

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・ラストイング

018

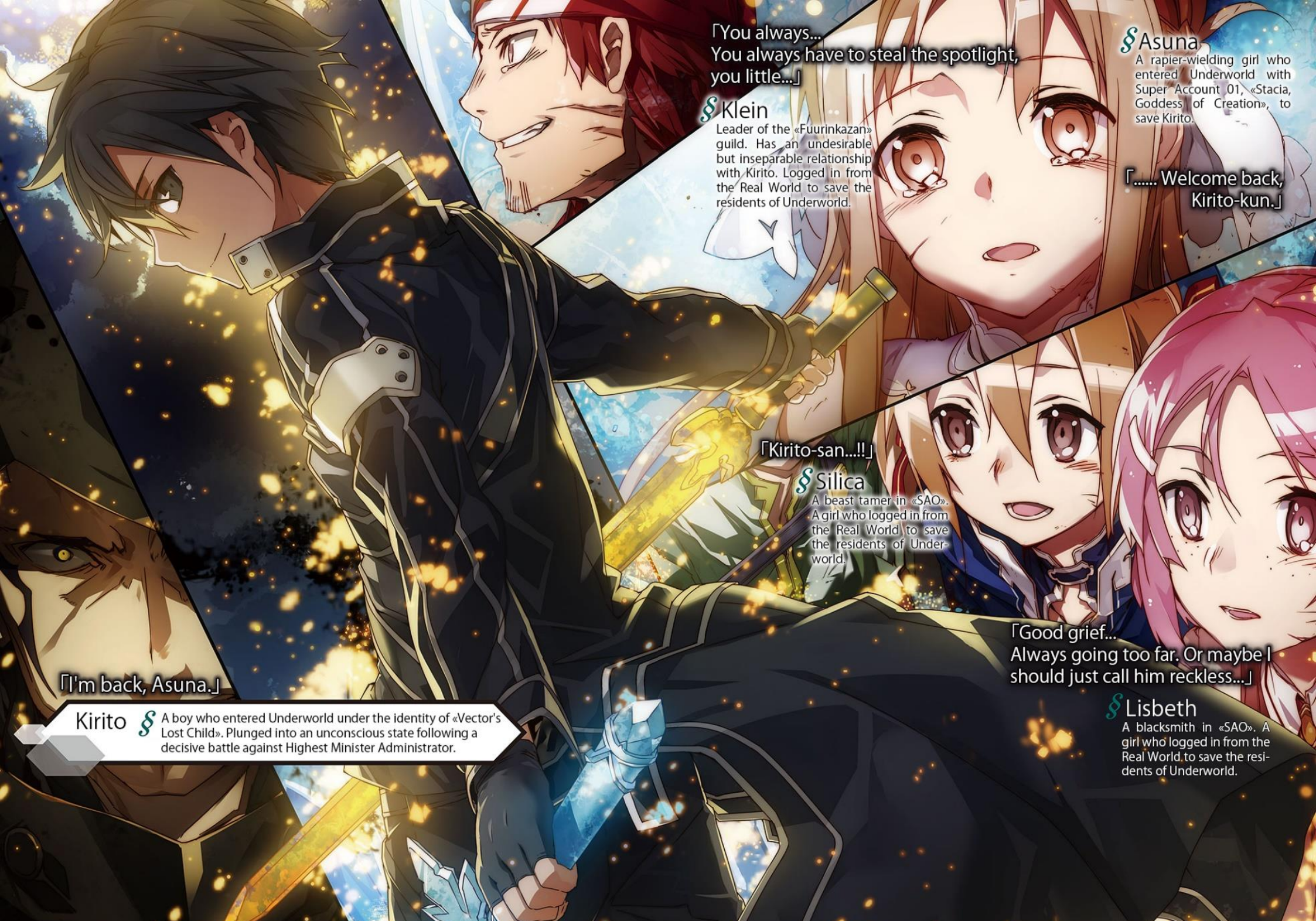


018

REKI KAWAHARA ABEC BEE-PEE

SWORD ART ONLINE

Alicization Lasting



「You always...
You always have to steal the spotlight,
you little...」

§ Klein

Leader of the «Fuurinkazan» guild. Has an undesirable but inseparable relationship with Kirito. Logged in from the Real World to save the residents of Underworld.

§ Asuna

A rapier-wielding girl who entered Underworld with Super Account 01, «Stacia, Goddess of Creation», to save Kirito.

「..... Welcome back,
Kirito-kun.」

「Kirito-san....!!」

§ Silica

A beast tamer in «SAO». A girl who logged in from the Real World to save the residents of Underworld.

「Good grief...
Always going too far. Or maybe I
should just call him reckless...」

§ Lisbeth

A blacksmith in «SAO». A girl who logged in from the Real World to save the residents of Underworld.

「I'm back, Asuna.」

Kirito

§ A boy who entered Underworld under the identity of «Vector's Lost Child». Plunged into an unconscious state following a decisive battle against Highest Minister Administrator.



「Your feelings, your memories, everything of your heart
and your soul... I will now devour it all.」

Gabriel

§ After the death of Super Account 04 «Vector,
God of Darkness», he logged in once more as «Subtilizer»,
his target the «Radiant Medium» Alice.

「— Here I come, Gabriel!!!」

「Alice, this is a path connected to that world...
connected to Underworld!!」

「In other words, the server that this
address points to is...」

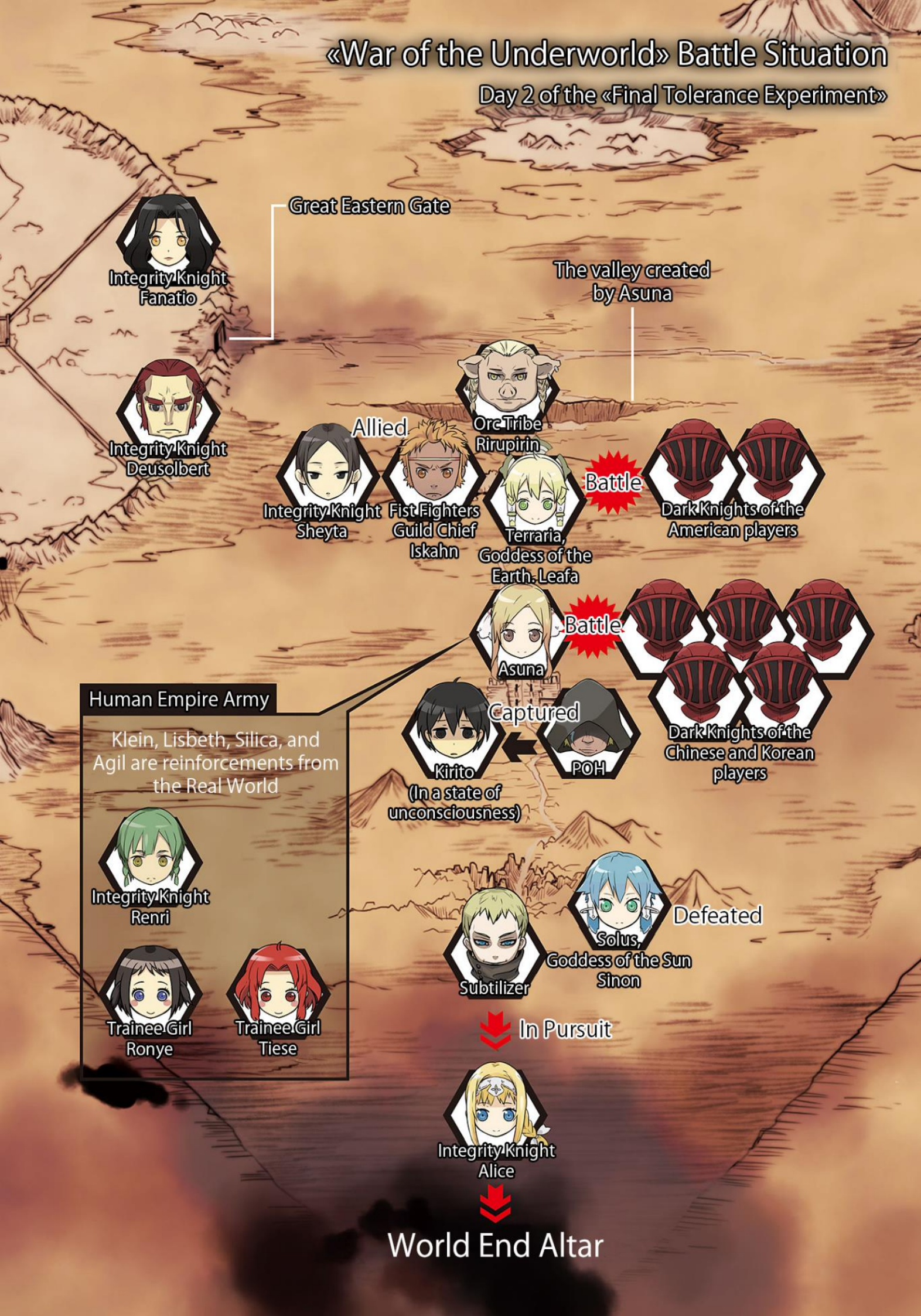
Yui § Originally a mental health counseling program in «SAO». The highest level top-down AI in the world.

