

川原礫
イラスト/abec

ソードアート オンライン

アリシゼーション・アウェイクニング

017



017

REKI KAWAHARA ΛΒΕC BEE-PEE

SWORD ART ONLINE

ALICIZATION AWAKENING



「Err.....Good afternoon. Good morning, perhaps?」

Leafa

§ Kirito's non-blood related sister. Logged into the Underworld using Super Account 03 «Terraria, Goddess of the Earth».



「Sorry for the wait, Asuna.」

Sinon

§

A «sniper girl» who logged into the Underworld using Super Account 02 «Solus, Goddess of the Sun».



「Your swordsmanship doesn't seem up to scratch.....Your Imperial Majesty.」

Bercouli § Wielder of the 《Time Piercing Sword》.
Commander of the Integrity Knights, and
the core of the 《Human Empire Army》.

「.....I've had enough. Die.」

Vector § The God of Darkness aiming for the
《Radiant Medium Alice》, and the
commander of the 《Dark Territory Army》.



「Subtilizer..... Why are you here?」

「.....As I remember, we should've fought before in a Gun Gale Online tournament. Who could imagine that we'd meet again in such a place?」

Subtilizer



The avatar of Gabriel Miller in «Gun Gale Online» who had logged into the Underworld with the Super Account 04 «Vector, God of Darkness».



「Gh..... Aaah.....」

「It smells..... I can smell it.....
So sweet is the fragrance of Life.....」

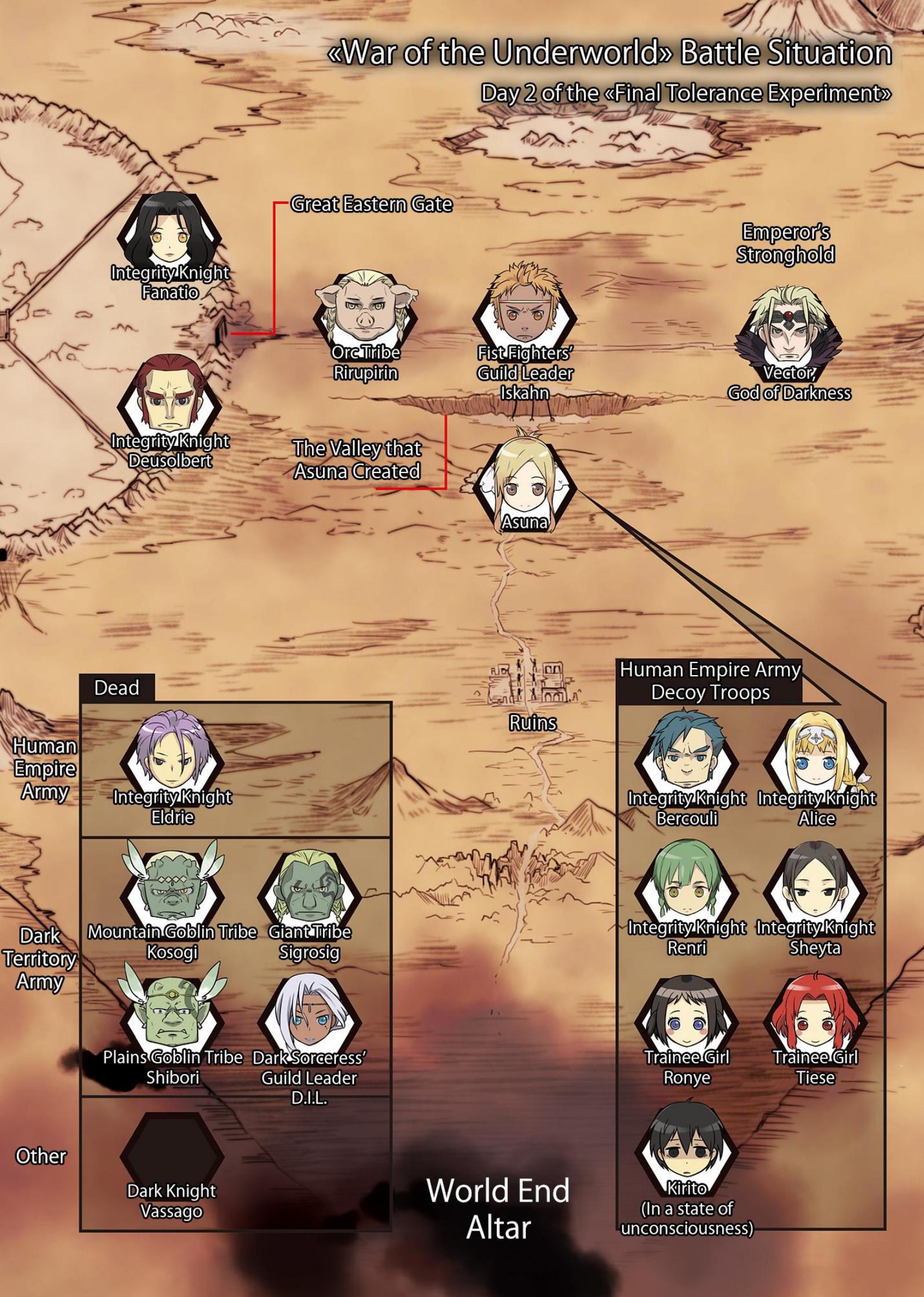
D.I.L.



Leader of the Dark Sorceress' Guild in the
《Dark Territory Army》. She should have been vanquished
in Integrity Knight Alice's wide-ranged attack, but.....

«War of the Underworld» Battle Situation

Day 2 of the «Final Tolerance Experiment»



Great Eastern Gate

Integrity Knight
Fanatio

Orc Tribe
Rirupirin

Fist Fighters'
Guild Leader
Iskahn

Emperor's
Stronghold

Vector,
God of Darkness

Integrity Knight
Deusolbert

The Valley that
Asuna Created

Asuna

Dead

Human
Empire
Army

Integrity Knight
Eldrie

Dark
Territory
Army

Mountain Goblin Tribe
Kosogi

Giant Tribe
Sigrosig

Plains Goblin Tribe
Shibori

Dark Sorceress'
Guild Leader
D.I.L.

Other

Dark Knight
Vassago

Ruins

Human Empire Army
Decoy Troops

Integrity Knight
Bercouli

Integrity Knight
Alice

Integrity Knight
Renri

Integrity Knight
Sheyta

Trainee Girl
Ronye

Trainee Girl
Tiese

Kirito
(In a state of
unconsciousness)

World End
Altar



**「This might be a game,
but it isn't something you play」**

— 「Sword Art Online」 Programmer • Kayaba Akihiko

ΣWORD ART ONLINE
ALICIZATION AWAKENING

REKI KAWAHARA

ΛBEC

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017

Chapter 20

Each of their Battles

7 July 2026 / Eighth Day¹ of the Eleventh Month of the Human Empire Calendar, 380

1

5:00 a.m.

More than 3,000 players gathered in a great dome in the World Tree that stood in the heart of Alne City, at the center of the world of ALfheim Online.

The winged knight monsters defending the dome’s roof gate had been removed.² Instead, the nine fairy races now used this space to meet and negotiate, or as a venue for events.

Only four players were facing the roughly 3,000 other players who had been gathered to this large, inconvenient meeting.

The hulking Gnome Agil, Salamander samurai Klein, Cait Sith beast tamer Silica, and Leprechaun blacksmith Lisbeth — partners of the «Black Swordsman» Kirito, who was still diving in «Underworld», yet to awaken.

At 4:20 a.m., when Klein and Lisbeth had been sending out in-game messages to every single friend on their lists, there were only three Lord-class players online. But, while pleading with them and their subordinate officers, they resorted to the taboo method of begging them to contact other players in real life. As a result, all of the players currently in the square had managed to assemble in just 40 minutes.

In this sizable, hemispherical space, nearly 30% of the floating or standing players were using newly created accounts.

1 Kawahara made a typo and wrote “Seventh Day” instead. It has been corrected here.

2 Referenced in Volume 4, when Kirito fights the guardian monsters to attempt to ascend the World Tree and save Asuna.

They were certainly not new to VRMMOs, however. They were veterans of other The Seed games, diving here by request of friends who had ALO accounts.

In other words, the 3,000 people gathered in this World Tree dome were the elites of the elites among Japanese VRMMO players. They were the final hope of Yui, the top-down AI: they were the only force that could save the Human Empire Defense Army in Underworld.

In the hushed dome, the Leprechaun blacksmith Lisbeth’s magically amplified voice continued to broadcast emotionally.

“... What I’m telling you guys is not a lie, nor a joke! A Japanese research organization has used our national budget and The Seed to build a virtual world called «Underworld», and thousands of American players who know nothing about it are about to dive in and massacre the residents inside!”

Lisbeth felt embarrassed at her own nationalistic tone, but remained encouraged by reassuring herself that was only to her advantage; she continued shouting:

“The residents of Underworld aren’t just NPCs! They are true artificial intelligence, born from the data of the countless VRMMO worlds that you’ve all been playing in! They have emotions like we do, they have souls like we do! Please, to protect them, please lend us your strength! Please convert the character data that you all are currently using into Underworld!”

Ending her five minute speech, Lisbeth surveyed the players, and hoped.

The crowd of fairy faces only looked confused. Of course, there was no way they could immediately understand just by suddenly hearing all of this. Even Lisbeth herself still found it hazy after listening to Yui’s explanation of Underworld’s structure, and the «Artificial Fluctlights» living within.

An elegant hand rose out of the shocked, clamoring players.

Sylph Lord Sakuya came walking out, her slender body wrapped in green robes.

“Lisbeth. I don’t think that you and your friends would do all of this just as a prank, and what’s more, there must be something big if even *that* Kirito boy hasn’t logged in for ten days. But...”

Sakuya’s fluent and calm voice wavered in perplexity.

“... To be honest, it’s difficult to believe this all of a sudden. There exists AI with human souls, and the American military is trying to seize them...? It’s all terribly far-fetched... Of course, to prove your words, we’d only have to log in and see for ourselves... But you just mentioned that diving into «Underworld» involves a few problems, right? Could you explain them first?”

— This moment has finally come.

Lisbeth took a deep breath, and closed her eyes for a moment.

This is the moment of truth. If I fail here, no one will come help us at all.

Snapping her eyes open and giving a sweeping look to Sakuya, the other Lords in front of her, and the countless players, Lisbeth replied adamantly:

“Okay. — Underworld doesn’t operate like a normal VRMMO game at all, so there’ll be a few problems when you dive into it. First of all, there’s no controllable UI in Underworld. In other words, you can’t log out on your own.”

The hubbub suddenly became louder.

Can’t log out on your own; was this not a phrase that conjured images of that death game from the past, «Sword Art Online»? These days, all games built off The Seed, including ALO, provided two ways of logging out: either by controlling the UI or through a voice command.

“The only way to log out is to ‘die’ inside. But that brings me to the second problem. In Underworld... there’s no Pain Absorber. If you take heavy damage that reduces your HP to zero, you should feel rather severe pain.”

The uproar grew even louder.

Pain isolation was a compulsory feature of any modern VR server. In virtual worlds without this function, getting slashed by a sword or burnt with fire would hurt as intensely as it would in the real world. Depending on the circumstances, bruises might even appear on one’s physical skin.

Yet there was a far more severe problem that came with this dive.

Waiting until the disturbance subsided slightly, Lisbeth then informed the players of the third and greatest sacrifice.

“— One more. Underworld servers are currently in a state where even the developers can’t operate them. Which means... we can’t guarantee that everyone’s character data can be converted back to their original games... In some situations, the characters themselves might even be lost.”

After a short pause —

Terrifyingly loud roars of fury flooded the vast dome.

Lisbeth, Klein, Silica and Agil lined up in the middle of the floor, with Yui standing on Klein’s shoulder in her tiny pixie form; standing silently, their bodies endured the wave of voices that lashed at them from all directions.

This reaction was exactly what they had expected.

The 3,000 top players had spent inordinate amounts of time and effort raising their characters. For ALO, they had spent hours furiously slaying monsters that yielded only one experience point; it was repeating the mundane task of emptying a lake with a bucket, day after day.

How could they remain silent upon being told that there was a chance of losing the characters they had built by infusing their entire spirit into them?

“Y... You’re fuckin’ kidding me!!” A player who ran out of the crowd shouted, jabbing his index finger at Lisbeth.

He was a Salamander dressed in crimson full-body armor, carrying a battleaxe on his back. He appeared to be a Commander-level player just below Lord Mortimer and General Eugene.

Pushing up his helmet visor and exposing his eyes that scorched with rage, the Salamander bellowed in a voice loud enough to shut up the entire group behind him:

“You gather everyone here and tell us to dive into some fishy server; that’s already pretty ridiculous. Now you’re telling me about character loss?! How the fuck are you gonna pay us back if they’re gone forever?! Or is this just a trap to weaken our entire race?!”

“..... Gurgh!”

Lisbeth stuck out an arm to stop a red-faced Klein from jumping forward, and tried her best to reply calmly:

“I’m sorry, we can’t. I know very well that the characters you’ve trained are priceless. That’s why we’re pleading you to help us... All I’m saying is, please help our friends in Underworld, they’re putting their lives on the line to defend against the Americans’ attack.”

Even though she was not shouting anymore, Lisbeth’s voice still carried across the entire dome. The Salamander seemed to hold in his anger for a moment, but suddenly it came sputtering out furiously again.

“The ‘friends’ you talk about are just the SAO survivors, aren’t they?! Those guys who make that face that screams ‘I’m super special’! I know all of it, you original SAO lot have always looked down on us!!”

Now it was Lisbeth's turn to be speechless.

Lisbeth had never once had thoughts like those the Salamander was accusing her of. But come to think of it, she could not be entirely sure that such a mentality had *never* come to her. Having situated her player home within floating New Aincrad instead of a town on the ground, she almost never went below and talked only to her old friends; that much was true.

The Salamander continued relentlessly, as though seeing through Lisbeth's hesitation:

“Who cares about artificial intelligence, or national secrets?! Don't get too cocky and bring real world shit into a VRMMO! You can go by yourself for that kind of stuff! Isn't that better, you splendid, noble Great Survivor?!”

Yeah, get lost; curses like those began to rouse the crowd.

— I can't do it.

My words can't get through to them at all.

Lisbeth couldn't help but feel tears welling up as she looked imploringly towards the strong, native ALO players whom she knew well — Sylph Lord Sakuya, Salamander General Eugene, and Cait Sith Lord Alicia Rue.

Even though their eyes met hers, they remained silent.

Their blazing gazes merely stared at Lisbeth unswervingly. As though they were saying, *show us your determination*.

Lisbeth took a deep breath, and shut her eyes tightly. She thought of Asuna, who would be desperately fighting at this very moment; Kirito, who was injured; Leafa and Sinon, who had rushed ahead into Underworld.

— At my level, even if I convert over, I won't be able to fight like Asuna and everyone else. But there must be something I can do. Right now, this place is my battlefield.

Forcing her eyes open and wiping away her tears, Lisbeth began her speech:

“... Yes, I brought some real world stuff here. And, as you said, those who emerge from SAO may find it very easy to mix up reality and virtual reality. However, I’m very certain that we’ve never thought of ourselves as heroes.”

Gripping Silica’s hand, who stood teary-eyed to her right, she continued:

“She and I currently attend a special school for the survivors you mentioned. We have no choice, since our previous schools had already dismissed us in the middle of the year. — All of the students in the survivors’ school have to attend counseling sessions every month. They monitor our brain waves with AmuSpheres, and we’re asked lots of uncomfortable questions like, ‘Have you lost your sense of reality’, or, ‘Do you want to harm other people’. There are children who have been forced to drink medicines they hate. To the government, we’re a reserve army of criminals that needs constant supervision.”

Sometime during her speech, the waves of fury had calmed, and a tense silence took over the dome. Even the Salamander had widened his eyes in surprise.

Lisbeth had no idea where the flow of her speech should terminate. She was only desperately converting her unstoppable emotions and thoughts into words:

“But... to be honest, the old SAO players aren’t the only ones who are treated like this. All VRMMO players are viewed this way, more or less. Some say we’re just a heavy load on society who contribute nothing, some say we’re escapists who don’t pay taxes and pensions... There have even been calls for a return to conscription, just to force us to serve society!”

Lisbeth could feel the surging anxiety of the thousands of players. If only she poked it with a needle, rage twice as intense than before would erupt.

But Lisbeth placed her left hand on her chest, and continued to shout:

“But I know! And I believe! This is reality!!”

Her arms motioned towards her surroundings — towards the whole of Alfheim.

“This world, and the many other virtual worlds connected to it, are obviously not imaginary places that we escape to! To me, there are real lives here, real friends, real laughter, tears, encounters, and farewells... This is ‘reality’!! I’m not alone, am I?! It’s because we believe this world is another reality that we try as hard as we do, right?! Yet, if we see this as only a game, as only a virtual world, and abandon it, then where *is* our ‘reality’ ...?!!”

Unable to hold them back any longer, Lisbeth felt tears rolling down her face. But she did not wipe them away, and squeezed out her last words:

“... The numerous worlds that everyone raised; they came together like this World Tree, and the tree has grown. Now that the blossom called Underworld has finally bloomed, I want to protect it! Please, I beg of you... lend your strength to us...!!”

Lisbeth reached out towards the roof of the dome.

In her vision trembling with tears, phosphorescence sparkled, falling from thousands of fairy wings.

A brilliant silver light drew a long, bright arc in the dawn.

A second later, with a dry snap, a thick rope was severed, and danced in the air like a black serpent. The tens of enemy soldiers hanging from the rope were plunged into the bottomless valley, howling. The «Twin Edged Wings», the Divine Instrument that had cut the rope, turned in a sharp curve and returned to the hands of Integrity Knight Renri Synthesis Twenty-Seven.

Although Renri had already quickly cut five of the ten ropes set up by the Dark Territory army to cross the valley, his face showed no sense of accomplishment or pride. Rather, he seemed like he was being tormented by the merciless order to sever the literal lifelines of the enemy soldiers, who were sacrificing themselves to cross the valley.

The same went for Asuna, who was beside Renri and clutched the reins atop a white horse.

When Asuna, Renri, Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty, Integrity Knight Sheyta Synthesis Twelve, and Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One arrived on horseback, hundreds of enemy soldiers had already crossed the valley, and began valiantly attacking them to protect the remaining ropes. A great number of enemies were killed by the three foremost Knights: Bercouli, Sheyta, and Alice. A few tried to flank Renri from the side, forcing Asuna to swing her own sword.

In the virtual world «Underworld», based on the The Seed program, Sword Skills and Horse Riding from the SAO era were still usable.

Not only that, Asuna was using the Super Account «Stacia, Goddess of Creation», whose every parameter was very close to the upper limit; in addition, the specs of her equipped rapier, «Radiant Light», were beyond that of the Integrity Knights' Divine Instruments. Therefore, even «Linear», a basic Sword Skill, could easily pierce through a Dark Knight's armor or a Fist Fighter's hulking frame.

Nevertheless, the blood spraying from enemies' wounds, their aggrieved screams, and their lost lives, were all real.

The people of Underworld, whether they came from the Human Empire or the Dark Land, all possessed souls of exactly the same nature as Asuna's — Fluctlights.

Her opponents were unquestionably real people just like her, yet they could be killed in one strike just because of some game-like status values and weapon specifications; this truth gave rise to an unbearable pain and dreadful feeling to Asuna's heart.

What was more, despite how they charged forward with tragic resolve, it was clear that the Dark Knights and Fist Fighters were not doing so of their own volition.

These Artificial Fluctlights possessed the trait of being utterly unable to resist their superior's orders. Under the command of «Vector, God of Darkness», a real world human using a Super Account like Asuna, they continued their attack despite everything, even knowing that they were dying in vain. In another sense, they were but victims, dragged into a real world battle over technology.

But Asuna still strove with all her might to dispel this thought from her mind.

Right now, her utmost priority was to protect the «Radiant Medium» Alice, whom Vector was pursuing — and Kirito, who was in the encampment behind them.

She'd heard that the only human resources left in the Dark Territory army were these Fist Fighters and Dark Knights. If they could take advantage of this reckless valley crossing operation and erode their main force, Vector would be left helpless.

“— All right, the sixth one next!!”

Integrity Knight Bercouli's firm, vigorous voice carried over and disrupted Asuna's train of thought. Only after Alice, Sheyta, and Renri immediately replied to acknowledge, did Asuna follow suit.

Just as they turned their horses around and prepared to move west, the sharp blast of a horn came from behind.

At a backward glance, they could see the Guardians³ of the Human Empire decoy squad atop a hill a kilometer away, surging down in orderly formation.

Having completed their preparations just fifteen minutes after the Integrity Knights did, they were coming from the encampment to assist.

“They’re such... a restless bunch.”

Bercouli’s words were bitter, but since nearly 500 Fist Fighters had successfully crossed the valley, it wasn’t a bad time for reinforcements to arrive. As long as the Guardians could hold off the enemy army, cutting the last five ropes would be much simpler.

— Seems like we’ve won this battle, Vector-san.

Asuna said softly in her heart —

Before she could finish, a peculiar phenomenon entered her vision.

Against the blood-red rising sun, mysterious objects began to fall from high in the sky.

Red lines. Not just one. Tens... Hundreds.

No, *thousands*.

The lines seemed to consist of tiny dots, linked together. Squinting her eyes, she saw that each dot was either a number, or a letter from the English alphabet.

These mysterious bunches of lines poured silently down onto their side of the valley, roughly one or two kilometers east of the battlefield.

Slowly, not just Asuna, but also the Integrity Knights, and even the Dark Knights and Fist Fighters of the Dark Territory, all ceased their actions to watch this bizarre event.

3 Referred to in previous volumes as “Guards”. Retconned to make it sound better.

The first red line that jabbed into the cracked earth became a small pile and shook —

It took only a few seconds to turn into a human form.

What he saw made Fist Fighter Chief Iskahn forget the rage coursing through his body, even if it was just for a split second.

— What are those?

On the other side of the great valley, the five hundred Dark Land soldiers who had successfully crossed the rope bridge were about to fearlessly engage the five Integrity Knights.

Yet their movements had suddenly stopped, and all had turned their astonished eyes outside of the battlefield.

Iskahn's face, as though pulled along by this scene, unconsciously swiveled in the same direction. There, he saw a torrential crimson rain, falling two kilol to their east.

With a odd thundering, countless red lines tumbled from the heavens. They swelled up upon touching the ground, and rapidly molded into human shapes.

Warriors appeared before them, their bodies secured completely in crimson armor, equipped with long swords, battleaxes, and spears.

Although its color was different, the shape of their armor was very similar to that of the Dark Knight Order. At a glance, they seemed to be Emperor Vector's divinely summoned reinforcements.

Then, Iskahn distinctly felt that something was ineffably queer.

These red infantrymen were standing without any sense of discipline or regulation. It was completely unlike the Knights trained under Dark General Shasta, who was now deceased. Some were chatting casually with swagger, some sat on the ground, and some even drew their weapons and waved them around without waiting for orders.

The most striking thing was — their number.

After the peculiar rain stopped, the legion appearing on the ground had swelled to an unbelievable size.

He estimated that they numbered far beyond ten thousand, twenty thousand... It looked like thirty thousand people. If the Dark Knight Order had such a powerful backup team, they would have abandoned the Ten Lords' combined regime long ago and brought the entire Dark Territory under Shasta's rule.

What was more, shocked and disturbed murmurs were breaking out even among the Dark Knights in the troops on this side of the valley. *Even they are clueless. What the heck is that?*

In this case, these red soldiers were the true “Dark Legion”, which their Emperor, Dark God Vector, had summoned with secret arts from the depths below.

As he realized this, Iskahn's shock changed to fury.

If he could summon an army as large as that —

Why didn't he do it earlier?! Weren't the Fist Fighters and Dark Knights who had perished in this pointless valley-crossing operation just lures that served only to attract the enemy now?!

Wait — what if that's really the case??

Had the Emperor only given the order to forcibly begin that unprecedented, suicidal operation in order to buy time to summon his own subordinates?

..... No.

Not just this operation. During the entire battle at the Great Eastern Gate, the loss of the Dark Land army's strength was beyond abnormal. Whether it was the Goblins, the Giants, the Ogres, or even the Dark Sorceress' Guild, they were all annihilated. Yet the Emperor didn't even bat an eye, let alone mourn their deaths.

In other words, to Emperor Vector, the fifty thousand people of the Dark Land army had been expendable pawns from the very beginning!

Before that moment, Iskahn, the young chief of the Fist Fighters' Guild, had merely been a young man uninterested in anything other than training his own skills, and the rise of his tribe.

But in this very second, his thought process had, for the first time, risen to a point from which he was able to view the entire Dark Territory, the Human Empire, and the entire Underworld. This perspective created an unsolvable conflict in his mind.

The Emperor was the strongest one. He must obey the strongest one, unquestioningly.

But.

But —

“Gurgh...!”

Excruciating pain, like nothing he had ever felt before, pierced his right eye. Iskahn groaned as he covered the right side of his face. The Fist Fighter Chief stumbled, and dropped to his knees.

With difficulty, he could make out over thirty thousand crimson soldiers beginning to run, speaking an unintelligible language.

At the location they were running to, nearly one thousand Human Empire soldiers quickly combined with the Integrity Knights and arranged themselves into a counterattack formation.

Between the two sides, five hundred Fist Fighters and Dark Knights stood still, utterly lost.

It seemed that, despite the mercilessness of the Emperor's strategy, he had at least saved the lives of these five hundred warriors.

Iskahn consoled himself as he massaged the intense pain in his right eye.

— Even after all of their suffering, he had still underestimated just how cruel Vector really was.

The instant that the five hundred Dark Territory soldiers, the Human Empire soldiers, and the summoned Dark Legion met —

Countless swords, countless battleaxes, and countless spears reflected the sunlight —

Then, with bloodthirsty howls, they were swung at the Fist Fighters, who were supposed to be their comrades.

“Those guys... Why?!”

It was Asuna’s first time hearing such a shocked yell from Knight Commander Bercouli, but words failed her.

The 30,000 soldiers who suddenly descended... no, dived to the east of the battlefield, had undoubtedly been summoned by Emperor Vector.

But where on earth did he get so many people?

Did he directly create system-controlled monster-type characters? But the central console was already locked, and this type of administrator-privileged operation was impossible; the only way to introduce new fighters was to create a character in the real world, then dive in like Asuna had, but the attackers only had two STLs.

Asuna sank into the chaos of the moment —

Her bewilderment was shattered by the roars of the red troops that had already approached within a few hundred meters.

“Charge ahead!!”

“Give ‘em hell!!”

— English!

Those people are all humans from the real world — judging by their accent, they’re Americans!

But, why would they be here... This is a genuinely different world, completely cut off from the real world...

No.

No —

Maybe, to the people diving in with STLs, Underworld was actually a different world created through the “Mnemonic Visual” with realism rivaling that of the real world. However, the generic VRMMO template «The Seed» had also been used to design this world. In other words, as long as one used an AmuSphere, they could dive into this world using a low-end server based on polygonal construction — furthermore, the Ocean Turtle had a large, military-grade bandwidth satellite connection.

Then, if someone were to write a client program that included Underworld central server address and the accompanying account information, and disseminate it in the real world —

Not just several tens of thousands; summoning an army of hundreds of thousands was certainly not impossible.

But what shocked Asuna the most was how those crimson soldiers acted; they had started to directly attack their supposed allies, the Dark Land Knights and the Fist Fighter army, without any hesitation.

“Wh, what are they...?!”

“Aren’t they supposed to be our allies?!”

The Knights screamed desperately while trying to defend against the attack, but their numbers were already far too disproportionate, and on top of that, the crimson soldiers’ weapons and armor were of much higher specs than the Dark Land army’s equipment.

One after another the swords and shields started breaking apart, and together with the agonizing screams from the collision of both armies, innumerable spurts of blood began gushing out.

“Dude that’s awesome!!”

“Pretty gore!!”

These Americans were probably completely unaware of the true nature of this battle. They were probably under the impression that their diving in was merely taking part in an open beta test for some new VRMMO. Therefore, she could not blame them for swinging their swords and killing everyone. After all, to them, these soldiers were not conscious beings equal to humans; they were NPCs, mere trifles. Of course, not everyone was atrociously evil; in the real world, they were still VRMMO players who could be friendly and work together with other players on the same server. If there was time to inform them of the true nature behind Underworld and the Artificial Fluctlights, Asuna believed that most of them would immediately drop their weapons.

But they hadn’t such leisure right now. Even if Asuna tried to step into the battlefield and explain the situation in English, they would just think of her as an NPC speaking preset lines. If they were told “killing enemies right now will earn you points, which you can exchange for rare items after the official release”, even the Japanese players would do the exact same thing.

In short, verbally convincing them was impossible.

The people the Americans were trying to kill were not NPCs, but artificial Fluctlights carrying real souls. After finishing off the soldiers of the Dark Territory, those of the Human World would surely be next. Then, as the only one present inhabiting a transient body, she had to fight.

With that resolve, Asuna raised the rapier in her right hand and began to quickly chant a command.

“System call! Create field object!”

A polychromatic spectrum of rays gathered on her sword.

There was currently no way to create a bottomless canyon like she had last night; if she did so, she would also cut off the Human Empire Army's path of return. Thus Asuna instead imagined a gigantic rock as sharp as a spear, and slashed her sword down.

Laa—. with a solemn sound effect, the spectrum of rays shot from her sword tip directly into the ground, slightly beyond where the American and Dark Territory armies collided.

The ground before her suddenly shook violently and a steep peak surged out of the ground, rising nearly 30 meters high at once. The tens of crimson soldiers standing atop it were all sent flying.

Four more mountains burst from the ground, shooting into the air, and the ground swayed without pause. Shouting earsplitting curses in English, several hundred crimson-armored bodies were thrown high; some were pierced by the rocks, while others landed heavily on the ground in a storm of flesh and blood.

Asuna could not summon the willpower to imagine how those people felt before dying, because a harsh, searing pain suddenly shot through her mind and caused her to collapse on the back of the horse.

Silver sparks scattered in her vision as she struggled to breathe and began to hyperventilate. The pain now was much worse than when she had created the deep canyon last night. Asuna was now personally experiencing the torment of massive amounts of geographical data coursing through her soul... The raw feeling of her Fluctlight being worn away.

— But I must not fall here.

If this was how Kirito was injured, this was how she wanted it to be. Asuna thought this as she clenched her teeth, and pulled herself up onto the saddle.

The zeal with which the American players came from the east side of the battlefield seemed less ardent than before.

But since the five rocky hills were only around 500 meters wide, the players would soon pass around them.

I must create a rock wall in the south, so that the Human Empire Army can retreat.

Asuna raised her trembling right hand, panting —

But it was seized tightly by another armored hand, which reflected the shining gleam of dawn.

“... Alice?!...” She called the golden knight’s name in a hoarse voice.

The golden knight’s beautiful white face showed steely resolve as she shook her head.

“Don’t push yourself anymore, Asuna. Leave it to us Integrity Knights now.”

“B... But, those people are enemies from the Real World... from my world...!”

“... Even so, if it’s just some tens of thousands of bloodthirsty guys waving their weapons around, it won’t be enough to scare us.”

“Yep, and that’s why it’s our time to shine.”

Bercouli added with an untroubled grin.

Although the Knights’ tones of voice eased the current situation, Asuna still detected tragic understanding in their faces, worse than before.

The crimson tsunami of enemies numbered more than 30 times that of the Human Empire Army.

This was no longer something they could face merely with courage. But the Knight Commander raised his longsword high, high in the air, and shouted an order in an extraordinarily irrepressible voice.

“Listen up! All units, assume a dense formation! Do not let the enemy breakthrough anywhere!”

“Oh... Ohh...”

What came from Iskahn’s mouth was no longer human language.

“Oh... OHHHHHHHHHH — !”

Blood dribbled from the fists clenched at his sides. But the young Fist Fighter roared like a wild beast, seeming not to feel pain.

Iskahn’s aide Dampe standing still by his side seemed to share Iskahn’s feelings, and was looking down, deeply... deeply.

All dead. All consumed.

His tribal warriors, in a storm of chaos, had perished, defenseless against the approaching dark cloud of swords, their souls lost in a mist of blood.

Moreover, the soldiers still crossing the valley on the five ropes were unable to stop, because the Emperor’s order of “reach the other side” still affected them. They could only obey their absolute master, precariously cross the rope bridge, then be surrounded by the crimson army and torn apart indiscriminately.

Why — *Why* hadn’t the Emperor given an order to stop crossing the valley, or for *that* army to stop attacking the friendly Dark Territory army?

Were his tribal warriors not even lures, but mere sacrifices offered to that summoned crimson legion now?

“Must... To the Emperor...”

He must report to the Emperor. He must request that he stop this operation.

Furious and desperate, Iskahn took a slow step towards the imperial throne carriage behind him. The entire right half of his vision turned deep red, and spates of excruciating pain assaulted his right eye.

Then, his aide Dampe looked at him, his now contorted face seemingly trying to say something.

Just then, a gargantuan black silhouette flew overhead.

Iskahn and Dampe instinctively looked up towards the shadow in the sky; it was a dragon.

Riding on top of the jet black armor was a figure with long, flowing golden hair dressed in a lustrous fur mantle — Emperor Vector himself.

“Ah... AH...!!”

As though he had heard Iskahn’s involuntary shout, the seated Emperor glanced quickly at the ground. No emotions could be read from his dark pupils. It was an icy glance that contained not a sliver of compassion— not even a speck of interest for his soldiers, who were dying in vain.

Then, Emperor Vector turned away from Iskahn, and directed his dragon south of the valley.

This is— the god. This is the ruler.

But, if this is the ruler, if this is the strongest being with unrivalled power—

He must take the according responsibility!!

Leading his subordinate army, ruling over his subjects, bringing the nation to prosperity; those are the duties of a ruler. Therefore, someone who sends several tens of thousands of lives to their end without even using them, without feeling anything at all — the Emperor — *right eye* — isn’t qualified — *right eye hurts* — to be a ruler....!!

“Uwo.... OH... OHHHHHHH!!”

Iskahn thrust his right fist high, and curled his finger into a hook.

Without hesitation, he stabbed it into the source of blazing heat blocking his thoughts — his own right eye.

“Ch... Chief!! What are you doing?!”

The young Fist Fighter stuck out his left hand to block Dampe from approaching him, and with a bellow, ripped his right eyeball from its socket. The white sphere gave off a strange gleam from within his fist, but as it shattered, that light disappeared as well.

As of now, Iskahn had not reached the point of completing removing «Code 871» through his own willpower, like Alice and Eugeo. Therefore, he was still unable to initiate any sort of traitorous intent directly towards the Emperor, or refuse the Emperor’s two orders: “continue the valley crossing operation” and “You yourself may not cross the rope bridge”.

However, he had discovered a rather barbaric method to evade the Emperor’s orders — and this method itself was asymptotically close to betrayal.

Iskahn spun around and spoke to Dampe staring at him speechlessly.

“The Emperor hasn’t told us anything regarding those crimson soldiers, has he?”

“Ah... No, he hasn’t. But...”

“Then, if we were to kill all of them, it would have nothing to do with the Emperor.”

“... *Champion*...”

Iskahn gazed at the dumbstruck Dampe with his remaining eye, and ordered.

“Listen up... After crossing the bridge, all tribe members will attack that crimson army. No matter what, we must save our partners.”

“Hah...?! The ‘bridge’ you refer to, how... would...”

“You know what I’m going to do. I leave it to you, then.”

With those calm words, Iskahn turned towards the valley.

Suddenly, roaring flames enfolded his feet.

Then the king of the Fist Fighters slowly began to run towards the valley, leaving a trail of blazing footprints behind him. He ran faster and faster, finally transforming into a flash of fire.

If I can't cross the rope bridge... then all I gotta do is fly over!

Screaming that in his chest, he flung his left foot over the roughly hundred-mel-wide gorge.

“Jumping” was a very important skill in a Fist Fighter’s training.

This training slowly progressed from being able to jump over a safe sand pit, to sharpening one’s willpower by crossing knife mountains and oil-filled vats, and served as the basis of forming one’s own firm confidence to their own jump; «incarnation», in other words.

Eventually, the jumping distance of a top-notch warrior could surpass 20 mel. In this flightless world, this was the extent of a human body’s physical jumping distance.

Yet what Iskahn needed to cross now was a bottomless canyon whose width was five times this limit. The Fist Fighter stared straight ahead, his heart still as he leapt into the air, his body dragging a long trail of flames.

Ten mel. Twenty mel. His body rose still.

Thirty mel. Thirty-five mel. A strong wind blew from the valley below, pushing the Fist Fighter up as though he possessed invisible wings, propelling him even higher.

Forty mel.

Just a bit more — he only needed to rise a bit more... Then he could rely on momentum to reach the other side —

But.

Just before he reached the very center of the valley, the upwards wind mercilessly ceased. The Fist Fighter’s body instantly lost its upward momentum; the trajectory of his jump reached its maximum, and he began to fall in an arc.

He was... five mel from the other edge.

“UWOOOOOHHH!!”

Iskahn screamed, flinging his right hand forward, attempting to grab something out of thin air. But no place existed for his hand or foot to grab onto; only endless, cold air extended on and on from below the darkness under his feet, wrapping around his body that was about to fall.

Just then —

“**CHAMPIOOOOOOOOON!!**”

A tremendously thick roar reached Iskahn’s ears.

He twisted his head around.

His own aide, Dampe, had wrapped his right hand around a boulder larger than his own head, and was preparing to throw it.

The Fist Fighter chief instantly realized what his loyal subordinate, who often followed him around, planned to do. But — throwing that gigantic boulder more than fifty mel was definitely impossible for a human...

Gowa.

Dampe’s right hand suddenly swelled, his muscles bulging and veins swelling, as though his entire body’s strength had concentrated in one spot.

“OHHHHH!!”

The giant man bellowed, ran a few steps, and flung the boulder from his right hand with all his might.

As the air trembled violently, the boulder shot out as though it had been launched by a catapult — then, the Fist Fighter’s right hand exploded, flesh and blood flying in all directions.

Iskahn imprinted the image of Dampe collapsing to the ground firmly in his left eye, clenched his teeth, and focused all his concentration on the boulder flying directly at him.

“... YAAAAAAAH!!”

With a shout, he stomped his left foot on the boulder.

Bagaaan!! The boulder shattered against the impact, but Iskahn’s small body was propelled upwards. The swordsmen battling on the other side of the valley were now closer to him.

“Damn!!”

Asuna tugged her rapier from the body of a cursing American player while breathing heavily atop her horse.

This was different when she was fighting the Dark Territory people earlier; she no longer had to deal with the mental strain of taking a person’s life. Asuna, previously known as “The Flash”, then the “Berserk Healer”, was finally able to initiate combo Sword Skills; the number of crimson soldiers who fell by her sword rapidly grew above ten.

But — despite that, there were just *too many* enemies!!

Not just Asuna, the Human Empire Defense Army soldiers and the four Integrity Knights also fought like fierce gods, and finally carved a bloody opening to the south. Bodies had piled up into mountains in front of the soldiers advancing in tight formation.

However, they were utterly unable to counter the waves of crimson soldiers streaming endlessly around the rocky mountains, and could only try their utmost to fight back and hold their current position.

Most importantly, they very quickly realized that the bodies of the enemies they destroyed would evaporate within tens of seconds, leaving not a trace of blood on the ground — they realized that their opponents were not real live people, but an army of phantoms. Then...

“Uwah... No... AAAAHHH — !!”

A sudden explosive scream made Asuna spin her head around.

— Then, she saw that a hole had opened in the Guardians’ defensive line, and the Americans were pouring in like black mud, throwing themselves with dirty curses at the weak Guardians. The Guardians were surrounded by enemies numbering several times more than them, and executed; flesh and blood flew into the air, and shrieks of pain slowly turned into dying screams. This extremely realistic picture of death seemed to stimulate the crimson soldiers’ bloodthirst even further, and they launched themselves towards new prey with renewed savagery.

“Stop it.... STOP IT...!!” Asuna cried.

She clearly understood that she was supposed to ignore the sacrifices of some of the troops, and push south as hard as she could. But she couldn’t control herself anymore and jumped off from her horse.

“STOP IT — !!”

Charging into the deadly crimson current alone, her scream was as bitter as blood.

She knew the American players were only being used, but even so, she could not suppress her boiling anger any longer.

Zzkukukuk —!!

Her right hand flashed, and «Radiant Light» stabbed straight through the visors of the crimson helmets. Four fatally wounded people dropped their longswords and crumpled to the ground, screaming.

Judging by their reactions, Asuna could see that although they had dived in with AmuSpheres, they were not protected by its Pain Absorber. In truth, Asuna had realized that long ago, so she had tried to make her attacks fatal stabs to the heart, instantly killing the person and logging them out of the game, yet this logic had also evaporated.

She now relied on her sword's Priority to stab through the enemies' armor, dispatching them instantly, and sometimes even cleaving the enemies' swords in two.

To the Americans, the enemies before them were mere polygons, and their blood was also computer-generated special effects. Yet to Asuna, who dived in through the STL, they were real, live human beings, and their spurting blood was chillingly warm, exuding a nauseating coppery odor.

Some time later, the pool of blood reached Asuna's feet, and she accidentally slipped and fell. The hulking soldiers then instantly surrounded her as she was sprawled on the ground.

"Take this!!"

A battleaxe swung down, and Asuna frantically dodged right. But before she should pull back her left arm, the heavy axe had already roared past.

Gatsu.

With a crunching noise, her left arm was severed down the middle to her elbow, and it flopped uselessly in the air.

"... AAHH — !!"

Excruciating pain blinded Asuna as her breathing froze and she went numb. A moment later, she breathed heavily and managed to cradle her left arm, which was spurting blood. But through her streaming tears, she watched in despair as the four or five black shadows surrounding her had already raised their weapons.

Suddenly —

The head of the man with the giant axe seemed to explode in a storm of flesh and blood.

Asuna heard heavy impacts like that of a machinegun. Every time an impact resonated, the body of a soldier attempting to slash towards her shattered and disappeared from view.

“Hmph... Why are these guys so soft?”

Asuna endured the agony and pushed herself up; before her was a lean, short young man with hair standing straight up like flames.

— Someone from the Dark Territory!

Asuna inhaled sharply and forgot her pain for a moment. From the color of his skin and the single leather strap tied around his entire body, he was unmistakably a member of the Fist Fighter tribe she had fought minutes ago.

But why would someone under Emperor Vector’s rule attack the crimson soldiers that Emperor Vector had summoned?

— It’s as if he had run over just to help Asuna.

Asuna looked down and noticed that the man only had one red eye left, an ugly wound was left in his right eye socket, and trails of blood were plastered on his face like tears; the blood looked fresh.

With his remaining eye, the young Fist Fighter looked askance at an American approaching him, and raised his right fist high.

That sharply defined fist was suddenly wrapped in roaring flames.

“Wa... RAAAAAAHHH!!”

With a scream that sounded like tearing cloth, the fist struck the ground.

Guwa!!

From where his fist hit the ground, a semicircular shockwave blew forward like a wall of fire, relentlessly expelling all of the crimson soldiers before them into the air.

— What strength!

Asuna gaped. If she fought this person now, she might lose...

The Fist Fighter wordlessly stretched out and grabbed Asuna's armor with his left arm, forcefully pulled her up, and gazed at her with his remaining eye.

“... Let's make a deal.”



Asuna couldn't immediately understand what this young but acrid voice wanted to convey.

"A... deal?"

"Yeah. You're the one who made those rock spears and that valley, weren't you? Listen, make a bridge across that valley, doesn't matter how narrow it is. That way, we four thousand warriors of the Fist Fighters' Guild can fight alongside you for now, until we finish off this crimson army."

Fight alongside — the Dark Territory army?

Was such a thing possible? The people of the Dark Land, no, all the people of this world should be unable to disobey their superior's orders, due to the existence of «Code 871».

But the young man before her had no right eye at all. Did this mean that he had broken the seal on his own? Had he, like Alice, evolved into a Fluctlight capable of breaking the boundaries of this world?

Alice had said last night: "To lose «Code 871», the eye must completely explode", but his wound didn't look like the product of an exploded right eye at all, it looked more like the entire eyeball had been torn out by force... What was she to do, then?

Asuna's momentary hesitation was broken by howls and sword slashes coming from her right.

"This person, is likely to not be lying."

The one who cleaved off the heads of a few approaching soldiers with a jet black longsword so thin it was nearly invisible, was the gray-haired female Integrity Knight, Sheyta Synthesis Twelve.

Catching sight of Sheyta, a boastful yet somehow embarrassed grin broke out on the young Fist Fighter's face. "Hey," he replied.

The instant she saw this smile, Asuna made her decision.

— I'll believe him.

