

Sword Art Online – Caliber SS

Translator's Note

The Caliber SS is an alternate end to the Caliber story found in Volume 8. It takes part after Part 3 and follows a "What if Klein didn't save Freyja" scenario. In order to fully enjoy the chapter, it is recommended that one finish reading the normal end first (the entire Caliber story line).

The first half of this chapter is almost entirely the same as the first half of Part 4 (with minor changes such as removing all references to Freyja) and was translated by BeginnerXP. The story diverges about halfway through, in the middle of the battle with Dym. To make it easier to navigate, I broke the chapter into sections, the third section being where the story path diverges.

Note: Here SS means 少し失敗 (sukoshi shippai) which translates to Slight Failure. However since there are no synonyms for failure starting with the letter S, therefore the title has been left the same as it was in the original.

Part 1

The katana user finished off the black Minotaur evil-god by stabbing it with his special skill, as if releasing the grudges he had kept up to this moment. Not paying any attention to the drop items on the spot the enemy avatar had burst apart, he turned around and yelled,

"Oi Kiritard! What did ya do just now!?"

That question obviously referred to my usage of one-handed sword skills while equipped with two swords, and explaining in detail would be very troublesome, so I obeyed my inner thoughts and said while giving my most troubled face,

".....Do I have to say it?"

"Course! After seeing something like that!"

It seemed I had pressed Klein's curiosity button, and since it was unavoidable, I answered briefly,

"It was a skill outside the system, «Skill Connect»."

Oo—, was the sound which flowed out of Liz, Silica, and Sinon mouth; suddenly Asuna pressed her fingertips to her right temple and growled,

"Um.....somehow, I got a strong feeling of Déjà vu....."

"It's just your imagination."

I shrugged my shoulders and clapped my hand on our healer-sama's back, whom despite her support duty in the back row, had sneaked in during the battle with the gold Minotaur to deliver the killing blow.

"This is not the time for relaxed talk. Lyfa, how much time do we have left?"

"Ah, right."

After sheathing her long sword in its scabbard behind her waist, Lyfa held up the medallion hanging from her neck. From a few steps away, I could see that the light within the jewel was almost completely lost.

".....At the current pace, we still have an hour or two."

"I see. —Yui, this dungeon structure has four floors right?"

I continued asking, so the little fairy sitting on my head the whole time responded clearly,

"Yes, the third floor is around seventy percent of the second floor size, the forth floor should be mostly the boss room."

"Thank you."

Stretching my right hand, my fingertips stroked my hair while I quickly considered the situation.

At this moment, in the Jötunheimr field far below us, the players accepting the «Frost Giant Tribe» side's quest and the hunting of the beast type evil-gods had gained momentum. The number of quest participants would only increase and not decrease. The remaining time was estimated to be around an hour. The battle with the last boss — probably «King Prym» himself — should take about thirty minutes, we wouldn't be able to move to the third and forth floor within thirty minutes.

If there were a little more time, we could explain the situation to the players on the field, asking for their assistance in revoking the ongoing quest, but at this moment we didn't have enough time to go back to the ground. The other alternative was to message the fairy lord requesting reinforcements, but organizing a force in the capital city beyond the mountain range, moving it to the Aarun plateau, and reaching Jötunheimr from the dungeon stairs, by the time they did them the sun would have set.

In other words, with just seven people, we were in a hopeless situation. — Or rather, factoring in the failure of «Queen Urðr»'side quest from the Cardinal's automatic quest generator function, Prymheimr castle would surface on Alfheim, and trigger the start of a large-scale campaign quest «Ragnarök». The fault was obviously the character who inherited its function from its creator.

Anyway——

".....In that case, I don't care if it's the king of the evil-gods or not, we will just «Smash» him for good!"

Lisbeth said that with a slap on my back, the rest of them altogether went "Oo!" in agreement. Where did they get that recklessness from? While thinking that, I strongly nodded.

"——Alright, everyone's HP and MP have fully recovered right? Then let's clean up the third floor quickly!"

The combined voice echoed once more, seven people then kicked the floor, and started running, aiming for the boss' room on the lowest floor, which was visible through the ice.

Just as Yui said, the third floor was clearly narrower than the second floor. It was natural for the lower parts of an upside down pyramid, but this place was quite a narrow and also had a complicated passage. For a normal clearing, we would be confused by the gimmick of the paths, but we had, enshrined on my head, the Navigation Pixie-sama which could give the latest model of an intelligent car navigation system a run for its money.

Our trump card accessed the map data, and with her instructions, we could run through the winding passage at full speed. Even the gimmick puzzles using levers, gears, or stepping switches were cleared without any time used to solve them. If this affair were to be observed from the outside, there would be no mistake for them to think that we were doing a time attack for the fastest clearing.

We ran into the sub-boss twice, but we still reached the boss room of the third floor in only eighteen minutes. What awaited us there had twice the size of the Cyclops and Minotaur from the previous floors, both sides of its long lower body had ten pairs of centipede-like feet, it was clearly the creepy evil giant, but it didn't have much physical resistance. Of course its attack power was through the roof, so the HP gauge belonging to Klein and me were in the red so many times after being targeted by it. This battle, which made my stomach sore later, when I thought that either of us dying would lead to a wipe, went on for nine minutes.

During that time; Liz, Silica, Sinon, and Pina tried their best to cut down the giant's feet one by one, I then finished it off with the «Skill Connect» which included multiple sword skills once it was unable to move. With our high spirits, we rushed into the fourth floor to beat King Dym and his Niflheimr. Once we stepped into the passage leading to the boss room, we stopped, as in front of our eyes —— a scene came into view.

It was a cage made of elongated icicles on the wall's edge.

Behind the fence caused by the stalactite growing sharply from both the ground and the ceiling, was a single figure. It was not of a giant's size. As it had collapsed on the ground, its

accurate size was difficult to tell, but its body should be about the same height as the Undine Asuna's.

The skin was as white as the powdery snow lying thick around. The long flowing hair was a deep brown gold. The volume of the chest covered by the clothing that could be seen from her sorry state, it would be best not to say this out loud, as it could easily overwhelm all of our girl members. Both her hands and feet were shackled in the rugged ice.