「Does that mean...
I can go — no, I can return?
Return to that world... to my... world...」

Alice § An Integrity Knight from «Underworld». A boundary-breaking Fluctlight: The «Radiant Medium».

«War of the Underworld» Battle Situation

Day 2 of the «Final Tolerance Experiment»



Great Eastern Gate

Integrity Knight
Fanatio

The valley created
by Asuna

Integrity Knight
Deusolbert

Allied

Integrity Knight
Sheyta

Fist Fighters
Guild Chief
Iskahn

Ore Tribe
Rirupirin

Terraria,
Goddess of the
Earth-Leafa

Battle

Dark Knights of the
American players

Battle

Asuna

Captured

Kirito
(In a state of
unconsciousness)

POH

Dark Knights of the
Chinese and Korean
players

Human Empire Army

Klein, Lisbeth, Silica, and
Agil are reinforcements from
the Real World

Integrity Knight
Renri

Trainee Girl
Ronye

Trainee Girl
Tiese

Subtilizer

Solus,
Goddess of the Sun
Sinon

Defeated

In Pursuit

Integrity Knight
Alice

World End Altar



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

— 「Sword Art Online」 Programmer • Kayaba Akihiko

SWORD ART ONLINE
ALICIZATION LASTING

REKI KAWAHARA

ABEC

bee-pee

018

Eschdol Woolsberg — Eldrie's father. General of the Imperial Knight Order.

Almera Woolsberg — Eldrie's mother.



Chudelkin — Senate Elder. Possesses authority second only to the Highest Minister.

«Elevating Operator» — A girl who transports people between Floor 51 and Floor 80 in the Central Cathedral.



Hoshigami — Integrity Knight Bercouli's dragon.

Amayori — Integrity Knight Alice's dragon.

Yoiyobi — Integrity Knight Sheyta's dragon.

Takiguri — Integrity Knight Eldrie's dragon.
Amayori's elder brother.

Kazenui — Integrity Knight Renri's dragon.

«Dark Territory»

»» Dark Army

Viksul Ul Shasta — Dark Knight Commander. Also known as the «Dark General». Bercouli's archrival.

Lipia Zankale — A Dark Knight. Shasta's lover.

D.I.L. — Leader of the Dark Sorceress' Guild.

Sigrosig — Chief of the Giants.

Fe Za — Leader of the Assassins' Guild. Originally named Ferrius Zalgatin.

Rirupirin — Chief of the Orcs.

Renju — Noble female knight, close to Rirupirin.

Lengil Gira Scobo — Head of the Commerce Guild.

Iskahn — Tenth Champion of the Fist Fighters' Guild.

Dampe — Iskahn's right-hand-man.

Yotte — A diminutive Fist Fighter.

Fulgrr - Chief of the Ogres

Hagashi — Chief of the Mountain Goblins.

Kosogi — Hagashi's successor; the new Chief of the Mountain Goblins.

Kubiri — Chief of the Plains Goblins.

Shibori — Kubiri's successor; the new Chief of the Plains Goblins.

Lizard Slayer Ugachi — Squad Chief of the group of Plains Goblins intending to invade the the Human Empire.

Aburi — Ugachi's subordinate.

Foot Slicer Morikka — General of the Orcs that attacked Rulid Village.

Minion — Demons used by the Dark Sorceresses. Devoid of intelligence.



«Gods and Goddesses»

Stacia — Goddess of Creation. Goddess of Life. Super Account 01.
Possesses the power of «Geographical Manipulation».

Solus — Goddess of the Sun. Super Account 02.
Possesses the power of «Infinite Flight» and
«Wide-Range Annihilatory Attacks».

Terraria — Goddess of the Earth. Super Account 03.
Possesses the power of «Infinite Automatic Regeneration».

Vector — God of Darkness. Super Account 04.
Possesses the power of «Memory Alteration».



REAL WORLD

Kirigaya Kazuto — The hero of «SAO». «Black Swordsman» Kirito.

Kirigaya Suguha — Kazuto's stepsister. A magical swordswoman
in «ALO». Character name «Leafa».

Kirigaya Midori — Kazuto's mother. An editor.

Kirigaya Minetaka — Kazuto's father.



Yuuki Asuna — Rapier-wielder in «SAO». Kazuto's lover.
Character name «Asuna».

Yuuki Shouzou — Asuna's father. Former CEO of «RECT».

Yuuki Kyouko — Asuna's mother. University professor.



Yui — The highest level top-down AI in the world.

Shinozaki Rika — A blacksmith in «SAO».
Character name «Lisbeth».



Ayano Keiko — A beast tamer in «SAO».
Character name «Silica».



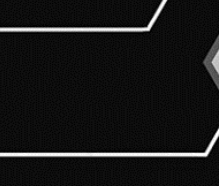
Asada Shino — A sniper in «GGO». Character name «Sinon».



Andrew Gilbert Mills — A weapons merchant in «SAO».
Owner of the «Dicey Cafe».
Character name «Agil».



Tsuboi Ryoutarou — Leader of the «Fuurinkazan» guild in «SAO».
Character name «Klein».



Sakuya — Race Leader of the Sylphs in «ALO».

Alicia Rue — Race Leader of the Cait Siths in «ALO».

Mortimer — Race Leader of the Salamanders in «ALO».

Eugene — General of the Salamanders in «ALO».
Mortimer's younger brother.

Chrysheight — Kikuoka's character in «ALO».



Siune — A member of the «Sleeping Knights» guild.

Talken — A member of the «Sleeping Knights» guild.

Jun — A member of the «Sleeping Knights» guild. Nori — A member of the «Sleeping Knights» guild.

Tecchi — A member of the «Sleeping Knights» guild.

Yuuki — Leader of the «Sleeping Knights» guild.



Hirono Takeshi — Japanese VRMMO player.

Kanamoto Atsushi — Originally Johnny Black of «Laughing Coffin».
Attacked Kirito and caused him to fall into a coma.

Shinkawa Shouichi — Death Gun. Originally Red-Eyed XaXa of «Laughing Coffin».

Shinkawa Kyouji — Death Gun. Shouichi's younger brother.
Originally Shino's classmate.



Subtilizer — Champion of the «Fourth Bullet of Bullets». Defeated Sinon.

»» RATH

Kikuoka Seijirou — An official of the JSDF who transferred to the Virtual Reality division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. Lieutenant Colonel. Supervisor of «RATH».



Higa Takeru — Project supervisor of «Alicization». The final student of Touto Technical University's Shigemura Laboratory.

Nakanishi — A colonel. «RATH» member.

Aki Natsuki — «RATH» nurse. Sergeant First Class.

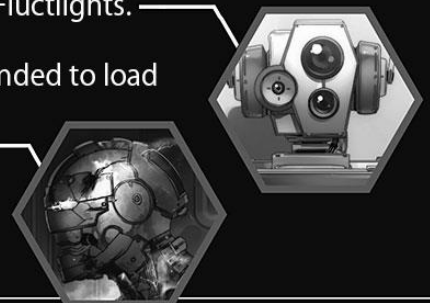


Hiraki — Head of development at the Roppongi branch of «RATH».



«Ichiemom» — Officially named «Electroactive Muscled Operative Machine 1». First prototype of a humanoid machine body intended to load Artificial Fluctlights.

«Niemom» — Second prototype of a humanoid machine body intended to load Artificial Fluctlights. Vastly improved performance compared to «Ichiemom».



Yanai — «RATH» member.

A spy. Originally a slug researcher for «RECT Progress».



Kayaba Akihiko — Developer of SAO. Former member of «Shigemura Lab».

Koujiro Rinko — Kayaba's former lover. Earned a PhD from the California Institute of Technology.

Former member of «Shigemura Lab».



Sugou Nobuyuki — Former employee of «RECT Progress».

Former member of «Shigemura Lab».



Jo Wol-saeng — A Korean VRMMO player.

Character name «Moonphase».

Myonwan — A Korean VRMMO player. Moonphase's online friend.

Helix — A Korean VRMMO player. Moonphase's online friend.

»» Ocean Turtle Infiltration Squad

Gabriel Miller — An employee of private military contractor «Glowgen Defense Systems».

Leader of a strike force team intending to steal Alice's Light Cube.

Vector, God of Darkness. GGO character name «Subtilizer».



Alicia Klingerman — Gabriel's childhood friend.