This was probably the last time she would be able to use the «geographical manipulation» ability. So wouldn't it be better spent on creation rather than destruction?

“... I understand, leave the bridge to me.”

Asuna moved her right hand away from the wound on her left wrist, and raised her rapier into the air with her right hand.

Laa—————.

The solemn sound of angelic song was heard as multicolored aurorae shot into the heavens and extended due north, crossed the entire valley, and connected to the other side.

With a sonorous thundering, the ground underneath began to tremble.

Everyone watched as two stone columns suddenly protruded from both sides of the canyon and slowly extended further and further, then joined together in the middle, widened, and finally became a stone bridge sufficient for crossing.

“OOOOHHHH, AHHHHHHH!!”

The furious bellows of the four thousand members of the Fist Fighters' Guild were several times louder than the tremors just then. Led by a giant, one-armed man, they converged at the stone bridge.

A headache several times more painful than the agony at her arm suddenly pummeled her; Asuna nearly lost consciousness, and had to lean on her rapier to avoid falling.

She could no longer see Alice, who was supposed to be guiding the entire Human Empire Army and cutting a bloody path through the enemy lines.

Asuna could only hope that she would be safe... and that the Fist Fighter army would fight together with them like their chief promised.

— Kirito-kun, I'm going now, okay?

Silently murmuring the name of her loved one, her pain seemed to fly far, far away.

About a minute prior, at the southernmost edge of the battlefield —

Integrity Knight Alice had already cut down countless crimson soldiers who charged forward one after another.

These guys — were a bit strange.

They were neither aware that they were swordsmen, nor trained in sword skills; they merely swarmed forward, stepping over their comrades' bodies and screaming in a strange tongue. It almost seemed as though they were completely unaware of the value of life — their enemies' lives, and even their partners' lives, all seemed worthless to them. It was as if they didn't even care about their own lives.

If the people who lived in the Real World were like this, it seemed that Asuna was exactly right in that “the other side” was not a kingdom of gods after all.

With the endless massacre and endlessly appearing enemies, even Alice's reaction speed began to slow.

She'd had enough. This wasn't a battle at all.

Quickly — quickly break through their ranks, and get out of here.

“Get out of the way... GET OUT OF MY WAAAAAYYY!!”

She screamed shrilly as the Fragrant Olive Sword slashed sideways. The heads and hands of the enemies scattered to the ground.

“System call!”

Then, she began rapidly chanting an incantation, formed ten Thermal Elements, molded them into a fiery lance, and shot it.

“Discharge!”

BOOM!!

Although it wasn't Deusolbert's Conflagrant Flame Bow, a gigantic explosion pierced the entire enemy formation and tore open a hole.

And beyond it was —

She saw it. A hill, rising out of the black ground.

If she could break through the encirclement and get over there, she could use the Spatial Resources scattered around the battlefield to initiate the "Sealed Mirror Light Art", and burn all of these crimson soldiers to a crisp.

"OUT OF MY WAAAAAY!!"

Alice screeched and kicked off the ground.

"... Lil' Miss!!"

Knight Commander Bercouli's shout came from behind. But Alice did not hear his next words: *Don't go forward anymore.*

— Almost there. We can almost break out.

Her feet unstopping, sword slashing at the last enemy blocking her, Alice finally broke out of the seemingly infinite circle of enemies and charged into the southern wilderness.

She slid her beloved sword into its sheath and continued her sprint, gulping down the fresh air that smelled of blood.

Suddenly, her surroundings darkened.

Has the sun been blocked out? Alice thought for a moment.

Then suddenly, she felt a heavy blow on her back, and was grabbed by a dragon's leg suddenly passing over; by the time she noticed, she was already being lifted by its claws.

Alice tried to activate her Armament Full Control Art, but before she could finish chanting, her field of vision began to be enveloped in darkness, and a biting chill filled her body.

Was it a Dark Art from the rider of the dragon? — No, that wasn't it. Her very consciousness was fading away, being sucked into an infinite darkness.

This was the enemy's Incarnation, completely different from Knight Commander Bercouli's polished steel-like Incarnation, and also different from the Highest Minister Administrator's scorching, all-consuming Incarnation; it absorbed everything and seized everything: an Incarnation of nothingness.

That was the last thing Alice could think of before her consciousness vanished.

To Emperor Vector / Gabriel Miller, this situation was a gamble.

Nonetheless, he firmly believed that as long as the several tens of thousands of American players diving into the battlefield were able to surround and attack the Human Empire Army, the «Radiant Medium» Alice would certainly break out of the encirclement alone — or with a small team — to initiate that huge light ray attack.

That was why he had stayed on the back of his requisitioned dragon, hovering far, far away from the battlefield and waited. He felt like this had been the longest stretch of time since he had first dived into Underworld.

But then, he finally saw it. The flash of golden light sprinting out from the ant-like swarm of soldiers.

“Alice... Alicia.”

Gabriel smiled a rare, genuine smile as he whispered that name. He whirled the reins in his hands, taking the dragon into a fast dive.

His overwhelming imagination that formed an Incarnation of nothingness had already consumed the dragon's AI, turning it into a controllable tool that slaved only for him.

Under his command, the dragon plunged like a stone, its wings silent, opened its right claws towards the ground and tightly grasped the golden knight's back.

Whoosh — !

Then, with the deafening noise of expanding wings, it flew back into the sky.

He'd never paid any attention to the bloody battlefield he had created.

To him, whatever happened next to the Dark Territory army, the Human Empire Army, or the people he'd summoned from the real world, had lost all value; none of it mattered anymore.

Now, he only needed to advance straight to the system console nearest to his current location at the «World End Altar», and from there, eject Alice's soul to the real world, and log himself out.

Gabriel's vision shifted down, and stopped on the golden hair of the unconscious Knight, billowing in the wind, caught in the clutches of the dragon's talons.

I want to feel her soon. This body, this soul, I want to taste it to my heart's content.

There was still a very long journey to the system console, which would take several days even by dragon. He could even use this time to properly enjoy Alice, while she still had a physical body in Underworld.

As this crossed his mind, a different type of sweet stimulation climbed up Gabriel's spine, and the corners of his mouth lifted again.

How could it be like this?

He actually — turned the Dark Territory army of fifty thousand and the newly-summoned thirty thousand soldiers all into disposable pawns, and just to...

Just to capture a girl!

Ever since Knight Commander Bercouli detected the Incarnation of nothingness wielded by the existence called Emperor Vector, an intense uneasiness had come over him. But the instant that Alice was captured by the other side, he finally realized that his predictions of the enemy had only been the tip of the iceberg.

After seeing what happened tens of miles away from where he was standing, Bercouli did something he had not done for who knows how many tens of years — he let out a roar of rage.

“You bastard, what have you done with my apprentice?!!”

His words pierced the air, agitating the surroundings more than a peal of thunder could.

Yet it was completely ignored by Alice’s captor, the dragon knight, who flew straight into the southern sky without so much as a backwards glance.

Bercouli raised his beloved sword, and began to chase after the flying dragon. But the hole that Alice had blown in the enemy formation with her Art had already been filled with crimson soldiers; they approached, spitting cryptic curses constantly.

“You’d better...”

Before Bercouli could shout *get away*, blinding silver lights flew overhead.

Kirikiriki, with that high, clear sound Integrity Knight Renri’s Divine Instruments, the Twin Edged Wings, flew past above.

The young knight’s sharp voice came from behind.

“Release Recollection!”

With a flash of light, the two throwing knives fused together. A cross-shaped blade flew low above the ground, whizzing forward and leaving a sharp trail, cutting down all enemies who tried to enter its path from either flank.

“Go ahead, Knight Commander!!”

Renri shouted, and Bercouli turned around to answer.

“Sorry! I’ll leave it to you!”

Then he bent over, and kicked his right foot briskly off the ground. In the next instant, his body transformed into a white hurricane, blowing a second time through the gap opened in the enemy group, at a speed several times faster than the sprints achieved by the Fist Fighters of the Dark Territory in their martial dance. But Emperor Vector’s dragon that carried Alice had already become a tiny black dot on the far-off horizon.

As Bercouli ran, he placed his left hand into his mouth and blew a high, piercing whistle.

Seconds later, a pair of gigantic, silvery wings appeared on the horizon; it was Bercouli’s dragon, Hoshigami.

But not just one dragon was flying towards him. Alice’s beloved dragon, Amayori, and the deceased Eldrie’s dragon, Takiguri, also followed close behind.

“You were all here...”

Bercouli was briefly overcome with emotion; no matter what, he couldn’t bring himself to order those other two dragons to stay here on standby.

Hoshigami turned low above the ground and glided as it approached Bercouli, extending both feet towards him. The Knight Commander seized a talon on its left foot and hoisted himself onto its back, straddling the saddle and pointing forward with the longsword in his right hand.

“GO!”

Hoshigami, Amayori, and Takiguri moved on command; three pairs of wings thundered simultaneously, and they flew into the violet dawn sky.

Far ahead of this triangular formation of three dragons, within the claws of the black dragon, a flash of golden light shined for a split second.

After the four thousand Fist Fighters charged across the stone bridge in one go, they quickly joined their nearly two hundred surviving partners, assembled into a formation at the Human Empire Army's flank, and drove straight into the center of the enemy formation like a gigantic battering ram.

They formed tight lines of ten each, raised their right fists in perfect unison, and readied their stances.

“U... RA!”

With a synchronized bellow, ten fists struck out and perforated the crimson soldiers' swords and armor. Screams and blood flew in all directions; with one strike, more than twenty enemy soldiers were knocked flying towards the back.

After this blow filled with the utmost fighting spirit, the ten people quickly parted and retreated to either side, leaving a gap, and the ten behind them advanced forward with the same stance.

“URARA!!”

This time, ten people raised their legs and delivered flying kicks in perfect unison, blowing a great number of enemies in all directions, as though a bomb had exploded in their midst.

“... Wow.”

Asuna could not help but marvel as she healed her wounded left arm with a Healing Art she had learned the night before. Even Sheyta, who was drinking water near her, seemed a bit surprised.

The Fist Fighters' battle technique was somewhat similar to the SAO progressors' switching tactic used during the boss fights, but their movements and cohesion were much more adept.

Ten people in a row, ten rows in a cluster; there were more than forty groups with one hundred people each that ravaged the enemy like heavy construction machinery reducing buildings to rubble.

“Don’t just sit there and watch. Even if we charge towards the south, what would we do then? Since there are this many enemies, even if we could break through them, it would be very difficult to kill them all.”

The temporarily allied red-haired enemy general stood beside Asuna, his arms crossed and face stern.

Indeed, even for the Fist Fighters who were breaking through irrepressibly, defeat would be difficult to avoid if the soldiers that outnumbered them by several times launched a flanking attack. There were at least twenty thousand summoned Americans left, in any case.

“... Then... after we break through the enemy formation and charge south of the battlefield, we’ll immediately get as far away as possible. I will then create another canyon to separate us and them.”

Asuna replied in a low voice.

— But could she really do it? Just now, she had only created a small bridge and almost expired from the effort. If she were to perform another large-scale geographic manipulation that extended all the way to the horizon, she might actually be forcefully disconnected — worse, her brain could even be physically damaged...

Asuna bit her lip, and cast away her momentary confusion. Even then, she must do it. Summoning the Americans to this world was probably Emperor Vector’s last resort. Then, if she could get rid of them, even if she were to be disconnected, they would be unable to do anything to Alice.

Just then, from the south, a soldier came running to Asuna on the north side of the battlefield.

“New orders!! New orders — !!”

The heavily injured soldier with half of his face dyed red with blood, fell to his knees in front of Asuna, and mustered all of his strength to shout his next words.

“Information from Integrity Knight Renri-sama!! Integrity Knight Alice-sama, has been captured by the enemy commander! The dragon has already flown south...!!”

“Wh...”

Asuna was dumbfounded.

Of course — she’d never thought that the current situation was intentionally created to lure Alice herself away from the Human Empire Army...!!

“The Emperor... has flown away?!”

That gruff, faltering answer was neither from Asuna nor Sheyta, but from the Fist Fighter Chief, whose remaining eye began to take on a strange glow.

“Then... Just now, that dragon... Wasn’t here simply to watch us ... Hey, woman!!”

The young man’s fiery eyes stared at Asuna, and he demanded urgently.

“That Alice is the «Radiant Medium»?! Why is the Emperor so dedicated to her?! If the Radiant Medium falls into the Emperor’s hands, what the hell is going to happen?!”

“This world... will be destroyed.”

Asuna replied simply. The Fist Fighter’s expression was one of frozen incredulity.

“When Dark God Vector brings the Radiant Medium Alice to the «World End Altar»... This world, whether it’s the Human Empire or the Dark Territory, all of its inhabitants will be obliterated.”

Asuna's voice had not fallen silent before she noticed that her words sounded exactly like the most classic RPG lines imaginable, but this was one hundred percent truth. As soon as the assault team got their hands on Alice's soul, it was very easy to imagine the fate of the then-useless Light Cube Cluster — they would destroy it without remorse.

Then, what on earth was she to do... even her Super Account «Stacia» did not bestow upon her a flying ability. How could she follow them?

The one answering Asuna's worries was the gray knight standing at her side, Sheyta. Returning the now-empty bottle to her belt, the icy-looking female knight said:

“Even for a dragon... it cannot fly forever. At most, half a day.”

At this, the Fist Fighter Tribal Chief stole a glance at Sheyta, then hurriedly looked away; he slapped his fist into his hand and finished her sentence loudly.

“Then just push yourselves out there and catch up to them!!”

“Catch up to them... But, aren't you...”

Asuna looked at the enemy general's young features in surprise.

“Aren't you from the Dark Territory army? Why, would you go this far...”

The enemy general responded like a spoiled, abandoned child.

“Emperor Vector... certainly told us before, we Ten Lords of the Dark Land⁴. He only wanted the Radiant Medium. If he gets her, he won't care what happens to us. Now that he's got the Medium, the Emperor's achieved his goal... In other words, the mission of the Dark Territory army has been fully completed. After this, aren't we free to do whatever the hell we want, even if that means cooperating with the Human Empire and taking the Medium back?!!”

How — absurd.

Asuna gazed speechlessly at the young enemy general. The expression on his face was completely out of place alongside his deterrent rhetoric a moment ago; it was filled with tragic resolve.

The Fist Fighter stared right at Asuna with his left eye, and spoke quietly.

“... I can't... We can't revolt directly against the Emperor. His strength is overwhelming... even Dark General Shasta, who was much stronger than I am, was instantly killed without him even lifting a finger. If he suddenly gives the order for us to fight you, we must obey... That's why, we Fist Fighters will defend against that crimson army here. You and the Human Empire Army, just chase the Emperor as hard as you can. And then... the Emperor... that bastard...”

The young man's words were suddenly interrupted, and his expression distorted — as though tormented by a pain coming from his nonexistent right eye.

“Tell... that bastard, ‘we are not your puppets!’”

Just then, shouts came from the Fist Fighters on the south side of the battlefield. The vanguard had finally broken through the crimson army's encirclement, and plunged into the wilderness.

“Very good...”

Zudan! The young tribal chief stomped his right foot on the ground and delivered an order in a tremendous voice.

“All of you, maintain that gap!”

Then, he turned to Asuna, and spoke simply.

“Run!! We can't hold for too long.”

Asuna took a deep breath — and nodded.

— This person, is also a human.

It didn't matter if he was an Artificial Fluctlight. His prideful soul was as real as any other human's.

They had clearly severed the rope that they had used to cross the ravine, and murdered more than a hundred of his tribespeople; he should be swearing revenge against them.

“... Thank you very much.”

Asuna could only manage that, then turned around.

From behind her came Integrity Knight Sheyta’s voice.

“I’ll... stay here.”

Having anticipated this, Asuna looked back, and gave the gray-haired female knight a short smile.

“I understand. We’ll trust you to bring up the rear.”

Iskahn watched wordlessly as that unfathomable, chestnut-haired female knight lead the Human Empire Army, reduced to about seven hundred people, and passed through the gap in the enemy formation created and maintained by his own tribal warriors in a bloody battle, then looked away from the commotion and fixated on the Integrity Knight.

“... You’re good with this, woman?”

“I told you my name.”

Stared at with a piercing look, the Fist Fighter could only laugh bitterly and change his method of address.

“Is this really okay, Sheyta? I dunno if we can make it out of this alive.”

The slender knight shrugged, and her brand new armor clattered crisply.

“I will be the one to kill you. No chance for others.”

“Hmph, so you say.”

This time, Iskahn laughed heartily.

Wanting to help his partners avoid dying tragic deaths — he had originally chosen to work together with the Human Empire Army with this desire in mind. But now, he was putting his entire tribe’s lives on the line to protect the Human Empire people from that crimson army; how incredible. Yet his heart felt wide open, like a breeze was passing by.

Well, even if I die here, that’s not bad.

If he were to die protecting this world, his father, brother, and sisters back in his hometown would definitely understand.

“All right!! Go all out, boys!!”

A roar of “URAAA!!” resounded across the battlefield.

“Form a circle!! Defend in all directions!! Trash all the idiots who come near!!”

“You’re really in the zone, **Champion.**”

Dampe had already taken his position behind Iskahn once more, and his clenched left fist emitted a grinding noise.

While Asuna was leading the army over the southern hill and retreating to the forest garrisoned by the supply team, the young knight Renri informed her about how the Knight Commander had already taken three dragons and flown after Emperor Vector.

“... Do you think he can catch up?”

At Asuna’s sharp question, Renri’s childlike face was severe.

“To be honest, the chances are very slim. In short, the two of them are flying at the same speed, and they need the same amount of time to rest... But, Alice-sama is also riding on Emperor Vector’s dragon, so that expend a bit more of its Life. On the other hand, the Esteemed Knight Commander can switch between his three dragons to minimize their fatigue, so in theory, he can gradually close some of the distance between them...”

«War of the Underworld» Battle Situation

Day 2 of the «Final Tolerance Experiment»



In other words, they could only pray that the Knight Commander would reach the Emperor before he arrived at the World End Altar.

But, even if he caught up to the Emperor —

Could the Knight Commander really defeat Super Account Emperor Vector by himself?

Since Asuna had never expected that the attackers might also log in with a Super Account, she had never asked Higa Takeru what kind of powers Vector had. But if Vector had the same type of powers as Stacia’s “Geographic Manipulation” — even for the Integrity Knights leader, winning against him in a one-on-one fight would be pushing it too much...

Just as Asuna was thinking this, Renri spoke in a more cheerful tone.

“If he catches up, the Esteemed Knight Commander will definitely save Alice-sama. After all, that man... is the strongest knight in the world.”

“... Yeah, that’s right.”

Asuna nodded fervently.

The only thing she could do now, was to believe. After all, during her battle a while ago, she had seen countless times how strong-willed the people of Underworld were.

“Then, let’s advance south together with the rest of the army. Luckily, there are only flat plains ahead of us. We might not be able to follow Bercouli-san, but we might be able to help him later somehow.”

“Understood, Asuna-sama. I will notify everyone to prepare for a quick march.”

Renri picked up his pace, and dashed into the forest.

Seeing him off, Asuna said to herself.

Kirito wanted to protect Alice, and the entire human world.

She definitely had to protect them as well, no matter how many injuries she sustained... no matter what kind of pain she had to endure.

At the same time —

In the main control room of the Ocean Turtle, intelligence warfare representative Critter was ready to let the second batch of 20,000 American players dive into Underworld.

And their login location was Gabriel Miller's current location — roughly ten kilometers away from the insertion point of the first batch.

2

“.....Gah!!”

Inhaling sharply, Vassago Casals jerked up.

He shook his bundled, curly hair and hastily observed his surroundings.

Steel walls emitting a dim glow, a floor plastered with anti-slip polymer, and numerous monitors and indicators glowing hazily in darkness.

When he saw a thin man with a crew cut sitting in a huge leather chair in front of him, Vassago finally realized that he had returned to the main control room of the «Ocean Turtle», in the real world.

The crew cut man — Critter, snorted, his voice full of ridicule.

“Whoa, you actually woke up. I thought all your brain cells had decayed.”

“... Shut the fuck up.”

Vassago groaned, and examined his own body. He was currently lying on a thin mattress placed in the corner of the room, a jacket carelessly spread across his stomach.

What the fuck just happened? Vassago vigorously shook his head. This brought about a stinging pain deep in his head, making him curse again. He then turned toward the other side of the room, where a couple of team members were sitting in a circle and having fun with their cards, and asked:

“Hey, any of you got some aspirin?”

The bearded Brigg, a member of the breaching team, wordlessly retrieved a tiny plastic bottle from his pocket and tossed it to him.

Vassago caught it with one hand, twisted the cap off, poured everything inside into his mouth, and crushed the contents with his teeth.

Along with the bitter, numbing sting on his tongue, his memories finally recovered a bit.

“So... I fell into that bottomless hole...”

“How the hell did you die? You were out for eight whole hours.”

“Ei...Eight hours?!”

Thunderstruck, Vassago jumped up, even forgetting his headache.

He glanced at the G-Shock on his left wrist, which indicated that it was 6:30 a.m., Japan Standard Time. Less than twelve hours before the time limit, when the armed teams of the Self Defence Force would leave the Aegis destroyer Nagato and break into the Ocean Turtle.

But more importantly —

Since he had been unconscious for eight hours, a couple of months should have passed in Underworld. How was the war? The mission to capture Alice?

But as though Critter had seen through Vassago’s shock, *tsk-tsk*, he clicked his tongue.

“Don’t stare so hard, your eyes are gonna fall out. Relax, when you died inside, the time acceleration rate had already been decreased to one.”

“O... One?!”

Then that meant nothing big should’ve happened inside. But wait, this is a huge problem in itself!

“Hey, four-eyes, do you really understand the situation? We only have twelve hours before the JSDF’s navy troops storm this place!”

Vassago shook Critter’s crew cut head, and the latter batted his hands away annoyingly.

“Of course I know. These are all orders from Captain Miller.”

Then, the “plan of attack” that Critter told him rendered Vassago speechless, even though he was a very experienced VRMMO player.

Before he left the system console in Obsidia, the imperial city in the eastern Dark Territory, Lieutenant Gabriel Miller had secretly given an order to Critter in the real world.

Create an advertisement website about a beta test for a new hardcore VRMMO freed from the laws — Underworld laws, of course — and write a connection client program. Then, set the acceleration rate to one by 12:00 a.m. on July 7, and at the same time, begin recruiting beta tester players from all across the US, he had said.

“With this restricted console, I can only see the coordinates of you and the captain, as well as the approximate distribution of the Units, so this operation was a backup plan in case the Human Empire’s resistance was fiercer than expected.”

Critter’s slim, long fingers danced across the keyboard, pulling up a map of the entire Underworld on the huge display.

On the world map that was shaped like a curved, inverted triangle, two red lines extended from the easternmost edge, all the way to the west.

“This is the movement log of you and the captain. Listen, you were just wandering around the eastern gate of the Human Empire, and then suddenly died.”

One of the red lines terminated with an 'X', south of the «Great Eastern Gate».

“But the commander went past you and is currently proceeding south. He even left the entire Dark Territory army at the north and moved alone. That means...”

“He’s either chasing after Alice or he’s already got her.”

Vassago muttered. Critter nodded and continued explaining.

“According to our original plan, when the remaining time goes down to less than eight hours, or when the Human Empire Army is completely destroyed, we’ll turn the acceleration rate all the way back up to 1,000 times. ‘Cause even so, we still have a full year of time in that world. Of course, when the acceleration rate resets, the US players diving in are all gonna get logged out because of a synchronization error, but as long as we win the war, who cares?”

“Then let’s turn the acceleration rate up now! There ain’t much left of the Human Empire Defense Army.”

“It’s not that simple. Come here, look, right here —”

Critter punched a key and magnified a section of the map.

A few kilometers south of the Great Eastern Gate that divided the Human Empire and the Dark Land, were plains, hills, and a forest, aligned vertically. The Human Empire had set up an ambush in the forest... In other words, that was where Vassago had died.

But somehow, between the forest and the plains, a gigantic valley had appeared almost 50 kilometers from the west to the east. Around that valley, clusters of extremely tiny dots were wobbling and squirming, displayed in different colors: red, black, and white.

“The red ones are those US players that I tossed into Underworld. A lot of them are gone, but there are still 20,000 left. And this

black circle surrounded by the red, is the Dark Territory army. About 4,000.”

“H... Hey, hey, no matter how you look at it, the reds are attacking the blacks, aren't they?”

“That's because the fake beta test information only told them that they could let loose and kill all the highly realistic NPCs. To the US players diving in, there's absolutely no difference between the Human Empire Army and the Dark Territory army. But, for some reason, the blacks are decreasing much slower than I expected. The Dark Territory army should be absolutely loyal to the Emperor, there's no way they're fighting against the US players, because they're thought to be summoned by the Emperor.”

“They must've stuck to killing for so long that they can't stop.”

“Well, let's say these 4,000 black guys are about to be overrun anyway. Despite that, the real problem is over here, this little white group.”

Critter moved the cursor. Indeed, a group of very inconspicuous white dots was currently moving south — as if they were chasing behind Emperor Vector, or Captain Miller.

“Those guys are the Human Empire Army. Though they look tiny from this map, there are still about 700 of them. However, it would be very troublesome if they catch up to the captain, so we have to stop them.”

“Stop them? ...What're you gonna do?”

Critter did not directly answer Vassago's question, but smirked shortly and continued to type on the keyboard.

He opened a new window on the map. Inside, an enormous red cloud was crawling against the flat black background.

“These guys are the US players that didn’t make the first connection, and are waiting for the second one. Once they reach 8,000, I’ll throw them at the Human Empire Army. They’ve got 28 times more people, so they’ll exterminate ‘em right away, right? Afterwards, we can raise the acceleration rate back to 1,000 times normal. That way, we can buy more than enough time for the captain to procure Alice and bring her to the system console at the southern end, right?”

“... If only it were that easy.”

Vassago retorted, stroking his rough beard.

“The Human Empire Army is much hardier than you’d imagine. Especially those guys called the Integrity Knights, they’re fucking insane; they totally destroyed the Dark Territory’s first wave, you know? If it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t have pitifully died... like that...”

Just then, Vassago finally remembered.

Exactly how, and by whom he had been killed.

His breathing ceased and his eyes widened. In his head, a memory gradually recovered, of that goddess-like figure floating high up in the night sky, looking down upon him. He instinctively yelled in Japanese instead of English.

“— «The Flash»...!! Yeah... There’s no doubt, it’s gotta be that bitch...!!”

“Hah? What are you on about?”

Vassago grabbed Critter’s confused, crew cut head.

“Listen, you geek bastard! The Rath guys playing ostrich in the second control room did the same thing as your so-called

‘operation’!! In the Human Empire Army, there’re already Japanese VRMMO players mixed in with them!!”

“What?!”

Ignoring Critter’s incredulous face, Vassago sneered.

“Since Asuna «The Flash» is there, could it be, *that* guy’s dived in too? ... Oh my god, how can I just stay here... Hey, I’m going back to the other side! Put me in together with those 20,000 reinforcements, and insert me at the white group’s position!!”

“You want to dive in again... But the black knight account you wasted is gone forever. Of course, if you don’t mind using the red soldier accounts just like the reinforcements, I have as many as you want.”

“I have an account... One that I’ve saved for so long.”

Kekek. Vassago’s throat emitted a laugh as he swiped a paper energy bar wrapper from the console, pulled a pen from Critter’s chest pocket, and quickly scribbled something down.

“Listen, use this ID and password to log into the homepage of the «The Seed Nexus» in Japan, and convert the saved character into Underworld. I’ll dive in using that account.”

Leaving those words behind, Vassago started running towards the door of the STL room.

But after a few steps, he abruptly stopped.

As he turned around, Vassago's face was twisted into a truly savage leer, enough to strike fear into the notorious cyber criminal Critter. It was as if his vulgar, energetic, and rowdy soldier character was no more than one of his personae.

Then, Vassago walked towards Critter with catlike steps, and whispered another short instruction into his ear. Seconds later, the STL room had swallowed him, and the hacker watched the room door alone, that tiny scrap of paper grasped in his hand.

On that paper were three English letters and eight numerical digits. Critter had never known the meaning of the string of text 'S', 'A' and 'O'.

As the Guardians were preparing to leave, Asuna ran through their crowd and came to the wagon behind the supply team. An overturned silver wheelchair appeared, along with a black-haired boy with his left hand slightly twitching, and two girls leaning towards him.

Ronye lifted her face when she heard the footsteps. Recognizing Asuna, her wet, teary face immediately looked ashamed, and she cried:

"A... Asuna-sama! Kirito-senpai kept... kept wanting to go outside... and then..."

Asuna bit her lip and nodded. She knelt in front of Kirito and gripped his left hand with her remaining right.

"I see... Alice... was taken away by the enemy's Emperor. Kirito-kun must've felt it."

"What?... Alice-sama was...?!"

Tiese cried in shock, her white face paling even further.

What broke this momentary silence was Kirito's barely audible voice.

“Ah... uh...”

His left hand stirred, trying to caress what was left of Asuna's left arm.

“Kirito-kun... Are you, worrying about me...?”

Asuna whispered gently. Just then, Ronye finally noticed Asuna's injury and screamed.

“Ah, Asuna-sama! Your arm...!!”

“It's okay. This is just a temporary injury for me...” she muttered. Asuna gently lifted her left arm, of which everything below the elbow had been cut off.

Higa Takeru had given her a very brief lecture about the «Mnemonic Visual» technology. Although all objects were created by The Seed program like in ALO, to Asuna and Kirito, who had dived in with STLs, and to Artificial Fluctlights like Tiese and the others, everything in this world was a «shared memory» loaded from the Main Visualizer, a different reality created through the power of imagination.

Super Account Stacia's Life, or HP, was an astronomical number, almost reaching the system limit. Hence, if she were attacked with a normal weapon, even stabbed by hundreds and hundreds of swords, her Life would still not be reduced to zero.

But when the red soldier swung down the giant battleaxe and struck her left arm, Asuna was thoroughly and utterly terrified; she had thought, *being hit with a battleaxe this big, my arm will be cut off*, and her imagination was realized.

The same went for Kirito's right hand. Although his Life value had already been restored, his arm had no way of returning to normal, because he continued to punish himself for everything.

Asuna placed her hand on her bandaged stump, concentrated her thoughts, closed her eyes and recited to herself with fervent tenacity.

I won't be afraid of anything anymore. Until I've protected Kirito-kun and this world to the very end, I won't lose to anyone... or anything.

White light concentrated onto the wound with a *pop*. As warm radiance silently spread, her left arm was restored.

Smiling at the two round-eyed girls who had just witnessed a miracle, Asuna reached out with her restored left hand and softly hugged Kirito's head.

“See? I'm fine. I'll definitely save Alice and bring her back. So... when that time comes, Kirito-kun, don't blame yourself anymore...”

Asuna did not know whether or not her words could reach Kirito's heart, but she felt that his emaciated body gradually became less tense. Asuna continued to hug him for several seconds, then stood up.

“We must immediately take the entire army and pursue the enemy Emperor. Knight Commander Bercouli has already taken the dragons after him, and we'll be able to catch up to them up somewhere ahead for sure. During that time, I'll leave Kirito-kun to you... Ronye-san, Tiese-san.”

“Y... Yes!”

“Leave him to us, Asuna-sama!”

Smiling at the two nodding girls and fighting back tears as she entrusted Kirito to Ronye, Asuna leapt off the carriage.

As soon as she stepped onto the ground, she caught sight of a tall swordswoman running over, who had also attended the “Memory Exposing Competition” last night with her and Ronye. Her silver armor was thoroughly stained with blood and dirt and her head was wrapped in a bandage, but she did not seem heavily injured.

“It’s great that you’re all right, Sortiliena-san.”

Hearing Asuna’s voice, the swordswoman performed an Underworld salute, and replied:

“I’m glad to see that Asuna-sama is fine as well... —It’s just that, I have just heard that Alice-sama has been captured by the enemy general...”

“Yes. I was just explaining to Ronye-san that Emperor Vector completely abandoned his own army and personally ambushed Alice-san. I didn’t expect him to do that, either...”

“... How can this be...”

With her newly restored left hand, Asuna tightly gripped a wide-eyed Sortiliena’s right shoulder.

“But all is not lost. Bercouli-san has already flown after Vector with the dragons. We will pursue them as well.”

“Understood.”

They nodded to each other, and hurried towards the center of the supply team decoy troops.

Under Integrity Knight Renri's instruction, the Ascetic team had finished healing all of the wounded, and the 700 Guardians had almost completed preparations to move out. The Guardians were smoothly lining up around the Ascetic and supply teams.

After receiving Renri's report that preparations were complete, Asuna issued him a new directive.

"You are the last remaining Integrity Knight, Renri. The order to move out should be given by you, the commander."

"Y... Yes, I understand."

The young knight's expression was somewhat anxious, but he nodded resolutely, raised his right hand high into the air, and shouted orders in a carrying voice.

"Alice-sama has kindly protected us all in the battle at the Eastern Gate! It's now our turn to fight for her! We shall take her back from the enemy, and return to the Human Empire together!"

"OH!!" Vigorous cries arose. Renri nodded, and sharply swung his right arm down.

"— All units, advance!"

Renri led the troops at the very front from his own dragon, Kazenui. He was followed by 400 Guardians, on horses or on foot, and the eight wagons loaded with supplies and a backup team of 300 began to move as well.

Only one dragon — Integrity Knight Sheyta's dragon, stayed its ground obstinately and did not move. With scales as grayish-white as its owner's hair, the dragon screeched *kuurrr* once it was freed from its reins, then flapped its wings and flew north — towards the battlefield south of the valley, where its owner had stayed behind.

In front of the wagons, Asuna thought as she shook back and forth on the horse with Sortiliena:

The final enemy is Emperor Vector.

His true identity was that of a person also from the real world, who existed here in the form of a virtual being. That was why, even if she had to go down with him, she must defeat him. For those who stayed behind to take on the red soldiers' attack: Knight Sheyta, the one-eyed Fist Fighter Chief, and the 4,000 Fist Fighters.

A few minutes later, the troops emerged from the withered forest and entered the immense mortar-shaped basin. A thin road cut straight through the crater-like ground, leading southwards.

According to RPG convention, the end of such a road would be a special location, such as a city or ruins. Yet she had heard that the southern area of the Dark Territory was not occupied by any of the demihumans. In other words, this road ended at the «World End Altar», and Emperor Vector was somewhere on it with Integrity Knight Alice.

Emperor Vector's dragon and Bercouli's dragons in hot pursuit were all out of sight. However, 700 Human Empire soldiers still advanced along the road as quickly as they could; the ground rumbled with their footsteps.

Clearing the edge of the crater, charging downhill— just as the entire decoy unit reached the bottom.

Something was trembling.

Vvvvvv... *m.* A rumbling like the wings of an insect.

“...?”

Asuna looked up, left and right, and behind her.

Just as she looked straight ahead, she finally discovered the source of the noise.

Red, thin lines.

Hundreds of randomly flashing, tiny strings of text, falling out of the sky straight to the ground.

“..... No way.....”

Asuna’s lips trembled, a broken voice leaking out.

— *No way. Stop. No more...*

But.

Zaaaa — !!

The roar of an explosion like torrential rainfall. Falling lines branched left and right, dropping in a downpour. They formed a high density screen along the edge of the crater, completely blocking the troops’ path.

Despite having just declared that she would not be afraid anymore, Asuna’s feet still instantly lost their strength.

What appeared where the lines landed were the brutal, ferocious soldiers clad in that blood-red armor — VRMMO players summoned from the real world.

“All... All units, do not stop!! Attack!! Attack — !!”

Integrity Knight Renri issued a clear order from the very front. The disturbed Human Empire Army regained order with a warcry: *Uooo!* and picked up their pace. The troops sprinted up the crater’s incline.

But, as if they had been anticipating this maneuver, the newly-appeared soldiers seemed to all have been placed on the south side of the crater, with the ones blocking their way numbering a thousand... no, nearly two thousand.

Shall I risk being logged out and use Stacia's Geographical Manipulation again? If she wasn't careful, however, it could backfire and impede the advancement of the Human Empire Army.

In the next instant, Asuna's puzzlement was shattered by a dragon's roar.

From the very front line, Knight Renri's dragon Kazenui was spewing scorching flames, and had charged ahead without looking back.

"No... Renri-sama is sacrificing himself to open a path..."

As though he heard Sortiliena's pained moan from beside Asuna, Renri slowly turned around from atop the dragon's back.

— Please take care of the rest.

The boy's lips mouthed.

Then, the charging knight drew the two boomerang-like weapons from his waist, and held them at the ready.

Just before he threw them forward.

The color of the sky above the crater suddenly changed.

A cross-shaped rift tore apart the Dark Territory's blood-red sky, from which Asuna caught a glimpse of an infinite blue behind it, clear as azure.

Whether it was the numerous crimson soldiers who seemed ready to charge down, the suicidally advancing Human Empire soldiers, or even Knight Renri charging at the very front, all lifted their heads together, looking into the sky like Asuna.

The boundless heavens, seemingly reaching into the universe.

From beyond, a bright white star descended.

No, it was a person. Clad in armor of the same azure as the sky, and a skirt as white as the clouds, with violently flapping short hair the color of water. The source of the blinding white light was the giant longbow in their left hand. Their face was imperceptible against the reflection.

— Who...? Who, are you?

As though in response to Asuna's silent demand, the one floating in the sky pointed the longbow into the heavens. Their right hand gripped the dazzling bowstring, and forcefully drew it all the way back.

With a stunning flash, an arrow of light shining pure white appeared between the bow and the string.

Both the Human Empire Army and the red soldiers had stopped dead, all seeming to forget how to speak in this instant, completely silent. The only sound heard was Sortiliena's low voice:

“..... Solus-sama...?”

As though answering this call, the dazzling arrow of light shot vertically into the sky.

It instantly split and spread in all directions.

As they turned at acute angles, they transformed into white-hot lasers and poured down towards the ground.



The words of Guardian Leader Sortiliena Serlut were only half correct.

Above the crater, a real world person appeared, no, logged in with Super Account 02, «Solus, Goddess of the Sun».

This account had been given the default ability «wide-ranged annihilatory attack».

Sinon/Asada Shino looked down upon the immense destruction she had wreaked, and recalled the explanation that the technician called Higa had given her over the intercom.

“Um, Sinon-san, although the Super Accounts are really strong, they’re not miracle workers. Since they’re prepared for times when you only have to perform large scale changes in the Underworld, we tried our best to configure them to fit a range acceptable to the inhabitants within.”

“So... are you saying that they’re not GMs⁴, just very strong PCs⁵?”

Sinon spoke into the microphone as she lay on the giant STL machine resembling the First Generation Fulldive experimental apparatus, located in the Roppongi branch of the mysterious startup «Rath». What came as a reply was a *click*— apparently the sound of someone snapping his fingers.

“Yes. Exactly. That’s why the «Solus» account you’re going to use can’t get around the Underworld’s resource boundaries either. Any attacks with your bow must expend Spatial Resources, no matter what. Since it has an auto-recharging feature, it shouldn’t be exhausted during the day, but you can’t do rapid fire.”

Just as Higa said, the light of the pure white longbow that Sinon gripped in her left hand had weakened after that wide-ranged attack.

4 Game Master.

5 Player Character.

Although the bow had already begun to replenish its light at both ends, another full-power attack would require a two to three minute wait.

— No combo attacks? Hmph, perfect.

Compared to an automatic⁶, manuals suit me better anyway.

Sinon boasted silently, confirming that the explosive flames on the ground had dissipated.

Along the edge of the roughly one kilometer wide crater, charred bodies vanished one after another with a luminous effect. A single shot had probably obliterated more than 5,000 enemy soldiers. Luckily, they were not real Underworld people, but Americans who had logged in from the real world just like Sinon. The players who had believed in the existence of this closed beta and were torched immediately upon connection must be seething right now.

In the crater's center, the small scale troops vastly outnumbered by the crimson army began to advance again. Although the enemy still numbered more than 10,000, most remained motionless out of fear of the next shot — or rather, explosion, allowing the Human Empire Army to break through.

Sinon gazed into the distance, verifying the Human Empire troops' formation.

She instantly noticed the chestnut-haired girl in their ranks atop a white horse, looking right up at her.

Sinon could not help but smile as she maneuvered the other ability that had been bestowed upon the Solus account, «unlimited flight». Although she was incredulous upon hearing Higa tell her “you fly with your imagination”, when she actually took control she felt that it wasn't much different from the free flight in ALO.

6 Automatic gun. Sinon is used to playing first-person shooter games.

She looked towards the carriage behind the girl, and flew towards it in a straight line.

When the tips of her porcelain-painted boots touched the canvas surface, she gently raised her right hand.

“Sorry for the wait, Asuna.”

As she saw Sinon’s warm smile, tears beaded in the eyes of the girl in the pearly dress. She stood from her galloping horse, and jumped beneath the carriage canopy:

“—— Sinonon... !!”

Asuna hugged her tightly with a strained shout.

Sinon lightly patted her best friend’s slender body, and said softly:

“You’ve worked hard. It’s okay... Leave everything else to me.”

As she was hugged by Asuna, who was slightly taller than her, she pointed the 20% recharged bow directly ahead, and slightly drew back the bowstring with her right hand.

The GM equipment given to the Solus account — the longbow «Annihilate Ray» adjusted its power according to bowstring force, and adjusted its attack range according to bow angle. An arrow of light, much thinner than the one before, appeared when the bowstring was drawn 10 centimeters back. Sinon aimed the arrow at the enemy troops blocking the dragons running at the front.

Vishu! The faint sound of a shot.

Tilted about 20 degrees to the right, the bow shot out a ray of light that split and landed within a 10 meter radius, creating an explosion not inferior to that of a TOW missile⁷

Crimson armor was thrown high into the air, and then disappeared. Taking advantage of the opening, the dragons immediately charged through. The ten or so soldiers who withstood the blast were slammed by the dragons' heads, kicked by their huge talons, and instantly defeated.

At this point, the enemy soldiers seemed to have recovered from the shock of the laser attack, and realized that their prey was fleeing. Exploding with obscene curses, they dashed down the slope of the crater like a red tsunami.

Sinon swung her bow over her arm, placed both hands on Asuna's shoulders, and gently separated themselves.

“Asuna. I can see the remains of something that looks like ruins about 5 kilometers south of here. The road runs straight through it, and several huge stone statues are lined up on both sides. We won't have to worry about being surrounded by the enemy, and we can shrink the battlefield. Let's find a way to repel the enemy there.”

Asuna was also a battleworn warrior, and upon hearing Sinon's words, her eyes immediately recovered a sharp gleam. She forcefully wiped away her tears, and spoke:

“Got it, Sinonon... Sinon. No matter how many American VRMMO players there are, they have no way of immediately gathering more. If we can repel those ten or so thousand people, the enemy will be helpless... I think.”

⁷ BGM-71 TOW, a widely used US anti-tank missile. More info here:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BGM-71_TOW

“Yeah, leave it to me. ... Well, that’s pretty much it...”

After confirming that the very last of the Human Empire Army troops had escaped the enemy encirclement, Sinon looked back at her best friend.

“... Um, is Kirito.... among the troops?”

Asuna could not help but give her a bitter smile at this.

“You don’t have to be so polite about that now. Kirito-kun’s in there.”

Asuna gestured with her right index finger at the carriage beneath their feet.

“Oh, really. Well... I’ll go say hello to him.”

Clearing her throat, Sinon moved to the rear of the ceiling canvas on the large carriage, and glided inside with the help of her flying ability.

She waited for Asuna to follow suit, then turned towards the depths of the carriage, stacked with wooden crates.

The first things that entered her sight were two otherworldly girls in gray uniforms covered with armor. Their eyes grew wide at the same time, and one of them uttered softly:

“S... Solus-sama...?”

Sinon glanced at her own outfit, and replied with a shrug:

“Hello, nice to meet you. Although I look a lot like Solus, I’m not. I’m Sinon.”

She tried her best to smile at them, but the duo only blinked in confusion. But as they saw Asuna as well, they seemed to understand something.

“Right, I’m a Real World person like Asuna. I’m also Kirito’s... friend.”

“I... see.”

While the red-haired girl still looked startled, the deep brown-haired girl wore a complicated expression, and murmured quietly: *Why are they all women?*

You have no idea. Sinon chuckled bitterly in her heart as she took a few steps into the gap that the girls parted to create.

She saw a boy in black, sitting on a plain wheelchair, hugging two longswords in one arm.

Although she had already learned of Kirito’s state through Higa Takeru, upon seeing his injured state in the flesh, her heart tightened and she felt tears welling up.

“... Ah...”

Even though those empty eyes did not look at hers, his throat did emit a small sound. Sinon fell softly to her knees before her former enemy, comrade, and savior.