The unexpected scene caused us to halt and feel worried, then the captive girl's shoulders made a sudden but subtle shake, as she lifted her face, with the blue chains ringing.

Her pupils were also of the same tea gold, like her hair. Her face, if it was a player avatar, would surely be because of overwhelming luck when it was created, or the account was bought with the large sum of money. However, her face was sublimed with the western European beauty, which was quite rare in this game.

Blinking once, her long eyelashes moved down then up, the girl said in a fine voice,

"Please..... Help me.....out of here....."

The katana user was sucked aimlessly toward the ice cage, I grabbed and pulled the bandana tail which dangled from behind his head.

"It's a trap."

"Trap."

"That's a trap."

The last two were Sinon's and Liz's words.

Klein straightened his back and turned around, as he made a subtle expression while scratching his head.

"O-Oh.....It's a trap.A trap, right?"

For the katana user on his death bed's sake, I asked in a small voice, "Yui?". The pixie on my head promptly replied,

"It's an NPC. Just like Urdr-san, there is connection to the language engine module. ——But, there is one difference. This person has the HP gauge enabled."

Normally, the HP gauge of the quest giving NPCs would be disabled to prevent them from taking damage. The exceptions were, when the NPC was the escort quest's objective, or the NPC was actually——

"A trap."

"It's a trap."

"I think it's a trap."

Asuna, Silica, and Lyfa said at the same time.

His eyebrows made a 八 shape, his eyes widened, and his mouth was pursed; I patted Klein's shoulder who was stiff in those complex expressions and quickly said,

"Of course it could be possible that it isn't a trap, but now we don't have time for trial and error. We need to reach Prym's place as early as possible, even if it is a second sooner."

"O.....Oo, hmm, well, that's right, yeah."

Klein nodded slightly and moved his glance from the ice cage.

When we ran until just a few steps before reaching the stairs, the voice came again from behind,

".....Please..... anybody....."

——To be honest, I also had the urge to help her, as I didn't think that NPCs were merely the system's automatically generated moving objects, but dwellers living in this world. If this was in a normal quest progression, helping that girl, accompanying her, and as the story progressed until the end, hearing her laugh from behind, "Uhahahaha, you fool—", would still be amusing. However, we were not in the situation to take that unnecessary risk now.

Part 2

The width of the descending stairs increased as we went down, and the decorative objects on the surrounding pillars and statues became more gorgeous at the same time. The «approaching boss room and resulting map data would be larger» tradition from Aincrad was also present here.

Standing at the end of the path were two wolves carved into the massive ice gate. So this was the throne room of King Prym. About 10 meters away from the gate, I cautioned everyone to slow down, as I turned to gaze at the medallion Lyfa was wearing. The delicate light orbs which once adorned the medallion were now 90% tainted black. We probably only had around 30 minutes left.

I took a deep breath, and said:

"Based on the dungeon design, the BOSS should be behind those doors. This BOSS will be harder than the previous ones, we'll need to do everything we can to defeat him. Before engaging, we'll first identify his attack pattern and focus on defense. I'll give the signal to

counterattack. When the BOSS's HP bar drops to yellow or red, his attack patterns will likely change again, so please be careful everyone.

I nodded and looked at the face of my companions, before adding:

“— This is the last battle, let's give it all we have!!”

“Yeah!”

This was the third cheer we had given since the start of this quest. Even Yui who was sitting on my head and Pina who was perched on Silica's shoulders cheered.

The gate began opening to both sides automatically once we were about five meters away. The cold air, along with a difficult to explain pressure, came from within. Asuna began re-applying supporting magics, and after confirming the numbers of buff icons below our HP/MP gauges, everyone made eye contact. We all nodded and rushed in at once.

The interior was an extraordinarily huge space in both horizontal and vertical directions. The wall and floor were blue ice, like the rest of the dungeon. The purple fire swayed eerily on the ice candles. High up on the ceiling were chandeliers of the same color, lined up. But what grabbed our attention was the dazzling reflection from the left and right wall lined along the interior.

Gold. Gold coins and ornaments, swords, armors, shields, sculptures and furniture, all kinds of golden objects were piled up to a scale where it was impossible to count. As the insides of the room sank into darkness, the full extent of the treasure was entirely unfathomable.

".....How much Yurudo are all these worth.....?"

Inside the room; Lisbeth, the only person who managed a player shop here murmured in a trance. “I should have emptied my inventory!” I thought, but I never mentioned this to anyone.

On the right side of the party, Klein slowly made his way towards the treasure mountain, as if motivated by his bushidō way of life. However, as he approached the treasure——

"..... A bug flew in."

The low frequency mutter could be heard from the dark open space deep within the room, causing the floor to tremble.

"I hear an annoying buzz. Where is it? I'll crush the bad bug."

Boom, the floor trembled. Boom, boom, the trembles approached, it sounded as if it were so heavy that it might break the ice floor.

Once it reached the lighting range, a human shape appeared.

Giant —— wouldn't be a suitable word. The humanoid evil-god was huge even compared to the bosses we fought in this castle so far. Its height must be at least fifteen meters. Even if I jumped with full force, I wouldn't be able to reach the knee of those giant tree trunk sized legs.

Its skin color was dull blue, like lead. Dark brown fur coiled around its arms and legs, and I wondered what kind of large animal the fur came from. A single part of the plate armor on its waist had the size of a small boat. While the upper part of the body was bare, the prosperous muscle looked as if it was able to repel any weapons directed at it.

Its muscular chest had its blue beard hung over it. Its head above it sank into a silhouette and we could only see its outline. However, the gold crown on its forehead and the blue and bleak blinking eyes below shone brightly in the dark.

In the old Aincrad, the system limit of the floor height was a hundred meters, the boss room inside the labyrinth zone was also under the same rule, it was unavoidable for all boss monsters to have vertical size in moderation. So up until now, I had no experience in fighting with an enemy which I had to look up to. As I couldn't fly, how could I fight like this? The best I could do was cutting no higher than its shins.

While I was thinking about various things, the gigantic giant —— the double expressions are necessary to describe its size —— took another step closer, and laughed like a gong being hit,

"Hu, hu..... the Alfheim bugs? Creeping into this place under Urðr's seduction? How about this, you small fry. Just tell me where that woman is hiding, and you can take the gold in this room with you, hmm?"