Ferguson — Chief Operating Officer of Glowgen Defense Systems.

Dario Geriani — Captain of the Seawolf-class submarine «Jimmy Carter».



Vassago Casals — A member of a strike force team intending to steal Alice's Light Cube. Originally the leader of «Laughing Coffin», «PoH».

Critter — A member of the strike force team.

A hacker for Glowgen Defense Systems' cyber operations.



Brigg — A member of the strike force team. Fought in the Middle East. Warlike personality.

Hans — A member of the strike force team. Fought in the Middle East. Usually speaks in a feminine tone.

Shack — A member of the strike force team.

Chapter 21

Awakening (Continued)

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

6

“Only... YOU...! Never... forgive...”

Crack!!

A second sword pierced straight through Klein’s body with a dull sound.

Tears, never running dry all this time, flowed uncontrollably from Asuna’s eyes.

Even while pinned heavily to the ground, Klein clawed at the earth with his right hand as the inciter in the black poncho — PoH, the former leader of the murder guild «Laughing Coffin», viewed him from above with a look of deep disgust.

“Ahh, I can’t watch this anymore. Nobodies like you should just get out of the way like the nobodies you are. This is what happens when you butt in and play the hero.”

PoH shook his head while spreading his arms, and then, in a language Asuna couldn’t understand, indicated something to the crimson knight players standing behind Klein. One of them nodded and raised another sword.

Just as the third gleaming blade was about to blast away what had to be the last of Klein’s HP—

“Hajimaaaaaaaaaaaa!!²”

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

2 Korean, “Stop”.

One of the crimson knights exploded from the rear of the human wall and with a scream that sounded Korean, used his own sword to block the blade about to fall upon Klein.

—You’ve gotta be kidding me... How does it hurt this much?

Jo Wol-saeng/Moonphase remained prone on the ground, enduring the pain on his back where the man in the black poncho had slashed him.

The AmuSphere he was using should only be able to generate a very weak sensation of pain. As a matter of fact, even if his avatar’s head were crushed in the jaws of a colossal dragon in the game he played so much, «Silla Online», he would only feel a jolt akin to numbness.

And yet, Wol-saeng was experiencing an excruciating agony as if he had been scalded with a torch.

No, if he were injured the same way in the real world, he wouldn’t be feeling just this. That man in the black poncho had swung his fiendish, thickset Chinese cleaver-like weapon so fast that not even Wol-saeng, who thought himself a veteran player, had time to react. He would probably die instantly if he were attacked like that in the real world, and if not, he would experience pain so intense that it would be difficult to remain conscious. That was why this pain could only be a virtual sensation.

But despite his awareness of this, an unbearable sensation was still unbearable. Wol-saeng almost wanted to abandon the scene before him and log out of the game as fast as he could.

But even as he curled up pitifully atop the black dirt, he kept enduring the pain, because he could not accept the situation playing out right before his eyes no matter what.

Japanese hackers have «attacked» the closed beta testing server of a new VRMMORPG jointly developed by American, Chinese, and Korean volunteers, and are killing the developers in the game world. We hope that everyone can fight to stop the barbarity of these Japanese.

This social media appeal was what the Korean players, Wol-saeng included, and the Chinese players were responding to before diving into this VRMMO. They then bore witness to a group of Japanese players annihilating another group of players, supposedly Americans.

But — did that scene really fit the explanation by whomever had sent out the appeal?

As Wol-saeng saw it, it seemed instead that the Japanese were the more desperate ones, while the Americans looked more like they were playing a game. This impression had not changed, not even when the tide of battle had been turned by the «rescue» from tens of thousands of Korean and Chinese players, and even now, with most of the Japanese incapacitated. Even with their equipment shattered and their HP bordering on running out, they were putting their lives on the line to... Yes, they were trying to protect something, not destroy it.

Before Wol-saeng was slashed by that man in the black poncho, a female player from the group of Japanese had made a plea in native Korean that went like this:

—You’ve all been lied to. This server belongs to a Japanese company, we’re not hackers, we’re the rightful users. You were all tricked by false information into coming here to interrupt its development.

Something about the voice and expression of that female player calling herself Siune had greatly moved Wol-saeng.

So he had endured hell and high water to get close to her in that free-for-all, to ask her *“Do you have a way to prove what you are saying?”*, and just as Siune’s partner was about to respond in Japanese, Wol-saeng was attacked by a slash from the man in the black poncho and was unable to get back up.

The developments that followed went blindingly quickly and were completely one-sided. The Japanese players were crushed by the crimson legion. A large portion of them lost all of their HP and were forcibly ejected from the game while the surviving half, numbering less than 200, were stripped of their weapons and rounded up in one place.

At that point Wol-saeng thought that the man in the black poncho, appearing again at the very front lines, was going to declare their victory, but instead he did something odd.

A single player wearing black clothes, sitting in a wheelchair and hugging two swords in his lap, was removed from a group of what appeared to be Japanese reinforcement players, and then the man in the black poncho began accosting him nonstop in Japanese.

This is getting weirder and weirder, thought Wol-saeng.

What on earth was a wheelchair doing in a virtual world — a VRMMO?

In the game he played frequently, «Silla Online», if one’s feet were injured or suffered otherwise abnormal status effects, free movement on foot would be restricted. But you would be able to fully recover with the use of magic, medicine, or simply waiting until time was up. If your ability to walk was so impeded that you needed a wheelchair to get around, then at that point it couldn’t just be an in-game punishment.

What was more, that young man in black seemed to have some sort of impediment to his consciousness; he did not react to anything the man in the black poncho said, and even when the man shook him he offered no resistance.

One might think that if he wasn't an NPC, then he was probably an empty character uninhabited by an online player.

Finally, as though he could not bear it anymore, the man in the black poncho delivered a merciless kick at the wheelchair's silver wheel and knocked it over. In a flash, Wol-saeng forgot the pain on his back and held his breath. The Koreans around him let out noises of confusion, unable to grasp the situation.

At last, the young man sprawled on the ground displayed a reaction of his own accord: he reached his left arm towards the white blade out of the two swords he had been hugging so precious until a moment ago. When Wol-saeng saw this he finally realized that there was nothing past the boy's right shoulder.

But his hand was still unable to touch the sword, because the man in the black poncho had picked it up first, and was holding it somewhat high out of reach as if he were taunting a child. The young man scrambled on the ground, desperately reaching for the sword, trying to get it back. The man in the black poncho seized the boy's left arm and violently yanked him to his feet. Loud words came from his mouth while his right palm struck the boy's cheek twice, three times.

All of a sudden, a new scream shattered the scene.

One of the captured Japanese players, wearing samurai-styled armor and a bandanna on his head, tried to grab the man in the black poncho.

But in the next instant a Korean player's sword thundered from behind and buried itself deeply into the samurai's body. Clearly enduring agony much greater than Wol-saeng's, he attempted to keep advancing forward but then a second sword stopped him.

The man in the black poncho sneered at the male samurai pinned to the ground. Then he delivered an order in Korean to the crimson knights.

"He's a nuisance. Kill him."

One of the crimson knights nodded and raised a third sword.

He just could not silently watch this happen anymore. He had not seen proof of what Siune claimed, but at the very least he despised the black poncho man's act of kicking over the wheelchair. On the other hand the samurai's desperate act gave Wol-saeng a strong impression that he was trying to protect his comrade.

Wol-saeng didn't hold much goodwill towards the country of Japan. Putting aside historical and territorial problems, their insular, scornful attitude made it seem like they thought they were the most superior nation in all of East Asia. The best proof of that was the fact that they had released The Seed Nexus to western nations, but specifically excluded connections from Korea and China.

—However.

The whole country of Japan did not equate to every single Japanese person living within it. There weren't many of them, but in the few international servers that did exist in the computer games before VRMMOs, he did have some unpleasant memories of certain Japanese players there, but of course he also had warm, amiable experiences of playing together with them.

Wol-saeng now loathed that man in the black poncho. He wanted to believe Siune and that samurai. It had nothing to do with them being Japanese or Korean. The simple reason was that a voice was screaming to him in his heart to do so.

The instant he acted, another wave of blinding, dizzying agony pierced through his back, racing up to his head, but he clenched his teeth and got up. He drew out his longsword and inhaled a chest full of air—

“..... *Hajimaaaaaaaaaa!*”

Roaring furiously as loudly as he could, Wol-saeng kicked off the ground.

The system granted very average stats to the crimson knight avatars; Wol-saeng's movements were a good deal heavier than that of his usual speed-type character «Moonphase» in Silla Online. But because of the effect of some unknown force, only in this moment did Wol-saeng fly across the wilderness like a gale and just barely manage to block with his own blade the sword about to steal the samurai's life.

“You... What're you doing?!”

