Kai again.

Noticing Jun glance over at her, Kasumi stiffened and smiled.

Damn it...

His heart throbbed. It must have been terrifying to have these feelings of despair and dread assail her.

She's my companion. I can't lose one of my greatly treasured companions.

The situation was as grave as could be.

But it was still too early to give up. They could still do tons of things.

"Eri. Can you go into more detail about what you heard about people who joined the Illusionary Brigade?"

"Nobody knew anything too important. First of all, they're focused on recruiting heavy warriors, white magicians, and black magicians. They're only taking half the magic swordsmen. Too bad for you, Jun."

"So they've got plenty of attackers. Makes sense for a large guild. In order to maintain balance, they can't just randomly select recruits. To keep things stable, essentially, they shouldn't be taking too many of the lower strata classes like attackers..." Jun retorted, responding calmly to Eri's provocation.

Eri spewed out, "Well that's boring."

Jun redirected the conversation.

"Well. There will always be new faces coming in and out. People fighting against raid monsters on the fifth and sixth rings need to prepare their equipment. They were really organized like an army, taking down strong monsters and aiming to become stronger themselves.

Loot from raid monsters often divvied up based on individual contribution. It is often the case that armor considered top quality by regular players is also considered trash by even lower ranking members of raid guilds.

Rather, that had to be the case. They, having entered a strictly organized army, had to be compensated for their discomforts in some way. For the promise of increased power for their own characters, those who joined raid

guilds are content with remaining mere pawns.

That in itself was not bad, but...

The nature of these raid guilds meant that they couldn't avoid a sense of elitism.

"The Illusionary Brigade seems notorious for being nasty. After joining, it was common for new recruits to take over and camp areas. I've heard that they purposefully unleash trains on others and monopolize monsters that respawn by triggers."

A "train" was a term developed early in the MMORPG world.

After engaging in battle with many monsters, one would send them all at a nearby group member.

For example, an adventurer infiltrating a goblin fortress could run past an unsuspecting lookout and bring with him goblins from inside the fortress. As the chain of goblins that would emerge from the fortress looked like a train, the word was coined for this concept.

When the train stopped right in front of another adventurer and the current train driver died, the role of the train driver would pass onto that nearby player. In MMOs, when somebody yells "Train!", everybody in the vicinity had to immediately drop whatever they were doing and flee.

However, with strong enough armor that could withstand such onslaughts, members of raid guilds could easily accidentally cause trains, though usually, they would feel ashamed afterwards.

But creating trains on purpose with the intention of killing other people...

Jun looked back to what had happened on Altaria. On that isolated island, Jun knew that that guild leader behaved unscrupulously and was no match for Jun herself. At wits end, she had no choice but to turn to MPK as her final option.

Eri's description of the Illusionary Brigade's actions was incorrect. It was clear that they couldn't have been unleashing trains on others just for their own happiness.

"They just absolutely want to do it."

“Raid guilds on the order of hundreds of members all wanted to go to higher rings. It seems nobody knows why the Illusionary Brigade would be so keen on having such a large presence in a place like this.”

Though Lao Thai, an island on the seventh ring, was said to be home to three thousand adventurers, most of them were unaffiliated with any large entity or only operated in small groups of up to ten.

Though there were a few guilds with more than a hundred players, they served no other purpose than to facilitate cooperation between players, never to do raids. Because their members weren’t even hardcore MMORPG players, their intentions didn’t change much after the Birthday.

Rather, people who were apt to risk their lives by joining a raid guild were quite eccentric.

“I really wonder why those fellows in the Illusionary Brigade are collecting so much Phoenix Blood...”

“At least, we know that they have no interest in the pyramid.”

“Ah, that reminds me. Jun, you went back to the pyramid right? How was it there?”

“Basically, all we found out was that the Illusionary Brigade doesn’t know anything.”

Ryuka’s bind point was still in front of the Penglai Emperor’s Pyramid. They made use of it. Jun brought a few of his dark hunter friends, as they were well versed in the art of investigation, and revisited the Pyramid thanks to Ryuka’s teleport spell.

Those dungeon experts left no stone in the pyramid unturned. Searching the hidden rooms, they even managed to begin and clear the appraisal quest.

What they did find out that time though, was that Kasumi and Ryuka were the first ones in the world to have experienced what they did.

“Dark hunters have the ability to analyze footprints. Yesterday, when they used that ability, they found that in the hidden passageway, there were no footprints other than the ones we left. Dust had constantly been piling up. That

dust also could not have been due to magic.”

“I wonder how much we can trust that ability of theirs,” said Ryuka, doubtful.

Yukaria smiled, “Where a game system is concerned, footprint analyses cannot deceive.”

“Is that so? So analyses that come from the system are absolute. Sorry, I still don’t know much about games.”

“Actually, it’s good to question what we take for common sense,” Jun interjected. “We don’t know where a vulnerability could lie ... Okay, let’s get back to the main conversation. There isn’t at all any other way to the room with the pitfall trap than the hidden passageway. While I’m at it, our footprints were the only footprints in that room for at least a hundred years.”

“Your point is,” said Kasumi, summarizing the results of their expedition. “The Illusionary Brigade’s efforts in gathering Phoenix Blood has nothing to do with anything related to the Penglai Emperor’s quest.” Everybody nodded. Everything up to now made sense. The problem lay with what was just said. “So, why? Even if it has nothing to do with the pyramid or with making elixirs, why would the Illusionary Brigade be camping Phoenixes for so long?”

Nobody had anything to say.

The raid guild was camping there with many, as much as a hundred, people for an extended period of time. They bought up all of the Phoenix Blood in town. What did they have in mind that led them to go to such lengths?

When would they stop camping? If they wouldn’t, would they be open to passing the camp location over temporarily?

“I don’t think there’s any way to get rid of the Illusionary Brigade,” Eri said, dejected. “It will be hard. Obsessing so much over Phoenix Blood and having it become the guild’s reason to live, that is, over getting stronger, must have been caused by an incredibly deep desire. If they needed a lot of materials for stronger weapons and armor, that’d be it. They’re thinking of controlling a monopoly over Phoenix Blood.”

“Getting other raid guilds to go to war with them... would that be impossible?”

After Jun thought about it for a bit, he shook his head. “We don’t know whether we could be able to do it, or if it would even turn out well. During a war, we wouldn’t even be able to get any Phoenix Blood. Not to mention that we don’t even have that kind of connections. First of all... nine days wouldn’t be enough. There isn’t even a large scale raid guild here on this island right now.”

“Ugh, so it’s no use.”

A Black magician’s teleport spell allowed fast travel between towns. However, only an airship could transport adventurers between islands. Such obstacles to movement existed in Sky World.

“Let’s continue gathering information. Yukaria, I’m counting on you to find and prepare volunteers for the Phoenix raid. It doesn’t matter whether you tell them about our situation. We need to be ready to swoop in immediately for our raid on the off-chance that the Illusionary Brigade disappears tomorrow. Ryuka, you’re in charge of going around and visiting the merchants once again. Kasumi-san, can you go through the bars and make sure that nobody has any more Phoenix Blood? Eri, can you make a list of people who are bitter with the Illusionary Brigade?”

“Fine with me, but... do you have a plan?”

“Of course I do.”

“Okay, Jun. I do love your scheming, so don’t let your perseverance rot.”

“Stop praising me, I’m shy.” Jun grinned widely.

“Exactly what do you have in mind? Are we not going to try to negotiate with the Illusionary Brigade?”

“Before that, I want to have a few things ready. Even if we enter discussions, we need to have a few trump cards to play.”

Part 4

Jun, having purposefully checked in at a usually empty inn, secluded himself in his room. After making sure that the door was safely locked, he called for Alice.

“So far, here’s what I know.” Alice nodded in response. “Let’s try to make this fast. If you have any clues, please let me know.”

“Any... clues?”

“It doesn’t matter what. Just anything about this quest, the Penglai Emperor, or why the Illusionary Brigade needs Phoenix Blood. Why would the developers design such a deadly quest? Exactly what kind of event is this?”

Alice shook her head in silence. It meant that she couldn’t respond. Though he didn’t expect much, Jun took a huge sigh.

“I’m begging you. *Anything* would be great. Did this quest exist since the start?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m asking if this quest was the same back when Sky World was an MMO.”

“It was.”

“Well, so it’s settled that the dangerous penalty of that quest stayed. But now, adventurers have to put up with a limited battery. Was that danger part of the quest design? Is there any way out?”

“There isn’t.”

“Let me rephrase my question. Is the situation with the Illusionary Brigade collecting Phoenix Blood something that would have been done back then too?” Alice remained silent. However, that was enough for Jun. “I understand. So, they won’t abandon their position.”

“I didn’t say anything.” It was true that she didn’t say anything. Though, there had to have been specific restrictions that Alice followed. However, she tried to keep those guidelines secret as much as she could. “So can I leave?” Jun took out a special linkstone from his back. “That is...”

“Right. You know what happened on Altaria Island. It’s Sakuya’s.”

“Are you going to... contact her?”

“Well, the situation calls for it.”

When Alice disappeared, Jun shook the linkstone.

Kai/Sakuya. He still didn't quite know what to make of her.

Jun's close friend. Kasumi's close friend. The complex circumstances that these words could not express, and the sentiments behind them, enveloped both of them. However...

“Yo! Haven't heard from you in a while.” Just as her slightly suspicious voice seeped out of the linkstone, Jun's spirits rose. He had missed her voice. Though he had only first heard her voice a month ago, he felt like he had known that voice all along. “I'd hoped that you would have contacted me sooner. How awful of you, ignoring me for a whole month. If I were fickle, I would have broken the linkstone a long time ago. You should really study the female psychology some more.”

Just two months prior, he had assumed that her voice would be that of a boy. Though he knew that they were both the same age, and that Kai was quite clever, Jun thought that she would've looked older than him.

He reminisced about these things as he listened to her tomboy-ish voice, thinking about her from the bottom of his heart.

It was Kai. This intonation and slurred speech. Her aloof and teasing attitude.

“Is now a good time?”

“I'm free today. Shouldn't we, as friends, chat until we're satisfied?”

“There's something I want to know... The Illusionary Brigade is collecting Phoenix Blood. Do you happen to know anything about what it can be used for?”

“You don't really care for large-scale guilds, huh. Well, I think it just all comes back to money.”

“It might. That's probably in the right direction. I just want your opinion. I'm asking if the guild's main forces are on higher island rings. As a matter of fact, over here, there's no information about anything past the fourth ring. How is

it?”

“What do you mean, ‘how’?”

“Hasn’t the Illusionary Brigade been painfully defeated?” In Jun’s mind, Sakuya was facing her linkstone with a smile on her face.

“Jun, I don’t know much about what goes on inside large-scale guilds.”

“Anyways, Sakuya, haven’t you worked with the Illusionary Brigade before?”

“Unfortunately, they didn’t think very highly of us. But there wasn’t much of tension between us.”



As far as Sakuya was concerned, though they were trivial, there had been provocations between them. Jun knew of Kai's uncanny ability to get on others'

nerves and pierce them with her words.

“Well, see. We haven’t been able to put out the sparks that did occur.”

That was all Jun needed to hear. Sakuya and her friends had a hostile relationship with the Illusionary Brigade. One of the reasons why they had been driven to a corner could have been her group.

“We need Phoenix Blood for a quest. That item is dropped by the Phoenix on Lao Thai. Do you know it?”

“Ah, I know. I’ve even taken part in a Phoenix raid once. Sorry, but I didn’t really enjoy it, so I didn’t ever get any of its blood.”

“As for now, the Illusionary Brigade is camping it. It’s already been more than a week. Whether they still can’t hand it over after negotiations, we have to find out...”

“Jun, I bet that with your unrivaled charismatic love of harmony, you would be able to move them to tears and convince them to let you guys use it.”

“Just to make sure in case they won’t budge, I want that information. Specifically, if we had to go to war, and call in reinforcements.”

“Would that be okay? Do you know how many members they have camping the Phoenix?”

“According to information we’ve gotten here, about hundred new faces have come to the island.”

“Do those newcomers of two months all seem to be there?” Unfazed, Jun smiled bitterly. He didn’t know what went on within the guild itself. “Jun, really, nobody knows about what I’m about to say. The Illusionary Brigade only knows about the same as us.” Prefacing with this, she continued, “Phoenix Blood is a material for a high ranked alchemy recipe. This recipe, found on the fourth ring... is a recipe for a special kind of potion. But it is kind of weak. It can charge tablet battery by just a little bit.”

“I knew there had to be something... so that’s why...”

The hundred or so people camping the Phoenix were underlings in the guild. Buying up items without caring about the expense and trying to endlessly

collect them. It had to be some sort of consumable.

The guild wanted to get its hands on them.

The final thing that solidified Jun's hypothesis was what Alice had said. She remained silent when Jun asked if it could have also been done back when Sky World was still an MMO.

The Birthday greatly changed one mechanic.

Battery Level.

It used to be the case that no matter how many times somebody died, there would just be a small penalty incurred. Shortly after the Birthday, the term "the third death" was coined.

Quarreling with other guilds, and raids. There were many dangers in Sky World. Challenging guilds in previously unknown areas came with increased dangers of death. As far as adventurers were concerned, the current death penalty was too unforgiving.

If there existed an item that could mitigate the effects of death, it would be worth collecting.

"Thank you. I've figured out what to do."

"No problem. Now then, isn't it time for you to hurry up and pay me back?"

"Sorry, but I'm poor."

"The price for information is other information of course... Jun." She chuckled. "How's Kasumi doing? Is she safe?"