With the enormous body and the crown on its forehead, along with the speech just now, this guy was the «Frost Giant King Drym», no doubt about it.

It was Klein who faced and replied to the great giant, who was an AI like Urðr.

".....Heh, a warrior just needs to eat, sleep, and laugh! Don't bother trying to tame us with a cheap invitation like that!"

While we made subtle expressions of relief from behind, as in front of us, Klein pulled his beloved katana from its scabbard.

With that signal, the rest of us took out our weapons as well.

They might not be legendary class equipment, but all of them either carried the name of ancient class weapons, or were carved to a satisfactory level by the master smith Lisbeth.

However, the daring smile under the long moustache of the Giant King Prym didn't fade due to the light from our weapons. Maybe it was natural, as our weapons to him were just slightly longer than toothpicks to him anyway.

The shining phosphorescence from the dark eye sockets glared at us from a very high place, the glance stopped at the eight person who stood there unarmed.

".....Ho, ho. I hear the buzzing of wings again. Very well then, I shall crush you beneath my feet, treat it as my gift, being turned into part of Jötunheimr!"

Thump, the giant king suddenly stepped forward, its large HP gauge appeared on the upper right of my field of vision. Moreover, it was stacked three layers. Cutting that off would be very troublesome.

As the HP gauge of those evil floor bosses in the new Aincrad were invisible in order to frustrate the player's mind, compared to those bosses, this battle's pace would be much easier to grasp.

"——Here it comes! Listen to Yui's instructions and focus on avoiding at the start!"

Immediately after my shout, Prym raised his huge rock-like right fist high up near the ceiling —— a blue frost storm wrapped its fist, then furiously swung down.

The last battle in Prymheimr castle —— but probably —— was as expected, a large and fierce battle I had never experienced.

The King Prym's early attack patterns were punches from both fists, three continuous stomping using the right foot, an ice breath in a straight line, and summoning twelve ice Dwarf minions from the ground.

The creation of the Dwarves was the most troublesome, but they were swiftly taken care of from the back of the party by Sinon's bow, cleaning them up in the blink of an eye by piercing their weak points with marvelous accuracy. The rest of the attacks were avoidable after observing its timing once, the counts from Yui also helped the three front row attackers in avoiding direct hits.

Once the defense was in place, it was finally the time to attack, however, this was certainly the hardest part. As I had feared, our swords could only reach Prym's shins, and the thick fur protecting that area had high physical resistance, like the gold Minotaur. I took a small chance to attack it with a three hit sword skill, risking my HP to do so, but a low delay skill also had low attribute damage. The result was an unpleasant response, like hitting an indestructible object.

We fought hard in the battle for ten minutes before the first HP gauge finally depleted, causing the giant king to make an overpowered roar.

"Pattern changed! Be careful!"

As I shouted, Lyfa who was next to me said in a nervous voice,

"This is bad, Onii-chan. Only two lights remain in the medallion. We only have about ten minutes left."

"....."

Prym had three HP gauges. However, we took more than ten minutes to deplete one gauge. It could be said that cutting the remaining two gauges within ten minutes would be very difficult.

But, for this opponent, the «Skill Connect» wouldn't work like it did when we were fighting the gold Minotaur. During monster delay — or to say the delay occurring after its attack, «striking the weak point to create heavy concentrated damage» was needed. However, Prym was weak to neither sword nor magic, so even if the sword skill connected four times, it wouldn't be able to make much change to that amount of HP.

As if seeing the moment of my impatience——

Prym suddenly inhaled a large amount of the air, inflating his chest like a bellows.

An overpowering wind occurred, sucking in the five people in the front and mid rows. It's bad, this is surely the harbinger of a full force wide area of effect attack. For evading, first of all, the sucking power of the wind magic must be neutralized. While I was thinking this, to my left, Lyfa started reciting a spell.

But, there was probably not enough time once I noticed the enemy motion.

"Lyfa, everyone, take defense!"

At my call, Lyfa suspended the spell, crossed her arms in front and bent her body. All members took the same posture, in that moment,

From Prym's mouth, which had sent out a breath in a straight line many times up until this point, released a wide conal diamond dust.

The shining pale wind wrapped around us. The cold which penetrated Asuna's buff made it feel like our skin was being torn off. Gin, gin, with a sharp sound, the avatars of five people froze at once. I tried to escape, but the thick shell of the ice completely locked my movements. Lyfa, Klein, Liz, Silica with Pina being hugged tightly to her chest, and I turned into blue ice sculptures.

At the moment, our HP gauge still haven't decreased. But we couldn't feel at ease. As this kind of special skill would increase the damage taken in direct proportion to the time being suspended.

Prym approached, then lifted up his massive right leg. Bad, pinch, danger. —— as I screamed in my mind, at almost the same time,

"Nuuu—!"

With a thick roar, Prym stomped furiously on the floor. The violent shock wave from it swallowed us while we were still frozen——

Caching! the frightening sound of breaking echoed throughout the hall, those of us covered in ice shattered. My eyes went dark due to shock. My body slammed hard on the floor while the damage effect light continued on.

At the edge of my vision, the top five of seven HP gauges suddenly turned to a deep red.

While the five vanguards got caught in Prym's large-scaled ranged attack, of course the two people in the back row weren't just watching.

Our HP gauges were taken by nearly eighty percent when suddenly, a soft blue light rained down on us, healing our wounds. It was Asuna's high ranked full recovery spell. The timing was perfect, which would be impossible to achieve without anticipating the occurrence of the damage and pre-casting the spell in advance.

However, in this game's large-scaled recovery magics, most of them were of the «Heal over Time» type, which didn't recovery all the lost HP instantly. So it'd be fatal if we were attacked again while our HP was still recovering.

Prym stepped forward in order to deliver the final blow to us who finally stood up. The long beard that hung over its throat —— was suddenly pierced by a rapid succession of fire arrows blazing bright red, causing a big explosion. It was Sinon's two-handed long bow sword skill «Explode Arrow». With ten percent physical, and ninety percent flame damage property striking the frost giant tribe's weak point, his HP gauge clearly decreased.

"Munuuun!"