Leaning on the chair’s back and the armrests, the swordsman’s body had become so thin and frail that she hesitated to touch him. Sinon set her longbow on the carriage’s deck, then reached out and wrapped both arms tightly around his emaciated frame.

She had heard that Kirito’s soul — his Fluctlight, the «main body» known as the core within, or his self-image, had suffered severe damage. Higa had told her in a somber voice that there was currently no known method of recovery.

But, Sinon closed her eyes tightly, tears streaming out as she screamed in her heart: *Well, that’s easy.*

Many people have countless memories of the times with Kirito, and strong emotions towards Kirito. They only needed to be gathered together, bit by bit, and placed back into Kirito's heart.

— Hey, can't you feel it?... The you that's inside me. Sarcastic, a bit naughty, stubborn, naive... and stronger, kinder than anyone. This is you, yourself.

Sinon forgot that Asuna was still gazing from behind her; she turned her head and planted a firm kiss on Kirito's face.

Just then —

Asada Shino was still unaware that her own emotional thoughts had barely scratched the surface of the only possible way to revive Kirigaya Kazuto's soul.

Had she possessed ample knowledge of Underworld and Fluctlights' structure, it would be possible for her to solve that method. But the explanation given to Sinon before she dived in only consisted of the current situation and how to use the Solus account.

That was why Sinon did not bother to consider the reason behind Kazuto's slight trembling and subtle rise in body temperature, which occurred when her lips touched him.

Sinon quickly released Kirito's body, stood up, and turned to the three watching from behind.

“Don't worry, Kirito will definitely make a speedy recovery. When we truly need him.”

Asuna and the two girls nodded tearfully.

“Well... I'll fly to the ruins in the south to confirm the geography. I'll leave Kirito to you guys.”

Having said that, Sinon turned towards the carriage rear–

Suddenly, Asuna tightly seized her shoulder.

Seeing the urgent gleam in her eyes, Sinon swallowed involuntarily.

“A... Asuna, what...”

Sinon thought that Asuna was going to interrogate her about stealing a kiss with Kirito, but naturally, this was not the case —

“H-Hey, Sinon, did you say you were going to fly?! You... can fly?!”

At this critical question, Sinon nodded confusedly.

“Y... Yes. They told me it was a default ability of the Solus account. I heard that it doesn’t have a time limit...”

“Then we aren’t the ones in need of help! Alice... Go after Alice, she’s been abducted by the Emperor!!”

The situation that Asuna explained afterwards was more urgent than Sinon had expected.

Integrity Knight Alice, the key to everything, had been captured by Emperor Vector, who was diving with a Super Account just like them, and was currently flying towards the faraway south on a dragon. The only one currently in pursuit was a swordsman called Bercouli, the Knight Commander.

“Going up against a Super Account, even for the Knight Commander, is too much for him. If we can’t save Alice before the Emperor reaches the «World End Altar», this entire world will be destroyed! Please, Sinon, go help Bercouli-san!”

After everything had been finally cleared up and she had carved Knight Commander Bercouli’s appearance into her mind, Sinon flew from the carriage and shot into the sky.

The 700-strong Human Empire Army was advancing south with a dust cloud.

Chasing furiously after them from the north, the red army seemed to consist of 20 times more people.

— I'll come back as soon as I grab Alice. Do your best until then, Asuna.

Calling to her best friend in her heart, Sinon spurred her imagination to accelerate southwards. She became a white-tailed meteor, tearing across the crimson sky.

Looking down upon the forever sprawling dark wilderness, Sinon suddenly remembered:

Come to think of it —

Where's Leafa, who should have logged in at the same time as she had?

3

Close behind the Human Empire Army led by Integrity Knight Renri was the second batch of inserted American players.

Far north, on the south side of the valley created by Asuna, Iskahn and the Fist Fighters' Guild, along with Integrity Knight Sheyta, were still locked in a desperate battle with the rest of the crimson army that still numbered more than ten thousand.

And even further north of this battlefield —

In the wilderness on the other side of the Great Eastern Gate, now stained with the remains of the bloodshed, stood the silhouette of a lone demihuman.

A body wrapped in bulging steel armor. A leathery mantle fluttering in the wind. Two thin ears drooping from both sides of a rotund head, with a flat nose protruding outwards.

It was the Chief of the Orc Tribe, Rirupirin.

Having ordered his surviving three thousand tribal members to standby behind, he had come to the Great Eastern Gate alone. He had not brought even a single bodyguard, because he did not want them to see him wavering over the ground.

After fumbling in the sand for who knows how long, Rirupirin finally found what he was searching for: A plainly carved silver earring.

What he gently picked up and placed into his palm was the eye-catching object that the Orc princess knight Renju had worn in her ear, as she followed the Emperor's orders and became a live sacrifice.

This was the only possession she had left behind. In the wilderness, not even a shard of armor remained, let alone the bodies of the three thousand Orcs who had died together with the princess. The Dark Sorceress' abhorrent magic had completely devoured the Orcs' bodies and equipment, transforming them into Dark Energy.

And the Sorceress D.I.L., who had enacted this cruel torture, along with the Emperor who had given the order, were no longer here.

D, the Head of the Dark Sorceress' Guild, had died after being engulfed by the «Radiant Medium»'s terrifying and magnificent counterattack, and the Emperor had flown south to pursue the Medium, without giving Rirupirin any new orders to move out.

The remaining three thousand Orc soldiers had no way of defeating the Human Empire soldiers and Integrity Knights protecting the Great Eastern Gate. The desire of the five races of the Dark Land, their dream of conquering the Human Empire, had collapsed.

— If that was the result.

Why?

Why had Rirupirin's childhood friend Renju, the three thousand Orcs sacrificed alive, and the two thousand Orcs battling at the Gate, died? What did their deaths bring to the Dark Land?

No answer. Nothing at all.

Just because of their inferior appearance, five thousand tribesmen died in vain, just like that.

Rirupirin hugged the earring in his fist to his chest, and knelt wretchedly on the ground. A raging, melancholic, crushing sorrow flooded his heart — when they melted into tears and sobs —

At that moment.

A *gaton* came from behind.

The Orc chief stood up and spun his head around, startled, then saw, fallen on the ground and creasing her brows, a human woman. Bright golden hair and pure white skin, wearing a grassy-colored outfit and shining armor... not someone from the Dark Land, but surely a Human Empire girl.

Instead of shock at her sudden appearance, or fury at seeing a human, the first thing that Rirupirin felt was a shame that said, “don’t look at me”.

Because the girl before him was simply too beautiful.

She was definitely the first young female white Ium he had seen close-up, and was so different from the tall, rough-boned, ashy-skinned females of the Dark Land that he thought she looked almost to be from a different species. Her hands and feet looked so fragile that they might snap at the slightest touch, her hair still gleaming under the weak sun, her large eyes looking straight ahead dumbfoundedly, like crystal-clear emeralds.

Rirupirin cursed himself for having such awestruck thoughts about the beauty of this weak race.

At the same time, he was scared that the girl’s eyes might fill with revulsion.

“Dun’ ... Dun’ look!! Dun’ look a’ me!!”

He shouted as he blocked his face with his left fist, clutching the hilt of his sword with his right.

Before she could scream, he would cut her head off.

As he prepared to draw his sword, Rirupirin felt the earring gripped in his left hand pierce his palm. A feeling like he was being held back by Renju made him stop his movements, and then he heard a surprising sound — or voice.

“Err... Good afternoon. Good morning, perhaps?”

Standing up swiftly and patting down her shorts, the girl smiled gently.

Hiding behind the shadow of his fist, Rirupirin watched in surprise and blinked several times.

There was not a sliver of revulsion or scorn in the girl’s eyes, not even fear. To white Ium children, the Orcs of the Dark Territory were supposed to be man-eating spirits.

“W... Why?”

The words that leaked out of his mouth sounded desperate, completely uncharacteristic for one of the ten Lords of the Dark Land.

“Why aren’t ya runnin’ away? Why aren’t ya screamin’? Yer jus’ a hooman, why?”

The girl looked surprised and perplexed.

“Why... Because.”

Then, as if affirming that the world is flat and the sky is red, she continued matter-of-factly:

“You’re a human too, aren’t you?”

In that instant, Rirupirin could not understand why his spine trembled. Gripping the hilt of his sword, the demihuman chief spoke in a panting voice:

“H... Hooman? Me? What kinda stupid stuff is that? You can tell jus’ by lookin’ a’ me! I’m an Orc! An Orc called a pigman by ya lums!!”

“But, you’re still a human, though.”

Placing her hands on her slender hips, the girl sounded like a parent teaching her child.

“See, we can talk to each other. Other than that, what more do you need?”

“Wha’ ... more...”

Rirupirin couldn’t retort anymore. The confident words spoken by the green-eyed girl were too abnormal to the Orc chief who had lived with burning inferiority and resentment towards humans.

... If you can talk, you’re a human?

Is that the only requisite of being a “human”? Goblins, Ogres, and Giants could all speak languages. But the four races that included the Orcs had been called “demihumans” ever since the beginning of the Dark Territory, strictly divided from the humans.

Rirupirin could only breathe roughly as he stood there dumbfounded. With a “Let’s not worry about that yet”, the girl swept his shock and chaos aside as she surveyed their surroundings.

“... Where... is this?”

Leafa/Kirigaya Suguha noticed that she had apparently appeared far away from her original login coordinates, and looked towards that ominous, red tinted sky.

Since hearing that the STL Unit 6 she was using was a new machine that hadn't even been taken out of its PVC wrapping after being moved in, she had felt uneasy. Suguha never competed with newly purchased *shinai*, and likewise, she never trusted newly unpackaged electronic devices. Because somehow, she'd always had an abnormally high chance of getting defective electronic hardware.

When she had logged in, like Sinon, who entered with STL Prototype Unit 1, her location should have been set to where Asuna was dived in, but since she could see neither of the two, something had certainly happened before she arrived. But that didn't mean that this desolate place was completely empty; before her stood a single rotund, pig-faced humanoid — in other words, an «Orc».

According to the color cursor that was only effective for an instant after diving in, this Orc should not belong to her current enemy — the American VRMMO players, but he was an “Artificial Fluctlight” living in Underworld, the “bottom-up” artificial intelligence that Yui had described.

After hearing Yui's explanation about the people of Underworld, Leafa was determined not to draw her sword against them unless absolutely necessary.

That was obvious — how could she kill the “humans” that her brother Kirito wished to protect? If an Artificial Fluctlight died in this world, their soul would be completely destroyed, unable to be revived.

Furthermore —

Even for Leafa, who was already familiar with ALO's top-notch graphics, the complexity of this Orc's model, which also existed inside much of The Seed Nexus, was shocking.

The twitches and breaths of his great pinkish nose, the texture of the metallic armor that wrapped around his giant frame and its leathery mantle, and most of all, his two beady black eyes and the richness of his expression were even more proof of the unquestionable, true presence of the soul living within him.

She had asked this Orc, who timidly turned his face away for some reason, about their surroundings, yet had not received an immediate answer. Deciding to start with a more present issue, Leafa raised another question.

“Well... What’s your name?”

Taken aback, the Orc chief uttered a reflexive, unconscious answer to the white Ium girl’s second inquiry. Maybe his name was the only thing he didn’t hate about himself.

“I... I’m, Rirupirin.”

He immediately regretted saying it. Because before, when he traveled to Imperial City Obsidia for the first time, the human knights and sorcerers had burst into laughter upon hearing the name Rirupirin.

But, the girl only smiled innocently, without any kind of hidden emotion, and repeated Rirupirin’s name in a clear voice:

“Rirupirin... What a great name. I’m Leafa. It’s nice to meet you, please take care of me.”

Then, she performed an bewildering action for the umpteenth time.

She extended her soft, white, right hand straight out.

Shaking hands — of course he knew about this habit. It was common among Orcs as well. But he had never heard of an Ium shaking hands with an Orc.

— What the hell is with this person? Is this a trap, or some Sorceress’s magic? Have I fallen for a Bewitching Art without realizing it?

Staring at that small, outstretched hand, Rirupirin could only moan without moving. The girl watched Rirupirin for nearly ten seconds, then let her hand fall with slight disappointment. Seeing her like that, he felt a stabbing pain in his heart for some reason.

If he kept talking to the girl... No, just looking at her, he didn’t know what would happen to his brain. Rirupirin had decided he did not want to kill this puny human before him anymore, but to find another solution that did not require brainpower, he spoke:

“Yer... a Guardian of the Hooman Empire army, no, a knight. I wanna take ya prisoner. Take ya ta the Emperor!”

Even though she was young, the armor she wore and the long sword equipped at her left waist were unlike anything given to a soldier, no matter how he looked at them. Their intricate designs and gleaming material were likely of much higher grade than Rirupirin’s equipment.

The girl did not show a trace of fear at Rirupirin’s roar, as though she was thinking about something, then finally shrugged and asked:

“The Emperor you’re talking about is Dark God Vector, right?”

“Y... Yeah.”

“Got it. Okay then. Take me to the Emperor.”

She nodded, brought her hands together, and stuck them out. This was very clearly not a gesture to shake hands, but one encouraging him to tie her up.

— What the hell is she thinking?



Rirupirin took a sash from his belt, and roughly — but a bit loosely, tied the girl’s wrists. After pulling on the end of the rope to tighten it, he remembered that the Emperor was no longer at the army encampment of the Dark Land.

But, if he continued to think about complicated things, his brain would be fried. Even if the Emperor wasn’t there, there was still that Dark Knight aide with the disgusting expression, or someone like the Commerce Guild leader Lengil who would know what to do.

A few seconds after he turned, he began to walk as he pulled on the sash with slight care.

Suddenly, a thick black haze appeared around him. A revolting smell pierced his nose. Everything instantly became invisible, and Rirupirin scanned his surroundings on alert.

“Ah...?!”

That short, surprised utterance was without doubt from that girl who called herself Leafa.

Flicking his head around, Rirupirin saw an arm sticking out from deep within the thick fog and pulling violently at Leafa’s tied hair.

Then, the owner of the hand appeared out of the haze.

The woman who should have died — Dark Sorceress’ Guild Leader D.I.L. stood there, her lips curved in a cruel smile.

Why can’t I catch up to him?

Bercouli, the leader of the Integrity Knights, felt as surprised as he was desperate.

His three dragons had been in pursuit for more than two hours.

They had flown over the forest, where the Human Empire Defense army was camping, and the wide circular depression, passed through the ruins lined with strange, giant statues, and burst into the uncharted southern region of the Dark Territory, but the distance between them showed no signs of decreasing. Having abducted his beloved apprentice Integrity Knight Alice, Emperor Vector's dragon still remained a miniscule black dot on the distant horizon.

The Emperor and Alice were riding together on a single dragon.

Conversely, Bercouli continuously switched between Hoshigami, Amayori, and Takiguri, trying his best to minimize their fatigue. In theory, he should have caught up by now.

Why can't he catch up then? Is the Emperor able to freely control his dragon's Life?

Impossible. Not even the Highest Minister Administrator could control Life as she wanted, that should be the greatest taboo.

Of course, he couldn't fly indefinitely. He had to let his dragon rest at least twice before reaching the «World End Altar» at the southernmost edge of the Dark Territory. But Bercouli's dragons also needed to rest. Since their speed was equal, he would never be able to close their distance.

It — won't end.

Bercouli was unable to use an Art that could reach all the way to the horizon. To break this current situation, the only possibility was to —

The Knight Commander gently caressed his beloved sword at his left waist with his right hand.

A reliable, gritty, ice-cold feel. But just from its touch, he could feel that its Life was far from completely replenished. The extensive Armament Full Control Art he had used at the Great Eastern Gate had expended more than he had expected.

The tactic that Bercouli was about to use, the ultimate pinnacle of the Divine Instrument «Time Piercing Sword», would expend an astronomical amount of Life.

He could use it only once. And the strike had to be more precise than threading a needle in order to hit its target.

Bercouli gently caressed Takiguri's neck, and leapt lightly beside it onto Hoshigami's back.

Even if he wasn't holding its reins, he passed his consciousness to his partner who had fought alongside him over the years, and carefully adjusted his altitude.

He aimed at the black dot like a grain of sand on the far off horizon.

Although he very much wanted to aim at the Emperor himself, at this distance he could not even see his silhouette, so the risk of missing was too high. He must see through his movements, and concentrate all of his energy on one wing of his dragon.

Standing straight up on his stirrups, Bercouli slowly moved his right hand and drew his longsword, forged entirely from a single material, out from its worn leather sheath.

The blade he held to the right of his body emitted a weak glow. The Recollection Release Art directly activated without an incantation and the longsword swayed like steam, drawing innumerable afterimages behind it with the dragon's advance.

The Knight Commander looked steely as the corner of his mouth twitched, gently apologizing to the innocent dragon.

Then, narrowing his pale blue eyes — Bercouli, the world's eldest knight, uttered a sharp cry.

“Time Piercing Sword — Unseen Slash!!”

With a heavy *zoom*, he swung the blade down heavily but surprisingly quickly. Countless blue afterimages flashed along in the direction of the slash, then disappeared one by one.

Far off in the distance, the left wing of the black dragon ridden by Emperor Vector was silently severed off from its roots.

“It smells... I can smell it... So sweet is the fragrance of Life...”

Clasping the human girl’s hair and lifting her entire body up, D.I.L.’s lips emitted a fractured voice.

Rirupirin could only watch dumbly at the Dark Sorceress, whom no matter how much he hated, it still didn’t feel enough.

Her dark skin, once gleaming with the sheen of fragrant oil, and her once magnificent black curls, were now in a horrible state. Her entire body was utterly covered in wounds seeping blood nonstop, incurred from sharp blades. With D’s every move, a few wounds would split open, spurting more blood. But the black haze surrounding the Sorceress would quickly gather around the wound, secrete a nauseating smell, and stem the blood flow.

The source of the smoke was a small leather pouch hanging from D’s waist. Upon closer inspection, when the pouch was open, strange insect-like things would occasionally poke their heads out to spray the thick fog. It must be a Dark Art that inhibited Life decrease.

Glancing at Rirupirin, who had pinched his nose out of disgust, the corners of D’s mouth lifted.

“What excellent prey. I commend you, pig. As a reward, I’ll show you something nice.”

Right after she said that —

D slid her talon-like right finger into the girl’s collar, who made a pained expression as her hair was hoisted further up.

With a relentless noise, the silver armor and light grass-colored shirt were suddenly torn apart and fell to the ground.

As the pure white skin on her upper body was exposed, the girl's face contorted even further. Watching her, D panted sadistically and revealed a wild grin.

“How is it? It's your first time seeing a human woman's body, is it? This might be too tempting for a pig! But the show's just getting started...!!”

The five digits on D's right hand suddenly began to wriggle and writhe like they had suddenly lost their bones.

Somehow, her fingers had already transformed into glistening, slippery worms. At their ends, concentric circles of thin, saw-like mouths opened wide, writhing disgustingly.

“Watch...!!”

As D shouted, her five fingers — no, five long worms stretched far beyond their original length and wrapped around the girl's upper body. They not only stopped her from moving; the ends raised their sickle-shaped necks — and stabbed into her skin.

“AH...!!”

Blood spurted in all directions as the girl called Leafa screamed, her green eyes wide. She tried to peel off the worms with her hands, but her upper body was entangled and her wrists were tied up by Rirupirin's sash.

The blood flow from her five wounds suddenly seemed to stop, but the reality was different. Rirupirin realized that the worms on D's right hand were emitting swallowing sounds; they were drinking her blood.

The Dark Sorceress lifted her head and began to recite a shrill incantation.

“System call!! Transfer human unit durability... Right to Self!!”

Pop, blue light burst from the girl's wounds.

Then, as if synchronizing with the flow of blood, it was sucked into D's hand through the worms. The girl's torment intensified, and her thin body arched backward as though it were about to snap in half.

“Ah... Powerful... Powerful!! How rich... and sweet!!”

A piercing screech shattered Rirupirin's eardrums.

This pain jolted the Orc chief back to his senses, and he shouted as if panting:

“Wha'... Wha' are ya doing!! This girl is my prisoner!! I wanna take 'er ta the Emperor!!”

“Shut up, you stupid pig!!”

D screamed arrogantly, her eyes bloodshot.

“Have you forgotten that the Emperor has given all operational command to me?! My will is the Emperor's will!! My command is the Emperor's command!!”

Gu. Rirupirin was at a loss for words.

Hadn't this operation ended in failure a long time ago? He wanted to retort. But the Emperor had disappeared from the battlefield without giving any orders. Now, there was no one to overturn D's perspective of her “power”.

As Rirupirin watched, dumbstruck, the girl emitted silent screams and her movements began to weaken. On the other hand, the countless wounds on D's skin began to adhere together, bit by bit, and close.

“Uh... Gurgh...”

Crushing noises came from his clenched teeth.

To Rirupirin, the girl having her Life slowly absorbed, overlapped with the silhouette of the princess general who had died as a sacrifice.

The light slowly vanished from the girl's eyes. Her skin had gone from white to pale, and her hands fell powerlessly to her side. But the tentacles on D's right hand still writhed hungrily, intending to suck out every last drop of her blood.

Die... She will die.

This rare prisoner.

No, the first human who was neither afraid of nor disdainful towards him.

Just then —

An unthinkable phenomenon, or rather, a miracle occurred. Rirupirin's eyes widened involuntarily.

The ground.

The jet black, charcoal-like desert ground of the Dark Territory, below the suspended girl, began radiating green.

What looked like very soft grass, which was unseen except in rare places, shot up from the ground, and innumerable flowers in all sorts of colors began blooming in every direction. The fragrance of flowers carried in the wind, and even the blood-red sunlight had changed to a warm cream color.

This scene, teeming with life, spun around and was instantly absorbed into the girl's body.

Her pale skin immediately regained its color, and her eyes shone once more.

As the sudden illusion disappeared, Rirupirin realized that the girl's Life had already completely recovered. An inexplicable relief flooded his heart.

But it was immediately shattered.

“Unbelievable... It's coming out... It's seeping out again!!”

D screeched, her wounds seemingly completely healed as well.

She released her right hand from claspings the girl's hair, and the fingers on that hand also transformed into ugly worms.

With corpulent, sticky sounds, the five newly generated tentacles pierced the girl's skin.

“... AHH...!!”

D's guffaws completely drowned out the girl's thin screams.

“AHAHAHAHA!! AH — HAHHAHAHAHA!! Mine! It's MINE — !!”

— I have to endure this.

Suffering an excruciating pain she had never felt before either in the real world or ALO, Leafa could only repeat this to herself.

Before she dived, she heard the explanation of Super Account 03 «Terraria, Goddess of the Earth»'s powers.

Unlimited automatic recovery. Automatically absorbing energy from the wide space around her, to recover her own durability or that of any static or animated object. According to that technician named Higa, her already vast HP level, together with that power, made it virtually impossible for her to die from HP loss.

That was why Leafa had decided to risk being captured to challenge Dark God Vector, and simultaneously chose not to draw her sword against the people of Underworld.

The woman tormenting her now was an Underworld resident like Rirupirin — an Artificial Fluctlight. If she was slashed with a sword, her soul would be completely destroyed. Without knowing how she had gotten wounded and why she wanted to recover, Leafa could not battle her.

Ahh — but.

Putting aside the shame of having her clothes torn off, the pain of her Life being drained was indescribable.

Was this truly a virtual feeling separate from her real, physical body?

“... Stop.”

Rirupirin was unable to immediately realize that the word had come from his own mouth.

But then, very clearly this time, his mouth moved, and his throat vibrated.

“Stop!”

Her pupils shrinking to the size of pinholes, D’s eyes cast a scornful glare. Enduring the chill welling from his stomach, the Orc chief continued:

“Isn’t yer Life not fully restored a’ready? Ya dun need ta get any more from that Ium’s body!”

“... Whaaat now? Giving orders to me...?”

D spoke softly, sounding like an off-key song.

Suddenly, the ten tentacles began to wriggle more intensely, forcefully pinching the girl’s skin, rapaciously sucking blood. The Dark Sorceress’s skin had already completely regenerated to an oily shine, and her hair was even longer and richer than before.

Not only that, the superfluous Life molded into blue particles and spread into the air from her body. Yet D showed no sign of stopping the torture, remaining wrapped around the girl, who was much smaller than her, from behind.

“I’ve said it before, pig. This prisoner is mine now. No matter how much Life I absorb, how much I abuse her in front of you, pig, or even if I kill her right here and now, it’s got nothing to do with you, does it?”

Kuku, kukuku. A leaden cackle came from her throat.

“But, yes, sure. You discovered her, so I should defer to you, shouldn’t I? Then... take all of your clothing off now.”

“Wha’... Wha’re ya sayin’...”

“Ever since a *long* time ago, seeing your poser armor and mantle has made me want to vomit. You’re just a pig, yet you dress like a man. If you go completely nude here, crawl on all fours, and grunt a bit for me, perhaps I’ll return this girl to you.”

Gu.

Suddenly, a portion of the right half of his vision flashed red. Simultaneously, a pain, like being stabbed with an iron needle, came from his right eye.

— *Just a pig.*

— *Like a man.*

D’s words overlapped with this Leafa girl’s words.

— *You’re a human, aren’t you?*

— *Other than that, what more do you need?*

He could not let D kill this girl. No, he did not want her to die. For this... For this.

Rirupirin’s trembling hands found the button on his leather mantle. *Buchi*, he tore it off.

Stepping on his coiled coat, Rirupirin moved his hand towards the leather belt securing his armor together.

Suddenly, a weak voice was heard.

“... Don’t.”

His head jerked up, and his eyes met with Leafa’s, who was staring at him.

Her teary emerald eyes swivelled back and forth.

“I’m... fine. So, don’t... do it.”

Her voice could not hold until the end. D suddenly bit softly into the girl's face.

“If you keep saying these useless things, I'll bite off this cute face of yours. We've already entered the good part. Hey, what's the matter, pig. Take it off. Or are you getting excited from human nudity?”

Kyahahaha. Her noisy cackling had no end.

His hand, gripping his armor's belt, began to tremble.

He didn't care at all about the pain in his right eye. After all, compared to the anger and humiliation filling his heart, this pain was nothing.

“I'm... I'm... I'm...”

Suddenly, something gushed from both of his eyes, running down both cheeks. The droplets falling on the left were clear, but those on the right side were dyed crimson.

His right hand slowly released the belt — and moved towards the hilt of the large blade on his left waist.

“I'm, a human!!”

As he shouted, an agony he had never felt before attacked his eye, and it ruptured in its socket.

Through his halved vision, Rirupirin accurately found D's silhouette. Her sadistic cackle ceased, and her mouth dropped open.

With all his might, Rirupirin swung his blade towards D's unprotected legs.

But — since he had just lost an eye, his perception was thrown off.

The tip of his sword just missed D's right calf. Rirupirin's body lost balance and his left shoulder collapsed onto the ground.

Lifting his head, he saw D.I.L. pouting, her expression now fierce.

“This stinking pig... dares to harm me...!”

She flung the girl’s body behind her, and raised her tentacle hands. With rough sounds, they suddenly transformed into ten sharp, gleaming black blades.

“I’ll slice you into mincemeat, and mix you into boar feed!!”

The Orc chief only waited for the moment that the blades on both sides swung down.

Thump.

Thump.

Two feeble sounds were heard at the same time. D’s movements stopped cold.

Stunned, Rirupirin saw that both of the Sorceress’s arms had fractured at their roots and fallen to the ground with dull thuds.

D’s expression was also one of shock. The tall woman slowly turned around, blood pouring from her shoulders like waterfalls.

Leafa’s radiant white features entered Rirupirin’s sight.

Compared to her slender frame that was rather lacking in muscle, her long blade that looked very difficult to control swung straight ahead. Although both her wrists were tied, this girl had, without a doubt, been the one who cut D’s arms off.

D croaked in a shriveled voice:

“A human... helping a pig, slashing another human...?”

Watching the Dark Sorceress shake her head back and forth in disbelief, Leafa replied:

“No. I’m only cutting evil to save another person.”

She briskly raised her long sword into a *daijodan* stance.

Hya-ka!

The girl slashed down from an incredible distance.

How — graceful.

Her movements had no unnecessary force, yet were surprisingly quick, and her technique was paramount.

Once more, Rirupirin felt tears — of emotion, this time. As he watched, D.I.L., the strongest Sorceress in the Dark Land and the strongest among the Ten Lords, was completely, and silently, severed in half.

4

Gabriel Miller watched indifferently as the black dragon beat its single wing, landed softly, uttered a soft cry, and expired.

The moment his eyes left it, everything related to the dragon's existence was completely purged from his thoughts and memories. He surveyed his surroundings without changing his expression.

The crash site was a region with numerous cylindrical stone pillars. The pillar he had landed on the center of the area was about 100 yards⁸ tall and 30 yards⁹ wide.

Jumping down would be too impulsive. He was still very unfamiliar with the magic in this world, which synthesized and controlled elements, and he could not leave the Radiant Medium Alice currently lying unconscious at his feet.

If he had some strong ropes, anchors, and carabiners, even in the real world, Gabriel could easily rappel down a wall of this height. But there was no need for that now, since the enemy who had somehow brought him down was now rapidly approaching from the north with three dragons. He would simply deal with the enemy, take over a new dragon's AI, and continue south.

Gabriel lifted his head and gazed straight above. The virtual sun floating in the red sky had reached a suitable height.

There was not much time left before Critter accelerated the time again. Could the American closed beta testers, numbering at least 50,000, wipe out the Human Empire Army before they were forcibly ejected due to the acceleration? With less than 1,000 left, the Human Empire Army could not possibly resist.

8 Approximately 90 meters tall. (The book includes metric units because they are more familiar in Japan.)

9 Approximately 29 meters wide.

As for uncertainties, there were only the Integrity Knights, who were ravaging the Dark Territory army one by one.

But one of them, Alice, had already fallen into his hands, and her approaching pursuer was probably a Knight as well, so there were only one or two of them left in the northern battlefield.

As soon as Gabriel determined that the complications were almost resolved, he finally turned towards Integrity Knight Alice, who lay beside him.

Absolutely — beautiful.

So beautiful that the excitement squirming deep down is just unstoppable.

Gabriel was a bit perplexed: should he remove her armaments before she woke up, and carefully incarcerate her? That would be the logical decision, but an enemy was approaching and it was difficult to find the determination to hastily deal with this stunning girl.

He would wait for the acceleration and take his time. Even for so much as undoing a buckle on her armor, he would do it gracefully, seriously, and symbolically.

“... Sweet dreams for now, Alice... Alicia.”

Whispering gently to her, Gabriel walked to the center of the cylindrical rock to engage the enemy.

Whether it was Gabriel Miller, who was using Super Account 04 «Dark God Vector», or Critter, who had discovered it, neither of them knew one fact: Alice, the strongest knight, had fallen unconscious for several hours from just a dragon’s kick all because of Vector’s own ability.

The four Super Accounts in Underworld were all created for direct operations — miracles — on the world and its inhabitants.

Stacia, who could change the geography.

Solus, who could destroy mobile units.

Terraria, who could recover durabilities.

And Vector, who could control the residents' Artificial Fluctlights themselves.

Specifically, he could edit the inhabitants' memories — the vector data within the Fluctlights, and relocate them to faraway places, or create new households.

Since this act was different from the other three gods and tantamount to pillaging the inhabitants, it was difficult for him to become a subject of worship. Hence, Vector not only possessed the highest Priority equipment and Life, he was also under the powerful protection of “the inability to be an Art's target”. “Vector's Lost Child”, passed along in fairy tales of Underworld, was created based on previous operations on the residents.

The combination of Dark God Vector's power and Gabriel Miller's unique imagination, or Incarnation, achieved a multiplied effect that not even the «Rath» technicians could predict.

He could absorb others' willpower without need for Arts.

Alice's Fluctlight was temporarily robbed of its dynamism, and forcibly placed into a state of slumber.

Vector and Gabriel's combined power had also engulfed Dark General Shasta's one-hit-kill Incarnation from before.

And now, Shasta's longtime rival — Integrity Knight Bercouli, had stepped onto the same road.

Bercouli saw that the enemy Emperor's dragon had crash-landed on a tall rock that could not be immediately escaped.

He confidently shrugged off the intense fatigue caused by his ultimate technique.

“Great... Please fly a lil' bit more, Hoshigami, Amayori, Takiguri!!”

As his voice rang out, the three dragons powerfully flapped their wings and accelerated. As long as the enemy stayed there, even a ten kilol gap would not take too long for a dragon.

In the remaining time before the battle, Bercouli began to silently contemplate. His mind clearly recalled a dream he'd had the previous morning.

— *Have you ever had a premonition of death?*

Highest Minister Administrator had asked him in his dream, and to Bercouli, whom she had known for hundreds of years, she remained an inscrutable existence until the very end.

After he was released from Deep Freeze and informed by Alice of the Highest Minister's death, he felt nothing as intense as shock and merely sighed: *Thanks for your long, hard work.* It was Senate Elder Chudelkin's death that stunned him more.

Because of that, he had never specifically asked Alice about Administrator's final battle, and her scattered situation. Of course, on one hand he was too busy with the important mission of the defense of the Human Empire suddenly resting on his shoulders, and on the other, he simply did not want to know — the perseverance and desires of that silver-haired, silver-eyed demigod, and just how deep her sins ran.

Administrator had always been listless, inconsistent, and capricious to Bercouli. Although he obeyed her, he certainly did not worship her like Chudelkin had.

But —

He did not hate serving her.

“That's right... Believe me just on that one, please.”

The oldest knight muttered, and suddenly opened his sharp eyes.

He could already clearly see Alice lying on the ground in her golden armor, and Emperor Vector's silhouette standing silently in front of her like a shadow.

“Okay... Standby in the air, guys! If I fail, head back north and join the troops!”

Signalling gently to the dragons, Bercouli leapt from Hoshigami’s back.

Trailing Sinon, whose flight left a meteor’s path of light, the 700 people of the Human Empire Army desperately advanced south.

They had already slowly lost the earth-shaking crimson legion behind. But neither the Guardians nor the war horses could keep running indefinitely like this.

Asuna stood atop Kirito, Tiese, and Ronye’s carriage, praying as she fixated her gaze southward.

After about twenty minutes of progress, as Sinon had said, the outline of gigantic temple-like ruins emerged above the horizon.

There was no sign of humans, demihumans, or any large beings. Only decaying rock lying silently on the ground.

Spanning the straight road were two flat shrines. They were about 20 meters tall, and more than 300 meters wide. They would be more than enough as barriers to prevent the enemy from surrounding them.

Between the two shrines, the road continued south. It gave one the impression of a *sando*¹⁰, because while it served to connect the shrine walls, there stood some massive, uncanny statues on either side of it.

These were not Oriental-style Buddha statues, nor were they Western-style mythical sculptures. At best, they were square figures slightly similar to those in the ruins of South America. All of them were carved with round eyes and large mouths, and their stubby arms were crossed in front of their chests.

¹⁰ A *sando* (参道) is the road approaching a Shinto shrine or a Buddhist temple. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandō>

Were these designed by Rath engineers when Underworld was created? Or were they automatically generated by The Seed program?

Or were they — hewn from the rocky mountains by the Dark Territory races who once lived here...? Like, giant tomb markers dedicated to many of the dead...?

Asuna sighed briskly, banishing these ominous thoughts.

She yelled at Knight Renri, who was leading the troops from his dragon's back:

“Let's engage the enemy near the center of the road!”

A reply of “Understood!” came.

Minutes later, the troops charged swiftly along the road between the shrines. Mammoth rectangular statues on both sides silently looked down upon them. The horses' hooves and soldiers' boots crunched dryly upon the road, which changed from dirt to cobblestone.

Renri directed them spiritedly, his voice cutting through the icy air:

“All right. Vanguard, part your ranks and stop! Allow the carriage team and the support team to pass through!”

The vanguard instantly split in two, and eight carriages passed through their cavalry, followed by the support team mainly consisting of Ascetics. Upon reaching the very back, they halted. A strong gust of wind blew from the giant doorway far down the road, and Asuna's hair billowed up.

This was the only moment of silence. The American players pursued them with a rumbling cacophony, rustling grains of sand from the statues.

Asuna leapt from the carriage, and spoke to the girls poking their heads out of the canopy and the woman standing beside them:

“This is the last battle. I'll leave Kirito-kun to you guys.”

“Yes! Leave him to us, Asuna-sama!”

“We will definitely protect him!”

“— Even if we must put our lives on the line.”

As Tiese, Ronye and Sortiliena held their fists tightly in front of their chests, Asuna did the same and smiled faintly.

“Rest assured. I will absolutely not let the enemy reach this place.”

A part of that was a promise to herself. Asuna gently waved her right hand and spun around with resolve.

Renri was currently in front of the vanguard, deftly preparing the Guardians.

The road was about 20 meters wide. Although it was a little too broad to defend, completely blocking it by putting the troops into a rotation system was not impossible.

The important thing was to control the number of deaths as best they could while carving away at the 10,000 or so enemies, as the Ascetics continued their magic support from behind. Fortunately, there were no signs of any magic users among the crimson soldiers. Although the players likely had no way of picking up Underworld’s complex command system in such a short time, this situation was, honestly, a godsend.

If this situation were to change —

I will kill the entire enemy army myself.

Asuna inhaled deeply and concentrated that thought inside her body, together with her commitment.

Considering Stacia’s vast quantity of Life and the Priority of her equipment, she shouldn’t fall purely because of numerical damage. The problem was whether or not she could withstand that harsh pain. When pain was dealt to her heart, her virtual body would be injured, and even if she tried as hard as she could, she would still fall into a state in which she couldn’t even hold her sword.

Asuna closed her eyes, thinking of the injured Kirito. She imagined the enormity of the pain and sorrow he carried.

By the time she came to the very front of the forces, not a trace of fear was left in her heart.

The titanic confrontation, meant to be the last of its kind in this war, unfolded under the sun at high noon.

About twenty heavily armored American players charged onto the *sando* of the ruins, seeking the realistic blood and screams as promised by the advertisement website.

Yet what awaited them were not pitiful NPCs designed to provide unrated entertainment, but true heroes filled with the determination to save the world and rescue their beloved golden Integrity Knight. Although heavily damaged, their swords still glinted with the glow of irrepressible will, firmly enduring their enemies' weapons, shattering their enemies' armor.

A lone silhouette was looking down from high above, upon the crimson-armored players being decisively destroyed.

Tight, leather clothing that minimized reliance on metallic armor, like a rider suit¹¹. The gleaming leather was covered with matte silver rivets.

The only weapon was a large dagger resembling a meat cleaver, hanging from the left waist. The face was obscured. The body was wrapped in a black leather raincoat-like poncho, with the hood drooping all the way to the mouth.

The lips, warped into a sneer, were the only visible feature.

It was Vassago Casals.

After diving into Underworld once more and barely avoiding Sinon's sudden wide ranged laser attack, he had mixed in with the Americans to chase the Human Empire Army.

11 Kawahara means "racing suit", which is tight-fitting full body wear for auto racers.

However, he did not join the early attack, instead smoothly climbing onto the wall of the west shrine, mounting a statue's head from where he was able to watch the battlefield, and deciding to enjoy the show in a premium seat.

“Kekek, that bitch is just as relentless as before when she's upset. She sure kills a lot.”

He murmured as his shoulders shook with indescribable excitement.

Exactly as she was in Vassago's distant memory, the girl in pearly armor with chestnut hair flying in the wind — Asuna «The Flash» let the rapier in her right grip gleam brilliantly.

Back then, Vassago had been in the same position, watching Asuna's battles while hiding from afar. He had adamantly vowed to himself: I will finish you before the world ends.

Together with the swordsman in black, who had fought even more fiercely by her side.

When he leapt from the dragon's back, Bercouli was still nearly two hundred meters above the ground. If he had simply plummeted straight down like that, even he would not have been able to withstand the impact.

But as though he were stepping down an invisible staircase, the Knight Commander rushed down the sky in a helical motion.

With every step he took, he was actually generating a Wind Element underfoot and immediately detonating it, using this kickback to decrease his own momentum. Controlling Elements with both feet was a skill he had stolen decades ago from Senate Elder Chudelkin.

Gripping the hilt of his sword, the eldest knight of this world leapt, and leapt, into Emperor Vector's blind spot. Vector stood at the summit of the pillar beneath him, which bore semblance to an artificial spire.

— Kill him in one strike.

It was Integrity Knight Bercouli's first time reanimating such murderous intent as when he had killed the Dark General from the previous two generations – more than a hundred and fifty years ago. In these long years, never once had an enemy appeared who was sufficient at provoking his utterly raw killing intent.

Even in his battle with that Eugeo boy, who had barged into the Central Cathedral alone, Bercouli had fought sincerely, without even a single trace of true murderous intent. But, if he looked at it this way, even against the Dark Generals, his strongest enemies throughout the years, he had never harbored such negative emotions as rage and hatred.

In other words, this was Bercouli's first time in his prolonged life channeling genuine fury into his blade.

Every fiber of his being was truly furious. Furthermore, it was not just because his opponent had captured Alice.

Coming from the outside world called the Real World, this outsider has forced the Dark Land people onto the battlefield when they could have achieved peace instead, and sent tens of thousands to their deaths in vain. To Bercouli, who had protected this world for over two hundred years, this was an absolutely unforgivable atrocity.

— Emperor Vector, I don't know what reason you have.

But not everyone from the Real World is a demon like you. I understood that as soon as I saw that lil' miss named Asuna.

That means, the only thing evil beyond help, is your nature.

If so, I shall bring forth your retribution.

I shall teach you the weight of Dark General Shasta, Integrity Knight Eldrie, and the lives of the countless humans who have perished on this battlefield.

Now learn... from this single strike!!

“Ze... AHH!”

Leaping ten meters into the air with his last step, the Knight Commander swung his sword down at Emperor Vector’s unprotected head in a slash charged with all of his willpower.

The air burned, glowing white. The blade radiated a light blinding beyond measure, causing even the world to lose its original color.

Without question, this was the strongest, most powerful strike among all sword techniques in the history of Underworld. Its priority was placed even above system commands as it overwrote the Main Visualizer’s mnemonic data. In other words, for everything that was placed in the path of this ultimate strike, all status values meant nothing whatsoever.

Even for Super Account 04 — Emperor Vector’s practically unlimited Life value, he would disintegrate if he were hit by this strike.

If he were hit, that is.

Even when faced with the fatal meteorite about to plummet onto his head, Vector’s face was devoid of emotion.

The speed of that strike was so fast that one could only stare motionlessly at it. The attack came in a mere instant; no matter how fast one’s reaction was, they ought to be unable to deal with it in time.

But in that instant, Vector’s body, wrapped in black crystalline armor, silently slid out of the way.

In the only direction to avoid the attack path, sliding just far enough to evade the strike.

Bercouli’s blade could only reach the red mantle flowing in the wind. The instant it came into contact with the sword, the thick fur pelt disintegrated into countless grains of dust.

Zugaaaaang!! With a thunderous noise, a deep, straight wound was carved into the solid rock. The entire mammoth peak trembled, and pieces of rock tumbled down the edges.

— He evaded that?

Although dumbfounded, Bercouli did not hesitate to move for even an instant. Through long years of battle experience, he had long learned not to stop and think under unexpected circumstances.

He took a final step on air, slid to the Emperor's flank, and landed. Immediately, he threw out a horizontal slash. Barely half a second had passed since the failure of his fully concentrated strike.

Yet Vector even evaded this second attack.

His body was like black smoke blown away in the wind, effortlessly sliding out of reach without any sort of preparation at all. The sword tip grazed his armor's surface, and sparks flew into the air.

However.

This time, Bercouli was finally certain of his victory.

His full-power attack from before had missed, but its strength had not dissipated. His beloved sword's Armament Full Control Art, «Time Piercing Sword, Empty Slash»— an ability to *slash the future*, had already been activated. It was an ultimate technique that would leave its power along the path of the slash, killing any who came into contact with the sharp blade; it had been a great torment to Eugeo during their fight back in the Cathedral.

The Emperor's back was pulled towards the space where there remained an undetectable slash.

The first to go was his silky platinum hair, swirling in all directions.

The crown atop his head shattered with a piercing metallic crack.

Vector raised his hands high into the air, as though begging for mercy.

Bercouli strongly felt that, in the next instant, that body wrapped in black would be severed in two from top to bottom.

Slap.

A clear, dry crack.

The source was — the Emperor’s hands, clapped together above the back of his head.

— He stopped the «Empty Slash» with his bare hands? With his back turned?

Impossible. Although the secret technique of catching a sharp blade with both hands had been passed down the generations of Fist Fighters in the Dark Land, it was an ultimate technique only made possible by their steel fists. More importantly, even the Fist Fighter chief would definitely be unable to stop the power remaining in that space with his bare hands.