"Ah. I'm doing whatever it takes to bring her to you, kick you over, and have you kneeling on the ground in front of her. We've decided. Look forward to it."

"Is that so? I'm relieved... By no means have you laid a hand on her yet, right?"

"Of course I haven't!"

"Even though you yelled at me, I'm not upset. Calm down, even if Kasumi may be a bit heavy, she's a good girl. And if it's convenient for you, I'm willing to join your harem myself."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! Are you sure that you don’t have a tumor growing in your brain?!”

“Excuse me. That was just a confession from the bottom of my heart. Ah, calm down. I’m bi, so I can take both of you on. Maybe we can have fun, the three of us, someday...”

“I have stuff to do. I’m hanging up.”

“Well then, see ya!”

Returning Sakuya’s linkstone into his pouch as soon as he could hear her no longer, Jun released a sigh.

Did she catch on?

He hid Kasumi’s current situation from her. He hid his own mistake in the Pyramid. Even if Sakuya *did* push her down onto Altaria Island, she did it to protect her. Sakuya’s tendency to worry profusely about those close to her, unrivaled by nothing but her infinite perverseness, caused Jun to not want to tell her.

Either way, going from island to island took time. Because of the air currents, traveling up and down island rings took whole days by scheduled airship. Between the fourth and fifth rings, there was an even more extreme turbulence, a grand storm. Going from the fourth ring to Lao Thai on the seventh would take more than five days.

Certainly, if Sakuya’s group had their own private airship, it would be a different story, but...

He didn’t want any advice. They could do it on their own. If Jun wasn’t certain about whether they could, then why would he have declared that they would be able to chase Sakuya?

Jun left the inn and returned to gathering information again.

If he was really on to something...

Part 5

The Phoenix, which resided in a temple halfway up Mount Kunlun, was one of the strongest raid monsters on Lao Thai. It was said that the natural barrier existed solely to encage the Phoenix within the temple.

Even now, nobody knew how or why it had been captured and sealed there. The Penglai Emperor's Prophecy that Jun's party had uncovered served to provide an inkling of the now-lost history.

The temple stood two days by Long Walk away from Payang. However, after completing a special quest, adventurers could teleport to the Stonehenge at the foot of the mountain. It was a handy game mechanism.

Of course, Jun had already finished that quest long ago.

The following morning, he teleported there alone. With Long Walk, it took him two hours to reach the temple from the base of the mountain. Since he had drunk an invisibility potion, he did not have to fight any monsters on the way...

After he reached a hill from which he could see the temple, his eyes fell on a fortress blocking the way ahead, and beyond that, he spotted the Illusionary Brigade's camp.

Since small patrols of two littered the perimeter of the tall wooden fence, Jun couldn't find a single place from which they could break in. Observing them as closely as he could, Jun noticed that their magicians kept on casting See Invisibility spell.

They had been trained well. Jun even admired them a little. This guild really knew the ins and outs of PvPing.

"So, this means that we can't resort to normal means against them."

Lower ranked members were led to believe that their commanding officers were perfect humans. Someone who could lead an organization over the internet was deemed just as important as someone who could in the real world.

"Well, okay. For the time being, let's not expect too much from formal negotiations."

Though he didn't really wanted to do it, he had no choice. As he donned his

school uniform again to show his messenger status, Jun set off in the direction of the entrance to the heavily guarded encampment.

The ensuing dialogue was just as he feared. Disheartened, he tried harder and harder.

From the start, the Illusionary Brigade underlings shunned him, and no matter what Jun said, they kept on refusing him. They even ignored his request to see their superior. Finally, stubborn as he was, Jun picked up his sword.

“Hey, hold on a sec. I’ve seen you around before.” Just as a guard said that, Jun realized. It was Zakka, the guy who had tried to forcibly take all of the Phoenix Blood from Ryuka’s shop. “That’s right, I remember. If I’m not mistaken, you were that guy from the second-hand shop...”

“Ah, you again?” After that curt response, Jun sighed exaggeratedly. “You were being reckless to that little girl... You’d best only act like that with 2D girls.”

Zakka made eye contact with one of his comrades. Others nearby took a few steps back. “Wait, that’s a misunderstanding! ... What are you blathering about?!”

“Don’t you get it? ... though I don’t think you’re capable of holding back your lust.”

Zakka became flustered, shaking his head profusely.

The members who were surrounding them jeered. Fed up with being organized like an army, they had to have been thirsty for some sort of entertainment and ridiculing Zakka came in handy.

“Quit screwing around with me! I hope you realize that we’re not in the middle of town!”

His cheeks flushed from the undesired attention, Zakka took out his large axe.

Bandit Warrior.

That was Zakka’s class. Though it was a front-line attacker, just like Jun’s magic swordsman, a bandit warrior could not use magic. Instead, bandit warriors had excellent resistance to magic and were known as the magic

swordsman's mortal enemy in PvP.

"Hey, hey, aren't you cool with that big weapon of yours. Want to have a one on one duel to test your manliness?" teased Jun.

"Huh, do you think that you could possibly win against me?"

Jun glanced around. When he mentioned dueling Zakka, it seemed to fire up the others. Not a single one of them appeared to want to help Zakka out. Labeling Zakka a lolicon worked out quite well for him.

This was all in accordance with his plan. He shrugged, knowing that he had no choice but to do it this way.

"Awaken!" As light enveloped his body, his clothes changed to armor. Jun drew his greatsword from behind him. "Well then, brave lolicon-sama, show me your power!"

"I'll cut you in two!"

Kicking the ground, Zakka charged at him. He moved in a straight line.

——— *Of course, heh.*

Jun chuckled as he took a nimble step and avoided Zakka's attack.

"This guy won't stop moving!"

Bandit warriors had the strongest regular attacks. Aside from attack abilities that could be used once every few minutes, they could not be affected by magic. If magic swordsmen imbued magic into their swords, their attacks would be rendered almost completely ineffective. So as a matter of course, spells like Quick Stun did not work.

If only he could move as freely as Jun could, Zakka would have been a formidable foe.

Zakka abruptly unleashed an attack ability. Though Power Attack and Whirlwind could do large scale damage...

In any case, his unvaried attacks were nothing to be afraid of.

"Uh-oh, this is dangerous."

Jun sidestepped two of his attacks by a very thin margin.

Zakka's face grew more and more stern. Bandit warriors could only attack. If he couldn't even land a single attack, then...

"You... what kind of cheats are you using?!"

"You should stop thinking that anything that doesn't make sense to you is automatically cheating." Zakka had no clue how Jun was dodging his attacks.

Jun looked around. The others were teasing Zakka and looking down on Jun. Those were the underlings of the guild. They too, just like Zakka, did not quite understand how Jun was able to keep it up.

It makes sense to me now. These guys have not been taught anything aside from raid mechanics.

He had all the information he needed.

"My turn to attack."

Jun swung his sword down at his unskilled opponent.

The duel turned completely one-sided.

Jun's HP bar was still full to the millimeter. Only Zakka's was depleting. As his health reached 20%, and then 10%, he dropped his sword.

"Pl-please wait. I surrender. I surrender!"

Jun drew his sword back. He stared at Zakka silently. Then, Zakka started laughing abjectly and stepped back.

Jun had not yet noticed that the Illusionary Brigade members who had come to watch their battle had now filled the entrance. They called out to Zakka frantically.

"Y-you guys, look at this dude! He's a cheating rascal! Let's get rid of him quickly..."

"Don't do anything," said a throaty male voice from behind them.

The crowd parted, and a tall, imposing male appeared. He was a young man with a full beard and well-shaped features. Clad in black armor, he carried a scythe.

He was a bandit warrior. And in addition to that, he was an elite of the guild,

possessing armor leagues better than what Zakka had.

“O-officer! This guy...” Panicking, Zakka pointed at Jun.

However, the man completely disregarded Zakka’s presence and made eye contact with Jun.

This guy’s the boss of this unit.

Jun chanted, “Break Down”, and changed back into his school uniform. Generally, when a player wanted to have a conversation, they would change into regular clothes to declare their intent. It meant that he didn’t want to fight. At least, for now.

“Pardon me for causing a squabble at the gate. I’m unaffiliated with any guild. I came here to request a favor of you.”

The officer was silent. Squinting, Jun saw his name light up green above his character.

Daikoku. That was the name of the leader of the one hundred newcomers to the island.

Jun explained the circumstances of his visit. That he got a quest from the Pyramid. That his friend was nearing her third death in just eight days. And finally, that he needed Phoenix Blood to prevent it from happening.

Looking back at the quest description, I expect that the curse will be unleashed after failing it just once. It’s no big deal for Ryuka to die once. So...

“I’m begging you. Just one is all I need. Please let me have one. Or maybe you could let us do the Phoenix raid just once. In that case, I won’t mind if you take every item other than the Phoenix Blood.”

After sincerely and passionately saying that, Jun bowed his head. However...

“Go home. This is the Illusionary Brigade’s camp.” Having said that with indifference in his voice, Daikoku turned back.

“Please wait a moment. Is there any way...”

“You talk too much.” Daikoku suddenly raised his hand. His underlings, now standing in rows, drew their swords.

“I get it. Well then, at least take this.” Jun took out a new set of linkstones from his bag, and threw one linkstone to Daikoku. Almost as if he had eyes on his back, Daikoku caught it with his back turned. “Please hold onto it.”

“I will look forward to hearing from you.”

“Actually, it will be the other way around.” Jun grinned. “Maybe you’ll need to contact me.”

“... What?”

“Now that that’s done, I’ll be taking my leave.”

Jun turned around and ran off without saying anything else.

He had accomplished what he had set out to do. He had sown the seeds that were to be sown. Jun had not hoped that it would have gone as smoothly as it did. All he had to do to get the boss’ attention was to act a bit.

Then, if those guys are able to handle things well...

Part 6

Flashback to the night before that visit.

Jun gathered about ten of the most important members of the Vermillion Bird raid in the bar.

Discussions with them bore fruit. After a debrief on Kasumi's situation and how the Illusionary Brigade was camping out at the Phoenix, they agreed to help.

"If we *do* end up going to battle with the Illusionary Brigade or embarking on a Phoenix raid, it seems we'll be able to gather about 80 people," reported Eri, turning to look at Isao, who had been sitting next to her. A simple alchemist himself, he managed all of the craftsmen in Payang.

"That's not including any potential support," Isao said.

"Right, I didn't include the people who would work behind the scenes in the count. Hey, Jun, you're being awfully insistent on keeping the backstage workers separate from the rest of the group."

"Because we need to work separately at the same time. Eighty people should be enough for our actual work," Jun responded.

"The Illusionary Brigade has a hundred. And those hundred members are clad in raid gear. With just 80 untrained players, we would have literally *zero* chance of victory," chimed in Yukaria.

With her countless connections, she had been responsible for getting so many people to agree to help out. She knew all too well that they would be no match for a well-trained group of raid guild members.

"Of course, some of them *will* be skilled, but... if push comes to shove, and we have to fight, it'd be much better if we had two groups," Yukaria continued. Unfortunately, her former teammates were away on their honeymoon. They were touring around Sky World in an airship, and they wouldn't return for another month.

"One group is plenty enough. What I'm saying is that we can't afford to cross swords without a plan."

“Jun-san, what are you going to do?” Kasumi asked. “You said that you were going to negotiate with the Illusionary Brigade tomorrow, but...”

“The ‘negotiations’ are just an alibi for what I really have in store... though I’m sure they won’t be receptive to what I have to say. Nonetheless, if we don’t start preparing to fight now, we won’t have an excuse for not being able to go through with the Phoenix raid later.”

“That’s right. It would really be laughable if we could make it all the way to the fight with the Phoenix, but not be able to finish it,” said Isao, composed. Jun had not yet told him anything, but he seemed to have vaguely realized that Jun had something in store. Isao knew him well from working with him in other games.

“So, what *are* you going to do?” Eri asked, not satisfied with that explanation. “Are you saying that we are gathering people for a battle we know we’ll lose? Hurry up and tell us your plan.”

“I’ll start with how it’ll end. We’re going to use starvation as a war tactic.” Jun looked over at everybody. Having understood, Isao nodded, while the others blinked in surprise.

“Starvation as a war tactic?” Ryuka tilted her head. “So we won’t let them get any food. However, the Illusionary Brigade should definitely have magicians who can summon bread and water, right?”

“Yeah, most adventurers can summon as much food as they want. Therefore, starvation may not have been the best word to use. Let me rephrase it. We’ll cut off their provisions.”

“Jun, being the wise man exuding intelligence you are, you would understand. But you know, I’m just an inexperienced little elementary schooler so please explain it in simpler terms. What’s a provision?”

An inexperienced little elementary schooler would not talk like that!

Jun read into her retort.

“Supplies. Provisions refer to medical supplies, weapons, ammunition, and other items that fighters use. We’ll be restricting their access to those supplies.”

“But in Sky World, there’s no durability system,” Yukaria pointed out. In games, weapons and armor were assigned durability values, and as one fought, durability would decrease. Sky World had no inconvenient system like that.

“However, weapons and armor can still be damaged. Furthermore, all kinds of potions are needed for raids. Jun made eye contact with Isao. “Isao-san, please tell me what consumable items are needed for the Phoenix raid. Just what well-equipped raid guilds regularly use would be perfect.”

“Sure! Hi-potions aside... without anti-corrosion agents, weapons and armor would degrade a lot. And then, since Phoenixes can inflict the burn status effect, high grade burn salve is needed as well. Raid guilds should have resistance buffs against common negative status effects.”