The crimson knight right in front of him bellowed in Korean, with shock — and much more, rage — in his voice. Had it been a Chinese, he would have been done for, so Wol-saeng did not waste this tiny stroke of luck and desperately tried to persuade the player.

“I wanted to ask *you* whether you think this is weird?! The battle is over! Why are we doing still doing things that basically amount to lynching?!”

Hearing him say this, his fellow countryman was forced to fall silent, and turned his gaze to the samurai collapsed at his feet and the wheelchair boy sprawled on the ground behind Wol-saeng. The eyes behind the visor blinked, seeming to hesitate. He had to have been growing confused too as the frenzy of battle cooled down. The grip on the sword he was pressing against Wol-saeng's slowly relaxed.

But before Wol-saeng could speak again, a sharp voice flew out of the human wall surrounding the scene.

“*Baesinja!*³”

“Kill him too!”

As though he were being spurred on by the fury of his comrades, the crimson knight before him renewed his grip on the longsword.

But what Wol-saeng heard next completely exceeded his expectations.

3 Korean, “Traitor”

“Wait! Hear what this guy has to say!”

“That poncho guy’s taking it too far!”

At a glance, Koreans all over the wall of players had also begun to argue. The embers of discussion spread instantly, dividing the players into the radicals — who wanted to kill every last one of the surviving Japanese — and the moderates — who wanted to wait until the situation was properly explained before taking any action. Fierce arguments erupted between the two factions, and this dichotomy even spread to the Chinese: one could hear unintelligible roars rising and falling on the wilderness.

How was their only leader going to handle this situation?

Just as Wol-saeng was pondering this, he turned to look—

Standing beside the one-armed boy lying on the ground, the man in the black poncho was twirling his thick cleaver-like dagger, a great, great sneer curving the mouth hidden deep under his hood.

It took Wol-saeng only a moment to understand that he was not looking at anger, but suppressed laughter. A shudder, cold enough to offset his pain, ran down Wol-saeng’s spine.

This man had absolutely nothing to do with a game jointly developed by Chinese, Korean, and Americans or whatever. Whether such a game even existed was highly doubtful. He wasn’t clear on the details, but it was just for the sake of pitting players from every country against each other in a fight on this battlefield with real blood and real suffering... No, pitting them in a massacre against each other. That was his only goal.

“.....*Agma*⁴.....”

Wol-saeng heard the hoarse word slip from his own mouth.

4 Korean, “Demon”.

Vassago Casals was born in San Francisco, in the slum district of the Tenderloin. His mother was of Spanish heritage and his father was Japanese.

The US birth certificate agency refused names that clearly caused harm to a child. So his mother named him Vassago, instead of Devil, or Satan. The functionary was not aware that Vassago was a minor demon named the «Prince of Hell», and approved the application.

There was only one reason a mother would give a demon's name to her own child. She had not wanted him to be born — putting it more extremely, she hated this child with every fiber of her being.

Vassago did not know the details on how his parents met, nor did he want to know. Put simply, it had probably been a «monetary transaction». The pregnancy had been an unexpected development. His mother wanted to abort him, but gave birth to Vassago under his father's orders. In that sense, did it mean that his father had wanted him? That was not the case. His father only occasionally checked on the child's health without so much as bringing him a toy for a gift. The only thing he left with Vassago was his knowledge of Japanese.

It was not until he reached the age of fifteen that Vassago finally knew why his father had refused to allow his mother to abort him, and even put in the least amount of child-rearing expenses possible.

A child with a congenital kidney defect had been born into his father's side of the family, and Vassago had been ordered to become his donor. He was completely unable to refuse, but he raised one condition: he expressed his desire to live in his father's home country, Japan. After completing his donation duty, Vassago lost all value as an existence to his father, so he did not know how much longer he could stretch his allowance. The only future awaiting him if he stayed in the slums was as a drug dealer, so he decided to simply leave the country and begin anew in a new world.

His father accepted his condition and exchanged a passport and plane ticket for Vassago's left kidney. Without saying goodbye to his mother, Vassago left for Japan, but what awaited him there was an even crueler fate.

Japanese law required a complicated procedure and strict review for international adoptions, and even if Vassago were successfully adopted, the authorities did not grant residency permits to children above the age of six. So from the very beginning, the only thing he had was a life in the criminal underworld.

Vassago was taken in by a Korean criminal syndicate, who granted the English, Spanish, and Japanese-speaking teenager a counterfeit ID and trained him into an assassin.

Having completed nine «jobs» in his past five years upon turning twenty, Vassago received his tenth job, with rules of engagement entirely different from any job he had received before.

It involved killing a target in a virtual world, one who would normally be completely unapproachable in the real world.

The meaning of that directive downright escaped him at first, but he finally understood after hearing the gist about the «SAO incident» taking place a few days before. Vassago's target, having been enfolded into the incident, was currently holed up in his heavily guarded residence and would never set foot outside. Leaving it to the death game was unreliable, since he couldn't be sure on which day he would die, and there was even the possibility of him escaping without dying at all. But if Vassago dived into the same game as him and removed all of his HP, the NerveGear in the real world would help take him out.

But there were three big problems with this method.

First, as an assassin, Vassago himself would also be unable to logout of the game before it was completely cleared. Second, if he died in the game, he would lose his life in the real world as well.

And third, Vassago could not directly attack the target on his own, because if player-on-player violence was logged, that would become evidence of an assassination.

Faced with such an impossibly difficult mission, the syndicate offered him an astronomical sum in reward money. Vassago was not too sure whether the group could even pay out such a sum in the event that he successfully completed the mission, but he didn't have the right at all to refuse anyway.

Almost all unused NerveGears had been confiscated by the police, but the syndicate managed to obtain one through unknown means. All they needed now was a copy of the SAO game software and the willpower to enter the death game of one's own accord; neither the police nor the game's development company possessed a way to stop him from doing the latter. Finally, he encountered unexpected difficulty in choosing his character name, but eventually decided on adopting a moniker akin to the original name his mother gave him: «PoH».

Vassago's first experience in a true virtual world changed, or rather, *liberated* his personality. The Japanese players surrounding him reminded him of his father and relatives, whom he had forgotten for many years, and it was then that he finally realized how much he loathed them — all East Asians.

He had to take out his target because it was his job. But he also wanted to kill as many other players as he could.

Steeling his determination, Vassago founded the largest murder guild in SAO, «Laughing Coffin», and stole the lives of a great many players other than his original target. Eventually, after getting fed up with leading an overly large organization, he orchestrated a clash between his guild and the Progressors, letting them kill each other off. Just as he was preparing to personally take out the ones he viewed as his greatest, most prized prey, the «Flash» and the «Black Swordsman», the game was cleared.

The first thing Vassago felt upon returning from the death game to the real world was not joy, but despondency and disappointment.

Although he knew that there was no way he was going back to that dreamlike world, he decided to return to America to pursue the same experience. The syndicate boss was unwilling to fork over the reward money, so Vassago killed him and took the cash. Upon returning to the US he entered the cyberoperations department of a private military contractor headquartered in San Diego.

In VR combat training he sparred against servicemen of the National Guard and Navy, and after flexing the skill he had honed within SAO, Vassago was immediately singled out and promoted to an instructor. But even with a stable life utterly incomparable to what he had before, there was no satisfaction in his heart.

Again. He wanted to go back to that world again. That true virtual world where all was digital and humans displayed their true nature, that true world tainted with lies.

Having maintained this wish for so long, it had to have been not a miracle, but fate that he would encounter the «Flash» and the «Black Swordsman» once more in a frighteningly realistic virtual world named Underworld.

The Black Swordsman's mental state seemed currently altered for some reason, but if Vassago killed all of the players around him, he would awaken for sure. It was because the Black Swordsman reacted in such a manner that Vassago — PoH was more drawn to him than anyone he had ever met. He even felt that as long as he got to kill this boy with his own hands, he would be indifferent to committing suicide afterwards.

First, he instigated a mutual massacre between the Chinese and Koreans he had tricked with false information into entering Underworld, and plunged them into a bloodbath. He had never expected an off-the-cuff fib to hold for too long. Quite a number of people felt off about it and began arguing with the firmly hot-blooded patriots. When things grew just tense enough, all they needed was one spark.

The man who had just delivered a blow towards him was a slight distance, currently attempting to persuade his fellow countryman and showing no intention of losing hope. Vassago only needed to cleave the man's head from his shoulders and yell at everyone to kill all cowards, and the overzealous patriots would draw their swords just as easily.

"Just wait... I'll wake you up in no time..."

Vassago murmured towards the blank-faced black swordsman sprawled on the ground. It was then that he noticed that the young man's profile looked a bit like his brother from a different mother, whom he had caught a brief glimpse of before their kidney transplant surgery. Stinging pain stabbed him in the chest.