These thoughts only persisted for an instant, but afterwards, Bercouli finally stood still.

Therefore, he could only stare blankly at what happened next.

The mirage-like amorphous slash left in the air was absorbed into the Emperor’s hands.

At the same time, the Emperor’s blue eyes were dyed with a seemingly bottomless darkness.

At the deepest point of that darkness, countless lights flashed — those were, stars...?

No.

They were souls. Souls that this man had absorbed and trapped there. Dark General Shasta and his female aide were probably in there as well...

“... You bastard, you can devour other people’s Incarnation?”

At Bercouli’s murmuring, Vector slowly lowered his hands, which had completely absorbed the slash, and spoke calmly.

“*Shin’i?*¹² ... I see, ***mind*** and ***will***.”

That voice was bone-chilling; it seemed devoid of any feeling of a living human. And the source of the voice, those thin lips, warped into a shape that resembled a smile.

“Your mind, is like ***old, vintage*** wine. Thick and rich... With a heavy, long-lasting aftertaste. Although it is not to my liking... it would do well as an appetizer before the ***main course***.”

The Emperor’s pale hands gripped the hilt of the longsword on his waist.

The thin blade he slowly drew out of the sheath was covered in a violet phosphorescence. Tilting the tip downwards like a weak person, Emperor Vector smiled again.

“Now, let me drink some more of it.”

The giant’s rough sword eventually grazed Asuna’s left arm.

Pain assailed her, like white-hot iron wire digging into her flesh.

— *This is nothing!*

She thought intensely, as the small pink wound on her wrist silently vanished in the next moment.

And then, with a wispy flash of her right arm, her blade stabbed the man in front of her four times in graceful succession, from his right shoulder to his left ribs. The man’s face distorted as he shouted obscenities, then he keeled over onto the ground.

She had already lost count of how many she had struck down.

At the same time, she was unaware of how much time had passed since the beginning of this battle in the ruins.

¹² Incarnation (心意, shin’i) is a foreign concept to Vector, so he repeats it aloud in Japanese here.

She was only certain of the fact that the number of crimson footsoldiers, flooding like an avalanche through the entrance to this road, was still nearly endless.

— Hmph, a drawn out battle like this isn't much. In Old Aincrad, boss battles that took three to four hours were commonplace.

Asuna boasted in her heart, leapt over the disappearing corpses of her allies, and parried away a new enemy's brandished axe with her rapier.

The enemy's balance was shattered by this blow; Asuna struck accurately at his heart as she glanced left and right.

Asuna's location of battle was dead center of the road; to her right, Integrity Knight Renri was alternatively projecting the two throwing blades in his hands with chilling strength and accuracy, as the bodies ahead of him piled high. He seemed fine for now.

The problem was to her left. Lead by Sortiliena, the captain-class Guardians were stationed there, and yet it was clear that the frontline was being gradually pushed back.

“Left flank, rotate between vanguards faster! Please prioritize Healing Arts on that side as well!”

“Asuna-sama, I can still fight!”

The one who responded was Sortiliena on the very front line, activating a wide-ranged two-handed Sword Skill, «Cyclone». Her long sword rotated rapidly with a light green glow and blew back three enemy soldiers, but Liena knelt down immediately after. Judging by the conversation during last night's Memory Exposing Competition, swordsmen of the noble class were more accustomed to one-on-one, gentlemanly duels, and long skirmishes with no end in sight were completely unfamiliar.

Although Liena's sword skills were actually quite fluent and fierce, even to Asuna, who just arrived in this world yesterday, they were simply too *proper*.

She used virtually no feints or tripping techniques before her critical skills, and consequently the enemies' flailing weapons would inflict scratches on her when she became rigid before or after her skills activated. Her armor was already riddled with scars, and trails of blood seeped through her purple Guardian uniform.

“Retreat and heal, Liena-san! Trust your partners!”

At Asuna's directive, Liena bit her lip and nodded, then retreated, saying “I'll be right back!” The gap she left in the front line was immediately replaced by the Guardian Commander, but his face was weary.

Other than the exhaustion of the left flank, there was something else that worried Asuna.

The crimson soldiers they were currently battling were not mere humanoid monsters driven by algorithms, but veteran players from America, the birthplace of MMORPGs. They, who had been familiar with player combat since long ago, would eventually realize that their current, simple assaults were ineffective, and begin carrying out more strategic maneuvers.

What would she do in their situation? Asuna whirled her rapier nonstop as she thought.

Typically, she would launch a long range attack from the rear. But there were no wizard-class players among the enemies, and even if there were, they would be unable to familiarize themselves with Underworld's complex Arts language in such a short time.

Other than magic, there was archery. Fortunately for the Human Empire Army, the other side could not prepare archer accounts. Their last resort was to simply lob the weapons in their hands, but this would give them great pause, because if they threw their weapons away, they would be unable to participate in the battle afterwards.

It seemed that their opponents were out of options to attack them.

Then, just like she envisioned beforehand, they only needed to cut down all ten thousand or so of these enemies.

Almost exactly as Asuna renewed her determination —

The entrance to the road was suddenly obscured by darkness.

The morning sun was blocked out by gigantic shields raised into a neat row and lances standing like flag poles.

— Heavy lancers!

“Pre... Prepare to defend against the assault!! Be careful to avoid the enemy’s lance tips!! Just get close to the enemy and you can knock them down!”

Right as Asuna shouted, with a *CLATTER* of metal on metal, the giant lances were pointed forward in an orderly fashion.

“““***Assaaaaaaaaaault!!***””””

A full row of 20 heavy lancers let out a ferocious bellow, and began charging.

The Guardians were made restless by the pressure from the red tsunami. *I’m begging you all, please calm down*, Asuna prayed silently as she gazed at the lancers rushing towards them. The lances, gleaming a vicious black, were fast approaching in a straight line.

Wait until the last instant and — *Cling!*

Yellow sparks flew in all directions as her rapier slid across the side of the lance. The sharp tip grazed Asuna’s right cheek, and flew past.

“... Haaah!!”

With a shout, she jabbed her rapier into a slit in the enemy’s armor, and looking up, saw that it had pierced her hulking opponent’s throat. With a raw, vivid impact, blood spurted from the helmet’s visor.

The screams that rang out, however, were not just from the footsoldiers.

Several Guardians defending the left flank, unable to avoid the lances, were skewered.

“Grgh…………!!”

Gritting her teeth, Asuna left her position and ran to the left. With a single stab, «Linear», she pierced through the chest armor of a footsoldier pulling his lance from a dead Guardian’s body. Holding up her blood-soaked sword again, she cut off both hands of the next enemy with a double stab, «Parallel Sting».

She evaded the lance thrust by the third, jeering footsoldier with a vertical leap. Landing on the lance, she ran up, planted her feet on the enemy’s shoulders, ripped off his helmet with her left hand, and buried her rapier in his exposed nape.

The enemy fell without so much as a scream. Stepping onto his back, Asuna shouted:

“Bring the wounded to the back! Heal them with maximum priority!!”

Surveying her surroundings once again, it seemed that, with Knight Renri and the Guardians’ hard struggle, they had somehow repelled the heavy lancers, but six Guardians had suffered direct hits from the lances. Three of them were likely beyond help.

— If our opponents repeat this strategy, the vastly outnumbered Human Empire Army will no longer be able to hold its current position.

Her fears were realized with a new wave of earthshaking tremors. The next 20 heavy lancers charged in from the entrance of the *sando*.

Asuna tore her gaze from the incoming swarm of lances and glanced at her designated position in the middle of the front line.

There stood a young, almost childish-looking Guardian trying to control his sword, his knees quivering.

“AH.....!!”

Yelling sharply, Asuna ran to the right.

She leapt between the young Guardian standing stock-still and a spear coming from the left. Her rapier wouldn't make it in time to parry. She could only grip the lancehead with her left hand.

If this was a normal VRMMO world, then Asuna, who had overwhelming reaction speed and physical strength, would be able to successfully block it. But in Underworld, the countless parameters that were ignored in SAO and ALO, existed.

The smooth steel lance slid through her bloody fist —

A blunt impact shook her entire body. Unable to utter a sound, Asuna silently looked down at her side, where an enormous piece of metal had pierced through.

Minimal movement maximizing his sword's efficiency.

To Knight Commander Bercouli, Emperor Vector's swordsmanship was just that: completely different from any style he had ever seen before.

First, he almost never used his feet. When avoiding an attack, he would merely slide slightly along the ground. Also, even when he was attacking, it didn't seem like any preparation was made beforehand. The sword he held loosely in his right hand would suddenly come flying from the nearest distance.

In short, predicting his movements was nigh impossible. The veteran Bercouli had not countered any of the Emperor's five quick and powerful attacks.

But five times was enough.

Due to his vast combat experience, Bercouli, who had roughly grasped Vector's techniques, began his first counter at the start of the other side's sixth attack.

"Hsss!"

Releasing as little of his spirit as possible, he launched an overhead slash right before Vector did the same.

Along with a violent metallic clank, bluish-white sparks spurted in all directions.

The two swords crossed in midair. From here it was a contest of strength. The enemy's sword sank down without even the slightest resistance. Seemingly unable to withstand the pressure, the tall-statured Vector bent his knees.

— This is the critical moment!!

Bercouli infused his beloved sword with refined Incarnation. The battle-worn steel sword's blade gleamed silver. The Time Piercing Sword, slowly pressing down on Vector's black longsword, touched the enemy's shoulder, piercing his armor —

Immediately, Vector's sword emitted an ominous glow.

An indigo phosphorescence squirmed out like a living organism, coiling around the Time Piercing Sword. At the same time, the explosive silver gleam on the Time Piercing Sword vanished, as if it had withered.

— What, is this?

No...

What, am I... trying to do... in the first place...?

With a sharp crackle, he felt a freezing chill in his left shoulder. Bercouli opened his eyes, jumped back, took a deep breath, and regained the consciousness that had slipped away from him for an instant.

— What the hell was that?

Someone like me, right in the middle of battle... was spacing out?!

Just as he demanded of himself, Bercouli realized that it was not that simple.

It was as though that the forced blankness was corroding his consciousness, rendering him unable to understand why he was here, or even, who he was.

“Bastard... You directly absorbed my Incarnation through my sword?”

Bercouli groaned huskily.

The response was a silent grin.

Clicking his tongue, he glanced at his left shoulder. It was a graze, yet the wound was deep.

“Hmph... this is all very interesting, isn’t it, Your Imperial Majesty? But being unable to cross swords is pretty troubling.”

Bercouli chuckled. In contrast, Vector erased his smile and murmured.

“... Indeed. Come to think of it, there’s something else I haven’t tried yet.”

After that, he casually extended the sword in his right hand straight ahead, but it was completely out of range. There was no way the blade would reach —

From the tip of the blade suspended in mid-air, a repulsive dark blue light reached out.

... Don’t tell me, from a distance too?!

Just as that thought flashed through Bercouli’s mind, the light touched his chest.

His consciousness faded away like an extinguished candle.

The longsword slowly approached the Knight Commander, sliding straight under his left arm — yet he merely stood there, blankly watching it all.

The sword was casually swung upward.

With a wet, sticky noise, Bercouli's thick arm was severed from his body.

“Ku... u... ughh!!”

Asuna somehow managed to suppress her scream, which was about to leak out, into a low moan. Excruciating pain — or rather, it was more like being exposed to a white-hot blowtorch, continuously scorching her abdomen, crushing her senses beyond her limits.

— This bit of pain is nothing!

It's just a scratch, it doesn't matter if it hurts!!

The gleaming black lance that stabbed through her upper left abdomen must have protruded nearly a meter from her back.

Asuna twisted her head around to look behind her. The lance tip only ended up grazing the cheek of the young Guardian standing there. It took all of her willpower to squeeze out a smile to the young boy, who looked palely back at her.

— Compared to the precious life of this child... What do these virtual injuries matter?!

“Ungh... Ah!!”

With a shout, she infused strength into her left hand, gripping the lance that pierced her body.

With a deafening *crack*, the metal rod nearly five centimeters in diameter snapped in two in her fist. She then reached behind herself, grabbed the protruding lancehead, and wrenched it out.

Sparks danced before her eyes, and a shocking pain like lightning ran from her fingertips to her toes. Yet Asuna's hand did not cease, pulling out the lance with an almost violent movement and flinging it to the ground.

A frightening amount of blood gushed from both her mouth and the gaping wound in her abdomen, but her body remained unswervingly upright. Asuna wiped away the blood at the corner of her mouth, and looked up at the enemy with fire in her eyes.

The hulking owner of the lance blinked rapidly inside his helmet, his eyes revealing confusion.

“Oh, gosh.”

After this exclamation, uttered twice, came rapid English.

“... The hell, man... This type of game isn't fun at all. I'm logging out.”

After hearing that, Asuna accurately pierced the man's heart with the rapier in her right hand. His enormous frame keeled over, and was engulfed by a disappearing effect.

The agony from her wound had not caused Asuna to cry, yet in this moment her eyes filled with tears.

The pain and hatred enveloping this battlefield now should not have been necessary from the start.

The American players and the Guardians of the Human Empire Army never had a reason to murder each other in cold blood. If the circumstances under which they met had been different, both sides should have become good friends — just like she had.

Virtual worlds... VRMMOs did not exist just for this.

“H... He... Help... Gh!”

A scream in Japanese interrupted Asuna's thoughts. Turning her eyes, she saw a great lance stabbing toward a Guardian lying immobile on the ground.

“U... AAAAAAAHH!!”

Asuna’s emotions became a roar as she sprang forward.

The rapier in her right hand slashed ahead nonstop and the white glow flowing from its edge enveloped her entire body; her feet left the ground as she flew forward like a blinding comet. The highest level rushing attack for the rapier, «Flashing Penetrator».

The lancer just about to kill the Guardian was flung high into the air, and the enemy behind him suffered the same fate. A third one as well.

After securely pinning the body of a fourth man under the foot of a gigantic statue, her sword skill ended and she turned around, exhaling.

The second assault wave of the heavy lancers had caused more than five deaths in the Human Empire Army. Simultaneously, at the entrance to the road, the third wave of twenty men had already readied their ferocious lances.

Asuna pulled her rapier from a corpse and cried loudly.

“All units, hold this position at all costs! Renri-san, please come to the middle!”

Asuna squeezed out a short smile, comforting the young Knight whose face became rigid upon seeing her bloodsoaked form, and uttered a last sentence.

“— I will rush into the enemy formation alone. I’ll leave any enemies that slip through me to you all.”

“A... Asuna-sama?!”

Asuna raised her left fist towards the panting Renri and the Guardians.

Then, she broke into a run.

Bercouli's center of gravity suddenly wobbled, and it was then he realized that what he was stepping on was his own left arm, rolling on the ground.

What awakened his consciousness was not pain, but that chilling feeling.

“Guh...!”

He leapt backward again, widening the distance between himself and Vector.

The blood pouring from his left shoulder dyed a crimson arc onto the white stone.

— What the hell... is this?

He just pointed his sword at me, and my consciousness was forcibly halted...?

Bercouli lifted two fingers from his right hand's grip on the Time Piercing Sword to heal his wound, racking his brains as fast as he could. The nonverbal Healing Art quickly stopped the flow of blood with a glimmer of blue light. However, there was not enough Sacred Spacial Energy on these desolate rocky mountains to regenerate his fallen arm.

— How should I fight this enemy?

His Armament Full Control Art «Time Piercing Sword, Empty Slash» was utterly ineffective. The Incarnation left in the air by the slash would be completely absorbed by his opponent.

His absolute last resort was his Release Recollection Art «Unseen Slash». But if he wanted to use that technique, he would have to fulfill two very harsh conditions. First, the opponent could not interrupt his lengthy attacking movements. The second was to be extremely accurate, with the difficulty of the latter surpassing that of the former...

Bercouli flicked away the sweat beading on his forehead with a flourish.

Then, he realized.

— I’m being desperate.

Somehow, I have nothing more to spare.

In other words, now, this is where I die. The next moment will be my death.

“... Heh.”

After correctly realizing his impasse, instead of frowning, Integrity Knight Bercouli Synthesis One grinned.

His eyes slowly moved away from Emperor Vector, who was approaching him ceaselessly, and fell onto the golden knight lying horizontally in a corner slightly away from him — Alice Synthesis Thirty.

— Lil’ Miss.

I still couldn’t give you what you wanted, Lil’ Miss. I couldn’t give you fatherly love. Because, I can’t remember, anything about my own parents either.

But, there’s one thing that I do know.

These so-called parents die protecting their children.

“A bastard like you... would never understand, you monster!!”

Bercouli bellowed and sprang forward.

Without any plan whatsoever, merely injecting everything he had into his beloved sword, the eldest Knight sprinted forward.



“Ga... Hah...”

A great mouthful of blood gushed out with her rough breath, and splashed at her feet.

Asuna remained upright, even if she was only propped up by the rapier in her right hand.

After repelling the third and fourth assault waves of heavy lancers, she had been wounded more than ten times all over her body. Her pearly white blouse and skirt were torn to shreds, stained red by the blood of herself and her enemies.

Having taken a direct hit from a lance, which opened a hole in her body, it was astonishing that she could still move. In fact, Asuna’s unfairly enormous HP didn’t allow her strength to drain.

— This body will fall only when my heart fall.

If so, I can stand forever.

Her entire body had lost nearly all sensation. Only burning heat ran through her nerves, distorting her vision.

The enemy’s fifth wave of troops appeared in Asuna’s dim vision, and she pulled her rapier out of the ground.

She was no longer able to perform perfect evasions. She could only stop the enemy’s lance with her body, and counterattack with sword skills.

Asuna’s feather-light rapier felt as heavy as a leaden rod in her grip, but she strained to raise it with both hands, hold it in front of her, and wait for the enemy’s arrival.

“— **Go!!**”

The ground shook, and 20 lancers began charging ahead.

Boom, boom, boom boom boom boom...

In the slowly accelerating footsteps, a sharp vibration mixed in out of nowhere.

Asuna's eyes were attracted upward.

From the scarlet sky, a single line streaked down. It was a thin sequence of digital code.

— Enemy... reinforcements...?

“..... Ahh.....”

Although just a sliver, the sigh she emitted was mixed with despair.

But —

The color of that line was not the familiar crimson, but a deep blue akin to the night sky before dawn.

Asuna could no longer foresee what the color meant, and could only widen her eyes, awaiting the result.

The line halted around ten meters above the ground; the code began to consolidate and, after a flash of light, became a human silhouette.

Voom.

The air howled suddenly, and the silhouette began to spin so fast that it blurred. Uttering a vigorous roar like a tornado, it began falling again.

Directly under that silhouette, those 20 heavy lancers had stopped unknowingly and looked dumbly up at the sky.

The azure tornado landed directly in their midst.

Then, suddenly, crimson exploded outwards.

Blood. The soldiers twisted within the tornado were immediately ripped apart, and blood was thrown by the wind in a wide radius.

Finally, in the middle of the radially spread fallen lancers, the tornado began to slow, and eventually regained the shape of a person.

The newcomer's back was turned to her, with a somewhat slender, tall body. Vibrant, Japanese-style armor shined in the backlight. His left hand gripped a sheath hanging from his waist, and his right hand clenched a terrifyingly long sword, no, a katana, which slashed out horizontally.

Asuna had seen that attack before, in another world.

A Sword Skill.

A heavy, ranged katana attack — «Tsumujiguruma»¹³.

The silhouette slowly stood, rested the longsword on its shoulder, and gradually looked back towards her.

Under a striking bandanna, a stubbled face grinned at her.

“Hey, made you wait, Asuna.”

“K... lein...?”

Asuna could not hear her own hoarse voice until the end.

Suddenly, an ensemble of rumbling resounded throughout the world. Although the sound effects were indistinguishable from when the Americans had appeared, to Asuna, this must be angelic song.

13 旋車, literally, “whirling wheel”

Then, thousands of bright blue strings of code began raining unceasingly from the crimson sky.

Cut.

Consciousness blurred.

Pain from his wound jolted him wide awake.

Bercouli had lost count of how many times he had gone through this process.

As though he were intentionally dragging out the fight, Emperor Vector never once inflicted any sort of fatal injury. But Bercouli clearly knew that the blood flowing from his numerous wounds, that is, his total amount of Life, was fast approaching its limit.

But through his immovable willpower honed over two centuries and several decades, he cast away all delusions and expelled all fear, performing but one single action inside his head.

Counting.

Specifically, measuring time.

Bercouli possessed the special ability to confirm time through instinct alone, and now he was relying on this power to record it. Even as his thoughts were disturbed by the Emperor's sword, he continued to count unconsciously.

— Four hundred and eighty seven.

— Four hundred and eighty eight.

Bercouli read the seconds precisely while repeating his foolish attacks, occasionally sputtering taunts from his mouth.

“... Your swordsmanship... doesn’t seem, up to scratch... Your Imperial Majesty.”

— Four hundred and ninety five.

“You can’t beat me, with these sword skills... with this second rate stuff, no, third rate at most.”

— Four hundred and ninety eight.

“Watch this, I’m not done yet!”

With a shout, he slashed down in front of him.

— Five hundred.

His sword blade touched the indigo halo radiating from the Emperor.

Sucked into Incarnation, his thoughts were interrupted.

When he regained consciousness, he was already down on one knee, blood dripping from a new wound on his left cheek.

— Five hundred and eight.

Almost there. Just endure it a little bit more.

Bercouli stood up with difficulty, and looked towards the Emperor behind him.

A hint of slight disgust appeared on Vector’s usually expressionless face. The reason was that, when he had cut Bercouli’s cheek, a drop of blood had flown out and splashed onto Vector’s pale cheek.

Vector wiped away the stain with his fingertip, and mused.

“... I’ve had enough.”

He took one step forward into the red puddle that Bercouli created.

“Your soul is too heavy. Too thick. It sticks to my tongue. And how boring, you merely think of killing me.”

The Emperor said in a flat voice, and took another step closer.

“Die.”

Raised silently, the black sword emanated a viscous gleam.

Bercouli’s expression did not change, but he secretly clenched his teeth.

— Just a bit more. Thirty seconds left.

“Heh... Don’t, say that. I can, still... enjoy, it.”

The Knight Commander hobbled a few steps towards thin air, and feebly raised the longsword in his right hand.

“Where’d you... go. Where the heck did you go. Oh, there...?”

With empty light in his eyes, the Knight Commander swung his sword.

Clank. He hit somewhere completely off with his sword tip, and stumbled exaggeratedly.

“Ah... Was it... here...?”

He swung another attack that lacked even a swishing noise. Then, dragging an already disabled foot, Bercouli shambled cluelessly at random.

Since his vision had failed due to enormous blood loss, his thoughts also became hopelessly jumbled — he certainly looked like that.

However, this was the Knight Commander's once-in-a-lifetime performance.

Those half-closed blue-gray eyes were only tightly fixated on one single thing.

Footprints.

Through nearly ten minutes of pointless attacking, Bercouli had spilled his blood over the entirety of this rocky summit, which was not wide at all. Hence, the two different footprints tracked out over the whole surface by the Emperor's boots and the Knight Commander's leather sandals, were clearly carved and highly distinguishable.

In other words, this was the detailed record of the two men's movements.

Acting demented, Bercouli was searching for the driest, darkest footprint of the Emperor, created when he cut off Bercouli's left arm ten minutes ago.

After that, Bercouli had immediately, and unconsciously, begun to count the time.

Which means, that was the place where Emperor Vector had stood ten minutes ago. Then, his bloody footprints precisely recorded the direction he advanced in, and where he moved.

— Five hundred and eighty nine.

— Five hundred, and ninety.

“Oh... I've found... you...”

Bercouli mumbled feebly, rocking from side to side as he swung the Time Piercing Sword.

This truly was the last strike.

Whether it was sword, or its owner, both of their dwindling Lives had reached their ends.

And Bercouli expended them both to exhaustion, activating the Release Recollection Art of his Divine Instrument, the Time Piercing Sword.

«Time Piercing Sword, Unseen Slash».

The opposite of the «Empty Slash» that could sever the *future*, the «Unseen Slash» had the power to sever the *past*.

Within Underworld’s Main Visualizer, the recent movements of all human Units were recorded for six hundred seconds, or ten minutes.

The Time Piercing Sword could interfere with this record, causing the system to mistake the Unit’s position ten minutes and one second ago for the Unit’s current position.

As for the result, the blade that could normally cut only nothing, could be transmitted to the body of a person who had existed in this area in the past. Unavoidable, unblockable, true to its name, it was a strike that could betray¹⁴ all other sword techniques and hard work.

It was for this very reason that Bercouli always shunned activating the «Unseen Slash». When battling Eugeo, even though he had lost to the Release Recollection Art of the Blue Rose Sword, he resolved never to use this technique that could easily earn him victory. He knew that Senate Elder Chudelkin would even recognize that as an act of treason against the Axiom Church.

14 There is wordplay here. The word “betray” (裏切る, uragiru) conjugates into 裏切り (uragiri) when it transforms into a noun, which is pronounced the same as “Unseen Slash” (裏斬)

But, with Emperor Vector as his opponent, who rode above inestimable power far exceeding his own, he had no such hesitations.

The instant that Emperor Vector had stepped down from his dragon, Bercouli had taken advantage of the fact that his enemy flew in a straight line at a constant speed to correctly calculate his location ten minutes before. Yet, in the mix of the close quarters melee that ensued, locking onto his location was insurmountably difficult.

Of course, if he could recall where his enemy was during that instant ten minutes ago, he could activate this technique. But while using this method, if his sword technique activation was disturbed by the enemy, it would be very difficult to accurately count to ten minutes after that.

— Just like this instant right now.

“You look like you’re plotting something.”

Emperor Vector approached as though gliding, and Bercouli was forced to quickly avoid the blue-black Incarnation emanating from the longsword. Just like that, «ten minutes and one second ago» were forever lost to him.

— So I’ve missed my chance.

Bercouli once more readied his Time Piercing Sword about to use Release Recollection, cursing in his chest.

He was truly at his wit’s end.

Since the Emperor already realized that he was concealing a plot, he would activate his own ultimate technique again without hesitation. In reality, the gleam of Incarnation on his longsword was already reaching towards Bercouli.

Opposite it, the Knight Commander began to evade with all his might.

Crawl away.

Crawl away, crawl away, and fall shamelessly to the ground. He had known since very long ago that he would welcome death in this haggard state.

Three times. Four times.

Right until after the fifth attack, Bercouli successfully evaded all of them.

But after that, the blue black light finally grazed his body.

His consciousness broke off with a *snap*.

When Bercouli opened his eyes again, what he saw was Vector's longsword, penetrating deeply into his stomach.

With a *whoosh*, the blade was jerked out, and the last of the Knight Commander's Life gushed out in the form of crimson liquid.

As he slowly fell backwards, he saw —

The silhouette of a dragon high above, tearing the air as it dove down at lightning speed.

— Hoshigami.

Hey, didn't I tell you to standby? Why did you disobey me, you've never done that before, have you?

The dragon stretched its maw wide, and bluish-white flames shot straight out in jets.

Faced against that attack with the strength to wipe out a hundred soldiers, Emperor Vector merely stretched out his left hand and caught it.

The translucent black armor on his hand effortlessly deflected the flames in all directions. Flying sparks dazzled in the air.

The sword in the Emperor's hand shot out that dark blue light once more, traveling up against the white flames and piercing directly into Hoshigami's forehead. Bercouli's dragon took the full force of the sword skill that could easily control the Dark Knight Order dragon from before — but he did not stop his movements.

On the contrary, Hoshigami converted his entire Life into white rays that shot from his wings, diving straight towards the Emperor.

A sliver of disgust crossed Vector's pale face; he raised his sword high and thrust an extremely simple stab toward the gargantuan jaws of the dragon wanting to tear him into pieces. Dark light poured in all directions, absorbing the dragon's life, tearing its body apart.

Hoshigami gave his Life for merely seven seconds of the Emperor's hesitation —

Bercouli would definitely not let it be in vain.

The Knight Commander felt the last breath of the beloved dragon who had spent its long life with him from behind and swung his Release Recollection-activated Time Piercing Sword high into the air, which began to leave a blue afterimage.

This method of simply recalling “the enemy's position ten minutes ago” could only allow one attack attempt every ten minutes.

Yet, the movement record etched into the ground in blood suggested that it was possible to continually pursue the enemy ten minutes before.

Seven seconds after Bercouli stared at the spot where he could not snipe from before, the blood-red footprint indicating the Emperor's position, he launched his ultimate attack.

There was another characteristic of the «Time Piercing Sword, Unseen Slash».

By directly interfering with the system, the strength of this sword was to “completely erase the Life value of the slashed target”.

Therefore, this strike could not be blocked even with Incarnation.

Indeed, Emperor Vector's power to nullify and absorb all Incarnate attacks could not be activated in that instant.

Therefore, the astronomical Life set for Vector in the system, was first changed to zero.

As a result, the Emperor's large frame was completely split from his left shoulder to his right waist.

Even as his body was split in two along a gigantic cutting surface, Emperor Vector's face remained devoid of expression. Those light blue eyes merely looked blankly up at the empty sky, like glass beads.

The instant that his upper body was about to land and hit the ground, around his heart, jet black light burst, creating an immense, silent, explosion without heat.

By the time the explosion had settled, there remained nothing on the ground that could prove the Emperor's existence.

Seconds later, the Time Piercing Sword that depleted its Life in Bercouli's right hand crumbled into debris with a weak crackling noise.

... It's so warm.

I really want to stay here for a bit longer.

Awakening from her slumber, Integrity Knight Alice smiled lightly, as though still floating in that comfortable state between dream and awakening.

Swaying sunlight.

Wide knees that allowed her body to lay atop of them.

A rough hand that kindly caressed her hair.

..... Father.

How long had it been since she had lay down like this, on his knees? She had long forgotten this peacefulness... This feeling of being completely protected, having nothing to worry about. The feeling that all was well.

Ahh... But, it's time to get up.

Then, Integrity Knight Alice lifted her eyelashes.

Appearing before her face was the figure of a middle aged swordsman, his eyes squinting in a smile as he looked down upon her.

On his toned face and chest, many old scars crossed over. And covering those, countless new wounds were present, yet to heal.

“..... Oji-sama?”

Alice murmured in a low voice, her consciousness finally rousing in this instant.

— Right, I was grabbed by Emperor Vector's dragon. Really, how careless do I have to be, I even charged ahead while completely letting my guard down behind me.

But, as expected of Oji-sama. Even as I fell into the hands of the enemy general, he rescued me. As long as this person is here, I can rest easy.

Smiling again, Alice sat up. As she noticed the wounds of Knight Commander were beyond his face and chest, she held her breath.

His left arm was completely severed from the top of his shoulder. His eastern-styled robe was completely dyed red with blood. And below that wide chest, that horribly deep wound was even more terrifying.

“O... Oji-sama... !! Esteemed Bercouli!!”

Alice screamed and reached out, her fingers touching Knight Commander Bercouli’s cheek.

Then she finally understood, that the oldest, greatest Knight in the world, had finally exhausted his Life.

... Aw, don't cry like that, Lil' Miss.

This moment would've come anyway, it just happened to be now, right?

Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One said warmly, as he looked down upon the golden haired girl bawling over his body. Yet his voice did not reach the ground.

... Lil' Miss, if it's you, it'll definitely be okay. Even by yourself, you can definitely live on.

Because, you're my only apprentice... my daughter.

The scene below gradually departed from Bercouli’s vision. Casting a last smile toward his beloved golden knight maiden, his eyes turned toward the sky to the far north.

His thoughts flew toward another female knight, who should be under that part of the sky..

He did not know whether they would reach or not, but in this moment, his heart was filled only with the deep emotion for the finally-arriving end of his life, which he had originally thought eternal.

... Well, it's not a bad way to go down, is it?

“Yes, you should feel blessed that this many people are crying for you.”

As he turned towards the suddenly resonating voice, he saw a girl floating there, stark naked save for her flowing silver hair.

“... Hey, so you really were still alive.”

Bercouli shrugged, and the Highest Minister Administrator blinked her silvery eyes and smiled softly.

“But that can't be true, can it? Appearing before you now, is only your memory of me. This 'me' is merely the memory of Administrator saved in your soul.”

“Hmm, I still don't really get it... But, if it's the you inside my memory, it's good that you can smile like this now.”

Bercouli responded with a grin, and suddenly glanced beside him. Unknowingly, his beloved dragon Hoshigami had wrapped its long neck around his body.

The Knight Commander softly caressed the dragon's transparent silver neck, leapt onto its back with a *whoop*, reached out, and pulled the Highest Minister up before him.

“Do you not hate me?” The Knight Commander’s only master in his long life asked, tilting her head. “Do you not hate me, the one who imprisoned you within the confines of eternal life , and stripped away your memories again and again?”

After some brief thought, Bercouli replied.

“Although it’s true that it was long enough to get bored at, well, it was still an amusing life. Yeah, that’s right.”

“... Really.”

Looking away after Administrator’s short reply, Bercouli took Hoshigami’s reins.

The dragon expanded its transparent wings, and slowly flew into the boundless yonder.

Under the distant northern sky —

On the dry ground, the rubble of the former «Great Eastern Gate» was piled up. To the east and west of these enormous ruins, ten thousand Dark Territory reserve soldiers and four thousand main troops of the Human Empire Defense army were in formation, preparing for confrontation, staring at each other.

Since Emperor Vector had vanished without a trace, the Dark Territory army could not begin the attack on their own. The completely clueless Human Empire Army also made no movements, and that long stalemate continued.

Near the ruins of the great gate where only the dry wind was heard, there was the silhouette of a lone female knight. It was the Integrity Knight left in charge of the main troops of the Defense Army, Fanatio Synthesis Two.

She had ordered the Guardians and Ascetics to rest in preparation for the upcoming battle, but she herself was not in the mood to sleep in her tent, so she had walked alone to the rubble that used to be the Great Eastern Gate.

The black night had long passed, and Solus's light dyed the sky above the Dark Territory in red, and the side of the Human Empire in blue.

More than half a day had passed since the the decoy troops of the Defense Army, led by Knight Commander Bercouli, had departed to the southern Dark Territory from the Great Eastern Gate. Although she knew that their mission would not be achieved that easily, blindly waiting here for them was hard to endure.

Just as Fanatio was about to close her eyes, praying to the three goddesses for, at least, the safe return of the troops —

Her eyes snapped open.

She felt as if the man she loved was speaking into her ear.

— Sorry, Fanatio. Seems that we can't meet anymore.

— I'll leave the rest to you. Let that kid, live on happily...

Not long ago, Fanatio had heard the exact same words. It was the last sentence that Knight Commander Bercouli had left with her when they separated here.

Covered in silver gauntlets, her hands gently caressed her abdomen.

The new life bestowed upon her body was something that had happened three months ago. Bercouli, who had gone more than a hundred years without touching Fanatio, probably already predicted it when the taboos were released.

Predicted his own death.

Sensing that the long life of Knight Commander Bercouli had ended under the faraway sky, Fanatio slowly sank to her knees, and buried her face in her hands.

Unable to contain them, she let out sobs.

The reason that Bercouli always estranged himself from Fanatio, or any other female, she had once heard a very long time ago.

The men and women of the Human Empire could only marry under official recognition of an Axiom Church priest, and could only produce the next generation under a contract. Yet Integrity Knights took on the roles of the priests, and did not need all the fanfare that came with marriage. They needed only to vow their love, share a bed, and could have children.¹⁵

Yet this child would age and die sooner than its parents with frozen Lives. Even so, having the Highest Minister give this child the same treatment would be much crueler.

Although, after the Highest Minister passed away, Bercouli finally accepted Fanatio's feelings. That is, he decided to protect his child, and let him live until the end of his time.

Then —

“... Please rest assured, Esteemed Bercouli. I will properly raise this child. I will make him into a man as strong and proud as you.”

Holding back her sobs, Fanatio uttered her own determination.

— But, now, just for now.

Just for now, allow me to grieve.

¹⁵ See Volume 12, Chapter 7, Part 1. Cardinal explains that reproduction in the Human Empire must be officially approved to successfully conceive children.

Throwing herself onto the ground, Fanatio tightly held a grain of sand that Knight Commander Bercouli had stepped on, sobbing without holding back.

5

“Although I don’t have anything personal against you guys...”

Pointing his long sword at the red army, Klein’s words reverberated throughout the ancient ruins.

“I’m gonna return your debt of severely hurting my friend. I’ll return it threefold... No, I’ll return it a thousandfold, you damned bastards!!”

Right after declaring that, he plunged directly into the enemy army. Asuna was so stunned by his recklessness that she forgot the pain of her deep wound for an instant. Yet immediately, another string of code poured down right next to Klein, creating a silhouette.

Appearing there was a hulking, chocolate-skinned man grasping a large battleaxe.

“... Agil-san!!”

She called his name hoarsely.

When the “battle merchant”, who had once continued to provide strong support in the forms of battle strength and supplies to the SAO Clearers, glanced at Asuna, a broad grin stretched over his gigantic features and he stuck his right thumb into the air.

Soon after, he turned around and began following after Klein, running fiercely.

The third and fourth persons appeared right in front of Asuna.

A girl with shortcut hair, in a reddish-brown costume draped over her breastplate and with a silver mace suspended from her waist.

Next, a petite girl wearing an ultramarine tunic and skirt, with hair tied in twin tails.

“— Liz!! Silica-chan!!”

It was here that, at last, both of Asuna's eyes were overflowing with tears.

All strength left her body. While somehow staying in that place, Asuna extended both her hands toward her friends whom she had strong bonds with.

"You really... you really came..."

"Of course we'd come!"

"Isn't that obvious?"

Beaming at the same time, Lisbeth and Silica seized Asuna's left and right hands respectively and clasped them tightly. Both of their expressions became tearful smiles.

"— Being this rash... Bleeding everywhere... you're trying too hard, Asuna."

"Leave the rest to us. Because everyone else came as well."

Just by being hugged from both sides by Lisbeth and Silica, Asuna felt the pain from the wounds riddling her body dissolving in the soft warmth.

"Thank you... Thank you all..."

Through her endless tears, she saw a rain of code strings suddenly pouring down at the entrance of the ruins.



Appearing there were hundreds of swordsmen dressed in vibrant armor.

“Those red guys are the enemies!”

“Vanguard, attack! Drive them back!”

“Rear guard, retreat temporarily and check your incantations!”

Right after landing, they began to exchange shouts in Underworld language, no, Japanese — held up their swords, axes, and spears, and began assaulting the red soldiers in front of them.

Judging by their magnificent individual combat skills and uniformly understood teamwork, it was apparent that they were undoubtedly seasoned VRMMO players.

— *So that's what it is.*

Asuna finally recovered her thought process and understood the situation before her.

Ever since the American players appeared on the battlefield, the time acceleration rate of Underworld must have been fixed to 1:1 by the attackers' manipulation. In other words, it was also possible to Dive here with AmuSpheres from Japan.

But the radiance emanating from their equipped swords and armors indicated that they were not using the default Guardian accounts.

Meaning — they had converted here.

They had undoubtedly converted their characters, which they had fostered — by investing great time and effort — to Underworld.

Even though they don't know whether or not they can return to their original VRMMO worlds. On the contrary — considering Underworld's structure, it's possible that their own character information would be deleted the moment they died, and yet...!

“Everyone... Sorry... I'm sorry...”

With a tearful voice, Asuna apologized to her two bosom friends before her, and then to the countless swordsmen pushing the front line back.

“What are you saying, Asuna?”

Lisbeth’s reply was filled with solid determination.

“The reason we did our best in SAO and ALO is surely so that we could protect important things in this place right now.”

“Yeah... that’s right... thank you all...”

Whispering her gratitude, Asuna nodded deeply, fervently.

However, there was one more thing she had yet to learn. Exactly who had informed Liz and the others in the real world about Underworld crisis and requested reinforcements by means of conversion? It would be very unlikely for Kikuoka and Higa, who were confined in the Ocean Turtle’s sub-control room, to have the spare time to formulate and execute this plan.

“Hey Liz, Silica-chan. The one who brought everyone here, who was it...?”

At Asuna’s question, the pair exchanged glances, and grinned.

“Wait, Asuna, isn’t that obvious?!”

“It was Yui-chan! She tried her hardest to explain things about Underworld and the people living here!”

When Asuna heard those words, her heart tightened strongly and tears gushed out endlessly from her eyes.

Yui. Born as a Top-Down AI in old SAO, Asuna and Kirito’s daughter. Yes... it couldn’t be anyone but her. She sensed the attackers’ plans that Asuna, Kikuoka, and the others couldn’t even predict, and took action to counter them.

“..... Thank you, Yui-chan.”

Murmuring words filled with all of her feelings, her severed left arm had regenerated completely and the wounds covering her body had mostly vanished upon standing up.

At that moment, a timid voice came from behind.

“Um... Asuna-sama? Those people are... or rather, those knights are...”

Integrity Knight Renri stood there with a dumbfounded look. Behind him, the Guardians, who had just been saved from danger as well, similarly had their eyes become round.

Asuna, after fluttering her gaze between Renri, Lisbeth, and the others, smiled and replied.

“My very important friends. They came from the Real World to help us.”

Renri blinked a few times, then stared fixedly at Lisbeth and Silica —

A relieved expression floated onto his adolescent face.

“...So that’s the case... I’m really glad. I thought that, without a doubt, the people of the outside world besides Asuna-sama were all those kinds of scary soldiers...”

“Hey, that’s impossible!!”

Along with a slightly upset smile that was nonetheless filled with intimacy, Lisbeth patted Renri’s shoulders.

“I’m Lisbeth. Please take care of me, Knight-kun.”

“Ah... Y... Yes. My name is Renri. Pleased to meet you.”

Asuna, who was watching this scene with a smile, was suddenly hit by a strong premonition.

She, in her entire life, would never forget this scene.

This moment, when people who were born in two different worlds met, exchanged words, and fostered relationships.

This story, which should continue for a long, long time, should not end in tragedy.

Asuna took a deep breath, changed her tone of voice, and asked Lisbeth.

“Liz, how many people converted?”

“Ah, well, a little bit over two thousand, I think. I already tried really hard, but... I still couldn’t make everyone who listened to my speech convert over...”

Asuna lightly patted her bosom friend, who was biting her lip, on the back.

“This is more than enough. But... to preserve the chance of them converting back, we must avoid a war of attrition if possible. Don’t spread the front lines too much, and step up the healing. Liz and Silica-chan, take about two hundred men, retreat to the rear, and set up a support team.”

Switching her awareness back to the battle, Asuna rapidly delivered directives to Renri and the Guardians.

“Everyone else, although it may be against your will, please merge with the Ascetics team and use Healing Arts. The swordsmen from the Real World are not familiar with the Sacred Arts, so it would help if you teach them the commands.”

“Un... Understood, Asuna-sama! You heard her, Guardians! We’re assisting the knights from the reinforcements!”

As Renri yelled, the Guardians, exhausted from continuous battling, responded emphatically.

“... What will you do then, Asuna-san?”

At Silica’s inquiry, Asuna winked.

“I’m going to attack at the very front, of course.”

I don’t feel like losing anymore.

Charging at the very front were all familiar faces from ALO — Asuna, noticing Sylph Lord Sakuya, Cait Sith Lord Alicia, Salamander General Eugene, and the others, hardened her determination and they nodded fervently at each other.

No, they were not just the players who had converted from ALO.

Those strongly backing the swordsmen by rapidly firing crossbows with extreme accuracy were probably players from Gun Gale Online, like Sinon.

Moreover, that team sticking tightly together, mowing down enemies like a storm, was formed by the members of the strongest guild that had swept across many VRMMOs, the «Sleeping Knights».

Spotting Asuna, the mage Siune smiled at her. As Asuna waved her right hand in response, she once again held back the tears that were slipping out.

They all came to help despite arriving at the resolution that they could lose their avatars, which were akin to their other selves. Then, as the only one protected by a Super Account, she had to take the greatest risk to minimize their sacrifices.

Asuna sprinted across the battlefield, giving on-the-fly orders to the support army to narrow the over-widened front line and form a semicircle again with the entrance to the *sando* at its center.

But no matter how strong the equipment and statuses of the 2,000 converted players were, there still remained more than 10,000 American players. If it became a war of attrition, the casualties, in other words, players with probability of data loss, would increase as time went on.

Furthermore, there was another unignorable concern.

The realistic pain that could not be avoided during battles in Underworld.

Unlike most of the Americans, who would have already died and logged out the instant they felt pain, the Japanese players, who repeated the routine of getting injured, retreating, and being healed, were constantly exposed to agony. And Asuna had just experienced, firsthand, the fact that it would gradually break their spirit.

—Please, everyone, do your best. Until these 10,000 enemies are all eliminated.