“Excuse me for a second. Burn and disabled weapon effects don’t count as bad status effects?” asked Kasumi, with her hand raised, nervously, “... though I remember that we used anti-corrosion agents during the Vermillion Bird raid.”

“Eri, as a white magician, could you explain it to her?”

“Got it! Let me see, negative status effects... are status abnormalities that stick to your character. Stuff like paralysis, bind, sleep... you know, Yukaria’s specialty. These effects can usually be cured by a healer’s recovery magic, which can get rid of many, save a few, bad status effects at once. However, disabled weapons and armor are a separate thing completely. They’re not things that can be recovered with magic. That, Kasumi, is the work of alchemists and blacksmiths. Do you get it now?”

“So you’re saying that armor and weapon disability is recovered with alchemy and blacksmithing, right?”

“It requires special equipment. Or a potion. More specifically, anti-corrosion agents can prevent weapon and armor deterioration. Once broken, weapons and armor have to be taken to a special workspace to be repaired with blacksmithing. As is it is now, that process has fallen out of style. It’s annoying... well, aside from raid monsters with special abilities, enemies usually can’t cause weapons to deteriorate. It might be a different story on higher island rings, but at least that’s the way it is here, on the seventh ring. NPCs don’t sell the potion, so players have to make them themselves.”

Kasumi nodded, finally understanding. Picking up things quickly was her forte.

“Well then, is the burn effect any different?”

“That’s a special status effect. Though it wipes out all other status effects, it cannot be cured with the use of magic. You *could* wait for it to elapse on its own, but it would take a few days. Luckily, the burn effect can be healed with a high grade burn salve, a special item that alchemists can craft. Since that effect is really rare on the seventh island ring, NPCs here don’t sell it.”

“So basically, Jun’s plan is to prevent the Illusionary Brigade from getting any more of these key consumable items, right?”

“Right. We’re aiming at the anti-corrosion agents and high grade burn salves, so by extension, we’re pinning for the alchemist and blacksmith areas in the crafting district of town. In order to stop their supply, we need to buy up all of them in the city, and then reserve all of the crafting spaces so that the Illusionary Brigade cannot use them. Though in the beginning, they’ll still have a stockpile, the Phoenix respawns every six hours, so they can fight it up to four times a day. In that case, since they have 100 members, their stockpiles will surely be depleted soon. And then after that, all we have to do is sit tight and watch.”

Jun laughed loudly.

Eri responded, “Wow, what an unpleasant laugh!” as if it were something evil. Some of the others moved away in surprise, while Yukaria and Isao smiled and muttered, “How Jun-like!”

They adjourned.

There would be a war.

This conflict between this temporary alliance of volunteers against the Illusionary Brigade may as well have been Sky World’s first full-scale war.

Part 7

According to earlier reports, it seemed that some Illusionary Brigade members would visit Payang to buy consumable items in bulk in order to replenish their stockpiles. Fortunately, it just so happened that the day right after Jun met with them was one of those item restocking days.

Before their forces could return to town, adventurers working under Isao scoured the city for all of the alchemists and merchants, and then the auction house, buying up all of the anti-corrosion agents and burn salves.

Seven days remained.

“Yo, I let adventurers skilled in smithing and alchemy know what’s going on.” Isao announced happily. In the morning, as usual, he had gone to the inn where Jun and co were staying.

When training alchemy or smithing, the biggest hindrance proved to be the requirement of a suitable working area. In the city, there was only one place where these skills could be used. Therefore, those who wanted to hone those skills became referred to as craftsmen.

As a result, so-called alchemists and blacksmiths formed their own networks. Even if they didn’t join any large crafting guilds, they could still feel solidarity with the rest of the crafter community in smaller guilds. Jun’s plan depended on them being able to make use of this solidarity among craftsmen.

If even a single alchemist or blacksmith did not cooperate, his plan’s prerequisite would not be satisfied...

“Those Illusionary Brigade dudes really have an awful rep ‘round here. Dead ass. Everybody gladly agreed to cooperate. They’re on lookout around all the blacksmithing and alchemy areas.”

“How’s buying up everything?”

“We’ve put in a word with some adventurers who possess some stock. We should have everything from within the boundaries of the city. But hey, is this fine, Jun? We’re spending a lot, man.”

“Doesn’t matter to me. Keep going. If necessary, I’ll repay the favor

sometime... do we not have enough money?"

"Nah, seems the guild's got a large stockpile. Got it bro, I'll do what I can."

Fortunately, Jun had valuable security items.

It was the airship that he had just recently lent out to those cooking aficionados. They borrowed money from Isao's guild, the Sage Association, to serve as collateral.

Members of production guilds, besides selling their products, could use alchemy to craft mostly consumables. Luckily, the Sage Union had amassed a lot of liquid capital.

"Next, we're off to the port, right?"

In the southern part of Payangwas the island's sole airship port. It was an open place where, unsurprisingly, regularly scheduled airships could anchor in between their routes around the islands.

"Dead ass? All of the Illusionary Brigade's main force is on the fourth ring or higher, right? Surely it would take at least seven days for regularly scheduled airships from there to reach here."

Without using personal airships, there was no way to go from the fifth to fourth rings without having unlocked the weekly airship service by completing the Fulfai Campaign. Even with personal airships, in order to access the route, a special item from the Fulfai Campaign was still necessary. According to the first to make it through, there was a special whirlwind that could only be crossed if timed in a particular way. This was known as the Grand Storm.

The next hole in the Grand Storm would appear after three days. Following the route of a regularly scheduled airship, it would take an additional four days after that to land on Lao Thai.

"I'm pretty sure of it."

"Often the people will stay on the fourth ring anyway. In a guild shrouded by secrecy, information rarely travels even within it, yo."

"Ah, well, that would be unexpected." Jun responded, avoiding the question. At any rate, his informant was Sakuya. Since then, she had passed along

information several times, happily informing him of the Illusionary Brigade's movements.

"Jun, if you could beat the Illusionary Brigade into a corner, I would be really happy," she said, laughing happily from the bottom of her heart. "Well, it's your battle. Or just my own wish."

"It's both of ours."

It seemed like they were at the brink of an awful confrontation with the Illusionary Brigade.

"Yeah, yeah. They have one personal airship. Since it's small, even packed in like sardines, it would only hold ten people, but ... it's really fast. They could make it over to you just a single day. That's if they were careful enough to leave the day after a hole opened in the Grand Storm," reported Sakuya the previous day.

"Isao-san. Please keep getting players to join our cause."

"Got it!" Isao nodded intently.

Part 8

Acts of violence in town were inexcusable.

The Imperial Guard stationed in the city piloted Knight Golems and could teleport anywhere. As they were incredibly strong fighters, even members of a large scale guild would not stand a chance against them. Big and booming cities like Payang had over a hundred Knight Golems at their disposal. In addition, the skillful Guard would usually keep watch over the town through their magic, looking out for bad-intentioned adventures causing trouble.

Sure enough, though Illusionary Brigade's restocking team would soon pick up on Jun's little trick, they wouldn't be able to interfere with Jun's squad or any of the merchants around town. They could do nothing but grind their teeth.

"If you don't want anything bad to happen to you, listen to us," threatened members of the Illusionary Brigade inside hidden alleyways. However, just as they wanted to go through with the threats and assaulted a group of local alchemists, a Knight Golem appeared behind them.

Afterwards, when Jun heard of this situation, he thought that somebody clever had reported that the Illusionary Brigade was probably causing unrest in advance. Even the city itself knew of the Illusionary Brigade's outrageous mannerisms and watched their members well.

"I thought that the Guard didn't really think much of adventurers," Eri said, laughing happily, as she heard the report from the first floor of their usual inn.

On the one hand, Kasumi, who had been sitting next to her, said, "Really? But whenever I greet them, they respond with a smiling face," slanting her head.

It used to be that Jun would have surely chuckled and added, "That's just because your affinity with them is high." Since she repeatedly completed a lot of quests, Kasumi had maxed out her Affinity in Payang.

The current Jun had a different point of view.

Kasumi Yukasaki, even without using her Affinity or other numerical values, had a certain charm about her that attracted people to her in Sky World. That's what he thought now.

From the start, the denizens of the city and the Guard had never been boring, one-sided NPCs...

“Here’s the takeaway. I still have a long way to go. Preoccupied only with adventurers, I forgot that the people of this world were not just NPCs.”

Practically speaking, it’s not unlikely that they would try to trip us up.

Though he didn’t make any facial expression, Jun stroked his chest in relief. This was a gamble he couldn’t afford losing. Double and triple checking was quite necessary.

“It’s not too late. We can ask players who get along well with the regular residents of the city to contact the influential NPCs. Though I don’t know how much they would understand our cause... if they could make sure that there was no animosity among the townsmen, everything would be fine.”

“If you say so, I can...”

“No, Kasumi-san, you asking them yourself won’t work. This might be bad, but we need to make you out as a tragic heroine.”

“A tragic... heroine, huh?”

“In fairy tales, an obvious heroine, and a clear-cut villain is necessary. Not to mention that our opponents are perverted otaku, right?” He quickly made eye contact with Eri, who understood immediately and puffed out her cheeks in discontent.

“Being a perverted otaku doesn’t have to be bad!”

“Speaking of that, Kasumi-san. You ought to know somebody who’s proud and prideful. Please introduce me. I want to entrust him with the job of telling our story to the soldiers. About the tragic heroine and the adventurers rising to save her.”

Part 9

Lefay was a first-class member of the Guard.

As the second son of a merchant in Payang, he was expected to join the Guard while the eldest son would succeed his father.

First-class members of the Imperial Guard qualified to operate the near-invincible Knight Golems. Lefay was thirty-two years old and only eight years separated him from a public retirement and membership in the council. He was running down the path to success at full speed.

The council had claimed that the Imperial Guard, tasked with protecting Payang, was the city's trump card.

But protecting it from what? Dreadful attacks on the city by monsters, or even dangerous adventurers. Though only three thousand of them lived in the city, they held great economic power. Even dozens of regular citizens wouldn't be able to overpower one member of the Guard.

Adventurers – special beings who had been granted divine protection, able to return to life even after death. Though they looked just like humans, they were a completely different existence. In these few months since the adventurers came, some new trends emerged despite the city had been well established for a long time. They were particularly dynamic; some assimilated into the native culture, while on the other hand, others seemed to treat the natives as mere tools.

They were curious neighbors, who acted on whims and proved difficult to understand.

They couldn't match the strength of the proud and powerful Knight Golems, whose biggest concern was keeping the adventurers civilized.

All the while, Lefay was supposed to understand the adventurers. By no means were they heartless scoundrels. At least, some people he knew heard many things. About their marvelous world they called Reality where they had once lived. And about games they called MMOs and RPGs.

“Soooo, Kasumi-chan, a friend of mine, is really in a biiiiiig pinch right now.

You know, Kasumi-chan. The polite girl who always greets you guys,” said Chacha, the adventurer in front of him. They were drinking tea in his usual station, in the room he himself called the intel room. “For the sake of helping Kasumi out, we adventurers have joined forces. We’re rising up to give the evildoing Illusionary Brigade a taste of what they deserve. But even though I say that, they don’t actually use force. They’re more like saboteurs, just spreading their wrath and all.”

Though she used some words Lefay didn’t understand, it was a business as usual. In conversation, she displayed a strong grasp of many different areas of knowledge like a sage. In spite of their youth, those adventurer guys all knew a lot.

“Following from that, the members of the Illusionary Brigade do have a fondness for violence. What troubles me the most is that they’ll coerce people into doing things against their will under the threat of violence. Lefay-san, if your men watch over the Illusionary Brigade for us, we would be incredibly happy.”

“We treat all adventurers equally. We cannot take sides in any of your conflicts.” Lefay had no choice but to respond in that way. The superiors had said often that they should try to get information out of the adventurers. They were to act in such a way so they would better understand them. However, developing personal relationships, or acting out of kindness for them was disallowed. “If we see any signs of violence, we make sure to keep watch on them, as is our duty. If you take up arms against them, we will not act with discretion. You too will be punished.”

“Of course, that makes sense. For starters, I hate violence myself. Besides, I really like this city. I want to protect the city’s friendly atmosphere towards adventurers. Ah, here, Kasumi-chan baked a delicious pie. Try some if you want.”

“Sorry, I can’t take anything. We consider gifts from adventurers to be the same as bribes.”

“Um, it’s not meant to be a bribe or anything... How deplorable, and after Kasumi-chan went to such great lengths to bake it...”

“... Well, if it somehow shows up as lost property without a known owner, it is allowable to deal with it properly before it rots. Though I shouldn’t say this too loudly, there are many fans of Kasumi-dono’s [1] baking...” He coughed, and a second-class soldier came rushing towards him with a document. “Sorry to bother you, but can you sign this waiver to submit it as lost property?”

“Yeah, sure. Must be tough being a government official.” Just as she finished signing and left, second-class soldiers, enticed by the delicious smell of the pie, rushed into the room.

“Adventurers really make scrumptious food. Did you know that? There’s a new bakery in the second district owned by an adventurer too.”

“Hey, wasn’t it prohibited for adventurers to own land?”

“Well the legal owner is a regular merchant... the previous lady who owned it passed it on to the adventurer. She devoted herself completely to pastries.”

Watching on, as the second-class soldiers got busy devouring the pie like vultures, Lefay started thinking.

Adventurers.

What really are they, and why are they in this world?

What are they looking for?

Also, is there still any pie left for me?

“Officer, is it fine if I eat the last slice?”

“No, you glutton! Show some restraint!”

They hadn’t thought of using magic to check it for any poison. He knew that he could trust that female adventurer, Chacha, but still...