Prym raised an angry voice and changed his direction to target Sinon. Flashy attacks on the enemy's weak point from the back row's damage dealers caused a massive amount of hate, taking over the hate of the vanguards, resulting in the enemy switching targets. It was a mistake beginners always did, but of course, this wasn't the case this time. Sinon acted as a decoy, knowing it would likely lead to her death, to buy us time for recovery.

"Sinon, give me thirty seconds!"

While shouting, I gulped down a recovery potion from my pouch. Next to me, the others also poured similar red liquids down their mouths. Pina, Silica's partner, seemed to have narrowly survived because of its master's guard skill. In this world, unlike Aincrad, there was a pet resurrection spell, but taking time to do so during a battle would be very difficult.

My vision switched between the irritatingly slowly increasing HP gauge, and the blue Cait Sith's continuing to avoid Pym's fierce attacks. Even though Sinon had come to ALO not long ago, her body control was spectacular. In GGO, as a sniper who forfeited all defensive skills, running away was the only way if an attacker type approached, that experience was probably still with her now.

".....Prepare the attack."

Removing my eyes off the HP gauge, which had finally came back up to eighty percent, I called my companions. Re-gripping both of my swords, I began to start counting, in that instant——

Part 3

"Onii-chan!"

Lyfa's trembling voice vibrated from my side.

"It's too late... The lights in the medallion, are gone..."

"What...?"

I held my breath and turned towards the large jewel on her chest. The jewel that seemed to be made of intricate carvings was almost completely black, save a small shred of light that remained near the bottom. Even as I spoke, it was gradually turning black.

That was to say, beneath the Ice Castle Pymheimr, on the frozen fields of Jötunheimr, the beast-type evil gods, Tonkii and Urdr's brethren, were close to being completely slaughtered. In other words, we who had accepted the quest "Urdr's request" had failed, and the hundreds of players who took Pym's quest had succeeded——

Even though my brain registered this fact, I couldn't accept it no matter what, as I stood there with my mouth wide open. From the looks on their faces, everyone felt the same too. Even so, I managed to pull myself together, and prepared to yell at Sinon, who was dodging Pym's fierce attacks alone far away from the party, to retreat. However——

DUUUN! A huge shockwave shook the earth, and the wide floorboards started to vibrate.

I lost my balance and fell to the floor. Far away, Sinon slipped too, and Pym raised his ice-covered right fist to smite her delicate body.

However, Pym's movements seemed to have slowed down. Then, two things happened at once. First, Pym's HP bar which had more than 60% HP remaining disappeared. Next, a string of red text messages flashed across my sight: "QUEST FAILED".

"Uwa... Uwahahaha..."

Slowly lowering his fists, the king of Giants laughed out loud.

"Uwahahahaha..... I can feel it... I can feel it! The one who has constantly been opposing me and my brethren, that hateful woman's aura is finally gone! Wahahaha....."

Once again, the frozen ground— No, the entire castle started to vibrate. The blue flames on the wall suddenly flared up, as if coming to life. The gleam in Pym's eyes seemed to be magnified tenfold.

The five vanguards finally found the energy to stand and reunite with Asuna and Sinon. However, their faces no longer held that determined look they usually had. Ignoring the pitiful ones on the ground who had to spread their legs to even stand straight, Pym let out a loud roar:

"Now! Now is the time my long-awaited wish will finally be fulfilled! Come forth... My brethren!"

His brethren? Who?

Just as I was lost in thought, huge crashes echoed throughout the throne room.

CRASH!

The mountain of treasure that was previously stacked high suddenly expanded, before crashing down towards the floor. And emerging from within were—even though they weren't as tall as Pym—giants, with sick blue skin and sporting matching blue beards. These were undoubtedly Pym's minions... The frost giants.

There were more than 30 of them. Creating miniature earthquakes as they walked, they lined up in a row at the center of the room, and placed one of their arms on their chests. They looked like statues from afar.

Seeing this scene full of muscle-bound males, most of us forgot about our failed quest and just stood there in shock. Even Yui, who was sitting on my head, didn't respond.

Again ignoring the fairies on the ground, Pym lifted his head sternly, planted his left hand on his waist, and lifted his right fist high. Everyone else looked at the direction he pointed - the huge crystal chandelier.

No, that wasn't it. He was pointing to something beyond the chandelier, after penetrating the castle and the crust, the place he pointed to was—

Our kingdom, The Fairy Kingdom Alfheim.

My suspicions were affirmed as that large bearded mouth started moving.

"Let us go! With our breaths let us bury that kingdom blessed by Yggdrasil in a sheet of ice!!"

"ROAR!!!"

DUM, *DUM DUM*. The thirty giants and Prym marched, the vibrations throwing us off our feet.

"Prymheimr — ATTACK!!"

GOWAAAAAAN!! A huge shockwave vibrated throughout the castle. I tried to stabilize myself before realizing I had been put into some sort of Gravity Bind - a huge force was being applied to me from above. No, that wasn't it — I was being suppressed by the force of the floor — the castle moving upwards.

A huge crash emanated from the castle's four walls, the loudest sound I had heard so far in ALO. This was undoubtedly the sound of the castle breaking through the boundary between Jötunheimr and Alfheim. Prym's plan which Urðr spoke of, "To forever encase Alfheim in snow and make his way up Yggdrasil" had apparently been put into motion.

"..... What's going to happen... next....."

Hugging her war hammer near her chest, Lisbeth asked. Of course, no one had an answer. The only one who knew who probably be the "Cardinal System" who created this quest. No, maybe it could be said that this world had been devoured by darkness to the point that not even gods could tell what would happen next.

The castle had been rising for about three minutes now. In the meantime, Prym stood with his fist pointed towards the distance, like some warped representation of a legendary hero. The rest of the giants were going "OOR, OOR!!" non-stop, while stamping their feet in unison.

Soon, there came the final, loudest crash yet, and the castle, as well as the giants, went silent.

I noticed that the throne, which had been dark until now, suddenly lit up. I watched as light trickled in from the north wall, like rays of gold. It was Sunlight, something the underground world of Jötunheimr shouldn't possess — the radiance of the sun.