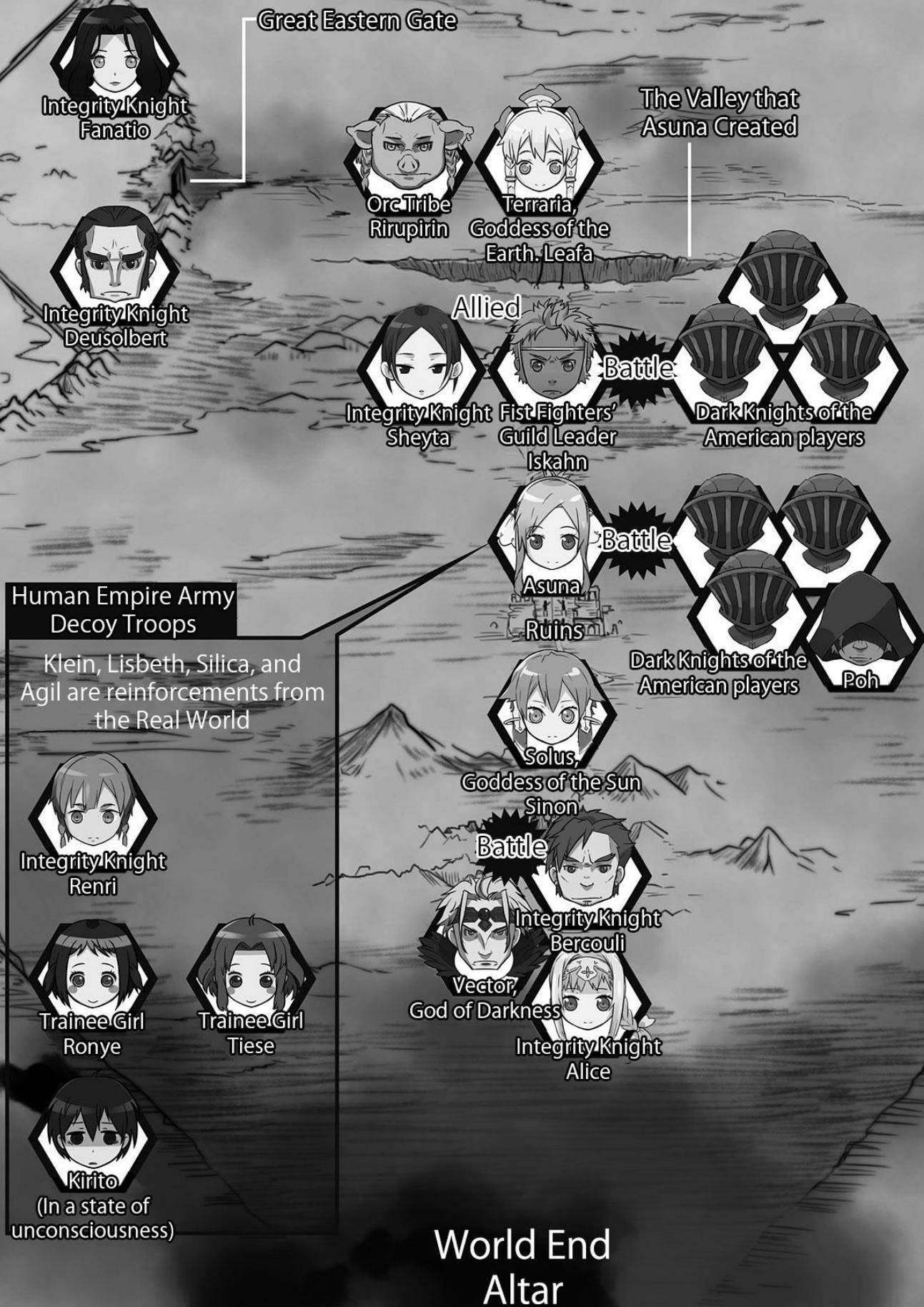
If we do that, then the war potential available to those who attacked the «Ocean Turtle» will truly be depleted this time. Afterward, we'd only need to catch up to Emperor Vector, who should have been tripped up by Knight Commander Bercouli and Sinon, and rescue Alice.

Asuna flashed her rapier on the foremost line, and shouted with all her might.

“No problem... we can win! If it's everyone, we can definitely win!!”

«War of the Underworld» Battle Situation

Day 2 of the «Final Tolerance Experiment»



Hirono Takashi, a Japanese VRMMO player, had asked himself: *Why the hell did I come to this place?* Not that it did any good now.

The reason that he accepted the all-too-sudden conversion request from ALO, which he logged into after being woken up at 5:00 a.m. by a phone call from his friend, was definitely not because the girl desperately giving a speech was cute, nor was it because he sympathized with her claims.

To be honest, he had mostly trusted his gut.

Additionally, one part was a curiosity that asked, *What kind of world would a VRMMO made using national budget be like?* Another part was an irresponsible feeling that said, *I scored the worst on my very first proficiency test in high school, so my AmuSphere will be confiscated soon anyway.* And a small part of him had a hunch — *Maybe there really is ‘something’ in that world I haven’t found in any other game that I’ve played.*

After Takashi had converted the character he had raised for two years and logged into a server that he had never heard of before, what awaited him was a hulking man clad in red armor standing in his way, curses in native English slang, and a halberd swinging down mercilessly.

He jumped back while pressing down the scream about to leak from his throat, but the halberd’s tip still hit the armor on his left leg, tore through it, and cut into his shin for just a moment. He had never felt such pain since he had fallen from his bicycle and broken a bone in elementary school.

No one told me about this—!! Takashi shrieked in his head as he earnestly slipped through the halberd's pursuit, somehow repelled the man with his extremely rare one-handed sword, and was taken to the rear by the support team around the time he felt a wave of nausea hitting him due to the large amount of blood flowing from the wound on his leg.

— I've had enough, I'm logging out!

Letting such words slip out, Takashi was being healed by a priest-like girl about the same age as him, wearing a light blue habit.

Somehow, when looking at her, he had a really weird feeling.

"I will treat you immediately, please endure it for a moment, Esteemed Knight."

The girl spoke in a delicate voice, then cupped her hands on the severe wound on his left leg — severe only by Takashi's standards, though — and began her incantation. Watching her demeanor, Takashi thought for a moment that she was merely an NPC.

However, the serious expression exuding from her gray eyes speckled with brown, her cute features that looked like those of both an Easterner and a Westerner, and the warmth that came from the white light healing his wound, all clearly told Takashi that this girl was neither an NPC nor played by a Japanese person, but a true human being living in this world.

But could something like this really be true? She was clearly speaking Japanese, but was not Japanese nor an NPC. Who really was this girl, then?

Rather than realizing it the moment he felt the agony of a halberd slicing his left leg,

Takashi clearly recognized something when his wound was healed by the girl's magic: he was not in any game event, but in the middle of some extraordinary occurrence.

“All right, everything is fine now, Esteemed Knight.”

When the girl in the habit lifted her hands with a slightly proud expression, his wound that had been more than 5 centimeters long was completely sealed and the pain had disappeared, leaving only a shallow, light brown scar.

“Th... Thank you.”

Stumbling with his words, Takashi somehow vocalized his gratitude. *Oh, why didn't I come up with something more fitting for an «Esteemed Knight»?* He thought, irritated. Yet his face grew scorching hot, and his tongue became stupidly immobile. When he finally realized it afterwards, he had already taken a daring action that even he himself could not expect. Reaching out with both arms, he gently hugged the girl's slender body.

Had this been a normal VRMMO world, Takashi's actions would be determined as «Inappropriate Contact with an NPC» and he would have been given a system warning.

Yet the girl in the habit jerked in Takashi's arms, taking a shallow breath out of surprise. A few seconds later, Takashi felt the girl's arms nervously circling around his own back, and applying slight but definite pressure.

“It's okay, Esteemed Knight from abroad.”

Close to his ear, the sound of a soft yet steady voice came.

“Even a nun-in-training like myself, although insignificant, can complete my own duty like this. Esteemed Knight, you are fighting plenty times more proudly and bravely. Please remember... you are taking up your sword to protect many people, to protect this world.”

The girl then gently smoothed Takashi’s back with her right hand.

Whether it was in the real world or a virtual world, Takashi never had any experience with hugging a girl. Yet even if he was going to have a girlfriend in the real world, he had a feeling that he would never become more emotional than in this very instant.

After that dreamy moment, Takashi steeled his determination as soon as their two bodies separated.

“Um... W-would you mind telling me your name?”

Patches of scarlet appeared on the trainee nun’s fair face, and she nodded.

“Of course not... My name is Frenica. Frenica Szeski.”

“Frenica...”

The name sounded very strange, but the girl before him had spoken it with exceeding familiarity. Unusually, Takashi also clearly told her his own name. Not his character name Velios, but his own, original name that he was not particularly fond of.

“... My name is Takashi... Hirono Takashi... Um... Can we, meet again, when the war ends?”

Frenica raised her eyebrows slightly, narrowed her eyes in kindness, and nodded.

“Absolutely, Knight Takashi-sama. When the war ends and peace comes to this world, we will. I shall pray to the three gods for your safe return.”

Frenica softly wrapped her hands around Takashi’s left hand on his knee, and swiftly stood up.

Frenica flapped the hem of her habit, turned, and ran to heal another of the wounded. As Takashi stared towards her back, and he clearly realized something: if he was going to stand proudly — like a knight in front of her, he would have to fight bravely until the end. This world was no longer a game, but another reality completely equivalent to the real world in which Takashi was born and grew up in.

Even if he ran out of HP, no, lifetime, and was ejected from this world, he would face forward and hold up his sword until the very last moment. No matter how heavily he was injured, how much it hurt. He would certainly never see Frenica again if he failed.

Takashi stood up, shouted “All riiiiight!”, and ran toward the front line to complete his goal that was not a quest, but his duty.

Chapter 21

Awakening

7 July 2026 / Eighth Day¹⁶ of the Eleventh Month of the Human Empire Calendar, 380

1

“Can we... make it...?”

Higa Takeru murmured to himself as both his arms, stiffened from overwork, dangled heavily.

In just under an hour, he had managed to successfully convert approximately 2,000 pieces of account data, which had been suddenly transferred to the «Ocean Turtle», from Japan’s The Seed network into Underworld. The texture of the keyboard seemed still stuck to his fingertips.

“We’ll make it. Definitely.”

Professor Koujiro Rinko answered firmly while thrusting a sports drink towards him.

Accepting the bottle, Higa painstakingly twisted off the cap with his numb right hand and began to drink in large gulps. The liquid flowing into his mouth was lukewarm, but he felt it in every inch of his stomach.

After downing about half the bottle, Higa shook his head weakly.

“*Really...* That’s the first time I’ve been *that* careless...”

16 Kawahara made a typo and wrote “Seventh Day” instead. It has been corrected here.

Upon learning from two female high school students calling themselves Leafa and Sinon, who had suddenly appeared at the «RATH» Roppongi branch, that their assailants had been letting real world American VRMMO players dive into Underworld, Higa's mind had blanked for a full five seconds.

Moreover, the one to discover this had been a top-down AI connected to Yuuki Asuna's portable terminal. He couldn't help but acknowledge his own oversights.

He had allowed these high school students, who claimed to be acquaintances of Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka, dive into Underworld with the leftover Super Accounts using the Roppongi STLs, then completed the mammoth conversion operation, and finally, landed 2,000 reinforcements at Yuuki Asuna's current coordinates.

If they fail to eliminate more than 50,000 American players, Alice would almost certainly fall into enemy hands. In actuality, Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka and Captain Nakanishi both understood the situation and had already considered scaling the outer wall of the «Ocean Turtle» to physically destroy the satellite antenna.

However, to reach the outer wall, they would need to release the lock on the pressure-resistant partition dividing the main shaft for nearly ten minutes. If their assailants notice them, then the worst case scenario would very likely occur, involving them losing control of the sub-control room too...

Therefore, Kikuoka and Higa entrusted everything to the three female high school students descending into Underworld as the «Three Goddesses of Creation», and the Japanese VRMMO players volunteering to join the battle as reinforcements, despite knowing the risk of losing their accounts.

From the moment that they had established their connections, more than half the confidential information concerning «Project Alicization» had already become public.

But that was no longer a significant issue.

That is, compared with losing Alice to the assailants, who were possibly under the authority of America’s military-industrial complex, and then falling completely under their control in the oncoming era of autonomous weaponry.

“Indeed...”

Higa muttered in a voice inaudible to anyone else, his entire body slumping into the chair.

“Alice is no longer a simple AI to be used as a UAV controller.¹⁷ She is now a new human born into a truly different world... You’ve known that for a while, haven’t you... Kirigaya-kun?”

His eyes moved from the main monitor presenting the situation in southern Underworld to a corner display showing Kirigaya Kazuto’s Fluctlight.

The delicately quivering ray of light was still wrapped around an empty void in its center. The subject he had lost after injuring himself... His self-image.

Unable to bear keeping this window open, Higa moved his cursor with the intent to minimize it.

Just as he was about to click the left mouse button, his finger halted abruptly.

“Hm...?”

Pushing up his round glasses, he fixated on the Fluctlight activity log displayed at the bottom of the window.

Only 45 minutes ago, there was a single sharp peak engraved on the line graph that had remained flat. He frantically maneuvered the cursor again and slid the log to the left. Doing so, he saw another, even greater peak around 10 hours ago.

17 Unmanned aerial vehicle, commonly known as a drone. Aircraft without a human aboard that can be remotely controlled to attack targets. More info:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unmanned_aerial_vehicle

“Uh... Um, Rinko-senpai. Could you come and take a look at this?”

“Could you not call me that?”

Professor Koujiro snapped as she looked towards the main monitor.

“This is Kirigaya-kun’s Fluctlight monitor, isn’t it? ...What’s up with this movement?”

“He should’ve lost consciousness, but for a second it was showing activity... or something like that, but that’s not supposed to happen.”

“Your Japanese is so weird. — Perhaps he somehow received a strong external stimulus?”

“But the circuit that processes those stimuli is completely dead. ... Let me see, the time was...”

Higa clicked on the peak and the corresponding timestamp popped up. But even if he did confirm the time, they had no way of learning what had taken place in Underworld.

But at that moment —

“Wait a second.”

Professor Koujiro spoke with growing anxiety.

“Right during this time period. Aren’t these... when those girls dived in with the STLs? The first peak was Asuna-san, and the next would be Sinon-san and Leafa-san, who both showed up in Roppongi...”

“Huh, really? ...Whoa, really.”

Higa held his breath. The timestamps listed under those two sharp peaks were indeed when the female high school students had descended into Underworld.

“Um, what exactly happened...? Are these just intense reactions to familiar people appearing? No... Kirigaya-kun’s wounds aren’t something that can be recovered by such fantastical means... There must be some cause... Some physical or logical cause...”

Higa stood from his mesh chair and began to pace nervously back and forth in front of the console. Perhaps noticing his mood, the technicians sitting on the floor against the wall glanced at him confusedly, along with Kikuoka, who was collapsed dispiritedly in a chair some distance away.

But Higa paid them no attention and continued to think intently.

“The self... The subject... A self-image regulated by oneself... A backup of that quantum pattern exists somewhere...? No, that’s impossible... Kirito-kun’s Fluctlight has never been duplicated before. Even if it had, there’s no way to separate his self-image from the backup and copy it over... A dynamic quantum pattern that can connect to his Fluctlight...? Where is it... Where the hell is it...”

“Hey... Hey, Higa-kun.”

Higa finally looked up after his name was called several times.

“What is it?”

“What exactly do you mean when you said that he ‘lost his subject’?”

“Umm... Well, that is...”

He took several seconds to switch trains of thought before answering rapidly:

“«The one who sees, the one who acknowledges»... the ‘you’ within your heart. In philosophical terms, it is the *subject*, the opposite of the *object*. The central processing unit that deals with all information received through your senses.”

“Okay... In other words, you’ve united materialism and dualism through the STL. Well, that’s fine. What I want to ask is, can you really separate the subject and the object so easily?”

“... Huh?”

Higa blinked several times at the unexpected question.

Kikuoka and the technicians said nothing. Professor Koujiro’s hoarse voice broke the silence of the room, filled only by the drone of the circulatory cooling system.

“The subject, the one who acknowledges. The object, the one who is acknowledged. Those are only philosophical concepts used to express relationships between objects. I don’t believe you can apply such theory to our consciousnesses, which are visualized as Fluctlights. Humans are social animals, not solitary existences that shun others. Others in you, and yourself in others... They’re all connected, like a network, to some extent. Don’t you feel that way?”

“Yourself... in... others...”

After expressing it in language, Higa realized that this concept was one of the things he had avoided the most.

How am I seen? How do I compare to others?

How does Koujiro Rinko see me?

How do I compare to Kayaba Akihiko?

— Yeah...

— I don’t even really remember my face. If I were to draw a portrait of myself, I’d end up with something that somehow looks like me and yet actually doesn’t. That’s because I’ve been avoiding myself — whether in terms of appearance or mentality, my sorry ass can never compare with Kayaba-senpai, no matter how hard I try. That’s how low a level the subject in me is.

Yeah, maybe you could even combine the everyone's very impressions of «Higa Takeru» and you'd basically end up with me. That's how low a level my subject is...

Okay, she's got me. Higa thought as his mouth stretched into a wry, self-deprecating smile —

When he arrived at that conclusion, he finally understood what Koujiro Rinko was trying to say.

“... A backup of the self-image.”

He murmured, and the instant he looked up, the self-loathing embarrassment vanished from his face.

“I see... It does exist. The data capable of restoring Kirigaya-kun's destroyed subject! It's inside the Fluctlights of the people close to him...!!”

He shouted and began to rapidly hover back and forth.

“But we need an STL to extract that data... And the reproducibility within one person is not enough... We need at least two, no... we need three... people...”

He took a deep breath and held it in his chest.

The person who understood Kirigaya Kazuto the most and preserved a detailed image of him in their soul. Without question, that person was Yuuki Asuna. And she was currently lying in the STL beside Kazuto's.

Moreover, there were two more girls who should have close relationships with Kazuto inside the STLs at the Roppongi branch.

Higa turned towards Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka and asked him hoarsely:

“Kiku-san. Do the girls who dived in from Roppongi... have relationships with Kirigaya-kun?”

“... Ahh, of course.”

Kikuoka nodded, lenses glinting in his black frame glasses.

“Sinon-kun was Kirito’s partner when he took care of the «Death Gun» incident half a year ago, and Leafa-kun is Kirito’s younger sister.”

For a moment, the atmosphere was silent. Higa’s round glasses flashed.

“... That’s it. That’s it, that’s the one! We can do it... We might be able to restore Kirito-kun’s self-image! Let’s say we separate their stored impressions of Kirigaya-kun from their Fluctlights, and then connect it to the missing area... The active data may fit into Kirigaya’s soul and activate it, and that should restore the lost subject...”

Driven by waves of warmth gushing through him, Higa clapped his hands together.

Then, a second later.

A wave of cold suddenly extinguished this warmth.

“Ah... Ahh... No way... Aaaahh...”

“Wh-What happened, what’s wrong, Higa-kun?!”

Watching Professor Koujiro stutter frantically, Higa murmured in a trancelike state.

“To execute this operation... we have to do it from the main control room...”

Leaden silence sank like dust once more, piling up on the floor of the sub-control room.

Commander Kikuoka sighed heavily.

“I see... That’s right, of course ... No, don’t look so down, Higa-kun. We’re very fortunate to have a path towards treating Kirito-kun now, anyway. As for the actual operation, after this current situation is finished and we drive away the people on the «Ocean Turtle»...”

“It’ll be... too late by then...”

Higa interrupted Kikuoka's words, hanging his head.

“When the *Nagato* begins the assault as ordered, if a huge battle breaks out in the main shaft, the sub-power will be cut. They might even destroy equipment in main control. Of course, Kirigaya-kun's STL will shut down, and he will also log out from Underworld without waking up. But then... I'm afraid that Kirigaya-kun will never be able to connect to the STL again. In his current condition, he wouldn't even be able to pass the preliminary stages... To continue treatment, we have no choice but to do it while the three girls are still diving in Underworld.”

Higa said lightly. He felt himself filling with a sort of determination.

What should he do in this situation?

A moment ago, Higa's subject would have definitely replied like this: *There's nothing I can do. I'm not Kayaba-senpai anyway.*

But this shouldn't be his true self-image. He was only avoiding, trying to find excuses.

The Higa Takeru I know, the brilliant genius who designed the STL and Underworld, would absolutely say this:

“... I'll go, Kiku-san.”

“Go... where?”

Turning his entire body towards his Hawaiian shirt-wearing commander, whose face was taut, Higa took a deep breath and replied:

“I'm not going to break into the occupied main control room. Listen... At the stern side of the main shaft running through the «Ocean Turtle», there's a cable duct connecting STL Room Two, where Kirigaya-kun is now, and the main control room below the pressure partition. There should be a maintenance connector on the cable. If I enter the duct by ladder from STL Room Two and connect my laptop to that maintenance connector, I'll be able to control Kirigaya-kun's STL.”

After hearing Higa's idea, Kikuoka's eyes widened in surprise behind his black framed glasses for a moment, as though saying, *how didn't I think of that?* But he immediately returned to his severe expression and refuted.

"But the maintenance connector is on the other side of the pressure connector dividing us and the attackers. To access the connector, we need to temporarily release the lock on the pressure partition sealing the cable duct. Moreover, the duct can also be accessed from STL Room One, which is right next to the main control room. If they notice the lock's release and realize what we're doing, they might attack us from below."

"Then we'll just combat that with a decoy."

"A decoy...?"

Kikuoka's eyes glinted sharply. Higa hurriedly shook his head and replied:

"We can't use precious human resources here, of course. As soon as we release the lock on the partition, we'll make him rush down the staircase on the opposite side of the duct."

"I see... You mean «Ichiemom»? Luckily, he's being kept in the upper shaft storage room. Could someone bring him here?"

Under Kikuoka's directive, two staff members who had been sitting against the wall and listening to the conversation got up and jogged out of the room. On the other hand, Professor Koujiro spoke with a worried look:

"Wait a second... you're using Ichiemom as a decoy, but he can only move slowly on stairs, you know. If he attracts the enemy's attention, he can't just run back immediately."

Ichiemom, properly named «Electroactive Muscled Operative Machine 1», was an experimental humanoid machine body used for loading artificial Fluctlights. Using artificial polymer muscles to drive its metallic skeleton, it was what could be called a humanoid robot.

Since it was experimental, it had exposed robotic parts and cables that did not make for an aesthetically pleasing exterior, and it was without any sort of bulletproofing technology.

Although Rinko, whom Higa requested tune Ichiemom's self-walking balancer yesterday, had complained quite a bit, she seemed to have become rather engrossed in it, and that was why she had opinions of her own regarding this "Ichiemom decoy operation". Of course, Higa deeply regretted this strategy himself, but now was not the time to hold back from using available equipment.

"... I feel really sorry for Ichiemom, but all we can do is make him do his best. However, he looks a bit *that*, you know, so our enemies might not immediately shoot him for fear that he might explode."

"... Indeed..."

Just as they were talking like this, the door slid open and a huge trolley was pushed into the room. Carried in a seated position with its legs held in its arms was a tall mechanical figure with three lenses mounted in its roughly-shaped head.

Professor Koujiro glanced at Ichiemom with a somewhat complicated expression and immediately turned around:

"... Well, he does look pretty conspicuous, and will probably make them think that we have some grand plan here..."

"At least they definitely won't ignore him. While the enemy is dealing with Ichiemom, I'll slip into the lower part of the cable duct and operate Kirigaya-kun's STL through the maintenance port. The problem is how much time this thing can buy me..."

At Higa's words, Kikuoka asked as he jiggled the clogs on his feet:

"Then couldn't we throw in «Niemom» as well?"

"We can't, unfortunately."

Higa shrugged and replied:

“Although Niemom’s physical performance is stronger, he was created under the pretense that it would be piloted by an Artificial Fluctlight, and, unlike Ichiemom, he’s not loaded with a self-balancer. In his current state, he’ll fall over as soon as it starts going down the stairs.”

“I see...”

Higa’s gaze turned to the right, away from the nodding commander’s face, then saw Rinko staring at the floor with an odd expression. She then asked as if she had just returned to earth.

“But, Higa-kun, even if we manage to camouflage ourselves unlocking the partition like that, there’s still a risk of you being seen when it opens. It’s still better to bring a bodyguard with you to the cable duct, isn’t it?”

“... No, right now the JSDF staff is much too precious as our fighting strength. Besides, I’m the only one small enough to move quickly through that small, overly cramped duct. In any case, I’ll just be in and out in a jiffy.”

Even though he answered in his usual tone, his heartbeat accelerated when he thought about the details.

If he were to be found by the enemy and shot at while inside the lower section, there would be no escape. When the «Ocean Turtle» had first been attacked, Higa had only heard gunshots, but never once saw even the appearance of the enemy combatants.

— However.

I... No, the entire organization of «RATH» has much too great a debt to Kirigaya-kun.

Higa Takeru engraved those thoughts into his mind once more.

If they temporarily put aside the act of sealing away Kazuto’s memories, they had still forced him dive for three real world days, equivalent to 10 years in Underworld. That could be called the most important spark for the Artificial Fluctlights. The birth of an Artificial Fluctlight who broke the boundaries of the world,

«Alice», was undoubtedly deeply related to Kazuto from the very beginning.

Furthermore, although it had been under the pretense of treatment, having him connect to an unrestricted STL ended up dealing severe damage to his Fluctlight. This was because he had fiercely battled the ruling organization of Underworld to protect Alice, causing him to lose many of his partners in the process. Therefore, as long as the chance to treat him existed, Higa had to challenge whatever risks arose. If he didn't, he would be much too ashamed to see Kazuto for the rest of his life.

Higa Takeru clenched his fists, and nodded at Kikuoka.

It was at that time.

A fourth voice resounded in the sub-control room.

“Umm... Me too, I'm going with Chief Higa...”

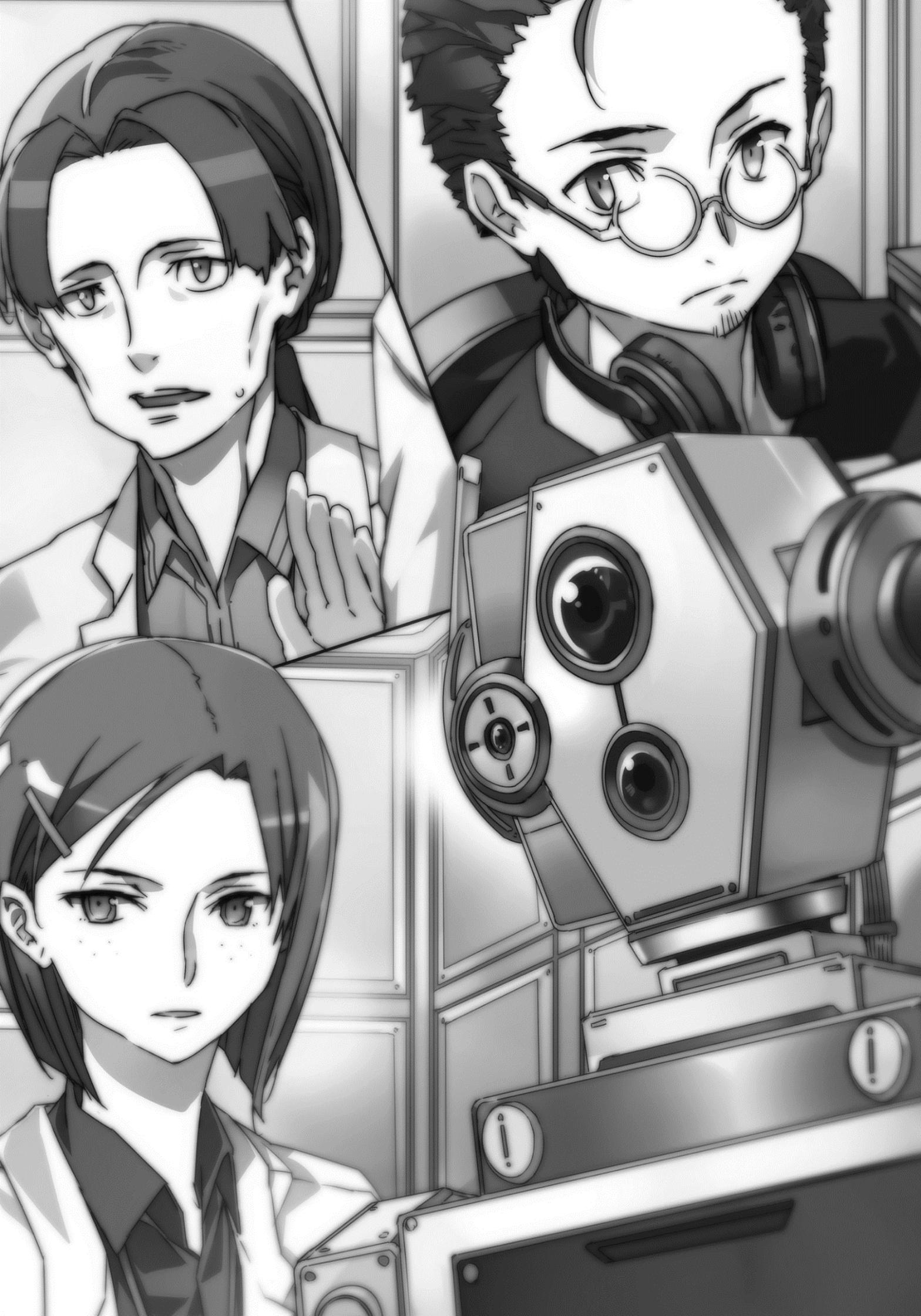
Everyone's eyes gathered on one of RATH's staff technicians, who until now had been seated on a mattress against the wall.

He was about as short as Higa, with long hair tied behind his head. Mustering as much courage as possible, he stood a bit clumsily and continued his speech.

“I'm also quite thin... But I could at least be the chief's shield or something... And also, I've always done the maintenance around the cables...”

Higa gazed carefully at the face of the man, whose voice was barely audible.

He was much older, probably in his mid-thirties. Having been aboard the Ocean Turtle for several months, his skin was pale white. If memory served, he was a man who had quit his job at a large game development company to join «RATH».



Although his fighting strength could not be compared to that of a JSDF soldier, having a companion was reassuring. Higa immediately stood from his chair and bowed deeply to this staff member.

“... To be honest, I actually don’t remember the exact location of the connector. Thanks very much for your company, Yanai-san.”

2

Having returned to the real world, Gabriel Miller slowly lifted his eyelids within STL #2.

To be precise, he didn't return, but was unexpectedly exiled. Lying still in the gel bed, Gabriel chewed over the aftertaste of astonishment left in his mouth.

How did he lose a one-on-one battle in a virtual world? The opponent wasn't even a human; it was an AI.

Why had he lost against that knight? Gabriel spent a few precious seconds pondering what the reason could have been.

The strength of will? The bonds between souls? The power of love that connects people...?

— Utterly preposterous.

The corners of Gabriel's mouth lifted into a cold smile. Whether it was the real world or a virtual world, if invisible forces truly existed, then there could only be one — the force of destiny leading him forward.

In other words, his defeat had been inevitable. Because it was essential. Destiny wanted Gabriel to fight not in a borrowed avatar like Dark God Vector, but in his true form. It was asking him to descend into that world once more, the right way.

Then he shall accompany that notion to the end.

Completing his musing, Gabriel slipped quietly off the seat.

Looking towards the other STL, he was surprised that his aide Vassago Casals was still diving. He thought that he had long died and logged out, but it seemed that this man had also found something to pursue.

— Well, do as you please.

Shrugging, Gabriel opened the door leading to the neighboring main control room. The shaven-headed team member looked up from the console he was facing, then spoke in an unperturbed voice:

“You’ve worked hard, captain. Ahh, you were also done in.”

“Give me a sitrep.”

Gabriel inquired indifferently. Critter changed his expression slightly and reported:

“Well, as you ordered, I have sequentially deposited the 50,000 players gathered from different parts of the US. Half of them have been worn off, but yeah, the goal of annihilating the Human Empire Army should still be within reach. As for any uncertainties, Rath has taken the same course... We’ve confirmed a large-scale connection from Japan on the battlefield. They number only 2,000, so I don’t think they’ll pose much of a threat.”

“Oh...?”

Raising an eyebrow, Gabriel looked at the main screen.

A topographical map of southern Underworld was displayed there. A black line stretched south directly from the «Great Eastern Gate» and terminated with an “X” mark, which was most likely Dark God Vector’s, or Gabriel’s, movement log. There was more than half the journey left before it would reach the system console at the southernmost edge of the world, but Alice currently should still be at that X-marked point on the map.

After that, a thick white line was moving south as if in pursuit of the black line. That should be the Human Empire Army. They seemed densely packed together, and had stopped for now.

These white Human Empire troops seemed as though they were about to be crushed by that large, red-labeled army. Assuming that the red army was the American VRMMO players, then the blue glow that spread like a protective wall between the red and white would be the 2,000 connectors from Japan.

“Are these Japanese using the Human Empire Army’s default accounts?”

“I think so, what about it?”

“Nothing...”

Gabriel took a bottle of mineral water Critter handed to him and drank from it as he thought.

Could those Japanese VRMMO addicts have converted half of themselves — no, in a sense, a character they valued more than their real selves — into Underworld?

As if. Gabriel smiled coldly again.

Around half a month ago, Gabriel had participated in a PvP tournament on a Japanese server in the VRMMO «Gun Gale Online». Even if those youngsters, whom he had easily crushed, logged into Underworld out of interest, they’d never take the risk of losing their characters.

A mental image flashed through his mind of that blue-haired female sniper, who had been locked in his fatal chokehold but fought until the very end, but Gabriel quickly brought his thoughts back on track.

“Good work, I’ll dive in again. Convert this account into Underworld.”

He picked up a piece of paper and a pen that were conveniently laying on the console, wrote down his ID and password, and passed it to Critter. Critter looked surprised.

“Whoa, you too, Captain?”

“‘Too’, meaning...?”

“Well, didn’t this guy Vassago come back after dying as well? And somehow he looked all happy, converted his account, and went back in.”

“Oh...?”

Gabriel's eyes fell upon the dropped scrap of paper beside Critter's hand. Within what seemed to be Vassago's ID, the first three letters grabbed his attention the most.

"I see... I see."

Kek. Rare, genuine laughter spilled from Gabriel's throat. When Critter looked even more shocked, Gabriel clapped him on his shoulder and said:

"Don't worry about it. He may not look it, but he has... his own tangled mess. Well then, I'll leave the rest to you."

Gabriel turned and headed back towards the STL Room, a contorted smile hanging off the corners of his mouth.

Meanwhile, Vassago Casals was grinning under his black hood while looking over the battlefield.

Standing atop the head of a god's statue erected at the entrance of the *sando* into the ruins, he was able to take in all of the bloody, gruesome combat between the American and Japanese players.

No, more precisely, it was a one-sided slaughter.

In the middle of the *sando* entrance, 2,000 Japanese formed a gigantic semicircle, continuously shaving down the charging crimson soldiers while losing almost none of their own. One reason for this was the immense difference in the two armies' equipment performance and level of teamwork, but the robust support system at their rear was practically decisive. Wounded players were immediately transported to the newly erected encampment inside the *sando* and treated with healing incantations, and then they would rush vigorously back to the front line.

The fact that they possessed such high morale within Underworld, which dealt pain equal to that of the real world, was truly worthy of admiration.

But in realistic terms, the fact that 2,000 players were willing to convert their own characters into this world to join the fight was already a great miracle in itself.

A situation like this, declared impossible even by Gabriel Miller —
Had been, however, almost perfectly predicted by Vassago Casals.

If connecting from the US was possible, then it was likely that Japan would also send reinforcements for the Human Empire Army. Moreover, Vassago had even predicted the fact that they would achieve this by converting their accounts.

Amongst these valiantly battling Japanese players, other than «The Flash» Asuna, there were several other familiar faces. This brought him heartfelt elation.

After all, the death game that he'd given up on ever being able to enjoy again had reappeared before him in a different form.

No, even if they died in this world, the players' real-world lives could not be stolen.

But in Underworld, there existed something absent from that floating castle, and within that floating castle existed something absent from Underworld.

In other words —

There was «pain».

But no «Crime Prevention Code».

Then, it would absolutely bring him great joy, possibly more thrilling than taking a life with his own hands.

“Kek, kekek, kekkekkek.”

Vassago couldn't stifle the muffled cackling that leaked from under his hood.

— I didn't make it.

Sinon silently gazed down at the aged knight's wound-riddled body, and the golden-haired female knight sobbing as she hugged him tightly.

The two great dragons beside the knight were hanging their heads, as though sharing in the lament.

In order to catch up to «Radiant Medium» Alice, on whom rested the fate of the world, to Dark God Vector, who had abducted her, and to Knight Commander Bercouli, who was in pursuit of those two, Sinon had flown frantically. She had fully utilized her free-flight technique, trained intensely in ALO, and flown south at the greatest speed allowed by the system, but the battle had long ended by the time she finally caught up to them.

No — What deserved praise was Bercouli's strength.

Because he had caught up to Vector, who had been thought unreachable, and had killed a Super Account, which had been thought invincible.

But there existed a massive injustice.

Knight Commander Bercouli's death indicated the total demise of his soul. Yet for Dark God Vector, who had died in the same way, his soul was not bound by this rule.

Sinon knew that she must convey to Alice, who had finally ceased her weeping and now hung her head as though she had collapsed, that danger had not yet passed, but she could not find the words to do so.

After several valuable minutes passed in silence, the first to speak was the knight, Alice.

Even with tear-stained cheeks, Alice's stunning beauty caused Sinon to hold her breath. Alice gazed into Sinon's eyes with her own, which shone cobalt blue like the surface of water. Her cherry-colored lips moved, emitting a voice that reminded one of silvery bells:

“Are you also... from the Real World?”

“Yeah...”

Sinon nodded, and spoke with difficulty.

“I’m Sinon. Asuna and Kirito’s friend. I came to save you and Bercouli-san from Dark God Vector... I’m sorry, I didn’t make it.”

Sinon knelt down atop the summit that retained marks of an intense battle, and deeply bowed her head towards Alice. Alice, however, softly shook her head.

“No... This was my foolishness. I paid no attention to what was behind me and was seized like an infant; it is all my fault. How can my insignificant life ever compare to that of Oji-sama... to that of the great Integrity Knight Commander?”

The deep self-hatred and loathing mixed into her voice left Sinon speechless. Holding back tears with all her might, Alice asked another question:

“How is the war?”

“... Asuna and the Human Empire Army are just barely managing to block the red army from the Real World.”

“Then I will return north as well.”

Alice stumbled as she stood up, heading towards one of the dragons, but Sinon called out to stop her.

“You can’t do that, Alice-san. You must continue south, to the «World End Altar». If you are able to touch the **console**... no, the crystal tablet atop the altar, you should be able to hear a call from the Real World.”

“Why? Is Emperor Vector not dead already?”

“... That... is not the case.”

Then, Sinon explained the situation to Alice. Even if a Real World person died in Underworld, they would not truly lose their life.

It was very likely that the enemy within Emperor Vector's body would gain a new body and attack again.

Alice's reacted with thunderous fury, as though all of the emotions she had been suppressing until now completely exploded all at once.

"Oji-sama... threw his own life away to slay that enemy, and the enemy didn't die?! He merely disappeared for a while, and soon he'll revive as though nothing happened... Is that what you mean?!"

Alice drew near Sinon, her golden armor clattering.

"How can... How can there be something as absurd as that?! Then... for *what* did Oji-sama... why did he have to sacrifice himself?! A faceoff that only puts the life of one on the line... that's just... that's just a... travesty..."

Tears sprang once more from Alice's azure eyes, yet Sinon could only gaze silently at her.

— I don't have the right to say anything.

I have died too many times to count in the battles of GGO and ALO. And, like Dark God Vector, I can keep on living if I die in this world. Someone like me has no —

But Sinon, staring hard into Alice's eyes, drew in a deep breath and said:

"Then... Alice-san, do you mean to say that Kirito's pain is fake too?"

The golden knight suddenly held her breath.

"Kirito is also from the Real World. Even if he dies in this world, his real life won't be gone. However, the injuries he suffered are real. The pain he felt, his broken soul, they're all real..."

Sinon paused for a bit, then continued as a slight smile appeared on her lips:

“I... love Kirito. Very much. So does Asuna. There are many more who love him as well. They’re worried about Kirito, all of them. They’re desperately praying ‘Get well soon’. Also, even if no one’s saying it, everyone’s thinking, ‘Why did Kirito have to push himself that far?’”

Sinon reached out, softly pressed down on Alice’s shoulders, and spoke firmly:

“Kirito got hurt in order to save you, Alice. That’s the sole reason he fought so hard. Do you even want to call his thoughts fake? No, not just Kirito, the Knight Commander too. In order to save you, he was beaten black and blue, even creating an opportunity at the cost of his life, just for you to escape the enemy’s clutches and to buy you valuable time.”

Sinon did not immediately hear a response.

Alice gazed silently at Bercouli’s body, lying on the ground.

Once again, great tears spilled her eyes — Then the golden knight shut them tightly and lifted her face as though she were desperately resisting something. She then asked in a hoarse voice:

“Sinon, if... if I go to the Real World through the «World End Altar», will I be able to come back? Will I be able to see my loved ones again...?”

Sinon did not possess the knowledge to clearly answer Alice’s pressing question. The only thing she could be sure of was that, if Alice fell into enemy hands, the entire Underworld would be obliterated and eventually completely disappear.

If they could protect both this world and Alice, they could definitely realize her wish. That was all Sinon could believe right now.

Therefore, she slowly nodded.

“Yeah. As long as you... and this Underworld, are safe.”

“I understand... I’ll head south then. I don’t know what awaits me at the «World End Altar»... But if this is the will of Oji-sama and Kirito...”

Alice gently spread her pure white skirt as she knelt to the ground. She reached out and warmly caressed Bercouli’s hair, then softly touched her lips to his forehead.

When she stood up again, an entirely different aura emanated from the knight’s entire body.

“Amayori, Takiguri. Please endure a bit more.”

After saying this to the two dragons, Alice turned to Sinon.

“What... will you do then, Sinon-san?”

“This time, it’s my turn to put my life on the line.”

Sinon smiled slightly and continued:

“Dark God Vector will probably revive here. I’ll try my best to defeat him... or at least buy you enough time.”

Alice bit her lip softly, then deeply bowed her head.

“I’ll leave it to you. I will absolutely not betray your intentions.”

After watching the two dragons fly into the southern sky, Sinon took into her hands the white longbow hanging from her shoulder.

The group that had attacked the «Ocean Turtle» was likely a private military contractor under the aid of an American government agency. One of the combatants had used Super Account 04, «Dark God Vector», to attack Alice.

In the real world, Sinon, a mere high school student, stood no chance against an opponent like that.

But in this place, as long as it was a one-on-one battle in a virtual world —

No matter who I face, I must win.

Swearing such a vow to herself like that, Sinon awaited the moment in which the enemy would dive in once more.

As he yanked back his right fist, its final bone let out a parched crack.

Fist Fighter Guild Chief Iskahn looked away from the spread-eagle body of a soldier whom he had struck dead center in the armor, glancing at his right hand in silence.

Gone were the iron knuckles capable of smashing all to smithereens. In their place was a deeply swollen sac of skin covering shattered bones and torn flesh, smeared with blood.

His left fist had transformed into the same state not long ago. His feet were covered in bloody bruises. He could no longer run, let alone kick.

“You fought like a true warrior, *Champion.*”

The hoarse voice of his aide, Dampe, caused Iskahn to look behind him.

After completely losing both arms, the hulking man sitting on the ground had kept up the fight solely by headbutting or body-slammings the enemy, as evidenced by the sword wounds on his face and body. His eyes, once shining with fighting spirit and wisdom, were now clouded over, making clear that Dampe’s Life was nearing exhaustion.

Iskahn raised his shattered fist in a gesture of respect towards the warrior’s soul, then replied:

“Yeah, if we die like this, we won’t be ashamed once we meet our ancestors in the afterlife.”

Dragging his feet, he shambled to his aide’s side, collapsing his hindquarters onto the ground.

After a lengthy, fierce battle, the crimson legion that once numbered over twenty thousand had now been reduced to around three thousand. But in exchange, there were only around three hundred surviving Fist Fighters. Moreover, every one of them had been maimed and mangled. They were even unable to assemble into a complete formation, merely curling up into a group and waiting to be slaughtered.

But the sole reason that the three thousand enemy soldiers tightly surrounding them hadn't launched their final assault was —

A knight and a dragon, still battling like demons right before Iskahn and Dampe's eyes.

Her physical body and mental spirit had already been expended far past their limitations.

