

川原礫
イラスト/abec

ソード
アート

オンライン

アリンゼーション・エクスプロード

016

「第一部隊、抜剣、戦闘用意！」

副団長・(天穿剣) §ファナティオ

「大丈夫よ、心配しないで」

(金木犀の剣) §アリス

「アリス様の期待を……
私は裏切った……」

(箱崎姫) §エルドリエ

「司令官……闇の神ベクタ、か」

団長・(時穿剣) §バルクーリ

整合騎士団

「踏み潰せ」

ジャイアント族長 § シグロシグ

「首はこのシボリ様が落とす」

平地ゴブリン族長 § シボリ

「整合騎士とやらに、
軽く挨拶に行くぞ！」

拳闘士ギルド
第十代チャンピオン § イスカーン

暗黒術士ギルド長 § デー・アイ・エル

「整合騎士を五人、
確実に屠ってみせますわ」

「光の巫女を無傷で捕らえるのだ」

皇帝 § <闇の神>ベクタ

「人どもめらが!!!」

オーク族長 § リルピリン

「ゴブリンのくせに……
ってツラだな、坊や」

山ゴブリン族長 § コソギ

人界侵略軍



「ステイシア……
さま……？」

少女錬士 § ティーゼ

「あなたは、奇跡を起こして、
私を助けてくれました」

少女錬士 § ロニエ

「キリトくんのところに、連れて行って」

(創世神) § アスナ

「マジかよ……おい、マジかよ」

暗黒騎士 § ヴァサゴ

果ての山脈

峡谷

峡谷

《《ダークテリトリー》》



少女練士 ロニエ



少女練士 ティーゼ



キリト
(心神喪失状態)



人界守備軍
総数 5,000

整合騎士
レンリ



整合騎士
ベルクーリ

整合騎士
シェータ

後方第二部隊

左翼



整合騎士
エルドリエ

中央



整合騎士
ファナティオ

右翼



整合騎士
デュルバート

前方第一部隊

東の大門



山ゴブリン族
コノギ



平地ゴブリン族
シボリ



ジャイアント族
シグロシグ

オーク族分隊

暗黒術師ギルド

オーガ族隊

暗黒騎士隊

拳闘士ギルド
イスカーン



オーク族本隊
リルピリン

暗黒術師
ディー・アイ・エル



暗黒神ベクタ

皇帝本陣



暗黒騎士
ウァサゴ

侵略軍
総数 50,000

果ての山脈

《《アンダーワールド大戦》》戦況

Chapter 18

War of the Underworld

(7th Day of the 11th Month of Human Empire Calendar 380)

Part 1

18:00

Solus's afterglow dyed the gate isolating the two worlds in the red of blood.

«Great East Gate».

The humongous structure, built at the hands of gods, that isolated the Human Empire and Dark Empire for over three hundred years started crumbling away this very moment.

Tremors thundered throughout the world like roars from some immense beast in the Great Gate's death throes, the last of its effectively infinite Life dripping away, while the five thousand in the Human Empire Defense Army and fifty thousand in the invading army watched on without a word. Those crossed from the Human Empire's central capital, Centoria, in the east to the land of darkness's imperial capital, Obsidia, in the west as distant, ominous thunder, prompting all in the Underworld to peer up towards the skies.

Seconds passed.

A crack streaked through the core of the over three hundred mel tall Great Gate. White light gushed from within and scorched the soldiers lined up on both the east and west.

The fissure branched out infinitely, reaching the ends of the Great Gate in no time, as the white light chased after, spreading out like a mesh. Giant words in the sacred script erupted among flames upon the gate's two sides next. There were merely two throughout the vast battleground who understood the meaning behind the words, [Final Tolerance Experiment].

It started just about as those words burnt out.

The Great East Gate crumbled from the top, releasing flashes of light that extended to the skies.

Part 2

“Uoohh...”

An excited voice escaped from Vassago Casals whose upper body went over the command vehicle's rails.

“This the «final load test»? It puts even Hollywood movies to shame. Shouldn't we be taking this videography

technology instead of the AI, bro? We would be billionaires in no time if we start a VFX studio.”

Despite having his eyes glued to the great spectacle in the distance, Gabriel Miller coolly pointed out upon hearing that.

“Unfortunately, this sight cannot be recorded onto any medium. After all, it’s not polygons that form everything in this world. It’s a grand show visible only to those connected to the STL.”

Half of the Great East Gate had already crumbled into countless pieces of rubble. Though the noise and tremors were tremendous, the massive rocks all melted into light right before they crashed into the ground. Judging from that, it seemed the remains of the gate would not end up as a barricade.

Gabriel stood from the throne installed on the command vehicle’s roof with his jet-black fur mantle aflutter before walking towards a large skull set up by one of the Ten Lords of the land of darkness, the chief of the Dark Arts Users’ Guild, D.I.L.

The skull placed on a small table was apparently an artifact capable of transmitting sound. She said that by speaking into this master skull, his voice would be sent to the slave skulls in the generals’ possession. Though inferior to the

Stryker Command Vehicle’s multi-channel transmission system, it was far more effective than sending an army of messengers for every little command.

Looking down into the skull’s hollow eye sockets, Gabriel let out a somber voice suited to his role as the «Dark Empire’s emperor and Vector the god of darkness».

“Warriors of our land of darkness! The time you have await’d hath arrived! Kill all who live! Pillage all without hesitation! ——Trample upon them all!!”

War cries burst forth from all across the battle formations, their volume exceeding the Great Gate’s collapse. The countless machetes and pikes thrust upwards shone in the hue of blood under the setting sun.

The first batch of the Dark Territory Army comprised five thousand mountain goblins, five thousand plains goblins, two thousand orcs, and a thousand giants for a total of thirteen thousand units. He would first have them lead the charge and observe the enemy army’s reaction.

Swiftly swinging his raised right hand down in front, Gabriel gave his first command as a player in this war game.

“Group one—begin the assault!!”

* * *

The one who assumed command over the five thousand mountain goblins on the right flank of the goblin force making up the first group of the fifty thousand-strong invading army was its new chief named Kosogi. He was one of the seven sons of the previous chief, Hagashi, who incidentally died through the Dark General Shasta's rebellion drama.

Hagashi was extoled as the cruelest and greedy even among the past chiefs. Not only did Kosogi inherit a strong tendency for that disposition, he only concealed a high intelligence unbecoming of goblins under his hideous face.

Having reached twenty this year, Kosogi had been pondering over why the goblins were regarded as the worst among the five races of the land of darkness—the humans, the giants, the ogres, the orcs, and the goblins—for over five years.

Certainly, the goblins were the smallest among the five races and the weakest physically too. However, they once held numbers to compensate for that disadvantage and in fact, they conducted battles against the orcs and humans on equal terms during the ancient «age of blood and iron».

When the races eventually ended their wars, exhausted, the goblin chief, too, gained a seat in the Ten Lords Assembly, the highest aggregation in the land of darkness, upon the

conclusion of the five races' peace treaty. However, the treaty was, in reality, in no way fair. Both the mountain and plains goblins were given no more than the withered wastelands in the north as their dominion and there was nowhere near enough agriculture or game to preserve the Life of a whole race; their children constantly starved and their elderly rapidly died.

In short, they were done in by the chiefs of the other races.

In order to curb the goblins' greatest strength, their numbers, they forced upon them a vast but infertile land. As such, the goblins had to exhaust all ends to even survive to this current day and could not further their civilization. Having maintained training institutions for their children to practice like the black iums was impossible; they were instead sent down rivers on boats in order to reduce the mouths to feed. All while aware of the treatment their children would receive in the lands of the other races when they arrive.

If only they had fertile land and sufficient resources, their soldiers would now hold not these machetes and plate armor casted from crude iron but tempered steel equipment. They would have amassed Life from ample food supplies and studied sword techniques and tactics. They

might have even acquired those dark arts monopolized by the black iums eventually.

If they had, no one would claim the goblins to be an inferior race.

Kosogi's deceased father, Hagashi, was constantly haunted by his anger and jealousy towards the black iums, but he lacked the brains to think about what he could do about it. He possessed wisdom enough only to hope to stay within Emperor Vector's thoughts through military exploits in this great war.

What foolishness. How could they hope to distinguish themselves in battle? That was obvious with a look at the army's arrangement.

It was likely suggested to the emperor by the chief of the Dark Arts Users' Guild. That woman must have forced the «honor as the shock troops» upon the two goblin races to use and dispose of them from the start. The goblins would charge in as the vanguards and be promptly cut down by those devils of legend, the Human Empire's integrity knights, before incinerated by her as collateral damage from the safe rear with the intention to rob them of their merits.

—*How could he let her?*

However, that, in no way, meant that they could disobey their orders. The descended Emperor Vector was not damaged by even a hair after immersed in Dark General Shasta's attack which instantly annihilated the two goblin chiefs and the head of the Assassins' Guild. The emperor held absolute strength and the law in the land of darkness decreed that the weak shall not disobey the strong.

However, that black ium female was different. Kosogi was now one of the ten lords, on equal footing as her. He had no duty to obediently abide by her malicious schemes.

The order given to the goblins was truly simple. They would penetrate in with a charge as the vanguard and annihilate the enemy army.

That was all. There was nothing about maintaining the warfront until the flames from the art users poured in from behind. They had the allowance to outwit that woman.

Kosogi secretly passed down a directive to his trusted commanding officers right before the Great Gate crumbled.

The moment the slave skull given to him clicked into movement and delivered the assault order from the emperor, he stuck his hand under his armor and pulled out a small ball he prepared prior. His commanding officers ought to be doing the same at that time too.

The clump of rocks that was once the Great East Gate crumbled completely with a roar and vanished as light.

He spotted multiple watch fires and the glint of dazzling weapons and armor further into the valley that opened straight on.

That was the white iums' defense army.

Beyond them were lands sufficiently filled with abundance, endless resources, and manpower, enough for the mountain goblins to regain their age of glory.

How could he become some discarded stone? He shall have the plains goblins, cursed with a chief without brains yet again, and the orcs, who were even stupider, play that role.

Kosogi gripped the ball firmly within his left hand and thrust up the thick mountain knife in his right as he screamed in a deep voice.

“All of you, stick together and come with me!! — Chargeeeee!!”

* * *

“First Unit, draw your swords and prepare to engage! Ascetics, prepare your healing arts and incantations!”

Fanatio Synthesis Two's proud voice pierced through the twilight, in her role as the integrity knight serving as the deputy head for the Human Empire Defense Army.

Jyariin!! The chorus of swords slipping from their scabbards rang through the valley. Their watch fires, whose numbers were suppressed, imbued their steel blades with a red gleam.

A thunderous noise finally approached from beyond the collapsed «Great East Gate» with the ground practically rumbling from it.

The goblins' short pace. The orcs' tepid pace. The giants' footsteps, which sounded like hammers slammed into the ground, mixed in and overlapped atop their war cries. The howl of the massive beast known as war yet unknown to all humans.

It took everything they had for the mere three hundred guards lined up in defensive lines two hundred mel from the Great Gate to stand their ground. It would not have been strange for their files to collapse before even crossing swords once and to scatter in confusion. This was the first experience all of those guards had in a battle with their lives at stake, let alone with war.

What kept them standing at their post were the backs of three integrity knights standing alone in intervals at the frontmost line.

In charge of holding the left flank was the «Frost Scale Whip», Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one.

In the middle was the «Heaven Piercing Sword» who also served as the force's commander, Fanatio Synthesis Two.

And the right flank was protected by the «Conflagrant Flame Bow», Deusolbert Synthesis Seven.

The three knights clad in full body armor which would glitter beautifully even in the depths of darkness stood firmly on the ground with each of their two feet and awaited the enemy troops without even a twitch.

Fear and fright were present even within the knights' chests. They might have experience in real battles unlike the guards, but most of those were no more than one-to-one combat with dark knights. No one had experienced fighting against a force this massive: not Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio, not even Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One who commanded the second unit in the rear.

To top things off, the ruler of the Human Empire, the highest minister of the Axiom Church, Administrator, was no more.

The absolute justice that served as the symbol of the church, too, had long gone missing.

The knights stood on this battleground, trusting in their one last belief. Ironically enough, it was one particular emotion that should have been destroyed through the «Synthesis Ritual» once performed on them.

Deusolbert Synthesis Seven awaited the enemy army with his chest boldly puffed up while gently stroking the aged ring fitted on the ring finger of his left hand, holding onto the Conflagrant Flame Bow, with his right-hand fingers.

Ranking among the oldest integrity knights, he had protected the order in the Human Empire's northern region for over a hundred years.

He drove away invaders from the Dark Territory in their attempts to cross the mountain range at the edge, exterminated large magical beasts within his base of operations, and occasionally took in criminals who committed taboos. He had ceased thinking about the reasons for his responsibilities since long ago. Believing without doubt that he was a knight summoned from the Celestial World, he held not even a drop of interest in the activities of the humans living on the surface.

What confused Deusolbert at times were those mysterious dreams that would pay him a visit at daybreak without fail.

A small hand so pale it seemed see-through. The light shining from a simple silver ring on its ring finger.

That hand would stroke his hair, touch his cheeks, and softly shake his shoulders.

He would hear a gentle whisper.

—Wake up, dear. It's morning...

Deusolbert told no one about those dreams. He thought the Chief Elder would erase them with his arts upon hearing of them. He did not want to lose those dreams. After all, the ring shining on that small hand in his dreams had the same design as the one he had on his left ring finger since he woke up as a knight.

Were those memories from the Celestial World? If he fulfilled his mission as a knight in this lower realm and gained permission to return above, could he meet with the owner of that hand and voice once more?

Deusolbert hid that question—or hope—deep in his heart for the longest time.

However, something happened during that severe shock sent throughout the Central Cathedral half a year ago.

Deusolbert, who fought with the two youths rebelling against the church, lost despite resorting to his armament

full control art. The black-haired youth, who broke through the Conflagrant Flame Bow with a sword technique he witnessed for the first time, spoke of something he found hard to believe.

The integrity knights were not summoned from the Celestial World. They were mere common folk born in the Human Empire, trained to become knights with their memories sealed.

The highest minister, Administrator, the supreme good, the absolute order, and personification of perfect justice could not possibly be involved in deceiving all of the knights. However, those youths repelled Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio, Knight Commander Bercouli, and Chief Elder Chudelkin, reached the top floor of the Central Cathedral, and defeated even Administrator herself. A party of mere rebels could not hold such might in their swords.

He frankly knew from the start, ever since he first fought them. Their straight sword strokes possessed not even a trace of falsehood or deception.

That then meant the owner of that small hand in his dreams, too, was not from the Celestial World but a human born on the surface.

Deusolbert did something for the first time since he became a knight the moment he realized that truth. He embraced

the ring on his left hand to his chest as tears flowed from his two eyes.

After all, unlike the integrity knights, the lives of the people in the Human Empire were extinguished within seventy years at most. In other words, Deusolbert understood he would never meet again the one who called him, “dear”.

Yet still, he responded to Knight Commander Bercouli’s plea and advanced onto where the decisive battle would take place.

To protect the world where he lived with the owner of that small hand, regardless of how far in the past it was.

That was to say, what gave Integrity Knight Deusolbert Synthesis Seven the strength to stand his ground without budging before the great force from the land of darkness was the strength from that one emotion he should have gotten rid of—«love».

And unknown to him, Knight Fanatio and Knight Eldrie, too, stood there to fight alongside him for their respective loved ones.

Deusolbert separated his right hand from the ring and grasped four steel arrows at once from the gigantic quiver set on the ground by his side.

He arranged them carefully onto his divine instrument, the Conflagrant Flame Bow, that he wielded horizontally.

He was nearly done with the incantation for his armament full control art. Fanatio and Eldrie would still restrain from doing so, but Deusolbert's secret technique could not display its might when it became a ruckus. With the resolve to expend half of his beloved bow's Life, the integrity knight sucked in a deep breath and uttered the final phrase.

“Enhance armament!”

“Crimson.!”

The humongous flames from the great copper bow dyed the invaders who reached two hundred mel away in a brilliant red.

The four arrows nocked on the bowstring shone too, immersed within deep crimson flames.

“—I am Integrity Knight Deusolbert Synthesis Seven! All who stand before me, you shall burn away, leaving not even your bones!!”

Though it did not remain within his own memories, he once named himself similarly when taking in a single girl from a small village in the northern region eight years ago. However, with his thick steel mask now removed, his voice rang out, accentuated and sonorous.

The knight's fingers released the taut bowstring drawn to its limit.

Zudoo!! Four streaks of flames shot forth in a radial formation with that roar.

The first victims of what would be later known as the «War of the Underworld» were the plains goblin soldiers who charged in from the left side of the valley.

The new chief of the plains goblins, Shibori, had neither wisdom nor schemes on the level of the mountain goblins' new chief, Kosogi, and was a youth who could boast only about his constitution and strength.

As such, he went up against an integrity knight, possessing overwhelming might even when alone, absolutely unprepared and simply ordered his five thousand soldiers into a tactless charge.

Deusolbert's four flame arrows pierced into the tightly packed plains goblin army from the front, achieving their maximum potential. A whole forty-two infantry goblins were instantly incinerated in that first strike and sent the surrounding soldiers into a fine disarray.

However, as their charge was undisciplined from the very start, most of the machete-wielding soldiers thirsting for

blood tread over their torched kindred and continued their disordered rush, pushing their faltering comrades aside.

Deusolbert nocked another four arrows onto his Conflagrant Flame Bow in response.

Instead of spreading out his range, he shot them while still bundled up.

The grand, conflagrant spear impacted upon the direct middle of their ranks and brought forth a tremendous explosion. Many soldiers were blown away amidst the scattered shrill screams. The casualties exceeded fifty, but still, the plains goblins charged on.

Naturally, they would. Two thousand orcs and a thousand giants followed after the two goblin races who kept pace with each other and stopping would be equivalent to getting stomped upon by them, several times their size, moments after.

While the plains goblins lacked a tangible plan like the new chief of the mountain goblins, Kosogi, they held anger and resentment against the scorn and oppression they faced as the weakest race. And that emotion was redirected towards their hatred towards the people of the Human Empire, who would eventually become slaves under them, named «white iums» in their tongue.

Raising the brusque battle axe he held with his two arms, far more muscular than the average goblin, Chief Shibori let out a savage scream.

“All of you! Kill that archer first! Surround him, cut him, smash him!!”

“Orarara—!! Kill!! Kill!! Kill!!”

That battle cry resounded throughout the five thousand soldiers.

Deusolbert took on the imposing anger and bloodthirst without a word as he let loose his third volley of fire arrows. The number of goblins charred to cinders exceeded fifty yet again, but the enemy forces charged on.

He stored away the Conflagrant Flame Bow’s flames as the distance between them reached fifty mel and switched over to normal shooting. Taking steel arrows out from the quiver at a ferocious pace, he fired blindly without any particular target. Each arrow pierced through three goblins, or two at the very minimum.

Guards ran forward from Deusolbert’s sides with their swords drawn.

“Protect Master Knight! Don’t let their blades reach him!!”

The one who yelled that was a young guard commander still at the age of twenty or so. He put the large, two-handed sword, with which he had went through intensive training, before himself. However, its edge trembled, just a little.

Deusolbert thought to ask them to retreat and to not over-extend. He held no confidence that the young guards could endure a real battle awash with blood yet, in spirit, in technique, and in body, despite experiencing the knights' strict guidance.

However, he sucked his breath in before giving a deep shout instead.

“My apologies. I’ll leave the left and right to you.”

“Leave it to us!!”

The guard commander showed a distinct grin.

Seconds passed.

And the shrill noise made when the plains goblin soldiers' machetes collided with the longswords of the intercepting guards rang out for the first time.

* * *

Several seconds before that.

In the middle of the gorge, Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio Synthesis Two was awaiting the enemy army in a posture that could be considered only odd by the common knowledge in this world.

She was standing with her feet far apart and the left of her body forward. Her right hand, aligned to her shoulder's height, was gripping tightly onto the hilt of her divine instrument, the «Heaven Piercing Sword». However, her sword was held horizontally in a reverse grip with its bottom end supported by her spaulder.

Meanwhile, her left hand was stretched out forward, her palm supporting the Heaven Piercing Sword's blade. If Gabriel or Vassago were to witness this scene, they would likely come to the same thought. Simply said—she was like a sniper with a rifle at the ready.

That could be said to be true in a sense. Fanatio drew the rushing enemy army in for as long as possible while scouting out the most effective point.

Though Deusolbert's Conflagrant Flame Bow could adjust the broadness of its arrow firing, the Heaven Piercing Sword could only shoot a single narrow beam of light. As such, naïvely firing it into the massive enemy army would hardly do much.

She should aim for the commander somewhere within the enemy army—any of the Dark Empire’s Ten Lords.

The Dark Territory led its forces through power and fear. The average soldiers pledged absolute obedience towards their commanders and they would fight on until their end as ordered regardless of any development. But turning that around, it meant they would lose all leadership with the defeat of their commander.

—*We, too, were once so.*

Fanatio embraced that intense, fleeting thought.

The news that the highest minister, Administrator, had passed away broke down the Order of the Integrity Knights in a single night.

It was Bercouli’s words that allowed the knights at the peak of chaos to regain themselves.

—*Was our mission, our purpose to live, to obey the highest minister and chief elder’s orders?*

—*No. We live to protect those living in the Human Empire.*

—*As long as we have the intent to protect, we will remain knights until we perish.*

In reality, not all of the integrity knights had understood and abided by the knight commander. The knights assembled on this battlefield numbered less than twenty.

However, they all held the will to fight until the bitter end even if they alone remained. The same likely went for the five thousand guards who hastened here, this place of death. That was the decisive difference between the Dark Territory forces and them.

Fanatio brought her bare face, stripped from its silver mask, towards her cherished sword's guard and caught firmly onto the enemy army with her widened eyes.

The goblin unit charging in as the ground rumbled was already narrowing the distance between them to a hundred mel. Deusolbert had started his assault from her right with his armament full control art and explosives flames lit up the twilight in red twice or thrice.

It was in that brief radiance— that Fanatio finally found her target.

Huge shadows in the middle chased after the goblin forces in the advance party as though urging them on. They were the giants, boasting bodies several times the size of humans'. The one leading them had a tremendous frame a head taller than the rest; he was unmistakably Sigrosig, one of the Ten Lords, a chief she had caught sight of once before.

The giants were a proud, or perhaps terribly haughty, race. They measured superiority based only by the size of their bodies, and it seemed that inside, they looked down even on the true rulers of the land of darkness, the dark skinned humans.

That meant taking down the tribe's leader with a single strike before the war truly began would cause a great disturbance indeed.

Fanatio took in a deep breath, held it, and whispered.

“Enhance armament.”

White light, bright as Solus, engulfed the Heaven Piercing Sword's blade as a low noise vibrated.

She accurately seized, with the path its keen edge traced, Sigrosig who ran in from that distant point and shouted out sharply.

“Pierce through—light!!”

Zubaaaa!! The air shook as a dazzling heat ray converged from the might of Solus penetrated through the battlefield.

* * *

“...It began...”



Integrity Knight Renri Synthesis Twenty-seven listened to the continuing sounds of explosions from far away while murmuring so with a sigh.

Renri was one of the seven high ranking knights charged with the duty of defending the Human Empire. In other words, he could be said to personally hold more than just a little of the defense army's entire war ability.

However, he now crouched, hugging his knees, not at the front of the Defense Army Second Unit's left flank where he originally was but far behind, in a corner of the dim tent used for stores and provisions.

He had fled.

After running away in the fluster several tens of minutes ago immediately before the battle began, he snuck into an empty tent and had been silencing his breath and pricking up his ears ever since.

The reason he behaved so was based in that same motive he participated in the defense army for.

A failure.

Judged so by the highest minister, Administrator, Renri had done no work of significance as an integrity knight and spent a whole five years in cryostasis. Despite throwing

himself onto this battlefield in order to overturn that dishonor, he had lost against his fear in the very end.

Though the memories had been erased from him, Renri was once a youth termed as a genius swordsman, unmatched by all, in the Southacroith South Empire. Advancing to Central Capital Centoria at the young age of thirteen, he brilliantly achieved victory in the Four Empires Unity Tournament the following year and was promoted to an integrity knight.

Even after losing all of his memories until then due to the «Synthesis Ritual» and awakening as a knight, he displayed awe-inspiring talent with the sword. Climbing up the ranks to become a high ranking knight at an exceptional speed, he was personally granted a divine instrument by the highest minister.

The treasured divine instruments in the Central Cathedral were not bestowed by the highest minister's or the knights' whims. It was, in fact, the opposite, with the divine instrument choosing its user. Via a certain sort of resonance between the knight's soul and the divine instrument's memories.

The resonance between Renri and his divine instrument, a pair of throwing knives, the «Twin Edged Wings», was strong indeed.

However, unbelievably, he had never invoked it. He had never invoked the proof of the high ranking knights, the armament full control art, even once.

That was sufficient for the highest minister to lose her interest in Renri. With Alice Synthesis Thirty becoming an integrity knight after him, his meaning of existence was pushed further into obscurity in light of her overwhelming talent.

It would have been unfair to lay that blame on Renri. After all, Alice's talent propelled her straight up to the third position in the knight order and was worthy of the strongest and oldest divine instrument, the «Fragrant Olive Sword». Still, Renri was branded as a failure in reality and forced into a long slumber.

The moment he was turned into an ice sculpture by the chief elder's «deep freeze» art, what came into his mind was a crushing sense of lacking.

He lacked something important to himself... that was why he could not control the «Twin Edged Wings» despite their resonance.

Renri woke once again after a long time had passed.

It was exactly amidst that rebellion incident that made the Central Cathedral tremor. With the resident knights

defeated, including even Knight Commander Bercouli, and the fate of Alice, their trump card, unclear, Chief Elder Chudelkin found it fit to have him thawed.

However, Renri did not fulfil his duty this time as well. Chudelkin and Highest Minister Administrator fell before he fully awakened and all his eyes caught, upon him regaining his movement, was the Order of the Integrity Knights in a state of utmost disorder.

The request to participate in the futile mission to face off against the large-scale invasion from the land of darkness came from Bercouli, who assumed command, in the highest minister's stead.

Renri felt the high ranking knights who responded, such as Fanatio, Deusolbert, or Alice, shone all the brighter despite having experienced defeat.

He thought he might understand if he went with them. He thought he might understand what he lacked. Why his divine instrument would not answer to him.

Cowering in the corner of that hall, Renri timidly stood up and raised his hand. Bercouli placed his large hand on Renri's shoulder with a firm nod and said only a single line to him. That he would be counting on him.

Despite that.

The pressure he felt in his first battlefield, or his first actual battle, rather, surpassed what he expected by far. The bloodthirst and lust of the scrambling forces of darkness separated by a whole thousand mel surged towards him as a scorched stench of steel and Renri fled before he knew it.

—Stand. I have to return to my post. If I don't fight now, I will remain a failure forever.

He must have rebuked himself so, time and time again, in the tent he had snuck into.

However, heavy tremors and ferocious war cries reported the start of the battle while his two hands still remained wrapped about his knees.

“.....It started.....”

Renri murmured once more.

The pair of throwing knives equipped on both sides of his waist seemed to waver as though condemning their master.

But he could not return now. What expression could he make to stand before the knight commander and those guards who had placed their trust in him once again?

—Nothing will change even if I'm there. A high ranking knight incapable of the armament full control art would just be a bother instead.

Thoughts that sounded like excuses went through his mind and he buried his face deeper in between his knees.

It was then that a soft voice reached Renri from the tent's entrance, sending a jolt through his entire body.

“Tiezé, how about here?”

Renri cowered with fright, utterly unlike a knight, wondering if they were searching for him, but heard another voice immediately after. Both voices seem to belong to young girls.

“Yes, this tent looks like it'll do, Ronye. Let's hide senpai in here and guard the entrance.”

* * *

The giants' chief, Sigrosig, was a legendary warrior with a bronze beard and unkempt hair, a brawny appearance, and a stature the size of a hill covered all over with countless gashes.

They, the giants, were the very ones with the purest interpretation of the Dark Territory's only law, «the strong shall rule». With each of them sieved through every possible means of comparing their might, skill, and guts for as far as they could remember, their hierarchy was decided in a manner stricter than the Order of the Dark Knights'.

Though the giants' domains were the high plains in the west region of the Dark Territory, the various kinds of large animals and magical beasts that ought to be spawning there in abundance were constantly depleted. The giants had thoroughly hunted them down as targets for their rites of passage.

Why did they go that far in their pursuit for strength?

If they had not, their souls, their «fluct lights», would break.

The four demi-human races in the Dark Territory were terribly warped existences, with the «soul prototype» confined within flesh not that of humans. A mental safety was necessary in order to guard against the breakdown of one's psyche.

For example, the goblins anchor themselves by converting the inferiority complex towards humans, born from their small stature, into the strength of their resentment and hatred.

The giants, on the other hand, hold back the distortion of them being human yet not through developing a superiority complex over humans.

Each and every giant would never lose against a human in one-versus-one combat at least. That served as the foundations of their mentality, an absolute rule. That was

especially why they imposed such excessive rites of passage on their youth, pulling up each individual's priority even if it meant reducing their race's numbers.

As such—

The thousand giant warriors called to this battlefield, contrary to their taciturn nature, seethed with an intense will to fight. To them, born into the times after the ancient «age of blood and iron», this would be the first large-scale battle they experience.

The race's chief, Sigrosig, thought in all seriousness.

That they would massacre the entire enemy army with the initial charge and end the war.

They would grant no chance to step forward to those determined by Emperor Vector as the army's main force: the Order of the Dark Knights, the Dark Arts Users' Guild, and the Pugilists' Guild. By attaining victory without them, the giants would be validated as the truly superior race.

When the slave skull given to him rattled its jaw, resounding the emperor's order to charge, Sigrosig felt the old scars carved all over his body rise in heat. He thought it proof that might of those innumerable large magical beasts he had torn apart with his bare hands had transferred into him.

“—Trample them!!”

His thundering command consisted of a single line.

That was enough. Swinging up the gigantic warhammer in his right hand and making the ground tremble alongside the reliable, brave warriors around him, Sigrosig began his assault.

The soldiers of the Human Empire were packed tightly into the valley in front.

To the three-and-a-half meter tall giants, they were weaklings not much different from the goblins. The swords they wear were smaller than even the teeth of a newborn rockscale dragon.

They would crush, punt, and tear apart every last one of them.

The circuit carrying Sigrosig’s superiority complex grew red hot and scattered sparks of pleasure. His rectangular chin warped and exposed a brutal smile.

In that moment.

A foreign sensation that was, however, not all unfamiliar ran up his spine.

Cold. Numbing. Like being pierced through with needles of ice.

He had tasted this sensation a long, long time ago. In the «Fledging Valley» not far from his village. His first trial. When he went to steal snapping birds' eggs, in that moment the mother swooped down from above...

Sigrosig continued his charge even as he widened his two eyes and searched for the origin of that sensation.

He saw a small, small human at the front of the Human Empire ranks, in the exact middle of the gorge. Long hair with a slender body. A female—a knight adorned in glistening silver armor.

He saw a dragon knight of the Human Empire soaring beyond the mountain range at the edge just once before. He had thought to crush that knight upon landing, but the knight flew away into the mountain range after circling two, three times in the sky.

That bunch was worthless.

Nonetheless. In that female knight's black eyes.

Sigrosig vividly felt the gaze from the knight despite their distance apart exceeding three hundred mel. The fear or fright, which should have been present, were missing, making up less than even a speck of salt would after falling in a large kettle of hot water.

Instead, it had the coolness of ascertaining and targeting one's prey.

...Hunt, him?

To hunt him, Sigrosig, the giants' chief and thus, the mightiest warrior among the Dark Empire's five races?

“Hgg.....”

A shrill shriek, unsuited to his grim expression, leaked out from the depths of his throat.

Strength left his two legs and the large hammer in his right hand grew terribly heavy. Sigrosig's posture crumbled as he stumbled over.

An instant.

Zubaaa!!

A ray of dazzling light shot out from the sword the female knight propped up with that buzz unlike any sound he had heard before. It stabbed through the right side of the chest of the giant running right in front of Sigrosig without any resistance.

If Sigrosig had not tumbled, that light would have blown away his heart next.

Instead, the white light vaporized part of the giant chief's disheveled red hair and his right ear decorated with his prey's teeth.

Piercing through another two of his allies running behind, it dissipated into specks of light, leaving behind those fatal wounds.

Sigrosig's consciousness could hardly register the three giants who lost all of their Life in an instant and fell like logs. Even the intense pain burning at the right of his head was stabbed like some tiny insect before the humongous emotion assaulting him.

That was, in short, terror.

Sigrosig shamefully continued sitting on his backside as his jaw chattered in his trembling.

Even when he witnessed the upheaval during Dark General Shasta's rebellion, while he was surprised, there was no fear. The ones Shasta killed after turning into that black tornado were no more than a feeble assassin and those goblins. Though he had to admit Emperor Vector's power, he had no issue there as he was no human but a god of old.

Yet why had that mere female knight inspired such fright in himself?

Sigrosig could hardly bear to be paralyzed in fear from a mere human as his opponent.

“No... No, no, no...”

Smoke rose from his burnt hair as the giant chief moaned.

Impossible. He could not be frightened. White fireworks shot off deep in his mind as intense pain ran through it the harder he fretted. His mouth and tongue convulsed rapidly, spewing out uninterrupted words that came out as strange noises.

“Nononono, kill, kill, killkellkeldell, delldelldelldelldel.”

In this instant, the «core»—the self-image of himself as the strongest—rooted firmly in the middle of Sigrosig’s fluct light along with this «situation» where he was paralyzed in fear induced unavoidable conflicts, bringing on the collapse of light quantum circuits within his light cube.

The giant’s two eyes released crimson light.

“Dell, dell, de—————”

While the warriors of the giant race watched on in shock from all around, Sigrosig sprang up with force.

Swinging about his gigantic warhammer as though it was a tiny twig, he restarted his charge with tremendous vigor.

Sending those of the same race in front flying to the left and right, he caught up with the vanguard goblin force before long. Moist noises and shrill screams continuously welled up from his feet upon him pushing on without any attempt to let down on his momentum, but the giant no longer perceived those with his consciousness breaking apart.

The command to kill that female knight alone resounded through the core of his head like a broken bell.

* * *

In the end, the chiefs of the plains goblins and of the giants underestimated the existences known as integrity knights.

However, the chief of the mountain goblins, Kosogi, who led the invading army's vanguards' right flank was different. He had paid a high price to study the tremendous military might the integrity knights possessed not long ago.

The excavation of the buried cave at the northern end of the mountain range at the edge and the invasion of Rulid Village, by that large force of goblins and orcs, were planned by Kosogi. Though he stayed put at Obsidia Palace himself, he had granted troops to three of his brothers whom he shared blood with, instigated those of the orc race, and carried out the invasion strategy.

However, it ended as a tragedy. The few soldiers who barely escaped alive unanimously cried out unbelievable stories in front of Kosogi who was astonished over the information that the force was utterly annihilated, his brothers killed in battle.

According to them, the joint invasion force of over two hundred goblins and orcs were made to flee by a single human knight and a flying dragon.

However hard he found that to believe, Kosogi was no fool to abandon for nothing a lesson learnt at the cost of many sacrifices. He decided to never again commit the foolishness of challenging the integrity knights of the Human Empire to a frontal assault.

However, in this particular major invasion, the role ordered of the mountain goblins by Emperor Vector was precisely that.

The dark arts users' chief, D.I.L. must be well aware of those dreadful integrity knights. That would be exactly why she offered this strategy up to the emperor. To use up the goblins, orcs, and giants and create a disordered melee in the valley before reducing them all to ashes along with the integrity knights.

They could only obey while the emperor approved of D.'s plan. Kosogi racked his brains over three days and nights.

How could he carry out the order for a tactless charge while escaping from the jaws of death formed by the integrity knights in front and the dark arts users behind.

The intelligent scheme he finally worked out took the form of those small grey balls distributed to his subordinates.

Having charged over the valley the moment the emperor issued his order, Kosogi discovered a tall integrity knight clad in glittering armor far in front.

Though that was not Alice Synthesis Thirty who destroyed the invasion force in Rulid Village but her disciple, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one, Kosogi could not distinguish between them. Either way, they were demons scattering death without mercy to the goblin race.

“Right... throw them!!”

Kosogi issued a new command the moment they arrived fifty mel from the knights.

At the same time, he crushed firmly the small ball held in his own left hand.

Small flames leaked out from the cracked ball with crackling noises. Of course, it was no sort of gunpowder. Underworld, as it currently was, had no objects on that level of civilization.

Simultaneously, it was no thermal element generated by arts. Inserted within the balls were small beetles known as «Firestarter Beetles» which lived solely at the volcano at the northern end of the land of darkness, a holy ground for the mountain goblins. They would scatter blazing hot flames and burn one's hands if crushed on accident.

The grey ball enveloping the firestarter beetles were from the north as well, it was formed by drying a kind of moss out in the sun, kneading the powder made, and drying it once more. As it let out a large quantity of smoke once ignited, it was originally used as a signal. However, through the technique of concentrating like the Assassins' Guild, Kosogi had amplified the objects' effect by tens of times.

As a result—

The moss balls thrown by Kosogi and his subordinates as one became what could be considered as impressive smoke grenades. Ignited by the firestarter beetles, the balls spewed out dense smoke that hid away even one's own nose and shrouded the entire northern half of the valley stretching out east and west.

Not even the goblins with their excellent night vision could fight properly within this smoke.

However, Kosogi's scheme was not to defeat the enemies by slipping into the smoke. Immediately before diving into the dense smokescreen, he shouted out his third command.

“All of you, ruuuunn!!”

Returning the mountain knife to his back at once, he landed both hands onto the ground. With their small statures, goblins reached no higher than humans' knees when scrambling on all fours. The smoke was faint closer to the ground with the enemy soldiers' positions barely visible.

The five thousand mountain goblin soldiers with Kosogi, their chief, completely ignored Eldrie and the guards and slipped past, running on farther into the valley.

The emperor's orders were merely to charge into the enemy army. It did not specify which part to target. Kosogi set up a plan to pass by the enemy's main force, especially the integrity knights, without engaging them and to assail their reinforcement units behind.

By sneaking in beyond the front lines, they would avoid the combined attack from the dark arts users and orc archers that would eventually rain down from behind. They would return about and finish off the integrity knights and guards after the flames and arrows deal them a devastating blow, or simply flee off into the endless Human Empire otherwise.

Thus, among the three openings of hostilities in the hundred mel wide valley, the north side alone advanced without bloodshed.

Just about as the second unit of guards in the Human Empire Defense Army stationed behind Eldrie finally noticed the disappearance of the high ranking integrity knight commanding them, Renri Synthesis Twenty-seven.

* * *

The first casualty from the Defense Army was the elderly guard struggling by Deusolbert's immediate side at the right flank of where the first unit held down the front line.

He did not manage to stop the hand axes thrown by the goblins with his shield.

He was a lower noble that had long commanded a platoon in the Wesdarath West Empire's imperial guards. Though he certainly had skill with the sword, he could not help but to approach the undisputable descent of his Life and the axe that dug deep into his wrinkled neck dealt him a completely fatal wound. Not even the healing arts hurriedly recited by the ascetics party on standby behind could make up for that damage.

Deusolbert had paused his random firing immediately and performed a high ranking healing art on the fallen old

guard. However, the guard shook his head and shouted out while vehemently vomiting blood.

“You must not!! This is, truly, this old man’s sacred task and Life... esteemed knight, I trust you... with our home.....”

A moment later, the old guard passed away with what was left of his life force released as space resources.

Deusolbert bit down hard and shot at the goblin who had hurled that hand axe with the blaze from the Conflagrant Flame Bow powered by the old guard’s life.

The guards of the Defense Army continued falling after that, too, sporadically yet without end. Tens of those numbers among the demi-humans lost their lives as well, obeying the command for their ruthless charge to the very end.

Much of the flood of Life resources dispersed throughout the battlefield rose as specks of light—

Far, into the skies above the gorge.

Where a single flying dragon hovered under the cover of night.

Spiraling as they coalesced towards the integrity knight, clad in golden armor, standing atop its back.

* * *

He had neither the time nor space to hide himself.

Renri curled up his back within the darkness in a corner of the supplies tent and awaited the approaching silhouette with his arms around his knees.

The round hole for sunlight faintly shone upon girls who seemed to be fifteen or sixteen years old. One had vivid red hair while the other's hair was a deep brown. They wore light armor above the grey tunic and skirt that appeared part of some academy's uniform. Slender, straight swords hung at the left of their waists. He held no recollection of their faces, but they were likely guards from the common folk rather than knights, judging from their equipment grade.

What seemed out of place was the metallic chair pushed by the dark brown haired girl. A black-haired youth sat upon the chair, furnished with four wheels instead of legs, with his head hung down. Renri's eyes were drawn towards his face.