Prym slowly retraced his right fist, coming into contact with sunlight briefly. His face contorted in displeasure, as he tightened his fists. A low sound escaped his throat, unlike anything an NPC usually produced. It seemed as if he was speaking to himself.

"... Look out, Æsir... I will reach the top of the world tree and overthrow Midgard, before taking over Asgard which all of you are cowardly hiding, and crush everything under my feet..."

Lifting his right leg, he stomped his feet, as if trampling someone who wasn't there. Then, as if suddenly remembering our existence, the king of giants turned his blueish white eyes towards us and said, with a smile.

".....Shouldn't you thank me, insects? Hurr~?"

"W-Why should we thank you, you bastard?"

Klein shouted, his red hair shot upright. Prym looked at him in amusement and said while smiling:

"Uwahaha, because I saved you the time to travel back here from Jötunheimr! Look around you and behold my castle's true form."

The king of giants, snapped his fingers *SNAP!*, and—

Suddenly, the floor we had been standing on slid open, revealing a huge gaping hole.

"Waaah!?"

I shouted in surprise, and the wings on my back started flapping instinctively. However, even though the castle was no longer in Jötunheimr, I still couldn't fly. Just like that, the seven fairies plus one more (Yui) plus a dragon (Pina) fell into the newly formed hole. To be exact, only Silica's pet dragon was capable of flight, but because her owner was gripping her so tightly in front of her chest, she wasn't able to do anything.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

The loudest scream was made by Asuna, who had a fear of falling from great heights. Lisbetg and Silica also made similar screams, while the cold Sinon actually shrugged and shook her head in midair. Even the speed freak Lyfa didn't scream "YAHOO" and instead clutched my left shoulder tightly.

"I'LL GET YOU FOR THIS YOU OLD GEEZER AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

Klein's curse trailed into a long scream, as the seven of us fell right down the hole.

Thinking back about it, Prym has no reason to spare our lives back there, instead of dealing the finishing blow. Though one could probably argue that falling from such heights would lead to our deaths anyway. Just as I was thinking to use magic like 'Feather Fall', the darkness in front of me began to curve, before finally becoming an icy slope. With our behinds planted on the icy surface, we had no choice but to slide down the frozen ramp. Before long, a white light appeared in front of us, and quickly began expanding. At the same time, there was a change in the air—

"..... We're gonna fly! Get your wings ready!"

I shouted out, just before the entire party plunged into the void.

I spread my shoulders and commanded my wings to fly. This time, a very reliable flapping could be heard, and a propelling force wrapped around my body. Gently picking up Yui who was perched on my head with my right hand, I placed her in my front shirt pocket, and began flying upwards. I looked to my left and right, and soon everyone noticed me.

The scenery before me that was tinted with white slowly regained its original palette. Right in front of me was a blue sky above green field, and numerous white mountains. This was, without a doubt, The Valey of Aarun, located in central Alfheim.

From the looks of the earth, it seemed as if the castle was heading south of the valley. That is to say, the great World Tree should be behind me, along with the town of Aarun which rested near one of its roots.

However, I hesitated to look back. What had happened to the beautiful scenery of Aarun, this was something I was afraid to find out. That said, I couldn't continue flying straight either, or I would end up in Salamander territory. I decelerated and gradually came to a halt, hovering in midair.

Taking a deep breath, I turned around.

"...Oh... Ohhh....."

The stifled cry came from Lyfa, who was to my right. It was followed by the surprised cries of the other six people.

The Central City Aarun, the capital of Alfheim which was bustling with life throughout the year — no longer existed.

The world tree, even though it looked as grand as always, had something lodged near its roots. Numerous roots had been upturned, and just a few hours ago, a lively stonework city was supposed to be there. The stones that Aarun were built on were now scattered all over, like a mountain of rubble.

Taking its place was a huge, eight-sided crystalline object that reflected off all the sun's rays.

This was without a doubt the castle Dymheimr. However, when observed from Jötunheimr, it was the shape of an inverted triangle. That was to say, what we had previously seen was only the bottom half of the castle. Perched on top of the inverted pyramid was another similar pyramid, and it was its sharp tip that had pierced through the earth's crust.

The queen of the lake Urðr had used her powers to keep Dymheimr sealed, but as her kind perished, so did her power. The castle had then broke free of its chains and revealed its true form. It was about 300 meters wide, and the height from the tip to the base was approximately 300 times $\sqrt{2}$, around 424 meters. Only about one tenth had pierced through

the rubble, the tip pushing upwards lunging greedily for the world tree's core. The world tree still held strong with its remaining 10 or so roots, but even then it seemed it would eventually fall.

I exhaled and glanced away from Dymheimr, surveying my surroundings.

The original inhabitants of Aarun were scattered around the valleys. Looking like ruin excavators, countless players stood there transfixed, their gaze upon the ice castle which had caused the city's ruin. If a player was running a shop in Aarun or simply taking a rest in their own house, the sudden emergence of a huge block of ice that laid waste to the entire city would certainly be quite a surprise. Because the city was a designated safe zone, none of the players had their HP reduced, though after going through such a shock it wouldn't be a surprise if their lives were shortened in the real world.

A group of players were pointing at the ice castle, their mouths moving nonstop. Because fairies had enhanced hearing, I could faintly pick up what they were saying.

"...This kinda event is too much no? Even my house is gone..."

"That's right, and not even a word of warning! It's still quite some time away to the annual end of year event too..."

"The appearance of Aincrad wasn't announced either, but this is beyond what you'd call a surprise event I think..."

Even though they hadn't fully recovered from shock, but their emotions should be turning to rage soon enough. Just like the conversation I had heard early, the entire streets of Aarun—

"...Players who had houses in Aarun or item storages, what's going to happen to them?"

Lisbeth, who was to my left, said, taking the words out of my mouth. Klein answered, seemingly robbed of spirit.

"Of course... Everything's gone, no matter how you look at it."

"No, it seems that property has been converted to Yurudo while items have been converted into scrolls and stored in the players' inventories."

This explanation came from Yui, who stuck her head out from my shirt pocket. Normally immovable objects could be converted into scrolls through the banker NPC. It seemed that even the Cardinal System wasn't cruel enough to remove players' items in an instant. It felt oddly heartwarming.

".....Is that true? At least some things can still be salvaged then..."