He'd kill the «Black Swordsman» and the «Flash» in this world first and force them to logout, and then he would follow suit. Then he would find them, hidden somewhere on the Ocean Turtle, and kill them again, with extreme prejudice.

The thought of that moment alone seemed enough to slightly alleviate the pain in his left abdomen, which had never once vanished since his kidney had been stolen from him at age fifteen.

Deep underneath his hood, Vassago grinned and murmured again towards the young man lying at his feet:

"If you keep sleeping like this, everyone's gonna die. Come on, wake up. Please."

Vassago began to walk again, his right hand playing with his favorite weapon, the «Mate Chopper».

Crunch.

Her soul deprived of strength, Asuna listened to the sound of someone's shoe stepping against the arid ground.

Crunch, crunch. A cold, robotic sound, yet rhythmic at the same time, like there was a jig in their step.

It was the sound of the footsteps of the reaper, a sound she had heard many times before, within the now-gone floating castle.

Looking up, she watched as the black poncho silhouette walked towards her from beside Kirito, lying about twenty meters away.

No, he was not walking towards her. He was walking towards her right, towards Klein, who had been pierced by two swords in his right side. Probably to personally deal with that samurai, who seemed to be struggling against death with willpower alone.

But after a moment, she quickly noticed that she had been wrong again.

Close to Klein, who was lying on the ground, two knights in crimson armor were arguing fiercely in unintelligible Korean. It was then that Asuna realized that the gigantic legion numbering tens of thousands of knights surrounding the surviving Japanese players and Underworld troops, was also locked in turbulent opposition left, right, and center.

This had to be the confrontation between the players who had realized PoH's lies and the players who still believed him. At this rate, the slightest sign of trouble would cause the latter to turn their swords against the former, which would expand the chain reaction of hate onto the Chinese-Korean allied players. And PoH was trying to prevent that...

———No.

No. No.

That man intended to personally ignite this all-new conflict spreading gradually across the battlefield.

Just as he had intentionally leaked the location of the headquarters of his own murder guild, «Laughing Coffin», so as to allow the Progressors to engage them in a bloody crusade.

Asuna could not understand the benefit behind allowing one's own troops to be halved. But she was certain that something extremely vile was about to happen.

PoH advanced at a leisurely pace, indicating something in Korean.

As though they were casting away their momentary doubt, the two men who had stopped Klein seized a different person, then each of them grabbed one of his arms and robbed him of his freedom.

With a *whip*, the reaper in the black poncho renewed his grip upon his thick cleaver.

He meant to personally execute this «traitor», then raise his head high, using that to incite the Chinese and Korean players who still believed him now and spur them to attack their own comrades.

She must not allow that to happen. Although her ultimate goal was to protect the Underworld residents, she really ought not to stop the crimson knights from killing each other. Even if their number was halved there would still be more than ten thousand of them. Moreover, at that time their hearts would be boiling with deeper rage and hostility than before, and those negative emotions would be directed at the Japanese and Underworld residents.

On top of that, the halved number of Chinese and Korean players incited by PoH and about to be murdered, were slowly realizing the truth behind this world... They were beginning to believe the Japanese players who had spoken out to them. She simply could not watch them be murdered.

She had to act. She had to stand up and swing her sword to stop PoH's execution.

But neither her hands nor her feet had any strength left in them. Every time she took a breath, the countless wounds that laced her body would throb, weakening her fading consciousness.

.....No..... I can't get up.

Asuna exhaled feebly, remaining knelt on the dry ground.

She slowly curled her back. Her filthy, disheveled hair fell from her shoulders, obscuring her vision.

Just then.

It's all right.

You can do it, Asuna. Stand up.

Someone's faint, yet firm voice entered her ears.

Someone's arm gently, yet powerfully encircled Asuna's shoulders.

Warm light flowed into her body — into her soul. A refreshing breeze blew away all of pain in her body.

Come on, Asuna. Stand up.

To protect what's important to you.

Asuna's right hand twitched, crawled across the ground, and grabbed what had fallen on the ground.

The hilt of «Radiant Light», the rapier of Stacia, the Goddess of Creation.

Raising her face, she saw the reaper in the black poncho raising his cleaver high, high in the air, as it emitted a blood-red gleam. The captured crimson knight had frozen to the spot, as if out of fear. The commotion all around had ceased and all eyes were concentrated on the blade, devoid of mercy.

Holding her breath, clenching her teeth, concentrating the very last bit of strength she had...

Asuna kicked hard off the ground.

“Ooh... AAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!”

She pulled back the rapier in her right hand with a scream that felt like she was spitting out a mouthful of blood.

The sharp tip ejected a white flash. A basic Sword Skill she had used many thousands, even tens of thousands of times in the past: «Linear».

PoH noticed Asuna's surprise attack with astonishing reaction speed.

“Ohh...”

Emitting a grunt she threw her upper body backwards. Asuna frantically thrust her right hand towards the darkness deep within the hood far away.

She felt some resistance. A lock of black curly hair flew towards the sky and droplets of blood slipped from gray skin.

—He dodged it!

Whether it was in Underworld or in Aincrad, activating a Sword Skill would create a large opening with it. Instantly Asuna was plunged into a fatally rigid state and PoH's cleaver was already thundering towards her, slicing the air as it came.

But at the same time Asuna concentrated her imagination under PoH's feet.

Variegated light blossomed slightly from the ground and vanished. Asuna used the power of Stacia the Goddess of Creation to raise the ground under PoH, with his feet as the center, a few centimeters into the air.

It was only a slight bit of geographical manipulation but her head was stabbed by a thunderous pain like a bolt of lightning. After she had paid such a price, the black reaper's body lost balance and the cleaver only slashed a hole into Asuna's clothes.

“Gur... rgh!”

Released from the rigid state, Asuna pulled back the rapier again.

“Rrgh!”

PoH raised his cleaver straight ahead of him, poncho whirling.

A jab with godlike speed clashed ferociously with an unyielding slash, spitting pure white and crimson red sparks.

Asuna summoned all of her strength to force back the sword clash while demanding hoarsely:

“What the hell... do you want?”

The corner of PoH’s exposed mouth under his hood lifted silently, and he responded in an coarse voice:

“Do I have to spell it out for you? I want that «black» guy... Ever since I first tried to kill him on the fifth floor of Aincrad he’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“...Why do you hate Kirito-kun so much? What’s he ever done to you?”

“Hate...?”

PoH repeated, sounding very disappointed. He brought his face slightly closer and murmured:

“I thought you, of all people, would understand how much I *love* him. He’s the only guy I can trust unconditionally in this whole shit-ridden world. No matter how much pain I put him through he doesn’t break, and no matter how much I tempt him he doesn’t sink. He brings me hope and joy no matter what time of day it is. So... I can’t allow him to become like this when I’m not there. You bet I’ll make him wake up. For that, I don’t care who or how many thousands... tens of thousands I have to kill.”

Those petrifying words exited the reaper’s mouth, transforming into a black miasma that encircled Asuna’s body, trying to rob her of her will to fight.

“Hope...? Joy...? What you did, do you know *how* much Kirito-kun has... has.....!”

She wanted so much to refute him, but the point of intersection where the cleaver and rapier clashed suddenly and explosively ejected sparks, pressing closer and closer to Asuna.

No — Asuna's will to fight didn't move an inch. The demonic blade Mate Chopper clenched in PoH's right hand was vibrating and increasing in thickness like a living organism.

PoH seemed to notice Asuna's shock: he sneered deep within his hood.

"I finally understand how this world works. Here, spilled blood and lost lives are directly converted into energy. Like when the «Radiant Medium» shot that laser and torched the Dark Territory army."

Before Asuna had dived in, she too had listened to an explanation of the system that comprised the foundation of Underworld. They were «Spatial Resources», but they either required a complicated incantation or equipment capable of absorbing them. Even if the Mate Chopper's expansion in size was due to Spatial Resources, PoH had not recited the command, and the Mate Chopper should be merely a remnant of a converted SAO account, so it ought not to have the ability to absorb Resources in Underworld.

But as though he had read her thoughts, PoH continued:

"In Aincrad, the «Mate Chopper» got weaker the more you killed monsters with it, but the more you killed players... humans, the stronger it became. Yeah, it seemed that this curse would break after killing a lot of mobs, turning the blade into a katana with a similar name, but I'm not interested in that. What's important is that its original ability to absorb human life and increase in power works in Underworld as well. The lives of all those American troops you killed and the Japanese killed by the Chinese and Koreans are circling around this battlefield. If the Chinese and Koreans start killing each other next then even more lives will seep out."

While the reaper murmured, Mate Chopper began emitting growls of *gigi, gigi* and was swelling nonstop. Asuna's GM equipment «Radiant Light» screeched against the blade, as though it were unable to withstand the opposition anymore.