Approximately twenty? Not only was his frame horribly thin, his right arm was also missing from where his shoulder ended. He could only consider him weaker than the girls from a single glance. However, Renri understood at once that the two longswords held tightly by the young man's left arm—commanding tremendous presence

despite their sheaths—were divine instruments, possibly ranked higher than the «Twin Edged Wings».

How could it be? Even if he ignored how he was sanctioned to own those, it still required physical strength on the level of integrity knights to have them on one's lap like that. However, the youth who blankly stared into space could hardly possess such strength.

He thought to that point before it seemed the girls noticed Renri cowering in the darkness, freezing up after drawing sharp breaths.

It took surprisingly little time before the red-haired girl reached out towards her sword's grip with her right hand.

Renri spoke hoarsely before she drew.

"I'm not your enemy... sorry for frightening you. Mind if I stand? I'll show you my hands."

"...Go on."

Waiting until the girl stiffly responded, Renri gently rose. After taking one, two steps forward with both hands raised, the afterglow from the roof's hole lit up his armor of the highest grade and the divine instrument on both sides of his waist. The girl curtly gulped and straightened up in a hurry. Their right hands left the sword handle and chair, and formed a sign of respect before their left breasts.

“Es... esteemed knight! We are terribly sorry!”

Renri shook his head and interrupted the red-haired girl who continued her apologies with a pale face.

“No... it was my fault for startling you. Besides, I’m... no longer an integrity knight...”

Though the latter half barely even made it as a whisper, the girls blinked with puzzled looks. Their confusion came as no surprise. The white mantle hanging around his back and the cross joined with a ring, the Axiom Church’s crest, shining in the middle of his breastplate served as definite proof of his status as an integrity knight.

Renri placed his right fingers at the crest, as though to hide it while exposing the truth with his twisted mouth in self-depreciation.

“I left my station and fled earlier. The fighting had already begun at the frontmost line. It must be chaos at the unit under my command about now. There must be casualties too. And despite that, I can’t move from here; how could I be considered a knight?”

He bit down hard on his lips while glancing upwards.

He saw himself in the widely opened eyes, in the colors of autumn, belonging to the red-haired girl.

Grey hair hanging down slightly from the forehead. Those round cheeks. And two feminine eyes with long lashes, lacking all knightly fortitude— A failure of a knight, confined eternally at fifteen years old.

It was when he quickly averted his eyes from those features he despised.

The red-haired girl covered her mouth with a hand as though assailed by some new cause for surprise.

“.....?”

Renri frowned in suspicion before the girl averted her eyes this time and shook her head slightly.

“I-I’m sorry. It’s, nothing...”

Taking the place of the red-haired girl who continued looking down, the girl with dark brown hair who kept silent until now stepped forward and stated her name with a faint yet firm voice.

“We apologize for not introducing ourselves earlier. We belong to the supply unit, I am Novice Trainee Ronye Arabel and this is Novice Trainee Tiezé Shtolienen. And this is... Elite Swordsman-in-training Kirito.

«*Kirito*».

Renri let out a soft voice from the immense shock of hearing that name.

He knew him. *Was he not one of the mere two rebels who cut through the Central Cathedral half a year ago?* He was the very one who Renri was thawed to intercept, the one who he missed out on engaging due to his late awakening.

That meant this skinny swordsman was the one who defeated the highest minister, Administrator? Was that missing right arm a relic from battle?

Renri drew his right foot back, feeling a pressure that he could do nothing about from the youth who kept quiet with a hollow expression. Showing no sign she noticed that movement, the small girl who seemed to be named Ronye continued in a tone tinged with resolve.

“Erm... I have no opinion regarding your circumstances, esteemed knight. While we do belong to the Defense Army, we, too, remain here in the back without engaging at the front lines. ...That said, that is currently our responsibility. We are tasked to protect this man at all cost from Knight Alice...”

Alice. —Alice Synthesis Thirty.

The young prodigious knight, a stark contrast of Renri on all fronts. She should be preparing for the Defense Army’s

secret plan even at the current moment, a large-scale art to halt the front lines on her own.

As though cornering Renri, tormented by an emotion that made him feel even smaller, Novice Trainee Arabel added to her words with a desperate look.

“Esteemed knight, I do apologize if I am overstepping my bounds... but could you possibly lend us a hand? To be honest, the two of us can hardly even defeat a single goblin. We must... we must keep Kirito-senpai safe!”

Renri squinted against the dazzling light in Ronye’s eyes.

He thought it a light that belonged only to those who had carved their mission onto their heart, those determined to accomplish their mission even if it meant casting their lives away.

—Where had I left mine behind, when even a novice trainee girl, yet to graduate from school, has it? Or perhaps I had lacked mine ever since I first woke up as an integrity knight in this Human Empire...?

Renri heard a dry voice trickle from his own mouth.

“You should be fine here... I think. His Excellency, Knight Commander Bercouli, is the one commanding the Defense Army Second Unit and if anything gets past his guard, that’s equivalent to the end of the Human Empire anyway. It’ll end

up the same no matter where you run. I plan to sit here until the battle ends. I won't get in your way if you intend to stay anywhere close..."

With his words fading off into his soundless breathing, Renri went back, deeper into the tent, and sat down with a thud.

It was about then—

That smoke shells thrown by Kosogi, the chief of the mountain goblins, and the rest blew up at the left flank of the frontmost lines where Integrity Knight Eldrie awaited. Taking advantage of the dense, rising fumes, a flood of goblins began slipping past the defense line like water through coarse fabric.

Neither Renri nor two female novice trainees could have possibly known that their aim was precisely the annihilation of the supply unit at the Human Empire Defense Army's rearmost.

* * *

The progression towards destruction advanced rapidly for the collection of light quanta that made up that soul, that fluct light, belonging to Sigrosig, the chief of the giants.

However, as the collapse caused heavy damage only to certain parts rather than it as a whole, there was a delay

before his fluct light ceased functioning. On the other hand, that phenomenon induced a particular «side effect».

With the hatred and bloodthirst Sigrosig had directed towards the humans for decades released all at once, they overflowed from his fluct light and reached even the light cube storing Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio's soul through the «Main Visualizer» regulating the Light Cube Cluster.

Direct control of phenomena via imagination. The power termed «incarnation» by the integrity knights robbed the freedom of movement from Fanatio's body despite her lengthy experience.

Charging forth with his humongous frame of almost four mel with terrible vigor, the giant chief swung the large hammer held in his right hand up high.

—*Why won't they move!?*

Fanatio thought to beat some sense into her two legs that refused to listen to her, but she could not even ball her hands into fists to do so.

Even with the giant chief as her opponent, the deputy commander of the Order of the Integrity Knights would never freeze up with a mere glare.

She told herself so, but still, her body seemed frozen in her shooting stance with her right knee on the ground.

During a bout with Knight Commander Bercouli, she could not gain any ground with her sword prepared—she went through such an experience. However, this was utterly different from that heavy yet somehow tender presence that emanated from the knight commander and enveloped her. Pain, like leather belts covered in iron thorns wrapped over her one after another, tormented her entire being.

The giant chief, Sigrosig, bellowed out a strange yell as he kicked the goblins and orcs who should have been his allies aside and charged closer. Cutting the distance down below fifteen mel.

He would be no challenge in a one-versus-one; that was how it should have been.

Among the ten lords in the Dark Empire, Fanatio acknowledged only the might of the leader of the Order of the Dark Knights, Shasta. In a prior bout, her helmet unfortunately cracked at the end of an intense battle exceeding thirty minutes and she tasted humiliation when Shasta drew his sword back after seeing Fanatio's bare face.

However, she never considered defeat even at that time. She was under a strict restriction from Bercouli regarding the usage of the armament full control art when fighting

against dark knights. Hence, she should not be falling behind anyone else. The very thought of freezing up from a mere glare was preposterous.

That said, the phenomenon that exceeded Fanatio's understanding was drawing closer before her eyes, moment by moment.

It would not even take ten seconds before that gigantic iron hammer swings down upon her. She had to stand up and fix her sword stance at once. If she could intercept it with a slash, the «Heaven Piercing Sword», a distinguished divine instrument, would never lose to that coarse iron hammer on Sigrosig.

Despite that, she could not stand. Unseen shackles bound Fanatio and the giant chief, a dark red gleam seething in his two eyes, approached before her eyes—

“Humankilldeldelde———

Spouting a scream that sounded no longer intelligible as his iron hammer roared down.

——*Your Excellency.*

Fanatio quietly muttered with her immobilized mouth.

Dakira Synthesis Twenty-two, a low ranking knight, had offered everything to a sole person ever since awakening as a knight.

Not to the ruler, the highest minister, Administrator. Neither was it to the leader of the knight order, Bercouli.

It was to Deputy Commander Fanatio and no one else. Dakira was strongly drawn by her relentless intensity and the anguish she concealed.

That emotion could be no other than love, going by the Human Empire's standards.

However, Dakira sealed all emotions away due to a variety of reasons and served as a faceless and nameless member of the unit directly under Fanatio, the «Four Oscillation Blades». Being by her side alone made Dakira feel more fortunate than ever hoped for.

The Four Oscillation Blades were, by no means, some elite unit among the low ranking knights. Fanatio had gathered those lacking power, judged to be at risk if assigned to the front lines on their own, and had them learn combination techniques to raise their survival rate, creating a so-called «unit of leftovers».

As such, they garnered low evaluations from the highest minister and chief elder, and in actual fact, they, the «Four

Oscillation Blades», all committed the heavy blunder of suffering heavy injuries against the two student swordsmen from the common folk in that rebellion half a year ago.

But what hurt Dakira much more was how they failed to protect Fanatio. The time spent on the bed in the ward was filled with incessant thoughts of how it would have been better to die back then.

However, Fanatio spoke kindly instead of harshly towards Dakira after the injuries healed.

With the silver mask that she had never taken off in public removed, the deputy knight commander showed a beautiful smile and slapped all four of their shoulders in turn as she spoke.

—I, too, was saved by the rebels right before my death. Gentlemen, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Rather, that was a good fight. I had never seen a finer coordination of the «Encircling Bladed Oscillation Dance».

Dakira's mind was made up, then, as tears ran under that helmet.

To not allow any harm to befall the venerated deputy knight commander the next time.

And this was that very «next time».

Regardless of the orders to stay stationed until further commands, Dakira leapt out from the ranks the instant upon feeling abnormality in Fanatio's state.

There were over twenty mel until Fanatio, on her knee, and the giant chief swinging a humongous iron hammer down onto her from overhead.

Covering that distance in time was not viable with the physical ability of a low ranking knight. However, Dakira dashed on as a blurred streak of light and jumped before Fanatio, intercepting the iron hammer roaring down with a two-handed greatsword.

The resultant noise, shaking the earth, flared out alongside a flash tinged with red.

Though Dakira's greatsword was far sharper than the guards' weapons could hope to be, it could not compare to the high ranking knights' divine instruments in terms of priority. On the other hand, Sigrosig's iron hammer had its priority raised to a terrible level through the «power of incarnation from bloodthirst» streaming into it.

The skirmish collapsed in a mere half-second and numerous cracks ran through the greatsword's blade. It took another instant before the sword shattered into fleeting shafts of light. Dakira threw the handle away at

once and intercepted the falling humongous iron hammer with bare hands.

Multiple dull noises echoing throughout the body.

Both arms breaking in numerous places from the wrist to the upper arm.

Vision hurling into whiteness from pain. Fresh blood spurting from between armor joints, staining the helmet's surface.

“Ku... hh... oohh!!”

With teeth clenched, Dakira molded the scream struggling to escape into strength and caught the iron hammer, beyond those two hands' capacity to support, from below with that helmet.

The steel crossed mask shattered without resistance and unpleasant noises could be heard coming from Dakira's neck, back, and two knees. The pain surging throughout as scorching flames dipped everything visible into a deep crimson.

However, the lower ranking knight, Dakira Synthesis Twenty-two, did not fall.

Fanatio was right behind. This detestable weapon must not be swung down.

—I will protect her. This time, for sure.

“E... eaaaaaahh!!”

A shrill yell rang out from Dakira’s throat, freed from the crossed mask’s voice morphing function.

The blood dripping from the injuries all over enveloped Dakira as bluish-white flames.

Gathering at those broken arms, the flames burst as dazzling explosions. The iron hammer shot back, blown over ten meters away accompanied by Sigrosig’s huge frame.

Dakira slowly collapsed while listening to the heavy quake from the giant falling.

“...Dakira!!”

A shout, almost a scream, shot in from point-blank range.

—Aah, Fanatio-sama called out my name.

—How many years has it been?

Dakira smiled while crumbling into the arms extended from the deputy knight commander as her short, straw-colored pigtails and freckled cheeks laid exposed with the loss of her helmet.

Dakira was born and raised in a small village beside the sea in Southacroith South Empire. Her parents were poor,

holding no family name and fishing for a living, but the girl blessed with the strength of a man grew up healthily while helping out with her parents' work.

That girl committed a taboo at the age of sixteen. She fell in love with her close friend of the same gender who was a year older.

Of course, she never found it in herself to confess. Unable to deal with her suffering, Dakira sought penance from Goddess Stacia in an empty church altar late at night. However, as the altar was connected to the Central Cathedral's automated elders mechanism, Dakira was detected to have violated a taboo and was brought to the Axiom Church, becoming an integrity knight with all of her memories pilfered.

Though she could not remember her name any longer, the older girl Dakira had loved resembled Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio a little.

At peace, Dakira looked on with her dimly blurred vision as Fanatio's beautiful features crumpled and tears trickled from her long eyelashes.

—The venerated deputy knight commander is crying for me.

She could think of nothing that could make her happier. She had accomplished what she set out to do at the end of those

long, painful days and all that remained as death approached was satisfaction.

“Dakira... don’t die!! I’ll tend to you this moment!!”

A heartrending voice rang out at her ears once more.

Dakira urged her broken left hand upwards with the last of her strength and with her trembling fingertips, gently wiped away the drops along Fanatio’s cheeks.

Grinning, Dakira formed those thoughts she had always kept hidden deep in her chest into a whisper.

“Fanatio... sama... I shall... forever... adore... you.....”

In that moment, Integrity Knight Dakira synthesis Twenty-two’s Life reached its complete end.

The first fatality from the knight order lowered her eyelids for all eternity.

What——What had I been doing?!!

Fanatio screamed in her chest as she hugged the small body covered in wounds tightly.

The giant chief, Sigrosig, who tried to stand up was reflected within her vision warped with tears along with the remaining three members of the «Four Oscillation Blades» fiercely charging forward in response.

Dakira. Jeis. Hobren. Giro. She had placed them directly under her to train them up and to protect them. Though she gave them only strict words, they were her cherished younger siblings. Despite that, she was protected instead, with one of their lives even sacrificed—

“.....Unforgivable!!”

That word was directed at Sigrosig as well as her own self.

She would allow no more casualties. She would protect those three to the end, for Dakira’s sake as well.

That resolve became a «power of incarnation from love» and radiated from Fanatio’s soul with an intensity surpassing the abnormal bloodthirst seething from Sigrosig.

The icy thorns, binding her entire body, thawed in an instant.

Laying down Dakira’s corpse, Fanatio stood up straight as the «Heaven Piercing Sword» noiselessly floated from the ground into her right hand.

Before her was the scene of Jeis, Hobren, and Giro knocked away with a single swipe of Sigrosig’s left arm after they leapt forward with their greatswords raised.

The crimson light residing within the giant's two eyes seemed of the flames in the demon world far under the earth. Even the surrounding goblins and orc soldiers had ceased their approach, seemingly afraid.

“Kee... keel... Keelllll!!”

An abnormal scream roared from the giant who sluggishly stood up. However, there was no longer even a smidgen of surprise or fear within Fanatio's chest.

Smoothly pointed straight towards the sky by her right hand, the «Heaven Piercing Sword»—

Gained a coating of pure white light with a dull rumble. That dazzling radiance stretched on for over five mel from the sword's tip and remained as such.

“Humankeeeelllll——!!”

Swinging the iron hammer with both hands, Sigrosig jumped at Fanatio.

“...Return, unto the earth.”

Fanatio carelessly swung down with that murmur. Having extended several times its previous length, the blade of light drew a white streak through the air as it struck the iron hammer's blunt surface.

A crisp noise echoed with the gigantic weapon dividing into two. Burnt red from the cross section, the melted iron splashed all over.

The huge sword of light came into contact with Sigrosig's head just like that—slicing down into the ground without its momentum even waning.

The giants behind and the guards of the Human Empire descended into silence at that scene; the legendary warrior, boasting of the world's largest body, was severed into halves while still airborne.

Fanatio raised the blade of light over her head with a satisfying sound from the two lumps of flesh, falling with a damp noise, and shouted out loud.

“First Unit, middle, forward!! Repel the enemies!!”

* * *

The waves of attacks from the never-ending stream of plains goblins sank Deusolbert into impatience.

There was no chance he would be defeated or even challenged by some average goblin soldier in one-versus-one combat, no matter how many times that was repeated. The mountain of corpses burnt by the flames from the arrows he shot earlier served as actual proof of that.

However, he could not take on all of the enemy troops alone as they came as a wide, horizontal wave. He could only leave most of those on the sides to the guards from the Defense Army.

In terms of individual expertise, the guards surpassed the enemy troops by a significant gap. Their sword techniques, polished through half a year of strict training, were certainly faster and sharper than the goblins who relied on their strength in swinging their machetes. But that strength difference was far less sure than the overwhelming gap between an integrity knight and goblin soldiers. It would be tough to overcome those numbers, several times their own, with purely skill.

Deusolbert keenly felt the desire to share with all of the guards the great strength his body was endowed with. But naturally, there was no art capable of that.

The guards under him lost their lives one after another, one jumped upon by multiple goblins, another collapsing from exhaustion. Deusolbert felt as though his own Life was shaved away each time he heard their shrieks echo through the battlefield.

So this was «war»?

It was utterly different from the old fights: sweeping up intruders on the ground while atop a flying dragon or a one-

versus-one duel with a dark knight. It was an ugly war of attrition with each moment certain to add to the number of casualties.

The pride of the integrity knights served no purpose on this battlefield.

Was it not yet? Was the order for the unit to retreat not given yet?

Even the knowledge of how much time had passed since the start of the battle escaped him. Deusolbert cut through the advancing enemy soldiers with the longsword in his right hand and randomly shot with the Conflagrant Flame Bow whenever he could. With his calm lost without his notice, he failed to notice the strange movements taken by a slice of the enemy troops.

The new chief of the plain goblins, Shibori, was far more of a fool than the mountain goblins' chief, Kosogi; the same went for his cruel nature.

Shibori recognized the integrity knights leading the enemy troops as no more than large magical beasts. He made light of them, thinking that no matter how strong they were, they were just one white ium on their own, doomed after being surrounded.

However, he found the integrity knights to be much more troublesome than magical beasts after the fighting began, barely slipping from their encirclements despite how many charged forth. Ten would be blown away with the explosion from a single fire arrow and even normal arrows flew true, to a horrifying extent, towards their heads and hearts.

Now then, what to do?

The conclusion Shibori reached after some thinking could not have been any simpler or cruel.

He would continue having his soldiers charge forward until the enemy knight's arrows ran out.

That said, the soldiers sent ahead without a plan were in no mood to simply “go with it”, naturally enough. There was a fair amount with intelligence surpassing Shibori and though they went with his orders, they contrived whatever gimmicks they could.

They began lifting up corpses from their fallen comrades and hiding in their shadows or staying a fair distance from the knight while strafing left and right.

Deusolbert should have seen through such a naive plan at once if he had his usual temperament. However, the screams from the guards whose strength left them shaved

away at his calm without his notice. The goblins benefited from how the war started at evening as well.

The enemy was taking awfully long to fall.

By the time Deusolbert noticed that, his stock of more-than-enough iron arrows was nearly exhausted.

“Good, good, looks like he’s finally out of arrows.”

Shibori scraped the nape of his neck with the backs of the two machetes against his shoulders as he snickered.

The tragic display of the countless corpses of his race, too, failed to instigate much influence on his mind. He inherited that tenacity from his ancestors who had lived through the old «age of blood and iron» which could have been no more appalling.

It appeared a whole third of his allies were done in, but there still remained over three thousand soldiers. If they obtained plentiful meat and land after invading the white iums’ lands, they could replenish their race all they liked.

However, they had to produce significant results to expand their territories. They would first have to take care of that integrity knight in red armor.

“Alright, let’s go, all of you. Surround that archer and drag him down. I’ll take his neck off myself.”

Shibori instructed those forming a barricade around himself, his close aides who were both brawny and boorish, and slowly stepped forward.

“...I slipped up...”

Deusolbert let out a deep groan.

He had finally realized those enemies erratically moving through the darkness and those scarecrows improvised from raised corpses.

After bringing down those manipulating the scarecrows by aiming at the feet rather than the heart, the right hand searched through the large quiver behind and grasped only a fruitless emptiness.

Without arrows, the «Conflagrant Flame Bow», a divine instrument, was no different from a plain longbow. Though it was possible to produce arrows from metallic elements with sacred arts, that technique could only be used in a one-versus-one where he had the chance to recite the art.

In the first place, almost all of the space sacred energy should have been absorbed by the integrity knight standing by in the sky, leaving the atmosphere dry.

Grinding his teeth as he hung the Conflagrant Flame Bow on his left shoulder by its string, Deusolbert drew the longsword from his waist once more. It was in that precise

moment that he spotted a party rapidly approaching through the darkness from in front, with sizes rather large for goblins.

Their outfits differed from the small fry he faced off until now. Their chest to around their hips was covered in plate armor and riveted leather belts wrapped about their brawny arms. They held thick, large hatchets that seemed fit to sever even cows in their right hands.

Deusolbert confirmed another goblin approaching from behind those seven—with a frame that exceeded even orcs in terms of height.

Judging from the cast iron armor shining with black luster, the two large hatchets hanging from his hands, and the vivid, decorative feathers swaying on his head, he figured there was no mistake that he was the army's commander.

The goblin general's two eyes shining red under his bulging brow collided with Deusolbert's pair of eyes and the surrounding air creaked in that instant. The swords and machetes striking against each other without pause on the front lines gradually petered out and came to an eventual stop. Both the guards and the goblins gained distance from each other without further words and watched the two generals' confrontation with held breaths.

Deusolbert held back the numerous approaching guards with his left hand. Brandishing the sword in his right hand without letting down his guard, he questioned in a deep and seasoned yet distinct voice.

“You are one of the ten lords of the Dark Empire... the goblins’ chief, huh?”

“That’s me.”

The large goblin responded with his yellowed teeth showing.

“Chief of the plains goblins, that’s Shibori-sama to you.”

Deusolbert steadied his breathing, rough from the long, fierce battle while gazing straight towards the enemy general.

—If I defeat this general and those close to him, the goblin army would lose its will to fight, even for a moment. If we take the initiative and push the lines back, we would accomplish our role as the vanguards.

Even if he could not use his Conflagrant Flame Bow.

Even if it was eight on one, he could only aim for a certain victory now. He would prove the integrity knights’ strength, said to comparable to a thousand, here and now.

“I am the integrity knight, Deusolbert Synthesis...”

Shibori's vulgar cry cut his sonorous voice short as he tried to state his name.

“Hold there, who cares about some ium's name?! You're meat, meat stuck on that head I'll be taking!! Get to it... all of you, get him!!”

“Uu———raaaaaahh!!”

Deusolbert took on the seven elite goblins jumping forward with brutal war cries on his own.

They should have simply continued that boorish war if they lacked the pride of swordsmen so. Proposing this shame of a duel was just—

“Ridiculous!!”

Before picking up the whip, the spear, or the bow, every integrity knight was an experienced swordsman.

Not even a single being there could perceive the motion of Deusolbert raising the longsword in his right hand overhead and swinging it down.

The slash at godspeed drew a dimly white streak of light. A faint noise rang out as the large hatchet raised by the leading goblin was split into two.

That was a moment before that goblin was cut into two from the crown of his head to his stomach, fresh blood

gushing out everywhere. However, the knight was gone before that spray reached.

Deusolbert carried out his next attack, having moved to the second before the first even noticed his own death.

It was not some consecutive sword technique like those of Knight Fanatio or the rebels he had once fought against. Those were repeated single slashes in the old style of sword techniques executed from the traditional stance. However, Deusolbert's skill was polished through a near infinite number of months and years, to a practically divine level. Only the upper ranks among the dark knights and pugilists could react against that single strike.

In actual fact, the second, cut from the left at nearly the same time as the first, had perished with his plate armor severed along with his heart by the time he began swinging down his large hatchet.

The overwhelming power difference was evident in everyone's eyes.

However, the elite goblins showed no hesitation. Chief Shibori, too, was a superior being that inspired fear in them and they did not even consider opposing his command.

Two who circled around from Deusolbert's side, bathed in the blood sprays from their own race, assailed him from both the left and right.

The experienced knight showed not even the least panic and first cut into the left goblin from below and drew that into an arc into the right goblin from above. The single immediate motion that ended the enemies on both sides was truly on the level of divinity.

Three remained, no, four if the general was counted too.

Would they come all at once or one after another?

Avoiding the spurts of blackish-red blood with a jump back, Deusolbert prepared his next attack.

The fifth naively slashed at him from the left of his vision. He saw no light reflected off blades from any other direction.

“Nuhn!”

He sliced horizontally with the sword on his left with that curt yell. The tip cut a silver arc and sank into the enemy's right.

Both of Deusolbert's eyes opened wide in that moment.

A large hatchet had stabbed through the enemy goblin's chest from behind, right as he had slashed, and flew towards him.

The massive blade scattered all around the fresh blood from its still breathing comrade as it closed in towards Deusolbert's throat.

He could neither dodge nor block it with his sword.

Having judged so in an instant, the left forearm he raised collided with the tip of that large hatchet, producing dull light.

A numbing, intense pain. Though he had somehow endured with his reddish-copper gauntlet, the blow spread through his bones from his flesh.

“Ku... ooohh!!”

Blowing through his surprise with a shout, Deusolbert forced the enemy's blade to glance off towards the left. A cracking noise rang throughout his body, informing him of the broken bones in his left arm.

That was no more than a single arm!!

With the slash stopped with his mustered up spirit, Deusolbert charged straight in just like that. Stabbing

through the sacrificed fifth's stomach, his sword reached the overlapped sixth's body.

However, the feedback was shallow.

He had to quickly withdraw his sword, gain some distance, and link that into his next attack.

Deusolbert pulled the sword out at once, sweat rising onto his brow without his notice.

The fifth slumped over, dead, and beyond that, he saw—

The sixth and seventh throwing their large hatchets away and leaping at him with their arms spread out at a height equal to crawl across the ground.

And there existed no stance fit for attacking an enemy in that position within Deusolbert's style.

Falling into a momentary rigidness, the knight's two legs were grabbed simultaneously by the two goblins. Incapable of dealing with their dreadful physical strength, Deusolbert fell onto his back.

His two widened eyes perceived Shibori, the enemy general, jumping forward with his large frame and two battle axes brandished while showing a brutal joy.

—In such a place, against goblins?

—*It's impossible for I, Deusolbert, an integrity knight, to face defeat here.*

«*Impossible*».

That thought could prove to be a dangerous poison for one's mental state the stubborner one was. Though he remained above falling into a berserk state like Sigrosig, Deusolbert's motion came to a complete stop within his numbed consciousness.

The knight could only watch on as the lethal blade loomed closer before he heard—

A scream, hoarse from exhaustion but valiant all the same.

“Esteemed knight——!!”

A single guard charged towards the enemy general and his fiendish features. That was that young guard commander. That youngling whose name he had not even heard yet raised the greatsword his two hands held up and carried out a slash from above with all he had.

In response, the enemy general swung the battle axe in his left hand as though it was a bother.

Gagiin!! A dull, shrill metallic noise rang out.

Though it paled when compared to the enemy general, the guard commander had a large build and wore heavy armor,

but was blown away like a paper doll, rolling two, three times across the ground. That physical strength overthrew the gap between their technique, speed, and equipment all too easily.

The two eyes of the demi-human shone red and narrowed. Releasing the murderous aura of a beast's, he leapt and swung up the axe in his right hand as though to put an end to the guard commander who had yet to stand up.

—*No.*

—*I cannot allow any further casualties as a knight, and as their commander!*

The momentary thought stabbed into Deusolbert's stiff mental state like a bolt of lightning.

There was not enough time to shake his legs free from the two elite goblins binding them, stand up, and move before the guard commander. Throwing the sword in his right hand would only serve to delay the same conclusion by seconds.

Before he could consider what to even do, his two hands swung almost automatically—carrying out what he had never thought of prior.

Nocking the longsword in his right hand as a replacement for an arrow onto the bowstring of the «Conflagrant Flame Bow» he wielded horizontally, he fiercely tugged at it.

The heavy resistance felt as though he was pulling on a rope fastened to the great earth. The intense pain practically wiped his consciousness blank from the roots.

However, Deusolbert let a groan escape amidst his clenched teeth and pulled it to its very limit. Taking up a posture to fire, he yelled.

“Come, flames!!”

The divine instrument responded to its owner’s will even without reciting its art.

The energy from the flames emitting from all over the bow surpassed all previous manifestations of his armament full control art.

Though the longsword nocked onto the bow could not compare to a divine instrument, it was a named good produced personally by the highest minister. It possessed a priority on an entirely different level from the mass-produced steel arrows. The sacred energy contained within its blade transformed into flames without moderation.

The full body armor on Deusolbert, with its supposed resistance towards heat, turned red hot at once.

The two goblins clinging onto his legs let out shrieks as flames started spouting out from their eyes and mouths, burning them, before they could react accordingly.

The enemy general, turning back upon noticing the abnormality, widened both eyes from surprise and anger as he tried to hurl the axe in his right hand.

However, that was too slow—

“—Burn down to ashes!!”

Shouting so, Deusolbert released the bowstring. Shot forth with a roar, the longsword flapped its crimson, blazing wings as it soared straight. It appeared just like the Conflagrant Flame Bow’s original self—the phoenix that lived in the oldest volcano of the south empire.

“Graahh!!”

The enemy general let out a groan as he crossed the two large axes before his body. The phoenix clad in flames struck the heart of that for an instant.

The large, pig iron axes vaporized all too quickly with a hiss.

And their owner, Shibori the chief of the plains goblins, skipped through the usual processes of combustion, immediately turning into black charcoal— He crumbled into pieces right after and vanished without a trace.

Having witnessed their general's horrifying death, the goblin soldiers turned around at once and began fleeing. However, over three hundred soldiers could not escape the phoenix's inferno and disappeared into cinders.

* * *

The distress both Fanatio in the first unit, middle, and Deusolbert in the right flank went through.

Instructing the second unit in the rear, the commander of the Human Empire Defense Army, Bercouli Synthesis One, clearly knew of those as well as the chaos the left flank under Eldrie's command experienced from that smokescreen.

However, he did not take even a single step.

The first reason was his trust in the knights and guards brought up under his personal care. The second reason was how the Human Empire could not send out its second unit either, with the main force of the enemy's ground troops, the Order of the Dark Knights and the Pugilists' Guild, yet to make a move.

And the third reason was the possibility of a surprise attack, something he could not help but worry for, with his knowledge of the Dark Territory beyond everyone's.

Or in other words, the enemy's might in aerial warfare.

In this world where the art for flight did not exist—save for the one recorded in the index only Highest Minister Administrator could call out and was lost forever with her death, to be specific—the few «dragon knights» among the Order of the Integrity Knights and the Order of the Dark Knights possessed exceptional war potential. Freely soaring through the skies beyond the reach of swords, they could raze infantry with the knight's arts and the dragon's heat rays.

However, they could not be rashly let out onto the war front due to that value of theirs. If they sent theirs out before the enemy and any fell from the off-chance of an art or arrow from the ground, they would be laden with a tremendous disadvantage from that very point.

As such, Bercouli retained all flying dragons aside from «Amayori», ridden by Alice, in the rear of the battlefield and trusted in the enemy to do the same. Hence, the surprise attack he fretted over would not come from dragon knights.

Aside from them, the forces of darkness held an aerial force that they monopolized.

They were repulsive, winged monsters termed «minions». Created from clay and other materials by dark arts users, they possessed no intelligence and could understand only certain basic orders.

In truth, Bercouli had heard from Alice that the highest minister had created and researched into those same minions in secret. However, it seemed even the highest minister hesitated in deploying the repulsive minions as they were to the Axiom Church. He could only feel it a pity that she had not changed their appearances into something fitting in time before she departed, but there was no use in crying over spilled milk.

Due to those reasons, Bercouli felt it necessary to prepare for minions launching surprise attacks from the skies. And in this situation with the flying dragons held back and the ascetics unit tied up with healing, he was the only option left for aerial defense over a vast area.

To be accurate, the divine instrument Bercouli held, the «Time Piercing Sword», was the only option.

Bercouli focused entirely on his mind while standing firm in the middle of the second unit with both hands against the pommel of his precious sword in its scabbard.

He could constantly sense the difficult battles the three integrity knights and the guards of the first unit went through.

However, he could not take even a single step.

After all, Bercouli had already activated the armament full control art for his cherished sword.

A humongous clock mounted on the Central Cathedral in an age long past had informed the residents of Central Capital Centoria of the time. Its minute hand and hour hand were reforged into a divine instrument, the «Time Piercing Sword». The power it concealed was to «cut the future». The power behind a slash would remain in the trajectory where the sword was swung and anyone who touched that would be cut, a technique that was just as exceptional.

Just before the Great East Gate collapsed, Bercouli straddled the knight dragon, «Hoshigami», and created a gigantic «slashing space» spanning a hundred mel in width, two hundred mel in length, and a hundred-and-fifty mel in height right before the Great Gate. Swinging his sword time after time with subtle vertical and horizontal movements, he drew out a fine mesh in the empty air. The total number of slashes exceeded three hundred.

Maintaining those «incarnation blades» on such a scale for over tens of minutes was a first for Bercouli, the practically immortal being who had lived for over three hundred years, as well. The technique was made possible only by separating his consciousness from his flesh and concentrating solely on his mental state. He had left

command of the first unit to Fanatio for this one and only reason.

—*Hurry... if you're coming, come quick.*

That earnest wish remained with Bercouli despite having reached a realm detached from needless impatience. Putting aside his mental exhaustion, over half of the «Time Piercing Sword»'s sacred energy was already consumed. He could not dispel the armament full control art for the moment and repeat the act. If he failed to annihilate the enemy's minions and they assaulted Alice, preparing a large-scale art in the sky above the first unit, they would lose their one and only hope.

—*Come, quick.*

* * *

Though Renri Synthesis Twenty-seven who abandoned his post was the one stuck with the most pessimistic state of mind among the seven high ranking knights gathered at the Great East Gate, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one, too, was up against the wall despite how he should have much more experience in actual battles.

That emotion differed from what Dakira of the «Four Oscillation Blades» held for Fanatio, that honest love. He wanted to offer all of himself to serve under Alice, yet at the

same time, he experienced the contradictory desire to place her under his protection as his senior.

Alice was reputed as the greatest genius in the church's history ever since he awoke as an integrity knight. She possessed a talent at the sacred arts far surpassing the ascetics and priests, was chosen as the owner of the oldest divine instrument, the «Fragrant Olive Sword» with its alternate name, the Eternal Immortality, which had rejected all resonance with other knights, and even had the gift to take in all of Knight Commander Bercouli's techniques.

She could be seen only as a young girl on the outside, but to most of the knights, Alice was like a lone star in the northern skies, distant from all else. The circumstances had also spurred the rumors that she would succeed the highest minister, Administrator.

As such, Eldrie, too, made no effort to approach Alice after awakening as a knight. It could even be said he actively avoided her.

Though his memories in the Human Empire were stolen through the «Synthesis Ritual», Eldrie was the eldest son of Eschdol Woolsburg, the greatest commander-in-chief of Norlangarth North Empire and a first class noble.

In addition, in Year 380 of the Human Empire Calendar, he was the first representative swordsman from the north empire and the champion of the Four Empires Unity Tournament. Even after becoming an integrity knight, his innate pride and conceit as a noble remained.

To that personality of his, Alice's existence as a knight far superior to him despite being young and female, and her position as Knight Commander Bercouli's only disciple should have brought him discomfort and never affection.

However, it happened late at night sometime after she became a knight.

Eldrie spotted an utterly unexpected aspect to Alice by accident.

Delving deep in the rose garden in a bid for some secret sword training, he saw Alice, dressed in simple sleepwear, throwing herself down before a coarse grave marker and sobbing. The name on the grave marker, a mere cross carved from plain wood, was that of an old flying dragon whose Life went dry several days prior—the mother dragon who gave birth to Alice's knight dragon, «Amayori», and Eldrie's knight dragon, «Takiguri».

They might be highly valued for their war potential, but still, they were mere dragons. Was she not just a lower, kept beast? What reason was there for a grave and that grieving?

That was what Eldrie thought then.

However, when he tried to turn aside and snicker, he was shocked upon noticing something hot welling from his own eyes.

Alice, crying as she mourned for the deceased mother dragon. He still did not know why that had made his heart quiver hard enough to have it tear apart. However, Eldrie could only stand still, unable to even wipe his tears, as he realized. That graceful, fleeting figure was the true Alice Synthesis Thirty.

Ever since that day, the aloof Knight Alice appeared completely different when reflected in Eldrie's eyes. He saw her as a crystal flower, capable of withstanding any draught with her head firmly held high yet close to shattering at any moment—

He wanted to protect her. He wanted to guard that girl from any tormenting, cold wind.

That emotion in Eldrie grew only stronger day by day. Still, his thoughts of protecting were too impertinent. Alice's talents surpassed Eldrie's be it in arts or the sword.

The only possibility he had left was his desire to receive Alice's guidance as her disciple.

From then, Eldrie lived while holding onto a single desire. To have his master, Alice, recognize him as a swordsman and as a man.

That goal was difficult or even impossible. With the true strength of that genius knight, Alice, at a level recognized by even Knight Commander Bercouli, Eldrie's zealous, desperate training was more to keep his patience strong rather than to catch up to her.

At the same time, he made great efforts to draw his master's smile out, by even the slightest bit, with conversations over all sorts of topics, meals together, and a pompous manner of speech that just came to him—though that was, in fact, a resurgence of his personality from before becoming an integrity knight.

It was around those days when his effort began to bear fruit, with his skill with the sword growing and him succeeding in having his master's lip form an extremely faint smile.

The cathedral was assailed by the largest incident in the church's history.

It should have been standard duty at the start. Certainly, the major crime, «murder», committed by the two swordsmen-in-training was horrifying, but still, accidents involving disputes with bloodshed, the accumulation of unfortunate

circumstances, did happen throughout the vast Human Empire at times.

In reality, he felt practically no danger or enmity from the students when he saw them brought to the cathedral. He thought them no more than utterly dejected youths from the common folk.

That was why, when his master, Alice, shut them away in the cathedral's underground jail and ordered at the end of her contemplation—

[Guard the exit to the underground jail for a night just in case.]

—Eldrie was somewhat astonished. And he took up the duty with the thought that keeping vigil in the rose garden was nice once in a while, but felt a great shock when the criminal did escape just as the eastern skies began to turn white.

Admiring his master's insight, Eldrie stood before them to accomplish his role—and yet of all things to happen, he had to lose; and he had no excuses to deny that. He faced off against commoners with torn chains as weapons and he even made use of the recollection release art for his divine instrument, «Frost Scale Whip».

Truly, he could only admit his defeat. In the end, those two broke through the upper ranking knight, Deusolbert, Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio, his master, Alice, and even Knight Commander Bercouli, and ended up even defeating Highest Minister Administrator.

Alice had clearly mentioned as well, in the log house at that meager north village he did not know the name of, in front of one of those criminals. That he was the strongest swordsman who surpassed even the integrity knights.

He did not feel regret over losing to that black-haired youth in terms of might with the sword.

That was not it, he was not the one, those thoughts hurt.

The one to release his master, Alice, from the ice garden that confined her heart was not him but that youth. Eldrie's heart jolted at that realization.

Hours before the Great East Gate collapsed, his master, Alice, spoke with a gentle smile he had never seen even once in the past.

[I had continued down that bleak journey to reach today only with your support. Thank you, Eldrie.] ...Or so she said.

Eldrie resolved himself with tears of gratitude when he heard those words. He would show how much Alice's

guidance had helped develop himself on this battlefield, at the very least.

That strong determination lent strength to Eldrie as the power of incarnation and drove him into a corner at the same time.

Even if the mountain goblin army had waged a normal war on the left flank of the first unit he led, Eldrie would show ferocity in no way inferior to Deusolbert at the right flank.

However, in reality, the mountain goblins came up with the unexpected strategy of completely robbing the left flank force with a dense smokescreen and slipping past their feet to assail the rear.