Just as Lisbeth was speaking.

A huge shrill scream from behind us interrupted her.

"Hey hey hey, is that true?! The scroll conversion I mean? Please please please tell me it's true!!!"

I turned around in surprise. About two meters away, a small girl wearing a round hat was standing, no, levitating in the air. A cloak was draped around her, and her right arm clutched a staff almost as tall as herself. From the rims of her hat, a large amount of golden curls fell forward, covering her eyes. Her skin was milky white, and her wings were pale yellow.

...Who's that? No, before that, what race is she? Someone short enough for me to look downwards, she was either Cait Sith or a Leprechaun, but she didn't have the symbolic cat ears on her head of gold hair. Upon further pondering, I came to the conclusion that she was an NPC. If that was the case, her color cursor should be the same as Pym.

To affirm my point, I looked straight at her and locked my cursor upon her veiled face.

However, a rectangular frame appeared at the top right corner of my vision, accompanied with a soft sound effect. This frame displayed the cursor information, and meant that the target was either a player or a monster. I nervously scanned her name. "Marinca", spelled entirely using alphabets. Wait, the ALO system shouldn't display names of unaccustomed players. No matter how much I racked my brains, I couldn't recall where had I met her before. If so, how was I able to see her name...?

"Ahh..."

Silica, who was hugging Pina tightly against her chest, let out a soft gasp from behind me. A moment later, I finally understood.

There was a string of shining letters hovering above the mysterious girl — Marinca's cursor.

"GAME MASTER"

"W-Woah, aren't you a GM?! Wow, it's the first time I've seen one in ALO!"

Klein muttered in amazement. I was similarly shocked. A Game Master was, as the name implied, the ones who managed to world of Alfheim Online. They were positioned higher than the Cardinal System, in other words they were employees of the company running ALO.

As to how much influence a GM had in game, this differed among games. There were MMOs where GMs specially dived in to interact with players and announce of upcoming events, but I never heard of such things happening in ALO. To me, this was the first time I had seen a GM's Avatar in Alfheim.

"E-Erm, I'm sorry, I haven't told you my name... You can call me Marinca from Ymir..."



Ymir, this was the name of the company running ALO. After RECTO's dissolution, ALO was supposed to be shut down too. Ymir though decided to purchase the servers despite declining player population, just like gods descending to save a doomed planet. However this wasn't revealed to the players. Even I didn't know much about the company, save that one of the employers was an old friend of Agil's.

Despite that, this GM, a supposed God in this world, gave me a feeling that she was unreliable. I shook my head, thinking of the current situation, and asked.

"...Erm, Marinca, you previously asked if the scroll conversion was true... Does that mean even Ymir doesn't know what's going on in Alfheim right now...?"

"Err—Erm... To be precise..."

Marinca lifted her staff into the air, twirled it for a moment, before saying:

"To be honest, this situation in Alfheim was just discovered not long ago."

".....W-What...?"

This low sound came from Asuna, who was standing on my right. Recognizing this voice full of agitation as the voice of "the sub-leader of the Knights of Blood" before going berserk, I hastily tried to stop her — but I was one step too late.

"What irresponsible words!! How long do you think this quest has been going on? Haven't you had ample opportunities to stop the script using administrator privileges?! To think none of you noticed this before Aarun crumbled, what are the game managers doing?"

"I'm s-s-sorry!!!"

As Asuna berated Marinca, Klein and I both tucked our heads away in fear, a habit inherited from attending her strategy meetings in the past. It was fortunate that Asuna didn't notice our gestures, as she moved a step forward —her shoes made a sound as they scrapped against the ground, this might just be me imagining things— and yelled in an enraged voice:

"Let's ignore the matter of how this happened in the first place — in a situation like this, wouldn't a simple Rollback be sufficient? How many hours can we rollback to?"

A rollback was the final measure in an MMO. Because the server was reverted back to a state in the past, it would reset all progress players' made in this time frame, including Yurudo and Experience. Of course, these were extremely important.

Even though we had took up "Urdr's request" to avoid complete destruction, we failed at the last moment. It should be dawning on the players who had taken "Prym's quest" now, that they had indirectly caused Aarun's destruction, and the holy sword promised as a reward was nothing but the "Fake Sword Caliburn". Since things had progressed to such a level, a rollback

was inevitable, and most players should be able to understand. Now to hope that the time lost was as minimal as possible. That was what I thought as I awaited Marinca's reply.

How would she reply? This GM who didn't look at a GM at all would probably stutter and smile clumsily at us.

"Well, about that... I checked the logs and it appears that the completion of the quest, in other words the beginning of this script, triggered a server backup..."

"W-What???"

This loud sound came from the seven of us. The GM's small stature quivered, as she continued nonchalantly.

"But it's such a relief that all the items were converted into scrolls! This is like casting an anchor windward... No, a blessing in disguise... That's not right either..."

"By the skin of your teeth"

In a low voice, Sinon who was situated behind me replied. "True, True", the rest of us agreed. Taking out a strand of spear mint from her pocket and placing it in her mouth, the sniper coolly asked:

"GM-kun, how did the situation get like this? Did the Cardinal System's 'automatic quest generation' feature malfunction?"

Upon hearing this, Marinca pouted "Uuuu" and said.

"Y-You sure know a lot! I've been working at Ymir for two weeks, and only known of Cardi-chan yesterday! No, I'm not joking!"

In these three sentences, there was at least one I was tempted to take a jab at, to the point my mouth was twitching on its own. Marinca waved her arms and said in an innocent tone:

"Wow, Cardi-chan sure is amazing! Not only can it identify bugs in quests, it can also fix dungeons with exploitable EXP mobs and even trace players with abnormal Yurudo and EXP stats!"

I suppose by Cardi-chan she was referring to the Cardinal System. This was one of its main advantages, of which we were all familiar of by now. In the old SAO, the Cardinal System often found our 'EXP farming spots' and quickly patched them. My lively daughter Yui was also part of the Cardinal System's low level processes; I shudder to imagine how powerful the computing levels of the Cardinal System are.

Marinca, who probably had no idea that the majority of us were SAO survivors, clasped her hands together.