Lefay sighed, and snatched away the last slice.

He suspended it in his mouth. As he gently felt the texture of the pie, the sweet and sour fruit sap dripped down his tongue.

“Purely scrumptious.”

“Yeaaaah, it’s the best!”

He thought that he would want to eat Kasumi's pie again sometime in the future.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

[1] – A formal honorific meant for use between people of similar rank. Somewhat antiquated, and roughly a more formal “-san”.

Part 10

Daikoku, the Illusionary Brigade's commanding officer, folded his arms as he watched his subordinates engage in battle with a Phoenix.

They had fought fifteen battles since that boy named Jun made contact with him.

They stayed at the respawn spot of the dreadful undying bird, which was also known as the physical incarnation of flame itself, without moving an inch. Since they had been accustomed to the battle and were well coordinated, they continued unilaterally dealing damage to the Phoenix.

"We have an issue with supplies," a male adventurer said seriously as he adjusted his glasses.

That man, Size, was Daikoku's aide. Like Daikoku, he had been a part of the Illusionary Brigade from the start.

"We're running low on high-grade burn salves and anti-corrosion agents."

Jun. That boy is trying to make our stockpiles of medicine we need for the Phoenix raid run dry by cutting off our supply.

"No matter what, we want to save as much as possible. We can reduce the amount of people fighting in order to lower our consumable expenditures..."

"No, let's not." Daikoku shook his head. "If we had our main army, we could defeat them with three parties. But those guys..."

"After all, they're just a motley crew of adventurers. They're completely different from our well-equipped, experienced, and well-trained army."

Daikoku was concerned that if they changed tactics this far in, the soldiers would only get confused, and he would lose his authority. Daikoku understood bureaucracy well. In real life, he was a regular white-collar worker, a low level manager. Playing MMORPGs was a longtime favorite hobby of his. At least to the extent that he bought a personal tablet just for the purpose of playing Sky World.

He could assert his own experience. Telling his current subordinates to adapt to the situation and act appropriately would bewilder their less capable selves.

“Hmm. I’ll make that person join us. He’ll pay for his mistakes.”

“It’s the higher-ups’ policy. The elites think that since we already have plenty of intelligent leaders, disposable fighters are of a higher priority, with simple honesty valued more than wit. It’s not your responsibility as a commanding officer.”

“Criticism from the elites, huh.” Size pushed his glasses up and gazed downwards. Though he was quite capable, he was still just a college student. He didn’t understand the strength and dreadfulness of so-called “bureaucracy”.

“That was a slip of the tongue. Please forget what I just said.”

“Best case scenario, it’s still a complicated situation. Don’t say anything carelessly.” That boy’s loyalty ran deep. For this reason, Daikoku thought that he couldn’t only protect himself. “Don’t fret. We’re acting. I believe that people have just set out for the fourth ring. They should arrive tomorrow.”

“On an airship, right?”

“Yeah. I told them to send twelve powerful men, along with some medicine. It’s Sakamoto’s company.”

“Sakamoto-san is...” Size was surprised, and Daikoku smiled at him. Sakamoto was one of the veterans of the guild, just like Daikoku. Though he lacked any seriousness, a heavy warrior, he was the guild’s number one tank. But then, he *did* have the best equipment. Given that they sent his group, the higher-ups must have seriously been resolved to not let this Phoenix camp fall into anybody else’s hands.

“Furthermore, I see that it’s possible that that person, Jun, called on other guilds for gold and silver.”

The Silver Winged Knight Association, and the Golden Berry Club were powerful guilds that competed with the Illusionary Brigade for influence. He heard that their conflicts on the higher rings had intensified.

“I didn’t think that it seemed that they would have such support.”

“However, in actuality, those guys managed to gain control over all of the adventurers in Payang in a blink of an eye.”

“That’s because we’re hated.” Size glanced down at their underlings as if they were ants swarming around the Phoenix. “We’re not managing these energetic brats well enough. Whenever they go into town, I heard they often cause all sorts of ruckuses.”

“They blindly follow whatever anybody stronger than them says.”

“Isn’t that what the higher-ups said? ... Well now, we’ll be scrutinized for it.”

“That’s for me to do.”

“Of course. ... We’ll fight the Phoenixes steadily.”

This raid too would end safely. They had the same amount of consumables as usual. They reckoned that they should just barely be able to maintain their ground until the supply airship arrives.

Part 11

Late at night, the full moon shining bright. About twenty adventurers hid in the meadow at the foot of Mount Kunlun.

“Hey, Jun. Are they really going to get off here?” Eri inquired, anxious. The Illusionary Brigade’s airship would arrive that night. Jun, well-informed by Sakuya, had chosen his twenty best fighters in preparation for an ambush.

However, this ambush would not take place in the harbor; it would occur in this meadow.

Of course, at the harbor, the Guard would not have let a battle break out...

“If they end up docking their airship somewhere else, all of our painstakingly hard work will have come to nothing.”

“Though docking at the harbor would normally be a no-brainer, there, they would have no choice but to put up with us. Aside from that, this location makes the most sense since it’s so close to Mount Kunlun, so they must be using it. Though that means that they could still do something unexpected...”

“What?”

“If by some chance, a problem arises, we can fight freely here. I reckon we can push through with brute force. They’re too confident in themselves.”

“Well, so what’s going to happen?” said Eri, still anxious.

Loud but distant roaring broke the night’s silence. Without mistake, this had to have been the airship’s engine whirring.

Showered in moonlight, the ten-meter-long ship shaped like a mayonnaise jar landed in the field. Men began descending from the ship. There appeared five, six... ten people. And two stayed on top of the ship.

In total, there were twelve people. Jun smiled. This was exactly as Sakuya had said.

“First, we’re seizing the ship. Let’s go!”

At the signal, his troops attacked all at once.

Chapter 4: The Penglai Emperor's Resurrection

Part 1

Night had fallen for the ninth time since Kasumi was cursed.

If her curse did not get dispelled by four o'clock the following afternoon, she would die for the third time.

After their final meeting of the day, Kasumi and Jun slipped away from their noisy gathering and walked around the empty town square. Past dusk, magic lamps illuminated the square. Even the areas usually littered with stalls during daytime had returned to a dull silence.

"We must end this curse. So, please don't do anything rash."

Tomorrow at noon, Jun, along with eighty fellow fighters, would confront the Illusionary Brigade.

They had done everything they could. According to intelligence reports, the Illusionary Brigade was not at its strongest due to the supply embargo. The odds were in Jun's favor.

However, his plan could not have been said to be bulletproof.

Jun never wanted to get Kasumi involved in fights.

If she had, by some coincidence, been dragged into a battle... He couldn't have her dying from such an accident. After getting a Phoenix Blood, he would teleport her over. That would have been best.

Kasumi objected stubbornly. Everybody had been fighting for her sake. She couldn't just sit tight, locked away for her own safety. She insisted on it.

Kasumi Yukasaki was the type who wouldn't listen to anything once they had made up their mind. In the end, Jun gave in.

"Trust me. Please wait on the far end of the battlefield. If you do that, I will be able to fight knowing that you are safe." Kasumi stopped walking and turned

towards Jun. Her red qipao, a traditional Chinese dress, creased, revealing her slender thighs. She hastily pulled her dress back. “He-hey, how embarrassing... did Eri-chan do that?”

Eri had picked up the qipao somewhere. Finding it not very useful for herself, she forced the distraught Kasumi to wear it against her will, *“This’ll give you some sex appeal!”*

“Don’t lose yourself over this!”

“Ah, no. That won’t happen... I think.” Jun responded hesitantly, averting eye contact. His nervousness was written clearly on his face.

Actually, she knew that Eri was in the right. She had only been trying to cheer Kasumi up.

“Is that... so?” Blushing, Jun gulped down a breath and looked at Kasumi. His throat felt dry from the anxiety. “Am I... bothering you?”

“There is no way that you could be bothering me. Uh, no need to be so shy. It’s really nice to be able to rely on your friends.”

“But... I’m doing nothing *but* relying on you, Jun-san. You always help me. This time, you’ve even taken on such big debts, all for my sake...”

“Please stop thinking of me as a saint. I’m far from it. I’m just doing as I wish. Starting now, I’m going to blatantly say awful things about you.”

“Y-yes!” Startled, Kasumi stood up straight.

“I’m excited.”

“...huh?” Kasumi tilted her head not knowing what he had in store.



Jun grinned widely.

“And this *is* your life we’re talking about here. I’d gladly rush to help work on difficult quests. The harder the quest, the more interesting it is. It’s well worth the challenge. The tougher the objective, the more worked up I get. I, Junichiro Mikimori, am just that kind of person. Getting so dumbfounded over quests and throwing myself face-first into them... I’m hopeless. So, you should not feel like you owe anything to me at all. People think about using fools like me for their own benefit.”

Kasumi smiled.

Jun hadn’t seen Kasumi smile from the bottom of her heart like that in a long time.

“You’re really having fun here in this world, right?”

“Yep. It’s a blast! This world is the best! I can’t help but get excited!”

“... I think that’s fine. That’s just what I’d expect from Jun-san. But...” The next instant, Jun grabbed and hugged Kasumi. “H-h-h-he-hey!”

She felt her large breasts get squashed by Jun’s chest. Her heartbeat grew fainter, almost as if her heart had become tired. Her cheeks flushed. Her head felt like it was boiling. All the words she had been about to utter flew away...

“If that’s how it is, then even if I thank you, everything’s going the way you want... yeah?” Her mischievous voice echoed in Jun’s ear. “I’ll put my faith in you and do as you say.”

Part 2

Nine in the morning. Daikoku, a commanding officer of the Illusionary Brigade, stood straight at the top of a small hill near the Phoenix camp, his arms folded as he watched his eighty men climb up the mountain road.

“I’m coming.” Next to him, Size, his aide, pushed his glasses up. “We’re all worn out. By the end of the last battle, twelve people had almost died their second deaths. As you instructed, I had them take shelter somewhere safe. Among the rest of us, twenty have yet to receive weapons or armor. As for close-up fighters, everybody but you and me is participating in the Phoenix fights. Presently, we are even running low on hi-potions and mana stones.”

Mana stones were high-ranked consumables. They could heal mental points, though not even that much. They usually served as last resorts for real line fighters during raids, but reserves were running lower and lower by the minute, given their current deplorable situation.

“That’s true, but we can still fight. Honestly speaking, two days from now, we wouldn’t be able to hold up, but if they come today, they won’t be able to take over the Phoenix camp. If we fight today, we can still win.” Daikoku chuckled self-depreciatingly. “Though we’re an uber guild, even a randomly thrown-together motley crew could stand a fighting chance against us as it stands.”

“I understand. Working together well, they can drive us into a corner. That boy Jun is a skilled leader. He must have assembled many capable men under him.”

“Maybe we should try to recruit him. With Phoenix Blood to win him over... how’s that?”

“We’ve made too many jabs at their pride.”

“Our guild *is* a big group of ruffians, after all.”

“It was our superiors who decided that. And officers like me would deem making him a leader acceptable.”

Daikoku smiled, remembering his own superior’s face.

He was a very respectful guy. However, one could only rarely see him around.

He kept himself busy all the time, with little room for flexibility... Daikoku thought of comparing himself to his own leader.

His leader's lack of free time was not the same as his own. Daikoku shook his head. Daikoku had been entrusted with the job of looking after the new hooligans. He could use his own discretion in training them. Daikoku could even teach them things other than battle strategies. Maybe even some good manners...

Those were all hypotheticals. Daikoku himself wasn't the kind of person to praise people easily. Far from it.

"We know what we're basically going up against. Let's get back in formation."

"I'll deal with the details of our battle strategy. I just have one favor to ask of you. Send me out in front."

"How is that okay?"

"As the strongest able-bodied one here, I should lead the front lines."

"I'm worried that they'll concentrate their attacks on you."

"I'll work at breaking down their formation until I die."

"I see." Daikoku gave up and let Size have his way, nodding his head. "Well, I'm sorry, but I'll give commands from a safe place."

"Of course. If you're commanding us from the back, I can have some piece of mind while I get attacked." Daikoku smiled. "Well, I like fighting. I chose to be a bandit warrior for the hand-to-hand battles. Aside from being able to help protect those brats, this role just suits me well." He made a firm fist with his hand. "I want to fight!"

He didn't exaggerate. He spoke his true feelings.

This was it. Daikoku had found the adversary he had always longed for.

Part 3

Jun watched members of the Illusionary Brigade line up in rows beyond the fences surrounding their camp; his opponents were determined.

In Sky World, spells and archery generally only had an effective range of fifty meters. However, Jun stopped his troops and kept them fairly close to him. Gesturing with one hand towards the impatient front-line fighters, Jun uttered, “Awaken,” changed into his adventurer armor, and took a solitary step ahead.

“It’s our turn to raid the Phoenix. Next time it spawns, we’ll take control,” he shouted loudly. Those who had shown up all had a history with the Illusionary Brigade’s soldiers. Jun shrugged lightly, and looked behind him. “I shall fight back! Everybody, this is...”

“Jun, hold on a sec.”

Yukaria, pointed ahead, somehow appearing to part their enemies’ lines. A male clad in black armor emerged. “That’s their boss?”

“Daikoku. So it is you. I’ve been waiting for you to come to me begging.”

“I threw your linkstone away a long time ago.”

“That’s too bad. Thanks to you, I was stuck doing such a menial task.”

“Shut your piehole. How dare you make fun of us like this. What guild are you working for? What did they pay you? Gold, silver?”