He was done in by goblins. He showed that shameful sight to Alice, watching on from the sky.

That impatience robbed the capability for composed judgements from Eldrie. He recklessly looked about in the dense smoke that concealed even his own nose from his vision and thought to give instructions to the guards. But he noticed in time at least, somehow, that an order to attack in this state would end in friendly fire and yet could think of no means to get rid of the smoke.

Eldrie could only stand stock still, disheveling his light purple hair and chewing on his lips hard enough for his blood to flow.

Part 3

“Heey, you know, the left doesn’t look so in control.”

As Fizel, her partner, reported to their commander in a somewhat carefree voice, Linel nodded as well as her pigtailed wavered. However, no reply came from their commander. She shifted her sight forward while thinking about how she barely spoke.

Fizel Synthesis Twenty-eight and Linel Synthesis Twenty-nine, apprentice knights, were stationed at the front of the second unit’s right flank of the Human Empire Defense Army. Despite the ruckus at the first unit’s right flank positioned a hundred mel in front, no enemy had penetrated the defense line. It seemed the senior high ranking knight, Deusolbert, was making quite an effort.

The center of the first unit that Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio was entrusted with, too, held its position for the time being. Though Linel and Fizel treated her like an elder sister and a natural enemy of sorts, they could not deny her might. That tense feeling she gave off previously, too, had

mostly vanished after she shed that iron mask and revealed her bare face.

What worried her, as expected, was the left flank of the first unit.

Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one, who took up command, was a newcomer who awoke merely seven months ago and though his abilities recently improved significantly, the sudden, major role might have been a little too heavy for him. He did command the front lines by his own wish, but it felt like it would have been better to leave it to the other senior knights instead—

She pondered over those thoughts as she pictured the stations for each knight in her head.

The high ranking knights gathered on this battlefield numbered merely seven.

The first unit had Eldrie on the left, Deputy Commander Fanatio in the middle, and Deusolbert on the right.

The second unit had the young Renri on the left, Knight Commander Bercouli in the middle, and the silent female knight on the right.

And the last position, in the sky, was taken by Alice Synthesis Thirty.

“...The left is a cause for concern no matter how you look at it, isn't it...”

Fizel was the one to curtly nod her head instead, this time, to Linel's mutterings. In fact, the situation at the left flank had been strange since minutes ago. There were no signs of injuries, but countless disorderly cries could be heard from across the troops in the middle. What appeared to be thick smoke, darker than even the darkness at the bottom of the valley, could be seen lingering there after squinting hard.

In the off-chance they slipped through Eldrie in the first unit, the second unit commanded by the young Renri should still hold them back—or at least, they should.

“Will that kid really be okaay?”

Nodding to Fizel's words, Linel drew her head closer to her partner before whispering.

“I did not say anything because I figured Esteemed Uncle Bercouli would have something in mind, but the left and right flanks of the second unit really should have been swapped. I'm not sure at all about lining up Eldry with Renry.”

Fizel lowered her voice even further at that and replied.

“I thought about it and all, but dear uncle’s probably thinking about making us fight as little as possible, don’t you think...?”

“.....Aah...”

Coming to an understanding, Linel watched as a slender figure quietly stood up a short distance away.

The thin armor was in matte grey, a rare choice among the integrity knights. Her hair, dark grey as well, was separated neatly at the middle of her pale brow and tied up at the back of her head. She appeared around twenty years old with single eyelids on her eyes, narrowed in a refined manner, and no rouge on her lips.

She was named Scheta Synthesis Twelve. Her alias seemed to be «Silent», but the origins for that were unknown. However, at the very least, Fazel and Linel understood well enough that this knight was nowhere as harmless as she looked. This knight was dangerous. They had no desire to even remain near her when she draws the rapier at the left of the waist.

Knight Commander Bercouli must have thought of having Scheta avoid battle as well, thus setting her behind the senior Deusolbert instead of the young Eldrie. In other words, if that archer continued to hold his ground, Linel and the rest would see no action.

That hardly constituted a valid reason, but—

“Excuse me, Scheta-sama.”

Linel spoke to their taciturn commander once more. She shot a glance at them, so she voiced out the rest of words.

“May we go take a look at the rear?”

The knight’s slender right eyebrow moved just two millice at that. As she felt a questioning “why” from that, she replied in a hurry.

“Erm, well, we are a little concerned...”

Her eyebrow moved once again. It must be asking “over what”. Her answer made her hesitate and she struggled before she somehow got out the words.

“Erm... that person who should be together with the supply unit. The rebel... Kirito.”

Fizel nodded with slight motions from the side at that.

In that great turmoil seven months ago, Fizel and Linel fought against the rebels, Kirito and Eugeo, on the Central Cathedral’s grand staircase. To be accurate, they paralyzed them with concealed, venomous swords in a surprise attack and dragged them before the deputy knight commander before trying to behead them.



It should have been easy. However, that rebel, Kirito, had recited the detoxification art without them noticing, stole their swords, and paralyzed them in the end.

When Kirito swung the venomous swords down towards Linel and Fazel, collapsed on the ground, they did not feel any fear in particular. They simply sighed and felt slight regret, missing out on the opportunity to advance to being real integrity knights from apprentices. Thinking that it would be nice if Kirito killed them skillfully—in a clean and relatively painless manner, in other words—Linel awaited the moment her Life would be severed.

However, Kirito did not kill the pair. The venomous swords stood stabbed in the floor and he turned his back to them, standing against Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio. And he achieved victory in that unwinnable battle with wounds all over his body.

Fazel and Linel could still clearly recall the words Kirito's partner, the rebel, Eugeo, gave them right before they left.

—Fanatio and Kirito are that strong because they have their sacred instruments and armament full control arts; that might be what the two of you thought, being who you are, but that's wrong. Those two are much, much stronger. They could fight on even when hurt that badly not through their skills or weapons but through their heart and mind.

To be honest, she did not truly understand the meaning behind those words even after these seven months passed.

However, it was reality that the rebels, Kirito and Eugeo, defeated even Highest Minister Administrator. In exchange, Eugeo lost his life and Kirito lost his heart and an arm.

What did the two rebels seek as they fought? What strength did they gain from their hearts and minds?

It was in pursuit of that that Fazel and Linel participated in the Human Empire Defense Army and came all the way to the faraway Great East Gate.

The answers remained obscure. However, an unfamiliar sensation went through Linel's chest when she saw Kirito, atop the wheelchair pushed by Knight Alice, appearing on the battlefield. She could not determine what she felt and thought then; a first for her.

The apprentice knights, Linel Synthesis Twenty-eight and Fazel Synthesis Twenty-nine, were born in the Central Cathedral. Though they had heard their parents were among the ascetics of the Axiom Church, they recalled neither their names nor faces.

Their parents were ordered by the highest minister, Administrator, to procreate and to send the babies to a certain establishment in the tower. Though there were a

grand total of thirty in that establishment from the same background, the only ones living on now were Linel and Fazel. All of the other twenty-eight could not endure the «resurrection sacred art» experiments conducted by the highest minister and died.

Fazel and Linel lived on only because of their wholehearted research into «good methods of dying» that placed their flesh and spirit under least burden. The pair stabbed each other in the heart as ordered, died, and were resurrected by sacred arts. By the time the highest minister gave up on her experiments, each of them had already gotten the knack of killing the other while causing nearly no pain.

Strength, to the pair, referred to effective techniques for murder. If the opponent proved stronger, they would promptly flee. Flee, and train, to surpass and to kill again when given an opportunity. By that logic, there was no reason to take on injuries while standing against someone stronger. They had always thought so.

The rebels, Kirito and Eugeo, appeared to be only as skilled as the lower ranking knights when judging from their combat capabilities alone. However, the pair fought against that highest minister, abandoning an arm and a life, and triumphed.

For what cause?

And thus, what had that pair to gain?

They wanted to ask Kirito upon meeting again with him, but Integrity Knight Alice was constantly by his side and they found no opportunity to come into contact with him. Though they did not know if they could hold a conversation with him in his current state, it would be a bother if he died off before they could try. The supply unit behind ought to remain safe as long as the second unit hold, but that chaos on the left flank was definitely of worry.

—And as they could not possibly explain all of that to Scheta, the acting commander here, the pair restlessly waited for approval.

The knight, «Silent», glanced towards the left flank with her grey eyes and pointed towards the rear with her left hand after approximately two seconds of thought.

“Eh... erm, s-so we can go?”

As Scheta nodded without a word, she hastily made a simplified knight’s salute with Fazel.

“Thank you very much, we will be back immediately after confirming their safety!”

Turning about, they began running by the side of the ranks.

—*Thank you very much, huh. She had never said that, not even to the esteemed highest minister.*

Linel's eyes met with her partner and they exchanged cynical smiles before she accelerated further.

* * *

Integrity Knight Renri Synthesis Twenty-seven, about to put his arms around his knees once more, drew in a sharp breath deep in the supplies tent after several shouts reached his ears from surprisingly close by.

Could it be? He could not believe the enemy army could have broken through the valley's defense lines so quickly. Only tens of minutes had passed since battle began.

It was just due to him being worked up that he could hear those faraway noises so clearly; Renri convinced himself.

However, the reactions from the two girls who had taken refuge in the same tent told him that he did not mishear the approaching soldier voices.

“No way... they're already this far back?”

The red-haired trainee named Tiezé Shtolienen flicked her face up and rushed to the tent's entrance. Lifting the drapes, she ascertained the outside. Her whispering resounded immediately after, in a tone of increasing anxiety.

“...There’s smoke...!”

The trainee called Ronye Arabel, too, tensed up at that.

“Eh... Tiezé, is there fire too!?”

“No, there’s just this oddly colored smoke streaming in... —
No, wait. In the smoke... there are all those people...”

The words from Tiezé, peeping outside through the gaps in the drapes, stopped as though absorbed by the thick cotton.

Renri strained his ears once again in the tense silence, getting onto his feet.

The cries had vanished some time ago. However, he sensed someone approaching beyond that stillness. He heard gradual, damp footsteps.

Without warning, Tiezé retreated to the middle of the tent with uncertain steps. Her shuddering right hand reached out towards her left waist.

It happened then, when Renri realized she was trying to draw her sword.

Baff! The drapes at the entrance tore as they were pulled apart without care.

The outside was mired in dusk without him knowing and the torches’ light quivered alone in a pale red. A humanoid

silhouette stood in silence against that backdrop. Despite its small frame and hunched back, its two arms were abnormally muscular and gripped onto a coarse machete that appeared as though cut out from sheet metal.

The stench mixed into the air blowing in from the entrance stung Renri's nose.

Trainee Shtolienen drew her sword as its sheath clattered and Trainee Arabel shouted in a low voice from beside the wheelchair.

“—A goblin!?”

The intruder with bizarre features responded in a hoarse voice, scratchy in some places.

“O-hoh... white ium girls... trophies for me...”

Tiezé slowly stepped back at the sheer rawness of his desires.

While he was a high ranking integrity knight, this was Renri's first time witnessing a demi-human from the Dark Territory. He had been dealt with, by being frozen, before he was granted a flying dragon to fly to the mountain range at the edge.

This was completely... different.

Renri thought absentmindedly.

He thought he had learnt sufficiently regarding the four demi-human races from the lectures given by the senior knights and the written material in the cathedral. However, the goblin he imagined, taking on an appearance like that of the mischievous fairies from nursery tales, resembled this repulsive organism standing a mere eight mel away in no way.

The goblin lumbered a step forward in Renri's view as he shivered to the tips of his fingers, unable to even move. His dirtied plate armor shone dully like scales.

Tiezé turned the long sword held in her two hands towards the goblin, but its point wobbled as her knees quivered uncontrollably. *Did that soft clattering come from the girl's teeth?*

"Ti... Tiezé..."

A feeble voice leaked out from Ronye's throat. She hid the wheelchair Kirito sat upon before her back and held onto her sword's grip with her right hand, but her legs, too, were shaking.

He had to stand.

He had to stand, draw the Twin Edged Wings from his waist, and fight against the goblin soldier.

Despite those thoughts, Renri's body rejected any notion to move as though petrified. The enemy was no more than a single demi-human soldier. The high ranking knights, capable of matching a thousand, should have been bestowed enough power to achieve victory even when up against a thousand of these goblins.

“Gufh... you look tasty...”

The goblin licked his lips as his viscous drool dripped in strings.

“Ba... back off! If you don't...!”

The warning Tiezé desperately wrung out served no purpose except to stimulate the goblin's appetite. With a smug smile, the demi-human took another step forward, his machete brandished. Then—

Thump.

That stale noise rang out in the tent.

The goblin soldier's two yellow eyes opened widely in confusion as he looked down at his own chest.

Sharp, smooth metal sprung from the coarse plate armor. It was wet with drops of fresh blood; a sword's pointed tip. Some being had stabbed precisely into the demi-human's heart from behind.

“...What is, this thing ...?”

Those became the goblin soldier’s final words. Strength left his brawny frame and he crumbled onto the tent’s floor in exhaustion.

Standing beyond him and half a head shorter than the two female trainees was a small swordswoman, or perhaps a female ascetic. Her dark, reddish-brown hair was braided and she wore a silver breastplate atop black ascetic clothing. The sword she held in her right hand was rather short, fitting her physique. Despite how she could still be labelled a child as according to her age—despite how she had just killed that horrifying demi-human soldier, her adorable face showed not even a hint of fear.

After seeing that much in a daze, Renri noticed at last.

This girl was neither a swordswoman nor an ascetic.

She was a knight. An apprentice integrity knight with a name of Linel Synthesis Twenty-eight if he recalled right. The girl was half of the «dreadful twins»: the one who murdered the previous twenty-eighth knight in a match and stole the position.

Linel’s expression showed no reaction even when she saw the foolish sight of Renri sinking onto the ground. After

confirming the safety of the two trainees and Kirito, on the wheelchair, she spun about.

Another apprentice knight appeared at the tent's entrance immediately after. Her short hair was in same hue as Linel's and Fazel Synthesis Twenty-nine whispered to her partner in a soft voice.

"Nel, I took care of all of the goblins nearby, but they're still coming. May be best to move."

"Nn, okay, Zel."

Having nodded, Linel caught the obstructing goblin corpse on the floor near the entrance with the tip of her right foot and rolled it somewhere less troublesome. The near lack of spilled blood was likely due to the speed and precision of that one strike from behind.

Turning around, she called out to the trainees who appeared incapable of speaking.

"I am Linel and this is Fazel. The two of us are apprentice knights."

"Y-Yes, we've seen you during practice. We are trainees, Tiezé Shtolienen and Ronye Arabel. Thank... Thank you very much for saving us."

Tiezé stated her name with a voice that still trembled and Ronye bowed as well. Linel shrugged her shoulders in a precocious fashion at that.

“It’s still up in the air whether you’ll live or not. It looks like more than a hundred goblins slipped through the defense lines while the left flanks of the first and second units are covered in a smokescreen.”

Linel went quiet for a moment there and finally looked straight at Renri.

Her grey eyes tinged with violet narrowed.

“What could you be doing here as the esteemed knight who is supposed to be taking command of the second unit’s left flank? Those under you are moving about in confusion under the smokescreen, you know?”

Averting his face as though to escape from the apprentice knight’s sight, Renri replied softly.

“...It’s nothing to do with the two of you. Please take those two and the ill one to somewhere safe.”

Renri felt vividly a change in Linel’s presence in that moment.

A cold, murderous aura, unfitting for a child, brushed against his cheek. The sword stained with goblin blood shone orange in the torches' light.

Was she thinking to kill him like she did to the previous twenty-eighth?

Then that would be all to that. It was a mistake in the first place to hurl him, a failure of a knight who should have been frozen forever, into a real battlefield. He could not possibly return to the second unit now and there was no place for him even if he fled back to the cathedral.

Though she was an apprentice, an execution by Linel who held a number as a knight would be a fitting end for such a coward.

Renri turned his face away as he awaited the blade of condemnation.

But what he heard was a soft whisper rather than approaching footsteps.

“...You are a terrible coward, but you must have some strength if you're supposed to be a high ranking knight. Thank that swordsman you called ill.”

—*What did she mean?* that thought came and he raised his face only after Linel's ascetic clothing spun about.

“Trainees, come, and bring Kirito with you.”

Went Linel’s instructions.

“Nel, they’re here! There’re eight... no, ten!”

Before Fizel’s voice overlapped them. Certainly, there were multiple sets of footsteps approaching from the east.

Turning about, Linel quickly instructed Tiezé and Ronye who stood frozen.

“I take back that order, stand by for a while. We will take care of the goblins.”

“We... we understand, esteemed knight.”

Tiezé nodded and Linel left the tent, as though sliding away, and vanished alongside Fizel. Cries from the goblins going, “There they are! Ium children!” came straight away as the footsteps left. They must have planned to draw them away before engaging.

Standing against ten whole goblins without fear required courage beyond what one would expect from apprentices. However, those two held strength worthy of that.

Strength.

Linel judged Renri as a coward but still said he “must have some strength”. And that he should thank the rebel, Kirito, who should have originally been their enemy.

He did not understand the meaning behind those words and he doubted there was even a trace of strength inside himself. After all, he could not even bring himself to stand even with an enemy soldier within sight.

Renri looked downwards, unable to even muster the courage to confirm the expressions Ronye and Tiezé had.

However, that lasted only seconds. A straight line tore through the thick, woven fabric on Renri’s immediate left, separating the tent’s inside from the outside. That was reason enough for him to get up and leap backwards, rather than cower as he did.

Standing on the other side of the torn fabric was a goblin soldier shorter in stature than the one earlier but clad in armor that seemed of somewhat high quality. Though made from leather, it was tailored skillfully and even dyed black. Judging from how he hid from Linel and the rest’s notice, he was apparently a scout that excelled in covert operations.

Renri unconsciously reached out towards the throwing knives on his waist. But he could not draw them. Like when he saw the first goblin, the fear seeping from the depths of his stomach numbed his frigid finger tips.

Renri was mostly unaware of it himself, but the source of that fear did not stem from seeing a demi-human soldier up close for the first time.

It was fear towards fighting. To be specific, he feared the death match that engaging a goblin would lead to.

He feared getting killed. That said, he feared killing even more.

Sets of footsteps reached Renri's frozen ears. They must be from a unit different from the one Linel and Fazel drew away. There really were more than ten or twenty goblins who slipped past the defense lines.

Perhaps having seen through Renri's fear as he stood frozen, the scout grinned and turned towards Tiezé and Ronye. The two female trainees hid Kirito on the wheelchair behind themselves and firmly brandished their swords once more. However, despair flashed onto their faces right after. Numerous shadows approached through the smoke hanging behind the scout.

The scout readied the scythe-like weapon in his right hand and sidled towards Tiezé and Ronye.

“Stop... stop there! We will cut you if you come any closer!”

The red-haired girl shouted boldly. But that voice was faintly hoarse and quivered.

“

The goblin shortened the distance in silence. The lack of pointless banter, unlike the normal soldier from earlier, indicated him to be higher up among the soldiers, with more training. Still, Tiezé held her ground and held her sword aloft with an expression displaying her readiness to die.

—*You can't do it, run.*

He wanted to say so. But Renri's mouth did not move. His body, no, his soul rejected the option to fight even in this situation.

It was then—

A weak, creaking noise reached Renri's ears.

He flicked his sight alone towards the right.

The black-haired youth looking downwards with an empty expression, still powerlessly sitting on the wheelchair in the tent's murky depths. The noise came from his left hand. Blood vessels showed up on the hand hugging the two swords, rousing his joints, displaying the tremendous power within them.

As though resenting the lack of a right hand to draw those blades.

“You.....”

Renri whispered with an inaudible voice.

You wish to protect those two? Despite being unable to stand, to draw your sword, or to even speak?

Out of nowhere, he noticed.

The strength Linel and Fazel mentioned before they left. That must refer to neither swordsmanship, nor arts, nor divine instruments, nor even the armament full control art.

It was that meager power everyone, both integrity knights and the common folk, possessed from the start, yet lost sight of all too easily.

Courage.

Renri’s right hand slowly began moving. His still-numbed finger tips brushed against the Twin Edged Wings on his waist. Sensation returned to his hands in that instant. His divine instrument seemed to speak to him.

The goblins carelessly swung that brutal scythe up towards Tiezé.

Then—

The sharp noise of the air being sliced apart echoed as a bluish-white light illuminated the murky insides of the tent.

The light sprung upwards, tracing an arc from Renri's hand, grazing the tent's roof as it dived. It turned upon passing through the goblin's body and settled between the index and middle fingers of Renri's outstretched right hand.

“...Gh-hi...?”

The goblin moaned as though doubting what had occurred. A light red line drew across the middle of his face without a sound.

Immediately after, the top half of the goblin's face slid out of place and fell onto the ground with a damp noise.

The divine instrument, «Twin Edged Wings», was a set of extremely thin, steel throwing knives bent in the middle.

The knives of approximately forty cen long had no grip to hold them by. Both sides ended in sharp tips and they were thrown by placing that between one's fingers. The edges that flew while revolving at high speeds could freely change their trajectory and would return to their owner's hands before received between one's two fingers again.

In other words, even normal usage required a level of concentration incomparable to that of swords. He could easily lose his fingers if his focus was disturbed by the slightest bit and he failed to receive the returning edges.

His evident control over such a weapon could be said to be proof enough of Renri's capabilities. However, he himself was absolutely unaware of that. His spirit languished at the feeling of inferiority from his incapability to activate the armament full control art.

As such, Renri had not actually become any readier for battle despite having killed the goblin with a single stroke.

Renri repeated his shallow breathing while focused on the cold steel faintly quivering, whirling to a stop at the tip of his extended right hand. He killed, he had finally killed; those words alone resounded in his mind time and time again.

“...Esteemed knight.”

Tiezé was the one to break the silence. Tears lightly stained her eyes in the shade of autumn as the trainee spoke in a whisper.

“Thank you... very much. You did save us, in the end.”

Warmth spread through Renri's chest, icy with fear, from those words. That said, he did not have the time to respond. Multiple shadows came directly at them from beyond the smokescreen. Their numbers were likely beyond ten.

—Impossible. I can't fight any longer. It was scary enough even against that one goblin.

The meager courage he gathered from all of himself scattered and vanished.

His breathing grew shallow. Strength left his legs.

His eyes swam, seeking a path of escape, and were drawn to the two long swords held in the black-haired youth's one arm.

One among them, the sword adorned with a detailed rose inlay on its grip, let out a feeble light in the dim darkness. The blue light, faint yet somehow warm, pulsed just like a heart. The icy dread enveloping his entire body gradually thawed.

After drawing in all the air his chest could hold, Renri spoke.

“...The two of you should stay here and protect Kirito-san.”

“Y... yes!”

Tiezé and Ronye replied with spirit. Replying with a light nod, Renri left the tent from where the scout tore through. The two goblins leading the approaching enemy soldiers noticed Renri and bared their fangs.

A flash came from his right hand and a bluish-white radiance ran through the air.

The throwing knife returned to his fingers just as their two heads fell. However, Renri shifted his sight without making

sure of that and let loose the knife on his left waist towards a new target. Another two goblins had their life cut away as they crumbled.

New troops surrounded Renri who had dealt with four goblins in merely four seconds.

“It’s a knight...”

“The general’s head!”

“Kill! Kill!!”

Bathed in those savage voices, Renri ran forward in order to draw the enemies away from the tent behind. The goblins’ armor rattled as they chased after.

The orderly lines of supplies tents came to an eventual end. On his immediate left was a cliff wall that rose vertically and a dense smokescreen obstructing the front with goblins gushing out from there, one after another. And behind him were the ten chasing him.

Having jumped into his own doom, Renri stopped his feet and stretched his two hands grasping onto the two throwing knives towards the left and right before shouting.

“—My name is Renri! The integrity knight, Renri Synthesis Twenty-seven!! If you wish for this head, then come at me ready to set your life aside!”

The goblins responded with ferocious roars at that speech that took all of his courage.

Their machetes swung up as one and Renri let loose both throwing knives concurrently, targeting them who leapt in from both ends.

The knife in his right hand towards the right. The knife in his left hand towards the left. The two soaring edges traced arcs as they intercepted the frontmost goblins.

Heads left their bodies, dismembered one after another, before falling onto the ground. Their bodies fell forward, delayed, as dark fresh blood spurt from them.

Renri caught the two returning knives not by holding them between his fingers but by hooking them around his index fingers. Spinning them at high speeds in order to maintain their momentum, he threw them once more without pause.

The exact same scene repeated itself yet again. A naive comparison of his normal attacks against Deusolbert's «Conflagrant Flame Bow» and Fanatio's «Heaven Piercing Sword» in terms of might would probably result in his victory. The edges of the «Twin Edged Wings» were thinner than paper and as they spun at extreme speeds, they cut through inadequate armor as though they were not present.

The two consecutive throws downed over ten and even the goblins who knew no fear had their vigor dampened, spooked by the disconcerting manner of death of their allies.

I can do this— If he held on for a little longer, backup should come from the frontlines where the smokescreen was fading.

Renri held down the terror from the genocide he committed as he took a third throw.

However, what arrived at his ears was the noise of twigs fell by a hatchet rather than the prior cutting noises.

Kakiiin! A shrill sound of impact.

The two knives returned somehow despite how their courses were violently altered and Renri reached out as far as he could with both hands to retrieve them. Deprived of the composure needed to risk hooking it against his fingers, he narrowly brought the lethal knives to a stop.

His two widely opened eyes caught sight of a figure, a single goblin, languidly appearing from beyond the smokescreen.

Large.

His height did not differ much from Renri whose body was at the physical age of fifteen. However, the bulging muscles

covering his entire body and the burning murderous aura emanating from his pair of yellow eyes were wholly different from the other goblins. He wore riveted leather armor, perhaps for the sake of mobility as it appeared light, and a massive hatchet dangled from his right hand.

“...You’re their general?”

Renri asked in a soft voice.

“Yer. Chief of the mountain goblins, Kosogi.”

The goblin replied calmly and slowly looked about.

“Ah-ah, that’s one grand display you put on in killing them. To think there was an integrity knight left behind all the way back here. I didn’t expect that at all.”

It was not just his physique, but his manner of speech, too, completely differed from the other goblins. Despite possessing an intense, seething blood thirst, his high intelligence held that down.

—Not that it matters. He only got lucky and deflected the Twin Edged Wings once, that won’t happen again.

Renri crossed his arms before himself and shouted.

“Your war will end here!!”

He threw them as fast as he could, with all he had.

The right edge soared down at an angle as the left grazed the ground as it sprang upwards, accurately flying towards Kosogi's neck. Still.

Once again, all that rang out was a shrill, clear metallic noise.

The enemy general, Kosogi, shifted the hatchet quickly enough for it to turn into a grey blur and splendidly warded off the simultaneous attack from left and right.

He barely caught the deflected throwing knives.

—Why!? The «Twin Edged Wings» should be enough to slice through that goblin's weapon...!

Shocked, Renri's sight was drawn in towards Kosogi's hatchet.

Though its make was coarse like the machetes the goblin soldiers had equipped, the tint of its blade differed. That was not a product of primitive casting. It had a sharp blade with high priority, forged over much time with tempered steel.

Perhaps having seen through Renri's astonishment, Kosogi brought the hatchet before his face as he grinned.

“This? It's a prototype, but it's quite well done, right? There was blood spilt in order to steal the materials and methods

from the Order of the Dark Knights. But you see... that's not the only reason why your attacks are being blocked, knight kid."

".....Then how about this?!"

He swung both hands straight up. The throwing knives that soared into the dark night skies vanished from the enemy's sight and drew a great arc as they assailed from behind. Deflecting this would be—

".....!!"

His conviction immediately fell apart. The goblin chief named Kosogi swung the hatchet behind and deflected the knives travelling at extreme speeds without even looking, of all things.

Renri failed to perfectly catch the returning knives, wobbling unsteadily, and suffered a cut on the middle finger of his left hand. However, the situation gave him no time to even feel that pain.

"They're light, kid. And that noise too."

Kosogi's short lines covered every single one of the «Twin Edged Wings»' weaknesses.

The weight of each throwing knife was unbelievably light for a weapon considered a divine instrument. That was only

natural given its pursuit for only sharpness and rotational energy, but as a result, it could not cut down by force any opponent with a defense of sufficient priority to handle its velocity.

In addition, the knives that spun at high speeds as they flew exhibited a distinctive noise as they sliced through the air. It was within the realm of possibility for someone who had trained their hearing to predict the trajectories.

Renri shuddered at Kosogi's intellect, seeing through that much after watching his attacks only those few times. To think a goblin, a crude, inferior demi-human could—

“And that's just a goblin... your face's speaking, kid.”

Showing a grin that appeared somewhat depressed, Kosogi whispered.

“But in my case, I would like to say this. You're supposed to be some great esteemed knight, right? Some integrity knight capable of facing against a thousand... that's what I heard, but looks like it's different for you? That's why you're hiding all the way back here, aren't you?”

“...Yeah, that's it.”

It was his mistake in the first place to make light of the enemy before himself as some goblin. Understanding that, Renri abandoned his bluff and nodded.

“I’m a failure of a knight. But still... make no mistake. I’m the failure here, not this.”

He brought the silver edges held between his fingers in both hands before his face.

The «Twin Edged Wings»‘ weaknesses. The one method to rid it of them would be the integrity knight’s secret art, the armament full control art.

This divine instrument was said to be once a pair of divine birds who had respectively lost their left and right wings. Unable to fly with a single wing, they joined together and soared higher than any of the other birds could go and flew on for close to an eternity.

That legend gave birth to a small, stinging wound deep in Renri’s heart without his own notice.

The one he cherished in those memories robbed from him through the Synthesis Ritual.

The childhood friend he crossed swords against in the final match of the Four Empires Unity Tournament and stole the life of by accident at the end of that battle surpassing all other.

He and Renri were truly a pair of birds. They had competed against each other for as far back as they could recall and even after moving to the central capital from their village,

they broke through all trials while relying on each other for mental support, reaching that ultimate stage.

But their wings broke there.

Even with his memories sealed and him turned into an integrity knight, the gigantic sense of loss in Renri's heart remained unfilled. Having lost the courage to take up the sword to fight and the joy of connecting, heart-to-heart, with another, Renri could not possibly have called awake those two divine birds soaring with their wings joined.

But.

That black-haired youth he met on this battlefield who had suffered more than anyone else and the two swords he held in his arm.

The warmth light emanating from one of those spoke to Renri in a mute voice.

Things existed in this world that remained even after one's life came to an end.

Those were memories. Recollections.

Connections between hearts allowed for one's life to be succeeded by another, and yet another. Without end, as long as the world continued on.

Renri averted his sight from the goblin general, approaching with an expression certain of victory, and gently lowered his eyelids.

The young knight appeared as though he had given on everything before his body let loose an abrupt tempest of his spirit as a swordsman. His two eyes flickered open. His two arms, gripping onto the two metal knives, intersected as though to conceal the bottom half of his face.

“——Fly, Twin Wings!!”

Those arms swiped horizontally along with that shout. The two soaring streaks of light traced a steep arc and assailed Kosogi from the right and left.

“You can keep trying... but it’s useless!!”

The goblin chief brandished his hatchet and deflected the throwing knives with all his strength.

Shrill, metallic noise accompanied crimson sparks. The two knives bounced away all too easily, but they took off back into the skies without falling onto the ground. Just like two nestled birds, they drew a helix as they intertwined, joining ever closer.

It was then, when the knives came together.

“Release... recollection!!”

Rather than the armament full control art, Renri cried out loud the phrase for the true secret art surpassing it, the «recollection release art».

A pure white radiance illuminated the valley.

The two facing metal knives united at their apexes within the light and became one.

Revolving gently, the knife that had now become a cross glittered bluish like a distant star in the night sky. The divine instrument, the Twin Edged Wings, released.

Renri slowly reached his right hand towards his other self, still releasing light from far above.

—*Beautiful.*

—*Just like me together... with—*

He gripped, tightly, the right hand that he had raised so high.

The crossed knife began rotating with tremendous force. The noise of it cutting through the air grew steeply before eventually disappearing as it exceeded the audible spectrum.

Renri leisurely swung down that right hand.

The «Twin Edged Wings» slid through space soundlessly as a disc of light towards the goblin.

“It’s... no use!!”

Roaring, Kosogi slashed the hatchet at the «Twin Edged Wings»’ assault from the sky above in a bid to knock it down.

However, it occurred a moment before the thick steel went up against the ultrathin knife. The divine instrument rapidly altered its prior trajectory and leapt vertically for a moment before accelerating downwards once more after the hatchet swiped through empty air.

Khh.

It was a dry, quiet noise.

A bluish-white streak surged through the middle of Kosogi’s figure, trained to the extremes, in the very next instant.

“Gaaahh!!”

Kosogi leapt at Renri with a savage roar. But the right half of his body fell behind the left. He ran a step or two before his body separated fully, crashing towards the right and left.



On the verge of his death, Kosogi pondered on the cause of his defeat with his excellent intellect.

Going by his preconceptions, it would mean that puny, budding knight hid bloodthirst and desires greater than him.

However, no matter how hard he stared with his divided vision, he could discern no bloodthirst at all on the knight's childlike face.

—Then, what had I lost to?

Though the desire to know overwhelmed him, that was but a moment before complete darkness engulfed his vision.

Upon receiving the returning «Twin Edged Wings» with both hands, they separated without a sound and returned to how they were.

Renri silently stared at the two knives unstained by even a drop of blood.

It was not as if his sealed memories came back to him. In the first place, Renri had no notion that his memories were sealed.

Yet still, Renri affirmed the remnants of memories, sparse as they were, of another person whom his heart had joined with once. He thought that sufficient for now.

After shutting his eyes for a moment, he flicked his head upwards in realization. There should have been many goblin soldiers waiting behind the enemy general, Kosogi. Yet it was strangely quiet.

Focusing his eyes beyond the finally clearing smokescreen, Renri noticed countless corpses heaped upon each other. They were all those of the enemy troops who should have been still alive minutes ago. Surprise took him as he wondered who could have done it.

“...You’re looking a little more like a knight now, aren’t you?”

Hearing that voice, he flusteredly turned his body about. The person trotting in from his right was the apprentice knight, Fazel Synthesis Twenty-eight. Linel Synthesis Twenty-nine was present beside her too. It must have been this pair who took care of the remaining enemy troops.

He stood stock still, not knowing how to reply, and Linel, with her hair in pigtails, snorted before carrying out an embellished knight salute.

“Esteemed High Ranking Knight, we await your orders.”

That must have been part sarcasm, but it was still better than scorn. Renri cleared his throat before asking of the pair.

“...Are Tiezé and the others safe?”

“Yep. They joined up with the supply unit.”

As Fazel nodded, he let out a relieved sigh and nodded.

“What about the enemy soldiers who got past?”

“We took care of all of them.”

Linel replied this time.

“Then... I’ll return to my unit, so it would be for the best if the two of you did the same.”

“Okaay.” “Understood.”

After seeing off the apprentice knights who turned about with absolutely no sign of exhaustion from the combat and rushed off, he turned his eyes towards the rows of tents behind once more.

.....Thank you.

Expressing his gratitude in his heart to the two female trainees and that young swordsman, Renri Synthesis Twenty-seven the high ranking integrity knight began running towards the east to join up with the left flank of the second unit.

Part 4

At the back of the Dark Territory's second army, stationed roughly five hundred mel from the valley where the fierce battles continued.

A tall woman in a revealing outfit stood on the second floor of a four-wheeled carriage, luxurious enough even if inferior to Emperor Vector's earth dragon war vehicle, with her arms folded. She was one of the Ten Lords of the Dark Empire, head of the Dark Arts Users' Guild, D.I.L.

The black-clothed messenger arts user waiting at her side looked up at her master as she reported in a low voice.

"Sigrosig-dono, Shibori-dono, and Kosogi-dono have all been lost in the battle."

D.'s lips curved in that instant and she spat out.

"Ugh, how useless... I suppose that's as far as those stupid demi-humans could go."

She took a glance at the necklace dangling on her captivating breasts. With twelve precious stones set on the silver circle, it was a treasured divine instrument that told the time through their fluctuating hues. The six o'clock stone lit orange and the seven o'clock stone was still dark. In other words, only a mere twenty minutes or so had passed since the battle began at six in the evening.

“Have those integrity knights’ positions been uncovered?”

She asked, making no effort to hide her irritation, and the messenger arts user chanted a short art and listened to the art users lurking on the battlefield before replying.

“We have visual sight on three at the frontmost lines. We have found two in the rear, but confirming their positions will still require time.”

“Still five? Or perhaps their numbers are simply few...? Still, we must be sure to slaughter those five...”

D. muttered to herself with a ruthless expression, far from the coquettish behavior she put up before the emperor, and gave an order after slight thought.

“Fine, release the minions. Make the commands...”

Squinting, she judged the distance to the collapsed Great Gate and the war front beyond it before continuing.

“...«fly seven hundred mel», «descend onto ground», and «unrestrained annihilation».”

“I believe the demi-human forces at the frontmost line will be swallowed up with that distance?”

“That’s of no issue.”

She decided in an apathetic manner.

The female messenger arts user, too, showed no emotion and nodded with an “understood” before asking again.

“How many shall we send? We currently have a total of eight hundred incubated and all available here.”

“Hmm, let’s see...”

D. took several more moments as she pondered.

She felt minions, requiring many resources and much time in their production, to be far more important than those goblins in terms of fighting strength. Though she wanted to exercise prudence wherever possible, the emperor would certainly be displeased if D.’s proposal to [annihilate the enemy’s main force through a concentrated volley of arts from behind] were to fail.

“...All eight hundred.”

A cruel smile made its way onto those lips that issued that order.

D. hid an ambition. To achieve victory in this battle and obtain that «radiant medium» person, and thus, to succeed the position of emperor from Dark God Vector who had returned to the earthly realm for absolute rule over the entire Underworld.

Upon taking the throne, she could create thousands, tens of thousands of minions if she so wished. Her greatest obstacle, the Dark General Shasta, had already died and the only ones with power remaining were the merchants, interested only in money, and the pugilists, interested only in battle. The realization of her ambition could be said to be imminent.

She would succeed in subjugating the entire world, a feat unaccomplished by even that half-god, half-human Highest Minister Administrator, and get her hands on that art for eternal Life said to be concealed at the stronghold of the Axiom Church.

Perpetual youth and immortality. Everlasting beauty.

Sweet shudders crept their way up D.'s back. Her scarlet tongue dabbed at her lips painted blue.

It was about then when the orders from the messenger arts user dispersed through the Dark Arts Users' Guild at the front lines and those pitch-black golems, manifestations of darkness given wings, flew off as one.

As the light from the torches shone upon her glossy skin, the eight hundred minions rose and flew straight through the gorge as commanded.

* * *

—*They're here.*

A wide grin carved itself on Knight Commander Bercouli's lips that have been pursed like some sculpture since the battle began.

He sensed many aviating soldiers intruding the range of the armament full control art he maintained in the skies right before the Great Gate.

Those were not flying dragons with dark knights astride. They appeared to be those minions, cold as mud and devoid of soul.

However, it was too soon to invoke it. He would pull the minions released by the enemy in until they were all swallowed within his «slashing space».

Bercouli's keen senses had already perceived the tough battles Fanatio and Deusolbert went through, as well as how Renri awakened even if he had fled temporarily.

With the three generals of the invading army's vanguard defeated, there was no worry they would lose their hold on the battle line. Next, if only the seventh high ranking knight on stand-by in the sky were to render the enemy's long range arts futile by exhausting every last bit of the space sacred energy, the unhurt second unit of the Defense Army

would be capable of intercepting the enemy's main force, the Order of the Dark Knights and the Pugilists' Guild.

Bercouli had predicted his true role to arrive after that.

It was not to fight, one-to-one, against his arch rival of many years, Dark General Shasta.

Bercouli had already sensed Shasta's absence from the enemy's main force. The immense spirit he felt vanishing far in the east days ago—that must have been that master swordsman's final moment.

As the most senior integrity knight, having lived through practically countless years and months, Bercouli no longer grieved and mourned for those bound by Life. Still, the death of Shasta, the one he hoped capable of reconciling the land of darkness and Human Empire without bloodshed, filled him with chagrin and nothing else.

With things as they were, he would simply have to cut down the one who ended Shasta's life, the owner of this presence that felt like a frigid emptiness—that unknown enemy supreme commander likely leading the Dark Territory army—by his own hands to avenge his death.

Or perhaps his own life would end there, Bercouli thought.

Still, he no longer felt even a fragment of attachment towards life.

He would simply die when the time came.

Bercouli had thought that incarnation released by that lower ranking knight under Fanatio on the verge of death to be admirable, and felt slight envy from it too.

But naturally, this was no time for such.

The slashing area had, at last, devoured every single one of the swarm of minions tearing through the dark skies above as they advanced.

Bercouli's two eyes flashed open and gently swung up his cherished sword, the «Time Piercing Sword», that was thrust in the ground.