"I also wish to one day reach Cardi-chan's level of administration! During yesterday's maintenance, even though it wasn't required, I still dived in from a specialized VR Console to monitor the situation up close. I even discovered many unused functions and models in the Quest interfaces. I thought that since the server was shut down, messing around a little wouldn't do any harm..."

"...Just like one of those movies, where the single press of a button would cause an explosion..."

Lyfa mumbled. I felt the same way too, but Marinca seemed to have missed that and continued her astonishing story as a GM.

"...But then, even when I turned the settings ON, nothing happened. So I continued watching the maintenance, and finally when it was time to reboot the server, I totally..."

"Forgot to turn the settings OFF, right?"

Asuna took another menacing step forward. Marinca immediately stopped talking and let out her third whimper.

"I-I'm the kind of person who is great at turning things like television, lights and air conditioners on, but I'm really bad when it comes to turning them off. I've been telling myself that in order to not cause trouble for others, I need to erm, mind my own business... Ahh, that's not it..."

This time Sinon didn't correct her. She continued staring straight ahead, with the spear mint still in her mouth. Maybe something about the Cath Sith's gaze caused Marinca to straighten up and finish her story.

"So um... After confirming the maintenance was complete, I slept for a while in the office. In the afternoon I was awoken by the shouts of other employees... It seemed that something huge had happened in-game. Looking at the situation, I had no idea if Cardi-chan was going on a rampage or kicking up a fuss... Actually, I was the one who had activated the 'Speed up mission' option! Ahh, this is the dream of every MMO operator — even though it's freeware, it's still capable of such intricate and powerful operations, Cardi-chan sure is awesome!! O-Oh yeah, where was I? Ahh yes, after I woke up, I was ordered to assess the situation in Aarun. Hearing that the players' items have been converted into scrolls is such a relief, like a blessing in disguise... No I mean... Ahh how should I put it!"

Taking our gazes off the GM who was frantically hugging her hat, we exchanged gazes.

"...Anyway, at least we now know the reason why the Cardinal System's quest suddenly accelerated."

Yui, who was resting in my front pocket, nodded after hearing my word.

"This fits the saying 'You can't hate a crying GM'^[1] pretty well"

"Yeah... Even the Cardinal System wouldn't be able to sit idly in dummy mode forever.^[2] Putting it in another perspective, it seems that the Cardinal System's finally shown its true potential..."

"It must be a desire that's been accumulating for months, finally exploding all at once."

We all agreed to Silica's words. If we treated the Cardinal system as a living being instead of a regulating program, it wouldn't be too hard for us to understand its feelings. The question was, just how much power did the Cardinal System have? Even though the world was supposedly based on the Norse Mythology of Ragnarök and the «Twilight of the Gods» seemed to be a fitting final battle, but...

I looked at Lyfa, who was gazing up at the blue, frozen castle basked under the sun.

"From Prym's speech it seems that the Frost Giants aim to reach the top of the World Tree. If we just ignore this, not only Aarun, even the entire Yggdrasil City could be decimated..."

"E-Ehh?!"

This came from Lisbeth, who owned a smithing shop in the city of Yggdrasil. Even though the Yurudo used for purchasing the shop and the items within were safe, it was hard to accept a giant flattening her shop which she had painstakingly spent months to acquire and decorate.

Asuna and I had previously rented a small house near Liz's shop in Yggdrasil City. After we moved to the 22nd floor of the floating castle Aincrad, I no longer had any reason to defend Yggdrasil City. However, there was one thing which made me uneasy.

"Say, Lyfa."

I said to the Slyph swordswoman, who turned towards me with her golden ponytail swishing in the wind. Searching my memory of the past ten or so minutes, I asked:

"Before we were ejected from the castle, that old geezer Prym said something about what he would do after climbing the World Tree... Something about overthrowing Midgard. What exactly is Midgard?"

"Mmm, even though I've never heard about it in ALO, but according to Norse Mythology it's supposedly one of the nine realms. Just like how Jötunheimr is the world of Frost Giants, Alfheim is the world of elves and Asgard is the world of gods... Midgard is the world of humans. But there is no human race available for ALO players."

Staring at my sister who was rapidly feeding us information, I muttered the only conclusion I came to.

"Then Midgard... Should probably refer to Aincrad..."

"W-WHAT??"

This time it was Klein, who up until now had knitted his brows and crossed his arms, that screamed.

"Overthrow from the sky... The entire Aincrad? If that's the case, shouldn't the final act be starting..."

"Final act?"

"Of course... The 'Legendary Samurai Klein' Act"

Not even bothering to come up with a reply, I dragged the swordsman by his patterned bandana aside and looked at Asuna, asking her 'What do you think?' with my eyes.

Upon hearing that Aincrad, or more specifically 'The house in the forest on the 22nd floor' was in jeopardy, she should be in a state of panic. However, the expression on Asuna's face was unbelievably calm, and after a quick moment of thinking, she nodded her head.

"Yeah... I think that's possible. In the old SAO, all of the players were human. After being incorporated into ALO, it's possible that NPCs would designate that castle as the 'Human World Midgard'."

"H-How can that..."

With an expression that looked like she was about to cry, with her ears drooped down to the lowest, Silica said in a pained voice. In perfect contradiction, the other Cait Sith who was waving her tail around like a Metronome, concluded the situation in an icy voice even colder than Asuna's.

"This means that if we don't stop the Frost Giants' imminent attack on Yggdrasil City and prevent them from obtaining the 'Golden Apple' on the tip of the World Tree, it might not only be Aarun and Yggdrasil City which lie in ruin, even Aincrad would be at danger of being destroyed. Let's stop thinking about what they plan to do next. What we need to do now is to stop them at all costs... But what can we do to prevent that..."

Everyone nodded solemnly after listening to Sinon's report. True enough, we had failed the quest "Urdr's request", but the quest window didn't point us to a follow up quest. There was bound to be another opportunity to attack Prymheimr castle in the future, but before that battle, King Prym's HP bar was nonexistent. In this state he was no different from an unengageable NPC. This was what I was worried about the most, as even if we made preparations and stormed the throne room again, if we were unable to fight him it would be meaningless in the end.

However, the one who gave us our next clue was unexpectedly the clumsy GM Marinca.

"No worries, there's a way!"

"....."