All surroundings gradually faded as her ears were filled with the sound of her own breathing and the hammering of her heartbeat.

As if even the owner of the demonic blade was growing taller himself, PoH pressed against Asuna while saying:

“After I absorb all of their lives, I’ll kill every last one of the Artificial Fluctlights in this world. Not just those guys cowering in the back over there... the monsters in the Dark Territory and the humans in the Human Empire as well. I don’t know how many tens of thousands there are but at that point, he’s gonna wake up. If he’s the «Black Swordsman» I trust.”

Cold wind blew against the black poncho, exposing for an instant the eyes deep within the darkness. They were eyes glowing dull red.

He was a demon. Inhuman. A true demon.

This was the true nature of the man called PoH. No matter whether he wore the false mask of a «Cheerful Inciter» in Aincrad, or the false mask of a «Stern Commander» on this battlefield, all of it was fake. The true PoH was a cold avenger, desiring the torture and torment of humanity, desiring only to kill...

Asuna’s knees gave way. Her rapier screeched again and the cleaver’s blade pressed towards her throat.

“Relax. I’m not going to kill you. I’ll just make sure you don’t keep bothering me. Because I gotta let you watch... watch him wake up, and watch him die by my hand.”

Mate Chopper had now swollen to twice its normal size. Radiant Light let out a piercing, crisp scream as hairline cracks appeared on its body.

With one knee now against the ground, Asuna’s vision was blocked by the black miasma gushing from the hood. In the darkness, the only things that existed were the monolith steel blade and his eyes glowing crimson.

Before she was about to collapse, someone’s small hands...

Pushed Asuna's back one more.

It's all right.

I am always by your side.

Clear, azure light burst from Asuna's chest and tore apart the darkness before her eyes.

Reflected in Mate Chopper, she saw pure white wings expanding wide behind her own back.

All sound returned, and she heard her comrades' voices mixed among the hubbub of the battlefield.

"Asuna! Keep at it, Asuna!"

"Asuna-san! Asuna-saaaaaaan!"

"Get up, Asuna!"

"Asunaaaaaaaa!"

Lisbeth. Silica. Agil. Klein.

Not just her comrades. The voices of the surviving ALO group, including Sakuya and Alicia, Siune and the Sleeping Knights, Renri and the rest of the Human Empire Defense Army, Tiese, Ronye, Sortiliena and many other Guardians and Ascetics all went into Asuna's ears.

—Thank you, everyone.

—Thank you, Yuuki.

—I can still fight. You all have given me strength.

".....I can't lose..... I can never lose to... someone like you, who only knows how to hate!!"

As Asuna screamed, white ripples erupted from her entire body, throwing PoH backwards off his feet.

She stood up, pulling back the rapier in her right hand with all of her might. Lavender flashes discharged and ran the length of the blade, resembling bulbs and petals of thyme flowers, dyeing the world in the same hue.

“Nurgh...!!”

Directing it at the body of the reaper trying to regain his footing, now greatly exposed.

Asuna activated the Original Sword Skill she had received from «Absolute Sword» Yuuki.

Starting from the upper right she thrust five ultra-fast jabs, imprinting five points of light diagonally downwards.

Five jabs starting from the upper left intersected with the path of her blade just now, imprinting another five points of light.

“Guaagh...”

Even as he spat air mixed with blood, the gargantuan cleaver in PoH’s right grip remained glowing crimson. If Asuna were hit by his large counterattack, her remaining HP would be exhausted for sure.

But Asuna’s attack was not over yet.

“WOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

Concentrating every last bit of her remaining energy at the tip of the rapier, and releasing it at the center of the crisscrossed sword paths — the final, strongest attack.

Eleven-hit combo OSS, «Mother’s Rosary».

Violet radiance bore through PoH’s chest like a meteor.

The reaper in the black poncho flew high into the air and crashed dully onto the ground far away.

Now, having exhausted the last bit of energy she had, Asuna dropped to one knee again, calling out in her heart.

—Thank you, Yuuki.



She could no longer hear a response. Perhaps the hands and voice had all been mere illusions borne from Asuna's memories from the very beginning. But even so, in this world where everything was borne of memories, they definitely could not have been fake.

Yes — she should never have been able to use the OSS Mother's Rosary in Underworld to begin with. Even if Higa and Kikuoka had imported the old Sword Skills from SAO along with The Seed, the one who had inherited Mother's Rosary had been Asuna the Undine in ALO. Having not converted her character and instead using the Stacia account, Asuna ought not to have that data on her.

But the OSS had still activated with that special lighting effect. If this was the power of imagination, then the Yuuki who had temporarily awoken from Asuna's memories and encouraged her had been undeniably real. Because memories never disappeared.

PoH's avatar remained prone on the ground. But having been directly struck by an eleven-hit combo from a GM weapon, there was no chance of him surviving. Unlike other players, he ought to be using an STL, which meant that even if he died, his body probably would not burst apart and remain temporarily intact at the scene like a resident of the Human Empire or Dark Territory.

Leaning on her rapier and expending significant effort to stand, Asuna then turned to look back at Klein. His abdomen was still pierced by swords, but the three players holding him down had all left his side and were watching Asuna speechlessly along with a fourth knight who came trying to help stop the execution.

Although she badly wanted to get to Kirito's side as quickly as possible, she first had to pull out the swords from Klein's body and treat his wounds, and just as Asuna was about to walk towards him—

She felt the ground tremble slightly.

Asuna held her breath and looked behind her again.

PoH remained motionless on the ground. But a deviant reddish-black glow blossomed from the cleaver Mate Chopper gripped in his right hand. Looking more closely, Asuna realized that the air on the battlefield was forming a slowly spinning vortex, concentrated at the cleaver.

“No... It’s absorbing Sacred Power!!”

Guardian Leader Sortiliena shouted from the very front of the Human Empire army.

Asuna clenched her teeth and ran forward to destroy the demonic blade.

But a step faster than her, the black reaper’s body rose up from the ground as though it were being dragged up by Mate Chopper, which had floated into the sky.

A huge rip had appeared in the very front of the poncho, exposing his bare body behind tight-fitting leather clothing. There was a large hole in the chest where he had been hit by the final strike of the OSS, and the space behind him was visible through it.

Watching PoH stand even as his entire heart had been blown away, the Underworld residents let out moans of fear. A violent stir even ran through the Chinese and Koreans who thought this was a normal VRMMO world.

It seemed that Mate Chopper had absorbed a great deal of Spatial Resources and converted it into HP for PoH. Even as she made this guess Asuna found herself trembling uncontrollably all over.

PoH was diving with an STL.

If that were the case then he ought to be suffering the same level of pain as he would in the real world. Asuna had already tasted pain almost enough to make her faint when the lances had penetrated her; it was impossible to imagine what sort of agony would come from having a huge hole opened in one’s chest.

But the reaper's lips, dripping blood, grinned wordlessly — and then shrieked in an utterly deafening roar loud enough to shake the entire battlefield:

“Comrades! This is the true nature of the Japanese! Kill every last one of the weak traitors... and the filthy Japanese too!!”

He had clearly shouted in Korean but for some reason Asuna understood what he meant.

Reddish black aura spurted from PoH's highly raised Mate Chopper, spreading all the way to the ends of the wilderness.

Ohhhh....

OHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!

Half of the Chinese and Koreans also raised their swords high, emitting a ferocious roar.

They began to attack the moderates who had attempted to persuade them... and some of them began to attack the remaining Japanese players and Underworld troops as well. But Asuna had no way of stopping them.

All of a sudden, someone shoved her roughly from behind and Asuna collapsed to the ground. Her heavily damaged rapier flew out of her hand and rolled away onto the dry dirt.

Far away ahead, the black-haired young man was desperately reaching his left arm towards her.

“.....Kirito-kun.”

Asuna murmured, reaching her own right hand towards her lover, awaiting their final moments.

7

I'd only dozed off slightly in the classroom, but I felt like I had dreamt a very long dream.

An enjoyable, painful, sorrowful dream. I tried to recall the details as I walked through the empty corridor, but I couldn't remember anything at all.

I gave up and changed shoes at the entrance.

After exiting the school gate, a chilly, dry autumn breeze blew my slightly too-long forelocks.

I swung my backpack onto my left shoulder, inserted my hands into my uniform pockets, and walked forward with my head slightly lowered.

Directly ahead of me, my fellow classmates were chatting animatedly to each other. To block out those dream-filled, hope-filled, romance-filled, camaraderie-filled conversations, I inserted the earphones of my music player deeply into my ears, hunched over, and started home.

On the way back, I stopped at the convenience store and checked through all the week's gaming magazines, choosing and buying the one with the most pages dedicated to «Sword Art Online», which should be releasing in around one month. I took the opportunity to charge a couple of points into my online gaming e-wallet as well.