“——Cut!!”

He slashed the empty air with its naked blade with that brief shout.

At that, endless dazzling white rays of light joined together as they traced out a three-dimensional grid in the sky beyond.

Following a grand, bizarre cacophony of death cries, darkness rained upon the heads of the enemy demi-human forces like a waterfall. The weak poison in the minions' blood spurred on the confusion among the forces that had lost their generals.

* * *

Ominous premonitions seized D. right as she heard a faintly startled ring in the messenger arts user's voice which had persisted in its utter lack of emotion thus far. Only to be realized a second later.

"Lamentably, Your Excellency... it appears the eight hundred minions have been all annihilated before they landed."

"Wha....."

She lost her words.

The shattering noise following that was a shriek from the expensive crystal cup struck against the carriage's flooring.

"How could it be?! I had never heard of any force capable of arts on this scale among the enemy!"

In the first place, it would be near impossible to massacre eight hundred minions with only arts. As they were largely produced with clay, they held high resistance against thermal and cryogenic arts. A slash from a sharp blade would be most effective, but the infantry units' swords could never reach the minions in the air.

"...The enemy has yet to release their flying dragons?"

D. asked, somehow bringing her rage under control. The messenger arts user confirmed with her head still lowered.

“Yes. We have yet to confirm even a single flying dragon at the current moment.”

“In that case... it’s that? The trump card belonging to those integrity knights... the «armament full control art». Still... to think it’s capable of...”

Saying no more, she grinded her bared canine teeth together.

Like Dark General Shasta, D., too, had attempted to collect information regarding the secret arts concealed by the integrity knights. However, it was near impossible to witness some precedent on such a scale. She could explain it with nothing more than the synergy between the divine instrument and the knight’s own strength.

“That said, using their weapons in such a way should consume much of their Life. Continuous usage shouldn’t be...”

It was when D. muttered so as her thoughts whirled about at full speed.

Having listened to a report from the frontlines, the messenger arts user’s head shot up and she conveyed it with a voice that had regained some of its strength.

“Your Excellency, the tracing of the two integrity knights in the rear has been completed. In total, we have the five targets within sight.”

“...Good.”

Nodding, she gave it more thought.

The most uncertain element was whether to send in the second main force of the army, the Order of the Dark Knights and the Pugilists’ Guild in order to further debilitate the enemy’s armament full control art. Another choice would be to invoke their trump card, the Dark Arts Users’ Guild now and to settle the war in one blow.

It was in D.’s original character to be wary, to carefully work out a plan and to eliminate any obstacle before putting it into action.

However, the unexpected loss of her eight hundred treasured minions in an instant drove her into an unconscious uneasiness.

Filling up a new crystal cup with a dark purple wine, D. spoke to herself.

—I am calm. This is the time for the first grasp at glory.

Raising the cup that she had drank down all at once, D.I.L. loudly ordered.

“Move out all of the ogres’ archer forces and the Dark Arts Users’ Guild! Enter the gorge and begin reciting the «Wide-area Incineration Projectiles» art!!”

* * *

Kurururu...

The voice produced from her throat was shrill and sounded somehow forlorn. The flying dragon, «Amayori», encouraged her master.

Integrity Knight Alice forced a mild smile onto her lips and whispered.

“I am fine, there is no need to worry.”

However, she was, in actual fact, not fine in the least. Her vision strangely distorted, her breath rough, and her limbs icy cold. It would not be odd for her to fall unconscious in the next moment.

The compressed, enormous art, possibly exploding at any moment, that she had continuously chanted for immediately after the battle began was not what exhausted Alice so.

It was what served as the source of sacred energy that art consumed: the countless deaths.

Knights. Guards. Ascetics. The dread, grief, and despair from the instant before they disappeared tormented Alice without pause.

Once, Alice would have paid no notice to the lives and deaths of the Human Empire's common folk, let alone those from the Dark Territory.

She had lived in Rulid for half a year, understanding the preciousness of the villagers' modest yet earnest lives, and recognized them as something worthy of protection, but that was no cause for thinking the same of those living in the Dark Empire. In reality, Alice had annihilated the gang of goblins and orcs who assaulted Rulid a mere ten days ago without the slightest hesitation.

The dark forces were heartless invaders, an enemy to be destroyed without mercy.

She accepted that without doubt until she assumed this duty Bercouli assigned her to.

However...

How could it be—?

The sacred energy born from the Life of both armies' fallen soldiers in the battlefield below were of the exact same nature be it from a human of the Human Empire or a demi-

human. They were all warm, pristine, and without any means at all to distinguish their former selves.

Pondering on the reasons for that threw Alice into great turmoil. What if, what if the Human Empire's inhabitants and the land of darkness's monsters effectively possessed the same soul, differing only in whether they were born on this side of the mountain range or that?

Why, exactly, were they fighting against us?

“.....Kirito. If only you were around...”

You might have found some other way; she stifled those words without verbalizing them. She had to focus on the art now.

In the war council before battle began, Alice expressed her doubts to Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio. On who could be the one capable of using an art enormous enough to exhaust the vast gorge of its space sacred energy.

Fanatio looked straight towards Alice at that and answered.

—That would be you, Alice Synthesis Thirty.

—You may not have noticed, but your current strength exceeds that of integrity knights. You should be capable of it as you are now. The true power of the gods, to split the skies and tear the earth asunder.

She thought she expected too much of herself then. Still, at the same time, she felt that she had to accomplish this role even if it meant her life in exchange. That it was her responsibility as the one who pointed a sword at the highest minister and so drastically altered the Axiom Church's ruling structure.

Alice thought no further and focused solely on gathering the sacred energy released in the gorge and converting that into the art.

However, Alice felt tight in her heart and she could do nothing about it as screams incessantly echoed through the gorge.

Die. Dying. Fathers; brothers; sisters; and children.

...Hurry.

Alice murmured into her heart.

She wished for «that time» to arrive even a second earlier. The time to end this tragedy by giving birth to deaths far outnumbering the current horrendous count—

* * *

The jumbled forces of mountain goblins, plains goblins, and giants demi-humans making up the first unit of the invaders were a step before going on a stampede.

The three chiefs had all died in battle. In other words, the knights leading the enemy army were stronger than anyone among the demi-human forces. «The strong shall rule»—that was the one and only law engraved onto the souls of the Dark Territory's inhabitants.

If this battle belonged only to the demi-humans, the soldiers would have all surrendered as soon as their commander was defeated.

What narrowly prevented that situation was the presence of the god of darkness, Emperor Vector, who had descended into the Dark Territory. The emperor was stronger than anyone among the Ten Lords and it was still unknown if the knights of the Human Empire were stronger.

Hence, the demi-humans could only follow their initial order and continue with the momentum, earnestly swinging their blades against the Human Empire Defense Army.

Utilizing the minutes gained from their desperate combat, the Dark Territory army's trump card, their long-range military force: the ogres' archer forces and D.'s Dark Arts Users' Guild advanced to a position barely before the crumbled Great Gate.

The plan was to have the three thousand strong ogre unit ready their massive crossbows in front and the dark arts

users, also three thousand strong, chant their offensive arts behind. The one assuming overall command was not the ogre chief, Fulgrr, but an adept arts user close to D.

That arts user listened to the commands coming in from the rear and nodded once before shouting.

“Ogre unit, ready your crossbow! Arts unit, begin chanting for the «Wide-area Incineration Projectiles» ceremony!! Spotters, begin chanting the marking art for the enemy integrity knights’ coordinates!!”

Wide-area Incineration Projectiles referred to a large-scale annihilation art designed by D.I.L. for the sake of this plan. Converting all of the space darkness energy filling the battlefield into thermal elements, they would then achieve firing it at long distances by affixing them onto the ogres’ arrows. As it consumed no darkness energy through transformation phrases like «bird shape» or «arrow shape», the output should far exceed their expectations. It was the mightiest offensive art in history, absent from the «age of blood and iron» and possible now only because the races fought together under Emperor Vector.

In addition, D. had prepared a careful plan to make use of arts users excelling in aerial elemental arts as spotters, creating «wind paths» for concentrated fire on the enemy army’s main force, the integrity knights. If all of the

incineration arrows impacted upon a single point, it should result in an attack of extreme priority that not even that Highest Minister Administrator could guard against perfectly.

That was the exact situation that the Sage Cardinal once feared, the «strength of many overwhelming the strength of one».

* * *

Amayori let out yet another low growl.

However, this time was one to warn, with a sharp roar mixed in.

Alice mustered her will, taking back her consciousness that had begun to fade, and stared hard towards the twilight far in front.

—They are here!!

Fresh troops approached at a controlled, steady pace from beyond the demi-human forces still brawling with the Defense Army. She could see no metallic glint. They were likely the long ranged attack unit—the Dark Territory’s Dark Arts Users’ Guild.

They were the ones Knight Commander Bercouli was most vigilant towards, those who held sufficient destructive

power to sweep away the Human Empire Defense Army in one strike.

However, the same could be said of Knight Alice.

Alice had been chanting for a large-scale art. It was conceptualized after hearing of Deputy Commander Fanatio's battle against Kirito, what might be called a «reflected light amplification» art.

With the mass of space sacred energy, sourced from the countless lives lost to the fighting, as a base, Alice first changed the shape of crystal elements and created a gigantic glass ball measuring three mel across.

Next, she created a thick metal film with metallic elements and shielded the entire glass ball.

The product was a «sealed mirror». Placing that onto the fitting gap between Amayori's wings on her back, she pushed both hands onto its smooth, curved surface, and sealed in luminous elements generated from the constantly produced space sacred energy.

Element preservation.

That was a basic yet ultimate technique that many high ranking art users racked their minds over since ancient times.

Without constantly fixing one's mind onto them, generated elements like thermal, cryogenic, and aerial elements would drift about the area on their own volition and eventually vanish, scattering as hot or cold air. Simultaneously, there was an upper limit to the number of elements maintained, fixed to the terminals the arts user possessed: the number of fingers on their two hands.

Chief Elder Chudelkin used his unique physique to stand upside-down with his head alone and made the toes on his two feet into terminals as well to maintain twenty elements. Furthermore, Highest Minister Administrator turned her silver hair into terminals through some technique, allowing her to concurrently handle over a hundred elements.

That said, Alice could emulate neither of those techniques. To begin with, ten or even a hundred would not suffice for this situation. The enemy dark arts users numbered three thousand—even if they each maintained five elements on average, their total would actually exceed fifteen thousand.

Hence, Alice explored means to maintain the produced elements without the need to focus on them. What first came to mind was to set them into some vessel. That said, the standard elements for offensive arts, thermal and cryogenic, would instantly disappear upon coming into contact with some material, heating it up or cooling it down.

However, an idea came to Alice when she heard about how Kirito had reflected the light from Fanatio's divine instrument, the «Heaven Piercing Sword», with a mirror created from just thermal and crystal elements in the fight on the cathedral's fiftieth floor.

If light did no more than rebound upon touching a mirror—she would only have to produce a fully sealed mirror.

And if she were to generate luminous elements within it.

It could, theoretically, maintain an infinite number of luminous elements until the mirror's Life expired.

* * *

The crossbow, drawn to their limits, by the brawny ogre archers creaked as they were pointed towards the dim sky.

In order to ignite the innumerable arrowheads, gleaming dully, the three thousand dark arts users held their hands up high as they recited the opening phrase as one.

“““System call!!”““

The incantation consisting only of female voices could be called only a chorus of death. Intoxicated by the immense power it was to be, the arts users sang the next phrase.

“““Generate thermal element!!”““

Faint red particles flickered as they lit up on their lithe fingers—

Yet it was but an instant before they turned dull, extinguishing after letting out a modest puff of smoke.

The adept arts user commanding the unit could not immediately understand what had happened and recited the incantations once more. But the result remained the same.

Surprise overcame her while bewildered voices from her subordinates reached her ears.

“We cannot create the thermal elements!”

“We cannot initiate the «Wide-area Incineration Projectiles» ceremony at this rate!”

She scanned the surroundings in pursuit of the cause of the phenomenon and her close aide nearby timidly opened her mouth to speak.

“C-Commander... shouldn’t it be due to a lack of space darkness energy...?”

“H-How could that possibly be?!!”

The commander shouted out in shock. She pointed at the frontlines in the distance with the left hand on which she wore numerous rings.

“Do you not hear those screams!? Don’t you see those humans and demi-humans dying?! Just where do you think all of their lives could have vanished off to?!”

No one had an answer to that question. The ogre archers, too, grew irritated with the command to fire delay and could simply continue to keep their crossbows drawn.

* * *

The time had arrived.

Alice shut her eyes for a moment and prayed.

She would personally shoulder the sin of robbing many of their lives for the sake of one.

The silver sphere with a diameter of three mel on Amayori’s sturdy back had its pressure raised to its maximum. Pulling away the two hands in contact with it, she drew her sword from the left of her waist.

“—Bloom, flowers! Enhance armament!”

Her sonorous shout divided the blade of her divine instrument, the «Fragrant Olive Sword», in countless small orbs. Maneuvering the golden yellow swarm, she instructed the knight dragon.

“Amayori, lower your head!”

Following her orders, the flying dragon inclined forward. The silver sphere quietly rolled and tumbled off the dragon's head into the air after one revolution. Carefully catching it with the small orbs, she adjusted it until a certain point on the silver sphere was directed diagonally downwards.

Alignment... set.

Drawing in a breath, she whispered.

“...Burst element.”

An incantation far too short and plain for an art holding such terrifying power.

The silver, reflective sphere was made with one spot thinner on purpose.

Focusing the immense light and heat from the countless exploding luminous elements onto that one point, the silver film and glass liquefied into a crimson red—

Letting them loose into the world outside with a shrill explosion.

Fanatio stood in a daze, looking up towards «that» from the ground, while she thought about how it must hold a might thousands of times stronger than the light ray produced by the Heaven Piercing Sword's armament full control art.



The guards and knights aside from her were simply awed by what they believed was Solus's might.

The pure white pillar measuring five mel wide fell upon the earth from the skies with extreme speed and stabbed in between the demi-human forces. It then made its way farther into the gorge as though nudged gently—

A roaring symphony of several thousand bells rang out as the waves of heat and light grew to encompass the entire width of the gorge. It became a towering pillar of fire immediately after, practically touching the mountain range at the edge, and dyed the night skies red.

* * *

D. chuckled upon seeing the absurd explosions almost close enough for her hands to reach, in belief that it was the result of her own strategy.

However, the heat wave surging forwards at her four-wheeled carriage from the gorge wiped that smile off.

The burnt, charred wind brought her tidings. The screams of the demi-human units and the dark arts users D. personally raised as they perished.

The messenger arts user reported hoarsely as D. stood in silence.

“...Due to the unknown deficiency of space darkness energy, we were unable to set off the «Wide-area Incineration Projectiles» ceremony... immediately after, the unidentified large-scale attack launched by the enemy forces appears to have wiped out ninety percent of the demi-human units, seventy percent of the ogre archers, and also... over thirty percent of the dark arts users units...”

“Unknown deficiency...?”

D.’s frame trembled, boiling over with anger at last, as she exclaimed.

“We clearly know why! It’s that ridiculous art that sucked up every last drop of space darkness energy in the gorge!! Still... I can’t believe it, an art on such a scale is impossible for me... the deceased highest minister must be the only one capable of it!! So tell me, who was the one behind it!?”

Despite her rant, naturally enough, there were no answers to be had.

How could she find a way out of this situation—or rather, how should she report this to Emperor Vector? The one boasting the greatest intellect among all in the Dark Empire, D.I.L., could do no more than breathe raggedly.

* * *

Assailed by the recoil from firing that exceptionally great art and the tragedies born from it, Alice returned the Fragrant Olive Sword to its scabbard immediately before collapsing onto Amayori's back.

The flying dragon gently accepted its master before tracing slow spirals as it descended onto the frontmost lines of the Human Defense Army.

The first one to rush in was Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio. Reaching out both arms, she caught Alice who slipped off her dragon.

“...That art and display of incarnation was magnificent, Alice.”

Somehow raising her eyelids at that truly touched voice, Alice saw the gorge with its surface still burning red as well as the shadows of the enemy survivors fleeing in a frenzy. She could hardly find any corpses. They must have been disintegrated by the initial ray of light or blown apart without a trace by the following explosions.

She could not bring herself to feel any pride over the far too ruthless destruction.

Still, cheers surged in like a tidal wave from the surrounding guards straight away. They eventually

streamed together and turned into cries of triumph as they continued.

While listening to the cheers for the Order of the Integrity Knights and the Axiom Church, Alice finally let out a choked breath and lifted her body which was supported by Fanatio. The deputy knight commander showed a tired smile and gave a deep nod.

“The enemy has retreated. You have led us to victory.”

Responding to those words with a smile as well, Alice stiffened her expression and spoke.

“Fanatio-dono, the war has yet to end. Please prevent the fresh sacred energy from the earlier art from being reused by the enemy and spend them on healing arts.”

“That’s true... they still do have their main forces, the Order of the Dark Knights and the Pugilists’ Guild at the peak of their health.”

The black-haired beauty nodded and raised her voice with a trace of fatigue that even she could not hide.

“Good, all who can move, retreat to the second unit and bring the wounded along! If you’re from the ascetics unit or even a guard with knowledge of healing arts, treat the wounded with all you have until the space energy runs out! Do not take your eyes off the enemy forces’ movements!”

Her concise orders resounded and the guards swiftly got started. The starting phrase for sacred arts could be repeatedly heard from behind.

“I will report to His Excellency, the knight commander. Can I entrust this place under you?”

Alice nodded and Fanatio showed another smile before leaving, half running. As people left, Alice was left alone at the frontmost lines with Amayori.

Having sent off the deputy knight commander, Alice took several steps and scratched the underside of her cherished dragon’s chin while she gently whispered.

“You have done a great job, too, Amayori. It must have been tiring staying still in that one place. Be sure to eat up after you return to your bedding.”

The flying dragon purred happily, flitted up as it beat its wings, and glided towards its peers all the way in the rear.

Now then, time to go to the wounded’s aid. Alice took a step with that in mind.

“.....Master.”

The low voice belonged to Knight Eldrie.

What Alice saw when she turned about to commend her only disciple was the youth's grim figure despite his usual unrestrained and slick self.

The sword in his right hand and the whip in his left hand were dyed red and black with the copious blood coating them. That was not all. His silver armor and once-glossy light purple curly hair were in a terrible state, too, from the blood of his victims. *Just how did the battle go to reduce him to such a condition?*

“Eh... Eldrie! Are you unharmed!?”

She asked with her breath held and the knight slowly concurred with a somewhat empty expression.

“...Yes, I have not suffered any heavy injuries. Still... I should have just thrown this life away in battle...”

“What are you saying? You have a mission to lead the guards until this war ends...”

“I did not complete that mission.”

The young integrity knight muttered in a cracked voice.

Alice could not have known, but after the smokescreen tactic made Eldrie let the mountain goblins through the defensive line, it took several whole minutes of futile effort

at clearing it without arts before he finally could lead the guards to chase after the goblins assaulting the rear.

That said, by then, the chief of the mountain goblins, Kosogi, was already defeated by Integrity Knight Renri, mostly branded as a failure of a knight. Deprived even of a chance to regain his honor, Eldrie lost his cool and massacred every last one of the fleeing goblins—before looking up at the godlike art launched by his master, Alice, from above.

“I have betrayed... your expectations, Alice-sama...”

Returning the Frost Scale Whip to his waist, Eldrie grabbed his own face with his left hand.

“How can I... this foolish... pathetic... disgraceful... person be a knight...?!”

And how could he [*protect his master*]?

The power of that art, comparable to natural disasters. They were too far apart. In every sense.

She never did need him. His master, that prodigious knight, never needed some halfwit like himself. He had nothing he excelled at, be it swordsmanship, arts proficiency, or the full control art; and his foolishness in having a bunch of goblins outwit him was in full display.

To even think he could obtain his master's heart... her love with such a sorry sight; such a thought would be an insult.

"I... have no right to name myself as your disciple, Alice-sama!"

Eldrie screamed in agony.

"You... you have done well!"

Alice somehow got that out her mouth despite her bewilderment.

Just what had happened to Eldrie? Though there was moderate confusion at the frontlines, had he not kept the casualties caused by the enemy low?

"You are necessary to me, the Defense Army, and the people of the Human Empire too. Why do you insult yourself so?"

Despite asking in a tone as gentle as she could muster, the depression in Eldrie's eyes remained. The blotches of split blood on his cheeks quivered as the knight mumbled at a muffled volume.

"Necessary... Do you mean, for my power? Or do....."

He could not finish his words.

An abrupt, bizarre growl shook the air and both Alice and Eldrie simultaneously turned to look.

“Fgrrrrr...”

A damp, throaty noise reminiscent of a menacing wolf. Alice opened her eyes widely and focused them on the darkness farther into the gorge.

Spots throughout the valley were still illuminated by the smoldering flames and a humongous shadow weakly stood up there.

It was no human. Its legs bent at a peculiar angle; its back was strangely slender; its brawny upper body leaned forward. The head atop of them all was, simply put, that of a wolf. It had to be a demi-human from the Dark Territory, one from the ogre race.

Though Alice swiftly stretched her right hand towards her precious sword’s grip, she immediately noticed the foe was unarmed. And that was putting it lightly as the left half of its figure was terribly charred with thin smoke rising from it. It must have suffered those heavy burns from the white-hot light ray. *Still, why had it not retreated like its surviving comrades?*

She confirmed the situation in the area: the guards were still all back at the rear, leaving Alice and Eldrie alone. Alice questioned in a sharp tone while keeping vigilant against the ogre’s actions.

“...You must not have much Life remaining. Why are you standing there unarmed?”

The demi-human replied that with an anguished growl.

“...Grr... I am the ogre chief, Fulgrr.....”

The manner in which he stated his name made his long tongue hang out while panting exhaustedly.

Alice put strength into the hand holding onto the grip. *If he was the ogre chief, that made him one of the Ten Lords in the Dark Empire, a general for the enemy forces. In that case, did he really come for an attack with the last of his strength?*

However, the ogre continued with surprisingly words.

“Saw, you. That, light art... launched by, you. That power, that figure... you, «radiant medium». Grr... you, bring... war, end. Ogre, return, grasslands...”

What—was it saying?

Radiant medium? The war would end...?

Alice gleaned no meaning from it at all; still, her intuition told her the information she received was important. She had to question more. *Just who was this radiant medium? And where was he to bring it?*

However, the ogre halted there.

“Damn you... you have no right to speak, you beast!!”

Eldrie was the one who screamed. Raising the bloody sword in his right hand up high, he tried to cut straight down at the ogre chief.

That blade never did swing down, however.

Alice who practically teleported forward had Eldrie’s sword grasped between the fingers on her right hand and stopped the slash with all her strength.

“Ma... Master, why!?”

Though her disciple let those words escape, going limp onto his knees, she had no time to reply. Alice let go of the sword before slowly approaching the standing, still ogre.

A closer look showed that the demi-human’s wounds were not just heavy but fatal. He was charred black from his left arm to his chest and his left eyeball had turned a muddled white. Though she judged him to be in a befuddled state, she still took caution as she continued her questioning.

“—Indeed, I am the radiant medium. Now, where will you take me? Who is the one asking for me?”

“...rrrr...”

The ogre’s intact eye shone with a dull light. His saliva, mixed with blood, trickled down his long tongue.

“...Emperor... Vector said. Want only, radiant medium. Any wish, granted for, one who caught medium. Ogres... return grasslands... Raise horses... birds... live.....”

—«*Emperor Vector*».

The name of the god of darkness passed down even in the Human Empire’s legends. *Had such a being descended onto the Dark Territory? Had that god started the war in order to obtain this «radiant medium»?*

Alice made a note of the information received in her mind as she turned a look of pity on the demi-human before her eyes.

The raw stench of craving the goblins emitted was nearly absent from this warrior with the head of a wolf. He was simply made to participate in the war and to draw his bow as ordered—only to have most of his race perish without firing a single shot.

“...Do you bear no grudge towards me? I am the one who had massacred your people.”

Alice could not help but ask despite lacking any reason to do so.

The ogre’s reply was plain.

“The strong need to... shoulder that strength. I, too... shoulder the chief’s role. So... catch, you, bring... to.....!”

“Grrroohhh!!”

A brutal roar suddenly bellowed from the ogre’s mouth.

His muscular right arm reached out for Alice faster than the eyes could follow.

Clink.

That brief ring came from the Fragrant Olive Sword’s scabbard. Having drawn her sword several times quicker than the ogre, Alice cut once before returning it to its scabbard.

The demi-human’s huge frame came to an immediate stop.

And that body slowly sank onto the earth as Alice took a step back. A straight scar showed on its brawny chest from which the last of its Life streamed away as fleeting light.

Alice held her right hand towards the proud wolf-headed warrior’s corpse. From the flitting sacred energy released, she generated numerous aerial elements.

“May your soul, at least, reach the grasslands...”

Alice waved her right hand and the green light soared towards the eastern skies as a whirlwind.

Part 5

The gaze from Emperor Vector, down towards her, frightened D. to the depths of her heart while she prostrated herself on the dragon military vehicle, her forehead against its floor.

There was no anger in the emperor's ice-colored eyes. He seemed to measure D.'s worth without any input from his personal emotions. How would the emperor treat one he judged incompetent and useless—she shook to her core, merely imagining it.

A brief question eventually came in a deep, fluent voice.

“Hmm. That is to say, your plan failed and a thousand dark arts users died due to the enemy taking the initiative to absorb and consume the space darkness energy... is that correct?”

“Ye... yes!”

D. lifted her face by the slightest and answered.

“That is precisely the case, Your Majesty. I have not received any intelligence that the enemy army still retains an arts user of such caliber despite the highest minister's absence, so...”

“Is there no means of replenishing darkness energy?”

Interrupting D.'s desperate excuses, the emperor pursued a countermeasure. However, D. could only shake her head at that as well.

“Un... unfortunately... replenishing the amount of space darkness energy necessary to annihilate the enemy integrity knights would require plentiful power from the earth and sun, but both are lacking from the battlefield. The treasury in Obsidia Palace does have minerals saved which could be converted to darkness energy, but we would need several days in order to retrieve...”

“I see.”

The emperor casually nodded and turned his sharp features towards the distant gorge.

“...From what I can see, however, there is no vegetation on this land and the sun has already set. Where is this energy source you planned to utilize for that large-scale art ceremony?”

Despite how the god, Vector, the supposed originator of the darkness arts, had enquired about the basic theory behind them, the fear occupied too much of her mind for her to pay attention to it. Desperately seeking for nothing more than means to secure self-preservation, the female arts user earnestly spoke.

“Yes, it is a battlefield, after all... the blood and lives lost by the demi-humans and enemy soldiers change to darkness energy and permeates the atmosphere.”

“Hmm... mm.”

D. stiffened up entirely with the emperor rising from the provisional throne.

Tap, tap, the black leather boots drew closer. Fear squeezed her innards.

Coming to a stop on the direct left of D., frozen, the emperor’s fur mantle danced in the night wind as he muttered softly.

“Blood... and lives?”

* * *

“Radiant medium...?”

Taking big bites from flatbread mixed with diced dried fruits and berries, Knight Commander Bercouli’s sinewy chin moved as he spoke in a muffled tone.

Making use of the temporary ceasefire, rations were distributed to the Defense Army soldiers by the supply unit with great haste. The healing of the wounded was almost complete and thanks to the integrity knights, and their

status as high ranking arts users, even those on their deathbed were up and sipping at their soups.

However, the deceased naturally had no path of return. Among the first unit of over two thousand people, close to a hundred-fifty guards and a single lower ranking knight had lost their lives.

Alice nodded towards the knight commander sitting on the other side of a folding table.

“Yes. Though I do not recall such a name from any of the history books, it appears to be certain that the enemy commander is persistently searching for that person.”

“Commander... the god of darkness, Vector, huh?”

Pouring siral water into the cup left in front of the groaning Bercouli, Deputy Commander Fanatio spoke.

“It’s hard to believe... the revival of a god...?”

“There’s that. But well, it’s convincing. You felt that foreign incarnation covering the enemy’s main force, too, didn’t you?”

“Yes... certainly, I did feel as though I was being pulled into some chill...”

“It’s the first time the Great East Gate collapsed since the creation of the world. Anything can happen now, maybe we should be preparing ourselves for that. But still... lil’ miss.”

His forceful eyes caught tightly onto Alice.

“Let’s say Dark God Vector had descended onto the Dark Territory and he’s looking for the «radiant medium» who happens to be you, lil’ miss. That question here is, how will that affect this war... huh?”

Indeed.

That was what it boiled down to in the end. Even if Vector would be satisfied with the medium in his hands, the other dark races would not stop until they had devoured the Human Empire. They still had to defend this gorge to the very end.

However, one other phrase remained stuck on Alice’s mind.

«World End Altar».

The words spoken by the «god from the outside world» who Kirito conversed with via the crystal pane on the Central Cathedral’s top floor after that fierce battle.

—Head for the World End Altar.

—Straight south after you exit the eastern large gate.

It might be possible to resurrect Kirito's heart if she went there. Still, even if she wished to go, she could not abandon the defense at the Great Gate.

But what if they chased after her?

What if Vector and his army chased after Alice alone, leaving through the Great Gate, in pursuit of the radiant medium?

Would it not buy time for strengthening the Defense Army by having the enemy army depart from the Human Empire?

Concealing the matter about the «Altar» which was far too uncertain, Alice declared to the supreme commander of the Defense Army in a firm tone.

“Esteemed Uncle... no, Your Excellency, Bercouli. I will break through the enemy camp alone and head for the remote regions of the Dark Territory. If the enemy leader seeks this «radiant medium», he should pursue me with a sizable number of troops. After there is a reasonable amount of distance between their divided armies, please launch a counterattack on what remains of the enemy army and eliminate them.”

* * *

Emperor Vector spoke with a dry voice devoid of all emotion.

“D.I.L. Would three thousand suffice?”

“Yes...?”

Not understanding the meaning behind those words, D. once again raised her face. The emperor’s side profile was glazed over to the extent of even appearing gentle, but his pale blue eyes looked down upon the troops with a frigid look.

Vector’s mouth moved again.

“What I asked, is that to gain sufficient darkness energy for that large-scale arts ceremony to eliminate the integrity knights—”

The following words made even the ruthless D. open her two eyes widely in astonishment.

“Would expending three thousands of those orc soldier lives we have in reserve suffice?”

A chill crept up her two legs. With an intense sensation of dread.

Those warped into sweet intoxication as they seeped into D.’s mind.

“...They would suffice.”

D. whispered with her forehead unconsciously against the emperor's boots.

“Yes, they would certainly suffice, Your Majesty. I shall raise our collective strength and put on a display with the two thousand arts users remaining... my Dark Arts Users' Guild shall showcase the greatest, strongest art in history, a terrifying art no one had ever witnessed before...”

* * *

Whether in the Human Empire or the Dark Empire, the names of its inhabitants held no literal meaning in the languages they use.

This originated from how the four Rath researchers raising the initial artificial fluc lights decided to give their children and grandchildren names in katakana typical of fantasy settings without much thought.

With those four dead (logged out), the fluc lights could only give birth to and raise children on their own volition. What perplexed them then was the inconsistent system of naming.

Reluctantly, the first parents gave their children names similar to their own, formed from combinations of sounds. However, as time or the generations passed, rules emerged

for naming and they evolved into a sort of «naming convention» unique to the Underworld.

In short—they placed wishes for their children’s futures into the combinations of those characters, from a (ア) to n (ン) and their variations, which were given meaning.

To state an example, the vowels represented sincerity. Zeal for the k sounds. Wit for the s’s. Vitality for the t’s. Benevolence for the n’s. Beauty for the r’s... and so on *. For instance, «Eugeo» contains the traits of being gentle, working fast, and honesty. «Tiezé» was named as a wish for her to be energetic, helpful, and talented at military arts. «Ronye» was a name praying for her to be lovely, rich of heart, and earnest.

The naming convention was mostly shared by the demi-humans of the Dark Territory too. For example, «Sigrosig» was a greedy name, hoping for alacrity, bravery, fearless, and alacrity with bravery once again. The goblin races with their speed of reproducing were an exception, often using conjunctive forms of verbs such as «Kosogi» and «Shibori» *. Meanwhile, the distinguished families among the dark arts users consider the conventions as a practice of the inferior castes and have a tradition of using the initials alone of ancient Darkness Script.

Now then—

The final one still living among the five generals leading the demi-human races was the orc chief.

His name was «Rirupirin».

Rirupirin was, according to Dark General Shasta, known to hold an intense grudge against humans which made him as much of an obstacle to hindering peace with the Human Empire as the dark arts users' leader and the goblins' chiefs.

However, that nature was certainly nothing he had from birth.

He came into his world as the child of an influential and powerful orc family and was praised to be the most beautiful baby in the history of the race. The name gave to him contained the r sound for beauty thrice, rarely seen among the orcs.

Rirupirin was raised beautiful both outside and inside by his parents' wishes. He was blessed with talent at the art of war as well and all had expectations of him as the next chief; and one day, he accompanied the current chief then out, from the southeastern lakes and marshes of the orcs for the first time, to Obsidia Palace.

Adorned with a set of gorgeous armor and a sword, he bent his back with pride as he entered the town near the

palace—only to witness humans with their slender bodies, glossy hair, and lovely facial features.

Rirupirin went through a realization that broke down his entire cognizance. His beauty had to be quantified by affixing it with, “as an orc”. And that the orcs were belittled as the unsightliest race in the Dark Empire.

Stout, round bellies; stumpy limbs; a large, flat nose; beady, sunken eyes; and droopy ears.

Among the orcs given such features, Rirupirin was said to be beautiful as he possessed a face somewhat similar to the humans.

Rirupirin’s soul was driven to the verge of collapse upon that realization. He could only cling on to a certain strong emotion in order to maintain his mental state.

That was, animosity. Someday, he would definitely overthrow the human race, making them all slaves and crushing every last one of their eyes to prevent them from turning their sneers on the orcs; Rirupirin became the orc chief while veiling that gruesome determination.

Hence, he certainly did not have some innate inclination towards cruelty like Kosogi. His hostility towards the humans could be viewed as a major inferiority complex and he ruled over his people with unchanging benevolence.

“Dat... dat is going too far!!”

Rirupirin unconsciously shouted when the orders from the emperor arrived.

The orcs had already pitched in a thousand soldiers to serve as a reserve force for the first unit and they were all lost. Thinking about how they were ordered, outside of his command, by those goblins and giants to fight and die was enough to make his chest tighten, let alone this new, cold-blooded order handed down.

He was to contribute three thousand sacrifices as a foundation for the dark arts users' offensive arts.

It was to be a death devoid of honor as a warrior or even dignity as an intelligent being. They were to be just meat—no different from those yaks brought by the transport unit as edibles.

“We game here to bight! Ngot to pay for your mistakes wib ow lives!”

Rirupirin protested in a strained, shrill voice.

However, the leader of the dark arts users, D., who stood with her arms crossed looked down on the orc chief with cold eyes as she arrogantly declared.

“This is an edict from the emperor!!”

The orc chief felt something get stuck in his throat.

He had witnessed Emperor Vector's strength during the dark general's insurgency more than he had cared to. His overwhelming strength far exceeded that of the Ten Lords.

The strong must be obeyed. That was the absolute law of the Dark Empire.

Still— still.

Rirupirin stood still as his two firmly balled up fists trembled.

It was then when a voice, harmonious for an orc, came from behind.

“Chief. We must obey the emperor's orders.”

He turned back in surprise and the one standing there, with a slender body and dainty, long ears, was a female of his race. She was born in a distinguished family related to Rirupirin's and they had often played together in their childhood.

Revealing a placid smile on her lips, she continued.

“I and three thousand other soldiers will gladly offer our lives. For the emperor... and our race.”

“.....”

Rendered speechless, Rirupirin could do no more than grinding down on his long fangs as though to crush them. The female orc took a step forward and whispered in a hushed tone.

“Riru. I believe. The celestial world invites not only the humans but the souls of us orcs too. We will... meet again, someday, there.”

You would not need to sacrifice your life too, he wanted to say. However, he knew it would take far too much time for the three thousand soldiers to accept that unreasonable command without the noble lady knight, who they exalted more in a sense, sharing their fate.

Rirupirin opened his fist, held the noble lady knight’s hand, and moaned.

“I’m sorry, Ren... forgive me... I’m sorry...”

D.I.L. spoke without mercy while turning an unpleasant look down on the pair.

“You are to have three thousand troops in a closely packed formation a hundred meters from the gorge within five minutes. That is all!”

The orc chief glared at the dark arts user, turning away and leaving, with eyes short of flaring up. *Why did the orcs alone have to suffer this treatment?* It was the umpteenth time that

question had swirled in his chest, but this time, too, was fruitless.

The three thousand marching to their deathbeds, formed in orderly files, appeared even triumphant. On the other hand, soft weeping and outraged voices permeated deep within the other seven thousands of their race seeing them off.

The three thousand orcs led by the noble lady knight astride an armored boar boldly passed between the encampments for the Order of the Dark Knights and the Pugilists' Guild, forming a square a short distance from the entrance to the gorge.

The two thousand dark arts users who were not engulfed within the earlier grand explosions ominously showed up, as though in wait, and surrounded the formation.

The atmosphere trembled, accompanying an incantation that started up horribly dissonant and grating on the ears, perhaps reflective of the art's hideous nature.

“Ah... aah.....”

Rirupirin let escape a hoarse moan. The orc soldiers had suddenly distorted in anguish and collapsed onto the ground.

White, fleeting light particles was being drawn out from their writhing forms without pause. Turning into black,

viscous sludge as they gathered at the arts users' hands, they gradually transfigured into what resembled bizarre snakes.

The shrieks from the three thousand soldiers arrived at Rirupirin's ears crisp and vivid. Along with a united cry mixed in.

“Long live the Orcs. Glory to the Orcs.”

The soldiers' bodies burst apart in succession immediately after. Their blood and flesh scattered as the light leaving them grew in intensity before stolen by the arts users all at once.

Rirupirin was on his knees when he noticed, his right fist striking the ground. The overflowing tears spread out over both sides of his large nose and audibly fell onto the black gravel.

Fresh blood left the noble lady knight, dressed in ornate armor, like crimson flowers in the middle of his warped vision.

“...Renju...!”

It was in the moment he wrung that name from his throat that the noble lady knight slowly fell to the earth, out of his sight.

Rirupirin's gritted fangs tore into his lips as blood trickled from his own mouth as well.

—*Damned humans.*

Damned humans!

Those damned humans!!

The screams of anger and hatred rattling the core of his mind, curiously enough, inflicted a great pain at his right eye each time they came.

* * *

Tens of minutes passed.

At the Human Empire Defense Army's headquarters, the guards divided into two were exchanging handshakes and hugs, vowing they would meet again.

Accepting Integrity Knight Alice's proclamation, Knight Commander Bercouli added another compromise.

That was to have Alice, the decoy «radiant medium» for luring away the enemy army, accompanied by half of the troops. Of course, Alice vehemently opposed it and requested for independent action, but the knight commander would hear none of it.



—There're still many in the enemy army. You won't be luring many of them away on your own. We'll only succeed in breaking them up if there're enough of us running with you.

She could say nothing to refute that. It certainly would be too arrogant to assert that she could lure the entire enemy army away based solely on that vague information mentioned by the ogre chief.

Besides, Alice planned to have Kirito ride with her on Amayori's back. She was not fully confident she could continue protecting him while serving as a decoy alone. An accompanying force would be heartening in that aspect at least.

Bercouli had another surprise for everyone after deciding to split up the Defense Army.

He, the supreme commander and knight commander, would personally join the decoy unit.

With regards to that, Fanatio, who was assigned to command the unit staying back, raised vehement opposition along with Deusolbert.

“You've done enough, haven't you? Lemme fight a little.”

Fanatio refuted with the corners of her eyes raised when Bercouli said that in an admonishing tone.

“Who are you to speak when you can’t even fold your own change of clothes without me by your side?!!”

That incited much jeering from the knights and guards. Bercouli showed a cynical smile, drew closer to Fanatio’s ears, and whispered something—with the deputy commander averting her face downwards and backing off, surprisingly enough.

As for Deusolbert, he reluctantly relinquished as well after having the evident fact that he had ran out of arrows from the battle earlier pointed out. Supply units were currently heading towards the nearest town to restock, but that would easily take more than an hour or two.

Worry and concern were on full display on the soldiers’ faces, regardless of whether they were from the departing or remaining unit. It was honestly unclear which was in more danger. Only the gods—no, only the god of darkness and the supreme commander of the enemy army, Vector, knew how many would pursue the decoy unit and how many would continue the assault in the gorge.