“I’m unaffiliated. I’m only going to such lengths to help my friend. I’m not taking part in a conflict between guilds. Though, you guys aren’t the only ones in Sky World. Everybody here in this game has the right to enjoy themselves.”

“After the Birthday, could you really still call this a game?” Daikoku readied his scythe. Behind him, his fighters followed.

“I’m having fun in this world. I’m having fun. I’m a gamer by nature.” Jun drew his sword. “So, we are fighting so that everybody can have a good time in this world. Go, Plan C! Let’s sweep ‘em!”

He lifted his great-sword into the air. Plan C’s success was contingent on their enemies being eager to battle. The strongest fighters were set up in rigid groups

of four in the front.

“Assault!”

Just as he swung his sword to the ground, Jun charged forward.

Spells flew back and forth on both sides. His opponent's buff and debuff icons started to disappear. The same began to occur to his own men. Jun scowled at the guy in black armor.

That guy's weapons and armor sparkle as if they were new. I'm no match for him.

Jun knew he would have to battle against him. He questioned himself, but... then he thought that it would actually be convenient for him. Jun and the others *had* to fight the next Phoenix. In order to minimize losses, it made sense to capture the opposing side's leader.

Jun, understanding this, grinned at Daikoku.

“So you were able to defeat Sakamoto! However, your weapon's special ability is close-ranged, so it won't mean anything against me! You won't be able to use your secret technique here!”

“Whatever. I didn't even have the time to use it against your well-prepared bandit warrior friend!”

The spells from both sides kept canceling each other out.

Jun and Daikoku. There was very little distance in between them...

“Go!”

Daikoku raised his scythe. Mirroring him, Jun prepared his sword...

Battle cries filled the air as they crossed swords.

With just one hit, his hands went numb with pain. Up until now, he hadn't seen such a strong scythe. The difference in quality of their equipments was obvious. The most likely outcome would be...

Swinging his blade diagonally across Daikoku's body, Jun attacked on his opponent's left side. However, Daikoku took a small step to build some distance and attacked back fiercely.

“Tch...”

Jun reacted quickly and rolled, only narrowly avoiding decapitation. The tip of the scythe grazed his armored shoulder. Jun’s health bar depleted by 5% with just that hit.

“Hey, that wasn’t very funny.”

Jun got up. Daikoku relaxed his scythe, and moved away from Jun.

“Hey magic swordsman, don’t die so fast!”

“Don’t worry, I’m certain I won’t. My body *can* to handle this.”

He kicked the ground. Their weapons collided violently yet again.

Even though they were surrounded by an all-out close-ranged melee, there was still a considerable amount of space between Jun and Daikoku.

Everybody knew not to interfere in a duel between two people.

I knew it, this guy’s just like me, from his swordsmanship and his agility. He’s even fighting with the next step in mind!

Originally, quick thinking à la Jun wasn’t necessary for raids.

What *was* necessary in group battles was being able to watch one’s surroundings and react quickly. Superficial motions were not only pointless but even harmful.

When Sakuya explained this to him, she chuckled, looking down on him.

“Jun, you don’t know *anything*. Your thoughts lack depth. You’re getting too complacent. Don’t you think that your brain will start to dissolve?” She thoroughly made fun of him.”You ought to seriously think about the nature of our own power. It’s violence. Pure violence, imbued with recklessness. This isn’t just a comfortable virtual game world. Our power is the pureest kind that exists when even violence clashes with violence,” she instructed. “It’s more important than paying attention. Raid guilds are essentially nasty organizations not very different from gangs or militias. They are formed to rule over others with brute force. Those who join such groups are always captivated by physical power. In order to control them, more brute force is necessary... If you end up fighting against their leaders, be cautious of this. They are always studying the system.

Their greed is constantly fed by the prospect of even more power.”

“Have you fought with the Illusionary Brigade’s leaders before?” Jun asked.

“... Feigning innocence, huh? You have a bad personality.”

“Have you ever fought with Daikoku?”

“I still can’t reveal that kind of information. But, okay. New raid guild recruits are often annoyingly bubbly about their guilds. If you don’t use violence, they won’t even be able to perform raids.”

Everything was as she said. While Jun fought Daikoku, he came to understand him.

Daikoku was strong.

His skill was undeniable, and his equipment surpassed Jun’s by leagues. He exceeded Jun even in attack and defense levels. Magic swordsmen and bandit warriors also happened to be each other’s natural counters. Moreover, Daikoku had yet to use a single of his abilities.

However...

“Should you really be acting so carefree?” Jun grinned, still trading hits back and forth.

“Your underlings are quite disappointing. They’re quite the mish-mash of adventurers.”

On the battleground, Jun’s group had the upper hand numerically. Though it appeared that Daikoku’s aide was giving orders from behind in his place, their movements were awfully sloppy.

Though the guild was visibly burdened, up until now, the new recruits had been exclusively fighting battles that they knew they could win, as if they had been playing on low difficulty. They had never experienced real adversity. In addition, their weapons and armor were damaged, so their equipment superiority faded to nothing. Morale was suffering.

As for Jun, he had assigned a few trusted adventurers to the front-most line. They were skilled fighters that did not have to rely on their equipment. In order to live up to Jun’s expectations, they tore deep holes through the Illusionary

Brigade's front lines and dished out large quantities of damage to the defenseless rear fighters.

"Did you only teach them to be full of themselves? What an inconceivably incompetent commander you are."

"In order to boost dependence on the guild, we cut them off from the outside world."

Daikoku, unperturbed by Jun's provocations, calmly swung his sharp scythe downwards. Jun once again narrowly evaded the strike and tried to attack him back with his own great-sword.

However, it was no use. Since his posture hadn't been perfect, Jun was only able to shave off a sliver of Daikoku's health as his blade only skimmed his armor.

— *He's strong!*

Though Jun kept on attacking and making full use of proper footwork and his body weight, Daikoku avoided each of them with his own defensive martial arts techniques.

Damn, I'm beaten.

Of course attack magic and debuffs like Quick Stun would have little effect on bandit warriors. The advantages of being a magic swordsman were all but meaningless here.

He didn't even have time to use his secret techniques. Besides, weapon swapping to spam secret techniques would only surprise each opponent once. As Daikoku himself said, once Jun ends up showing him something, it'll never work again.

If that's so, then my next move will be... that, right?

Jun waited for the right timing, and then made some distance between them.

Even though Daikoku quickly worked to close up the gap...

"Option E3! I'm counting on you!" As they had planned earlier, when they noticed, some of his team's light warriors quickly forced their way through.

“Get out of the way! Whirlwind!

The violent gales of wind brought upon by Daikoku’s scythe swept up the light warriors all at once.

This short period of time was exactly what Jun wanted.

“— Change, long-sword mode!”

His large great-sword changed into a long narrow sword that could be used with just one hand.

By nature, magic swordsmen could wield shields, but they rarely used one-handed weapons. One-handed weapons needlessly reduced attack ability, while magic swordsmen’s strong suit was supposed to be in offense.

“What are you thinking of doing?”

Daikoku frowned, moved closer to Jun, and vigorously swung his scythe downwards. When Jun’s long-sword made contact with Daikoku’s scythe, it bounced off. Even though the scythe had an overwhelming amount of destructive power, this was still a game. When it came to parrying, no matter what the difference between the weapons, the weapon used to deflect an attack could never be broken.

“What were you thinking by changing from your great-sword to a one-handed sword and losing attack power?”

Using his free hand, Jun removed a small golf-ball-sized black orb from his pouch.

“I wanted to do this!” He threw the orb onto the ground. It exploded from the impact. Out came intense grey smoke.

Suddenly, Daikoku’s field of vision become covered in smoke.

“Hey... what are you doing? Where did you get such an item? ...”

“They’re fireworks that a summoner spawned, but I purposefully moistened it so that only the smoke would come out. It’s like a makeshift smoke ball.”

Jun chopped at Daikoku’s back. Daikoku had lost sight of Jun. He resisted a bit, but Jun managed to slice off more than thirty percent of Daikoku’s HP by

continuing his basic combo attacks.

“You’re making this up on the spot!”

Using his intuition to figure out his opponent’s location, Jun steadily attacked Daikoku, who was swinging his scythe mindlessly. The length of his HP bar decreased rapidly.

I knew it. He’s not used to this kind of unconventional fighting.

Jun had wanted to ask Sakuya whether the leaders in raid guilds polished their own fighting skills.

As far as Jun was concerned, he couldn’t ask unimportant questions like the degree to which they brazenly disciplined subordinates that stepped out of line or how competent they were. After all, he could only joke around with close friends.

“Daikoku, why did you join a raid guild?”

“Why are you asking me such a question?!”

“Is doing these kinds of things fun?”

Daikoku remained silent.

“There are dungeon traps that suddenly plunge the area into darkness. A darkness that only magic light can pierce through. When that happens your hearing and intuition need to be reliable.”

The fog cleared. Daikoku’s wrath was written on his face. His teammates began casting spells, healing Daikoku’s HP...

Bullets hit Daikoku’s white magicians, who stiffened, one by one. They had been forcibly put to sleep.

“Let’s not breach etiquette now, shall we? I won’t forgive those who meddle in duels.” Yukaria and the other controllers stun-locked them, continuously shooting spells and bullets.

“ARGHHH. YOU...!!!”

Daikoku grasped his scythe tightly and brandished it, forcing it ahead. This was his Power Attack. However...

His legs trembled.

“Ugh...” Thinking that the ground was just especially tough, before he knew it, tree roots had appeared at his feet. “This can’t be... have these been here for a while?”

“Invisibility works on objects too. But they only work for 10 seconds. I’m sure even you have some invisibility potions somewhere.”

Floods of people ran in towards the incapacitated Daikoku. Jun did not go easy, pushing them away with a single blow each. Daikoku was panicking, having been bested by a battery of unexpected attacks. Jun skillfully made fun of him, continuing to flake off parts of his HP bar.

“Raids. They’re fun. Everybody getting together, joining forces to defeat an ubermonster. And collecting good equipment too. There are even books about it.” Jun knew that feeling well. He, of course, had once run guilds that were the best in their servers. Besides, he understood the feeling of being engrossed in it. “But you know, MMOs aren’t just that. I get really excited about drifting about in the world and exploring new places with my friends. It’s not just about how to defeat a new challenge, or how many people you need to assemble to do so.”

There were many different kinds of people enjoying themselves in many different ways.

Because of that, MMOs were wonderful. Jun subscribed to that belief.

And then, even as Sky World ended up like this, as far as he was concerned, this world was...

“I just want to adventure.”

For however simple it was, that simplicity was all Jun wanted.

He came to this world to go search for his friend, Kai. Nevertheless, he ended up adventuring on the way. And after finding Kai, there would certainly be even more adventures waiting for him. Jun was optimistic like that.

It was the same with quests. He wanted to learn more. He enjoyed it. He wanted to hear all the stories the quests had to tell. After all, it was adventure.

The future. What could possibly lie beyond this hill?

“I won’t stop. I won’t let Kasumi-san stop. It’s been decided. We’re continuing forward. And because of that, if you guys are in our way...”

Jun slashed Daikoku diagonally from his shoulder.

His HP bar emptied...

“I will surmount any wall that lies in my way.” The Illusionary Brigade’s commanding officer fell right then and there. “Officer Daikoku, I’ve vanquished you!”

Jun lifted his sword and let out a war cry.

His comrades cheered. High-spirited, they redoubled their attack on the Illusionary Brigade lines. Members of the Illusionary Brigade started to rout, each scrambling for his or her own safety, when at last, they all fled, knowing the battle had been lost.

“Follow them! The remaining ones can’t be allowed to bother us during our fight with the Phoenix!” ordered Isao, acting on behalf of Jun on the front-most line.

The battle was nearing its end.

Part 4

Kasumi gazed at the fight from a small distance.

She couldn't get involved, since she was approaching her third death. She was very aware of that.

However, she felt distraught. The thought of her comrades fighting to the death on her behalf without her even joining in the intense battle frustrated her.

In the end, I guess I'm the one being protected, huh... she wondered.

When escaping Altaria Island, even then, she could only rely on Jun and Eri. Kasumi just did as they said. Even though they praised her often, she hadn't really done anything substantial.

This was the same. This strange quest, all of it happened because of Kasumi's slip-up. At first, it seemed as if they stood no chance of winning against the Illusionary Brigade. However, Jun and the others fought hard, exhausting every method possible, for Kasumi's sake.

Their efforts were now showing. Their motley crew, inferior in raw stats, was overwhelming the raid guild.

"Something... something I can do..."

Her body felt hot. Her heart ached. She clenched her fist.

Kasumi entered the edge of the battlefield, staggering near the fence.

She entered the Illusionary Brigade's base through a section of the fence that had been destroyed by a magic spell. There was a structure, a bind stone, made out of limestone that was reminiscent of Grecian temple ruins nearby. Around the bind stone stood more than twenty men who, startled by Kasumi, had cast their eyes downward in shame. They fell in battle, had just revived, and now had been afflicted by revival weakness debuff.

However, Kasumi had no interest in looking at them.

Glancing up, there was an extravagant stone temple. A depiction of a Phoenix was engraved on the gatestones.

The Phoenix Temple. From what scouts could gather, the Phoenix would respawn in three hours.

— *No.*

“Is someone there?” Kasumi looked around restlessly for the source of that voice. Come to think of it, why was she there? And yet she had been supposed to stay far from the battlegrounds. When did she get to such a dangerous place?

“In the temple?” Kasumi asked, as she listened carefully for the feeble voice.

The voice told her to enter the temple. Quickly.

“Yes, once the battle comes to a close, I’ll go pay a visit... Who are you?”