All of us looked at the administrator who didn't look like one at all. Her gaze unshifting, Marincase puffed out her chest and said:

"I just checked Cardi-chan's quest generation status, it seems that an event will happen later at 3 in the afternoon! If you join that event, I'm sure you'll receive a follow up quest!"

".....Erm, I think Ymir should be capable to doing something from the outside, is that not?"

I asked casually. For the fourth time a whimper escaped Marinca. We could only hope that it was the last.

"Ah, I just received a message from my superiors, it seems there are only two options — 'Rollback to two weeks ago' or 'Complete the Cardinal System's Quest!' Oh there's a postscript, 'Since you've been involved until now, take responsibility and join an in-game party in clearing the quest!' Ohh, this is like being paralyzed while you're poisoned!^[3]"

"That's why, please accept me into your party! Ahh the numbers don't matter, as a GM I can join as a special 8th member!"

Stunning silence.

Being able to hear such words, I don't think such opportunities will ever present themselves again.

I removed the AmuSphere from my head and continued lying down on my bed, stretching my rigid hands and feet.

A minimal amount of Winter Sunlight poured through the window into the room, landing on the surface of my alarm clock next to my bed before warmly reflecting off. The time was one thirty. The second chapter in our quest would continue only at three, hence it was vital that we ate and did any other things in the meantime. Due to this, we checked in an inn situated in the Aarun valley and logged out.

With all my might, I let out a deep sigh and said to myself.

"...Things sure have gotten bad huh..."

Cardin-chan — That is to say, the Cardinal System, even though it was a self sustaining, high level VRMMO management system, all this mess happened because it threw a ruckus. No, maybe the Cardinal System didn't think there was a problem. Instead of saying it 'managed' the world, a more appropriate term would be 'supported' it — that would be the reason for and proof of her (because of Marinca calling her affectionately, I couldn't help but visualize her as a female now) existence...

As I was lost in thought, there was a light knock on my door. Even though there wasn't a voice, I could guess who it was. Because aside from me, there was only someone else in this house.

"Please come in."

I sat up as the door opened with a *Ka-chak*. I was confused for a moment — if it was the person I expected, the door should have opened with a *Ka-chak-Pong* sound.

Slowly opening the door and peeking her head in, it was my sister Suguha after all. She wore the same green shirt as she did this morning, however her expression was different.

"Onii-chan... Before we have lunch, can we talk for a moment?"

Suguha looked very nervous, as if she was seeking assurance. I nodded and replied unsurely "Ahh... Okay, yeah". She quickly closed the door and hopped lightly across the floorboards, sitting on the other side of the bed.

Her fringe was trimmed just before her eyebrows. Lowering her head, she said softly.

".....Will it be alright?"

At first I thought she meant Alfheim, but I quickly changed my mind. If she was worried about the Elven Kingdom, Suguha would definitely shout energetically "We'll try harder this time!" or something to that effect. She was worried not about the current situation, but about her precious comrade.

I moved next to my sister and patted her back, saying:

"Of course he'll be alright. Right now he's not a monster but an NPC, even if someone else attacks him, he'll have no HP Bar. The next time we want to descend into Jötunheimr, he'll definitely come flying over when he hears our call."

Of course, the comrade in question was the Evil god-type monster Tonkii, which we had rode on plenty of times. Right now, in the underground world Jötunheimr, hundreds of players had accomplished "Prym's quest", which meant all beast-type evil gods had been slain. Suguha was worried about whether or not Tonkii had been slain too.

"...And that guy, he's always flying up high above ground. It's impossible for players to fly in Jötunheimr, so swords and magic definitely can't reach him."

I added enthusiastically. Suguha finally looked up at me and smiled, saying:

"Yeah... That's right. Thank you Onii-chan, now I can finally be at ease."

Suguha tilted her body and rested her head on my right shoulder. My posture was already odd to begin with, with the added weight of Suguha's body, I lost my balance and fell onto the bed.

Suguha came tumbling down moments later, her head landing on my chest.

"Uwaa..."

Upon hearing her, I immediately tried to move my body, but it was once again squashed by something warm, as I sank further into the bed.

"Oi oi, Suguha..."

As I frantically moved my body, my brain searched for words to be used in this situation. My mind however failed me and I was unable to come up with anything to say. Suguha whispered into my ear:

"...The next quest starts at 3, there's still some time left. So for a while... Just let me..."

I had no idea what to do or what was going on. At the very least, I should stop moving. A nostalgic yet slightly different smell wafted through my nostrils, and from my chest I felt my heartbeat accelerate.

"...Unbelievable."

Suguha, who was lying on my right shoulder, squinted and looked at me straight in the eye.

"After something so monumental happened over there in 'that world', it feels unbelievable to be back here again. It's just like, that's reality, and this is the illusionary world..."

"Yeah... To an extent, I understand."

I continued speaking, momentarily forgetting my nervousness.

"It's surreal... Just like a dream. I've felt that before. It's like a dream I experience once I fall asleep in the inn over there..."

"...Yeah, just like that. A dream... That could be the case maybe."

"Heh heh." That familiar, innocent yet somehow appealing face let out a laugh, causing me to hold my breath.

I closed my eyes, not due to tiredness but because I felt a wave of drowsiness wash over me in this situation. Suguha's voice was like the trickling of a stream, comforting my senses.

"If this is a dream..."

—If this is a dream?

"...Then let's redo the failed mission."

—So that's it.

With my eyes closed, I let out a bitter laugh. Maybe because my concentration was waning due to being on the verge of sleep, but my gamer's instinct told me this.

We failed the quest "Urdr's request"... Even though it was due to us being short-handed, I had this feeling that if we hadn't made a mistake or missed something somewhere, we might have been able to complete the quest.

The only point where a choice was offered in the game— that would be.....

It was here that I stopped thinking further and fell asleep. It might be a short nap till our next adventure in a matter of minutes... Or an infinite sleep where I would never wake up.

(End?)

References and Translation Notes

1. ↑ Originally 'You can't hate a crying kid'
2. ↑ Referring to the current situation of perfect autonomous server management, without the need for GMs
3. ↑ A pun on a proverb which roughly translates to 'adding snow to frost'. An English equivalent would be adding insult to injury.