Those included in the decoy unit finished their preparations before long: the four high ranking knights, Bercouli, Alice, Renri, Scheta, and their flying dragons, a company of guards numbering a thousand, a company of ascetics numbering two hundred, and a supply company

comprising of fifty. Eldrie insisted on being added to the decoy unit himself, but he reluctantly backed off after a fierce remonstrations from Alice. The apprentice knights, Linel and Fizel, threw a tantrum as well, but even they could only give in after the knight commander told them that he would be “counting on them for the rest”.

Eight fast coaches, each drawn by four horses, were readied for the transport of materials. Kirito and his wheelchair along with the two female trainees should be riding on one of those.

Alice hesitated much over whether to allow Tiezé and Ronye to follow or not. However, someone had to care for Kirito and though she did not know what had happened, Renri, a high ranking knight, swore to protect the girls even at the cost of his life.

To be honest, Alice had few memories regarding Knight Renri. However, she felt no deceit from the determination visible on his adolescent face and the formidable gleam on the divine instrument, the «Twin Edged Wings», equipped on both sides of his waist.

Bercouli’s flying dragon, «Hoshigami», began its dignified ground run and the guards let out hushed cheers.

Alice gripped Amayori's reins and awaited the time for take-off as she sent a glance towards Eldrie sending them off on from the ground.

She was bothered over how her perpetually talkative disciple was unusually quiet while they prepared for the sortie. However, before she could send any words his way, Hoshigami softly took off and Alice turned towards the front in a fluster before gently kicking Amayori's side. Her beloved dragon lifted off after a powerful ground run, followed by Renri's knight dragon, «Kazenui», and Scheta's knight dragon, «Yoiyobi».

Bercouli, who had taken a slow lead, turned about and shouted.

“Right, we'll hit the enemy's main force with the dragons' heat rays all at once as we get out of the gorge! They shouldn't have any means for long ranged attacks now, so just be on your guard for the dragon knights!”

They responded to the knight commander's instructions with a sharp “yes”.

The sound of the guards charging in on horseback or foot chased after them from right behind. The four high ranking knights had to shake up the battlefield on their own until those guards and the coaches left the gorge, turning

south—towards the right—and gained sufficient distance from them.

Countless torches were visible before them in the confined, dark gorge.

They were really many of them. Despite the many defeated, it appeared the enemy was still almost thirty thousand strong.

That said, their main military strength should be with the dark knights and pugilists. Both units focused on close quarters combat and possessed no offensive effective against integrity knights mounted on flying dragons.

—*No.*

What, was that?

That deep, meandering recitation, much like a curse, that came from below the noise of the wind.

A coordinated chanting... of arts!?

That would be ridiculous, this zone should no longer have the sacred energy left for a large-scale art!!

Alice rejected her own instincts.

However, just as she did so, Bercouli who flew right in front of her spat out, “Those bastards... what have they done?!!”

* * *

“Aah!”

“What power!!”

The leader of the dark arts users, D.I.L. raised her hands towards the sky as her entire body shivered in sweet ecstasy.

Had any other arts user in history experienced a space charged with such concentrated darkness energy?

Nothing in this world held priority as high as and power as pure as intelligent Life. It did not matter even if it came from those vulgar, repulsive orcs' lives. If this viscosity was precious wine, aged for a hundred years, then the darkness energy provided by the sun and earth would be plain water.

The energy meant for «Wide-area Incineration Projectiles» earlier were, in the end, mere dregs left from the lives expended on the battlefield. However, a whole three thousand lives were converted explicitly to darkness energy, here and now, for this art.

Every arts user, from Dee to the other two thousands, had both of their arms extended as numerous grotesque snakes with countless legs, each seemingly appearing from clotting black mist, coiled about them.

These were artificial organisms, «Life eaters», created from umbra elements. No corporeal object could guard against them, not even swords or armor of the highest priority. The conversion efficiency for darkness energy was inferior to that for offensive flames, but everything changed with a source this abundant.

Dee had chosen this art as revenge for the enemy's «light pillar» that burnt a thousand of her precious subordinates to death. Even the screams of the orc soldiers, writhing as they dyed, sounded pleasant to her ears now.

“Good... be prepared to launch the «Death Curse Worms» art!!”

Dee's shout rang out and—

She spotted four dragon knights charging in from the gorge, as though they had lost their minds, with her own two eyes.

The momentary shock soon changed into elation. She could tidy up the enemy's greatest force, the integrity knights and their flying dragons, all at once as things as they were.

“Stand your ground!! Let them approach!! ...No... not yet.....
—Now, let them loooooose!!”

Zwaaaaaaa!!

The countless black snakes set off in straight courses towards the enemy knights, scattering vibrations that seemed to spread pure fear.

* * *

The realization that the enemy's offensive art had become an immense, pressing wave of absolute darkness shut down not only the ordinary guards' minds for several seconds but the high ranking integrity knights' too.

It was an umbra elemental art with an extremely high priority, likely surpassing the luminous elemental art released by Alice earlier. A ranged hex that directly inflicted damage on one's Life and could not be defended against through physical means.

The mystery—of how they had invoked the umbra elemental art, with its low sacred energy conversion efficiency, on such a scale and density despite the inadequacy of energy in the area—was seen through only by Knight Commander Bercouli.

But not even he could give immediate countermeasures against it.

There were many aspects to offensive arts: the element they were based on, their density, range, speed, direction, and so on.

Hence, defending required either offsetting or countering those attributes. Instantly choosing and carrying out a suitable countermeasure could be said to be part of being a high ranking arts user.

Being capable of immediately selecting and carrying out a suitable countermeasure, such as extinguishing a thermal art with cryogenic elements, scattering decoys against a homing art, or quickly avoiding an art going straight, could be said to be a requirement for becoming a high ranking arts user.

However, this case was an exception.

The enemy's offensive was too far beyond the norm.

Only the luminous element could offset the umbra element. However, luminous elements also had a low conversion efficiency and it was effectively impossible to generate enough to dispel a curse on that scale. Fanatio's recollection release attack would most certainly pierce through the enemy's art without issue, but the Heaven Piercing Sword's light was far too narrow and she was absent from this decoy unit to begin with.

“Turn!! Climb!!”

Bercouli could only shout those.

The four flying dragons turned about as they traced out a spiral and headed straight for the skies above the gorge.

The swarm of snakes, too, adjusted their direction with an unpleasant buzz.

However...

“—No!!”

Bercouli shouted once more.

The worms on their tail were less than half of them all. The remaining went straight for the guards and supply unit rushing over the ground.

“.....!!”

Letting out a sharp gasp, Knight Alice had her knight dragon roll and swoop down. She twisted towards the beginning of the darkness art creeping ever closer below and rushed forward headlong.

Shaa!! She drew the Fragrant Olive Sword as that distinct sound rang from its scabbard. A bright golden radiance immediately swept over its blade.

“Lil’ miss!! No, that won’t work!!”

Bercouli desperately tried to hold back his beloved disciple.

The Fragrant Olive Sword's armament full control art exhibited overwhelming power in a fight of one-versus-many, but it was metallic elemental like the sword. It could not cut through the nearly incorporeal hex.

Alice, too, knew that all too well. However, she could not possibly bring herself to simply watch as the guards were attacked.

It happened then.

A fifth flying dragon rushed in from deeper in the valley with the momentum of a shooting star.

«Takiguri».

The knight dragon belonging to the high ranking knight, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one.

* * *

Eldrie repeated a single word over and over again in his mind as he gripped onto the dragon's reins.

Protect. His master. Alice.

He had to protect the person he pledged his sword and swore his devotion to, no matter the cost.

Yet at the same time, he could hear a voice mocking that determination just as loudly.

How would you protect her? When you are so powerless? When you are but a fool, still wanting your master's attention and feelings despite your capabilities falling far behind her?

Eldrie was still a fledgling when it became to being an integrity knight and what supported his blade was the fierce, single-minded will to serve Alice. That was how he became a high ranking knight, but that also amplified the backlash he felt whenever his heart wavered.

—I have neither the strength to protect Master Alice nor the right to stand at her side.

His strength fell rapidly as that thought adhered itself to him. Though he had leapt onto Takiguri and chased after the decoy unit, having sensed an ominous premonition, he had no idea what could he even do.

With things as they were, he might as well lay his life down on this land with his master.

Flying in resigned to death, Eldrie thought he heard something and lowered his eyes down towards the ground.

The guards company was there in disarray after noticing the looming dark art. Behind them were the supply company coaches with their rows misaligned as well.

A quiet blue light flickered through the canopy over one of them.

A mysterious voice spoke into his mind.

—*For your determination.*

—*For your desire to protect.*

—*You actually want nothing in return, don't you?*

—*Love is not to be sought out. You simply do it: love, with all you have, without end. Don't you...?*

Aah...

Where was I looking?

I lacked strength? I couldn't have her heart to myself? So I couldn't protect her?

What a petty man I am...

And to think Alice-sama is there, trying to save the entire Human Empire.

Eldrie snapped Takiguri's reins with his right hand and shouted.

“Go!!”

Perhaps sensing his master's will, the dragon flapped its wings strongly and accelerated all at once. Eldrie heard Alice's voice, her attempts to stop him, as they passed by with Amayori descending. Still, he showed no sign of

slowing down and climbed steeply towards the deadly flood of snakes.

His left hand removed a whip of white silver from his waist.

The origin of the divine instrument, «Frost Scale Whip», was a gigantic snake said to be divine from the mountainous area of the eastern empire. Releasing its memories increased its range by several times and allowed for its trajectory to be freely changed.

That said, that power held almost no purpose against that art classified as a hex.

Still, Eldrie prayed hard with an unshakable conviction.

—Oh, snake!!

Oh, ancient snake!

If you lord over the serpents, then how about you devour that swarm of mere worms!!

“Release recollection!!”

The Frost Scale Whip let out a dazzling silver light as it perceived his booming voice.

The whip divided endlessly within the brilliance. Turning into hundreds of streaks of light, they struck at the snakes dyed in darkness.

The light had transformed into glittering snakes before anyone noticed. Swarming out in a radial formation from Eldrie's left hand, they opened up their gleaming jaws of sharp fangs and bit at the snakes of death.

Zobuu! The snakes torn into infinitesimal pieces with that noise returned to umbra elements and scattered.

The swarm assailing the guards as well as the swarm pursuing the flying dragons in the sky above turned around as though recognizing that the glowing snakes must be prioritized first.

It took no time for the snakes to coil about the countless worms. Their hexes traced across the snakes' bodies and flooded towards their source.

Eldrie had made use of the only aspect to the enemy's art that could be interfered with here, their «automatic homing attribute», and focused all of their capacity upon himself.

——*Alice-sama.*

He smiled and lowered his eyelids.

While the darkness swallowed the knight whole in the next instant.

Integrity Knight Eldrie Synthesis's numerical Life which was slightly more than five thousand—

Turned to negative fifty thousand immediately.

Eldrie's figure crumbled and scattered from the chest down as though he was blown apart.

* * *

“Eldrie———!!!”

Alice screamed.

Her one and only disciple who had accompanied her through those short yet memorable days slipped from his flying dragon's back, having lost over half of his flesh.

Getting Amayori to roll about thrice, Alice dove into the vestiges of the dissipating worms and grasp Eldrie's right hand with her extended left hand. Her breath choked up at how light he was when she pulled him close, but still, she bore it with her teeth clenched and had her dragon climb.

Takiguri followed right by their side, perhaps out of concern for his owner. Alice shouted once more atop the dragons keeping in pace.

“Eldrie!! Open... open your eyes!! I will not allow it, you must not leave me behind in a place like this!!”

Eldrie's bluish-white eyelids quivered slightly, with everything below his chest lost.



Beneath his barely raised eyelashes, his eyes, tinged violet and still faintly filled with light, looked upon Alice.

“...Master... your safety puts me.....”

“Yes... yes, of course I am safe, thanks to you!! Had I not said before that I need you?!!”

Her vision suddenly turned distorted. Drops of water fell upon Eldrie’s cheeks, one after another. Unaware they were her own tears, Alice hugged her disciple close.

A near inaudible voice rippled at her ears.

“Alice-sama... there are many, many more people... who need you. I... am but a nobody... To even think... I could have you for...”

“I will give you anything you wish for!! So come back to me!! Are you not my disciple?!!”

“I have received enough.”

Alice sensed the insubstantial weight in her arms fading rapidly, leaving her, with that satisfied whisper.

“Eldrie!! Eldrie—!!”

One final murmur gently overlapped her weeping cries.

“Don’t... cry..... Mo... ther.....”

And the soul belonging to Integrity Knight Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one, also known as Eldrie Woolsburg, left the Underworld forever.

Alice's precious disciple turned into light, as though those few seconds she managed to converse with him was a miracle, and dispersed into the night air while Alice watched on with damp eyes.

Eldrie vanished before long, leaving not even a fragment of armor behind. The Frost Scale Whip he had gripped in his left hand quietly fell onto Amayori's back. Perhaps recognizing the death of his master, Takiguri who flew at their side let out an anguished howl.

Alice took in a deep breath of the faint fragrance of roses drifting about before pulling her face upwards.

—*This is war.*

That was why it would be absurd to bear a grudge, no matter what sort of offensive the enemy executed, no matter what casualties were produced as a result. In fact, Alice herself had robbed a horde of enemy troops of their lives mere tens of minutes ago with an enormous art that could be only termed merciless.

Thus.

This anger. This sorrow. Even if they became strength, even if they brought about a slaughter surpassing them—

“...Surely, you must be prepared!!”

Drawing the Fragrant Olive Sword with a distinct noise, Alice shouted.

“Amayori! Takiguri! Advance at full speed!!”

The flying dragons shackled by binding arts would never follow combat orders from anyone aside from their designated owner normally.

However, the two dragon siblings roared out ferocious howls together and flapped their wings as they began their onslaught. The Dark Territory, the ashen earth continuing infinitely beyond the gorge, drew close before long.

Incited by a blazing wrath, Alice’s blue eyes swiftly determined the distribution among the enemy’s main forces.

Roughly five hundred mel to the left from the gorge’s exit was the Order of the Dark Knights clad in uniform golden armors numbering approximately five thousand.

On the left was the Pugilists’ Guild, brawny figures strapped in leather belts, numbering five thousand as well. These were the enemy’s main force.

Deployed in their rear were the orc and goblin infantry, likely reserve troops, and an extensive transport unit. The enemy's supreme commander, Dark God Vector, should be among them.

And in the very front, crowded between the dark knights and pugilists was a group clothed in black.

Them. They were the dark arts users who launched that large-scale hex earlier. Their numbers were approximately two thousand. Those who noticed the approaching flying dragons scrambled to escape without concern for their peers.

“You will not escape!!”

Alice ordered the dragons with a booming shout.

“Aim for their rear... now, fire!!”

The dragon siblings immediately bent their necks and opened their jaws widely. Their white fangs shone crimson against the flames filling their mouths.

Zubaa the two heat rays that swiftly tore through the air side-by-side drove into the retreating dark arts users' path.

Explosions shook the earth. Flames erupted. The engulfed silhouettes were flung about like tree leaves.

With their path of retreat sealed by flames, the arts users lost all order and gathered together.

Alice raised the Fragrant Olive Sword up high. Its blade released a bright golden light more dazzling than the sun.

“—Enhance armament!”

The sword separated into hundreds of fragments with a crisp, metallic sound. Every single one reflected Alice’s will, gaining sharpness beyond any prior.

* * *

Ridiculous.

Impossible!!

The leader of the dark arts users, D.I.L., screamed in her head while looking up towards the dragon knight rushing in from the gorge like an arrow.

The «Death Curse Worms» art chanted by two thousand arts users with the sacrifice of three thousand orc lives had assailed the enemy army with more power than expected. They should have more than enough priority to devour not just every last one of those integrity knights but the ground troops as well.

And yet, for some reason, the art that should have fed on all of their Life focused on a mere single knight and dissipated after carrying out that horrible waste of an overkill.

The Death Curse Worms were drawn towards life forms with higher Life. In other words, instantly creating an artificial being on par with some legendary magical beast, surpassing humans and even flying dragons, could and would be required to intentionally lure them away, but it would be impossible to create that with a short art. This conclusion went against logic. There was no rhyme or reason to it.

—How could there be a power that I, the leader of the Dark Arts Users' Guild, the heart of the entire world's intelligence, not know about?!!

D. grinded her teeth as she screamed soundlessly.

Still, it was reality that the enemy army was restarting their charge with only one sacrifice, surging towards the mere two thousand dark arts users left with the momentum of raging waves.

“Retreat!! All arts users, retreat!!”

D. screeched with a strained voice.

However, two rays of flames crossed above in the next moment and drove in merely some tens mel behind.

The flames roared as they erupted, swallowing up tens of her screeching subordinates. The heat waves surged on towards the second floor of the carriage where D. stood and singed the black hair she was so proud of.

“Eek...”

Screaming, D. practically rolled down the carriage. Riding on it would be like painting a target on herself.

Blending with her subordinates, D. tried to flee before a glaring golden light shone into her vision.

In her sight, naturally drawn upwards, she saw the sword of an integrity knight astride a flying dragon split into countless specks of light.

She vividly sensed each of those specks possessing a horrifying level of priority. It was clear whatever element she generated from the sparse darkness energy drifting about would be unable to defend against them.

—Damn, damn it, how can I let that kill me!!

—In a place like this?!! I’m the one who will rule over this world!!

Raising the corners of her eyes with the face of an enraged deity, D. swung her two hands with her fingers bent like

talons and thrust them into the back of two arts users running in front.

Her sharp claws ripped through their soft skin, digging into their flesh. The shafts she gripped onto were no other than the arts users' spines.

“Gyaa... D-D.-sama...!?”

“Wha...!? P-Please stop...”

Paying no attention to her subordinates' begging shrieks, the highest ranked dark arts user let out sinister laughter as she recited the starting phrase for an art.

The words that followed were a true curse.

Transfiguration. An accursed, secret art to transform a living being's flesh, powered by their Life.

Squelch.

Blood and flesh scattered as the two young, healthy bodies dissolved into indefinite shapes. Each of them covered D., crouching on the ground, without leaving a single gap and hardened up, becoming an elastic defensive film that had once lived.

That was a moment before a tempest of golden death blanketed the entire land.

* * *

Alice hardened her heart and shut away the many screams reaching her ears.

She would not permit that art to be ever used again. She would eliminate those arts users and the invocation for it from this land.

Each time she swiped the grip gleaming with light in her right hand, the sharp petals followed suit and mowed down the enemy she looked down upon. The dark arts users wearing no metallic armor had their bodies pierced through without resistance and fell.

Alice maintained the recollection release state until she was sure she had annihilated over ninety percent of the arts users unit estimated at two thousand. Her sword's Life had considerably fallen, but she had no regrets over that.

Though around two hundred arts users had fled without even taking a look at the heaps of their comrades' corpses, Alice restored the Fragrant Olive Sword to its original state instead of giving pursuit.

She had seen around ten knights take off on their flying dragons from the rear of where the Order of the Dark Knights was based at the left of her sight.

Though she thought they would engage her straight away, the enemy dragon knights simply took up formation in the air without attempt to shorten the gap between them. She immediately knew why. Bercouli and the rest had chased after her from behind.

“Lil’ miss, don’t go overboard!”

Alice somehow responded to the knight commander who spoke the moment he overtook her, perhaps out of concern over Eldrie’s death.

“Yes... I am fine, esteemed Uncle. Please escort the ground units. I will fulfil my role as the decoy.”

“Right... but don’t go too far!”

Bercouli shouted and turned his eyes towards the enemy dragon knights. Commanding Takiguri by her side to stay hovering, Alice had Amayori slowly climb and advance.

She could somehow sense the attention focused on her from the dark knights, the pugilists, the orcs and goblins—and some being with an enormous presence in a place where she could not quite locate. She could hear soft roars from the guards and supply companies behind who had finally left the gorge and turned towards the south, fleeing at full speed.

Alice shouted loud enough to erase the noise they made as they move.

Her voice, amplified by incarnation, resounded vividly throughout all directions.

“—My name is Alice!! I am Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty!! The one who serves the will of the three goddesses protecting the Human Empire, the «Radiant Medium»!!”

It was a proclamation without any foundation at all, a mere bluff.

Still, the entire enemy army stirred in the next moment. The strong desire to capture Alice reached out towards her from the land like tentacles. It appeared the enemy actually did desire this radiant medium as much as or perhaps even more than they wanted to trample the Human Empire.

Did it truly refer to her, or was she only assuming the name?

Alice felt that irrelevant. She only needed half of the enemies to chase after herself. It would have been fine as long as drawing the enemy away from the land and earning the rest some time allowed her to inherit the wishes of Eldrie, Dakira, and the many lost guards.

“Resolve yourself to be crushed by my holy might if you dare stand before me!!”

* * *

“Ohh...”

The emperor of the land of darkness, Dark God Vector, and also the hunter of souls, Gabriel Miller, stood from his throne before letting a deep utterance escape.

“Ohh.”

Gabriel had felt nothing at all from how that attack expending three thousand orc units had apparently failed or even how the majority of the arts user units were annihilated. However, shudders were certainly going through his frigid soul at this one moment.

A quiet voice came from his pale lips that formed a smile.

“Alice... —Alicia...”

Gabriel’s two eyes captured in detail the young female knight clad in golden, gleaming armor atop a dragon in the distant night sky.

Straight, flowing golden locks. Fair, pale skin. Perfectly clear blue eyes like the skies in the heart of winter.

That figure matched exactly with the exquisite grown-up appearance of the girl he first laid hands on, Alicia Klingerman, in Gabriel’s consciousness. It was a fact in Gabriel’s mind, that Alicia’s soul that he had failed to

capture back then had appeared once more in this virtual world.

—*This time, for sure.*

This time, he would capture it with these hands. He would obtain the light cube that girl's fluct light was saved on and savor it to his heart's content.

Focusing his gaze, like a blue flame, upon the knight as she pulled on the dragon's reins and flew off into the southern night skies, Gabriel spoke softly and feverishly into the command skull.

“All units, prepare for movement. Turn south with the Pugilists' Guild leading, followed respectively by files comprised from the Order of the Dark Knights, the demi-humans, and the supply units. Capture that knight, the radiant medium, unhurt. I shall grant rule over the entire Human Empire to the commander of whichever unit captures her.”

Chapter 19

The Radiant Medium

(Seventh Day of the Eleventh Month of the Human Empire Calendar, 380)

Part 1

20:00

The Dark Army had just begun to move, kicking up a huge dust cloud behind. The dust cloud began to color the sky of the Dark Territory, already dotted with blinking, blood-red stars, a deep shade of gray.

Peering into the simple telescope generated with Crystal Elements, Knight Commander Bercouli looked up and mumbled softly:

“This is astonishing... Seems like that so-called Dark God Vector has his heart set on you, lil’ miss. The entire army is coming after you.”

“We should be... happy, I suppose. At least this is much better than being ignored.”

Alice muttered as she swallowed her nervousness along with some lukewarm Siral Water.

In the unexplored—only to those of the Human Empire, of course—Dark Territory wilderness, on a small hill about

five kilol south from the valley, the Defense Army decoy division was having their first short break.

The Guards were very excited.

Since an Integrity Knight had sacrificed himself to nullify a large-scale art that had plunged everyone into the abyss of despair, they were all determined once again, believing that they should treasure their given chance.

Meanwhile, however, Alice was still unable to accept the reality of Eldrie's death.

Although it had not been long since they first met in the Central Cathedral, much had happened. Recommending that Alice try some wine or snacks when he discovered them; telling her bad jokes from time to time; there had not been a quiet day with Eldrie.

She had often puzzled over whether this young man was here to learn swordsmanship and arts, or just to be troublesome. But now, she understood. She understood how much Eldrie had been filling her heart with levity.

...These things just seemed so normal that I took his presence for granted. Why am I just realizing how precious he was when he's not here anymore?

As she gazed towards the Mountain Range at the Edge that spanned the northwestern sky, she gently touched the

coiled whip strapped to the back of her waist. She could now well understand why Kirito would not want to relinquish Eugeo's sword.

As though he were waiting for Alice to open her eyes again, the Knight Commander said:

“About the current strategy... Basically, until all four Integrity Knights in this decoy division are fallen, we'll keep drawing the enemy away and shaving them off. Are you okay with that?”

Alice vehemently nodded to the Knight Commander, who stood beside the tallest boulder on the topmost part of the hill.

“This is how I see the situation: we've eliminated half of the invading army of fifty-thousand and have almost wiped out the most troublesome Dark Sorceresses. We're left with wearing out their main forces to some extent, which are the Dark Knights and the Fist Fighters... and also defeating Dark God Vector. Once we achieve these, the remainder of the enemy would be very likely to agree with a peace treaty. What do you think about that?”

“Hmm... the last problem is, who's gonna be the one to head over there. If that Shasta kid's still around...”

“So, the Dark General is really... Are you certain about that, Oji-sama?”

“He wasn’t there when I took a glance a while ago. Not only Shasta, but his apprentice, the female knight who fought you once wasn’t there either, lil’ miss.”

He sighed roughly. Alice knew that Bercouli secretly had great expectations of the Dark General and his apprentice.

Shaking his head slightly, the oldest Knight muttered in a low voice.

“Now we can only hope that the Dark Knight who took over Shasta’s place would be happy to pass on his will. Not very likely, though...”

“Not very likely?”

“Nope. Those who live in this Dark Territory don’t have any written laws like the Taboo Index. There’s only an unwritten rule ordering them to obey the strong. And... unfortunately, the Incarnation of Dark God Vector is overwhelming... A novice youngster obviously won’t be powerful enough to resist...”

Indeed, when she declared her own identity in front of the enemy a while ago, a terrifyingly cold, bottomless dark energy had reached out from the core of their formation, and she clearly felt it sticking to her. It was the first time she

had this sort of feeling since awakening as an Integrity Knight. If one were to say the Incarnation of Highest Minister Administrator resembled crackling bolts of lightning, what she had felt would be pitch-black emptiness.

She was getting goosebumps just thinking about it. Calming herself, Alice nodded.

“I see... I don’t expect many people to disobey a god, anyway.”

Right after she said so, the Knight Commander chuckled and slapped Alice’s back.

“Even though you say that, lil’ miss, you, Kirito and Eugeo, you three appeared over there in the Human Empire. Let’s hope there are fellows with guts over here as well.”

Just then, hearing vigorously flapping wings, the two looked up.

Renri’s dragon, Kazenui, was descending to the ground. The young knight dexterously leapt off before the dragon’s claws even touched the earth. He jogged over to Bercouli and urgent words began to tumble from his mouth.

“Commander Your Highness, report! There is an area of shrubbery about one kilol south that would be suitable for an ambush on the enemy.”

“Great. Good work on the scouting. Let me prepare to move the entire division... Your dragon should be pretty tired, so go give him as much food and water as he wants.”

“Roger!”

Bercouli watched as Renri quickly saluted in a Knightly fashion, and his short silhouette began pulling away. Alice suddenly noticed that there was a smile on the Knight Commander’s face.

“...Oji-sama?”

At her inquiry, Bercouli scratched his chin for a moment, as though he were a little shy, and shrugged.

“Well, uh... The Synthesis Ritual creates Integrity Knights by snatching their memories away and suspending their Life, and that’s absolutely unforgivable. But at the same time, I just think it’s a lil’ bit sad that there won’t be any fresher Knights like that young man.”

Alice thought for a moment, then a similar smile spread across her face:

“No one can become an Integrity Knight without altering their memories and freezing their Life? I don’t believe that’s true, Oji-sama.”

Her right hand gently stroked the Frostscales Whip once more.

“Even if everyone of us were defeated, I’m certain that our souls... our will shall be passed on to someone else.”

* * *

“All right, it’s finally our turn!!”

Bashing his right fist into his left palm with a pashii, the young chief of the Fist Fighter Guild, Iskahn, yelled with vigor.

I’ve been sitting and waiting here for too long since I felt the battle heating up nearby.

The terrifying pillar of light had burnt away the Demihuman troops, the Sorceresses had created a creepy swarm of worms, and Emperor Vector had demanded for the Radiant Medium so persistently that he even gave out a mysterious command. Yet these did not have the slightest effect on Iskahn’s fighting spirit.

His world was divided into two: his own body and everything else. Iskahn was completely uninterested in anything other than training to improve his body. In his mind, even if he became the target of large-scale arts like those he had just seen, he had absolute confidence in

repelling every single one of them using only his fists and spirit.

The Fist Fighter tied belts onto his naked, muscular torso burnt to a reddish-copper color, wearing only shorts and sandals. He turned to the five-thousand powerfully built men and women as their leader, and to the Dark Knights following them. They had hardly begun moving for five minutes, but already, there was a nearly thousand-mel gap between the Fist Fighters and the Dark Knights.

“The Knights are riding on horses but they’re just too slow, as usual!”

A hulking man stayed by Iskahn’s side, taller than him by more than a head. Right after hearing his insult, the man’s rock-hard face smiled wryly.

“That’s inevitable, Champion.”

Addressing the currently strongest Fist Fighter in Dark Tongue, the hulking man continued.

“They and their horses are wearing armor as heavy as themselves.”

“Completely useless, though!”

Concluding thusly, Iskahn faced front again. Shaping his right hand into a tube, he quickly put it against his right eye.

At the center of the flame iris, his pupil enlarged.

“Oh, the Human Empire guys have started to move as well. Seems like they’re... not coming this way. They’re still trying to run away?”

He clicked his tongue.

Though they looked as dim as the stars above them, Iskahn could perfectly capture the enemy’s activity five thousand mel away. He thought for a moment, then said:

“Hey, Dampe. The Emperor’s command was to chase after her and capture her, right?”

“Seems like it.”

“Right...”

He rubbed his nose with his right index finger, then grinned with confidence.

“Let’s speed up for a little while— Team Rabbit, to the front!!”

Fierce cries of ‘OH!’ both high in pitch and tension immediately answered the summon.

The team coming out from the army in neat formation were a hundred slender Fighters—that said, their muscles were as firm as a whip and perfectly balanced in volume. All of

their heads were wrapped with white straps of decorative rope.

“Let’s go say hello to those so-called Integrity Knights! Get ready!!”

OH!

“Martial Dance, step seventeen, GO!!”

Iskahn’s right hand fiercely punched the air and his feet violently stomped the ground as he shouted.

His trusted aide Dampe and the hundred men of Team Rabbit were performing the exact same action in perfect synchronization.

Zun, zat, zun zat.

Ooh, rah, ooh rah.

As the rhythmic steps and united cry continued, beads of sweat began to glow on Iskahn’s curled copper hair, and his healthy dark skin took on a red tinge. The same happened to his subordinates.

After the steps ended in one very long minute, one hundred and two Fighters stopped their movements, steam billowing from their bodies.

No, not only that. Their skin seemed to be glowing slightly red in the darkness.

Fist Fighters.

A tribe that, for hundreds of years, had explored the true nature of one's physical body.

Both the swordsmen and the sorceresses considered the summit of all arts to be *[interrupting a target with Incarnation]*. In other words, overwriting external events with imagination.

However, Fist Fighters thought the opposite—strengthening their own bodies with Incarnation. Surpassing their original limits, they would strengthen their naked bodies with defensive force stronger than steel, and wield their fists with attacking power enough to crush boulders.

And, of course, they would train their legs to run faster than horses, while barefoot.

“OOOOOH, RAAAAAH!!”

With a powerful roar, Iskahn kicked the ground and began sprinting forth. Dampe followed along with the other hundred Fighters in hot pursuit.

The air behind them was split apart; the ground shook furiously.

* * *

“——!?”

In order to keep close with the Guards who had started moving to the shrubbery suitable for an ambush, Alice walked a few steps, then looked back as she soon felt something strange.

Something is coming.

And they're fast.

When she looked closely, she could see a cluster of a hundred men bulging out of the slowly approaching enemy army, and closing the gap at a terrifying speed. They were even faster than the horseback riders running with all their might. For a second, Alice thought they were Dragon Knights, but soon realized that there were too many of them, and that they were actually moving on the ground.

“... Seems to be the Fist Fighters.”

Bercouli muttered beside her.

“They are...?”

She had heard that name before, but this was her first time witnessing them with her own eyes. This was because the ones who usually appeared at the Mountain Range at the Edge were mainly Goblins, Orcs, and rarely, Dark Knights. The Fist Fighters had never even attempted to invade the Human Empire.

Even so, having the advantage of a very long life, it seemed that the oldest Integrity Knight had experience battling the Fist Fighters. He continued somewhat nervously.

“They’re a pain to deal with. Usually a sword’s gonna hurt bare fists, but they’ll keep rejecting that.”

“Huh...? Reject...?”

There’s no way anyone can reject being cut, Alice thought. But Bercouli shrugged and said:

“You’ll know what I mean when you fight them. Better for us to handle them together, lil’ miss.”

“.....”

Alice swallowed hard. Bercouli just claimed that he could not handle them by himself; they must be extremely powerful opponents.

However, what the Knight Commander said next destroyed her painstaking concentration and spirit.

“And, by the way, lil’ miss... You’re not okay with stripping down, are you?”

“Haah!?”

Instinctively, she crossed her arms in front of her chest and squeezed out a sharp voice.

“Wh-what are you talking about?! Of course I don’t like stripping down!!”

“No, I don’t mean that... Well, I do mean that... I just wanna tell you that armor and clothes are useless against their fists, and they may hold you back, so...”

After saying those pointless words as he scratched his chin, the Knight Commander shook his head as if to say, “Suit yourself”.

“Anyway, if you’re gonna fight in that, get your Armament Full Control Art ready.”

“O... Okay.”

Anxiety trickled down her spine again. As it seemed, the enemy team was composed of around a hundred men. If she needed to utilize the full power of the Fragrant Olive Sword against such a small team, they were definitely not easy opponents.

However, there was one problem.

When she had released the «reflection-concealed beam» art, and during her battle against the Dark Sorceresses, she had twice used the Armament Full Control Art, consuming a large portion of the Fragrant Olive Sword’s Life in the process. She could still use it for normal slashing without fail, but she worried over how much longer it could remain in its split-form attack.

The same applied to the Knight Commander’s Time Piercing Sword. From a rather close distance, Alice had watched him perform the stunning wide ranged attack that had instantly eliminated hundreds of Minions. It could be said that both of their beloved swords needed rest in their sheaths overnight.

But within their tens of seconds of conversation, the enemy team of Fist Fighters had already closed in to a distance from where Alice could begin to make out their masculine physiques. She could not let them get any closer to the Guards, who were still preparing the ambush.

Alice bit her lip, nodded to the Knight Commander, and was about to slide down the rocky slope to the north.

Right before that, however, a timid female voice called to them.

“I’ll go.”

Alice spun around in shock; beside her, Bercouli's eyes widened as well.

The one who had been standing there without their knowledge, was one of the four Integrity Knights joining the decoy division—the one other than Bercouli, Alice and Renri.

She was tall and slender, clad in drab gray armor. Her hair, also gray, was parted so crisply that it looked artificially plastered to her head, ending in a tight ponytail. Her face was refreshingly clean, but showed not a shred of emotion. She was probably around twenty, like Alice.

Her name was Sheyta Synthesis Twelve.

The Divine Instrument strapped to her waist was the «Black Lily Sword».

However, she was seldom referred to as such. Whenever they happened to mention her in conversation, the Knights addressed her by another nickname.

«The Silent».

Alice was not shocked because she had volunteered to battle the Fist Fighters.

She was shocked because this was literally the first time she heard the voice of The Silent Sheyta.

* * *

Leaping over ditches and small rivers with ease, blasting boulders out of their way with single kicks, Iskahn, Dampe and the other hundred Fist Fighters continued their ferocious sprint.

In a few moments, I'll finally be able to fight these so-called demons, Integrity Knights. Bursting with anticipation, the young Fighters revealed disturbing grins.

In fact, Iskahn had been completely dispassionate towards the Integrity Knights of the Human Empire until he received the call to arms. He had looked upon them with contempt, under the impression that they were merely ruffians who hid behind armor and swords. Among all Humans in the Dark Territory, there was only one Dark Knight whom he had respected as a true fighter: the deceased Dark General Shasta.

But while he was meditating as he stood by for the order to attack, he had sensed the Integrity Knights' fighting spirit and aggressive energy, and that was something. At least they aren't just relying on their high-class weapons, he thought.

There must be impressively trained bodies beneath the armor and swords.

With heightened expectations, Iskahn couldn't be more excited about fighting them fist-to-fist.

So.

When he finally sighted a Knight in front of the hill where the enemy army had stopped minutes ago, the Fist Fighter chief's mouth dropped open, dumbstruck by her standing figure.

How thin.

She seemed to be a woman, so maybe her lack of a muscular build was inevitable; even so, she was way too thin. Although she was clad in metallic armor, she still looked more fragile than any of Iskahn's female Fighters. Her armorless body would only be about as muscular as a Sorceress's. Even the long sword hanging from her waist looked like a roasting spit.

Signaling with his right hand for his subordinates to stop, Iskahn skidded to a halt, kicking up a dust cloud. Raising his eyebrows that were curled up at the end like a flame, he opened his mouth.

“Who're you? What the hell are you doin' here?”

Slightly shaking her long, straight gray hair, the female Knight tilted her head. She looked as though she were

thinking of what to say—or rather, pondering whether she wanted to answer the questions.

Her brows, eyes, nose, and mouth looked as though they had been sculpted with a sharp knife. Without a shred of emotion on her clean face, the female Knight spoke quietly:

“I’m here to stop you.”

Iskahn exhaled a large amount of air from his nose and mouth; no one knew whether he was laughing or upset, but in the end he just shrugged.

“You can’t even stop a little kid. Oh, I know... You’re a Knight good at arts, eh?”

There was another awkwardly long silence before she answered.

“Arts are not my strength.”

Irritated by his enemy’s belittling attitude, Iskahn said: “Well, whatever,” and called out one of his subordinates. “Yotte, fight her.”

“Here I come!!”

A rather diminutive female Fighter leapt out of the formation with a vigorous reply. Despite that, she was still several times sturdier than the female Knight. Flexing her

stiff muscles and darting to and fro, she revealed a savage leer that was completely different from her opponent.

“HAAH!”

From five meters away, the female Fighter punched the air, generating wind that rustled the female Knight’s hair.

Even then, there was not an ounce of fighting spirit on the Knight’s slender face. Instead, she looked confused and whispered softly.

“... Just one...?”

“That’s my line, you skeleton!”

Curling her thick lips, Yotte shouted.

“After I teach you a lesson, I’m gonna stuff lots and lots of dried meat into your tiny little mouth before I finish you off! Just pull out your sword already!!”

With a face as though saying ‘So you have nothing more to say’, the female Knight gripped the handle on her left waist.

Shiyuran. Catching sight of the effortlessly drawn blade —

“...what the fuck!?”

Iskahn, who had backed off and crossed his arms, shouted instinctively.

“Thin” was an insufficient description. The scabbard already looked like a roasting spit, but the blade inside it was just a cen wide, like a child’s finger. The sword was matte black and thin as paper; just being able to see it was difficult under the starry night sky. How fragile.

Yotte’s face flushed red with anger.

“... Y’ gotta be kiddin’ me...”

Performing a short martial dance, or rather, battering the earth with her feet, the female Fighter charged straight and quickly closed the distance between her and the Knight.

Even to Iskahn, that was quite an impressive sprint. Team Rabbit of the Fist Fighters’ Guild were, unlike their name, elites that were not only agile, but skilled precision fighters.

Bibat!

Splitting the air, Yotte lashed out.

Unable to avoid the close-range attack, the female Knight defended with her paper-thin sword.

The resounding noise was piercingly high, as if created by a collision of two metal objects. Blinding golden sparks shot out.

Immediately after.

The needlelike sword was easily bent.

Iskahn smiled. A normal sword would never cut the skin of a Fist Fighter.

The children born as Fist Fighters were thrown into the training facility as soon as they became five years of age. Their very first training was snapping a cast iron knife with one punch.

As they matured, cast iron would be replaced with wrought iron, and knives would be replaced with long swords. Not only did they have to split them, they had to withstand slashes from the weapons without any protection. Through their training, the adolescents were confident that blades were nothing to be afraid of. I am invulnerable to blades. That belief—in other words, Incarnation, turned their bodies into steel.

As the guild chief, Iskahn could stop a needle 2 cen in diameter with his eyeball.

Although Yotte, a normal Fighter, had not trained her Incarnation to this extent, she was one of the ten group leaders in Team Rabbit. Her fist did not lose to any sword.

Especially not that pitifully thin one.

All of the Fist Fighters had one image in their heads: the horribly bent black needle would snap with an

embarrassing crack, and a fist would sink into the female Knight's face.

Thew

A strange sound, like a whip slicing the air.

Yotte froze, her fist hovering in the air. The punch barely grazed the female Knight's right cheek, and the Knight's hand lifted up.

Iskahn could not see the black blade clearly from his position.