‘...I... am...’ She felt the voice intensify as she moved closer and closer to the temple. She took a few steps forward. ‘...I... am... Peng...’

“Um, I’m really sorry, but can you please repeat yourself?”

“Hey, Kasumi! What are you doing?!” Jun shouted. Turning around, he rushed over with a completely different expression on his face. “It’s dangerous to come to somewhere like this! And I even said for you to stay there patiently... gosh!”

“Sorry... But a voice...”

“A voice? ... I don’t hear anything.”

“Is that so? I...”

“Wait, hold on. Kasumi-san, show me your tablet.”

“What’s wrong? Okay, here.” Snatching the tablet from Kasumi’s hand, he concentrated on the screen. His face grew stern. “Damn it! It’s like *that*, huh.”

“It seems like it’s... something bad?”

“Kasumi-san, get away from this place as soon as possible! This is... I was wrong. The trigger for this quest is...”

‘This way.’ The voice called out again to Kasumi, who had slanted her head in confusion.

“Yes.”

Kasumi obediently turned to the direction from which the voice had come. Facing the temple, she stepped forward.

At that moment, a strong wind swept through. She instinctively covered her face with her arm.

“Wh-what is this...” Jun said, panicking.

When she lowered her arms, a white-bearded old man stood in front of her, almost obstructing her view. He was dressed in a luxurious red and black traditional attire. Perhaps it was the image of... a Chinese emperor from antiquity.

Jun squinted. Kasumi followed suit. The old man’s name appeared above him. The Penglai Emperor.

“This man is...”

Kasumi swallowed her breath. The old man nodded once and started to slowly walk towards the Phoenix temple.

“This is bad, the quest event has begun! Isao-san, Eri... damn it, nobody’s picking up their linkstone! Those guys are engrossed in battle!”

“Uh, uhh, what the heck is this?”

Instead of responding, Jun handed Kasumi her tablet back. He pointed at the active window on the screen. The word “NPC” appeared immediately.

The event log showed everything that the Penglai Emperor had whispered.

“This... is what I’ve been hearing.”

“‘The Resurrection of the Penglai Emperor’ is not just an item retrieval quest. Quests that trigger NPC movement... I hadn’t known that they existed in Sky World! Since NPCs are also living beings, I didn’t think they could be affected by quests... but they are. Since the Penglai Emperor NPC exists in the game system, that possibility is here. I didn’t think of that. The event trigger is the questholder getting close to the temple. And after that condition is satisfied, everything else happens on its own.”

“What should I do...?”

“From here on, if you make a mistake, you might die. No need to listen to me anymore. Your life is in your own hands...” Kasumi slowly shook her head and stared at Jun.

“Just for now. I’m ready. Jun-san, your instructions?”

“... Got it. Follow the Penglai Emperor. Go.” Kasumi gently grabbed Jun’s hand. The fierce battle had scarred the face of the mountain. However, Jun’s reliable grip reassured her.

“No matter where you are, I’ll stay with you as your companion.”

There was no fear in Jun’s smile, and that dispelled any remaining uneasiness that Kasumi might have felt.

Part 5

Jun pulled on Kasumi's hand, and they followed the Penglai Emperor into the temple.

Candlesticks lined the walls in the passageway beyond the entrance, their flames swaying.

Far ahead, the Penglai Emperor's red garments seemed to flicker in the darkness.

Alice said that this quest existed back when Sky World was still an MMO. The event should have too.

This had been on his mind the whole time. The penalty for failure being death made this quest clearly unique.

Back in the MMO age, the punishment for death was a stat debuff for a certain amount of time. Since this debuff would stack, even having died twice would make the quest very high risk. Having to collect a Phoenix Blood, a raid item, made it all the worse. And the time limit for the quest was only ten days.

Maybe I'm still missing something.

He thought about it a bit. In general, there wasn't much variation between quests in MMOs. Since many players were interacting with the same world at the same time, quests that could bother others were scarce.

For instance, during a quest, what would happen if a shopkeeper for a very popular store disappeared?

It would be a great shock.

Maybe it cause such a problem if it were a store, since there were others elsewhere. However, what if important NPCs like the monks in Dragon Quest [1] were to disappear?

With this in consideration, designers limited quests' potential effects on the world. Large-scale events that could influence the game world itself would have to be harshly vetted.

However... was this one of those carefully chosen special events?

Coercion. That word floated through Jun's mind.

It was a harsh — no, an exceedingly harsh penalty. Players would, naturally, work to avoid penalties. So basically, the designers of this quest coerced people into completing it.

The developers wanted to make the quest move forward any way they could. It seemed that they put in the imminent death penalty to force the quest-starter to go to this temple. And if that wasn't enough motivation, another death loomed ahead.

Jun didn't know much about quests that could have consequences on the server itself. In the early days of the 3D MMORPG, there were pre-loaded events that involved unsealing horrid dragons. After releasing these cursed dragons, part of the server and the world itself would change completely. Events and items would also be scattered throughout the new world. Along the same vein, this quest event could do the same to those who possessed good items pre-upheaval, maybe. At once, the server might be split into two warring factions, those who supported the great bouleversement, and those who did not... But that's beside the point.

Will this quest rewrite the world?

What would happen to Lao Thai, the island where Jun and the others stayed currently on? And to the rest of Sky World itself?

If it happens...

"He stopped." Kasumi's voice pulled Jun back from his profound thoughts.

The Penglai Emperor had stopped moving in the center of the large hall. An enormous altar stood in front of the old man. On the altar was a candlestick that burned bright, reminiscent of a magical cauldron.

The Penglai Emperor lifted his hands into the air.

Immediately afterwards, hellfire spilled out of the candlestick and scorched the ceiling.

'The time has come! Phoenix, come to me!'

His loud voice echoed in through the temple.

The pillar of flame grew wide. Jun realized that it was simply the Phoenix spreading its wings.

The flames of the immense wings flickered. From the hellfire emerged a crimson beak, purple eyes, and a bird head. Then, finally, the phoenix's large body appeared, bathed in flames, on top of the altar.

"The... Phoenix." Jun groaned. The undying bird. The raid monster that was not supposed to reappear for another three hours.

The Penglai Emperor's words had summoned the Phoenix.

"... It's a triggered spawn, huh?"

Were they to engage it in battle? At that moment, many things went through Jun's head. They would not stand a chance. Everybody had been exhausted from the battle with the Illusionary Brigade, and everybody was scattered across the battlefield. It would take a ton of time just to reassemble everybody. Retreating there...

"Wait a moment, please." Kasumi stepped in front of Jun. "Please don't fight the Phoenix. Battling it is not necessary."

"Kasumi...san"

Jun looked at Kasumi, then fixed his eyes onto the Penglai Emperor.

The Penglai Emperor drew a thin sword from his back and approached the burning physical incarnation of fire. He ignored the great damage he would receive from simply being nearby, he brandished his sword...

Strike.

The colossal Phoenix fell face up.

"He ... defeated it?"

With just a single strike, he brought down the mighty Phoenix. Though, it was probably a special attack that was meant to take it down in one shot. As players found watching NPCs slowly hitting each other hardly making much progress at all, tedious, Jun liked to think that the developers took that into consideration with this event.

Speaking of which, this guy... he can't be...

The old man entered the flames to pick up some blood, and smiled.

Walking towards the fallen Phoenix, he stuck out his arm.

Isn't there plenty of data about this special character being configured...?

"The power of invincibility, become mine! Now is the time to take back what is rightfully mine, the world!"

Just as the Penglai Emperor touched the Phoenix's dead body, it disappeared. A red stone appeared in the Penglai Emperor's hand. The strange red stone pulsed like a heart.

The Penglai Emperor opened his mouth, and prepared to swallow the stone.

"Hand that over!"

A boy who had hidden himself in the room rushed over to the emperor.

He swung his large axe down at him. The Penglai Emperor was sliced into two.

"What!?"

Flabbergasted, Jun and Kasumi watched the blood trickle down the Penglai Emperor's body as he slowly collapsed.

He was the event's special character. Potential event disruptions were not accounted for, so his HP had been at the lowest value possible. He was effectively a wooden doll.

Back when Sky World was still an MMO, there were restrictions on what player characters could do, and so the Penglai Emperor couldn't have been hurt.

For this reason, he didn't need anything. So, the lowest HP and stats possible were fine.

"You..."

The boy who forced himself in the event took the red stone.

He was not an NPC, but an adventurer. And he was one that Jun happened to know.

“Zakka, why in the world are you here...”

“Huh, the battle got dangerous, so I came here seeking shelter. Then your event began. You were only thinking good thoughts and not paying attention to anything else. I wanted to break this shitty event.” The Illusionary Brigade’s low-leveled bandit warrior grinned and laughed. “What? ... a Phoenix heart? Sounds like an interesting item... What should I do? Should I use it? Well of course, your opinion doesn’t matter. Naturally, I’d use it...”

“Stop it, that thing is...!”

“Shut up! I picked it up, so it’s mine!”

“You’re wrong. Judging from the quest description, that is...”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Shouting pridefully, Zakka grasped the stone firmly in his hand.

He selected YES on the option window...

“Aaaaaggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

A mind-numbing shout filled the room...

Immediately after, the temple ceiling collapsed.

[1] – In Dragon Quest, monks were an essential part of gameplay, as player characters could only be revived with their assistance, and they also functioned as save points.

Part 6

Jun awoke in a dark room.

“Ouch... where am I?”

He got up and surveyed his surroundings. A weak light shone high up above. Though it couldn't even penetrate all the way to his feet, he surmised it to be sunlight.

“... Are we below ground?”

The room seemed to be a stone tomb. Passageways stretched out in all four directions.

After what had happened a while ago, Kasumi and Jun's fall ended up underneath the temple.

Jun felt around for his magic augite, took it out from his bag, and rubbed it. The stone lit up dimly and illuminated his surroundings. Not too far away, Kasumi lay collapsed.

Her HP bar had reached zero.

“Kasumi-san?!”

Jun touched Kasumi's face and shuddered from its icy texture.

Hope fled. Shaking, Jun called out to Kasumi over and over again. His throat dried up. He felt dizzy in the head. After letting out a low groan, he bit down hard on his lips.

“What... is this? How could it come to this?”

This wasn't just a game.

He knew that, yet he enjoyed himself. That's what he told her yesterday. He would treat the situation as just a game.

Even so, Kasumi entrusted, with full faith, her own life into Jun's hands. Yet...

“I've messed up big time...”

Jun's words echoed the tomb.

Part 7

Yukaria and Eri arrived at the Phoenix Temple which was near the battlefield. They had heard reports of a Jun and Kasumi sighting around there.

The battle was basically over. It had been a victory by landslide. They left the rest to the others.

On a different note, assuming that Kasumi had been staggering along, the great question of how she ended up here remained.

“Gee, maybe they went on a date?”

“But Jun isn’t that resourceful... something seems a bit fishy here.”

“Hmm, like, I’m a bit worried – Hah! Worried? What am I going on about, saying weird things like that?” Scratching her head, Eri approached the temple. “They’re around here somewhere. I bet the two of them are flirting. Oh you riajuu, go explode! [1]” Just as she closed her mouth, the roof of the temple suddenly exploded.

“Huh?” Smoke and a thunderous roar filled the air. Chunks of stone crashed down. “Huh? Huh? Huuh? What, what the heck is going on? I-is this my fault?”

“Can you stop saying stupid things? Let’s get out of here.”

Yukaria dragged Eri out of and away from the temple.

Immediately afterwards, a figure rushed out of the smoke.

“I-is that a human?”

Though she was very good at perceiving motion due to her experience in FPS games, Yukaria could not tell whether the figure was a person.

Could it be a player? B-but... She shook her head. The figure... had red wings. *That...*

All of a sudden, the newly-appeared figure charged at some adventurers that had gathered nearby after hearing the explosion. With violent force it scattered several of them. Screams came from everywhere.

“Wait, what’s going on?!”

“It’s a baddie!”

Yukaria pulled on her guns’ triggers. Though the bullets hit their target, they hardly scathed the figure. Their red-winged enemy made a U-turn towards them, plunging itself into the ground. It shrilled loudly.

“No matter how fast it is, if I can get the timing right, I’ll be able to defend against its attacks.”

Yukaria parried, deflecting her opponent’s huge axe with the handles of her guns.

The attack was stopped. The figure was...

“A human... bird?” Nearby, Eri muttered.

The out-of-this-world existence could have been nothing *but* a human bird. It had the body of a man and wings that burned like fire. As for its face, it had a nose that protruded out like that of a goblin, and hair burning bright red. Its unwelcoming eyes glowed an ominous bright purple.

“Is that an adventurer?” A two handed axe. A breastplate. Just from its equipment, Yukaria was able to surmise that the figure had been nothing but that “bandit warrior”. She squinted. The character name that appeared above the human bird was... “Zakka, huh... Hold up. Is this his way of getting revenge on Jun?!”

“Well, he’s got a face only a mother could love. So that’s what terrorized Ryuka. Eek!”

Out popped two flame-covered appendages at the human bird’s sides.

“He-hey! That’s cheating!” Yukaria rolled, trying to create some distance between herself and her enemy, who was now brandishing his flaming arms. He didn’t chase far, instead he flapped his wings extravagantly and rose into the air. “What the heck is this...”

Everybody else in the area looked up in amazement as the human bird began transforming. First, his legs swelled in size, followed by his flame-soaked wings, arms, and legs.

Flames gushed out of his skin and stuck to his body just like a reptile’s scales.