Despite everything, as soon as the shadow of an enemy appeared within her murky vision, Integrity Knight Sheyta Synthesis Twelve still raised her right arm, which felt filled with lead, and swung the Black Lily Sword.

The heavy din of sliced air was heard.

The needle-thin blade sank into an enemy's shoulder plate. Its recoil, like innumerable iron needles digging into her flesh, traveled from her wrist to her elbow.

“Ha... AAHHHH!!”

The gravelly bellow of rage exploding from her throat was as divorced as could be from her nickname of «Silent». Her sword pierced through the bulky armor and tore a straight line, cleaving the enemy's body in half.

Once the soldier collapsed, cursing in an unintelligible tongue, Sheyta wrenched her weapon from his body, wheezing crudely.

The reason behind her exhaustion was due in part to the nearly unlimited number of enemies, and also due to the uncanny way the red soldiers felt to her on the other side of her sword.

Her Incarnation hardly had any effect. Though the enemy's weapons and armor simply weren't worth mentioning when compared against Sheyta's Divine Instrument, whenever she sliced them apart she would always feel a troubling resistance. Their attacks were the same. They would clearly rely only on brute-force, crude slashing movements, but that caused Sheyta difficulty in predicting their next maneuvers.

She was practically fighting phantoms. This army was like a mass of men that weren't here at all, but shadows being projected from afar instead.

Battling them wasn't fun at all. Sheyta found as she executed these shadows that she, who was born only to slash, could experience nothing more than an intense repugnance.

— Why?

— No matter whether my opponents are shadows or bodies, or even stone statues, I ought to be satisfied as long as they're solid enough. I'm merely a puppet who knows naught but to slash...

The Black Lily Sword was a Divine Instrument that contained the highest Priority within its ultra-thin blade. It was a tool created solely to sever, just as Sheyta herself was. If either of them failed to continue slashing, their very significance as an existence would be lost.

Highest Minister Administrator had transformed a black lily, which Sheyta had retrieved from an ancient battlefield in the Dark Realm, into a sword. When she then bestowed the sword unto Sheyta, she had spoken thusly:

— This sword is the manifestation of the curse engraved within your soul. A curse by the name of a murderous urge, created by fluctuations in the parameters of personality inheritance. Slash, slash, and keep slashing.

Only when you walk this bloodsoaked road to the very end will you discover the key to releasing this curse... Possibly.

At the time, Sheyta did not understand what the Highest Minister meant.

She merely obeyed her directive and slashed her way along that road, for years and years that seemed like an eternity. Then, at last, she encountered her destined opponent. It was someone harder and tougher than anyone or anything else she had ever encountered by way of her sword: that Fist Fighter.

She wished to battle him once more. Only through battle might she eventually understand something.

Driven by this thought, Sheyta parted from the Human Empire Army and remained at this battlefield. Yet she seemed unable to battle that red-haired warrior again.

She swallowed her last mouthful of water and tossed away the empty waterskin while looking behind her.

She saw, sitting atop a boulder far away, the Fist Fighter Chief, with his entire body covered in wounds. Inexplicably, sorrow drifted into his left eye as he stared fixedly back at her.

Sheyta suddenly felt her chest sting.

— What is this pain?

— I should be longing to kill this man. I want to taste that all-consuming battle again, then slice off those fists that are harder than diamonds. That should be all I desire. Yet, why is my heart... What is this stirring feeling...?

Crack.

A feeble noise suddenly came from her right hand.

Sheyta raised the Black Lily Sword, inspecting it silently. At the very center of the jet black blade that looked capable of absorbing all light ran a fissure finer than spider silk.

Ahh...

I see.

Sheyta inhaled deeply and smiled.

All of her questions dissolved in that moment. Sheyta finally understood the meaning behind Administrator's words, and what her curse had been.

A wave of rumbling came from the ground. She glanced behind her, only to see an enemy soldier charging at her, brandishing a crude warhammer.

Sheyta fluidly sidestepped the enemy's first strike and her right hand thrust the sword directly into the red armor's center.

Her final attack had been, true to her name, silent. As if merely gliding, the Black Lily Sword slid into the enemy's heart and deftly took his life — then, beginning in the middle, it silently dissolved into countless flower petals and dispersed in all directions.

Sheyta mournfully brought her lips to the scattering sword hilt and whispered:

“... Thank you, for all this time.”

In that instant, she seemed to detect a faint whiff of a flower's fragrance.

To her right, the dragon Yoiyobi, her longtime companion, crushed an enemy with a swing of its tail.

The dragon's gray scales had been dyed red by the blood gushing from its innumerable wounds, and its talons and fangs were shattered and incomplete. It had long depleted its flames, and its movements had slowed to a pace uncharacteristic of its original agility.

Sheyta made sure that the enemy's assault had paused, then walked to her beloved dragon's side and brushed her right hand over its neck.

“Thank you too, Yoiyobi. Tired too, right?... Get some rest.”

Then, Sheyta and her dragon supported each other as they started towards the small hill where the remaining survivors of the Fist Fighters’ Guild had gathered.

Staying seated on the ground, the Fist Fighter Chief raised his right hand, which looked so swollen that it could burst at any second, and greeted Sheyta.

“My bad... I let your precious sword break...”

Sheyta shook her head at his apology:

“It’s fine. For I finally see, I see why I’ve been cutting everything apart...”

She dropped weakly to her knees, raised both hands, and took the young warrior’s face softly in her ten fingers.

“It was to find what I do *not* wish to cut. I’ve been fighting to find what I wish to protect. That’s... you. So I don’t need the sword anymore.”

In an instant, the Fist Fighter’s left eye widened, and a transparent droplet of liquid welled up from within. On the contrary, this made Sheyta slightly surprised.

The youngster clenched his teeth tightly together and muttered, his throat choking up:

“Ah... fuck. I wanna start a family with you too. We’ll definitely have a strong kid. A kid stronger than my ancestors, stronger than me, who can become the strongest Fist Fighter for sure...”

“No. That child will become a knight.”

The two stared at each other for a moment, then both smiled. With a hulking man gazing at them warmly, Sheyta and Iskahn embraced, then sat down next to each other.

Three hundred Fist Fighters, one Integrity Knight, and a dragon waited in silence as the crimson soldiers gradually closed their encirclement.

“Seems like... game, set, and match. Don’t it?”

Klein said as he and Asuna were returning to the rear encampment. “Yeah,” she replied.

Both of their wounds were being treated by a mage amongst the Japanese players using the Sacred Arts she had just learned. She was unable to amplify the efficacy of the Arts with her imagination like an Underworld Ascetic could, but since her character level was high, her converted character had received very high Arts-practicing authority that resulted in a plentiful healing ability.

“Thank you so much for coming to help us.”

Asuna thanked the female mage, and thanked Klein, who was standing beside her, as well.

“Thank you too, Klein. I really don’t know how best to thank you...”

Watching Asuna become momentarily tongue-tied, Klein embarrassedly rubbed his nose.

“Hey, don’t treat me like a stranger. I owe you and that bastard Kirito so damn much that this is far from enough... He’s here too, right?”

Klein couldn’t help but lower his voice. Asuna nodded slightly.

“Yeah. Go meet him after the battle. If he listens to some of your dirty jokes, Klein, he might just be unable to resist the urge to roast you and wake up.”

“Hey, that’s kinda cruel.”

A smile stretched over Klein's perpetually bright face, but his eyes showed obvious concern. He, too, knew how severe the wounds in Kirito's soul were.

— Ah, but, really...

After everything was over and done with, after they had repelled the enemies from Underworld and the «Ocean Turtle», if Sinon, Leafa, Klein, and the rest of the original SAO Progressors, along with Sakuya, Alicia, and the people from ALO... then Alice, Tiese, Ronye, Sortiliena, and the others all surround Kirito, then there's no way he wouldn't wake up, was there?

She had to keep fighting, so that when that moment came, she could greet him with a smile.

As soon as her wounds had closed themselves, Asuna thanked the mage player once again and stood up.

Like Klein had said, the fate of the battle was now certain and undoubtable. The number of red American players had already decreased to near that of the Japanese players, and they were acting as though they'd completely lost their earlier fighting spirit, repeatedly launching suicide attacks.

But this battle within these ancient ruins was merely a skirmish.

The crucial point was «Radiant Medium» Alice, who had been abducted by Emperor Vector. While Knight Commander Bercouli and Sinon were hindering his progress, they had to catch up to Vector and take Alice back. Therefore, they must pick out the elite among the elite from the converted players, borrow the Human Empire Army's horses, and head south as fast they could.

If they were able to catch up, even if the enemy *was* using a Super Account, he couldn't be a match for an elite, handpicked force comprised of the top players from Japan. The overwhelming strength that they possessed enabled Asuna to declare that.

The valiant swordsmen had equipped blades, shields, and armor reflecting a polychromatic shine, resembling the Einherjar¹⁸ of Norse mythos...

Asuna wiped away her forming tears and looked away from the front line, towards the very rear.

The supply team's horse-drawn carriages had already been pulled near the ruins' *sando* entrance, and a temporary encampment had been erected there. Asuna felt that the sight of wounded Japanese being healed by the Underworld residents' Arts also held indescribable worth.

"... It's okay, everything will be fine... for sure."

Asuna's spoken thoughts earned a vigorous reply from Klein, beside her:

"Of course. All right, let's get a move on."

"Yeah."

Asuna nodded, then turned towards the front line again —

But her attention was grabbed by something that brushed past the edge of her vision, causing her to jerk violently to a halt.

— What is that. Something black... pitch black, like a stain...

Asuna's eyes wavered for a moment, then she finally saw it.

The gargantuan god statues lining the two sides of the *sando* in the ruins.

Atop the statue nearest them to the right side stood someone.

Because the statue was reflected against the light, they could only make out a swaying black silhouette, almost like it was about to melt into the crimson sky of the Dark Territory.

18 Fighters who fall in battle and are brought to Valhalla by Valkyries. More info here:<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Einherjar>

Was it an American who had deserted the battlefield? Or a scout from the Japanese?

Startled, Asuna looked closer, and it was only then that she noticed that the silhouette was swaying because the person was dressed in a half-length black cloak. The poncho's hood had been pulled all the way down, so the person's face was completely invisible.

But.

“Hey, Klein. That man...”

Klein was just about to take off for the front line, but Asuna tugged on his sleeve with her right hand and pointed with her left.

“That man standing there, do you feel like you've seen him before?”

“Huh...? Whoa, he's watching the show from up there. Damn, who *is* that?... He's wearing a cloak. I can't even see his face, let alone... remember...”

Klein's voice suddenly broke off.

Asuna turned to look, only to see that Klein's stubbled, scuffed face had been drained of all color, white as a sheet of paper.

“Hey, what's wrong? You know him? Who is that?”

“No... How. No way, that's... Am I looking... at a ghost...?”

“A-A ghost...? What do you mean?”

“Be... Because, that black cloak, no, that leather poncho... is LaughCof's...”

The instant she heard that name.

Asuna felt her brain freeze in the blink of an eye.

LaughCof. Officially known as «Laughing Coffin». From the middle to the end of the death game SAO, it had been the strongest red guild, spreading terror throughout the floating castle Aincrad.

A great number of infamous PKers, including «Red-Eyed XaXa» and «Johnny Black», were under its wing, and it had passed its venomous hand over innumerable normal players... Finally, after a fight to the death against a crusade team comprised of the Progressor players, they were successfully destroyed.

During that battle, nearly every single member of «Laughing Coffin» was either killed or sent to the Black Iron Palace, but one man escaped. It was the guild leader, the man who had mysteriously vanished when the guild's lair was ambushed, and also the man who had, either by his own hand or through indirect methods, killed the most players in SAO. His name — «PoH». That murderous demon had frequently clad himself in a black leather poncho and wielded a large dagger that resembled a meat cleaver. Yet two years later he had come to Underworld, now standing and looking down upon Asuna and Klein.

“..... No way.”

Asuna could only muster a hoarse whisper at this moment.

It's fake. I'm looking at a ghost.

Go. Go away.

But, as though it were mocking Asuna's wish, the black silhouette wavering like a mirage slowly raised its right hand. It then lightly waved its hand back and forth, as though teasing her.

What followed —

Could only be described as her worst nightmare.

A new silhouette materialized beside the man in the black poncho. Then another, and another.

Atop the roof of the immense palace ruins connecting to the back of the statue, a crimson legion silently appeared. To the left of the palace roof, tens of silhouettes floated into being.

— Stop. Just stop.

Asuna prayed desperately. She feared that she could not withstand greater despair than this.

And yet.

The new crimson legion continued to appear without ceasing, as though it were literally endless. One thousand, five thousand, ten thousand.

By the time their number broke thirty thousand, Asuna gave up on an estimate.

Impossible.

More than fifty thousand Americans had just been painfully ejected. It was impossible that so many troops could be located in such a short time, and they could not be Japanese. If a fabricated announcement had been disseminated within Japan, Klein and the others would have been the first to know.

These were phantoms. They were all incorporeal shadows created with Arts.

At some point, the Japanese players, who were about to completely demolish the American players on the front line, had stopped fighting and turned to look towards them. The spacious battlefield was filled with an eerie silence.

Garble, garble.

The chatter coming from the red army that had filled the palace rooftop to maximum occupancy was blown into Asuna's ears like a sinister wind.

Asuna was momentarily unable to decipher exactly what language the mixed, intertwined chattering noise was in. She desperately

focused her hearing, and finally managed to detect some words that were uttered more loudly than others.

— *Bigeobhan ilbon-in*.¹⁹

— *Uli nalaleul jikyeola*.²⁰

— *Ganchuu renmen*.²¹

Not English. Not Japanese either.

At that moment, Klein let out a completely unrecognizable moan.

“Ah... This is bad... This is really bad... That huge army isn’t from Japan or America...”

Asuna felt cold sweat run down her back as she listened to his next words:

“..... It’s from China and Korea.”

19 Korean. 비겁한 일본인, “Cowardly Japanese”.

20 Korean. 우리 나라를 지키라, “Defend our country”.

21 Chinese. Possibly 趕走他們, “Drive them away”, or 幹掉你們, “Kill you all”. Could also be incorrect Chinese.



3

Probably due to a nearby university just beginning summer break, a VR bar in Cheongjin-dong, Jongno District in Seoul was somewhat crowded.

Jo Wol-saeng finished the entrance procedures, then picked up a paper cup and filled it with soda at the drinks bar. He entered a single room, leaned back into a reclining seat, and heaved a long sigh.

He felt like he'd been sighing like that more and more recently. He knew the reason for it, too. He was already 20 this year, a sophomore in university, and next year he'd have to take a leave of absence for two years' military service.

He had until his 30th birthday to enlist, so he could push it back a few years if he wanted to, but students who didn't complete their service before graduation would be at a heavy disadvantage when searching for a job. Nearly all of his fellow classmates would be taking leaves of absence for military service after their sophomore year, and since his parents were urging him to do so as well, he really had nowhere to run.

Wol-saeng took a sip of his flat soda, and sighed again.

Everything unsettled him, from whether he, who was out of shape, could withstand the harsh training to whether he would be bullied amongst the troops. But what depressed him more was the fact that his current life would be stolen away for two whole years. But he wasn't thinking of his life in the real world; rather, the virtual world, which his friend had invited him to experience when he had first started university, and where he had been engrossed ever since — two whole years of being unable to enter that world was, to him, more distressing than any sort of training.

“..... If only I could have this in the army...”

He muttered as he picked up the FullDive interface hanging from a stand on the table — the «AmuSphere». Belonging to a popular VR bar, the device was tattered inside and out, but to Wol-saeng, this machine shined brighter than an angel’s halo.

Three years ago — in 2023, this device was released in Japan; beginning to stock shelves all around the world the next year, it triggered a huge boom in South Korea, where the online game industry was already flourishing. Once named «PC Bars», Internet cafes began renaming themselves into «VR Bars», fully equipped with AmuSpheres. Young people all became absorbed by VRMMORPGs, developed in either Japan or the US.

«Silla Empire», which Wol-saeng had been playing for a year and a half, was a Korean localization of the Japanese-developed «Asuka Empire». It wasn’t merely translated; even the towns, the avatars, and the content of the quests were all modified to resemble Korea’s ancient Silla dynasty. It has had the highest popularity in Korea since beginning service.

On the other hand, players had been furiously clamoring for a purely Korean-made work, so numerous companies began developing all-new VRMMOs using the completely cost-free software package «The Seed». However, the package itself was still Japanese-made, so without connecting to the Japan-based «The Seed Nexus», one couldn’t fully utilize its features. But Japan’s VRMMOs fundamentally obfuscated connections from Korea and China, which resulted in an inability to produce new games with quality comparable to that of «Silla Empire», causing Korean players to feel increasingly dissatisfied.

— I really want to play an all-Korean game before I leave for the army, but it looks like that ship has sailed...

Wol-saeng sighed yet again, casting the thought away from his mind. He lay heavily back onto the reclining chair and donned the AmuSphere.

“... Link Start!”

He recited the sole universally-recognized voice command and closed his eyes.

Passing through rays of variegated light, he input the VR bar's User ID and password, and arrived in a simplistic launching area. Then, he prepared to press the icon for «Silla Empire».

But just then, he noticed that a social networking app window, floating on the right side of the dark space, was currently scrolling at an insane speed. It looked as though the several hundred users he followed were all reposting a single piece of news at once.

“..... What's going on?”

Puzzled, Wol-saeng pushed the launching program to the left, pulling the social networking app window towards him. Then, he tapped onto the news, magnified it, and read the words aloud.

“Hmm... ‘Korean, American, and Chinese volunteers have jointly developed an all-new VRMMO, and its test server... has been invaded by Japanese players, who are attacking the test players’?! What the hell?!”

To be honest, Wol-saeng found something like this hard to believe. But attached at the very end of the news was a link that resembled that of a video; he clicked it somewhat dubiously.

A player window opened, and then —

“Vanguard, attack!!”

A bold, ferocious roar played at deafening volume. Wol-saeng, who had watched quite a few Japanese anime, instantaneously recognized the pronunciation as Japanese.

The video displayed Japanese-looking players dressed in silver equipment launching an attack against players dressed in red equipment, killing them one by one. A great volume of blood would splash out every time that glistening sword swung, while curses in English and screaming echoed all around.

Judging by the utterly lawless cruelty taking place, this was indeed happening inside a test server. Just like the news had said, Japanese players were one-sidedly attacking American players.

When the 30-second video had finished, Wol-saeng felt somewhat absentminded.

A «server attack» typically referred to the act of increasing its workload in order to shut it down, or the act of vandalizing a website, but diving into a VR world and attacking test players... this was his first time hearing about such a thing. If the video's content were to be trusted, then that meant something like that was currently taking place, but something felt off to him.

Yes... in the video, the Japanese players, who seemed to possess equipment far exceeding that of the American players in terms of properties and abilities, were one-sidedly exterminating them. However, he felt that the desperate side wasn't the Americans, the ones being attacked, but the Japanese, the ones attacking them. Attacking a server almost always ended up being somewhat of a practical joke, but... these people seemed to be waging a life-and-death war...

Suddenly, a shrill *ding-dong* chime sounded, causing Wol-saeng flick his head up.

It was his fellow guild member from «Silla», who had seen that he was online and had sent him a voice-chat request. He pressed the “Accept” button, a new window opened up, and an urgent voice called Wol-saeng's character name.

“Hey, Moonphase, did you see those tweets?!”

“Uh... yeah, I just did...”

“Then what're you waiting for? Start downloading the client!”

“C... Client?”

He hurriedly looked back at the social networking app window and glanced at the next tweet.

Written there — *In order to save the test players from the Japanese’s despicable attack, we are recruiting volunteers from the entire Korean VRMMO player base. If you wish to help us out, please download this client software and install it onto your AmuSpheres.*

“...This?... Hwan-ung, you think this is real?”

“Of course I do, didn’t you see the video?! As we speak our comrades are getting killed!!”

“I did see it... But, that video...”

Wol-saeng was about to convey his feeling of unease, but was immediately interrupted.

“Anyway, just hurry up and install it! Myung-hoon and Helix already dived, so we’ll be waiting for you over there!”

The voice-chat ended, and silence was restored to the launching room.

Although Wol-saeng still had many doubts, nearly all of his fellow guild members were participating, and he didn’t want to know how they would chastise him if he ignored them. He’d probably find more clues inside — besides, come to think of it, a disturbance like this could very well be a guerilla event for a new game. If he didn’t participate, he wouldn’t be able to reap the benefits.

Making his decision, Wol-saeng pressed the “Download” button and installed the client onto the AmuSphere, causing a new icon to appear among the launch programs. After pressing the crimson icon, onto which the words “HELP US” were inscribed in black, Wol-saeng felt his consciousness being sucked into a different world.

Even after transferring a large number of connections from China and Korea into Underworld, Critter remained somewhat dubious.

Although he had followed Vassago Casals' instructions, to disseminate an Underworld connection client within the two countries that neighbored Japan, he remained very suspicious throughout the process.

— 'Cause aren't the Japanese and Koreans pretty much the same?

There were a great number of Americans who didn't know that Japan and Korea weren't connected by land, and there were even those who thought that the two countries were both part of China. Although Critter wasn't quite so ignorant, he was also under the impression that the three nations were completely friendly to each other. As for their relations, weren't they a quarrelsome but loving bunch, just like the EU?

That was why Critter was completely unable to fathom Vassago's instructions.

Since he hadn't had the time to create a new, fake site, he had used social networking sites to spread the news. His first tweet had been: "The Japanese are attacking a server for a VRMMO jointly developed by American, Chinese, and Korean volunteers!"

The second tweet was an explanation of the first: "The Japanese players want to hog The Seed Nexus so bad that they hacked the server, and started creating powerful characters as they please. They are attacking the American, Chinese, and Korean test players. Since this server has not been equipped with pain absorption nor an ethics code, our comrades are being massacred while experiencing intense pain." Then he attached a video he had captured of a battle in Underworld.

The video itself was actually footage of Human Empire knights and soldiers beating back American players, but the Underworld residents spoke Japanese anyway. It seemed that the video had made a gigantic impact; the number of retweets was exponentially increasing, and the number of downloads had far, far exceeded that of the US.

Taken aback, Critter thought:

— Why do I feel that the Japanese online gamers don't really get along well with Chinese or Korean players?

— Oh, it's far worse. They simply detest each other.

Vassago Casals, who had returned to Underworld with his «Laughing Coffin» character, «PoH», began to grin under his black hood.

He raised his right hand high, and shouted loudly in Korean to the red players behind him.

“— Go teach those invaders a lesson!! Slash and stab and kill, make it as painful as you can so that they won't even think of harming our comrades again!!”

As soon as the great army of no less than 50,000 heard these two sentences, it let loose a ferocious bellow. To them, the American “testers” being killed by the Japanese players had already become their fellow countrymen.

Trying his best not to laugh, Vassago swung his right hand down.

With a thunderous rumbling like an avalanche, the crimson legion threw itself towards the Japanese below them.

— Come on, kill each other. Dance that ugly, miserable, comical dance.

“... He's here.”

Sinon murmured to herself.

She was looking at a jet-black dotted line falling from the crimson sky, like a thread of silk.

Right now, she wanted very much to charge «Annihilate Ray» to its maximum and blow the enemy away as soon as he materialized. That way he would be unable to defend or evade.

But right now she needed to buy time. If the enemy were capable of producing unlimited high-level accounts, then instantly destroying him would be pointless.

First, she needed to drag the enemy into a war of attrition, then observe his reaction. If her opponent showed signs of wanting to protect his own life, she could deduce that he was using a valuable account that could only be used once. Then, she would attack at full force, rendering him unable to login with the same account again.

But, in the event that the account could be mass-produced, she couldn't kill him. She had to try her best to drag out the battle and buy enough time for Alice to head towards the «World End Altar».

So Sinon did not pull back her bowstring, and instead merely remained hovering in the air, waiting for the enemy to materialize.

The place where the black code landed was where, minutes ago, Knight Commander Bercouli's body had lay.

The Knight Commander's body had been placed onto the other dragon's saddle by Integrity Knight Alice; she seemed to want to deliver him to a female Integrity Knight waiting in the Human Empire.

Shino had asked: "Your rival in love?" Alice had smiled slightly and replied: "You are my rival in love."

— Good grief.

At this, Sinon could no longer log out easily. She had to stay in this world, at least until the moment when Kirito awoke.

Sinon steeled her determination once again, and stared towards the mountain of rock.

The black line touched the middle of the level summit and transformed into a pile of viscous fluid.

Its color was as dark as a bottomless pit leading straight to hell.

When the final line was absorbed into the puddle as well —

Bloop.

A tiny ripple poked out of the surface. Then a right hand extended outwards silently. As she watched the sight of those five long, thin fingers waving in the air, Sinon could not help but feel a cold shudder running down her back.

She did her best to resist the urge to immediately burn them to ash, waiting for the enemy to materialize.

Following the right hand, a left hand also appeared and seized the edge of the puddle.

Then a man's head appeared as well, with the slippery, moist sound of liquid.

— What slightly surprised Sinon was the fact that this character didn't possess any distinguishing facial features; at least, he wasn't handsome by any means. His short golden hair clung tightly to his head, his nose and lips were thin, and he looked somewhat Caucasian, but distinctly unremarkable.

Was this really the all-new body of the man who had controlled the Dark God Vector Super Account?... Sinon pondered, moderately surprised.

The man raised his upper body out of the puddle, swiveling his blue, marble-like eyeballs, finally sighting Sinon in the sky above him.

For an instant, Sinon felt strange.

She felt as though she had seen those eyes somewhere. They were a pair of eyes that seemed to reflect everything, yet seemed to consume everything at the same time; a pair of eyes without any emotion whatsoever.

Those eyes that sighted Sinon widened slightly. Then, a sliver of a contorted smile was visible on his lips.

Yes. I've seen them. I've seen those eyes... and that face. And it wasn't too long ago, somewhere —

As Sinon was staring blankly at him, *splat*, with a drawn-out, viscous splashing noise, the man leapt out of the puddle all at once.

His getup was a little peculiar as well. He seemed to have automatically converted his equipment over; he was not dressed in ornate metallic armor. His deep-gray uniform's top and bottom complemented each other and were secured with a belt, while his feet were wrapped in bound long boots, almost exactly like a combat uniform worn by soldiers in the real world. His weapons were a longsword at his left waist, and a crossbow at his right.

When the man had completely exited it, the black puddle did not disappear. Shockingly, it separated from the ground, wriggling like an animal. No, it *was* an animal. The part where it peeled off extended outwards, transforming into a set of long, thin wings that beat steadily.

Its bizarre appearance was not that of a bird, nor was it of a dragon. At the front of its flat, basin-like body were four beady eyes. To its left and right were bat-like wings, and trailing behind it was a long, serpent-like tail.

When the combat uniformed man leapt onto it, the mysterious winged creature beat its wings and left the ground, ascending to a height equal to Sinon's.

The creature hovered at 30 meters' distance from Sinon, and the man on top revealed a hint of a smile again.

For some reason, he raised his unarmed hands and extended them directly in front of himself. Sinon became alert, thinking that he was about to chant some sort of incantation. But nothing happened. The man merely encircled his arms together, as though around Sinon's neck, then made a sudden motion as though he were crushing his arms together.

In that instant, Sinon finally remembered. A parched voice escaped from her mouth.

“..... Subtilizer.....”

That was it. This man was the American player who had strangled her to death from behind during the finals of the Gun Gale Online PvP tournament — the «Fourth Bullet of Bullets», held two weeks ago.

But why would he be here?

Forgetting even the longbow she held in her hands, Sinon focused solely on her surprise, her eyes widening.

The middle of the pyramidal, self-sustaining artificial island Ocean Turtle was marked by an ultra-strong main shaft constructed from high-strength titanium alloy.

At the bottom of the hundred-meter tall cylindrical main shaft was the main machine, protected by a multilayered isolation wall — the pressurized water reactor. Above it was the occupied main control room, and STL Room 1.

Underworld, or rather, the focus of Project Alicization — the Light Cube Cluster, was directly above the main control room. The areas up to this point belonged to the lower shaft.

Above the Light Cube Cluster was a perfectly level, pressure-resistant partition that divided the main shaft into the upper and lower shafts. The area above the wall was deemed the upper shaft: first was a large number of cooling devices, and then came the sub control room where the Rath employees had retreated to, along with STL Room 2, which Kirigaya Kazuto and Yuuki Asuna were currently using.

On July 7, at 9:00 am, a humanoid robot began moving on its own along the cooling devices, down the stairs on the bow side of the ship's upper shaft. It was the Rath-developed prototype machine «Ichiemom». As though they were watching it totter along, three armed JSDF members followed it.

— I'm so glad that I'm not claustrophobic, acrophobic, or nyctophobic.

Higa Takeru encouraged himself silently, but at the same time, he felt that having a phobia shouldn't matter after all.

Because this duct, lit only by orange emergency lights, extended straight down for a full 40 meters. If his sweat-soaked hands slipped once, or his trembling feet missed a single step, he would plunge straight down onto the pressure-resistant partition that plugged this duct, and end up experiencing quite an unpleasant sensation.

If he'd known this already, he would have let the researcher, Yanai, go first. At least that way he wouldn't need to keep staring down into the vertical well.

— By the way, he said he was gonna be my shield, but went “After you” when it was the real deal. What the heck?

Higa huffed somewhat indignantly and glanced a few meters above his head, where Yanai was grabbing onto the ladder.

However, upon seeing his already white face become even paler as he clung to the ladder for dear life, Higa didn't have anything more to say. Yanai's willingness to accept such a dangerous mission should already be praised, and the automatic handgun stuffed into the holster on his waist was more or less a relief.

When he turned back downwards, the earpiece in his left ear transmitted a steady voice.

“How is it, Higa-kun? Everything okay?”

The voice belonged to Koujiro Rinko, who was peeking into the access hole above their heads.

Higa replied hoarsely into the microphone beside his mouth.

“Ah... yeah, kind of. About five more minutes and we should be able to reach the pressure-resistant partition.”

“Got it. When you guys are ready, I'll send the assault command to Ichiemom team. You guys should open the partition only after the enemy starts attacking Ichiemom when they spot it.”

“**Roger**. Wow, this really feels like *Mission Impossible*.”

“Oh pleeease, make this mission *Possible*. I can’t help but feel that how the situation changes in Underworld is all on Kirito-kun’s recovery... Sorry, Yanai-san, please watch over this kid.”

The last bit was directed towards Yanai. Once Higa heard Yanai whimper “**Roger**” in reply, he couldn’t help but chuckle bitterly.

— “This kid”, huh?

He shook his head and tightly gripped the iron ladder rung with his palms, which had somehow become sweaty.

Looking directly downwards, he found that the partition had, at some point, come into view.

Critter had been dully watching the gigantic, writhing cloud on his monitor, condensed from the Chinese and Korean players who had dived in, but a sudden alarm made him jump up.

“The heck...?!”

He scanned the console in a panic, and discovered that a red alarm was flashing on a side monitor to the right.

“Whoa... The pressure-resistant partition was unlocked! S- Someone go take a look at the duct!!”

Before he even finished shouting, the tall assault team member Hans grabbed his assault rifle and bolted outside.

“Fuck, there goes my good hand!”

Brigg muttered while tossing his full suit of playing cards onto the ground, then ran outside after Hans.

Had Rath, who were at a crushing disadvantage in terms of equipment and firepower, thrown the helve after the hatchet and begun a banzai charge? Or were they plotting something else...?

Critter left the console and walked towards the control room door. The power to the elevators had been cut, so he would have to use the stairs if anything were to happen. Hans and Brigg seemed to have come to the same conclusion; the loud stamping noises of their feet on metallic stairs traveled from above.

But the footsteps suddenly halted, replaced by coarse shouts.

“Woah!!”

“Are you kidding?!”

Then came a burst of rifle fire.

Higa could already feel a clear *ratatatat* coming from outside the duct; gunfire from an automatic rifle.

At that moment, on the other side of the main shaft, poor Ichiemom’s muscle membranes and titanium skeleton had probably been riddled with innumerable holes. However, his battery and control system were installed on his back, so even if he were hit, he should still be able to move for a bit.

“All right! Open the hatch on the pressure-resistant partition now!”

As Professor Koujiro’s voice traveled into his earpiece, Higa threw his entire weight into twisting the valve of the pressure-resistant hatch dividing the duct. With a *pssh*, the hydraulic damper began to move, and the heavy metal cover lifted upwards.

The other side of the partition, located in the duct of the lower shaft, was also illuminated by dark orange emergency lights. The commotion coming from the battle raging in the stairwell on the other side of the main shaft suddenly became much clearer.

Higa swallowed, readjusted his backpack that contained his mini portable laptop, and passed through the access panel that was narrower than the duct itself. Then, he stepped onto another ladder, and continued down.

— In this sort of moment, people in action movies would be yelling dramatically.

“Go go go!!”

He muttered, and Rinko’s confused voice came through his earphone.

“Um, what did you say?”

“N-Nothing. ...About ten meters to the cable maintenance port... Ah, I see it, there it is!”

The numerous thick fiber optic cables spread along the wall of the cable duct all terminated at a black fuse box. If he plugged in his laptop into the maintenance port inside, he could theoretically control Units #3 and #4 inside STL Room 2, and also Units #5 and #6 far away in the Roppongi branch, directly.

— Just wait, Kirigaya-kun. I’ll have you awake in no time!

Higa forgot his fear, and as he frantically descended the ladder, a voice came through his earphone again.

“Then I’ll go back to the sub control room to monitor Kirito-kun’s Fluctlight. Good luck, Higa-kun!!”

Being praised by Professor Koujiro — whom he once called Koujiro-senpai, in a way that seemed to transport him back their college days, made Higa look upwards in spite of himself.

But all he saw was Yanai, who was climbing down the ladder with a face full of desperation.

Higa sighed helplessly in his heart, then looked again towards the fuse box, which was drawing ever closer.

Having appeared atop the mountain still scarred by an intense battle, the man in combat uniform looked southwards and murmured in a monotonous voice:

“... Alice got away? No matter, I can catch up to her quickly...”

Then he looked to Sinon again, and smiled slightly.

“... As I remember, we should’ve fought before in a Gun Gale Online tournament. Your name is... «Sinon»? Who could have imagined that we’d meet again in such a place?”

Listening to the inhuman voice of that man, who was Dark God Vector and Subtilizer at the same time, Sinon desperately tried to stop her hands from shaking. But her fingers had stiffened, her palms were drenched in sweat, and she felt that if she made any sudden moves, even the Bow of Solus would drop to the ground.

Standing on the back of the disc-shaped, winged creature, Subtilizer smiled a temperature-less smile, and continued in fluent Japanese.

“What exactly is going on? I heard that there were no more STL units in Japan... Could you be an associate of Rath? Or rather, a mercenary who would even come to a place like this?”

With difficulty, Sinon urged her dry lips to move and demanded hoarsely:

“Subtilizer... I want to ask you, why are *you* here?”

“Because it is inevitable, of course.”

Subtilizer spread his arms wrapped in gray combat garb, seemingly unable to suppress the glee within him, and continued:

“This is fate. The power of the soul that has drawn you and me together.”

His tone was slowly changing. His very voice seemed to grow icier and icier.

“Yes... I want you. That is why we are meeting again. This will explain a great deal to me. Whether my target, whose soul I absorb through the STL, is limited to Artificial Fluctlights, or includes humans from the real world... I will also fully understand the sweetness of your soul, which I was unable to taste during that GGO tournament.”

As Sinon listened to these bizarre words, the words that this man had spoken to her during the fourth BoB finals echoed in her mind.

— *Your soul will be so sweet.*

— Your soul will be so sweet.²²

Her body grew increasingly cold, she became taut, and even her breathing turned erratic.

“Come... to me, Sinon. Give your everything to me.”

An icy glow gleamed within Subtilizer’s blue eyes.

Zzt. The world distorted.

Air, sound, and even light were all being twisted and absorbed into Subtilizer’s eyes.

“Wha..... “

What was this?

Even thoughts like that seemed to be dragged away by a powerful magnetism.

— No. I have to resist. I have to fight it.

A corner of her spirit screamed, but for some reason it felt incomparably weak.

Finally, even Sinon’s blue-armored body was sucked towards Subtilizer’s open arms.

The powerless fingers of Sinon’s left hand desperately pulled back the bowstring, wavering silently in midair.

Seconds later, through her muffled, cloudy consciousness, Sinon felt her own body become wrapped in Subtilizer’s darkness.

The man’s left hand found her back, his right hand grazed across her face and brushed her hair away from her ear.

²² Sinon mentally translates this to Japanese

Subtilizer's thin, thin lips approached her exposed left ear, and that voice like icy black water drilled directly into her brain.

“Sinon, have you ever thought of the meaning behind the name «Subtilizer»?”

“.....?”

Utterly powerless, Sinon shook her head from left to right.

“It very much resembles a name, «Satori», that an American would be fond of and change to their liking, doesn't it? However, this is genuine English. It is spelled «**Subtilizer**». It refers to «one who refines», «one who carves», «one who selects»... and «one who steals».”

Light even more intense than before suddenly exploded from Subtilizer's eyes, now directly in front of Sinon's face.

“I will steal you. I will steal your soul...”

The place where Jo Wol-saeng landed was atop a rock covered with cracks and moss.

This wasn't a natural rock, but a man-made object. He appeared to be on the rooftop of a gigantic temple-like structure. His surroundings were choked with Korean players who had just logged in, and they seemed to number in the thousands... probably the tens of thousands.

Since there hadn't been a character selection program, everyone's equipment was different, be it in the details or the weapons, but they were all colored a uniform crimson. Wol-saeng glanced at his own hands for a bit, which were now wrapped in gauntlets of the same color, then looked forward.

Although he couldn't really discern his location since he was in the midst of a crowd, he could still see that a battle was raging on the plains in front of the temple.

But the Korean players around him didn't move either, probably because the outcome of the battle was already decided. The group of people dressed in multicolored getups, who looked to be the Japanese players, seemed to have already completely annihilated the legion clad in the same red as Wol-saeng and the others. They had already reorganized their troops, but they didn't seem to be celebrating in any way.

He knew it. Something was off. But he was unable to immediately articulate what.

At the very least, it didn't look like a promotion event for a new game, like he had imagined before diving in. This area, with only a red sky and black ground, looked much too simplistic, and the complete absence of any user guidelines or warnings before he had dived in didn't indicate the presence of an official event at all.

But even so, he was still unable to completely believe what he had read in the tweet. Besides, what meaning was there in invading a test server and killing test players? Even if they could wreak temporary suffering and humiliation upon them, they wouldn't be able to stop, or even delay development of the game.

Nearly half the Koreans around Wol-saeng also looked bewildered about the situation. Voices saying "What do we do?" "Are those guys really Japanese?" were heard.

— But, just then.

"Comrades!"

A shout in Korean came from ahead, to the right.

Wol-saeng strained his back to see, but because he was blocked by too many players, he couldn't see what the speaker looked like. However, he did catch a glimpse of a red logo, **[Leader]**, hovering above someone in the crowd. The same voice rang out from the direction of that logo.

“Thank you very much for answering our call! — Regrettably, the closed beta testers who were testing inside this server have already all been killed by the Japanese aggressors, no, the Japanese invaders! But those guys are still preparing to head for other test points and repeat their crimes!”

In the next moment —

Wol-saeng felt palpable anger emanating from this group of several thousands.

What incensed the Korean players had probably been the word “invaders”.²³ The confusion and suspicion that had been plaguing quite a few players immediately evaporated, replaced with a boiling hostility that covered the entire area.

“... *BIGEOBHAN ILLBONIN!*”

Someone bellowed, then bits and pieces of enraged yelling were heard. After the hubbub subsided, that «Leader» declared again in a carrying voice:

“Those Japanese hacked our server, and created high-level equipment for themselves to their hearts’ content! And we, who have had our administrator privileges stolen, can only give you default equipment, comrades! However, your righteous and patriotic fervor will not lose to any sword or armor!”

At this, an even louder roar of assent exploded from the crowd.

“*ULI NALALEUL JIKYEOLA!*”

Then, from very far away to the right, a wave of furious roars that were not in Korean came thundering over.

“*GANCHUU RANMEN!*”

Wol-saeng couldn’t understand what it meant, but he recognized it as Chinese. It seemed that the number of Chinese players here as well was no less than that of the Korean players.

23 Invaders: 침략 (chimlyag). Spoken in Korean by the Leader. Likely a callback to 1910, when the Empire of Japan annexed the Korean peninsula under the Joseon Kingdom.

Even as the atmosphere intensified profoundly, Wol-saeng *still* felt very uneasy. But at the same time, he knew that no one could stop this fervor now.

Behind the human wall, the «Leader» raised his black gloved right hand high in the air.

“——— **Go!!**”

Receiving this command understood by both Koreans and Chinese, the red legion, burning with a blazing conflagration of rage, advanced forward like a gargantuan creature, trembling violently as it went.

“Hu... Human Empire Army! Supply team!
Advance at full speed—!”

Asuna shouted herself hoarse before the red army choking the palace rooftops left and right made their move.

The Human Empire Defense Army’s supply team currently had an encampment set up near the *sando* entrance of the ancient ruins. The temple stretched out on both sides of the *sando*. In other words, several tens of thousands of enemies were currently entrenched directly above the supply team.

“Dump your goods and run *now*, carriages and Arts Users!!”

Even though she gave that order, it was already too late. The new connector stepping into the battle, likely Chinese and Korean, had already crossed over the giant god statues’ heads and leapt directly into the center of the supply team.

Asuna clenched her teeth and raised the rapier in her right hand high.

Concentrating her imagination onto the sword’s tip, she forcefully swung it downwards. Divine, variegated light shot straight out and struck squarely onto the giant god statues lining both sides of the *sando*.

Even as excruciating pain shot through her head, almost enough to blow her consciousness flying, she concentrated her imagination. The stone statues shook the ground as they stood up, opening their rectangular mouths, waving their short hands, and began attacking the players choking the temple rooftops.

The red soldiers at the very front hurriedly retreated and collided with their friendly forces squeezing in from behind. They fell down like dominoes. Seizing the opportunity, eight carriages, the two-hundred member Ascetic team, and the supply team all began to move.

Asuna could only control the statues for around 30 seconds before the pain became too much for her to endure, and she dropped to her knees. But the rear of the Human Empire Army had managed to escape disaster and successfully retreated to the wide wilderness north of the ancient ruins. Around 500 Guardians and 2,000 Japanese players advanced forward and adopted a formation that defensively flanked their rear troops from both sides, preparing to engage.

But since this area had hardly any suitable terrain, their only option was to mount a despair-inducing omnidirectional defense against several tens of thousands of enemies. They had been able to painstakingly drive back the American players, who far outnumbered them, solely because they had used the walls of the palace ruins to restrict the front line to one place, and complemented it with a generous healing rotation. But now that they were surrounded by nearly forty to fifty thousand Chinese and Korean players, it was only a matter of time before the front line collapsed.

“Urgh.....”

Squeezing out the last of her little remaining strength, Asuna pushed herself up and raised her rapier again.

— Please, last one... Let me build a strong wall that can protect everyone.

She prayed as she attempted to concentrate her imagination.

But.

Accompanied by an extraordinary impact surging through her body like an electric current, Asuna was thrown to the ground again. Something welled up in her throat and she spit it out, only to realize that it was a small amount of blood.

“Don’t push yourself too hard, Asuna! Let us have some of the spotlight as well!”

Klein shouted at her heartily.

“Yeah, leave it to us now.”

Agil responded in a deep voice.

As the two men standing in front of Asuna raised their katana and two-handed battleaxe —

The crimson legion that had recovered from the chaos began leaping down from the palace rooftops again. Since they were 20 meters above ground, a great many of them did not land safely and suffered injured limbs, with some not even being able to move, but the soldiers coming after them used the injured as human trampolines and landed safely on the ground.

“DOLGYEO — G!!”

“TU — JI!!”

Asuna had never learned either Korean or Chinese, but instinct told her that those two screams meant *assault*.

The crimson legion fanned out left and right, approaching ever closer, but the first ones to engage them were Klein and Agil.

“Zeiryaaaaaaaaahhhh!!”

“U.... raaaaaaaaahhhh!!”

Accompanied by simultaneous bellows that shook the air, wide range Sword Skills launched by the katana and battleaxe erupted.

White and blue rays of light shone and enveloped each other as the blood of several tens of enemies flew into the air.

On both sides of the two men, the ALO Lords, their aides, and the heroes of the Sleeping Knights began to fight with all their might.

The continuous striking of metal pierced the battlefield like machinegun fire. A single explosion roared clearly and deeply. Swords, axes, and spears howled as each polychromatic Sword Skill exploded from them, cutting down the red soldiers without end.

The compressed air around them screeched and the army's assault halted for an instant.