— *What the hell? That's a pretty large target to miss.*

The chief cursed. Even if Yotte wins this battle, she'll have to start her training all over again in the arena's third-class waiting room. No matter how tough one's fist is, it's useless if it doesn't hit the opponent...

Yotte's clenched fist silently split apart between her middle and ring finger.

“Wh.....”

In front of the stunned Iskahn, the fissure continued from Yotte's wrist to her elbow, through her upper limb, and passing through her shoulder.

Perfectly displaying a cross section precise to the bone, muscles and even the thinnest blood vessels, the outer part of Yotte’s right arm dropped onto the ground. Only after did blood erupt in multiple jets, forming a crimson mist.

“— GHAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

Uttering an earsplitting shriek, Yotte collapsed to the ground, cradling her right arm.

The female Knight retracted her arm, and breathed a small sigh.

Back during her life in the Central Cathedral, «The Silent» Sheyta seldom spoke. This was not due to introversion, nor because she hated everyone else.

Just to avoid attention from other Integrity Knights—she suppressed her own existence, hoping that no one would challenge her to any sparring matches.

If she were to cross swords with anyone, even if it had been Knight Commander Bercouli, she possibly could have killed her opponent.

Fearing that this might happen, she had kept silent in the hundred years living in the Cathedral. Even if she spoke, her familiar caretaker and the elevating-disk operator girl were the only ones she would talk to.

Sheyta was entirely a swordsman, synthesized after winning the Four Empires Unity Tournament.

However, the records of that year's tournament were completely erased. The reason was that, in a tournament that appraised the principle of mercy as one's best quality, blood had been shed: Sheyta had brutally murdered every single one of her opponents.

The high-ranking Integrity Knight Sheyta Synthesis Twelve, in a certain sense, shared a similar mindset with the chief of the Fist Fighters' guild, Iskahn.

Iskahn thought only about beating up something or someone, while Sheyta was interested in nothing but slicing things in half. Despite that, from the bottom of her heart, she had never, ever enjoyed it.

She would just cut. Whether it be human or object, when she was confronted with something, Sheyta could already see its cross section sliced clean. Whenever that happened, she was never able to stop herself from realizing it. If her opponent were a wooden practice dummy, she could even cleanly sever it with her hand.

Sheyta had always suppressed her cut-hungry nature as something sinister.

The first to perceive this deeply hidden impulse in her heart was the Highest Minister Administrator.

For two hundred years, Administrator had been attempting to deduce the Spacial Sacred Energy Theory, which was now common knowledge to every learner of arts.

While the Highest Minister was still researching, she became deeply obsessed with the last and largest war in the Dark Territory that put the «Age of Blood and Iron» to an end. Administrator was concerned that it would be such a waste for no one to collect the virtually infinite Sacred Energy that had been released from the fierce battle between the five Dark Territory races, which took place in the wilderness between the Human Empire and the Imperial Capital Obsidia.

Despite that, she had been careful to never visit the Dark Territory herself. Instead, she had summoned Knight Sheyta. The Highest Minister had whispered to Sheyta, who had already earned the moniker, «The Silent»:

—Journey there alone and look for something in the battlefield. A demonic beast, or something of the sort unharmed by the war would be best if you can find one. If not, any large animal will do. A bird or an insect at least. Just find me anything that's engorged with Spacial Sacred Energy.

—Bring it to me, and from it, I will fashion a Divine Instrument for you.

—A sword with the highest Priority, a sword that can slice anything in half... How about that?

Sheyta could not resist the temptation. An Integrity Knight could not disobey an order from the Highest Minister anyway, but she, without taking a dragon to get over the Mountain Range at the Edge, trekking thousands of kilol deep into the land of ash, arrived at the battlefield that stank of blood.

There were no moving creatures where the five races had strained their limits to kill each other. Not even a mouse or a crow had survived, let alone a beast.

But Sheyta did not give in. A sword that can slice anything in half. The phrase had captured her heart, leaving her unable to think of anything else.

At the end of her three day search —

She finally found one lone black lily, wobbling flimsily in the wind.

That small flower was the only object that had survived the vast battlefield, charged with Spacial Sacred Energy.

The Highest Minister Administrator generated an extremely slim sword out of the flower that Sheyta brought back, and bestowed it upon her with the name «Black Lily Sword».

A year later, after killing an Integrity Knight in a duel, she was put into hibernation at her own request.

Sheyta did not know whether she sighed out of sympathy or intoxication when she cut the female Fist Fighter's fist.

Come to think of it, she also did not understand why she had volunteered ten minutes ago to defend this place, speaking to the Knight Commander and breaking her silence. Rather, she was unaware of any motivation to join the Defense Army half a year ago, volunteering herself while all of the Knights were invited.

Is it because I hope to protect the Human Empire, like the other Knights?

Or is it simply because I want to cut?

Or—it wants me to cut?

Well, it doesn't matter anymore. The situation is what it is, and there's no way to stop the sword anymore. Let's just hope that there won't be too many lives taken.

Sheyta calmly raised her head, and glanced at the terrified Fist Fighters who had frozen to the spot.

Without a trace of hesitation or fear, the gray Knight gripped her slender, pitch-black sword, and slashed head-on towards the hundred Fist Fighters.

* * *

“... What an incredible performance.”

At Alice’s hoarse comment, Bercouli muttered in a low voice.

“Right... Let me tell you something that you shouldn’t tell anyone else. Half a year ago, while I was waking her up from her deep freeze, I was actually kind of scared.”

“I never knew. I never knew that Sheyta-dono has been so adept...”

Beneath the hill, the battle between one hundred Fist Fighters and Integrity Knight Sheyta unfolded. To be precise, it was a one-sided massacre.

Whenever a *thew* came from the extremely thin and malleable sword, the limbs of the surrounding enemies would immediately separate from their bodies and hit the ground.

While impressed, Alice was slightly concerned about something that she should have felt from Sheyta's slim frame.

She could not feel Sheyta's murderous intent at all. Not only that, she could not even feel a shred of hostility.

If so, then how is she able fight so ferociously?

“Don't think about it. Even though I've been watching her for more than a hundred years, I still understand nothing about her. Nothing.” The Knight Commander whispered and turned around.

“We can leave this to her. The main enemy army should be arriving very soon; we have to prepare for the counterattack over there.”

“... Okay.”

Nodding and looking away from the battle below her, Alice followed him.

* * *

About a thousand kilol south from Bercouli and Alice, who were walking down the hill, the gray, rough wilderness finally came to an end, where some irregularly shaped shrubbery grew in the area. The main formation of the decoy division was concealed among them.

They consisted of one thousand Guards, two hundred Ascetics, and a supply team of fifty people. They had to face the five thousand Fist Fighters with such a small force.

Integrity Knight Renri had ordered the Guards and the Ascetics to hide in the plants' shadows, dividing them into twenty teams. The supply team wagon had carved fresh grooves into the only narrow path that stretched through the entire wooded area. The plan was to perform a pincer attack as the enemy followed the ruts into deep enough woods.

Renri had already heard from the Knight Commander that their swords would be ineffective on Fist Fighters, and he had heard about their weakness as well.

Fist Fighters were not good at defending themselves against Sacred Arts.

In the northern wilderness where not even moss could grow, there was simply not enough Sacred Energy to deploy any high-powered arts, but the air should be thicker in the shrubbery. The Ascetics hiding behind the leaves would ambush the enemy together, then retreat to the south while protected by the Guards. From the above, five Dragons would torch the enemy with their flame breath in the midst of the chaos.

Prepared for a quick retreat, Renri stationed the eight supply team wagons at the southernmost part of the shrubbery area. He determined that, the further away from the front line, the safer they would be.

However, just as Renri was devoting his mind to preparing the ambush, the five Guards, who were stationed around the wagons just in case something happened, silently died, one after another, without uttering so much as a whimper.

Its entire body clad in glossless black metallic armor that was fitted with a demonic horned helmet, a shadow moved soundlessly.

Before him, a Guard of the Human Empire Defense Army looked left and right, alert. He did not, however, look behind him at all, because the other Guards should have been watching that space.

The shadow entered his blind spot, approaching as if it were gliding. A long sword was equipped on its waist, but it did not draw. Instead, it casually raised the tiny dagger in its right hand.

It stretched its left arm like a black snake, blocking the Guard's mouth and nose.

At the same time, its right hand flashed, slitting his exposed throat in a straight line.

In complete silence, his Life was drained. Right after the Guard's body suddenly lost its strength, the black shadow pushed it under the nearest bush.

Behind the black veil that covered its face, a barely audible voice slipped out.

“Five, dooown.”

The shadow giggled.

This was not the Ancient Sacred Tongue.

This shadow was actually one of the three real-world people in the Underworld. He, Vassago Casals, was the adjutant under Gabriel Miller, who posed as Emperor Vector.

About an hour ago, Vassago was swigging his red wine straight from the bottle for the umpteenth time. Meanwhile, he caught sight of the large-scale art, which ended with a pathetic failure for his side, and finally said something that sounded like advice.

“Hey, bro. How ‘bout we stop depending on those guys and try moving a bit by ourselves?”

Gabriel rolled his eyes at Vassago, raised his blond eyebrows and replied.

“Okay, then you can make the move.”

The instructions that followed were not to invade the valley that the Human Empire Army was protecting, but to travel somewhere far away from the battlefield, far south, in the middle of nowhere.

When the enemy eradicated the Demihuman troops with a laser beam like those in sci-fi movies, Gabriel had already predicted that part of the enemy would be selected to enter the Dark Territory.

But when Vassago heard this, he questioned why he had to specifically move south instead of north. Hearing the reply “Look, there’s more space that way”, he couldn’t help but be even more doubtful. But since the enemy did actually come, he could only admit his mistake and get to work.

No matter how strong the Human Empire units were, they would definitely stop if they lost all of their food supply. In order to continue his ‘Killing Time’, which was his first since Diving into this world, he gazed into the dark woods.

Very quickly, he found wagons camouflaged with branches and leaves.

Licking his lips under the mask, the assassin began moving again.

Then, something moved behind a wagon. He stopped abruptly and pressed himself against a tree.

A fair-skinned young girl with tea-colored hair, which was not a face of the Dark Territory, stuck her head out of the roof. Perhaps she had sensed something, as she was looking around with a nervous expression.

As Vassago stayed still, it did not take long for the girl to step carefully out of the cart. She whispered something to someone in the wagon, and finally began to walk slowly.

Wearing minimal defensive equipment on top of gray clothes that looked like a high school uniform, the girl was heading straight to Vassago's hiding place.

Resisting the temptation to whistle, the assassin gripped his blood-soaked dagger tightly in his right fist.

* * *

“— DOOOON'T...”

Forced to watch his Fighters, whom he had painstakingly trained, effortlessly defeated nearby, Iskahn screamed in anger as he recovered from shock.

“GET TOO COCKY, YOU BIIIIITCH!!”

Kicking onto ground hard enough to produce a giant crack, he fiercely charged.

Flames erupted on his taut right fist as though they were the scorching fury itself.

He punched straight at the neck of the gray Integrity Knight. Sparks flew from his fist, creating a blazing tail in the air along its path.

At that moment, the Knight had just finished a slash with the sword in her right hand; she tried to block Iskahn's punch with her gauntleted left hand.

— *o my punch... all armor is no more than paper!!*

The strike engorged with Incarnation collided into the female Knight's palm; blinding sparks burst in all directions.

Immediately, the gray gauntlet shattered with a deafening crack, and the armor pieces from her arm to her shoulder were shredded and blown away.

Countless cuts crossed the smooth, white skin of the exposed left arm; droplets of blood flew into the air like grains of sand. However, surprisingly, he did not feel any bones breaking.

Even though it should be excruciatingly painful, the female Knight only frowned slightly, her right hand flashing her super-slim sword while her left hand grasped Iskahn's right fist.

Kiiin! A high metallic noise resonated, and sparks burst again from the Fist Fighter's elbow.

The source of Fist Fighters' strength was the confidence of being invulnerable to all blades. In order to obtain that confidence, they wrapped their bodies only with belts, exposing their skin. The moment they fell back on any kind of defensive equipment, a Fist Fighter's Incarnation would be weakened.

Therefore, Iskahn was trying to deflect the black blade that was about to cut through his right arm, just with his determination.

But.

The dense frigidty that almost sank into his skin was completely different from what he had felt from any other sword, even having taken slashes from them with bare skin.

This paper-thin sword was not just cold, hard steel; it represented will. Instead of a desire for victory, it was simply a thirst for division.

Sensing this, Iskahn reflexively punched with his left fist.

Po! Shattering the air, the punch pierced the space where the female Knight had been an instant ago.

That was impressively agile, but she did not completely evade the strike: the punch grazed her gray chestplate. As the Knight jumped out of the way, her chestplate shattered just like her gauntlet had.

But Iskahn was not uninjured either.

On his inner elbow, at the point that had met the blade for less than a second, there was a very shallow cut. A tiny droplet of blood slowly beaded out from its center. Only a drop—yet a drop nonetheless.

Licking the blood away, the young Fist Fighter savagely grinned.

“... Hey, bitch. You’re quite different inside from what you look like on the outside, huh.”

The gray female Knight and replied with something completely irrelevant.

“... I should be older than you...”

“Huh? You got that right. Integrity Knights like you are monsters that don’t get old for decades, right? What, you want me to call you granny?”

“.....”

Below her eyes, the female Knight’s clean face jerked, but soon she returned to dispassion.

“... I forgive you. You are very hard. I can barely see where I can slice.”

“Tsk... What the hell are you talking about?”

Iskahn clucked his tongue, feeling his spirit weakened from her offbeat attitude. However, as he looked around at the Fist Fighters on the ground, he recovered his anger.

Twenty of them of them, men or women, were moaning, their arms or legs having been cut from their bodies by the slim sword. The most unforgivable thing was, not only did the female Knight harm his subordinates, she was apparently merciful to them by sparing their lives. None of the injured had lost their heads. With her skills and the sharpness of the sword, the Knight could easily have made that extra stroke if she wished.

“... So you treat us like wood dummies for your fucking sword practice. Unforgivable... I’m gonna beat you to a pulp!!”

Zun, zat, zun!!

The remaining active Fighters followed the quick steps of the Martial Dance. Fierce war cries overlapped with their stamping on the ground.

Ooh, rah, oorarah. Ooh, rah, oorarah.

As they stomped and vibrated the air, the Fist Fighters intensified their Incarnation. Drops of sweat flied off from their copper skin, transforming into flying, blazing sparks.

The Integrity Knight did not move, as if she were waiting for Iskahn to reach his maximum state.

—That’s right.

The Fist Fighter champion stopped his steps; flames roared from his reddish golden curly hair, and blinding light effused from both of his hands.

The female Knight, as his opponent, was persistently calm. In her right hand, the pitch-black super-slim sword was giving off a freezing energy.

“Heeeere I come, you BIIIIIIITCH!!”

Setting the air ablaze with a pow, Iskahn instantly closed the distance between them in a straight line.

The female Knight effortlessly swung the sword in her right hand.

Thew!

Just before the fine black line touched Iskahn’s shoulder —

Faster than the sword that swung earlier than him, a blow from the Fist Fighter struck the female Knight’s left leg. Not a punch, but a kick. His right foot shot up, hitting the gray leg guard directly with his toes.

With astonishing reflexes, the Knight stopped her sword and leaned forward, avoiding a fall, but the left leg guard was instantly shattered. The skirt around her waist was torn; her toned yet slim legs were exposed.

“Don’t think Fist Fighters can only punch!!”

Grinning confidently, Iskahn began a high kick with his left leg.

The female Knight turned her wrist, trying to parry the kick with her sword.

The instant that the blade and the leg clashed, a deafening crack was accompanied by a shower of blazing sparks. The Fist Fighter Chief pulled his toned left leg back, feeling a sharp pain, and suddenly thrust his right fist forward.

Bathed in crimson flames, the strike hit the Knight’s chestplate squarely in the middle.

Kaboom! An almighty explosion propelled the two of them away from each other. Iskahn backflipped in midair and landed on the ground.

His left leg stabbed with pain again. He glanced at it.

On his rock-hard shin that could easily bend a steel bar, a fresh cut carved a straight line. Dark red blood flowed out at once, dripping onto the black ground.

Snickering at this small scratch, he observed the enemy.

The female Knight managed to withstand this as well, but she pressed her left hand onto her chest and coughed a few times. Her chestplate, already damaged, had shattered completely; her right hand gauntlet and the gray clothing covering her chests were the only things left on her upper body. There was not much left on her lower body either: only a torn skirt and her right shin guard.

Exclusive to those born in the Human Empire, her snow-white skin seemed to glow even in the darkness. Seeing this, Iskahn sneered:

“Now you look more like a fighter, but there just aren’t enough muscles. Go eat and train more, bitch.”

The Fist Fighters around jeered at her, but the Knight calmly tore off a hanging piece of cloth from her left shoulder and raised the sword in her right hand. Thew.

“... But you’ve become a bit softer just now.”

“... THE FUCK DID YOU SAY?”

His nostrils flared and he bared his canine teeth.

Even though he was bluffing with his expression, Iskahn felt that his breaths had become slightly quicker.

There's no way my spirit would decrease just by seeing some uncovered limbs. The women over here show much more of their skin every day, only a fresh trainee kid would hesitate just by seeing that.

The whole world is made out of opponents that I must beat up with my tough body, even if it's a foreign woman who's slim enough that the wind could bend her bones, whose skin is shining white.

“There's no turning back... I'm gonna show you all I've got!!”

Howling like a wolf, Iskahn jabbed his index finger at the female Knight:

“So show me yours as well, bitch!! Don't give me that fucking sleepy face!!”

As he said so, the Knight looked confused again, and touched her own cheeks and the middle of her forehead with her left hand. Changing her eyebrows' angle into a slightly fiercer look, she said:

“Bring it on... please.”

“..... Yeah, bring it on.”

I'll be thinking nonsense again if I follow her pace.

Iskahn inhaled deeply, gathered power in his stomach, and violently bent over.

Putting his left fist to his waist, and pointing his right fist at his opponent, he noisily exhaled the air. As he repeated the rough breathing, his parted legs began to glow red, drawing power from the ground. The energy channeled through his body and gathered at his fist.

Crimson blazing flames gradually shone yellow, and eventually turned bluish white.

Now Iskahn's right fist was at a temperature so high that it could almost burn the air, making high, sharp noises.

The female Knight faced him sideways, extended her left hand to the front with her thumb and fingers neatly lined up, and swung the fine sword in her right hand behind her. Her arms aligned in a straight line, giving a feel of strength like a catapult prepared to launch with full power.

The tension in Iskahn was so immense that he felt like he was already split into half, from the head all the way down to the stomach. And yet he grinned excitedly.

—She's the first one to burn me up this much.

Both of them moved at the exact same moment.

The Knight's sword drew a pitch-black crescent curve in the air.

The Fist Fighter's fist became a bluish white comet. At the instant that they collided, powerful shockwaves exploded outward, cracking the ground on their way. The remaining Fist Fighters surrounding the two were irresistibly blown backwards.

The sword and the fist were only meeting at the size of a needle's tip, yet they were battling intensely. Surpassing its limit, the compressed power shot forth into a beam of light, bursting into the night sky.

With Sheyta's combat skills, she could have defeated her opponent without this kind of stupid competition of brute strength.

Slightly surprising to her, the intensity of the young Fist Fighter's Incarnation was at the level of a high-ranking Knight. Even so, he concentrated all of his Incarnation at his fist as he charged, and other parts of his body actually looked rather soft to Sheyta. It seemed that she could have evaded the straight punch and cut his head off right away.

Sheyta, however, did not choose to do that; instead, she countered the opponent's white-blue glowing fist head-on. There was no rationale to this decision; she was simply following her body and her sword.

Sheyta was rather confused by herself. Since a hundred years ago, she had already realized that she had none of a

Knight's appraised mental qualities, such as pride or nobility. She would cut because she wanted to, and that was all she desired.

It should mean the same when “slice” is replaced with “kill”. Only when she had been assigned with the mission of securing the Mountain Range at the Edge, Sheyta could release her true self. She had ended countless lives of Dark Knights or Goblins by mercilessly cutting their necks.

She had been suppressing her nature as something sinister, so much, in fact, that she was called «The Silent», but why did she not choose to kill in this particular battle? Sheyta was deeply puzzled.

But even that was just too much to think about.

Now, at this moment, there was only herself, the Black Lily Sword and the fist in front of her.

—It's so hard. Can I cut it in half?

—This is fun.

Iskahn saw the thin and almost colorless lips of the enemy Knight slightly widening, a smile on her face.

And he had already understood that the smile was not a disgrace to him—nor the fight.

The reason was that he had the exact same kind of smile on his face.

—So you're one of the elegant Human Empire residents born with such a delicate figure, but we're the same kind of people, huh.

Click! A small vibration could be felt from within his fist.

Iskahn realized that the noise was not because of any cracks on the opponent's black sword, but it came from the fracturing bones of his own fist.

—No good. Even this doesn't get through, huh.

—But, well, that's how it is.

If his fist had been completely cut, for sure the black, slim sword would cut his entire body in half as well. Even though he expected for such a result, Iskahn felt no fear. I'm not going to meet such a great opponent like her for a second time. If so, well, this isn't such a dumb way to die.

Right at the moment when he thought so, and was about to close his eyes for a long nap.

The pressure added onto his fist slightly weakened.

Compressed at one point to its limit, the pressure released all at once, blowing Iskahn and the Knight away from each other as if they were mere leaves. He suddenly noticed why

his opponent's Incarnation had weakened. A large silhouette had tried to slip in between the two.

Sitting up on the ground, Iskahn yelled at the huge man who fell down as he did.

“Dampe, you bastard!! ... Look at what the fuck you've done!!”

“Time's up, Champion.”

The vice chief said, slightly opening his eyes that were usually almost closed. He stood up, raised his muscular right arm, and pointed it to the north.

As Iskahn turned his eyes to the same direction, he could see that the main army of the Fist Fighters and the Dark Knights behind had come so close to one another that they could recognize each other. Right, as the chief of the army, I shouldn't be too obsessed with a private battle when an army-scale battle's beginning anyway. But—

Clucking his tongue like mad, he spun around. Behind the floating dust, the enemy Knight that had lost almost all of her equipment and clothes slid her slim sword back into its scabbard, as though she did not care at all.

“Hey, bitch! Don't think you've won like this!!”



The young Fist Fighter screamed, forgetting that he had just been preparing his mind for death.

Swaying her gray hair, the Knight flicked her head to look at Iskahn, and tilted her head as if she were searching for the right words to say.

“Umm, that, *bitch* thing... Could you please stop that?”

“Look... In this situation, I don’t know how you’re gonna run awa...”

At that moment, a strong gust of wind suddenly blew from the south. The Fist Fighters surrounding her looked towards it as one.

Iskahn blinked unconsciously. In his sight, a Knight stretched her arm up high, and a gigantic monster quickly descended. Its gray scales twinkled like stars; this must be a Dragon.

As the Knight grabbed onto a leg, the Dragon rose into the sky at once.

“Hey you! ... Tell me your fucking name before you run away!!”

Intertwined with the noise of the vigorously flapping wings, a mild voice came down.

“... I’m not running away. I’m... Sheyta Synthesis Twelve.”

He stood up with Dampe pulling his hand; Iskahn watched the Dragon's silhouette vanishing into the nocturne darkness, and clucked his tongue again.

If he were allowed, he would love to fight that strong opponent again after a year of intense training, since he realized that he had a lot to improve on.

However, Iskahn was mature enough to know that his personal desire would be nothing in front of the war strategy.

Once his team rendezvoused with the Fist Fighter main army, they would have to crush the enemies together with the Dark Knights. There might not be a chance for them to fight again.

If only I could obtain the «Radiant Medium» —

After a moment, Iskahn clucked his tongue for a third time, this time to himself for having such a thought.

—What a retard I am. Begging the Emperor to save the life of that female Knight as a reward? My entire tribe will be furious at me.

Pulling himself out of the thoughts, Iskahn went to the subordinate that held a jar of medicine, in order to cure his left leg.

Part 2

That's right.

Just come 'ere like that.

Vassago thought as he savored the pleasure of the ambush, like a piece of candy in his mouth.

My hiding is perfect. Though the metallic armor had some drawbacks, he was still able to melt into the shadow of the shrubbery.

The black-haired girl was cautiously surveilling her surroundings, but her eyes merely passed through the bush that Vassago was hiding behind. 7 meters left... 5 meters...

—Good. Feels really good. I've missed this so much.

Approaching within 3 meters, the girl suddenly turned to her right and walked towards where Vassago had concealed the bodies.

He could have waited for her to come closer, but, well, that wouldn't change much.

Vassago slid from the darkness in dead silence and lunged at the girl from behind, thrusting forth his left hand. Muffling her mouth and slicing cleanly across her nervously taut throat with his dagger —

His anticipation was so realistic that Vassago could not immediately react to the blade flashing right before his eyes.

“... Whoa!”

As he hurriedly backed off, the tip of the blade whistled under his cheek, where his bare skin was exposed.

The girl, who had seemed not to notice him at all, suddenly unsheathed her sword from her left waist and slashed towards him without even turning around. That was one awesome counter. Had he stepped forward just a little more, his throat would have been cleaved in two.

Spinning around, the girl held her sword properly. He could see no surprise in her sapphire eyes, though they revealed fear and hostility. Vassago couldn't help but admit that his hiding was seen through very quickly.

Twirling the dagger in his right hand, he opened his mouth.

“Hey, baby.”

He suddenly remembered that English wouldn't work, and switched to Japanese that sounded almost native.

“How'd you know, little girl?”

The girl replied coldly while gripping her sword, fully alert.

“... My senpai told me: don’t just rely on your eyes; feel with your entire body.”

“S-senpaaai...?”

As he blinked in confusion, Vassago felt the sting of some ancient memory. I must’ve heard that somewhere...

But before he could form any substantial thought, the girl took a deep breath and let out a deafening scream.

“Enemy!! There’s an enemy—!!”

He clucked his tongue, and retracted his short knife back to the right of his waist.

Well, guess that’s the end of the game.

Vassago threw up his left arm with an exaggerated motion and shouted as well.

“Guys... Get to work!!”

This time, the girl’s eyes widened in genuine shock.

From within the shrubbery tens of meters behind Vassago, there came the scuffling of rustling branches; it was created by the thirty lightly-armored scouts selected from the main Dark Knight army rising to their feet, one after another.

A second girl jumping off the wagon, along with the ten or so Guards dashing from the north in response to the girl's warning, were equally dumbstruck.

* * *

“Wh... The enemy's at the back!? And there's about thirty people!?”

Integrity Knight Renri repeated loudly, hardly believing the distress call from the supply team.

This is bad—This is bad!

If the wagons were assaulted and the supplies were burnt or destroyed, the entire army would grind to a halt. Not only that, there were three people over there: two trainee girls who had sworn on their lives to defend it, and also a young man.

I have to send them a rescue team of a hundred, no, two hundred men. But if I split the main army even further, they might lose to the enemies approaching from the north. By then, they would immediately lose to the enemy's overwhelming number.

Wait, maybe our ambush plan has already been exposed? If it has, then should I have the entire army retreat further south, and wait for another chance?

Unable to come up with a proper conclusion, Renri stood still. Then, a rough voice entered his ears.

“I never thought that they would’ve predicted us going south and laid an ambush here ahead of us...”

Knight Commander Bercouli and Alice had just returned from the northern hill a kilol away. Renri viewed them both as possessing strength that towered far into the clouds above, but no longer could he detect even a sliver of calm on their faces, and especially not for Alice. She looked as though she were ready to fly for the supply team at once.

Looking to the north over Bercouli’s shoulder, behind the hilly area, Renri could almost clearly see the giant dust cloud of the approaching army.

The Knight Commander closed his eyes for a moment, then quickly revealed his bluish-gray gaze, and boomed:

“Renri, tell the main army to back off. Lil’ miss, get to the supply team right now. I’ll hold off the enemies coming from the north.”

“But, how, exactly? ... There are more than five thousand soldiers, Oji-sama! And didn’t you say that swords don’t work against them...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find a way. Just go!! Lil’ miss... no, Alice, you were the one who decided a fight to the death until our very last warrior falls!!”

Leaving those words with her, Bercouli immediately turned to the north.

His right hand, rough as the gnarled trunk of a tree, slowly drew the Time Piercing Sword from his left waist.

By the aged blade’s fading gleam, one could clearly tell that the sword only possessed a miniscule amount of Life left.

* * *

Sparks were thrown three times into the darkness.

The girl with tea-colored hair, who was seeing Vassago for the first time, parried all of his strikes.

Vassago had even used a combo skill. Therefore, when the sword flew from the girl’s hand on the third strike and stabbed into a nearby tree, the assassin couldn’t help but whistle appraisingly.

Even so, the dark-haired girl readied her fists, but Vassago dropped her with a sweep of his leg. Landing hard on her back, the girl let out a pained gasp.

“Ronye ——— !!”

A red-haired girl appeared from the wagon; shrieking, she rushed over.

Gripping the dagger in his right hand, Vassago pressed its tip against the throat of the girl apparently named Ronye, in order to restrain the red-haired girl. As though struck by fear, her slim legs stopped cold.

“Kek... Kekek.”

A muffled cackle slipped out from his mask.

—*This is it. This is the feeling.*

This is the joy of playing with someone’s life and relationships with a blade. This is why I just can’t stop player-killing.

“... I won’t kill her, as long as you stand and watch right there.”

Whispering to the red-haired girl, he crouched next to the girl called Ronye.

Behind him, about thirty bloodthirsty soldiers were inching closer, step by step.

Tears of fear and humiliation beaded within Ronye’s eyes. Her fierce determination sank into the depths of despair, and ——

.....?

Suddenly, Ronye's eyes shifted focus from Vassago's face to the sky.

Something was reflected in her watery iris.

— Light.

Milky white, radiant particles descended, slowly, gently, softly, like snow.

As a weird shiver ran down his spine, Vassago slowly lifted his head.

The night sky was pitch black. The stars were blood red.

In such a background, there floated a small silhouette—and yet its presence was ludicrously huge.

— That's a person. A woman.

She wore a breastplate gleaming with a shine akin to that of a pearl. Her gauntlets and boots were of the same sheen.

Her long skirt was sewed together with countless small pieces of cloth, fluttering like wings. Her hair flying in the wind was in fresh chestnut color—

“Stacia... sama.”

Ronye murmured from below.

These words did not reach Vassago's ears. The instant he had caught a glimpse of the woman's face descending from the sky, the assassin had leapt to his feet as though he were being yanked upwards.

Freed from Vassago's grasp, Ronye immediately backed away to where the red-haired girl was, but he did not even bother to look.

The silhouette floating in the air stretched out her right arm.

She gently swept her delicate hand across.

Laa—————

Resembling a chorus of thousands of angels, an overpowering harmony shook the world.

Spectrums of polychromatic light swallowed Vassago.

The ground beneath his feet vanished.

As he fell into the infinite darkness, Vassago thrust both hands upwards, trying to grab onto the tiny silhouette.

“Fuckin’ really? ... C’mon, fuckin’ really?”

A trembling voice slipped from his mouth.

That face.

That hair.

That atmosphere.

“Isn’t that... «The Flash» from KoB?”

* * *

The Knight Commander Bercouli stood still as he raised his beloved sword.

Before him, there yawned an enormous chasm in the earth, over a hundred mel wide. He gazed far towards the horizon to his left and right, but there was no end to be seen. The depth was unpredictable; bits of rock here and there dropped into the abyss, yet no sign of impact against the bottom reached his ears.

Tens of seconds ago, this rift in the earth did not exist.

From the sky, variegated rays of color had poured down with a grandiose harmony, and as they touched the ground, it began to fracture.

There is absolutely no way to trigger such a groundbreaking change, not with one thousand Ascetics, or even ten thousand Ascetics. Perhaps not even the Highest Minister Administrator herself.

This is the power of a God, a holy act.

Following Dark God Vector, another God is descending to the mortal world.

Bercouli thought with respect and fear, but he soon dismissed that notion.

On the other side of the chasm, the five thousand Fist Fighters were standing stock-still, thunderstruck.

If a God was determined to help the Human Empire, possessing the right to freely manipulate the lives and deaths of humans, they could have split the ground directly under the Fist Fighters, mercilessly plunging them to the depths below. This crack, however, was created with a safety margin in mind, enough for all of the Fist Fighters running at full tilt to stop.

From this, the Knight Commander detected a sense of hesitation towards wiping out a multitude of lives.

In other words, this was done according to human will.

Part 3

—*Faster.*

—*Faster, quickly get me to the ground, to where Kirito-kun is.*

Yuuki Asuna had logged into the Underworld with Super Account 01, «The Goddess of Creation Stacia». Protected by

the fall-cushioning mechanic only available on the first log in, she repeated her lover's name in her mind.

Almost an hour had passed since an unknown armed group had stormed the independent marine biology research mega-float, the «Ocean Turtle».

“I'll go,” Asuna had declared to Kikuoka Seijirou and company, and FullDived using Soul Translator No. 5. Higa Takeru located her insertion coordinates, which should have been right above where Kirito was now. When she landed, her lover would definitely be waiting there for her.

Accompanying her nearly insane yearning, a stabbing pain racked Asuna's head. She grimaced on reflex, resisting the discomfort.

She had been warned about the side effects that would occur with usage of the *[unlimited landscape alteration]* ability, the administrative authority given to the Stacia account. The area's Mnemonic Data was absurdly large; as the data instantly transferred repeatedly between Asuna's STL and the Main Visualizer, which stored the data of the entire Underworld, her Fluctlight would overload.

As RATH's chief engineer, Higa had strictly told her not to recklessly change the landscape too much—to stop whenever she felt a headache.

Below her were a thousand men from the Human Empire, and two enormous crowds from the Dark Territory that were approaching them from both the north and south. As soon as she realized that, despite the advice, she had immediately chanted the commands.

She put the cluster from the north to a halt by opening a long, wide valley in front of them. But for the thirty men drawing near the location where Kirito might be, she had no choice but to erase the ground they were standing on.

They are all human beings with real souls. They are the true bottom-up AIs that Kirito has strived for two years in this world to protect.

Perhaps this sharp pain is their intense fear and grudge flooding into the STL.

Even so, Asuna closed her eyes tightly, then opened them wide and freed herself of her hesitation.

Her priorities had been determined for years.

For Kirito—Kirigaya Kazuto, she would commit any sin. She would accept all deserved punishment.

At long last, the descent came to an end in tens of seconds that each felt like an eternity; the tips of her pearly boots touched the black earth.

She was in a wooded area filled with twisted bushes. Without a moon, there were only ominously shimmering red stars, faintly shining down from the night sky.

Asuna shook the remaining headache away and straightened her back. Right next to her feet, a dark, deep hole opened in the ground, into which she had plunged an armored knight-like Dark Territory man. It would be rather dangerous to leave it there, but she had difficulty handling the landscape again in a such a short time.

She heard the neigh of a horse nearby; looking in that direction, she realized that a few large wagons were standing behind the bushes, seemingly hiding.

—*Where...? Where are you, Kirito?*

Just as Asuna was desperate to the point of nearly crying out his name, a trembling voice called to her.

“... Stacia... sama?”

She turned her head around, and saw two girls leaning against each other as they stood. They were both wearing gray jumper skirts, just like school uniforms.

Their faces were a little strange. They did not look Japanese, nor they did they look Western. Their skin were smooth and cream-colored; the girl on the right had hair in maple

leaf red, and the girl on the left had hair in a dark coffee brown.

Two timeworn long swords hung from their belts.

The red-haired girl opened her mouth slightly, and a small voice slipped out once more.

“Are you... God?”

Perfect Japanese, yet her intonation was very subtly foreign. Thus, Asuna felt she had glimpsed the Underworld’s three-hundred year independent history.

—Kikuoka-san, Higa-san, look at what you’ve created.

—To Rath, this might only be a simulation, but this entire world and the people living here, are genuinely alive.

“... No... Sorry, I’m not a god,” Asuna answered as she gently shook her head.

The girl with dark brown hair wrung her hands. “But, but,” she whispered.

“You’ve kindly saved my life with a miracle. You’ve saved all of us from those scary soldiers from the Dark Territory... You’ve saved the Guards, the Ascetics... and Kirito-senpai.”

When she heard that name, Asuna gasped, and a violent twinge shot through her heart.

She straightened her body that almost lost balance, and finally squeezed out a feeble voice, her lips trembling.

“I... I just came here to meet him, Kirito... Please tell me... Where is he? Let me meet him... Take me to Kirito, please.”

Fighting back her tears, Asuna begged. The dumbstruck girls’ eyes widened, finally exchanged looks, and nodded.

“... Yes. Please follow us.”

The surrounding swordsmen clad in uniform armor formed an open circle, staring at her from a distance; Asuna walked through its center as the girls showed her the way.

She was taken to the back of a wagon. A thick, canvas-like curtain was hanging from the roof, and she could not see inside.

“Kirito-senpai is insi...”

Without waiting for the red-haired girl to finish, Asuna pushed the curtains aside with both hands and jumped onto the deck. She stumbled as she advanced.

Hanging from the roof of the cabin, a small lantern threw dim light onto stacks of wooden boxes and barrels. She slipped through the tiny space between them, getting deeper and deeper into the wagon.



「ステイシア……
さま……？」

少女錬士 § ティーゼ

「あなたは、奇跡を起こして、
私を助けてくれました」

少女錬士 § ロニエ

「キリトくんのところに、連れて行って」

(創世神) § アスナ

「マジかよ……おい、マジかよ」

暗黒騎士 § ヴァサゴ

Suddenly, she was hit by a nostalgic smell, as warm as the sun, as refreshing as a slight breeze over grasslands and forests.

Silvery light reflected into Asuna's eyes, which adjusted to the darkness.

It was coming from a wheelchair made of a metal frame and pieces of wood.

In the chair, there was a figure in black, sitting spiritlessly, its body sagging like a shadow.

“.....Gh.”

Overwhelmed by a storm of emotion, Asuna was struck dumb. Even though she had envisioned a multitude of scenarios, the words for their reunion became stuck in her throat.

Now lying in the STL No.4 on the Ocean Turtle in the real world, the one she loved most was there, in the form of his soul.

Hurt, damaged, but certainly alive.

Back when Kirito met me again in the hospital in Tokorozawa, when I didn't wake up even though I was released from the death game SAO, Kirito must have suffered the same pain, and was as determined as I am now.

—*It's my turn. I'll definitely save you, no matter the cost.*

Softly exhaling her stuck breath, Asuna whispered:

“..... Kirito-kun.”

The right arm was missing from his emaciated body. Hugging the black and white swords, his left arm jerked when Asuna's voice resonated.

His face stared downwards, and his eyes were empty; both trembled in tiny spasms.

“Uh.....”

A broken, hoarse voice slid from his parched lips.

“Uh... Aaaa... Aahh.....”

Taka, taka The wheelchair was shaking. His left arm stiffened, and tendons puffed up on his neck.

Two tracks of tears slid down his bowed face and dropped onto the scabbards in his arms.

“Kirito-kun... Enough, that's enough!!” Asuna shouted.

She kneeled, and gently but tightly, hugged her lover. From her own eyes, she also felt warm liquid gushing out without end.



Seeing each other once more, curing Kirito's soul, his consciousness would return—

It would be a lie if she said she had not hoped so.

However, Asuna understood that the damage dealt to Kirito's Fluctlight was deep. Kirito's Fluctlight core, or self-image, had been destroyed. As long as they did not reconstruct it somehow, no matter how much input he was exposed to, he could not articulate a proper output.

Higa's voice resounded in her mind.

—It seems that he has some accomplices... I mean comrades. They're artificial Fluctlights, of course. And most of his comrades died when they fought the Church, so in the end he severely blamed himself when he succeeded in contacting us. In other words, he attacked his own Fluctlight.

Desolation, regret and despair had cut a bottomless hole into Kirito's heart.

—Even if that hole were infinite emptiness, I will fill it up. If I can't manage that by myself, I'll enlist the help of those who connected their hearts with you. There just isn't any loss that can't be replaced with love.

Asuna felt her determination replenish: she would not let Kirito feel any sorrow again, not a shred of it.

—I will protect this world, which Kirito loved and lived in. I'll protect it from the mysterious attackers... and even from RATH.

After hugging Kirito tightly for one last time, Asuna stood up straight.

She spun around; and as tears flowed down her cheeks, she smiled at the two observing girls.

“Thank you. You two have been protecting Kirito, haven't you?”

The dark brown-haired girl nodded humbly, and replied with a question in a trembling voice:

“Excuse me, may I... have your name, please? If you're not Stacia-sama, then... who are you?”

“My name is Asuna. I'm a human like you. And just like Kirito, I come from the outside world... for the same purpose.”

Part 4

“All I can say is... I'm rather surprised.”

On the second floor of the imperial throne carriage, beside Gabriel who overlooked the sudden crack in the ground, came a voice that seemed quite relaxed.