I wouldn't have to go through these extra steps if I had a credit card, and even though I once ad-libbed a request to my mother for one, I was immediately told that I should perish the thought before I got into university. Come to think of it, I ought to be pretty grateful that she would give an allowance to a child she wasn't even directly related to, so I wasn't too bothered by her judgment.

It's about time we dropped cash and switched to a completely electronic currency... I thought as I walked through the automatic door out of the store.

Then I noticed a group of five, who weren't there when I entered the store, crouching in a corner of the parking lot. They had probably arrived while I was still focused on the magazines. The space around them echoed with coarse chuckling, scattered with the packaging of bread and snacks.

Judging by their uniform, they looked to be from the same school as I was, but of course I ignored them and was about to leave when—

One of them earnestly focused his line of sight towards me.

It was a small boy, who probably would have been mistaken for a primary school student if he hadn't been wearing my uniform. He was in a different class than me but we knew each other — no, I should say that, for a certain period of time, we were friends.

He had also taken part in the Sword Art Online Closed Beta held last summer.

For such a narrow gate that only a thousand in the entire nation were able to squeeze through, it was somewhat of a miracle that two people from the same school, and even the same grade level had been chosen. So even I, completely antisocial as I was, went and made contact with him of my own accord after hearing of his selection.

We talked to each other shortly before summer break began, and stopped when summer — or rather, when the SAO Closed Beta ended. During the beta we would team up every three days in the virtual game world, and got to know each other pretty well. Still, the moment I met him again a month after the second semester began, my bizarre personality, my idiosyncrasy of having thoughts like *"Who is this guy, really?"* towards someone right in front of me — someone I ought to be really familiar with — appeared again.

I felt that within that person, alive in the flesh, there was someone I didn't know at all. As soon as that thought popped into my head I was unable to socialize honestly with him anymore. Because I felt the same way even towards my parents and little sister.

It seemed that he kept wanting to be my friend for the official launch of SAO in October, as well as in school in the real world, but distanced himself from me after realizing my attitude. After that we never spoke to each other again.

So why was he sitting in the parking lot of a convenience store with students of the type he seemed never able to strike up a relationship with?

From his pleading eyes, and the words thrown at me by a male student beside him with a pudding-bowl cut, the reason became abundantly clear.

“The hell do you want? What're you looking at?”

The other three immediately creased their brows and pinched their lips together, uttering threatening noises of “Unhh?” and “What?”

In other words, he had been targeted by the «rough crowd» of the class and was either being extorted by them or forced to be their errand-boy. And now he was pleading to me for help with his eyes.

All I really needed to say was “Let's go home together”. But my mouth just would not move for some reason.

What managed to slip out of my glued throat was...

“.....Nothing.”

A hoarse mutter like that. Then I abandoned my ex-friend from a month before and kept walking back on my way. He didn't say anything, but through the corner of my eyesight I could see his soft face contorting, like he was about to cry.

After quickly exiting the store's property, I shrank my shoulders while gloomily walking down a path dyed the color of the setting sun. There was nothing in my head. I stared at the asphalt, walking, walking.

The setting sun behind me sank with surprising speed and the street was immediately plunged into a violet darkness. What should have been an extremely familiar road back home from school now felt completely foreign to me. Only the sound of my footsteps echoed throughout the street, not a single person or car in my view.

Pat, pat, pat... crunch, crunch, crunch.

"Huh.....?"

I suddenly stopped. At some point the asphalt beneath my feet had become low, thick grass. *Are there any unpaved roads like this on the way back home?* I contemplated as I looked up.

But what I saw was not the commuters' street of Kawagoe City in Saitama Prefecture. Instead, I was looking up an unfamiliar small path cutting through a deep wood.

I slightly surveyed my surroundings before glancing at my own body.

The black school uniform I'd been wearing had vanished, replaced by a tight-fitting blue tunic and leather armor. My hands were coated in fingerless leather gloves, my feet wrapped in short boots fitted with metal rivets. In place of my shoulder-hung backpack was a somewhat short, yet very heavy sword.

"Where... am I.....?"

I muttered, but there was no response. I shrugged and began walking along the woody path.

It hadn't been one minute before my memories began to prickle and tingle nonstop. The way the branches curled on these old trees, the feeling of the grass under my feet. I was in the expansive forest in the northwest portion of Floor 1 of Aincrad,

the «Town of Beginnings». If I were right, then Horunka Village ought to be just ahead.

I had to get into the town and stay at an inn. All I wanted to do now was to get in bed. Just go to sleep without thinking about anything.

I focused on walking through a deeper part of the wood, which looked blue under the dappled moonlight.

All of a sudden I thought I heard a thin scream just ahead.

I suddenly stopped, then kept walking forward. The trees ended at a clearing ahead of me to the right, and the blue moonlight illuminated the narrow path. Again I heard someone's scream. Also, the grating growl of a monster.

I inched forward, approaching the clearing, then stealthily peeked around a large tree trunk.

It was a wide clearing reminiscent of a circular dance floor. A bizarre shadow play was squirming about, illuminated by bluish-white rays of light.

The sharp tentacles of five or six plant-type monsters resembling gigantic pitcher plants were whirling around nonstop. Surrounded by them was a young boy who was dressed exactly the same as I was. He swung his sword wildly about, but the monsters' tentacles immediately regenerated upon being severed, showing no sign of stopping at all.

Looking at the boy's profile, I realized that I knew him.

He and I had formed a party, working together to collect equipment dropped by those plant-type monsters. His name was... Coper. But why was he surrounded by so many of them?

No matter what the reason was, since he was my partner I had to help him.

Even as I thought this, once again, my feet would not move this time. It was as if they had sprouted roots into the ground. I couldn't take even one step forward.

A tentacle shot forward from behind, sweeping his legs; Coper went sprawling to the ground. The monsters approached even closer to him, opening mouths filled with human-like teeth.

His face filled with despair, Coper reached his left hand out towards me.

But his silhouette was immediately crushed by the wave of monsters, and after a moment a beam of blue light shot up, accompanied by a meager shattering noise.

“Ahh.....”

Uttering a hoarse moan, I hung my head deeply, like when I had abandoned my friend at the convenience store.

Staring only at the grass beneath me, I got up shakily, then changed the direction I was facing and began walking on the thin path through the moonlit forest again.

Crunch, crunch, crunch... clack, clack, clack.

I suddenly stopped. At some point in time the low grass beneath my feet had become bluish slabs of stone.

I looked up and realized that I was no longer in the forest on Floor 1 of Aincrad; I was now in a slightly dark, nameless passageway. This ought to be somewhere in a Labyrinth... but I couldn't place which floor I was on just from its appearance. I could only press on.

Almost without me noticing, all of my full-body equipment and the sword on my back had changed as I walked silently along the straight corridor. I continued to walk, and walk, as though I were pursuing my own shadow reflected on the wall by the oil lamps. Aincrad's largest Labyrinth was 300 meters wide, so a straight corridor this long should not exist, but I did not stop, nor did I look back. I only kept moving my feet.

All of a sudden I thought I heard a thin voice coming just ahead.

It was not a scream, but a very joyous cheer. Moreover, it was several cheers overlayed on top of each other.

Somehow, those voices felt terrifically nostalgic. I slightly quickened my footsteps, pressing towards the source of the voices.

Finally, I saw a rectangular entrance in the wall to my left, from which a warm yellow glow was pouring out. I fiercely moved my feet, which for some reason had grown leaden, and came to the entrance.

Looking through the doorway, I saw a moderately wide room. Four players were facing the far wall, their backs to me.

I didn't need to look at their appearances to immediately recognize them.

The spear-wielder with unruly hair wearing a bizarre hat was Sasamaru.

The tall and lanky shield-bearing mace-wielder was Tetsuo.

The small dagger-user wearing the beanie was Ducker.

And finally, the short-haired girl equipped with a small spear was..... Sachi.

They were all members of the same guild as me. While their leader Keita negotiated the price of a guild home, they had come to this Labyrinth in order to make some money to buy furniture.

Wonderful... Everyone was safe.

I don't know why that thought popped into my mind just as I was about to talk to them, but my mouth would not open this time either. My feet were immobile, seemingly glued to the floor.

As I stood frozen to the spot, the four of them were bent over, peering down at a giant treasure chest placed beside the wall. The instant I realized this, a vile chill flashed down my spine.

Ducker, the thief, was complacently closing in on it, attempting to disable the chest's trap.

—No. Stop. No.

I screamed in my head, but I could not articulate a voice. No matter how much I wanted to burst into that room, my feet would not move.

Ducker swiftly opened the lid of the chest.

In a flash, an earsplitting alarm rang out and two doors concealed in the walls to their left and right opened. Innumerable bloodthirsty monsters poured out from within.

“Ah..... AH.....!”