But it was only —

Effort as meaningless as attempting to stop with his bare hands a muddy surge of water that had broken its banks and was rushing towards him.

Lying on the ground, Asuna seemed to hear faint, shrill, mocking laughter coming from above the battlefield engulfed with screams of pain and roars of rage.

She swiveled her cloudy eyes, and caught sight of a man in a black poncho standing on the rooftop of the palace ruins, twisting his body as though he were dancing.

Higa listened to the sporadic gunfire coming from the other side of the main shaft while climbing down the ladder as quickly as he could.

Finally, he arrived in front the fuse box that dully reflected the orange lamps, and pried open the cover with stiff fingertips.

Inside was a wiring board stuffed full of a web of fiber optic wires, momentarily weakening him a bit, but Higa pulled back wire after wire, and finally located the maintenance port.

The moment had finally arrived.

He sucked in a deep breath to calm his thoughts, then retrieved a cable and the laptop from his backpack. He plugged one end of the cable into the maintenance port, the other end into the computer, and launched the STL control program with a mood that was almost like prayer.

A completely black window was opened, and a cursor at its top left began blinking tantalizingly. Finally, the cursor moved right and displayed a status message.

STL #3, Connecting..... OK.

STL #4, Connecting..... OK.

The first to return normal signals were the two units inside STL Room 2, bordering the sub control room.

Then, connections by way of satellite link from the Ocean Turtle to STL #5 and #6 at the Roppongi branch were also confirmed.

“... Yes!”

Higa murmured. Now he should be able to operate on the four STL units that Kirigaya Kazuto and the three girls were using.

Regrettably, it was only possible to block the line connecting STL Room Two and the satellite antenna from the main control room, so he couldn't do anything to the two units inside STL Room 1. If that were possible, he would be able to eject the attackers diving in STL #1 and #2 from Underworld.

Suspending these turbulent thoughts, Higa placed his right hand onto the tiny keyboard and prepared to begin operating at once.

— Let's do this!

Just as he prepared himself, a shrill yell came from above his head.

“... F... Freeze!”

It was Yanai's voice. What on earth was he saying in this sort of situation?

Higa looked up, annoyed, but found himself staring straight down the barrel of a gun, gleaming blue-black, three meters away from his face. Behind the barrel, Yanai, staring at him with bloodshot, beady eyes, shouted again:

“Take your hand away from the computer! Or I’ll shoot!”

“..... Huh?”

He only blanked for half a second.

Higa instantly grasped the situation and began to speculate why Yanai was doing this.

— It’s him!

This Yanai man was the spy who had been leaking Project Alicization intelligence to the Americans.

But unfortunately, Higa was unable to come up with any countermeasures. The only thing he did manage to do was articulate a completely meaningless question from his parched mouth:

“... Yanai-san. Why?”

A layer of cold sweat appeared on the technician’s white forehead. His lips trembled for a bit, and then he mustered a weak voice.

“First... First of all, you’re barking up the wrong tree. Don’t think of me as a traitor.”

— What do you mean, “think”? You *are* a traitor!

As if he had heard Higa’s silent scream, Yanai continued:

“I’m just carrying out my original plan. I inherited my boss’s final mission... and that’s why I infiltrated Rath.”

“Your... Your boss’s final mission? Who are you talking about?....”

Higa asked blankly. Yanai brushed away a lock of hair that landed on his forehead with his left hand, and replied with a grin that looked ever-so-slightly insane:

“Someone you’re familiar with... Sugou-san.”

“Wh...”

— Whaaaat?!

The impact hitting Higa was greater than that when he had first seen the gun, and his eyes went wide.

Sugou Nobuyuki. A man who had worked in Touto Technical University’s Shigemura Laboratory during the same period as Higa, Koujiro Rinko, and Kayaba Akihiko. He had always been very blatantly competitive with Kayaba, the super-genius, but was ultimately unable to surpass him. Whether it was because of that or not, in the end, he went so far as to commit the crime of kidnapping hundreds of SAO players for illegal human experimentation.

Due to the actions of Kirigaya Kazuto, Sugou’s plot was brought to light. After being detained, he appealed the judgment by the first instance of law, and was still disputing it in the Tokyo Supreme Court.

“... He’s still not dead yet.”

Higa couldn’t help but mutter under his breath, and Yanai laughed shrilly.

“What’s the difference? He’ll be locked up for at least ten years, and for a researcher that’s equivalent to death. I was almost caught too, but I pushed all the blame to the other guy and eventually managed to slip through the long arm of the law.”

“Then you... were associated with Sugou’s human experiments?”

“Associated? I was the one actually collecting the data. That was a fun bit of research... Like the virtual tentacle play and stuff...”

— Why didn’t Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka properly check the background of a criminal like this?!

Higa thought, his breathing rapid, but then he sighed because he couldn’t really blame Kikuoka in the first place.

The reason that the front company Rath was created was to clear a new made-in-Japan line on top of the foundation of defense technologies nearly dominated entirely by the US. In other words, it would have threatened the interests of *zaibatsu*²⁴ manufacturers and defense contractors.

Therefore, it was extremely difficult to find and hire technicians. Almost no one was willing to job-hop from a large company to this place, and it was no wonder that they would be very welcoming to Yanai, who had once worked for a FullDive technology research company as large as RECT.

Yanai seemed to be temporarily lost in reminiscence in front of Higa, but he very quickly pulled himself together and raised the gun again. The safety switch on the left side of the firearm had already been released. In the beginning, Kikuoka had thoughtfully put all technical workers through firearms training, but now, ironically, he'd ended up shooting himself in the foot.

Luckily, Yanai seemed to still have a lot on his mind to pour out; he continued shrilly:

“... Anyway, my boss's life is over, but his connections are still up and running. So If I don't properly use them, then I'll be wasting his hard work.”

“Connections... Where?”

Higa demanded automatically. Yanai seemed to hesitate for a moment, but he eventually grinned and answered:

“The US National Security Agency.”

“Wha... What did you say?!”

Higa put on a look of shock, but inside, this had been expected.

²⁴ Japanese industrial and financial business conglomerate. More info:<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaibatsu>

Their activities, including spying and telecommunications surveillance conducted in Japan by the US National Security Agency, were already open secrets, so they were naturally uninterested in Japan's world leadership with regards to FullDive technology. Ever since they had gotten intel on Project Alicization from Yanai, Sugou's subordinate, the NSA, even went to the lengths of borrowing a Navy submarine to come and steal «A.L.I.C.E.».

Yanai still continued flaunting his own achievements without a shred of guilt:

“... If those Americans under us can successfully retrieve Alice, I'll be paid a handsome amount and a position in America can be secured for me. That's the American success story that Sugou-san was dreaming of.”

— The price being that the entire world will have to tremble under the shadow of the high-performance autonomous weapons that the US military will develop.

Higa desperately resisted the urge to retort like that. Right now he had to try his best to drag this out, to seize his only opportunity left.

— Realize what's happening, Rinko-san!

Just as Higa beseeched inwardly, the laptop in his left hand almost slipped off, and he hurriedly grabbed hold of it.

“F-Freeze!!”

In the next instant, Yanai's distorted shout entered Higa's ears as he pointed the gun barrel towards the wall of the duct and pulled the trigger. A yellow streak of light flashed by and the expanding air sharply numbed his ears.

Sparks exploded from the metal wall of the duct —

A fierce impact struck Higa's right shoulder.

“Huh?”

Higa uttered a surprised noise.

Ocean Turtle

メインシャフト

Main shaft

Stern

Higa Takeru

Yanai

Upper Shaft
Sub Control Room

Cable Duct

Koujiro Rinko

Kikuoka Seijirou



Lower Shaft
Main Control Room

Gabriel Miller



Vassago Casals



Critter

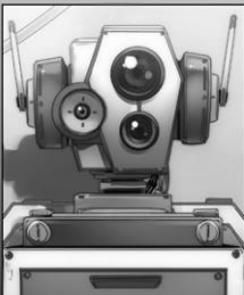


Hans

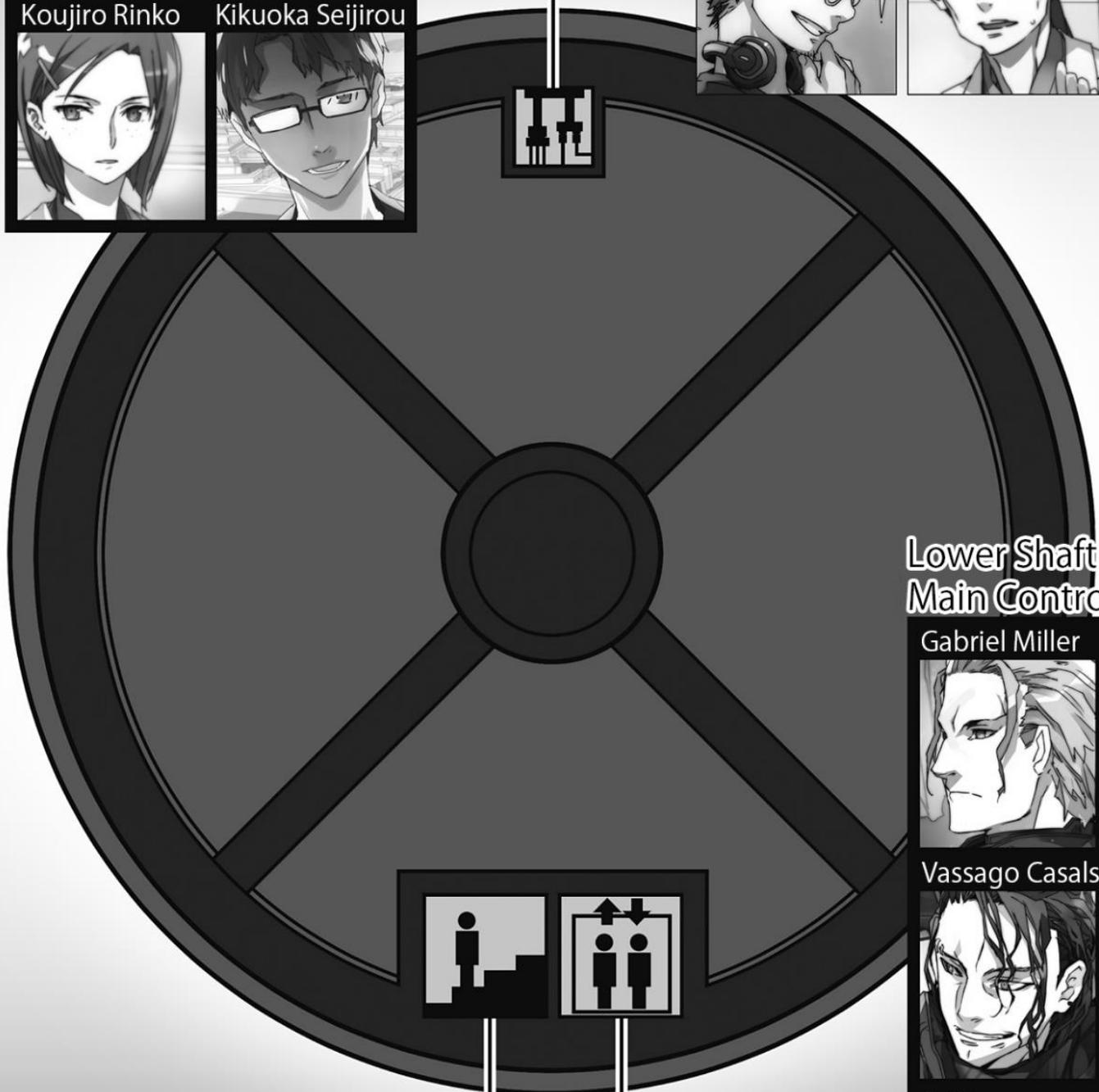


Elevator

Ichimom



Bow



Sinon stared dumbly into those blue eyes, which were almost close enough to touch, with pitch-black whirlpools swirling inside like black holes.

It was as if it were early morning and she was waking from a dream.

She had to do something. But it all felt like a dream, while in reality she was doing nothing. Merely a cycle of repeating illusions.

Fingers cold as ice caressed her neck. Intense revulsion and terror arose from within her heart, but even those were immediately sucked from her consciousness and replaced with a gray void.

— No.

This was no longer an imaginary event taking place in a virtual space.

This realization flashed at the edge of her consciousness like a flashing red alarm. She tried to concentrate on it, but that black, sticky, viscous liquid had already risen past her waist, unnoticed. Nowhere to run. No way to resist.

The man's face grew closer and closer. His thin, thin lips parted, sucking in air. With it went her emotions, thoughts, and even her soul.

— Stop.

— Don't steal it.

Yet even these pleas were quickly seized, leaving only that dull numbness.

“Sto..... op.....”

The man's lips slowly, gradually drew closer to Sinon's trembling mouth —

Crack!!

An impact suddenly gave a violent jolt to Sinon’s consciousness.

She widened her eyes and saw dazzling silver sparks spraying from the collar of her top.

— It burns!!

In an instant, a scalding sensation like an electric shock surpassed that man’s absorption. Sinon blasted her slightly-recovered consciousness to life like a bullet primer and threw her entire weight against the man’s arms, slipping away.

She used Solus’s flight ability to greatly widen the distance between them.

“..... Urgh...”

Gasping for breath, she reached her right hand into her top to pull out the object that was continuously spitting sparks.

It was a blanched metallic strip hanging from a thin chain. A disc about 1.5 centimeters in diameter, with a hole in its edge through which the chain looped.

“Wh... y, is this...”

— Here?

Sinon murmured hoarsely, astounded.

It was a necklace that Asada Shino always kept around her neck in the real world. It was nothing valuable. The chain was surgical stainless steel, and the metallic strip was merely an ordinary piece of silver-plated aluminum.

However, to Sinon, it possessed a great deal of meaning.

At the end of last year, Sinon was involved in the «Death Gun Incident».

One of Sinon’s male classmates was a member of a criminal group, and just as he attacked her with a high-pressure injector full of the poison succinylcholine, Kirigaya Kazuto — Kirito rushed over and protected her, but his own left chest was shot by the drug.

He was only able to prevent the deadly poison from entering his body because he had forgotten to peel an ECG electrode from his chest.

After the incident passed, Sinon found that the electrode had fallen on the floor in her room. She cut the tape from it and processed the silver metallic component into a pendant. She had been secretly wearing this homemade necklace all this time, not even telling Kirito or Asuna. She had dived fully clothed in Rath's Roppongi branch, and not even that worker named Hiraki had the chance to see it.

That was why this necklace could not have materialized within Underworld.

— But.

Kirito had once said so in the Dicey Cafe: the virtual world created by the STL was not simply comprised of polygonal objects.

He said that — it was a different reality generated through memories and imagination.

That being the case, this necklace must have been realized through Sinon's own imagination.

Sinon softly touched the pendant to her lips, and placed it back under her clothes.

Then, she directed her completely-regained consciousness towards the black, winged creature hovering in the sky far away.

Subtilizer stood atop the creature's back, looking at his own right hand in silence. Sinon could see wisps of white smoke rising from his fingertips.

Seemingly detecting her eyes on him, Subtilizer looked up, and the corners of his mouth curled with a trace of dissatisfaction. Sinon stared right at that man's face and spoke:

“You're not a god, and you're not a demon either. You're just a human.”

Indeed, Subtilizer was overwhelmingly powerful. He likely possessed an insanely strong imagination that had interfered with Sinon's consciousness... in other words, her Fluctlight.

— But if we're talking imagination and concentration, there's no way I'd lose to you.

Because those were a sniper's greatest strengths.

Sinon gripped the Solus account's GM equipment with both hands, the longbow «Annihilate Ray», and directed her stare at it.

The center of the gleaming white longbow began to take on a black hue with a blue tint.

As the range of the color shift widened, the bow's smoothly curved body began to transform into completely straight edges. That long, shining blue-black cylinder was the steel body of a firearm. The muzzle, handle, and stock appeared one by one, and finally, a gigantic scope seemed to surge from the gun body as it materialized.

At this moment, Sinon was no longer holding an elegant longbow.

But rather, a forthright, fierce, indescribably beautiful .50 caliber anti-material sniper rifle — «Ultima Ratio Hecate II».

With a sharp sound, Sinon pulled back the bolt handle of her trusty partner, grinning.

The bridge of Subtilizer's nose wrinkled very slightly, and his lips pulled back into a curve that suggested anger.



What could be called a battle only persisted for the short span of seven minutes. Then came three minutes of defense, and the situation turned into a one-sided slaughter.

“Defend at all costs...! No matter what, we must at least protect the people of Underworld.....!!”

Asuna shouted with all her might, brandishing her rapier on the very front line, ignoring the unceasing pain pulsing deep in her brain.

But she could no longer hear a unified, relieving reply.

All around her, one by one, the Japanese players in converted, multicolored equipment were being surrounded by the players clad in blood-red armor from neighboring countries and pierced full of holes with swords and spears. Bellows of fury, screams of grief, and shrieks before death resounded without end.

Compared to this, the Americans’ heavy lancing technique had been much simpler to deal with.

Whether it was because that huge, newly appearing army came from those two countries, or because of their abnormally scalding rage, they were completely ignoring all else and making annihilation their only goal. They launched themselves at their targets all at once, pulled them to the ground by their feet, and crushed them from above, peeling away their freedom. When faced with this type of battle strategy, tactics were ultimately unable to overcome vast numerical disadvantage.

The two thousand-man circular defensive formation was being eroded away before their very eyes, growing thinner and thinner by the second.

Using her rapier, Asuna desperately slashed and ran through the endless enemy soldiers lunging at her. This was her first time pleading so despairingly in her heart since she had logged into Underworld the night before.

Someone, save us.

In this battle of despair, one of the squads that had been bravely, persistently fighting was the Green Swordsmen team led by female player Sakuya, who held the role of being the Sylph Lord of Alfheim Online.

The Sylph race was inherently adept at flexibly carrying out high-speed cooperative attacks. This sort of battle strategy, honed to counter the Salamander race, which launched assaults with heavily armed players, was able to achieve some results in chaotic warfare like this. The lightly armed swordsmen maneuvered dizzyingly fast as they shielded each other, rendering the enemy unable to pick a target and preventing themselves from being pulled to the ground one by one.

“— Great, let’s open up another hole in their defenses! Rindou Team, Suzuran Team, push the front line to the right!!”

Sakuya personally stood at the very front, brandishing her slender katana in all directions, shouting orders.

At this moment, they should be rendezvousing with the Salamander team, currently fighting to their right, and borrowing their assault power to break through the enemy formation in one strike. As long as they could allow the reinforcement troops to escape to the *sando* in the ancient ruins again and limit the battle line to that narrow entrance, maybe they could whittle down the enemy’s astronomical number like they had the Americans.

“Advance! Prepare the «Synchro Sword Skill»!! Ready, 5, 4, 3...”

Just as Sakuya was about to give the order.

A clear scream of suffering came from the left side of the battleground they were defending.

“— Don’t give up, everyone. Just a bit more time!!”

Sakuya suddenly stopped breathing and looked to the left.

A troop of Japanese players equipped with yellow-based equipment was seemingly about to be swallowed by a tsunami of crimson. At their very front was a petite silhouette, thrown to the ground and pinned there by her metal claws.

“Alicia!!”

Sakuya yelled. In that instant, she changed from a calm and collected commander back into a female university student.

“*Stooooop — — !!*”

She screamed, bolting towards the left on her own. She swiped and knocked flying the enemies blocking her way, focusing only on charging to her best friend without stopping.

Longswords pierced through Cait Sith Lord Alicia Rue’s chest and abdomen, but when she noticed Sakuya approaching, she yelled back at her as though she were spitting blood:

“No, go back, Sakuya-chan!! Command your troops!!”

With those last words, those triangular ears poking out of her golden hair disappeared before Sakuya’s eyes.

“*Alicia — — !!*”

Sakuya let out a grieving scream and charged alone into the immense number of enemies about to decimate the Cait Sith team. She continuously activated Sword Skills, taking steps forward through spraying blood and pieces of flesh. She was only a bit further away from where her best friend had fallen...

Snikt.

With that impact, she looked down, only to see the head of a spear piercing straight through her right abdomen.

Her first taste of excruciating pain in this world surged through her nerves, robbing her of her strength.

Even so, she still took four more steps forward, but then her consciousness lost control of her character and she collapsed right to the ground.

In the next moment, Sakuya was utterly consumed by the gale of hatred. Her beloved sword was wrenched from her right hand, her left arm was sliced in two, and countless bits of sharp metal ran her body through.

Amongst the two thousand — although that number was rapidly decreasing — Japanese players currently diving here, the one with the clearest grasp of the situation was the third generation leader of the «Sleeping Knights» guild, An Si-Eun/Siune.

Her father was a Korean living in Japan and her mother was Japanese, so Siune was able to speak both nation's languages. Therefore, when she heard bits and pieces of the furious roars coming from half of the red soldiers, she was able to guess what kind of information had incited these people.

Rifts and conflict had begun to occur between the netizens of Japan and Korea before Siune had been born, at the dawn of the 21st century. There were a myriad of reasons for that, but it seemed that the development of the Internet caused the rift to grow faster and faster.

With little distinction between right and wrong, these developments corroded into the world of online games that Siune and her friends so adored. Even in 2026, within the international server of a mainstream VRMMO, it was not uncommon for fierce disputes over monster farming areas to break out between players from different countries. Recent games like ALO would all reject connections from overseas, and one even felt that the chasm between the neighboring countries was growing deeper and deeper.

Siune, who had grown up touched by both Japanese and Korean culture, had always felt distressed about this sort of situation.

The members of the Sleeping Knights in the VR Hospice Ward, who had invited Siune into a new world, remained very friendly to her like always even upon learning of her past, so she she had always thought... For everyone, she had to personally erect a bridge across this chasm inside the virtual world.

But now.

That man currently overlooking the battle from the rooftops of the palace ruins had incited VRMMO players from other countries with his dishonest rhetoric, played up their joint opposition against a common enemy, and brewed up the greatest hatred and tragedy since the inception of VRMMOs.

— I have to... I have to do something. I'm perhaps the only one among the Japanese players who can speak Korean.

— If I don't push forward, they won't understand. Right, Yuuki?

Calling the name of the previous guild leader, who had passed away three months ago, in her heart, Siune loudly instructed her four partners beside her.

“Please, everyone, just once, let's open a hole in their defenses!!”

Jun, a dual-wielder who was battling valiantly like a fierce god in the front, immediately shouted:

“Got it! Tecchi, Talken, Nori, release your all-out attacks all at once! 3, 2, 1!”

The perfectly synchronized, high-powered, single-strike Sword Skills triggered an earthshaking explosion, blowing back tens of enemies.

In this instant of silence and stagnation, Siune ran towards a huge Korean player who looked like the leader and threw out her left hand to catch the blade of the longsword he swung down.

Her palm split and blood spurted out.

But virtual pain like this, compared to the suffering that Siune had experienced from bone marrow transplants and chemotherapy for

her leukemia, was nothing at all. She merely grimaced a bit, kept her stare fixated on the man's eyes, and shouted in Korean:

“— Listen to me, you've all been lied to!! This server belongs to a Japanese company, we're not hackers, we're the rightful users!!”

Her voice echoed widely, stretching the silence for a few more moments.

The Korean whose sword was gripped by Siune's bare hand leaned backwards slightly, as though he were somewhat intimidated by her drive, but very quickly retorted sharply:

“— You're lying! I saw it with my own eyes, you killed all of those players who were the same color as us!!”

“They were the same as you, Americans who had been tricked into coming here by false information! The ones hindering the Japanese company's development are you all!! Think about it more carefully... Is this rage and hatred of yours right now really coming from your own hearts?!”

Siune's words caused the Koreans at the scene to fall silent, dubious.

Just then, a sharp — yet somewhat confused inquiry came from the rear of the crowd and broke the silence again.

“Are you telling the truth?!”

The one who shouted this in Korean, running out of the crowd, was a player who looked no different from the other soldiers. Siune subconsciously adopted a defensive stance, but the player arrived in front of her and lowered the sword in his right hand, declaring his absence of hostility, then pushed up his helmet visor.

“I'm «Moonphase», who are you?”

Siune was somewhat taken aback to have someone ask her name so suddenly, but the eyes of this man calling himself Moonphase shined with a sincere glow.

Siune took her left hand away from the sword blade she was blocking, then clenched it, still dripping virtual blood, into a fist at her chest, and spoke:

“... I am Siune.”

“Siune-san, is it? I’ve been also thinking that this whole thing is a little weird.”

Moonphase’s quickly uttered sentence prompted furious roars from Korean players around them. But he loudly slid his sword back into its sheath, suppressing the noise, and took a step forward.

“— Do you have a way to prove what you are saying?!”

“.....”

Siune couldn’t help but hold her breath.

This «Underworld» was a virtual reality world developed by a government-funded Japanese company to perform research and development, and the attackers were Americans trying to seize the fruit of that research, a new generation of AI — Siune had never once doubted these words that her friend Lisbeth had tearfully accounted to them inside the World Tree dome in ALO. But when she was asked for a way to prove it, she found herself lost.

There was no physical evidence in a virtual world. There were only testimonies from certain people, but no matter what the Japanese told them, the other side wouldn’t believe it. Siune could feel enmity flaring up again among the Korean players around them in the time that she remained speechless like this. What could she do... Where would she find...

“Siune, the Underworld people!”

Nori suddenly shouted from the left, behind her.

“Have him meet the people who live in Underworld, and once he sees that they’re speaking Japanese, they’ll understand that this is a Japanese server!”

“Ah……..!”

Yes, that was a possibility. Although Siune and the others had only spoken a few words with the people of Underworld in the middle of the circular formation, after feeling that they were neither real world people nor NPCs, she had experienced an impact enough to stun her soul. Even though — no, because there was a language barrier between them and the Koreans, the Koreans would also feel the same. As long as they kept an open mind and met and talked with them, they would absolutely understand.

Siune was about to translate what Nori had just told her in Japanese into Korean to tell Moonphase.

But just then, a ray of vicious red light flashed behind him.

“Ah... Look ou…….”

Siune desperately tried to warn him, but it was too late. A very short yet very thick cleaver buried itself deeply into Moonphase’s back and blew him nearly ten meters away.

“Guaagh…….”

Replacing Moonphase, who was now writhing in pain on the ground, there stood the man in the black poncho who should have been on top of the palace roof.

He pointed his right hand, which was gripping a dagger that resembled a Chinese-style meat cleaver, at Moonphase and shouted loudly in Korean:

“This battlefield is no place for traitors!”

Then he pointed the cleaver at each of the Koreans surrounding them.

“Don’t fall victim to the tricks of those dirty Japanese!”

The voice was low, powerful, and icy, yet it carried a faint trace of ridicule.

The final one the cleaver pointed at was Siune, who stood stock-still, stunned.

“If this is really a Japanese server, and you really are the rightful users, then why are you the only ones with such powerful equipment? They’re shining like GM equipment! You crafted them with cheating methods!!”

Exactly, exactly! Sounds of assent followed the man’s declaration.

Siune desperately refuted the man’s words.

“... No! Our equipment is different because we converted our own high-level accounts into this world!”

As soon as she said that, the man in the black poncho let out a high, scornful laugh.

“Hah, what kind of idiot would convert their account into a test server?! Liar, you’re all liars!!”

“It’s true, believe me!! We came here determined, not willing to lose our characters...”

Whoosh. The sound of sliced wind was abruptly heard.

As the dagger flying towards her buried itself deeply into her right shoulder, Siune was aware not of pain, but of deepest, darkest despair. She was completely unable to comprehend the words shouted by the man who had thrown his weapon.

A small group of Chinese players shattered the temporary ceasefire and launched an assault from her right. The leader of the Koreans, seeing all of this, brought Siune crashing to the ground with one kick, cursing.

Lying there, Siune listened to the sound of her partners’ footsteps as they rushed towards her, but was not able to get up again.

— Why?

Integrity Knight Renri Synthesis Twenty-Seven deeply felt the strong hatred enveloping the entire battlefield, only repeating that word in his mind.

— Why are these people so hateful of each other as to slaughter one another, even though they are all from the Real World?

No, perhaps he lacked the authority to say that. Even the people of Underworld were divided into the Human Empire and the Dark Realm, and had engaged in bloody warfare for hundreds of years. Just a few days ago, the blood spilled at the Great Eastern Gate was enough to rival the blood that was slowly soaking into the soil of this battlefield here. Even the Divine Instruments hanging from Renri's waist, the «Twin Edged Wings», had claimed the lives of countless Goblins.

But, that had been the reason.

That was the reason he had kept wanting to believe that the Real World outside of Underworld was a world without conflict or hatred, where wars would never, ever happen.

But that was clearly his own fantasy. Although the Real World people, Asuna and her partners, spoke the same language as the people of Underworld, the voices screamed by the army of tens of thousands appearing before him were incomprehensible to Renri. If there was already so great a difference just in language, then a ceasefire and peace negotiations were utterly impossible.

Could it be that war was the nature of man?

Whether it was in this world, or in the Real World outside, or in a world that might exist even further outside, were humans really repeating an endless cycle of slaughter?

— How can be allowed to happen?!

Renri clenched his fists, holding back tears with all his might.

Integrity Knight Sheyta alone had stayed behind in dire straits just to protect the enemy, the Fist Fighters' Guild of the Dark Realm. She must have established mutual understanding with the people of the Dark Realm by connecting sword and fists. Even at the end of a path splattered with blood, there must be hope.

Then, I must fight now. I cannot blindly allow myself to be protected and stand here dumbly.

Renri took a step towards the front line, preparing to rescue the Real World reinforcements who were putting their lives on the line in defense.

Just then, a feeble voice came from behind him.

“Esteemed Knight, I will go too.”

He looked around and saw the red-haired trainee swordswoman Tiese, who was attached to the supply team, standing behind him. She was tightly clutching a relatively small sword, a solemn expression on her face, her lips stiff.

“... You can't, you have to protect that man...”

“I've left that duty to Ronye... Because Eugeo-senpai, whom I love the most, has...”

Tiese's autumn-colored eyes glassed over, and she continued:

“That person lost his life to protect something important. I must carry on his mission.”

“..... I see.”

Renri bit his lips tightly.

Even he, an Integrity Knight, had little confidence that he could survive this desperate battlefield. He couldn't be sure that Tiese, who was not even a proper Guardian, could come out unscathed.

But just then, a new voice came.

“I shall go as well, Sir Knight.”

The tall, female Guardian leader with tea-colored hair tied behind her head walked forward from behind Tiese. She seemed to have been fighting all this time; her clothes were utterly filthy, her armor was filled with cracks, and yet her stern face was not without the will to fight.

“I have not yet fulfilled my promise to Kirito. Right now, I cannot abandon the people that child threw away his life to protect... and this world.”

“Sortiliena-senpai...”

Tiese called her name with a trembling voice. The Guardian leader smiled slightly and nodded at her.

Fighting not for honor, not for fame, but to protect something.

Renri seemed to feel the two women’s determination affecting his own heart, resonating with him.

He gently caressed the Divine Instruments on his waist with his right hand, and nodded strongly.

“... I understand. Then, I shall protect you... do not leave my side no matter what.”

“Yes, sir!”

“We’ll leave it to you, Esteemed Knight!”

Tiese and Sortiliena responded firmly, and drew their swords from the left sides of their waists.

Renri gripped his pair of Divine Instruments in his own hands, murmuring deep down in his heart.

— Eldrie-san. Sheyta-san. And Knight Commander Bercouli.

— Like all of you, I have finally found a purpose for my life.

Then, Integrity Knight Renri and the two swordswomen took off together, towards the battlefield spiraling with anguished wailing and despair.

4

Koujiro Rinko raced back to the sub control room and sat into the mesh chair previously occupied by Higa Takeru.

A few windows were open on the large monitor directly in front of her, but the first one she looked towards was a small window on the bottom. Displayed there was a three-dimensional graph representing Kirigaya Kazuto's Fluctlight status.

In the direct center of the reflected light, gradually shifting between spectral colors, there was a patch of darkness representing a «main body defect».

Currently, Higa Takeru was controlling four STL units, preparing to mend this defect using the memories in the minds of three girls in profound relationships with Kazuto. To do that, he had snuck into the lower shaft, which was swarming with enemies, by himself — wait, there was another person.

At that moment, the attackers were currently focused on engaging «Ichiemom», who had charged in from the stairs as a decoy. But even a steel-bodied robot couldn't withstand much of the wild spray from assault rifles. When Ichiemom was destroyed, there was no doubt the enemy would think: What on earth were the Japanese planning?

— Faster, Higa-kun!

As she spoke that inwardly, the sliding door opened with a *whoosh*, and a man dressed in a Hawaiian T-shirt and clogs rushed inside.

“How... How is Kirito-kun's status?!”

“Higa-kun's starting the operation now. Did the decoy work?”

As she answered his question with a question, Kikuoka Seijirou, his breathing ragged and shoulders quaking, pushed up his glasses, which were slipping down.

“We tossed over all of our smoke grenades from behind Ichiemom. It should buy us some more time before the smoke gets cleared from the passageway, but if we don’t seal the partition after that, it’ll be dangerous. We don’t have much time left.”

“Higa-kun said that it would take five minutes at most to show results...”

Rinko closed her mouth, looking towards the monitor again.

Kirigaya Kazuto’s Fluctlight remained unchanged. She thought of that old wives’ tale from America, “a watched pot never boils”, so she clenched her fists tightly and moved her eyes to the center of the monitor.

She saw a map resembling that of a fictionalized fantasy world — no, in a certain sense it was precisely a map of a fictionalized fantasy world, Underworld.

Compared to the full map of the Human Empire that she saw a few days ago when she had first arrived at the Ocean Turtle, this map showed a greater area. Due south of a circular mountain range surrounding the Human Empire, there was an artificial landmark that looked like it was comprised of four rectangles joined together, resembling ruins. The dot representing Yuuki Asuna’s current position, the blue pixels representing the Human Empire Army, and the white pixels representing the Japanese reinforcement players were all densely packed together at that location.

The gargantuan patch of crimson surrounding them was the American players who had dived in after being incited by the attackers — or so it should be, but their scale was simply too immense. Their number was already 20, no, 30 times that of the Japanese.

Was that really okay? Rinko searched the image for the two others apart from Yuuki Asuna, and finally discovered a water-blue dot very far south of the ruins. That should be Asada Shino.

Then where had Kirigaya Suguha gone? Rinko scoured the map, and at last located a yellow-green dot far, far north of the main battlefield. There was also a group of red enemies present there, but Higa had definitely said that both of their login points were at Yuuki Asuna’s coordinates. Rinko couldn’t help but furrow her brow, contemplating a reason why —

Just then, she seemed to notice another white dot blinking underneath Suguha’s gleaming dot, as if covered by it.

“.....?”

There shouldn’t be anyone on Rath’s side diving in with an STL. What on earth was that dot, then?

She unconsciously moved her mouse, carefully lined up the cursor with the dot and clicked it once, opening new window. Rinko scrutinized the tiny English letters.

“Um... Restriction, Confrontational Index... Threshold Detection... Report? What is this?...”

Just as she was about to say, “I can’t make heads or tails of it”.

“Wha... Whaaat?!”

Kikuoka suddenly yelled loudly, cutting off his stare at the image of Kirigaya Kazuto’s Fluctlight. Rinko leapt out of her seat in shock.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

But Kikuoka didn’t immediately respond, instead snatching the mouse from Rinko and enlarging the window she had just opened. Then he brought himself right up to the monitor, muttering at an extreme pace.

“Unf... Yes, there’s no mistaking it, it’s another Fluctlight that broke its limits! But, why now?!”

Rinko’s eyes widened, and she looked up at Kikuoka, who was furiously scratching his head.

“Huh... you mean, a second «A.L.I.C.E.»?”

“Yes, exactly... Ah, no, wait... This is...”

Kikuoka rapidly scrolled through the window displaying a detailed log, and began muttering again.

“... Strictly speaking, it’s not of the same caliber as «Alice». It broke the limitations of an Artificial Fluctlight not through its logical circuitry, but its emotional circuitry... nonetheless, it’s an equally important specimen. If only it could stay there and not move... Oh, damn, it’s moving south, where the group of Americans aren’t far away!”

Rinko snatched back the mouse from a distressed Kikuoka and stared at the detailed log of the Artificial Fluctlight at the time it had broken its limits.

“Hmm... Yeah, a new node was generated by a chain reaction in its emotional zone... Huh—? Hey, Kikuoka-san?”

“Wha... What is it?”

Twisting his body and moaning in dismay, Kikuoka craned his neck towards the monitor.

“What’s this external command plugged in here? It feels really off to me... It’s much too deliberate... Almost as if it were created to impede the circuitry.”

Rinko squinted, scrutinizing the code printed in minuscule font.

“Implant simulated pain... in the right visual domain? But then, even if an Artificial Fluctlight spends all that effort breaking the limits, it would be stopped by the pain created by this process. You guys even placed such a restriction onto the Underworld residents?”

“No... No, we didn’t do that. There’s no way we would, that kind of action runs counter to our goal... That’s practically blatant obstruction.”

“Hmm... Good point. Also, the programming style of this piece of code isn’t the same as Higa’s... Ah, there’s a comment at the very front... «Code 871»? What’s 871?”

“871? I’ve never heard of that number... No, wait... Wait, wait, I think... Not long ago...”

Kikuoka suddenly began to move, the clogs on his feet slapping loudly on the ground. He darted over to a nearby chair, seized a dirty white coat hanging from its backrest, spread it open with a *whap*, and stared at the inner collar.

“Hey, what’s wrong, what happened?”

At Rinko’s inquiry, Kikuoka, his eyes wide behind his black-frame glasses, held the white coat out to Rinko, inviting her to look at its collar tag.

There, clearly inscribed in black permanent marker, was [871].

“This white coat... belongs to that technician named Yanai who just went down with Higa...”

Muttering that, Rinko suddenly halted her speech.

Yanai. YA NA I.

“... 8 7 1?”²⁵

Rinko and Kikuoka screamed in unison, standing up at the same time.

Fist Fighters’ Guild Chief Iskahn was looking at the approaching crimson legion through his murky left eye.

After shrinking their surrounding circle to twenty mel, those soldiers speaking a strange tongue had seemingly confirmed that the Fist Fighters were depleted of their morale, and nodded at each other.

25 “871” can be read as “ya na i” in Japanese.

Then they emitted deafening, completely incomprehensible roars, and leapt from the ground all at once.

With his shattered left hand, Iskahn tightly gripped the hand of the female knight sitting beside him. She returned his grip very quickly, causing him a reassuring pain, momentarily restoring feeling to his numb left hand.

He lowered his head, and as he was about to shut his eyes and accept the end, just then —

“..... What is...?”

Sheyta’s voice made him raise his head again.

He saw a vast group of troops storming in their direction from the other side of the valley, north of the battlefield, kicking up a sky full of dust.

They possessed great, rotund physiques, long, flat snouts that curved upwards, and drooping ears.

Orcs.

“... Why?”

Iskahn murmured blankly. Having been ordered by Emperor Vector, the Orc army should still be awaiting orders at the «Great Eastern Gate» in the north. Since the Emperor had vanished, that order should now be unshakable. In fact, the remaining Dark Knights were also dully awaiting orders to no end on the other side of the valley, not far away.

Confounded, Iskahn perused the battalion of Orcs and spotted a tiny, tiny human silhouette running at their very front.

It wasn’t an Orc. Its yellow hair, with a tinge of green, was billowing in the wind, and the limbs extending from its tender green attire were so white that they were shining. Undoubtedly a human, and a young female from the Human Empire at that.

But was this person, who looked like a tiny, tiny swordswoman, heading the entire Orcish army?

Seemingly detecting the troops charging in this direction, the red soldiers surrounding the Fist Fighters stopped moving.

A blinding light exploded into being. The girl drew a silver katana from her back.

In that instant, Sheyta's right hand, which was gripping Iskahn's left, violently shook once, appearing to feel something.

When the human girl charged to the center of the bridge, she raised her katana high into the air. At that moment she was still more than two hundred mel away from the red soldiers.

But —

The girl's sword and hands became blurred like smoke. Even Iskahn's eyesight was unable to capture that slash. A flash of silver light was over in the blink of an eye, and then there was a terrifying sight.

A dazzling ray of light sped along the dark ground — but not only that; the tens of red soldiers standing atop that extending ray were silently sliced apart, collapsing to the ground before they could even scream in anguish.

The katana that had slashed downwards changed direction in the girl's hands, and sliced upwards with chilling speed. A second ray of light penetrated the red legion, and the soldiers clad in heavy armor were cleaved in half, carapace and all.

“..... So strong.”

Sheyta murmured in a barely audible voice.

Without a moment's hesitation, Sinon raised her beloved gun, Hecate II, which had transformed from the Bow of Solus.

She was currently less than 20 meters from Subtilizer. Much too close for an anti-material sniper rifle. Even the act of locking onto the enemy's movements with her high-magnification scope was very difficult.

As such, Sinon decided to determine the outcome of the battle before Subtilizer made his move; she pulled the trigger the instant she spotted a black shadow through the lens of her scope.

A flash of light. An explosive roar.

Intense recoil acted on Sinon’s hovering body, and she urgently tried to control herself as she began to tilt and spin. Every round would cause her body to move, so it was completely impossible to shoot repeatedly, but as long as that shot just now had hit its target, everything would be over.

With difficulty, Sinon stabilized her body, and looked towards Subtilizer.

Then her eyes opened wide with shock.

The man standing on the back of the winged creature had raised his hand, and his five fingers were curled into a claw shape.

In his palm was a vortex of darkness and light, spinning violently, and in its center was a brightly shining particle; it was unmistakably the bullet that Sinon had fired.

In other words, he could absorb that bullet as he had absorbed Sinon’s consciousness?

A bullet capable of piercing a two-centimeter steel plate, fired from a .50 caliber anti-material sniper rifle...

Slight fear emerged within Sinon’s heart. Along with it, the darkness in Subtilizer’s left hand seemed to become fiercer.

“Don’t lose...”

Sinon breathed unconsciously, then yelled vehemently:

“Don’t lose, Hecate!!”

Bang.

With this sound, light penetrated darkness.

A great hole was blown through Subtilizer's left hand; flesh and blood spun through the air.

— I can do this!!

Sinon sucked in a deep breath and pulled back Hecate II's bolt. The ejected bullet casing glinted in the air and fell towards the ground.

Subtilizer looked down at his wounded left hand in silence. Although a pitch-black, viscous liquid was currently patching up the huge hole in his palm, a wound that severe did not seem easy to heal.

He lifted his face, which was now devoid of laughter, and stared at Sinon.

His right hand moved and retrieved the crossbow from his waist.

“...Hmph.”

Sinon expelled a bit of air from her nose. How could something like *that* compete with an anti-material sniper rifle...

Flex.

The crossbow suddenly contorted.

The left and right limbs of the bow began to fold, and it elongated to at least twice its length. The once-wooden structure began to take on a black metallic gleam.

After one short second, Subtilizer's right hand was gripping a sniper rifle just as big as the Hecate. Sinon immediately recognized this gun.

The Barrett XM500.

Like the Hecate II, it shot .50 caliber rounds, but it was an even more advanced anti-material sniper rifle.

A warped smile appeared once more at the corners of Subtilizer's mouth.

“... Bring it on.”

Sinon muttered, and forcefully pressed the Hecate II's stock to her right shoulder.

“Oh god... A-Are you okay?”

Yanai's seemingly concerned words caused Higa to momentarily forget his pain and shout:

“He... Hey, you were the one who shot me, and you're spouting stuff like that...?!”

“No, no, I actually didn't mean to hit you, honest. I've no intention of committing murder; it took a lot of effort for me to buy that handsome condo on the west coast, but if I have to live my days in fear, what's the use in that?”

Once Higa understood that Yanai appeared to be truly serious, a wave of weakness welled up within him and he lost feeling in both hands. He knew that he was in trouble; he frantically pulled himself together and examined the wound on his shoulder somewhat timidly.

It seemed that the bullet had hit the cable duct, ricocheted, and struck him somewhere underneath his collarbone. Higa didn't feel much pain; rather, an icy numbness began spreading throughout his entire body from his right shoulder. The side abdomen of his shirt had already been dyed dark red. This didn't look like a mere scratch.

Fear of the current situation, and of its future development, began slowly climbing upwards from Higa's stomach, causing him to involuntarily begin to breath in gasps. A few meters above his head, Yanai was still chattering away with a complacent look on his face.

“To be honest, I only wanted to slightly hinder your work, Higa-san. After I destroyed the maintenance connector I would escape to the main control room below. That way I would be able to get away on the submarine. No one from Rath has died anyway, so if my side can successfully retrieve Alice, then everyone will be happy.”

“No one... died...?”

Higa demanded of Yanai, forgetting his pain once more.