He turned towards the voice and saw, popping up from one of the various hatches in the deck, the burly face of a middle-aged man. He recalled that this was Lengil, the head of the Merchants' Guild. Lengil joined his long sleeves and performed a sincere salute.

While he seemed to be one of the few remaining General Units, this man did not seem like he possessed any notable fighting prowess. What was the matter? Gabriel raised an eyebrow in acknowledgement. Lengil glanced left and right, but his body remained facing Gabriel. He saw that Vassago was not around, but did not say anything else and saluted once more.

“Your Majesty. The moon will rise soon... If there are no further orders to be executed accordingly, I humbly request that the troops be allowed to rest and dine.”

“Okay.”

He peered into the black, gaping chasm again.

The scouts that had been sent to report on its size had not yet returned. In other words, it wouldn't be just a few mel. And by the looks of it, it seemed that a hole of this depth was not one that could be easily filled in with raw civilian manpower.

Predicting that the enemy army had managed to infiltrate the southern parts, where Vassago and his subordinates were, there was now an extremely high chance that they would all be eliminated if they did nothing. But even if Vassago himself were to die here, he would still awaken in the real world.

Now he had to use the flying Units. But the Dark Knights only had ten dragons. He did not know the number of trips it would take to transport twenty thousand footsoldiers.

Or maybe it was possible with magic. But according to the Dark Sorceresses he had consulted, creating a sufficient bridge for the entire army to cross was not possible. If they were all as powerful as their leader D.I.L, maybe, with more Demihuman sacrifices... But reports told that D.I.L. had been vaporized in battle by an enemy Knight's counterattack.

—For someone full of ambition, you left the battle so quickly.

Gabriel thought with a twinge of regret. But at the end of the day, an AI was merely a piece on a chessboard, and her existence disappeared from his mind.

In other words —

That yawning chasm was something that upsetted the “game balance” of this world. This world had nothing that

neither the Human Empire AI nor Dark Territory AI were incapable of fixing.

If that were the case, this likely involved interference from the real world. Somebody from RATH, probably a higher-up, had logged in with a super account like him.

They might even have the same goal. Retrieve «Alice», then eject to the real world through a system console.

Although things were getting troublesome, at this point, he could only plan accordingly.

Or rather—things were getting more interesting.

The corners of Gabriel’s mouth lifted in the slightest of smirks. After it disappeared, he turned to Lengil.

“Very well. We will set up camp here tonight. Feed the troops well; tomorrow will be a busy day.”

“Yes, sire. Your Majesty’s benevolence is truly humbling.”

Paying his respects once more, the Merchants’ Guild chief left in high spirits.

* * *

“From the same world as... Kirito-senpai?”

The two girls asked in unison, their red and blue eyes round.

“Th-that means... the world of the gods? The three gods who created this world... the Kingdom in the sky that the gods who govern the Elements, and the angels reside in...?”

“No.”

Asuna shook her head.

“It is a world outside of this one, but definitely not one of the gods. Because... Look at Kirito-kun, do you guys think he looks like a god or an angel?”

The girls looked towards the wheelchair again, exchanged looks, then both stifled giggles. They hastily adjusted their expressions, and nodded.

“Yes... Yes... Right, there shouldn’t be any gods who escape from the academy in the middle of the night to buy snacks... right...?”

Hearing the red-haired girl’s words, it was Asuna’s turn to gape. Really, he was still like that even in this world. Speechless and elated, Asuna felt tears on her cheeks once more.

She blinked rapidly and nodded – Right. Then, the girl with tea-colored hair asked:

“Uh... Um, this outside world... What’s... it like?”

Asuna thought for a moment, then replied:

“It’s a long story. I’d like to tell it to the person in charge of everything here. Could you please take me to them?”

“O-Okay. Understood.”

The girls agreed nervously. Asuna prepared to follow them to the back of the large caravan, then stopped to look back at Kirito again.

On his bowed face, dried tear tracks were still visible.

—It’s all right now, it’s all right now, Kirito-kun. You can leave the rest to me...

Asuna said softly in her heart, tightly gripping his left hand. Then she turned, slipped past a crate, and jumped off the back of the wagon.

Just as her white shoes touched the ground —

Golden light appeared before her.

The glint of a sword blade.

Before she could react, her body moved on instinct. Her right hand lunged for the rapier at her left waist.

Kyariin!

The sound of metal against metal shattered the dark silence of the woods.

While she had managed to deflect the strike, the unexpectedly powerful impact had numbed her entire right arm. What a heavy sword.

Scattered sparks from the collision whitened across her vision. She could barely discern the path of a second instantaneous attack.

Unblockable with a single strike.

Immediately making that judgment, Asuna charged at her opponent and launched a succession of rapid stabs.

Her third jab finally to parry the incoming strike. Switching to the offense, Asuna finally caught a glimpse of the attacker's features.

She gasped in shock.

An astonishingly beautiful knight with snow-white skin, roughly the same age as she was, was glaring at Asuna. Her sapphire eyes emanated an animosity that seemed to crackle like electricity.

Her golden hair, seemingly fashioned from the element itself, billowed in the air. Her hefty armor and smooth longsword both gleamed a flaxen yellow.

From a distance, the girls looked on, eyes wide. Finally, they managed weak cries.

“Knight-sama, please stop!!”

“She is not an enemy, Alice-sama...!!”

—«*Alice*»!

Hearing this name, Asuna was stunned again.

This elegant swordswoman before her, wielding a weapon the weight of a boulder—was the world’s first true Bottom-Up AI, the highly adaptive artificial intelligence, ALICE? She was the goal of Project Alicization, and what RATH and the invaders both thirsted for—the center of everything.

But why was Alice attacking her?

Trying her best to block the golden blade, just as Asuna was thinking of what to say, a voice akin to the music of a famous violinist flared from Alice’s cherry-colored lips.

“Who are you?! What do you want with Kirito?!”

As soon as she heard those words.

Asuna tossed everything aside, feeling a certain emotion well up inside her. Specifically, it was a sudden fury.

Her reflexive retort only added fuel to the fire.

“Why...? Because he’s mine!!”

Gritting her pearly-white teeth, Alice yelled:

“What did you say?! You barbarian!!”

The two swords separated with a shower of sparks in all directions.

The golden-haired swordswoman, deftly leapt away, then immediately lunged forward with a vicious upper slash. But this time, Asuna stood her ground, and her right hand launched a familiar combo attack.

Within the nighttime forest, a gigantic crescent moon collided with streaks of comets, emitting a blinding flash.

The impact blew through Asuna’s elbow straight to her shoulder, knocking the wind and tongue out of her mouth. She was only able to match her opponent because of her super account Stacia’s rapier «Radiant Light», a «GM item» that possessed a higher priority than that of Alice’s golden longsword.

Their weapons met again, but a miniscule gap formed between them.

A deep masculine voice broke the silence.

“Ah, the scenery here is excellent. Two blossoming flowers. Ah, what a sight. What a sight.”

A pair of strong arms appeared from where previously there was nothing, their fingers gently gripping the middle of Alice and Asuna's swords.

"?!"

As if it were sandwiched between a vise, the sword was immovable. The arms effortlessly lifted both swords along with the speechless Asuna and Alice, gently separated the two fighting swordswomen, then placed them back on the ground.

Standing there was a huge man who looked more than forty years old.

On top of what looked like a kimono, he wore defensive gear of the lowest grade. Whether it was the iron-colored longsword hanging from his waist or the arms extending from his sleeves, both were carved with a myriad of scars. He perfectly fitted the description of a hero.

As soon as the man appeared, Alice puffed up her cheeks and began to protest as though she was suddenly younger:

"Why stop me, Oji-san! This person could very well be a spy for the enemy..."

"I don't think so. This young lady helped me escape from the jaws of death. I believe the same happened for you all?"

The latter question was directed towards the wide-eyed girls in gray uniforms who stood to the side.

Both of them nodded furiously, and spoke in thin voices.

“Y... Yes, Honorable Knight Commander. That woman saved us.”

“She just, with a wave of her hand, sent the enemy soldiers into the abyss... It was, simply a miracle.”

The man who had been addressed as the Knight Commander glanced at the large crevice that Asuna had created, then put his hand on Alice’s shoulder and explained:

“I saw it too. Multicolored light came down from the sky, and the ground split into a hundred mel crack. Even the Fist Fighters’ Guild couldn’t get away, and they panicked. Fact is, this young lady saved us just as our army was on the verge of defeat. This isn’t the time to fight.”

“.....”

Golden longsword in hand, Alice continued staring suspiciously at Asuna.

“Then... what Oji-san wants to say is, this person is neither a spy for the enemy, nor impersonating a divine figure, and she’s the real Goddess Stacia?”

Asuna bit her lip in silence. If this Knight Commander, the man seemingly at the top, were to regard her as a god, things would become very messy.

Fortunately for her, the man's chiseled mouth slackened a bit, and he replied.

"Probably not. If she really were a Goddess, she would be an existence far colder and crueler than the even the Highest Minister. Like, mercilessly ending the lives of those murderous wild men and all?"

Alice had no retort to that. Her hostility unchanged, she flashed a flaming glare at Asuna and placed her sword back in its scabbard with a shakin!

Asuna also had many questions. What was that for? What are you to Kirito-kun? But with a deep breath she could finally take, she suppressed her anger.

Asuna's mission was to bring Alice to the «World End Altar» at the southernmost part of the Underworld, and eject her Light Cube from the Light Cube Cluster.

In other words, she had to convince this girl, who did not mix well with her at all, to leave the Human Empire Army. This definitely was not the time to fight.

Sheathing her weapon, Asuna spoke to the Knight Commander:

“Yes... You’re right. I’m not a goddess; I’m a human like you all. However, I do have some knowledge of your situation. That’s because I am a human who has come from outside this world.

“Outside, huh...”

The Knight Commander stroked his chin stubble, then smiled crudely.

In contrast, Alice’s eyes went huge and she demanded shrilly:

“From outside...?! Then, are you from where Kirito came from?”

Asuna was astonished. It appeared that Kirito had already explained some things about the Underworld to Alice as well.

Taking the Fluctlight Acceleration Rate into consideration, Kirito had now remained in this world for three years. Asuna could not help but wonder that how much time he had spent together with Alice in this world.

It seemed as though Alice was thinking the same thing. Before she could ask more questions, the Knight Commander stopped her with a wave of his hand.

“What comes next is probably for the rest of the Knights and Guards to hear. We’ll talk about this over tea. Besides, the enemy aren’t going to make any more moves tonight.”

“... I see.”

Alice nodded, her face stern.

“All right, it’s settled... Could you young ladies over there help us prepare some tea, and get me some liquor as well? You ladies should hear this too.”

On receiving the Knight Commander’s instructions, the young uniformed trainees replied and saluted respectfully.

Asuna wanted to see Kirito once again before she left this place, but before she could move, Alice’s piercing voice entered her ears.

“Let me be clear: from now on, no one is to enter that wagon without my permission. Ensuring Kirito’s safety is my responsibility alone.”

This is the worst.

Asuna calmed her bubbling emotions.

“... Same to you, stop calling my Kirito-kun directly by his name...”

“What did you say?!”

“... No, nothing.”

Hmph, Alice and Asuna spun away from each other, and followed the Knight Commander’s retreating shadow.

The two girls left behind—Tiese and Ronye exhaled simultaneously.

“Looks like... things are going to be rough from now on.”

Tiese suddenly raised her hands and said to her friend:

“Come on, we’ve got water to boil! Right, which wagon was the liquor in? ... Come on, Ronye!”

Before she chased after the red-haired girl, Ronye murmured something that no one else heard.

“... He should be, my senpai, too...”

Part 5

Asuna held the teacup with one hand, while gazing at the crackling bonfire.

What realistic flames.

They were not even in the same dimension as the special effects flames depicted with the rendering engines in SAO and ALO. Every spark that danced up when dry wood cracked, the thick, charred smell floating in the air, and even

the warmth she felt on her face and hands, all stimulated Asuna's senses more realistically than reality itself.

Not just the fire. The rigidity of the folding chair's seat, the smooth feel of the wooden cup, and the rich, soothing aroma of the tea; along with the trees around them, their leaves rustling crisply in the night wind.

Since entering the Underworld, having to deal with endless drama, Asuna had been unable to fully experience this world. As she revived her senses, she was truly impressed by the STL's «Mnemonic Visual».

It seemed that Kirito, who had been logged in without knowing that this was a virtual world, must have become well-experienced before realizing the circumstances. After all—there was not a single NPC in this world.

Asuna turned away from the bonfire and gazed towards the people gathered in the round forest clearing. Quick introductions had already been exchanged.

Sitting to her left and hogging what looked like a bottle of vintage liquor was Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli. Beside him was Integrity Knight Alice, dressed fully in golden armor. Against the fire's orange glow, her golden locks deepened in color; Asuna could not help but acknowledge her stunning beauty.

To Alice's left sat a shiftless youth of about fifteen or sixteen years old, who seemed to be an Integrity Knight of the highest «Class». His name was Renri.

Further down, a slender female Knight sat as quietly as a shadow. Her shining new armor seemed not to fit her at all: from time to time, she either pulled on the straps, or loosened them, looking just like a beginner in a VRMMO. But when she was introduced as Sheyta, in the split second that Asuna met her long, narrow eyes, a certain indescribable boldness seemed to lay within.

To Sheyta's left, across the bonfire from Asuna, around ten people, addressed as Guard Leaders, sat side by side in a row of chairs. Among the tough, hardened faces, there was one female.

To Asuna's right, the young uniformed girls from before were curled up together, sitting as quietly and as far away as possible. The red-haired girl named Tiese and the teal-colored haired girl, Ronye, appeared to be younger students from the academy that Kirito had enrolled in half a year ago.

After sizing up each of the ten-plus swordsmen, Asuna was touched.

Without doubt, they were real humans.

Their appearance, actions, and even their breaths was absolutely devoid of artificiality. Furthermore, the fact that only one artificial Fluctlight, Alice, had managed to break through their «inability to defy law and order», was quite unbelievable.

She now completely understood Kirito's wish to protect each and everyone of them.

I will inherit that will.

Asuna steeled her determination, then took a deep breath, and spoke:

“Greetings, everyone. I believe this is the first time we've met. My name is Asuna. I'm from the outside world.”

While it had only been eight days since her departure, Alice was beginning to miss the short, idyllic time she had spent living reclusively with Kirito in the border village of Rulid, when she would often push Kirito in his wheelchair on their way to the nearby farm.

Surrounded by a white wood fence, woolly sheep would graze nonchalantly on the green grass, and among them, the pure-white lambs would race around, full of energy.

Alice could not help but marvel at their blessed lives. Not having to worry about the world outside that fence, peacefully living in captivity, protected by humans.

She never expected that —

The people of this world were leading lives exactly like those sheep.

That otherworldly girl Asuna’s words had dealt an earth-shattering shock to all of the Knights and Guard Leaders. Even Knight Commander Bercouli, while maintaining his usual relaxed expression, must have been thoroughly shaken inside.

Asuna had called the world where the Human Empire and Dark Territory existed together using a word in the Sacred Tongue: “Underworld”. And outside—not geographically, but conceptually—was a strange realm termed the “Real World”.

Of course, the Guard Leaders successively raised various questions about that world, which seemed no different from the land of the gods.

The visitor replied. The people living in the Real World, like them, were human beings with emotions, desires, and limited Life.

And right now, at a highly specific location in the Real World, two powers were jostling for control of the Underworld.

Asuna seemed to be a messenger for one of them. Her goal was to protect the Underworld.

The other side's goal was—to retrieve one single human from the Underworld. After that, they would undertake the destruction of the entire world, rendering everything they knew into absolute nothingness.

Hearing those words, the Guard Leaders began making a reckless racket.

What quelled this disturbance was Bercouli's thunderous bellow.

Isn't it the same? The three-hundred year old hero pointed out. Beyond the Human Empire lies the endless Dark Territory, with an army of tens of thousands just waiting for a chance to invade. Until today, there has not been a single one who has sat down and carefully thought about this reality. It's just an extra world outside of ours, what are you afraid of?

After this violent reasoning was conveyed through a steady and reliable voice, everyone accepted its view. Bercouli turned to Asuna and asked: Who is the person that your enemies are looking for?

The outsider's light brown eyes swiveled from Bercouli to Alice.

“... M... me?”

Not just Renri; Tiese, Ronye and even Sheyta revealed expressions of shock. Only Bercouli nodded as though he was expecting such an answer.

“As I expected... the «Radiant Medium»...”

Asuna did not understand what that meant. She blinked at the Knight Commander, then turned back to answer.

“We don’t have much time. To prevent the Underworld from being destroyed, Alice has to come to the Real World with me. If Alice is no longer here, the enemy will stop interfering with this world...”

“W... What kind of joke is that?!”

Alice yelled, unable to restrain herself any further. She leapt from her chair, slapped her chestplate with her right hand, and proclaimed, with increasing intensity:

“Asking me to flee?! To abandon this world, and abandon everyone here, and my comrades in the Defense Army... to flee to the Real World?! Impossible! I am an Integrity Knight! My greatest and only mission is to protect the Human Empire!!”

Now Asuna leapt to her feet. Tossing her chestnut hair that was reminiscent of silver oak acorns, she retorted with a voice like a silver bell:

“All the more reason! If the enemy... is not from the Dark Territory, but a thief from the Real World, and if they were to get hold of you and drag you out of this world, everyone here... not just them, even the earth, the sky, everything will be destroyed! We don't even know when the enemy will attack!”

“Hold on, about that, you're a bit late about that, Asuna-san.”

The Knight Commander spoke calmly:

“The enemy you speak of are already here.”

“Uh...”

To Asuna, who was suddenly struck dumb, the Knight Commander took a slow sip of liquor and continued:

“Seems like everything's been revealed. The «Radiant Medium». «Dark God Vector», who's chasing her. The god Vector who's directing his troops right now must be someone from the Real World like you.”

“Dark... God.”

Asuna whispered, her face pale. She continued with some incomprehensible words:

“I really didn’t think of that... the Dark Territory super account actually wasn’t locked with a password or anything...”

“Ex... Excuse me.”

Breaking the brief silence, young Knight Renri timidly raised his hand.

Seeing that everyone turned to look at him, the boy asked softly, his face reddening:

“About that, what exactly is a Radiant Medium? And, the thieves from the Real... World? Why do they want Alice-dono?”

The one who answered his question was someone whom everyone thought would remain as «The Silent» during this meeting, the gray Knight Sheyta.

“Because she broke the Seal of the Right Eye.”

Alice jumped at that, momentarily forgetting her indignation. Her hand unconsciously moved to her right eye, and she asked:

“You... You know about that, Sheyta-dono?! How?!”

“It still hurts... whenever I think about it. At that time, to cut down... the strongest thing in the world... the invincible Axiom Church... it must have felt good.”

“ ... ”

The Knights and Guard Leaders fell into a thin silence. Bercouli coughed and pretended not to hear that.

“Ah, I believe there are others here with similar experiences. If the slightest sliver of dissatisfaction or resistance was held against the Highest Minister’s power or the Axiom Church’s authoritative body, one’s right eyeball would begin to flash with red light, coupled with a stabbing pain. Typically, whatever thoughts one had would be forgotten due to the excruciating discomfort. But if one continued these unstable thoughts, the pain would intensify without end, and their right vision would be dyed completely red—and eventually...”

“Their entire right eye would explode.”

Alice whispered, her memories of that detestable moment still fresh.

“Then... Alice-dono...”

To Renri’s horrified voice, Alice nodded slowly and continued, her voice soft.

“I battled Senate Elder Chudelkin, and the Highest Minister Administrator. To summon that determination, I temporarily lost my right eye.”

“Erm... May I ask...”

A voice even smaller than Renri’s requested an opportunity to pitch in, belonging to the girl Ronye of the Supply Team, who had been listening wide-eyed until now.

“Eugeo-senpai too, to protect me... when he swung his sword for Tiese and me, and committed the crimes, from his right eye... Blood...”

That should be it as well. Alice nodded. Fighting countless battles as a civilian, defeating even the Knight Commander, and displaying perfect Incarnation against Administrator. That young man was definitely able to surpass the mere Seal of the Right Eye.

That’s right, during the battle on the topmost floor of the Cathedral, Administrator seemed to say something about the Seal of the Right Eye to Alice. Was it, Code eight seven...?

Without waiting for Alice to recall Administrator’s words, Bercouli spoke while rubbing his chin.

“Hm... In other words, those ‘enemies’ are looking for those who broke the Seal on their own. Asuna-san, do you people of the Real World have the same Seal as well?”

“... No.”

After hesitating for a moment, the chestnut hair swung from side to side.

“I don’t have any such experience. Maybe the only difference between Real World people and Underworld people is whether they can break laws or commands.”

“That means, Lil’ Miss Alice is now an existence exactly the same as you guys? But don’t you think that’s weird? If you’re the same, why do they have such a request? Aren’t there plenty of people in the Real World?”

“That’s...”

Hesitating more than she had before, Asuna fell silent.

But just as she dislodged her frozen memories, Alice’s shout interrupted Asuna’s words.

“That’s it! Code 871!”

Wringing her hands, she said frantically:

“The Highest Minister called the Seal of the Right Eye as Code 871. She said it was added by «that person»! I don’t know exactly what that means, though...It’s not Sacred Tongue, so it’s the language of the Real World?!”

“Code... 87... 1...?”

Asuna repeated, dumbfounded. Her brows creased in surprise.

“... Did... someone from RATH add the Seal...? But wouldn't that... just interfere with their purpose...?”

She sat back down, thought for a moment, then —

She suddenly looked petrified. Her pale pink lips trembling, she squeezed out a hoarse whisper.

But Alice did not understand what she said.

“... Damn it!... There's a mole in RATH...! On the other side of this wall...!”

Asuna was deeply shaken.

Blind obedience of a higher power. In order to remove the only flaw in the jewel of the artificial Fluctlight, Higa Takeru and the RATH technicians had put in immense effort.

This was because the current artificial Fluctlights were unable to evaluate the morality or utility of commands they were given. If they were loaded as AI onto war machines, even if their command system was hacked and they were ordered to attack the troops they belonged to or engage in indiscriminate murder of civilians, they would not be able to evaluate their commands, instead choosing to execute them directly. They were different from the regulations

within Western armies, who possessed the ability to defy orders.

Therefore, to engineer artificial intelligence that was able to break through this limitation, RATH undertook simulated experiments in the Underworld that spanned hundreds of years.

However, if the Seal of the Right Eye or «Code 871» was an apparatus to prevent the experiment from exceeding, if it had been inserted by someone unknown within RATH.

This attempt at disruption probably originated from a directive issued by the attackers on the Ocean Turtle.

And now this mole was still able to move freely in the upper shaft on the Ocean Turtle. If he wanted to, he could even slip past the other technicians and enter STL Room 2, where Kirito and Asuna lay completely defenseless.

Brushing away the chill that ran down her spine, Asuna continued to think:

Her only option was to run her current «Creation Goddess Stacia»'s HP to zero—to death, in other words. But if that happened, she would not be able to log back in with this super account. With the system administration authority commands currently locked, they were unable to reset account data.

Since the attackers were using Dark God Vector, an account of the same level, he was undefeatable with a civilian account. To protect Alice, and then log out safely, she needed this account no matter what.

—*What to do? What should I do first?*

After racking her brains for a split second, Asuna inhaled deeply, and decided.

She would prioritize the Underworld. This world ran at a speed one thousand times that of the Real World. Before the smallest movement happened in the Real World, they should still have some time.

In this time, she had to come up with a plan to protect Alice from the enemy-led Dark Territory army, and extract her to the Real World. If she failed at that, and Alice fell into enemy hands, those people would destroy all of the other Light Cubes without hesitation to solidify their status as the holders of the single true AI. They would destroy the Underworld, which Kirito had put his life on the line for.

* * *

From the reports they were receiving, it seemed that Yuuki Asuna's judgment had been completely correct.

But neither her, nor Higa Takeru and Kikuoka Seijirou on the Ocean Turtle, had realized an important truth.

Ever since Gabriel Miller and Vassago Casals had logged in, the FLA rate had been slowly decreasing. This operation was being performed by Critter, the technician of the attacking team, but the one who gave the order was Gabriel.

In about twenty hours, armed JSDF personnel from the Aegis destroyer «Nagato» would storm the floating structure. In that sort of situation, it was understandably inconceivable to RATH that the attacking team would lower the Acceleration Rate and throttle their own necks.

Of course, the reason behind their lowering of the Acceleration Rate was beyond anyone’s imagination.

But—

In this instant, only one person had seen through Gabriel’s motive.

Concealed in Yuuki Asuna’s portable terminal, «she», the world’s most advanced «Top-Down» artificial intelligence, stealthily planned as she flew through the internet.

* * *

“What’s... wrong?”

Alice had stopped using honorifics some time ago. Hearing her words, Asuna suddenly raised her head and shook it.

“No... It’s nothing. Sorry to interrupt.”

“You didn’t interrupt, we’re still waiting for your reply.”

Alice said testily.

“So, do you have any clues about the name «Code 871»?”

“Yes. I was just about to explain.”

Alice retorted coolly. Even Asuna herself was perplexed at this.

Asuna could not remember ever arguing with anyone. She was on good terms with her friends—Lisbeth, Silica, Leafa, Sinon, and even with her classmates in school.

Speaking of which, when was the last time she had contended with some like this? She thought for a moment and nearly burst out laughing. Without a doubt, that person would be Kirito.

Ever since they had met on the first floor of Aincrad and somehow struck up an interdependent relationship to begin clearing that death game, Asuna had stared at and shouted in Kirito’s face numerous times, occasionally even getting physical.

Maybe, there would come a time when she could get along with this girl named Alice.

—*No, that’s not very likely.*

As Asuna thought, she opened her mouth:

“... Then, the person who set up what Lil’ Miss Alice called «Code 871», or the Seal of the Right Eye, was someone from the Real World... in cahoots with the enemy.”

“Hmm... Well, besides destroying one’s right eye, is there another way to remove this so-called Code?”

At Bercouli’s inquiry, the otherworldly girl shook her head apologetically.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know either... I don’t think that it’s something that can be removed from within the Underworld, I’m afraid.”

Listening to Asuna’s clear voice, Alice felt uneasy.

Of course, her first impression of her was terrible. Asuna suddenly getting that close to Kirito without explanation left her deeply vexed. After all, she was the one who had protected and cared for Kirito and his injuries.

Then again, this girl named Asuna, like Kirito, was from the Real World. Judging by her words and actions, she must have had some relationship with him there. Then, since she chased him to another world, she at least had some say in the matter.

Was this the reason to her anxiety? She had thought that she was the only one in this world most obligated and responsible for Kirito, yet now there suddenly comes someone to challenge that?

Or was it her competitive spirit towards Asuna's frightening swordsmanship?

That was Alice's first time witnessing a strike with such ludicrous speed. It was a speed that not even Vice Knight Commander Fanatio could match. It wasn't merely a continuous strike; it felt more like multiple stabs coming at exactly the same time. If their swords had been knocked slightly off course upon hitting each other, her opponent would likely have recovered faster.

Or was it —

Because Asuna was so extraordinarily beautiful that just looking at her made you sigh?

An exotic face without even the slightest tinge of austerity, as though it were the embodiment of the word "exquisite" itself. The bonfire brightly illuminated her white skin and her soft, billowing chestnut hair, which looked to be top-quality strands of silk braided together. The Guard Leaders' eyes all revealed intoxicated gazes of admiration. If Asuna had called herself Goddess Stacia, they would have believed her without question.

She wanted to know.

Not about the Real World or about the enemy, but about this Asuna person. The relationship between her and Kirito.

Catching herself floating within her own thoughts, Alice regained her senses, struggling to concentrate and catch up with the conversation. Asuna continued to the Knight Commander:

“... The «enemy» are afraid of those who have broken the Seal in the Underworld... in other words, if their proverbial «Radiant Medium» shows up and is taken away by some external force. Because the Radiant Medium in the Real World is actually an extremely precious existence.”

“That’s what I don’t understand.”

Knight Commander Bercouli muttered, twirling his bottle of liquor.

“Your «Radiant Medium», or Lil’ Miss Alice, should be an existence equal to that of a Real World person, shouldn’t she? I just asked, why are they you all so stubborn about this? Whether it’s the enemy, or Asuna-san, what exactly do you want Lil’ Miss Alice to do once you take her away?”

“Um...”

Asuna bit her lip.

Her long eyelashes drooped as she showed a pained expression.

“... I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you yet. Because, I... hope that Alice-san can come to see and judge the Real World with her own eyes. It’s not the kingdom of the Gods, nor is it a fantastical utopia. In fact, it’s far uglier and dirtier than this world. I believe the same about the motives of the people after Alice-san. That is to say, I believe she would not forgive the Real World and the people living there. But... It’s not just that. There are many people who wish to protect this world. Just... Just like Kirito-kun.”

Alice silently listened to the other girl’s long, difficult speech.

Yet she found herself surprised, nodding slowly.

“... Okay. I won’t ask any more questions for now.”

She slowly parted her hands, and shrugged.

“No matter what, I’m not going to do what I don’t want to do. Besides, I haven’t decided to go yet. Although I do wish to see the outside world, that’s still a matter we can discuss after we... defeat Dark God Vector and his invading army, and establish peace.”

Alice thought that Asuna would rebuke fiercely again, but she only hesitated for a moment and spoke slowly:

“... Yeah. Since that Dark Territory army is being controlled by a Real World person, it would be quite dangerous for Alice-san and I to leave on our own. The enemy should have thought of that as well. I’ll... fight alongside everyone. Please leave the fight with Vector to me.”

Cheers were heard from the Guard Leaders. To them, no matter what she herself claimed, Asuna was no different from Goddess Stacia. At least, if she had that earth-shattering super attack, it wouldn’t matter if the enemy had twenty thousand or two hundred thousand troops.

The Knight Commander seemed to be considering the same thing. He crossed his arms and asked:

“All right, we’ll put aside the matter of the Real World for now. Back to the problem at hand... That skill you used just now, Asuna-san, can it be used infinitely?”

“... I’m sorry, but this will disappoint you.”

Asuna shrugged her shoulders and slowly shook her head.

“That sort of power places great mental strain on its user. I would be able to withstand it if it were merely discomfort, but if I use it without restraint, I may be forcibly ejected to the world to preserve my mental health. If that happens, I can never come back. Unfortunately, I can only perform large-scale geographical commands once or twice more.”

Let down by their excessive anticipation, the faces around the bonfire looked disappointed. Noticing this, Alice sprang to her feet again.

“How can we only rely on an outsider’s power to protect our world?! She has already given us enough aid. Now, it’s our turn to show the outsider what we, the Knights and Guards, are capable of!”

After this fierce call to action, Alice felt Asuna’s surprised gaze on her and avoided her eyes embarrassedly.

The first to agree was Renri, the youngest Knight present.

“Y... Yeah! Didn’t you hear that, she’s not a god, she’s a human like us! Then we can fight as well!”

With words that seemed to resonate from the two Divine Instruments at his waist, the young Knight looked towards the red-haired girl a distance away from Asuna. Alice chuckled inwardly.

“I wish to... battle that person again, too.”

«The Silent» Sheyta murmured, throwing her hat into the ring.

The Guard Leaders soon assented one by one, exchanging glances with one another.

That's right, we'll all work together and protect what we love – came the yells and shouts from the Guards who were gathered on the grass around them. As if it were swept up in the wills of the crowd, the fire also began to crackle more vividly, smoke flying towards the night sky.

* * *

Was this—really okay?

In her assigned tent, Asuna began to think as she removed her pearly-white armor.

According to Higa and Kikuoka's intentions in the Real World, Asuna was supposed to quickly bring Alice to a system console and extract her to the safety of the sub control room.

But what then? According to Kikuoka, as long as they procured Alice's Fluctlight and analyzed its structure, they could load it into an unmanned weapon as the basis for its AI. The remaining ten thousand artificial Fluctlights would then lose all purpose. It would also do them no good to waste an immense amount of power and space to keep them running.

Even they only rescued Alice and destroyed the rest of the Underworld, what would Kirito think after he wakes up? No, would he even be able to wake up in the first place...?

No, she could not falter like that again. She had come all this way to meet him, so she must try her utter best to connect with him, speak with him, and search for the key to his recovery. Higa had said that they could only hope for a miracle from within the Underworld to heal Kirito.

Right now, she wanted to be in the supply tent where he was, to hold him, and talk to him. During this period of diving in, she wanted to always be by his side. She never wanted to abandon him and travel to the system console in the faraway south.

—At least, just for tonight...

Making her decision, Asuna removed all of her armor, changed into a female habit and tunic, then moved to the entrance of the tent to listen.

Despite her protests, the Knight Commander had assigned a Guard to her as security. The young man, nervous with his task as Goddess Stacia's bodyguard, was restlessly pacing around the tent's surroundings.

When the footsteps passed over the grass directly across her and neared the middle of the back, Asuna hastily left the tent. In three silent and huge steps, she concealed herself within the shadow of a giant tree ten meters away.

Stealing a glance behind her, she saw that the guard seemed not to have noticed anything, continuing his rounds. After silently apologizing to him, Asuna walked into the depths of the forest.

The Human Empire Army, tired after their large-scale battle, had all retired early, with the exception of a few sentries. The sentries were focusing on the outskirts of the forest, so Asuna was able to sneak into the supply tent area undetected.

Close your eyes and focus.

She did not know whether it was the power of her super account or pure intuition, but she could immediately feel the location of her lover.

Taking a few steps in that direction, Asuna suddenly noticed in the corner of her eye a flash of golden light.

Damn—She timidly turned to look.

A silhouette stood with its back against the tent, arms crossed. Like Asuna, it wore a simple gown with a yarn scarf. Flowing golden hair that waved in the night wind. Deep blue eyes that projected a frightening glare.

“... I knew you would come.”

Alice snorted softly, shaking her golden ponytail.

Staring directly at her opponent of the same height, same body, and same age, Alice was just about to speak her prepared words.

—Didn't I say that you are not allowed near here? Just go quietly back to your own tent.

But the breath she had inhaled felt difficult to vocalize. Because within the eyes of the outsider Asuna, she saw an emotion that could not be clearer.

Yearning. Pain because of that yearning, and determination because of that yearning.

Fuu—sighing deeply, Alice asked herself.

—This is not me yielding. I am the one with the highest responsibility to make sure Kirito awakes. This reality will not change. Because Kirito has fought with me, hurt with me, and fallen out of exhaustion before me.

So this is—a part of what I have to do to make sure Kirito comes back.

“... Let's make a deal.”

Hearing Alice's short remark, Asuna blinked in confusion.

“I'll let you see Kirito. I'll also tell you what I know. In exchange, you tell me everything you know about Kirito.”

After less than a second of confusion, Asuna smiled confidently.

“All right. But it’s a long story. One night may not be enough to tell it.”

How uncomfortable. Pouting again, Alice demanded:

“How long have you been with him?”

So, Asuna’s light brown eyes stared up at the night sky, then she curled the fingers on her hands and replied:

“Well... we were battle partners for two years. Then we dated for a year and a half. We even spent two weeks living together.”

—*“Dated” meant a romantic relationship, right? No, maybe... But I’ve lived with him for longer...*

Alice wavered slightly, then threw out her chest and retaliated:

“I’ve spent an entire night fighting by his side. Then I took care of him in the same roof, staying by his side for half a year.”

It was Asuna’s turn to be shocked, but she quickly recovered. Is that so—she murmured.

The two glowered at each other, as though fully clad in armor, ready to draw swords and duel. The night air crackled, and dry leaves unlucky enough to land between them exploded: pishi, pishi.

The one who bravely entered the battle between an Integrity Knight and the Creation Goddess was—the thin voice of a young girl.

“Um...”

Shocked, Alice whirled in that direction. Asuna followed suit.

The voice had come from a young trainee from the supply team with a soft cap on her tea-colored hair and a gray nightgown—Ronye. She shyly clasped her hands together in front of her chest, and spoke again.

“Actually, I, I spent two months cleaning Kirito-senpai’s room, and he taught me sword skills as well, and even treated us to the Jumping Deer Inn’s honey pies several times! It does seem like very little compared to you two, but... I also want to share...”

Alice blinked a few times before exchanging glances with Asuna again. Both of their mouths smiled wryly at the same time, as though sighing together.

“Sure, Ronye-san. You were a companion, after all.”

Alice shrugged and nodded towards the petite girl. She could not help but praise the trainee exhaling and smiling in relief: what commendable bravery.

But—she was not the only challenger.

“May I partake in the information exchange?”

A seemingly masculine tone, yet a distinctively clear female voice. A rather tall woman had appeared under the moonlight without a sound. Gazing at her graceful features, Asuna let out a weak voice.

“... You’re the...”

Without a doubt, she was the female guard corps leader from the meeting a while ago.

The woman, whose brown hair was tied in a long ponytail, nodded.

“I am Sortiliena Serlut of the Norlangarth North Empire Knight Order. Although I wanted to wait until after the battle had ended... or so I thought, but due to my long association with Kirito, I couldn’t help but join in.”

Alice sighed again, raised her shoulders, and spoke to the tall Guard Leader:

“... And what sort of association is that, Guard Leader Serlut?”

“... If you don’t mind, please call me «Liena», Knight-dono.”

Sortiliena coughed softly before playing her trump card:

“When I was at the Norlangarth Empire Sword Mastery Academy, Kirito served as my valet for a year. I also passed some sword skills to him.”

“.....”

The other three sank into silence at this revelation.

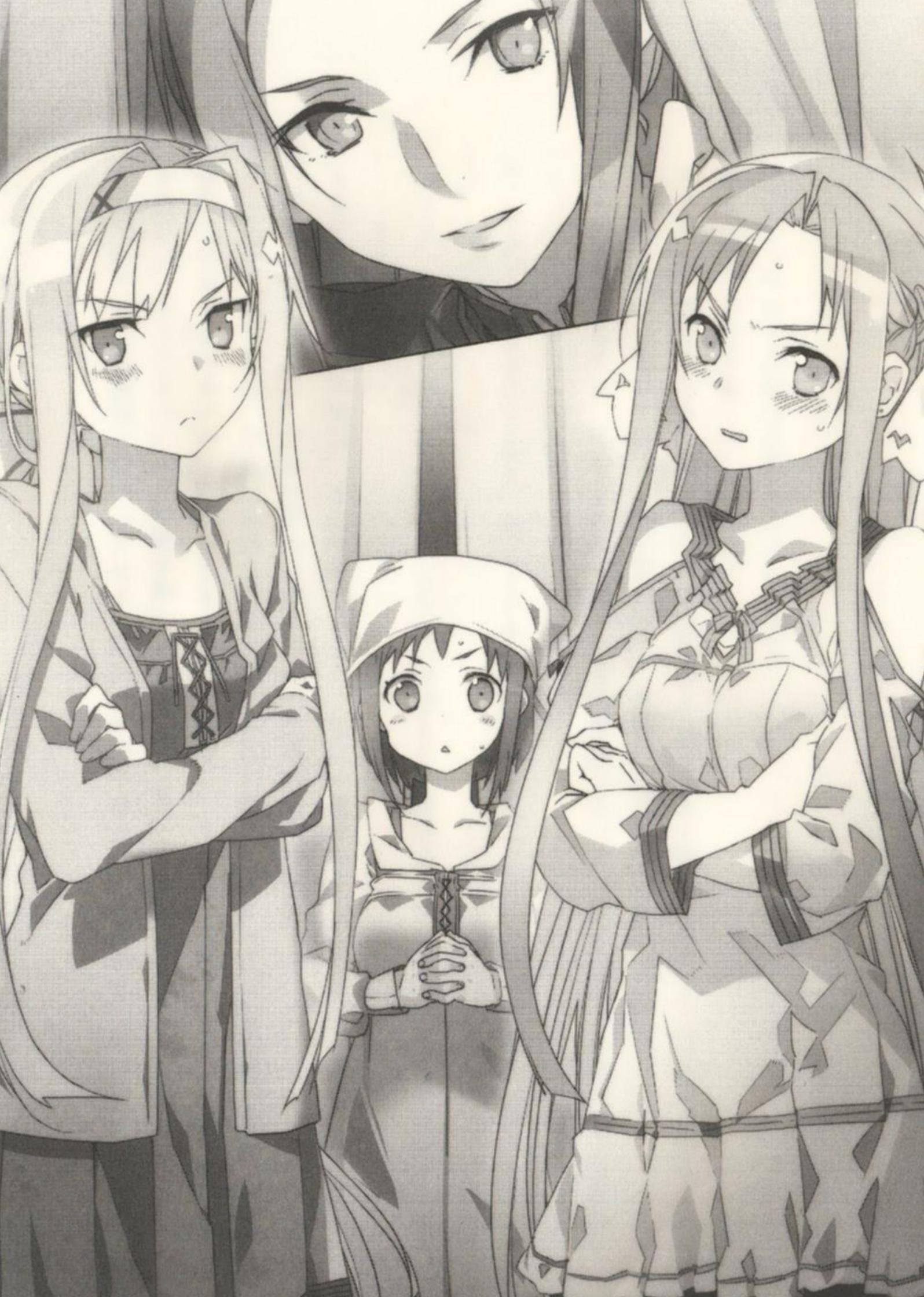
Asuna and Alice met eyes, simultaneously displayed expressions of “Really, now”, and nodded.