“So... that’s... a dragon?” Disarrayed, Eri shouted. Just like she had said, the human bird that had once been Zakka now transformed into sinister flame dragon over ten meters tall. It fit the picture of a “western dragon” [2] perfectly.

“Hey, this isn’t one bit Chinese,” complained Eri. The Dragon roared, baring its teeth. Shivering from the ripples in the air, she cowered.

The earth trembled. Eri and Yukaria staggered, taking a few steps away.

“...Wha-what, i-is tha-that!?”

Several parts of the ground rose up in mounds at their feet.

Dried up arms emerged from the earth. All the more confused, the two moved even further away. Crawling out of the dirt, entire bodies became exposed to the sunlight.

They were reanimated bodies with blue skin, wearing tattered dojo robes and having large charms suspended from their foreheads.

“Ji-jiangshi...? [3]”

In total, there were four of them. ... Actually, more would come out from the ground, one by one crawling out anew. It wasn’t clear how many there were left...

“This is bad...” Eri muttered. Right at that moment, the Jiangshi started to hop. “A, aahh!”

“Get down! I’m coming... Burst mode!” Yukaria let out her special ability, and fire spouted from her handguns. Before her eyes, the Jiangshi appeared to rush at her in a single row. She shot white spider threads at them. Caught in the sticky spiderwebs, they suddenly stopped moving.

“Wo-woow! Those icky white things are really sticky!”

She had used snare bullets. Usually, undead creatures would not be affected by anything other than that and bind bullets. Though the paralysis only lasted up to ten seconds, it was plenty for them to take cover.

“... It’s just like you to be so indecent.”

“Eri, let’s hurry up and get away from them.”

“Hey, don’t shift back into serious mode on me that fast. When’d you become so high strung?”

Ten adventurers under Isao’s command took their place and fought the Jiangshi. “Are you two okay!?”

Jun rushed over, running out of the fume-ridden temple.

“Hey, Jun, what in the world happened?!”

“It’s that guy.” Jun responded, glaring at the dragon that was once Zakka. “He killed the Penglai Emperor while a quest event was running, and stole his item.”

“Huh? So that’s the story. ... But how did he turn into a dragon?”

“The item was imbued with the Phoenix’s consciousness. Those Jiangshi were originally sacrifices made to keep the Phoenix sealed within the temple.”

“Why didn’t I know this?!” Eri screamed at the top of her lungs.

“I read about the Jiangshi in books about the temple I found while in town. Then I suppose the quest came along. Okay, the Penglai Emperor imprisoned the Phoenix in search of eternal life. Throughout the ages, anybody who selfishly sought out immortality was doomed by their own greed. We watched the Penglai Emperor fight for the Phoenix’s symbol. He was about to eat it. If he succeeded, the end product would have been...”

“Becoming immortal. But, he would turn into a Phoenix, right? Aren’t I’m quick to pick things up?” Yukaria continued. Before they knew it, a man in white clothes was standing next to them. “Are y-you... Daikoku?”

Eri turned around, flustered.

The white clothes meant that he had died earlier, and had just revived. Even though it would be tough to move with the revival weakness debuff active, the Illusionary Brigade’s commanding officer stood straight and glared at the dragon.

Confused with the state of things, one of his guild members rushed over to his side. He was a slender man with glasses. He was Daikoku’s aide, who had taken command of the battle earlier.

“Chief, what is going on?”

Daikoku didn’t respond. He turned to Jun.

“It seems one of my underlings interrupted your system event. That was an act of harassment. We apologize.”

“It’s not your fault. Besides, it’s definitely a bug.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“Somehow, I just am.”

That was a lie. Yukaria sensed it. At that moment, Jun was lying. *But why? More importantly...*

“Hey, wait, where’s Kasumi? Weren’t you two together?” Eri asked. After some hesitation, Jun looked towards the ruins of the temple.

“She’s lying down over there. She hit her head a bit when the temple collapsed. It’s a safe place. As long as she’s there, there’ll be no problem.”

Saying that seemed to be painful for him...

Yukaria had a hunch that something bad had happened.

“Jun, uhh...”

“Let’s deal with the situation we have in front of us.” Jun fixed his eyes on Yukaria. Hiding the determination in his eyes, he gulped.

“So, how do you suppose we do that?”

“We kill it.” Jun took out his sword. “We’re taking back the event item. Those who exploit bugs in online games are to be banned.”

[1] – “Raijuu go explode” is a Japanese internet expression (read: meme) meant to make fun of young people living their lives to the fullest (as opposed to spending all day on the computer). A similar word (in origin and use) in English is “normalfag”

[2] – Chinese dragons differ from the traditional Western dragon in that they generally are long flying snakes and are seen as divine (as opposed to Western

dragons being earthly creatures).

Part 8

A few hours earlier, Jun turned to see Kasumi's unmoving body. All while a silver-haired girl stood smack in the middle of the tomb.

"Alice." Jun glared at her. Even though he knew that he was just experiencing an outburst of rage, he couldn't help but vent his anger. "It was you guys! This is all because of some sloppy management on your end...!" he screamed, restlessly watching the girl's facial expressions.

Alice looked up at Jun – emotionless, as always – but...

This girl's really in a rush, huh?

This time, he could sense that she lacked her usual composure, though only just a little bit.

"A few bugs have popped up here and there." Of course, Alice spoke in monotone.

"That's enough beating around the bush. Is Kasumi coming back to life?"

"Kasumi Yukasaki is not dead. I just temporarily froze her avatar."

Jun's anger, searing hot like magma, suddenly cooled down.

He thought about what she said, and then understood... Jun finally took a deep sigh of relief.

"... Is that so? Alice, you saved us. I'm sorry for yelling at you."

"Not quite. I can only freeze her for thirty minutes... You have 21 minutes and 51 seconds left."

"So what do I do?"

"Kasumi Yukasaki was nearing her third death as a punishment for failing the quest. Currently, the Phoenix is behaving strangely. If you can restore it to normal, Kasumi Yukasaki's quest will be once again possible to complete, and the quest penalty will be nullified."

"So how do I go about 'restoring it to normal'?"

"At this moment, the Phoenix is being influenced by the player avatar known

as Zakka. You must sever the connection between the Phoenix and Zakka.”

“At any rate, I need to kill it?”

“The Phoenix was meant to run away to freedom after taking over the Penglai Emperor’s body. In that state, the Phoenix is not meant to be killed by a player character. The Phoenix, in controlling Zakka, overwrote his avatar.”

“Can the Phoenix... escape while controlling Zakka’s body?”

Alice shook her head slowly, “Having combined minds with Zakka, the Phoenix has been switched to KOS mode.”

Being in KOS (kill on sight) mode meant that it would indiscriminately attack all players.

“Isn’t that horrible?” Jun realized that this had emerged from Zakka’s inability to keep his cool in front of others. “This is, in fact, an invincible monster out to kill everybody it sees. It’ll go around murdering people all around the island... no, maybe even throughout all of Sky World.”

“I would like for it to be promptly stopped.”

“Of course.”

At that moment, Jun finally understood why Alice intervened.

She did not try to save Kasumi as just an act of goodwill. At this rate, all of Sky World itself was in danger.

“Have you prepared anything as support?”

Instead of responding, Alice touched Jun’s greatsword. Its large blade instantly glowed brightly.

The light faded away. Jun took out his tablet, and opened up the equipment screen. His sword’s stats had not changed, except for an attribute that had been added.

“Holy Avenger? I haven’t heard of that attribute before.”

“It’s the strongest existing attribute with many powers. When its user or the item with it is hit, no debuffs can be afflicted. It nullifies the use of Death Call on its user. It nullifies all spells cast on its user, rendering all weak magic useless. It

nullifies all special attacks used against its user. When the weapon deals damage, its target's regeneration abilities will be interrupted, rendering all special defensive abilities useless. It nullifies all of its targets' buffs, as well. And in addition to all of that, it increases your damage drastically."



“... What kind of cheat is that?”

“Originally, it was just for the GM’s weapons. Now, he has granted special

permission for its use in destroying the Phoenix-Zakka hybrid.”

“You mentioned this person before... So exactly who *is* he...?”

Alice looked up at Jun, not saying a word.

“I get it. Now’s not the time for that. I have something to do... right?”

Jun sighed and shook his head.

“That way leads outside.”

After she gestured towards the singular exit, Alice disappeared instantaneously, just as she appeared.

Part 9

Jun bit on his lips.

I absolutely have to defeat this dragon.

His sword with Holy Avenger in hand, he turned his eyes to the flaming dragon that had just landed in the middle of the group of Jiangshi.

The words displayed above the dragon's head shuffled back and forth between "Phoenix" and "Zakka". Perhaps because their minds were tangled together, the dragon did not begin fighting. It was only shaking its head around, as if it were confused.

Only one person, Jun, could defeat that beast.

The front line, under Isao and Daikoku's command, formed from the two's own forces and held off the Jiangshi's advances. However, they probably would not be able to maintain the current state of things for long.

Next to Jun's message window hovered four numerals. At present, they showed 1539. It was most likely the work of Alice. The numbers decreased for every passing second. It was a timer.

Leaving out certain details, Jun quickly briefed Eri and the others. He also told them about how mountain men had appeared to help them out as a natural part of the quest.

"I'm going to rush in. Yukaria, please make a path for me."

"Understood. I'll pin down the Jiangshi for you."

"In that case, I'll be support on you as always," Eri added.

The three of them, Jun, Eri, and Yukaria surrounded the dragon along an arc as Isao and Daikoku's men fiercely fought the Jiangshi.

When ten of the Jiangshi noticed Jun's advance, they immediately began hopping towards him. They were fast. At this rate, they would catch up to him quickly, but...

"Well then, I suppose I'll use my sticky white stuff. Burst mode!"

Yukaria, in accordance with Jun's instructions, fired alternately from her two

guns at her high-speed targets. The approaching Jiangshi fell prey to her incapacitation techniques.

“Wow, all the Jiangshi are covered in wet stuff...”

“Hey, you’re being indecent again! Jun, does this girl really have no self-restraint?!” Eri sighed. Jun unintentionally let a smile slip.

“Illusionary Brigade, prioritize! Dispatch the Jiangshi advancing towards Jun!”

“Guys, listen to him! Cover for Jun-san!”

Without having arranged anything beforehand, Daikoku and Isao gave identical commands. Their ten front line fighters sliced at the rooted Jiangshi. Among them were even a few Illusionary Brigade members.

“Sorry.” They lowered their heads and left Jun’s side.

“We’ll split up here,” Yukaria stopped moving 100 meters behind the Dragon. “I’ll leave it to you. Go ahead.”

“Sounds like a we’re going in for the kill!”

Yukaria’s job all along was to immobilize the Jiangshi. In order for her to be able to keep them from getting close to Jun, who would fight the dragon, she needed to stay there within range of the others.

“Eri, please buff Yukaria. Then, come follow me.”

“Got it! Don’t you die on me!”

Having separated from Yukaria and Eri, Jun rushed over towards the dragon. His timer read 0749.

Hmm... will I really be able to defeat this guy with just this cheating blade?

“In the first place, why is there even a western dragon here? Wasn’t this island supposed to be based off of China?”

“It seems that the Phoenix transformed into this form because of Zakka’s dream to become stronger.”

Alice’s voice resonated within Jun’s ear, “The Phoenix isn’t anything much at all. Originally, it was just the embodiment of an idea...”

Alice's voice faded. Jun smacked his lips and ran up to the over ten-meter-long dragon.

The Phoenix-Zakka hybrid dragon finally noticed Jun and opened its mouth widely. Flames crawled out like a tongue...

Immediately afterwards, the flames shot out. The crimson blaze enveloped Jun's body.

However, even though the temperatures completely charred the surrounding earth, Jun withstood it completely unhurt.

"... That honestly almost gave me a heart attack."

It wasn't that he didn't believe in the power of Holy Avenger, but...

Stroking his chest, Jun leapt out of the flames and slashed at the dragon.

Green blood sprayed all around. Even though his greatsword looked like a toothpick in comparison to the dragon, it was able to tear through its scales as if they were made of soft fabric.

The large dragon bellowed, then staggered. Jun squinted to look at his message window's battle log and could hardly believe the damage he had done.

"With this... maybe I can do it?"

This feeling in mind, Jun rolled on the ground. The dragon's limbs swooshed through the air. The colossal claws, about the size of Jun head, gouged a large hole into the ground. The dragon's wings, flapping back and forth violently, blew away nearby trees. Jun covered his head with his arms and endured the tempestuous gusts.

The winds were so dreadful that they themselves cut Jun's HP bar down by an entire tenth.

"Hold up! I can't withstand this kind of damage!"

The Veil Guardian from Altaria Island seemed like a mere filler enemy in the light of this awe-inspiring fighting strength. Holy Avenger *really* was the only way anybody could endure such power...

"Heals are on the way!" shouted Eri, as Jun's HP bar filled back up. She also

took the opportunity to buff him a few times.

Right. I'm not fighting alone.

Just barely avoiding the dragon's fierce attacks, Jun smiled. The timer read 0411. Everything would be okay. He still had four minutes.

As soon as he could find an opening, he attacked, dealing more damage. Having carelessly stepped into an area of effect attack, Eri, only barely within range, cast some healing spells on him.

"Please don't die in one shot! That aside, you're risking your life, so keep it up and stay alive!" screamed Eri. Though she didn't know whether her loud voice had riled the dragon up, it seemed like Zakka's mind was influencing the dragon into seeing Jun as the bitterest of enemies – flaring up its eyes, relentlessly biting at him, and aiming at him with its wings and its claws.

It reminded Jun of a battle between an ant and a beetle.