“... If I don't seize this opportunity to heal Kirigaya-kun, his consciousness will be gone forever! The one who killed his soul was *you*, Yanai-san! And you said that you aren't ready to murder anyone!”

“Ahh. Ahh... Riiight...”

Yanai's face suddenly went blank. Under the illumination of the orange emergency lights, his stubbled cheek twitched a few times.

“Hmm... Who cares if that brat dies.”

“Wha.....”

“Because, he was the one who killed her. My most important Admii-chan.”

“Ad... mii...?”

Yanai looked down at Higa, who was confused by the unfamiliar name, and screamed like he was furious:

“Her Eminence, the Highest Minister Administrator of the Axiom Church! I promised her that I would do my best to help her establish total rule over Underworld. And I agreed with her that I would safely store her Light Cube away if the server were to be formatted.”

Higa's eyes opened wide in shock.

The Axiom Church was the organization that ruled over the Human Empire in Underworld.

It held total control over the entire populace by way of extremely strict laws and powerful military force.

The reason Higa had not obtained the limit-breaking Fluctlight «Alice» when she had first appeared was that, in the time-accelerated Underworld, the Axiom Church quickly whisked Alice away and applied memory modification upon her Fluctlight.

Yes, their speed was much too fast, and their methods were much too effective.

As though they were completely aware of what an Artificial Fluctlight was.

Yet the truth was just that. The Axiom Church — or at least the Artificial Fluctlight by the name of «Administrator», who seemed to be in charge, understood the structure of this world.

“... Was it you who corrupted Underworld?...”

Higa moaned lowly, and Yanai smacked his lips exaggeratedly.

“No, no, that kid came and contacted me first. I was working a shift at the time, and then I suddenly heard a girl’s voice coming from the speaker, it damn near scared the shit out of me... She had discovered Underworld’s entire command list by herself, and then opened a contact line with the outside. If we’re being technical, you’re the main culprit for forgetting to delete the command that called up the entire list, Higa-san.”

Neheheheh. Yanai chuckled deeply a few times as though he were reminiscing about something, then continued with an absentminded gaze:

“I kept thinking that, at that rate, Underworld would immediately be totally formatted. It was all going to be deleted anyway, so it didn’t matter, and that’s why I secretly used an STL to go in and see Admii-chan. And then... God, I’d never seen such a beautiful girl. The kids that Sugou-san locked up in ALO were pretty cute, but Admii-chan’s personality, her voice, and her manner, it hit all of my buttons... — That kid promised me before. If I helped her, then in return she would become my number one servant. In the future she would rule the real world together with me, making me a king...”

— No.

The corrupted one was *this man*.

Higa seemed to feel all of the hairs on his body stand upright in fear. Yanai might be a silly traitor, but he was no idiot. What kind of person *was* Administrator, to be able to beguile and control someone like him so exquisitely?

Just then, Yanai’s seemingly reminiscent face went blank again.

“But... that kid’s dead now. Murdered... That brat not only hindered Sugou-san’s experiment, he killed Admii-chan. If I don’t help her get revenge, that would just be too sad for Admii-chan...”

Yanai widened his bloodshot eyes and aimed the gun at Higa again. Automatic handguns would automatically cock the hammer after firing a round, so the second shot would require much less pressure on the trigger compared to the first. If his index finger pressed just a bit, another bullet would be fired.

“... Yeah, that’s right... Yeah, I gotta kill at least one, as a sacrifice for that kid...”

Yanai’s shrunken pupils trembled slightly in the middle of his widened eyes.

... Damn it. He’s serious this time.

Higa couldn’t help but close his eyes.

— I won't make it.

Sensing that Asuna, Klein, and Lisbeth far away had plunged into dire straits, Leafa couldn't help but bite her lip.

But before her eyes, nearly 3,000 red-armored soldiers were blocking her way.

She had requested a favor of Rirupirin, who appeared to be the Orc tribal chief: to bring reinforcements towards the south in order to assist Asuna and Kirito, but the ones whom they had spent a great amount of effort to locate were not those Human Empire Defense Army troops.

According to Rirupirin, the few hundred people who were being surrounded by the army that dived in from the Real World were Fist Fighters, who were all attached to the Dark Army like the Orcs. Leafa was bewildered for a moment upon learning this, but very quickly decided to help them.

"I'll charge into the enemy alone. Rirupirin, you guys group up with the Fist Fighters, and you only need to fight back against the enemies that attack you first."

At this suggestion, Rirupirin protested fiercely: "I want to fight too!" But Leafa firmly shook her head, tightly gripping the Orc's gnarled hands, saying:

"No, I don't want any more of you to die. Don't worry about me... even tens of thousands of those kinds of enemies are no match for me."

After saying that with a smile, Leafa stood solitary before the red legion.

She already knew that Terraria possessed sufficient HP and near-unlimited regeneration. Moreover, the people from the real world in front, like her, had virtual lives. Even if it were too late to get to Kirito and help, Leafa couldn't watch the Orcs die in vain here.

After executing tens of enemies with her ultra-long range combo attack, Leafa stormed straight into the direct center of the enemy without hesitation.

For some unknown reason, she was able to activate Sword Skills with ranges several times greater than those in ALO, without stopping. Every time crisp light burst from Terraria's GM equipment the «Verduras Anima», a great splash of blood sprayed in a radial pattern.

But during the cooldown time between Sword Skill and Sword Skill, uncountable blades would seize this chink in her armor and come flying. She was unable to evade all of them, and the number of wounds on her body grew; excruciating, scalding pain threw dizziness into her head and stars into her eyes — But.

“HA — AAH!!”

She cried sharply and stamped her right foot on the ground. Green light erupted from underfoot and instantly healed all of the wounds on her body.

Leafa endured the lingering pain, unable to be completely purged, and concentrated on swinging the sword in her grip.

Even if every inch of her body were pulverized, she at least had to drive all of the enemies here back to the real world.

Although her dive coordinates had displaced her somewhere other than her intended location, if she had to name any of her responsibilities, it would undoubtedly be to save as many Underworld residents as she could. These were the people whom Kirito loved and vowed to rescue.

“She's such a boss!!”

Leafa used her left hand to stop a sword stabbing towards her during that shout.

“Haiyah!!”

One mere counterattack vanquished the owner of the sword.

Leafa clamped her teeth onto the sword stabbed into her hand, wrenched it out, and spat it onto the ground along with a mouthful of blood.

Their second shots seemed to discharge at the same time.

Bullets fired from two anti-material sniper rifles grazed past each other, then deviated greatly in their trajectories and disappeared into the sky.

Sinon did not lose her balance this time; she stamped both feet hard onto air, suppressing the recoil. Before her eyes, Subtilizer was also standing steadily on the back of the winged creature, which was furiously beating its wings.

It was Sinon's first time experiencing a space where all directions were extremely wide open, and a battle pitting two anti-material sniper rifles against each other. A game like GGO would naturally not support player flight; moreover, the Hecate was supposed to be fired with its bipod down and the shooter lying prone. The recoil from shooting it while in the air was far beyond her expectations.

This showdown —

Whoever was able to control their recoil and fire the next round before the enemy did, even by just an instant, would win. Sinon thought this as she pulled back the bolt.

Subtilizer probably had the same idea. As Sinon flew right to try and outflank him, he began flying left to counter her.

At virtually the same time, both of them began hurtling around at breakneck speed.

Under the condition that she didn't lose balance, she maneuvered around at sharp angles in arbitrary directions. While she tightly captured her enemy with the barrel of the gun, she had to be careful not to let the enemy's barrel lock onto her.

But Subtilizer's raised Barrett suddenly moved at a barely discernible speed, seemingly predicting Sinon's movements before she could do the same.

— It's coming!!

Sinon grit her teeth and opened her eyes wide.

Flames spurted from the Barrett's barrel.

Sinon flew as fast as she could while twisting her body to the left.

The deadly bullet roared past her chest, close enough to almost char the skin on her chest. Her blue armor split with a crack.

— Dodged it!

This was her first and last chance. She must fire in the instant that Subtilizer had stopped to control his recoil!

However, by the time Sinon had raised the Hecate.

She saw another bullet flying directly at her.

Repeated fire — why?!

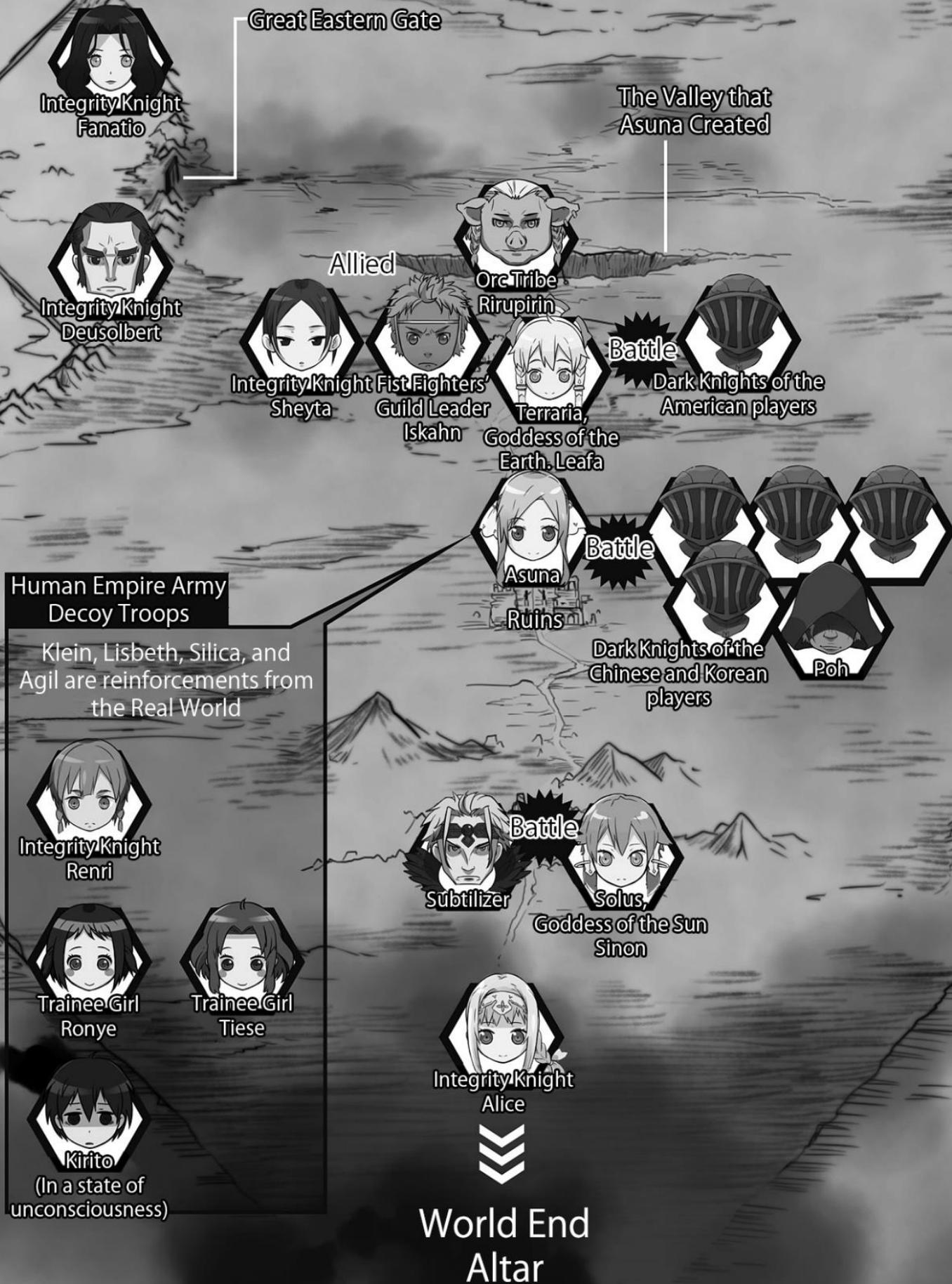
Ah... damn it.

Differing from the Hecate, whose bolt needed to be pulled back with each shot, the Barrett was semi-automatic.

When this thought floated into her brain, Sinon's left leg was torn to shreds above her knee.

«War of the Underworld» Battle Situation

Day 2 of the «Final Tolerance Experiment»



Making a stand against the despairing situation, fighting on the battlefield until the very end, were Asuna, protected by a Super Account, Integrity Knight Renri, a resident of Underworld, and his dragon, along with Trainee Swordswoman Tiese and Guardian Leader Sortiliena, who were being protected by the knight yet bravely swinging their own swords.

Though her exceedingly exhausted eyes throbbed with agony, Asuna watched as Knight Renri battled valiantly.

Around ten minutes ago, this diminutive knight had appeared here at the front line, and immediately began lobbing out his cross-shaped throwing knives. The throwing knives soared through the air as they pleased, killing every single enemy who charged towards them. This terrifying power was enough to beat back for several minutes even the fury-fueled assault from the neighboring countries' players. The flames spurted out by the dragon struck extreme fear into the enemies, solidifying the Integrity Knights' status as the true dragon knights born and raised in this otherworldly place, Underworld.

But it didn't take long for the enemies to notice. While Knight Renri had cast out his throwing knives and was controlling them, his person was virtually defenseless.

On his umpteenth time casting out his throwing knives, the instant he was about to make a clean sweep of the very front line of red soldiers, innumerable long spears were flung from the enemy's rear. The enemy was finally using the battle tactic that had appeared during their battle against the Americans, which Asuna feared in her heart.

The spears fell like a torrential black rain from the crimson sky.

Renri's dragon spread its wings and body, protecting its master from the first wave of attacks.

But it then collapsed to the ground with shattered scales and spraying blood.

Immediately, another wave of spear rain was lobbed their way.

Knight Renri looked up to see countless spearheads roaring his way and spun around to wrap Tiese behind him in a hug, shielding her with his body.

In the next instant, two spears buried themselves into Renri's back, forcing him to fall forward on top of Tiese's body. Having lost control, the cross-shaped throwing knives glinted once in the air before splitting in two, then stabbing into the ground far away.

At that moment, in the other parts of the battlefield, the fighting had all concluded.

Trying to outdo each other, the red soldiers pounced all at once, lunging towards the Japanese players who had collapsed from exhaustion, plunging sharp blades into their bodies. Flesh and blood danced in the air, while feeble screams of agony ensued, but were very quickly snuffed out.

A great many people's armor and shields were wrecked and destroyed, and they were pushed to the ground, utterly defenseless. The tears of repentance running down their faces were as unbearable to watch as the blood flowing from their injuries.

The two thousand converted players who made up the defensive array were completely incapacitated, until the Human Empire Army being protected in the middle was finally exposed.

In order to protect the unarmed supply team and Ascetic team, nearly 400 Human Empire Guardians had assembled themselves into a circular formation and raised the swords in their hands. Their faces were filled with an almost tragic determination as they waited silently for that moment, preparing for the approaching, unstoppable red legion to launch their fatal assault.

“..... Stop.....”

Asuna heard such a voice squeezed from her own lips.

It was not a voice emanating from the pain enveloping her body, but a voice of despair and sorrow, of her spirit finally surrendering.

“I’m begging you... Please stop...”

As she spoke, the rapier in her right hand fell to the ground. Tears slid over her cheeks, splashing onto the mutilated blade.

But the red shadow before her instead emitted an expletive filled with hostility, and raised its two-handed sword high into the air.

— In that instant.

A thunderous roar rang out, stopping the blade hurtling towards Asuna and all of the battles taking place in various locations on the battlefield.

“STOOOOOOP!!” The one who had bellowed at an absolutely deafening volume was the man in the black poncho, who had been observing the battle from afar until now. He was the ghost of PoH, the leader of the murder guild — Laughing Coffin.

The neighboring countries’ players seemed to confirm that the man in the black poncho was indeed the commander through some sort of mark on him, and reluctantly lowered their weapons. The man about to execute Asuna smacked his lips loudly and sheathed his sword, but still delivered her a savage kick.

Asuna fell forward onto her face, but desperately pushed her body up with her powerless hands.

She raised her head and looked, only to see a tall man walking towards her, his black poncho billowing. He seemed to say something to the surrounding red players in a low yet carrying voice, but since it was in Korean, Asuna was unable to understand anything.

Then, the red soldiers around them nodded one by one, and began relaying some sort of message to their partners beside them.

Suddenly, the man standing beside Asuna seized her by her hair and yanked upwards. She couldn't help but let out a scream of pain, but the man ignored her completely, instead violently dragging her forward.

The same situation was occurring all around her. They seemed to be rounding up the surviving Japanese players into one place.

The man in the black poncho walked nonchalantly to the Human Empire Guardians, who still had their swords raised. He turned and waved a hand, making some sort of sign towards the man with a fistful of Asuna's hair in his grasp.

Then Asuna felt a foot kicking into her back and she flew several meters out, landing on the ground. One by one, the Japanese players were thrown around her.

There were fewer than 200 survivors left.

It seemed that health points directly correlated to survivability; the remaining people here were mostly high-level players. Asuna scanned them, but was unable to immediately spot the ALO Lords, or the members of the Sleeping Knights.

Their equipment had either been destroyed or snatched away; all they had left were the tattered clothes on their bodies. Many had exposed skin that was criss-crossed with scores of wounds, and even bits of sharp blades that had snapped off inside them. Yet everyone's faces were trickling with the same deep, deep powerlessness and frustration.

Asuna couldn't bring herself to watch them anymore. She very much wanted to lay down just like that and wait for the end to come.

But she still watched the converted players through her tearful eyes, intending to thoroughly burn their appearances into her mind.

Her eyes scanned the entire area once, and spotted a female player hugging her knees not far away, her shoulders trembling.

Her short pink hair was matted with dirt, her maroon clothing torn to shreds.

With movements that were almost to the point of crawling, Asuna came beside her and wrapped her arms around her best friend.

Lisbeth's body suddenly went taut, then she rested her head on Asuna's chest. Her face trembled, splashed a complete mess of blood and tears, and she whispered hoarsely:

“Everyone... I did this... to... everyone...”

“No... *No*, Liz!”

Asuna said tearfully in a loud whisper.

“It's not your fault, Liz. It was me... if only I could have thought this out more, if only I could have predicted this...”

“Asuna... I... didn't know anything. How horrifying war is... how painful it is to lose... I didn't know *anything*...”

Asuna couldn't think of an answer, and could only hug Lisbeth tightly. Tears began to slide from her eyes. Then she heard low sobbing, causing her to turn around and see Agil motionless on the ground, and Silica kneeling beside him.

Agil's injuries were so severe that it was astonishing to see him still alive. Perhaps they were from long, intense battling in order to protect Silica. His gigantic frame was stabbed with many snapped swords and spears, and his limbs were smashed beyond repair. It was a sight more wretched than any other. Asuna watched him as he tightly clenched his teeth; he must be enduring unimaginable agony.

Near Agil she could see Klein, sitting cross-legged and crestfallen on the ground. His left arm had been severed past his shoulder, and he had tied his wound with what could be called his signature headband.

All of the survivors were in essentially the same condition.

The man in the black poncho looked down upon the 200 people sitting defeated on the ground, robbed of their weapons, armor, and morale — and his exposed mouth split into a big, big grin under his hood.

Then he turned softly around and looked towards the Guardians of the Human Empire Army.

Asuna waited, terrified for the moment in which he would raise his right hand, delivering the order to massacre them all.

But the man in the black poncho instead spoke something unexpected in Japanese.

“Throw down your weapons and surrender. Then we will spare your lives and those of the prisoners behind us.”

Momentary shock showed on the Guardians’ faces, but it quickly changed into boiling rage. One of them took several steps forward, facing the man in the black poncho directly; it was the female Guardian leader, Sortiliena. Her sword had already been dulled and blood was trickling down her forehead, possibly from fighting on the very front line with Klein and the others.

Even so, this did not impede her beauty. Sortiliena yelled resiliently:

“... What sort of joke is that?! You really think we would give up at this point...”

“Do as he says—!!”

Asuna screamed desperately, interrupting Sortiliena.

Tightly hugging Lisbeth, she raised her tear-stained face and begged wretchedly:

“Please... you can’t die! No matter how much you are humiliated, you must live!! That is... our... only.....”

Hope.

Asuna felt her chest seize before she was even able to finish her sentence.

But, even though Sortiliena and the Guardians still pinched their lips tightly together, furrowed their brows furiously, and trembled for a moment, in the end, their shoulders slowly drooped downwards.

Clang, clang. Watching them toss their weapons to the ground, the neighboring countries' players who had tightly surrounded them let out high calls celebrating victory, which very quickly turned into a nonstop chant of their own countries' names.

The man wearing the black hood quickly raised one hand, called forth a few players, and gestured something to them. They immediately nodded, went to part the surrendered Human Empire Army, and walked into the circular formation.

Before Asuna understood what they were going to do, the man in the black poncho walked towards her with crisp footsteps.

Even at such a close distance, she still couldn't make out the darkness underneath his hood. She could only see the tough corners of his mouth and the black curly hair around his neck.

His mouth broke out in a contorted grin, and emitted a somewhat cheerful voice.

“Hey, long time no see, «Flash».”

— It really is him!!

Asuna held her breath, and squeezed out the words hiding deep within her heart.

“... You're... PoH...!”

“Aw, what a nostalgic name. I'm quite glad someone remembers it.”

At that moment, Klein, who had inched himself over with his right hand, looked up at the black hood with eyes that seemed ablaze.

“You... it’s actually you. You’re still alive... you fucking murderer!!”

Klein swiped at him with his hand, but the man’s boot easily kicked him aside.

Asuna grit her teeth tightly and whispered:

“Is this... revenge? Revenge against the members of the Progressors, who destroyed Laughing Coffin...?”

“

PoH looked down at Asuna in silence for a moment. Asuna could see his shoulders trembling slightly.

Seconds later, he seemed finally unable to hold it in, and exploded. His body twisted under his cloak as he roared with nonstop laughter: *heheheh, hahahaha*.

After his epileptic, deriding laughter finally concluded, PoH stuck out his right index finger and spoke in a very sunny voice:

“Ah, hmm... how would you Japanese put it... I’ve been in the US for so long, I’ve even forgotten all the slang.”

His finger twirled over and over in the air, then he finally snapped his fingers.

“Ah yes, ‘*Are you an idiot?*’ Simply hilarious, it really is...”

The man bent down, staring straight into Asuna’s face from an extremely close distance. Only his eyes were shining very, very brightly under his hood.

“... I’ll tell you then. The one who secretly let you lot of Progressors in on Laughing Coffin’s hidden base, *was me.*”

“Wha.....”

Asuna, Klein, and even Agil, who was nearing death, all opened their eyes wide.

“Why... would you do that...”

“Naturally, because I wanted to see a bunch of monkeys killing each other... but of course the most important reason was probably this: I... wanted to make you lot «murderers». By you lot, I mean the heroes who spent all day thinking themselves extraordinary, the Progressors who did all that pretentious posturing on the very front lines. The preparation work took fucking forever... I had to send out a warning to the people at LaughCof at the very last moment, and time it right so that they couldn't flee but could still engage.”

— So that was why intel on their operation to assault that secret base was prematurely divulged? Asuna was shocked, but she continued to think.

For this very reason, the Progressors, who had the advantage in level and equipment, were instead at a disadvantage not long after the battle began, and a few of them even perished. They were only able to turn the tables due to the efforts of Kirito, who was a solo player yet still managed to gain recognition for his strength. They were only able to turn the situation around because he had taken care of a certain leading force of Laughing Coffin...

“... That was... your goal?”

Asuna whispered hoarsely.

“To make Kirito-kun... shoulder the burden of having to PK...?”

“Yes. Absolutely yes.”

PoH confirmed Asuna's inquiry with a tinge of fervor in his voice.

“At the time, I was concealed nearby watching that show of a battle. When Blackie-sensei went berserk and killed two people, I almost burst out laughing and blew my cover. The plan was to drop you two later with Paralysis and then seriously live-interview you guys to ask how you felt... But I didn't expect the game to end on Floor 75.”

For an instant, boiling rage made Asuna forget the pain of her wounds.

“Do... Do you have any idea how much distress and suffering Kirito-kun went through because of what happened back then?!”

“Oh, that’s wonderful.”

PoH’s voice was as cold as ice, creating a stark contrast with her.

“But, that’s weird. If he really is remorseful about that... typically, he would never be willing to look at another VR game again, now would he? Because of the guilt towards the people he killed and all that. I know he’s here, I can feel it. Although I don’t know why he’d be hiding in a carriage... Whatever, I’ll ask him in person.”

PoH smirked at the speechless Asuna, then stood up forcefully.

Amid the nonstop cheers coming from around them, a glacial, chilling voice rang out:

“It’s show ti—me!”

He spoke his catchphrase from the time he had been active within the darkness of SAO. Then he quickly he raised his right hand, and right in front of him —

There appeared a wheelchair being coarsely shoved along by a red soldier, and a girl in gray uniform desperately tottering along behind it.

Ah...

Stop.

Anything but that.

Asuna prayed and pleaded miserably in her heart. Klein, however, tried to leap up from the ground, but was immediately pushed back down.

PoH bent down, looking at the wheelchair in front of him.

“..... Hmm?”

He made a surprised noise and nudged the thin legs dangling from the wheelchair with his foot.

“What’s this? Hey, Blackie, get up. You hear me, Esteemed Black Swordsman?”

Even as he was called by his past nickname — Kirito did not display any reaction whatsoever.

His body was clothed in a black shirt, but there was no concealing the fact that Kirito was already so thin that it made one feel bad for him. He leaned against the backrest, his head drooping deeply downwards. His empty right sleeve wavered in the wind, and the bones in his left hand, which were wrapped over two swords, were poking at his skin.

Ronye rushed beside Asuna, blinking her eyes red from crying, and whispered:

“Kirito-senpai... while you were all fighting, he k-kept trying to stand up... although he quickly quieted down like he had lost his strength... but... tears... tears kept streaming down his face...”

“Ronye-san...”

Asuna reached out her left hand and gently hugged Ronye’s slender, quaking body.

Then she looked up and shouted shrilly at PoH:

“You get it now. He fought, fought, and kept fighting, and ended up getting badly hurt. So stop messing with him! Let Kirito-kun rest!!”

But the man in the black poncho seemed not to hear Asuna at all, and kept staring at Kirito’s face from an extremely close distance.

“Hey, hey, *hey*, you gotta be kidding me! How do we drop the curtain like this!? Hey, get up! **Hey, stand up! Good morn... ning!!**”

PoH suddenly stuck out his left foot and kicked the silver wheel, hard.

The wheelchair was knocked over with a loud metallic noise, and the frail body within it was thrown to the ground.

Asuna and Klein tried to stand up at the same time, but were pushed back by the soldiers' swords. Agil let out a low bellow of rage, while Lisbeth, Silica, and Ronye softly screamed.

But PoH took no notice of them at all, instead walking beside Kirito, and coarsely flipping him over with the tip of his foot.

“What the hell... he's really broken? The great hero is only a puppet now?”

He seized the white hilt of one of the two swords that Kirito's left arm was still hugging tightly. Then, he powerfully wrenched it out of its scabbard, only to see half a blade, and the point where it had cruelly snapped.

PoH smacked his lips loudly, and was about to toss the sword away. But —

“Ah... Ah...”

Kirito emitted a hoarse shout, and his left hand reached helplessly towards the white sword.

“Huh?! He moved!! What, you want it?”



PoH dangled the white sword like he was tempting him, then tossed it away at random. He then violently seized Kirito's left hand, which was reaching towards him midair, and yanked him to his feet.

"Hey, say something!!"

PoH slapped Kirito's cheeks with his left hand.

Asuna's vision had been dyed pink with palpable rage. But just as she was about to stand up again, Klein's bloody howl had already exploded into being.

"You bastard!! Don't you fucking touch Kirito, you bastard — !!"

As Klein tried to swipe and grab PoH, a gigantic sword buried itself into his back and pinned him mercilessly to the ground.

He spat mouthful after mouthful of blood, but he ignored the growing laceration on his body, attempting to crawl forward.

"Only... YOU...!! Never... forgive..."

Crack!!

With a heavy noise, a second sword pierced straight through Klein's back.

Unstoppable tears flowed from Asuna's eyes once more, as though she were going to totally exhaust them before the day was out.

At that moment, the fear in Sinon's heart was more for her inability to freely fly rather than from the pain of an entire leg being blown away.

Before now, Sinon had flown freely by stepping onto the air. But now she was only able to quickly evade with her right foot, which turned into a rapid descent as she spun around chaotically.

"Urgh....."

Sinon clenched her teeth, changing her movements into the only maneuver she could still manage — flying backwards without stopping. The blood pouring from her left leg drew a bright red line in midair.

She increased the distance between her and Subtilizer at the fastest speed she could muster, while aiming at him and firing a third shot.

But, the enemy chased after her easily, and the sniper rifle in his hands also emitted a muzzle flash, firing a fourth shot.

The two bullets raced towards each other in the same straight line, emitted a sharp dissonant noise and bright sparks the moment they grazed each other, and then diverted from their paths and flew into the sky.

Sinon pulled back the bolt, ejected her endlessly expanding fear along with the empty bullet casing, and fired her fourth shot.

Two cracks of thunder overlapped each other. Two bullets exploded into immense amounts of energy upon making contact with each other, then each corkscrewed and disappeared.

The fifth shot. The sixth shot.

The results were the same. Subtilizer was obviously intentionally coordinating and firing at the moment Sinon fired, making the bullets collide with each other nonstop.

Such skill could not exist in GGO, let alone this world. But in this world, imagination preceded everything. Not only had Subtilizer, who was intentionally creating this result, realized this, even Sinon had too; that was why this bizarre phenomenon of supersonic bullets endlessly taking each other out kept happening.

Even so, other than the three actions of pulling back the bolt, aiming at the enemy, and pulling the trigger, Sinon was still unable to do anything else.

The seventh shot gave off a sorrowful wail, deviated on a huge curve left, and vanished.

Eject casing. Aim.

— *Click.*

As Sinon's finger pulled back, the firing pin emitted a hollow clicking noise.

The Hecate II's magazine capacity was seven rounds. She had no backup magazines.

Conversely, the Barrett XM500's magazine capacity was 10 rounds. Two more left.

Sinon could clearly see the icy smile floating into being on Subtilizer's face more than 100 meters away from her.

Flames violently sputtered from his raised sniper rifle.

Following her left leg, Sinon's right leg exploded as well.

This prevented her from flying in a straight line, and she began to slowly descend.

Controlling the recoil, Subtilizer's pressed his right eye up against his scope, preparing to fire the final shot. That eye that resembled blue glass took over the entire lens, directing his vision squarely onto Sinon's heart.

— I'm sorry.

I'm sorry, Asuna. I'm sorry, Yui. I'm sorry... Kirito.

After Sinon murmured to herself, the XM500's tenth round flew out of its barrel.

The bullet traced a corkscrewing tail of fire behind it, accurately flying along Subtilizer's vision trail, shattering Sinon's blue armor, torching her clothes, and penetrating towards her body —

Bang!!

Sparks were ejected once more.

Sinon widened her almost closed eyes, watching the long, thin, rapidly rotating bullet be stopped by a tiny, tiny silver disc.

Directly in the center of the rotating white sparks, the radiance shining from that metal barely two millimeters thick signified her own resilient willpower. The instant she saw all of this, Sinon's tears spilled over her eyelids.

— I can't give up.

I can never, ever give up. I have to believe. Believe in myself. Believe in Hecate. And believe in that boy connected to this piece of metal.

Sinon firmly raised the Hecate and placed her index finger on the trigger.

Even if this weapon had transformed into a gun with her imagination, its inherent system property would not change — that is, the power of the Bow of Solus: the ability to automatically absorb resources from its surroundings and store it as attack power.

Then it was able to be fired. Even if the bullets within its magazine had been depleted, the Hecate would definitely respond.

“Go... 0000——!!”

Sinon pulled the trigger.

What fired out was not an armor-piercing round wrapped in metal.

A pure-white ray of light comprised of condensed, infinite energy erupted in a kaleidoscopic halo from the muzzle brake, slicing straight through the sky.

The smile vanished from Subtilizer's face. The instant he tried to move right to dodge it, the white light struck the Barrett.

An orange fireball began to expand, completely devouring Subtilizer —

A deafening boom. An explosion.

Sinon felt the scalding gale press onto her face as she dropped like a stone, and seconds later she struck the rock-filled ground.

She hadn't the strength to crawl, let alone fly. The blinding pain from her dismembered legs made it hard for her to even maintain consciousness.

Even so, Sinon kept her eyes open, observing the results of her direct hit.

Wind blew away the black smoke dominating the faraway sky.

Appearing there — was Subtilizer, still hovering in midair.

But he was not unscathed. His right hand had been completely blown away by the explosion of his sniper rifle, and slight black smoke was rising from his shoulders. The right side of his once smooth face had been charred, and a trickle of blood was flowing from his mouth.

Cruel, murderous intent finally revealed itself on Subtilizer's face.

— Bring it on. I'll take you on, no matter how many times.

Sinon concentrated her remaining strength, trying to raise the Hecate.

Seconds later, Subtilizer looked away. The winged creature underneath him changed direction and, tracing a thin wisp of black smoke, flew directly south.

Sinon softly placed the anti-material sniper rifle on the ground; simply holding it exhausted her beyond belief. The instant it touched the ground, it changed back into the original white bow.

She used the last of her strength to raise her hands, caressing the part where the necklace had snapped from her chest.

“..... Kirito...”

As she murmured, tears slid softly down her cheeks.

Leafa was now unable to spare time to remove the sharp blades stabbing into her body.

All of the pain in her entire body mixed together, as though needles were directly piercing her exposed nerves.

A few of her wounds were clearly lethal. Every time she moved, the two swords piercing straight through her abdomen would harm her internal organs, and the sword digging into her back and out her chest had gone directly through her heart.

But Leafa did not stop moving.

“Ura... AAHHHHH!!”

As a great amount of blood splashed out while she roared furiously, she activated a Sword Skill that she had activated who knows how many tens of times — or how many hundreds of times.

The katana «Verduras Anima» sliced horizontally towards nothing with a green glow. After a moment of power concentration, the curve of light around her expanded silently, and the bodies of countless enemy soldiers were torn apart.

A few enemies seized the opportunity of her cooldown time after she activated that huge skill, charging at her. She leapt back at the last moment, but although she managed to dodge most of the attacks, a long halberd still managed to slice off her left arm.

She stamped both feet hard on the ground to stabilize her body, which had almost fallen from the impact...

“HAAHHH!!”

Her sword slashed horizontally once, and three men expired then and there.

Leafa picked up her arm that had dropped to the ground, placed it onto her wound, and stamped her right foot hard on the ground.

Flowers and grass sprouted from the ground with a flash of green light, then disappeared. Her health was restored to normal, and although her gruesome wounds were still present, her left arm was reattached.

In this sort of situation, the infinite regeneration granted to Terraria's account could no longer be called the grace of a god.

Rather, a curse would be a more appropriate moniker. No matter how many wounds she suffered, how intense the agony she tasted, she was never, ever allowed to fall. She was not able to die, yet she was not invincible; she was facing unthinkable torture.

The only thing that still kept Leafa going was faith.

— If it were Onii-chan.

He would never fall from just these wounds.

So I can't fall either. It's just three thousand people, of course I'll get rid of them all myself. Because... I'm... Onii-chan's... the «Black Swordsman» Kirito's...

“— *Little sisteeerrrrrrr!!*“

Crimson light shot from the tip of the katana in her grip.

Zoom! The katana stabbed forward with a low, metallic sound, shooting out a gigantic spear of light that pierced directly through the hundred meter-wide battlefield. The bodies of enemies were twisted, and finally disappeared.

“... *Huff... Huff.....*”

Her rapid breaths quickly become mouthfuls of blood.

Leafa wiped her mouth, stood shakily, and a spear came roaring, striking her right in the left eye and exiting through the back of her head.

She staggered back a few steps — but Leafa did not fall.

She gripped the spear handle with her left hand and wrenched it out in one go. A sensation that was not pain surged through the inside of her skull.

“*Urgh... Uraaaaaaagh!*”

She screamed, stamping her foot violently to recover her HP. The temporarily missing left half of her vision regenerated with a *blip*.

At a glance, before she had noticed, there were only around one hundred enemies left.

Leafa grinned, reached her bloodied left hand forward, pointed her palm upwards, and moved her clasped fingers.

Against the legion that came storming towards her, emitting utterly desperate howls, she swung her katana with a heavy *whoosh*.

“*Eeyah... AAAAAHHH!*”

The sword flashed.

Blood sprayed into the air as Leafa plunged fearlessly into the obstructed center of the enemy legion.

Roughly three minutes later, after the final enemy had fallen, Leafa’s body had been stabbed with ten more pieces of metal.

Her limbs lost all feeling as she wobbled and fell backwards, then was suspended in midair by the swords and spears protruding from her back that had hit the ground.

Listening to Rirupirin and the others screaming her name, as well as the footsteps running towards her, Leafa closed her eyes and murmured softly:

“I... did my best, didn’t I... Onii-chan...”

As Yanai pulled the trigger, a muffled shout simultaneously came through Higa’s left earpiece.

“Higa-kun, dodge!!”

Huh?

Dodge... dodge the bullet?

While this dull thought floated into his mind, Higa heard the whistling sound of something falling from a very high place.

Clang!

That was not the sound of a firearm discharging. It was the sound of something falling from the opening of the cable duct high, high above and colliding with Yanai’s forehead.

Yanai’s eyes widened and swiveled upwards. His left hand gripping the ladder suddenly slipped.

“Whoa... Wait...”

Higa suddenly forgot the pain in his shoulder, clutched the ladder, and brought his body as close to the cable duct as possible.

A wrench so big that one questioned where it had come from fell past first, and then a small handgun still wafting the smell of gunpowder crossed his vision.

Finally, Yanai’s unconscious body wedged itself into the gap between Higa and the duct, then stopped.

“Hee... Heee!”

Higa’s shoulders unconsciously shrunk back, and he pressed his back hard onto the wall.

Yanai’s body slid down slowly, smothering the stink of sweat onto Higa’s shirt, inching past —

“..... Ah.”

As Higa made that noise, Yanai plunged 50 meters straight down into the hole. Several clangs from colliding with the ladder sounded, and then came a final boom as he landed at the bottom.

“..... Um.”

Is he... dead? No, by the looks of it, he probably broke two or three bones... No, probably five or six...

Just as Higa's cognition was about to halt, what sounded like a scream rang out in his ear, interrupting his thoughts.

"Higa-kun... Hey, Higa-kun!! Are you all right?! Answer me, *hey!!*"

"..... Ah, no, I was just surprised... that even you can make that sort of sound, Rinko-senpai."

"How... How are you able to say something like that now?! Are you hurt?! Did he shoot you?!"

"Ah, um..."

Higa looked towards the wound on his right shoulder.

The amount of blood he was losing was somewhat frightening. His right hand had lost all feeling, and he felt very cold. Even his thoughts were not as quick as usual.

But Higa sucked in a deep breath and, after collecting his strength in his stomach for a moment, said as cheerfully as possible:

"No, I'm completely fine! Just a scratch. I'll continue the operation, please go back to monitor Kirito-kun's situation, Senpai!!"

"Are you really okay?! I'm going to believe you, okay?! If you try and trick me I'll never forgive you, okay?!"

"About that... Just trust me."

Higa looked up and carefully waved his hand at Rinko, who was poking her head into view at the entrance tens of meters overhead. The great distance, combined with inadequate lighting, should have made it hard for her to see that he was bleeding.

"Then... I'll head back to the main control first, and if the image changes I'll come right back! Good luck, Higa-kun!!"

The instant her silhouette was about to leave, Higa couldn't help but call out to her in a low voice:

“Ah... Rin-Rinko-senpai.”

“What, is something wrong?!”

“No... Um, uh...”

— Did you know? In university, not only were Kayaba-senpai and that bastard Sugou obsessed with you, even I was too.

Higa wanted to say this, but he kept feeling that if he said something like that, his own survivability would drastically decrease, so he said something random to tide it over.

“Um, after this is all taken care of, would you like to grab something to eat together?”

“... I got it, I’ll treat you to burgers, or beef bowls, or whatever, good luck!!”

Then Professor Koujiro’s silhouette disappeared from Higa’s sight.

— She’s really cheap.

Come to think of it, on the scale of «famous last words», that wouldn’t be too different.

Higa smiled bitterly, then turned back to the laptop in his left hand. He placed his numb right fingertips onto the keyboard and began carefully typing commands.

STL #3... Connected to #4. #5, #6... Connected.

Possibly due to loss of blood, the words before Higa’s eyes began to double themselves. He shook his head and murmured silently to himself.

— All right, Kirito-kun, it’s almost time to get up.

Through a curtain of tears, Asuna gazed at the figure of her lover, praying.

— Please, Kirito-kun. I’m willing to devote my heart, my life, my everything... So please, wake up.

— Kirito-kun.

— Kirito.

— Onii-chan.

..... Now... Kirito...

5

Kirito.

Someone seemed to be calling my name —

I was brought back from my light slumber.

Lifting my eyelids, I saw innumerable miniscule particles floating through orange light.

My hazy vision gradually regained its focus.

Fluttering white cloth — Curtains.

A silver window frame. Old-fashioned glass.

A swaying tree branch. An airplane contrail slowly streaking across the sky, tinted red by the setting sun.

I took a deep breath of the dust-filled air, lifted my upper body, and saw a sailor uniform from behind, standing in front of the deep-green chalkboard. A brush swished around, scrubbing away the last words inscribed in white chalk.

“... Um, Kirigaya-kun.”

I heard someone calling my name again. I turned to look, and met eyes with another female student peering down at me with an expression that looked timid, yet somewhat cross at the same time.

“I’d like to move the table.”

By the looks of it, I’d fallen asleep during a class meeting again, all the way until it was time to clean up.

“Ah... Sorry.”

I muttered, then lifted my bookbag from its hook beside the table with my finger, and stood up.

My head felt leaden.

It felt like the fatigue I had after finishing a really long — an unfathomably long movie. I couldn't remember any of the story, but the detritus from countless emotions seemed to linger in my mind. I shook my head hard.

I looked away from my female classmate who was giving me a funny look, and took a few steps towards the door at the back of the classroom, murmuring softly:

“What... Was it a dream...”

(To be continued)



Afterword

Thank you very much for reading *Sword Art Online 17: Alicization Awakening*.

(Please note, there will be plenty of spoilers below!)

I deeply apologize for making everyone wait for so long after the last volume, "Exploding". The meaning of this volume's subtitle, "Awakening", means "awakening", so does that mean Kirito-san, who's been slumbering since Volume 15, is finally going to wake up?! Everyone might be thinking about that, but I'm terribly sorry, because for a number of reasons, I can only leave you to wait for the answer in the next volume, with a "Will he awaken...? Or continue slumbering...?" cliffhanger. To be honest, I really wanted to include the entire "Chapter 21: Awakening", but that would make this volume very thick and Volume 18 very thin, throwing off the balance, so I could only tearfully cut it off here. It doesn't exactly make up for it, but everyone shouldn't need to wait too long for the next volume. It'll be the «next» volume after the «next», so please wait for a bit, everyone...!

Now, I'll talk a bit about the content of this volume. As Gabriel, Vassago, and Critter have schemed, VRMMO players from the US, Korea, and China mass-invade Underworld and begin a fierce battle with the Human Empire Army and the Japanese players. When I wrote this portion of the plot in the web version ten years ago, it was because there had been an atmosphere of exclusion against foreign players present in the world of Japanese online games back then, so I hope that everyone can properly reconsider that part after reading it. But since my writing ability wasn't up to scratch, I instead created something that resembled what happens when anger is incited against a common enemy, and this has always made me very ashamed.

While I was editing this into the Dengeki Bunko version, at one point I considered completely rewriting this section, but then I felt like that would only be fleeing from it... in the end I didn't change the general plot. As to how Kirito will resolve the enmity created by the «Inciting PKer» Vassago/PoH, who is also beginning to take action from the shadows in Progressive, please wait for the next volume for that information as well, everyone.

Fifteen years have transpired since SAO was conceived in a corner of the Internet. I cannot help but marvel that it has managed to survive for this long. But now there will be a movie, video games, and many other projects that will keep expanding the SAO world, and I ask for everyone's continued support from now on. Finally, to abec-san, who so majestically and beautifully portrayed Leafa, Sinon, and the others who charged into Underworld, and Miki-san, who is beginning an all-new challenge as my editor, thank you so much!

A certain day in March 2016

Kawahara Reki

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²⁶ Translation from <https://defan752.wordpress.com/sword-art-online-volume-17-alicization-awakening/>, <https://defan752.wordpress.com/sword-art-online-volume-17-chapter-21/> and <https://defan752.wordpress.com/sword-art-online-volume-17-afterword/> on February 19, 2017