“Then you must have quite a bit of information too, Liena-san. Please come in with us.”

With an odd atmosphere, the four of them began silently moving, and Alice led them into a small tent. Simple bedding lay on top of two leather pads next to each other. One of them was empty, while a black-haired youth with his eyes closed lay on the other. Poking out of woolen blanket, two longsword hilts were slightly visible.

Seeing this, Asuna’s lips trembled with a deep longing. Alice did not discern it.

“... What’s the matter?”



At Alice's question, the otherworldly swordswoman momentarily forgot the animosity between them, and answered with a smile:

“Kirito of the «Dual Blades». That's what they call Kirito-kun over there.”

“... Hoh...”

Now that she mentioned it, when Kirito fought that decisive battle against Administrator, he was indeed freely wielding his own black sword and Eugeo's white sword. That definitely did not look easy.

Alice moved to sit down opposite the sleeping Kirito. She beckoned the other three to sit as well, saying:

“Then let's start from there.”

The dark night over the black wilderness became colder and colder, with only the violet moon shining silently over the land.

Whether it was the Guards of the Human Empire Defense Army or the Dark Knights and Fist Fighters of the Dark Territory army in their camp that was now split by a large crevice, all had sunk into deep sleep.

In one corner of the silent night before the final battle between the two sides, only one candle inside a tent could

not be extinguished. Sounds of quiet laughter came from behind the thick curtain, but the only one who could hear was a lone owl perched on a tree branch.

After the oil in the lantern was depleted, the four young women, exhausted from talking so much, sank into sleep beside Kirito.

A moment later, far away in Central Capital Centoria in the Human Empire, a bell steadily tolled midnight. Of course, this sound did not reach the camp in the Dark Territory.

At the same time —

A sensation so faint it could be described as the «vibration of time» reached every single person in the Underworld. That was the sensation of the FLA Rate dropping to 1:1, but even someone were awake, they would find it extremely difficult to feel it.

Underworld Human Empire Calendar, the eighth day of the eleventh month, Year 380, 0:00.

Real World Japan Standard Time, 7 July 2026, 0:00.

The timelines of both worlds were completely synchronized.

Part 6

—Have you ever had a premonition of death?

Suddenly, a distinctive sound penetrated the ears of Bercouli Synthesis One, and his eyes snapped open.

The rays of dawn, tinged an unknown color, began to slowly permeate the dark tent. The air was cold as ice, and his exhaled breath held traces of white.

He knew that it was currently 4:20 AM. Bercouli, whose consciousness was one with the Divine Instrument «Time Piercing Sword», which had once been the hour hand of a giant clock face, was exceptionally keen at determining the time. In ten minutes, he would need to relay an order to the messenger guards to blow the horns and wake everyone up.

Reaching behind his head with thick fingers, the aged Knight could hear the words that had broken into his dreams.

Have you ever had a premonition of death?

The one who had asked him was his only superior, the Highest Minister Administrator.

He had already forgotten the nature of this memory. One hundred years ago? Or was it one hundred and fifty years ago? In the past, to prevent his soul from breaking down, memories deemed unnecessary had been deleted from his

mind. Bercouli could not properly chronologically organize memories long past.

Yet that scene still remains so clear.

Maybe she was growing tired of those infinitely repeating days—although they were of her own desire to begin with—Administrator would occasionally call the man whose age was second only to her, Bercouli, to her bedroom for drinks together.

The silver-haired ruler reclined on a deep red couch, wearing only a thin silk scarf. She had asked that particular question as she lazily played with her wineglass.

He sat straight on the floor and crossed his legs. After taking a bite of cheese that accompanied the wine, Bercouli moved his chin and twisted his neck.

He was accustomed to the ruler's repetitive antics; Bercouli was not looking to please her, but only saying what he wanted to say.

—A premonition of death. When I was still a young brat and was defeated by a Dark Knight from the previous generation or the generation before that, it felt pretty bad.

So the Highest Minister giggled with her hand over her mouth, gently swirling her crystal chalice.

—But didn't you take his head off anyway? I recall that you seemed to transform it into a gemstone and placed it over there. You shouldn't have premonitions any longer.

—Yeah, I couldn't remember. But why do you think that way? Your Excellency shouldn't be associated with this type of feeling.

At this question, the ancient young girl shifted her body and crossed her long legs, smiling coyly.

—Oh dear, you don't understand it at all, Bercouli. Every day... I have this feeling every day. Whenever I wake up... No, in my dreams as well. Because I have not ruled over everything yet. There are still enemies alive. And, maybe at a certain time in the future, new enemies will be created.

—Really, being the Highest Minister is a pretty stressful job.

One hundred years after that conversation, far away from the Human Empire in the corner of a Dark Territory forest, Bercouli grinned fearlessly.

—Now, I finally understand your words.

The so-called premonition of death was just another side of one's lethal pursuits of danger.

A strong enemy that realizes the end of everything, searching for a proper death, unable to resist no matter how much it kicks or screams... You've been seeking it out, after all.

Just like me right now.

Just like me, who can clearly feel death knocking on my door right now...

After Administrator's death, Knight Commander Bercouli, who had become the longest-living human in the world, threw back his covers and donned a white shirt on his muscular body. He tied on his belt, laced his shoes, and stowed his beloved sword on his waist.

Walking out into the cool morning air, Bercouli started towards the messenger guards' tent to relay the wake-up call.

* * *

Almost exactly at the same moment.

Near the Dark Territory military camp two kilol to the north, against the slowly arriving dawn peeking up from the horizon, ten dragons took off into the air.

In the fists of the Dark Knights on their backs were grasped bundles of thick straw rope. One end of each was tied to

wooden stakes driven into the ground on the edge of the great canyon.

As the stretched ropes whistled in the wind, the dragons flew across the nearly hundred-meter wide valley and arrived at the southern edge. The Knights that dismounted were not wielding swords, but hefting great hammers. They began to pound new stakes into the ground with some unfamiliarity.

Emperor Vector's new orders were —

The Fist Fighters' Guild and Dark Knight Order were to cross the the valley on those ten ropes.

The enemy would naturally interfere by attacking, but they must cross regardless.

Those who fall should not be saved.

Food and other supplies need not be transferred over.

In other words, they were to sacrifice a great many people in a ruthless fight to the death, with no provisions. Fist Fighter Guild Chief Iskahn and ex-Dark Knight Commander Shasta's young successor both clenched their teeth in fury.

But they had not the option to disobey the Emperor, their ultimate ruler.

They had hoped at least to cross the valley before the enemy noticed them—yet the generals' wishes were dashed when Human Empire cavalry scouts on night watch sighted the Dark Territory army from a faraway hill, then turned their horses towards the knoll one kilol south.

* * *

With her mouth closed, Asuna chewed the stiff roasted bread with cheese, smoked meat and dried fruit, thinking while still bleary-eyed from sleep.

... Since the time's been accelerated by a thousand, I can eat a thousand meals in the time that the people in the real world take to eat their meal. That won't make me fat, will it...

Stealing a glance ahead of her, she saw Integrity Knight Alice and Guard Chief Sortiliena nibbling on their sandwiches, their eyes also clouded with sleep. Although it was through the fabric of their gowns, she could make out their even bodies, without a trace of flabbiness.

Was there anything like lifestyle-related diseases in this world? Or were body types decided by parameters granted and set at birth? Or—were appearances merely reflections of one's mentality?

Beside them, Ronye was tearing the sandwiches into bite-sized pieces and feeding them to a half-awake Kirito.

According to Alice, his life had been preserved through feeding, but it always seemed to her that Kirito's body was getting thinner every day.

Just as if he wanted to disappear from this world himself.

“... Kirito-senpai looks a little better this morning.”

Ronye suddenly murmured, as though she had read Asuna's thoughts.

“And he's eating, too.”

“Could it be the effect of four pretty girls sleeping beside him?”

Asuna could not help but smile complicatedly at Alice's quip.

Last night had eventually become a situation in which all four of them had lay down beside Kirito and chatted deep into the night. The four of them each shared their memories together with Kirito, but they had far too little time, and eventually surrendered to the demon of sleep.

What felt like an instant later, the call of the horn awoke them. Then, they dug into breakfast that Ronye brought over like they were now, as Asuna thought about her lover.

—Kirito-kun doesn't change wherever he is. He's that kind to everyone, which causes him too much of a burden, hurting himself in the process.

—But this has to be one step too far. Actually putting a whole world on his shoulders alone. You needed to rely more on me and other people. Because everyone likes you very much.

—Of course, I like you the most.

Asuna felt her heart fill with determination once more. When Kirito awoke, she would tell him with a smile: Don't worry, everything's been taken care of. What you wanted to protect, I and everyone else have protected.

Asuna's will seemed to infect the other three around her. Alice, Ronye and Sortiliena looked towards her with gazes now fully awake, and nodded forcefully.

Then, the horn that announced an enemy attack rang throughout the camp with an urgent rhythm.

With bread dangling from her mouth, Alice raced to her tent, slipped into her armor, grabbed the Fragrant Olive Sword and sprinted back out.

After meeting up with Asuna, who was also prepared for battle, she said to Ronye and Tiese, "Please take care of Kirito", and left for the north side of the camp.

At the boundary of the dark forest, she saw the silhouette of Bercouli with his sword. After receiving the cavalry scouts' report, the Knight Commander watched as Alice, Asuna, and, after a few seconds, Renri and Sheyta arrived, then grunted with a serious expression:

“So it seems that the enemy—the Real World guys really have tricks up their sleeve. Seems like Emperor Vector is pretty merciless.”

What he said next even made Alice bite her lip.

A forceful cross of a hundred-mel valley merely by thick ropes. If you fall, you die. A task impossible without steely physical and mental fortitude. To be able to use such a strategy, Vector must not care for the details—or rather, he views the lives of his soldiers as mere wastepaper.

In that case, even if one third of the enemy perished at the bridge, their main forces were still nearly seven thousand strong. One thousand Human Empire troops taking them head-on had no hope of victory.

Their original strategy of attacking with arts while concealed in the forest was now impossible in the light of day. Should they retreat further south and wait for another opportunity to ambush?

Knight Commander Bercouli's words interrupted Alice's confusion.

"This is war."

The ancient hero muttered softly. Bulges of muscle visible on his thick neck, he continued:

"Putting aside the outsider Asuna-san, this isn't the time to sympathize with the Dark Territory. If we wanna live we have to take this opportunity."

"Opportunity... you said?"

At Alice's surprised, parroted question, Bercouli replied with a glint in his eye.

"Yes. ... Knight Renri."

His name suddenly being called, the young Integrity Knight immediately straightened his back.

"Y... Yes."

"What's the furthest range of your Divine Instruments the «Twin Winged Blades»?"

"Yes. Normally thirty mel, but under Recollection Release, about seventy, no, a hundred mel."

"Very good. Then... now we four Knights will storm the main enemy force in the valley. Alice and I will lead, with

Sheyta focusing on protecting Renri. Renri will use his Divine Instruments to sever the enemy’s ropes at one end.”

Alice quietly gasped.

So—the enemy would definitely protect their crossing ropes with their lives. Even if they blocked the opening with a human shield, the throwing knives would curve in their flight, sail above their heads and directly attack the ropes. As Bercouli said, this was a merciless strategy.

But the young Knight only fifteen years of age slammed his right hand to the left side of his chest, face filled with firm resolve.

“Yes, sir!”

Then, The Silent Sheyta said in a low voice:

“Leave it to me. I will... protect him.”

Afterwards, Asuna, who had been purposefully left out by Bercouli, stepped forward.

“I’m coming too. The more defenders, the better.”

Alice closed her eyes for a moment, then said to herself softly:

As the situation stands now—I, who burned ten thousand Demihuman troops to death with a gigantic art and

murdered two thousand Dark Sorceresses with the Armament Full Control Art, am no longer qualified to seek an honorable fight.

Now, I can only draw my sword, and kill the enemy.

“— Let’s hurry.”

Nodding to all four, Alice looked towards the knoll to the north. The black ridgeline was already tinged with the deep red glow of dawn.

* * *

Hurry up!

Hurry, hurry!

Clenching both his fists, Fist Fighters’ Guild Chief Iskahn shouted silently for the umpteenth time.

On top of the ten thick ropes stretched across the yawning valley, the Fist Fighters and Dark Knights divided themselves up and began to cross, one by one.

They had attempted to curl their hands and feet around the ropes and inch across while hanging upside down, but the soldiers, having never experienced any kind of training in that area, moved extremely clumsily. If they had been allocated time to make and distribute safety harnesses for

everyone, that would have been beneficial, but the Emperor had given no such quarter.

Furthermore, Iskahn's request to be the first to cross had been instantly rejected. It appeared to be an explanation for last night's expansion of orders, punishment for taking only a small number of his subordinates to engage the enemy. You all must follow my orders alone. The Emperor's ice-cold voice resounded in his ears.

Before Iskahn, who was gritting his teeth and staring straight ahead, the frontmost subordinate finally reached the middle of the rope bridge.

He could see from this distance the copper red skin radiating heat in the cold morning air, droplets of sweat reflecting light. What an arduous task.

Just then.

A strong gust of wind blew through the valley.

Pyooooo! The ropes creaked in protest and began to shake left and right.

“AH...!”

Iskahn yelled, in spite of himself. A handful of tribal soldiers, their palms dripping with sweat, slipped off the rope and plunged downwards.

Beastlike roars shook the valley. The young Chief clenched his teeth. Those were not screams of terror. Those were bellows of remorseful deaths, unable to be afforded an honorable end on the battlefield, forced to play acrobatics.

After the wind passed by, a two-figure number of Fist Fighters and Dark Knights had fallen into the unending darkness of the valley.

But the soldiers behind bravely continued crossing. Every three meters a new soldier would grasp the rope.

More gusts of wind occasionally, unforgivingly taking lives with them every time. Without him noticing, Iskahn's clenched fists began flaring red.

—*Deaths in vain.*

No, not even that. They didn't even leave bodies to bury.

And the goal this time was not the wish of the five races of the Land of Darkness; it was merely the Emperor's desire for a woman called the «Radiant Medium». He didn't know how to apologize to the tribesmen like this.

—*Faster, faster. Everyone get across, before someone gets in the way again.*

Whether the young Chief's wishes had reached him, or whether they had merely grown accustomed to his actions,

the one in front increased his speed and finally arrived at the other side. After about five seconds, a second one stepped onto firm ground.

At this rate, it would optimistically take more than an hour for ten thousand soldiers to cross the valley on ten rope bridges. In this long period of time, the enemy had no way of not discovering them here.

But now he could only pray for their lucky one-in-ten-thousand chance.

The sun rose in the eastern sky at a frightening speed, throwing reddish light onto the black ground.

In contrast, the number of soldiers who had gotten across only increased at an infuriatingly slow pace. More and more fell into the valley, increasing from fifty to a hundred, two hundred, and just as that number hit three hundred.

At the black horizon line in the red sky, five silhouettes on horseback appeared.

At this distance, even Iskahn with his superhuman vision was unable to discern the features of the horseback enemies.

—Only five of them... Scouts? Then there's still time before the enemy adjusts their movements.

That judgment, or rather, hope, was instantly shattered.

The five Knights suddenly charged straight towards the valley with alarming speed. Billowing white cloaks, multi-colored shining armor, and what stood out the most to Iskahn, who was unable to deny what he saw radiating from all five of them, thick, powerful fighting intent rising from them like steam.

—*Integrity Knights! And five of them!!*

“Enemy attack!! Defend!! Protect the ropes at all costs!!”

Iskahn yelled, not knowing whether his voice could even reach the other side at this distance.

Seemingly hearing the order, half of the three hundred or so soldiers who had successfully crossed the valley surrounded the wooden stakes bound with rope, forming a circular arrangement. The rest prepared to repel the attack.

The enemy Knights that flew across nearly a thousand miles of wilderness from the hills to the valley leapt off their horses simultaneously, grouped together, and lunged towards the ropes on the right side.

Leading them was a hulking man in loose white clothing. To his right was a female Knight with shining golden hair and armor. To his left was a female Knight with whom Iskahn had fought against last night, named Sheyta.

Surrounded by the three of them was a shortish Knight, and behind him seemed to be another, but he could not see exactly.

Sweat flying from their naked bodies, tens of Fist Fighters sprinted towards them.

“URAAAA—!!”

With powerful screams, fists and feet flew towards the Knights.

Flash, flash flash. Numerous, instantaneous flashes of light.

Showers of blood plunged into the sky like a reverse waterfall. The hands, feet and heads of the warriors were easily sliced from their bodies.

Then.

Silver light that shined in its path flew high into the air from behind the three Knights.

It drew a curved path above the Fist Fighters’ heads in the red sunrise—flying straight towards the rightmost thick rope with a great number of soldiers still fallen on top of it

—

“NOOOOO—!!”

Iskahn's keen ears, undisturbed by his own scream of despair, detected the bzzp of a soft cutting sound.

The rope snapped back, dancing in the air like a great snake.

Tens of warriors were instantly thrown off and plunged below.

As this scene burned into his wide eyes, Iskahn felt words tumble from his numb mouth:

“Is this... war? Can you call this war?”

Behind him, his aide Dampe was at a complete loss for words.

Forced to play acrobatics, his fellow tribesmen who were unable to even stand in front of the enemy, devoured by a crack in the ground, had definitely not endured their grueling training to meet such an end.

How were they to explain this to their aged parents and sons and daughters back in their homeland? They had not died honorably in battle—but disappeared into the ground without a wound on their bodies. How was he to say such a thing?

Frozen to the spot, Iskahn's ears rang with the regretful shrieks of his fighters.

I will avenge you all. So please forgive me. Forgive me.

Even as he murmured in his heart, Iskahn was unable to immediately point the finger at who he should accuse.

Facing an enemy several times more than them, the enemy Integrity Knights were already giving it their all. Pleading with them to stop until the last person crossed the valley was impossible. On the contrary, their boldness to seize the opportunity and send only five people to attack was impressive.

Then who?

Who should pay for the senseless deaths of the warriors?

Their commander, who can only clench his fists and stand still like a fool?

Or —

Suddenly, excruciating pain that shot across his right eye made Iskahn grit his teeth. Blood-red light wobbled his vision. Yet before him, two more ropes split apart, dancing in the air.

* * *

In an instant, three of the ten rope bridges were severed. Gabriel Miller watched from behind his own troops, his cheek propped on his hand.

As expected, in terms of AI, the Human Empire Units excelled a bit more. No, just from situation control, he could see a great disparity between them. Including last night's first battle, the Dark Territory army had the tables turned on them in an instant, and suffered painful counterattacks. No matter how he thought about it, it did not seem like a simulation game in which he fought against the CPU.

The results of this game involved Gabriel losing more than 70 percent of his own Units. But he did not feel a sliver of impatience.

Even as he watched hundreds of main force Units get eliminated, he was merely waiting. Waiting for «that moment».

At this time, Critter, in control of the Ocean Turtle main control room, had successfully decreased the FLA rate to 1:1, an action that synchronized their time with that of the real world. They had spent that much time doing so in order to minimize the impact of decreasing the rate and to prevent the RATH worker who had logged into the Underworld from noticing.

At the same time, via satellite network, he had released a URL onto a large-scale video game social media website in the United States. The link pointed to a certain publicity website that Critter had quickly set up.

On the website, a sensational font accompanied with blood splatter special effects declared the following:

An all new VRMMO is now open for a limited-time closed beta.

The world's first killing-only PvP game is born.

Fully human avatars. No levels, no ethical limits.

Users who saw these fiery words marveled at the sheer audacity of the development company, yet rejoiced beyond belief.

As of now—July 2026, as part of a counterterrorism initiative, American VRMMOs had suffered legal limitations. Even for independent games developed through use of The Seed software package, if it had not been reviewed by industry rating boards and had a Code of Ethics applied to it, running its servers would be prohibitively difficult.

Therefore, activities of cruelty were strictly limited; if one insisted on adding «dismemberment» content, the characters must be set to insectoid figures, like «Insect Site». These restrictions, worse than that of Japan, the birthplace of VRMMOs, frustrated players all over the US. Yet now, a mysterious closed beta announcement has suddenly appeared.

The URL was distributed all over through SNS, and people downloaded, copied, and reuploaded the connection client with frightening speed. In a mere four hours, the number of AmuSpheres connected to the client that Critter had created broke thirty thousand connections.

Gabriel's greatest plan that he was unwilling to sacrifice valuable real world time for.

That is, handing over the Dark Knight accounts in the Dark Territory to the entire American VRMMO player base, letting them connect to the Underworld to display their own fighting strength.

Not even Kikuoka Seijirou, leader of RATH, or the designer of Underworld Higa Takeru could even dream of such an absurd situation.

But the underlying architecture of Underworld merely utilized The Seed's standard VRMMO software package. If it were a game world merely expressed through polygons, anyone could log in as long as they possessed an AmuSphere, and could touch Objects—or kill other characters.

And it made no difference whatsoever whether the killed characters were real world people or Underworld people.

Part 7

Gabriel and Critter's secret plan was completely out of the RATH technicians' imaginations.

On the other hand, even if they discovered it, they had no way of cutting off the satellite connection when the main control room was occupied like this.

But at the moment Critter sent out the suspicious URL, someone discovered that packet.

From within the portable terminal that Yuuki Asuna had brought with her, the Top-Down artificial intelligence that had been observing the Ocean Turtle's internal status—Yui, accessed the announcement website and correctly extrapolated Gabriel's goal.

She searched for a way to transmit a warning to the physically locked sub control room, but Asuna's terminal had been left in her cabin, and no matter how much she sounded her ringtone, no one could hear it.

As a last resort, Yui could only pull her consciousness back to Japan on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, and called several portable terminals at the same time.

* * *

Asada Shino, a high school girl in the real world and an elite sniper in the virtual world, was jerked awake, and jumped off her bed in her own apartment.

Her bedside clock read 3:00 AM. Although she had been awoken at a time like this, she was not the least bit drowsy. The reason for that was the melody she heard was Kirigaya Kazuto's ringtone.

Was it Kirito, who had disappeared unconsciously, calling her?

Clumsily pressing on the terminal and putting it to her ear, she heard the frantic voice of a young girl.

“Sinon-san, it's Yui!”

“Eh... Y-Yui?”

Of course, she knew Kirito and Asuna's «daughter»—the artificial intelligence Yui. A week ago, when she had been discussing Kirito's disappearance with Asuna and the others, she had personally witnessed Yui's high-tech information processing abilities and emotional expressions.

But, to call her directly by telephone was completely out of her expectations; Shino was temporarily speechless. A slightly electronic, sweet yet urgent voice reached her ear:

“I’ll explain the details later. Get ready to leave your house and take a taxi. I’ll send the destination and the shortest route to your terminal. First, I’ll wire the taxi fare into Sinon-san’s electronic wallet.”

Then, with a charin sound effect, Shino’s terminal notified her of an online money transfer.

“Hah... T-Taxi? Where...?”

Shino stood as Yui instructed, slipping her foot out of her sleepwear and asked with a heavy head. But Yui’s next words jolted Shino’s consciousness awake like ice water.

“Please hurry. Papa and Mama are in danger!!”

* * *

“D... Danger?! Onii-chan and Asuna-san?!”

A high school student and swordswoman, also Kirigaya Kazuto’s younger sister, Kirigaya Suguha demanded as she buttoned her pants.

“Leafa-san, you’ll wake up Aunt Midori if you’re that loud.”

Listening to the calm voice from the terminal, Suguha hurriedly closed her mouth.

“Ye...Yeah. Hey... This is my first time sneaking out this late...”

“Very regrettable, but now there’s not much time to explain the reason for your excursion to obaa-sama. Just leave a message in your home server explaining that you needed to attend an early morning club activity.”

“O... Okay. Wow... Yui sure is a great strategist.”

Suguha exclaimed as she finished dressing. She descended the stairs with soft steps, and extended her hand towards the front door handle. Although they lived in an ancient Japanese-style house, their online security system still ran throughout the night, but the alarm line seemed to have been severed.

After Kazuto disappeared, her mother came home early every day. Feeling guilty for her own actions, Suguha put her hands together and apologized before leaving through the entrance.

—I’m sorry, Mom. I will definitely save onii-chan.

After reaching the main road, a taxi appeared before her. Probably one that Yui had reserved online. Although the driver was slightly surprised at Suguha’s age, after she explained that her relatives were ill, she glanced at her terminal and said:

“Um... Please head to Tokyo harbor.”

She probably shouldn’t be too specific and say “Roppongi”.

* * *

Higa Takeru felt a half-eaten Energy Bar hit his leg after dropping from his desk, and suddenly opened his eyes.

After blinking forcefully a few times, he confirmed the time on the wall clock. There was still a while before 4:00 AM, Japan Standard Time. Glancing beside him, he saw that the RATH technicians watching the sub control room all had fatigued expressions.

Professor Koujiro Rinko sat horizontally on on a chair at the control console, her head drooping up and down as she drifted in and out of sleep. Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka was not asleep, but his thin slits for eyes staring at the main monitor from behind his black-framed glasses has lost their usual sharpness.

On the other hand, four technical crewmembers were sprawled like corpses on mattresses laid out beside the wall. Considering that any Defense Officer among the Self-Defense Force could be leaking information, Kikuoka had stationed them to guard the pressure-resistant wall partition beneath the sub control room.

Since they had been attacked by a mysterious paramilitary group, fourteen hours had elapsed—or rather, finally passed by.

Ten hours still remained before the Aegis destroyer «Nagato», which was protecting them from a distance—or so it was originally—would give the order to storm the Ocean Turtle. Under this situation, their wait was despairingly long. It was even more so in the time-accelerated Underworld.

Ten hours had passed since Yuuki Asuna had dived in with Super Account 01. Calculating according to the internal acceleration rate of one thousand times, that equated to ten thousand hours—over one year. But there had been no news on whether her mission to protect Alice had succeeded or failed.

“Is it really that far away... from the Human Empire to the World End Altar...”

Higa mumbled, his mind constructing a map of the Underworld that resembled the RATH logo— Just then.

The telephone on the control console burst to life with a earsplitting pi pi pi, pi pi pi. Higa jumped without thinking.

“Ki... Kiku-san, the phone.”

Wondering whether something had happened downstairs, he notified the commander.

Also startled by the phone, a figure in a Hawaiian shirt clamored for the receiver, his clogs slipping from his feet.

“Sub control room, this is Kikuoka!”

Although his voice was slightly hoarse, he still managed a forceful reply. After a moment, from the receiver came—not the voice of Captain Nakanishi, in command of the Defense Officers, but the hesitant voice of a young man.

“Uh, um, this is the STL development headquarters of RATH... Right? I’m Hiraki of the RATH Roppongi branch...”

“Hah? R-Roppongi?”

In regards to Kikuoka, this was an extremely rare, slow voice reserved for situations completely outside of his expectations. But Higa was the same.

Why would the Roppongi branch be contacting them at this time? The technicians there were completely unaware that RATH was a disguised business venture operating on government defense budget, that its headquarters was based not on Japanese soil but in the Ocean Turtle floating far out in the south Pacific Ocean, and the name Project Alicization should be completely foreign to them.

Of course, they were even more unlikely to know that RATH was currently under attack by a mysterious enemy. The Roppongi branch was set up entirely for the development of STL-related technologies, merely an outside institution.

Right... STL...

Suddenly, a feeling of noticing something flew past in Higa's mind, but Kikuoka coughed loudly before Higa could catch it.

"Ah, ahh, yes. I am Kikuoka of the STL development headquarters."

"Ah, hello, hello! We've met before. Long time no see, I am Hiraki, honored to be the development director as you appointed me here!"

— *No need for this corporate talk now, just get to the point!!*

Higa screamed silently. Kikuoka put on the same expression, but the words coming out of his mouth effused a faux corporate-like tone.

"Ah, greetings and thank you for your hard work, director Hiraki. It's pretty late; are you working overtime?"

"No, it's just that I missed the last train as I was drinking. It's all the fault of the office location. Oh, Roppongi. Ah, don't tell the higher-ups, heh heh."

— *You're talking to a higher-up right now! The highest-up! Now just spit it out!!*

Whether Higa's willpower had achieved some effect or not, Hiraki stopped his nonsense, and quickly changed his tone.

“Ah—right, it’s like this... We’ve got a problem, it’s... something strange. Right now, someone’s suddenly come in from the outside without an appointment...”

“From the outside? Is it a client?”

“No, it’s got nothing to do with that... Also, they look kind of like high school girls, and there are two of them...”

“HAH?!”

Kikuoka and Higa, along with Professor Koujiro who had stood up at some time, yelped in unison.

“High... High school girls?”

“Yeah. I tried to turn them away, since this company’s secrecy policy is very stringent, you know. But... the things they’re saying, makes me think... “

At Hiraki’s meandering words, even Higa rose to his feet, both hands on the control console. Once more, Kikuoka exerted his admirable iron willpower, and asked steadily:

“So, what exactly did they say?”

“I remember it was like, immediately contact Kikuoka Seijirou at the RATH headquarters, and tell him: confirm the Underworld FLA rate now... That’s what they said.”

“Wh... Whaaaat?!”

The two men yelled in unison again.

Why would high school girls from outside know these words?! These are not words that those who aren't familiar with all of Project Alicization would know.

Higa, his mouth hanging open, exchanged looks with Kikuoka and automatically turned towards the control console, his fingers sailing on the keyboard.

On the pitch-black monitor, the current time acceleration rate appeared.

x 1.00.

“Gh... One?! When did this happen?!”

Higa turned away, breathing hard, as Kikuoka frantically shouted into the mouthpiece.

“Na... Name. Did those two girls mention their names?”

“Ah, yes. That was funny... They didn't sound like their real names at all. They told me to tell Kikuoka-san that they were ‘Sinon’ and ‘Leafa’. They looked Japanese, though.”

Clack!

That dry noise was the sound of the clog hanging on Kikuoka's right foot falling to the floor.

* * *

Only after the automatic lock on the door to RATH's Roppongi branch had clicked open, and Asada Shino and Kirigaya Suguha had trotted in, did the artificial intelligence Yui feel slightly calmer.

In particular, she breathed a small hoh of relief, and allocated a large portion of her calculating power on another task she was running at the same time.

Yui estimated that achieving her goals would come with a great deal of difficulty, because this was something that she definitely could not bring about on her own.

But at the same time, if she failed, the ones she held most dear, Kirito and Asuna, would be faced with grave danger.

Pulling her consciousness away from Shino's portable terminal, Yui gazed with round eyes at each of the four fairies across from her.

Yui and the others were currently within the VRMMORPG—«Alfheim Online», in Kirito and Asuna's virtual cabin on Floor 22 of New Aincrad.

Before Yui, who had transformed into a Navigation Pixie and was floating in the air, sitting on the couch was the Cait Sith player Silica, with triangular ears and small fangs.

Beside her, with a head of metallic pink hair, was Lisbeth, a Leprechaun.

Leaning his waist on a table a slight distance from them, his standing red hair tied in a drab bandanna, was Klein, a Salamander. And beside him was a huge gray-skinned man with his arms crossed, Agil, a Gnome.

They were battle-worn VRMMO players often known as SAO survivors, who had lived through the death game «Sword Art Online», and also best friends of Kirito and Asuna. Even though it was currently very early in the morning, as soon as they received Yui's call, they had quickly logged into ALO, and had just finished listening to an update on the situation.

Scratching his bandanna-wrapped head, Klein snorted in a naturally carefree voice as seriously as he could:

“Dammit... That idiot got mixed up all by himself in something huge again... a virtual world made by the Self Defense Force, and a real artificial intelligence «Alice» that appeared there? That's beyond the boundary of a game now.”

“That so-called artificial intelligence, isn't just an NPC in the game... but an existence equal to humans like us?”

Lisbeth asked. Yui turned towards her and nodded forcefully.

“Yes, that is correct. Her structural principle is completely different from an existing AI like myself; she is a real soul. Known internally at RATH as «Artificial Fluctlights».”

“And they want to put them into war machines for use in war...”

Watching Yui and the little dragon Pina, who was curled up on her knee, Silica wrinkled her brow.

“Actually, RATH meant to display it as a technological base for a demonstration of power... But according to my estimations, the attackers currently occupying the Ocean Turtle have a more detailed plan.”

At Yui’s words, Klein mused with a troubled look:

“Who the hell are they, those attackers.”

“There is a 98 percent chance that they are either affiliated with the US military or the US intelligence department.”

“US... US military?! The American military?!”

Yui nodded towards Lisbeth, who had recoiled in shock.

“If Alice falls into the hands of the US military, the day when she is loaded as AI onto unmanned weapons and thrust into warfare will eventually arrive. Papa and Mama are probably trying to stop this from happening as much as they can. Because... Because...”

Suddenly, Yui became confused at the inconceivable effect that her own emotional output software was creating.

Large droplets of liquid rolled down her face.

Tears.

—I'm crying. But, why...?

As though her confusion was driven away just before gushing out, Yui tightly clasped her tiny hands in front of her chest and continued:

“Because, Alice is the proof that ever since SAO began, every single VRMMO world and the many people living within them have existed, and the result of the consumption of real resources. I am positive. The real goal of the creation of The Seed software package is the birth of Alice.”

The four players listened silently. Yui's tears flowed unceasingly as she continued:

“... It is because, among the countless worlds connected together, the laughter, crying, sadness, and love of countless people... the light of their souls are reflected, so that true humanity can be born in the Underworld. Alice was born from Papa, Mama, Leafa-san, Klein-san, Lisbeth-san, Silica-san, Agil-san, Sinon-san... and the cradle woven from many other people's souls!”



Yui also closed her mouth, and no one said anything for a while.

Yui was unable to discern the thoughts and emotions created in the consciousnesses of the people around her. An existing AI that was merely an information aggregate possessed no real emotions at all, and was therefore unable to process real emotions. There was no one who understood that better than she did.

Yes, this strong feeling of wanting to protect Kirito and Asuna, and the people she loved only stemmed from the most basic code written into her mental health counseling program.

And what she said were merely words comprised of simple lists of information, leaving her uncertain of how much she could convey to human hearts. Before this meeting began—Yui had feared this very moment since the instant she had flown from the Ocean Turtle with a heavy mission.

So when she saw the transparent tracks of tears suddenly flow from Lisbeth's eyes, Yui experienced rare shock.

“Y... Yeah. Everything, is connected. Time, people, like rivers.”

Silica, her eyes wet, also rose to her feet, knelt in front of Yui and gently hugged her with both hands.

“Don’t worry, Yui. We’ll help Kirito and Asuna. Please, don’t cry anymore.”

“Yup. Dun trea’ us like strangers, Yui-pppe. There’s no way we’ll abandon Kirito.”

Klein tugged his bandanna downwards, and agreed in a cracked voice. Agil nodded beside him, and declared in a solemn baritone:

“We still owe him a lot. Now is the time to repay some of that.”

“... Everyone...”

Hugged by Silica, Yui could only squeeze out one word.

Because she could not stop the unknown tears that had started just a moment ago.

—There shouldn’t be any time left. I still have a lot to say. In terms of my action prioritization, I should be calmly relaying the information. Has my emotional imitation circuit broken?

But Yui was overruled by a certain code that was berating her own entire existence, and could only repeat the same words over and over as she sobbed.

“... Thank you, everyone... Thank you everyone...”

After a few minutes, Yui managed to fight back her tears and quickly explained the current situation to the four players and her estimations of what would happen next.

The situation was that the attackers and occupiers of the Ocean Turtle, where Kirito and Asuna had created an announcement website in hopes of recruiting players. It was estimated that players lured by this website would begin appearing in massive numbers in the Underworld.

Klein furrowed his brow and spoke in a serious tone:

“There’ll be at least thirty thousand players diving in from the US... maybe even a hundred thousand or more... To them, Kirito and Asuna, along with the Human Empire army with Alice among them, are merely PvP targets.”

“What if we went and followed the threads on American video game social media? Expose the experiments and the attack, and turn them away from this fake closed beta... How about that?”

At Lisbeth’s direct suggestion, Yui gently shook her head.

“The reality of the situation is that Japanese and American troops are engaged in a top secret battle. If we arbitrarily expose that, it may have the opposite effect.”

“Your opponents are real humans, please do not harm anyone’... If we write something like that, it’s probably going to cause more trouble, huh.”

Silica murmured gloomily.

The deep silence was immediately shattered by Klein’s energetic voice.

“Hey, let’s fight fire with fire, then! The number of internet shut-ins here will never lose to that of the US. Let’s make our own closed beta website, have, um... RATH or whatever, prepare some more accounts, and we’ll have thirty to forty thousand people in no time!”

“But, there’s one very troublesome problem.”

Agil said shortly, his log-like arms crossed.

“What problem is that?”

“Time difference. The time now in Japan is still 4:30 AM, which is when the smallest number of players are online. On the other hand in the US, it’s 12:30 PM in Los Angeles, and 3:30 PM in New York. In terms of online player numbers, the other side has way more of them.”

“Hnnn.....”

Klein moaned, as if he had just realized this.

Yui nodded forcefully, having the exact same idea from the beginning.

“Agil-san is right. On top of the time difference problem, we have much fewer VRMMO players here in the first place, so recruitment will be slower, which means that we will probably be unable to gather up even ten thousand people. In other words, if we use accounts with the same level as the enemies’, the chances of us matching them is very slim.”

“But, the god-level account that Asuna is using is already gone, right? There’s no time to train our level from scratch like Kirito... Looks like we can only choose the strongest ones out of the accounts that RATH prepares and do our best...”

Yui looked towards Lisbeth, who was speaking with a stiff expression on her face.

“No... There are still more accounts. There are accounts that are stronger than the default accounts the enemy is using in terms of level and equipment.”

“Eh... Wh-Where?”

“Everyone has them. The accounts that everyone is logged in with right now.”

To the gasping four players, Yui began to explain the core details of her mission.

She knew that she was currently making a request for a ludicrous sacrifice—in the fullest sense of the phrase, she needed them to hand over one half of themselves.

But at the same time, Yui deeply believed that these people would definitely agree.

“—Account conversion! All of you and many other VRMMO players will need to convert the characters raised in numerous worlds of The Seed, and transfer them into the Underworld!”

(16th Volume: Alicization Exploding – To be continued)

Afterword

Thank you to everyone for reading the sixteenth volume of Sword Art Online, [Alicization Exploding], published a year after the previous one.

Ever since the battle in the Central Cathedral ended, the story has finally extended from the Human Empire to the entire Underworld... I'm very sorry for making everyone wait for so long. In this volume, Asuna finally descends into the battlefield, and seems like some familiar characters are joining the battle as well, so from now on, I hope I can recover the normal pace until the end of Alicization arc. After being constantly protected since the last volume, Kirito-shi may make a big comeback in the next one. I just can't help feeling so!

The subtitle of [Exploding] was added to reference the various explosions and bursts that occurred in this volume. Although the names were kind of short at first, like [Beginning] and [Turning], they've been getting longer and longer recently, so I want to shorten the next volume's name a bit. Below, I'll be discussing the plot of this volume for a bit. The first half of this volume is titled [War of the Underworld], and it gives a taste of a war chronicle since various characters are all fighting in a mess. Because of that, I've shifted the writing style from a limited third-person

perspective to the so-called “omniscient third-person perspective”. Please forgive me if you were confused by the endlessly appearing information that should remain unknown to that part’s central character!

Although I want to describe the author’s situation, life has been pretty normal like last time, so there aren’t any topics worth mentioning... I haven’t been playing any MMORPG games properly these few years. I’d love to start something new yet I haven’t done that since long ago, so I at least tried a western open-world RPG on the PS4, and wow, that was awesome. The map’s too big, there’s too much freedom, so after wandering around for a while I forgot what would happen during the main quests. I’m pretty sure that if I used an HMD and motion controllers to play this kind of game, I wouldn’t be able to return to the real world! I’m always dreaming that one day SAO will become like this kind of game, but when I pleaded to producer Futami over at Namco Bandai Entertainment, “Please turn the entire Underworld into something that you can adventure around in!”, I only got a stupefied smile in return.

Lastly, some routine words of thanks. To abec-san, who gave the Stacia version of heroine Asuna-san the most beautiful and cutest design possible (Sheyta, Renri, and the Goblin Tribal Chiefs are great, too!), and to Miki-san, who as

chief editor proofreads for me deep into the night, thank you very much! See you next volume, everyone!

A certain day in June 2015

Kawahara Reki