However, this beetle didn't quite know how to make the best use of its abilities. It only fought following its instinct. And as for the ant, it had a stinger that could penetrate even the beetle's mighty shell.."

"You've chosen the wrong enemy, Phoenix!" Jun yelled as a taunt.

He smiled boldly as the dragon's large dumptruck-like head stared him down.

"Or maybe, capturing an adventurer has made you feel cocky? Do you think that you could rule over us? ... In the first place, *how much of this world do you even know?*"

The dragon's eyes began to dart around, confused.

... I know that this Phoenix monster was originally the quest's creation. It was supposed to take over the Penglai Emperor's body, destroy the temple, and fly away into freedom. Becoming free, able to go wherever... but to where? What could the purpose of such an unrivaled event monster be?

That's how Jun originally thought of it.

If you think about it, couldn't somebody ride it all the way up to the first island ring? Doesn't it break the balance to shreds? Is that why Alice came and helped out? To seal it away? Somebody, or something, is going to such lengths to make

reaching Aion on the first ring so unattainable...

If that was how it was supposed to be, maybe she wanted Jun to ride it up?

... No, now's not the time for that.

He calmed down. Time was running low. He had two minutes left.

I'm going to save Kasumi-san!

Swinging his sword, he cut up the dragon's wings, which stiffened shortly afterwards. Jun continued to slice at the dragon's body, who anguished in pain.

Thanks to Eri's buffs, his jumps rapidly lifted him far off the ground. Jumping, he slashed at the dragon's nose, striking its mouth on his descent before rolling on the burning ground.

The timer still read 0059.

The dragon now only had a little bit of HP remaining.

Panicked, it stepped back.

Vigilant of anything that could happen, it turned its back to Jun, and flapped its wings trying to escape.

"... How unpleasant could you possibly be?"

Jun sighed and jumped onto the dragon's back.

"Change, lance mode!"

His greatsword changed into a longspear and he plunged it deep beneath the dragon's scales.

"Special ability, activate! Holy Wings Blast!"

White light poured out from the dragon's body...

Its large bulk exploded.

Part 10

As the dragon fell, the Jiangshi faded away as if they had been mere illusions.

Jun, having fallen off of the monster's back, got up, approached the fallen dragon's body, and looked at its drops.

"The Phoenix's Heart, huh?"

Jun quickly picked it up. At that moment, the fallen dragon's texture changed, and quickly shrank back down into Zakka.

It seemed like he had fainted. The one who perished was the Phoenix.

"Sheesh, this guy's truly a troublemaker."

Jun looked at his own weapon's status. Sometime earlier, the Holy Avenger icon had disappeared. The timer had stopped at 0018.

So it's all over.

Jun shook his head, and rushed back over to his comrades.

Then Kasumi-san... is safe.

Part 11

Kasumi awoke in a small underground room. In front of her stood the silver-haired girl, staring down at her.

“Alice...chan?” She was surely the kid from Altaria Island. Kasumi recognized her instantly. But, why was she here? And aside from that, what had happened to her herself?

“Look at your quest log.”

As she said, Kasumi called out her tablet and opened the window.

Quest: ‘The Penglai Emperor’s Resurrection’ has been cleared!

Seeing these words on her event log made Kasumi breathe a large sigh of relief.

But wait. Surely the Penglai Emperor had been killed. What happened to the boy who stole the Phoenix’s Heart?

“The exit’s that way.” The silver-haired girl pointed at the singular exit from the room. “Jun is waiting for you.”

“Is that so? Jun-san, what in the world happened...” In the short period of time that she had taken her eyes off of the silver-haired girl, she vanished without a trace. Kasumi blinked in surprise and tilted her head. “Alice-chan, where could you have gone...?”

Somehow though, for some odd reason, she felt like she didn’t have to worry about it.

Part 12

When Kasumi walked out of the temple ruins, Jun rushed over to her, panting.

He immediately handed over the Phoenix's Heart to her, still clueless of what was going on.

"You should take this," he said, and realized that Kasumi had tilted her head, confused. "... Uh, there are some choices on the display window...? Maybe you can use it."

At that moment, after looking for signs of Alice, Jun shook his head.

Now, the quest would be just any normal quest. That's how the rules worked.

"... Seems like everything's okay."

Kasumi smiled, but then she strained her ears. Whose voice was she hearing? Jun thought about how she heard the Penglai Emperor's voice earlier, during the event.

Then, the voice right now was...

'Yes... right, well then, see you around.'

Just as he said "see you around", light wrapped all around Kasumi's body.

To Jun, it seemed like the small source of light rose up into the skies from her palm.

Or actually, it might have been just an illusion. However, when he looked back at Kasumi, the red stone that had lain in her hand had disappeared.

"The Phoenix's Heart?" she asked.

"It left."

"Where did it go?" Kasumi looked up at the sky. There wasn't a single cloud. It had escaped into *the blue sky*.

"It's waiting at the end of the blue sky. That's what it said."

"Really? The Phoenix originally..."

— The end of the blue sky.

Jun had heard those words both from Alice and from Kai. Jun and Kasumi gazed up into the sky.

What could possibly be up there?

Epilogue

Part 1

From a hill close to the Phoenix temple, Sakuya had been watching the fiery affair in the sky.

“My, my, what a waste of time. I panicked and rushed here.” Breathing a sigh, she turned around to her own teammates. “Sorry guys, I guess I was being a bit paranoid. Kasumi’s safe. Let’s go back.”

“Is it okay that we’re not even going to pay Kasumi-chan, along with Jun-san, a visit?” a young woman in her party asked. “They’ve worked their asses off getting here.”

“I’m a weak girl. If we met up with them, I bet I’d get too emotional.”

“But...”

“It’s fine,” Sakuya smiled, turning around. “We have our own battles to fight.”

With her back turned to her old friends, she stepped forward.

Part 2

That night, they reserved the largest inn in all of Payang and threw a huge party. They celebrated their victories over both the Illusionary Brigade and the glitched dragon, but most importantly, they celebrated Kasumi's escape from danger. Gathered together in the room were not only the adventurers who directly took part in combat, but those who worked behind the scenes as well, numbering over a hundred in total.

Ryuka mentioned, "My battery has been recharged completely. And the quest has been completed. I never even experienced the death as punishment for failure... The phrase 'Received the Phoenix's blessing.' is displayed in my event log. I think that the Phoenix's blessing recharged my battery for me."

Jun could not believe his ears.

"Maybe it's a present from the Phoenix?" Kasumi said, smiling innocently. "It'd be nice if we could meet him again."

As for Jun, however, he did not fancy having to go through such a troublesome ordeal a second time.

Even though we've resolved the problem... there are still many unanswered questions.

Like who exactly the Penglai Emperor was, what the Phoenix was, and the purpose of the quest.

And then, Alice revealed that it had been a bug in the system. She also leaked out a few internal terms, like "model" and "incarnation", and she granted him the absurdly powerful Holy Avenger attribute.

Jun had even confirmed that Alice had powers akin to those of a GM.

But, who in the world was "that person" that she mentioned...

"Whaaaat? I'm seeing four Juuunnss." Her cheeks bright red, Eri walked up to him, smelled strongly of alcohol. Jun got out of the way quickly, avoiding her attempted hug. "Aah, Juuun, stop running awayyyy!"

"For god's sake... Who let this middle-schooler drink?"

“Mee!” Unsurprising, Yukaria was the one to raise her hand. “The mead is really sweet, so it just flows right down your throat.

“Sheesh, you...”

“Hey, heeey, quit running awayy.” Eri stubbornly continued chasing him. “Ahh, Kasumi-san, help me out...”

Turning around, Jun made eye contact with Kasumi, who had puffed her cheeks out.

“Huh, are you mad?”

“Not in the slightest.” Kasumi went “Hmph,” turned around, and took another glass from Yukaria. She downed the entire glass of yellow liquid in one gulp.

“Haha, you’re a good drinker!”

“Seconds, please.” Without moving her eyes, she passed the glass over to Yukaria. She immediately had another glass prepared.

Ryuka grabbed Jun, still trying to escape Eri at that moment, with both of her arms.

“Where do you think you’re going, you good-for-nothing buffoon.”

“Are you drunk too?”

“Sorry. I won’t do anything to risk sensei’s scolding. It’ll just feed the sadist in him.”

“... Give me a break.”

After drinking three cups in quick succession, Kasumi turned to face Jun.

“Jun-san.”

“Hmm?”

“I’m pretty good at holding down my alcohol.”

“Really?”

“My boobs are bigger than Eri’s!”

“... Enough, you’re drunk.”

“Yukaria-san told me! That, Jun-san, you like them big!”

“Okay, okay, got it. Now please lower your voice a bit...”

People began crowding around them. Isao and the others laughed. Of course, Yukaria had started it.

“Prepare for the consequences of your inability to read signals,” Ryuka murmured.

Part 3

Jun and Kasumi slipped away from the banquet and walked around the same plaza as the day before.

“... I’m so sorry, I drank too much...”

It seemed as if the evening breeze had woken her from her stupor. Jun chuckled and uttered “Don’t worry about it,” to her. Her face had turned red in embarrassment. “Aside from that... Sorry ’bout everything.”

“Huh, Jun-san, you shouldn’t be apologizing...”

“No. I was careless. I treated your life-and-death situation as a game... Maybe that was the server’s way of punishing me.”

Kasumi told Jun about how she met Alice. Though the naive Kasumi didn’t seem to have any suspicions about the girl’s peculiar tendency to appear and disappear randomly...

Even so, she seemed to understand that Alice was, in some way, related to Jun. “Alice-chan is one of your acquaintances, right, Jun-san?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, but I can’t really talk about her. Please keep her a secret even to Eri and the others.”

“Will do! Next time you see her, could you tell Alice-chan that I said, “Thank you so much!” please?” Kasumi said, nodding meekly. She proceeded to form a fist with her hand. “But, I won’t lose to her!”

“Let me just point this out to you so you don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not very fond of her. She’s more of a contact that I have to be careful of.”

“... Is that so?” Kasumi tilted her head slightly.

“Even though she helped you out today, that doesn’t mean that she’s on our side. You shouldn’t trust her... Actually, that wasn’t the best way to phrase it. Kasumi-san, speaking as a friend, trust me on this.”

“... Yes.” Kasumi nodded, hesitating a little. “That’s right. We’re friends.”

“Yeah.”

Jun scratched the back of his head. He knew what she wanted to say. He

knew what she was feeling, but yet the one who couldn't take the first step was...

Sakuya/Kai.

Jun had still kept his relationship with her a secret from Kasumi.

Previously, he had thought it was surely still too early to talk about it. However, Kasumi Yukasaki was growing at a rate that surprised even Jun. Her technical skill, along with her mental strength. But now, maybe she would be ready...

"To tell you the truth, there's one thing I really need to talk to you about." Jun turned around and faced Kasumi. He looked into her eyes, gazing at the faint reflection of the magic street lights.

"It's, important... right?"

"Yeah. I've been keeping it a secret from you the whole time... I... actually..."

Just at that moment, there was a loud zapping sound. The sound even reached Jun's ear. It meant that he had a new message on his tablet. Back when everybody used their tablets as educational supplements, this feature was available through system updates. However, this time...

"Uh, Jun-san. What's that?"

Jun peered into Kasumi's tablet, and then hurriedly got out his own. Only one sentence appeared in the message window, but it was the same thing.

It became very noisy near the bar. Maybe Eri and the others received the same message. Or maybe even every adventurer did.

The words on the message window were very simple and hard to misunderstand.

— Blessed by the Phoenix's spirit, secondary classes have been unlocked.
151 days have passed since the Birthday.

Afterword

I like mages in fantasy games. In computer games where you can freely form groups, mages can take on many different roles. Even in TRPG (tabletop role playing games), I'm sure they can do many things.

Even in MMORPGs I usually played mage classes. Since most of the time, I specialized in long-ranged battles, when I played as a close-ranged fighter every once in a while in 3DMMOs, I was confused and easily distracted by being close up to the enemy. It's my nature to be plopped in the back, carefully watching for any changes in the battle situation while watching out for monster adds.

Because of that, this time, the first half of the book emphasized battling in a group. The part about crowd control was especially for those who don't have much experience playing MMORPGs and thus would not be familiar with the concept...

The role commonly known as crowd controller in MMOs ended up shortened into just controller. But why?

Because "crowd controller" was too much of a mouthful to say! [1]

Wasn't that blunt? Sorry. It's the truth. Anyways, the phrase "controller" was used in the Japanese version of the fourth edition of the widely acclaimed TRPG, Dungeons and Dragons, and I guess it was easy to understand.

That is to say, games in which enemies were proactive in aiming for mages and priests were, though realistic, just shitty games if there wasn't a way to counteract their opportunistic targeting. In the early days of the 3D MMORPG, the counterbalance was the general idea of crowd control, or aggro management. It would be very interesting to talk a ton more about this stuff, but I'm leaving out since you could probably find it all if you fish around on the internet. If you're interested in learning more, please consult Google-sensei. And afterwards, if you notice that I've made a mistake somewhere, please tell me privately.

Well then, see you in volume 3.

I started a blog. Please come play on it if you want.

URL: <http://blog.livedoor.jp/heylyalai/>

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

[1] – The original went more like “The ruby text was too long.” In Japanese, ruby, or pronunciation guides are often written above Japanese words to show an “alternative pronunciation”. In Japanese, since consonant clusters do not naturally occur, seemingly short words in English become much longer. Crowd controller becomes クラウドコントローラー which is ten syllables for the four syllables in English. Because of this, crowd controller became controller (コントローラー).