My throat emitted a hoarse, cracked scream.

That was all I could do. Unable to move even a finger, I was only able to watch as my partners were surrounded by the monsters.

The first to die was Sasamaru. Next was Ducker, and then Tetsuo followed suit and exploded into azure particles, flying in all directions. Now alone, Sachi turned her head to look back towards me.

Her lips, parted in a sorrowful smile, wavered slightly.

In the next moment the monster's weapons and claws fell without mercy, and her slender body was wrapped in blue light.

“.....!!”

As I shrieked silently, Sachi transformed into countless shards of glass and flew into the air right before my eyes.

The tens of monsters also disappeared, almost melting into the air, and the room was shrouded in darkness.

Finally able to move, I dropped to my knees.

Enough. I don't wanna walk anymore. I don't wanna watch anymore.

Kneeling on the ice-cold floor, I plugged my ears and shut my eyes as tightly as possible. But the memories were like ice water, gushing at me without end and devouring me whole.

The two years of day-to-day battle within the floating castle of steel.

The boundless sky I had aimed for in the fairy kingdom.

The crimson bullets intersecting in their flight across the wilderness of perpetual dusk.

I don't wanna remember it ever again. I don't wanna know what happens next either.

I prayed desperately, but the flood of memories continued to besiege me with no end.

Suddenly being displaced from the real world.

Awakening in a clearing surrounded by thick forest.

Walking forward as though being guided by the sound of the axe, and arriving at the roots of a gargantuan tree, I met him.

The fight against the goblins. The felled tree.

The lengthy journey towards the center of the world. The two years spent training at the academy.

No matter when, he was always by my side. With that calm smile of his.

With him, I can do anything, no matter what it is.

Shoulder-to-shoulder as we raced up the marble tower, defeating strong enemy after strong enemy.

Reaching the top of the tower at long last,

Battling the ruler of the world,

And at the end of lengthy, bloody fight.

He, his,

Life———

“AH... AHHHHHHHHHHHHH—!!”

I clutched my head with both arms, shrieking at the top of my lungs.

It was me. My uselessness, my stupidity, my weakness had killed him. Had spilled blood not meant to be spilled, lost a life not meant to be lost.

I should have died. My life here is temporary. Nothing would have happened we had just exchanged roles.

“AHHHH... AHHHHHHHHH...!!”

Bellowing and writhing in agony, I fumbled for the sword that should be on my back. I’d use it to spear my own heart and slit my own throat.

But my fingers touched nothing. I searched for it around me, thinking I’d dropped it, but the only thing I saw was a black, viscous fluid.

I ripped open the front of my black shirt with my bare hands.

My right hand fingers, curled into claws, pierced into my thin, bony sternum.

My skin split and my muscles tore, but I didn’t seem to feel any pain. I continued to penetrate my own chest with my own hands.

To tear out my heart and crush it.

This is all I can do for him... and for all of those whom I have betrayed and abandoned until today... this final———

“Kirito-kun...”

Suddenly, someone called my name.

My hands stopped, and I raised my empty eyes.

Behind the darkness, at some point, a chestnut-haired girl was standing there.

Her brown, tear-filled eyes remained fixated on me.

“Kirito...”

With a second voice to my right, another person appeared. A bespectacled girl. Her eyes were also swimming with tears behind her glasses.

“Onii-chan...”

Then a third person appeared.

A girl with straight-cut black hair, tears streaming nonstop from her large eyes.

The will and emotions of these three girls transformed into light, projecting from them, flowing into my body.

A warmth, like that of sunlight, healing my wounds, melting away my sorrow.

—But.

But... Ahh, but.

How could I ever have the right to be forgiven like this?

“I’m sorry.”

I heard the word drop from my own mouth.

“I’m sorry, Asuna. Sorry, Sinon. Forgive me, Sugu. I... can’t get up anymore. I can’t fight anymore. I’m sorry.....”

Then, I prepared to crush the heart I tore from my own chest.

“Why... What happened, Kirito-kun?!”

Higa Takeru yelled hoarsely, desperately holding onto his consciousness, which was ebbing away with the blood flowing from the gunshot wound on his right shoulder.

He had already fed an enormous amount of Mnemonic Data from Yuuki Asuna, Asada Shino, and Kirigaya Suguha’s three daisy-

chained STLs into Kirigaya Kazuto's damaged Fluctlight in order to restore it. Even Higa, who had conducted countless experiments in his career, was utterly shocked by the sheer volume of Data, which in itself could be called a miracle.

But the 3D diagram displaying the dynamism of Kazuto's Fluctlight on his phone's screen had stopped short of the line that indicated functional restoration.

"Is even this... not enough.....?" Higa moaned.

At this rate, Kirigaya Kazuto's nearly-restored «main body» — his self image, will be unable to return to reality, connecting only with painful memories that tortured him, and will be unable to return from that point. Awaiting him would be an endlessly repeating nightmare. In that situation, one could say that being functionally terminated was a much better fate.

He needed at least one more person.

If only there were another person with deep bonds with Kazuto, possessing strong impressions of him!

But according to Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka Seijirou, the three currently daisy-chained girls seemed to be the ones who understood and loved Kirigaya Kazuto the most in the world. Moreover, there were no more usable STLs in the RATH Roppongi branch or the Ocean Turtle.

"Dammit... Goddammit..."

Higa clenched his teeth, claspings his right fist, about to slam it onto the duct wall.

But then he relaxed it.

".....What is this.....? This... connection.....?"

Higa murmured, bringing his blood and sweat-stained glasses closer to his phone.

He hadn't noticed it before, but just now he had realized that on the window displaying the state of Kirigaya Kazuto's Fluctlight,

other than the three connection lines coming from the girls' STLs, there was a fourth one — a gray line extremely faint in color, reaching from the bottom of the diagram and beyond.

As though he were being sucked towards it, Higa poked the touch panel with his right index finger, and flicked upwards.

The image scrolled downwards, revealing the source of the gray line.

“It’s... It’s from the Main Visualizer!? Why.....?”

Higa shouted, forgetting his own serious injury.

The Main Visualizer was the immense data storage center situated at the heart of the Light Cube Cluster, which collected all of the souls of the Underworld residents.

Only the geography, architecture, props, and related objects of Underworld should be stored there, with no human souls whatsoever.

But—

“Object... Memories as objects...”

Higa’s brain raced at maximum capacity as he muttered unconsciously.

“The memories of the Fluctlights and the objects of Underworld, their Data format is the same... In that case, if someone were to brand their will, and thoughts, onto an object... would that object display similar function... to a Fluctlight.....?”

Even as he arrived at this conjecture, Higa remained half-dubious. If such a thing were possible, then in Underworld a person’s mere willpower would be enough to control an inanimate object.

But he believed that this single, thin connection line was his only hope.

What is going to happen? — Higa was unable to predict whether the situation would look up or worsen, but he steeled his resolve and opened the pathway between the Main Visualizer and Kazuto's STL.

“Kirito.”

Just before my heart was destroyed—

A new voice called my name. A strong, warm voice that seemed able to contain everything.

“Kirito.”

As I slowly, slowly raised my head, I saw...

He was standing firmly on where had been endless darkness just a moment before.

There was not a single stain on his blue clothing. His messy, flaxen hair gleamed brightly even against the darkness, and a calm smile rested on his lips.

His deep green eyes were, like always, filled with a soft, yet strong glow.

My hands left my imperceptibly healed chest and reached towards him as I stood.

A low voice softly called his name from my trembling mouth.

“...Eugeo.”

And again.

“Are you still alive, Eugeo?”

My best friend, my best partner, Eugeo—

Silently shook his head, a hint of sorrow in his smile.

“This is your memory of me in your heart. Along with the memory fragments I left behind.”

“Me... mory.....”

“Yeah. Have you forgotten? Hadn’t we been convinced about it back then? Memories...”

Eugeo splayed his right hand and pressed it to his own chest.

“...are right here.”

I followed his movements like a reflection in a mirror, then said:

“Always, right here.”

Eugeo smiled at this, and at that moment Asuna stepped forward from beside him:

“Our hearts are always connected with yours, Kirito-kun.”
Stepping forward from the other side, Sinon nodded, the pigtails on the side of her face shaking.

“No matter how far apart we are... even if one day we must bid farewell.”

Coming forward from beside her, Suguha continued with a voice filled with energy:

“Our memories and feelings will always be connected. Won’t they?”

Hot, transparent liquid finally began to stream from my eyes.

I stepped forward, earnestly returning the gaze of my forever closest friend.

“Can I do it... Eugeo? Can I go forward... once more?”

His response was very quick and very firm.

“Of course, Kirito. There are many waiting for you. Well then... let’s go, together, and no matter where, I will always be by your side.”

Our outstretched hands touched. Asuna, Sinon, and Suguha’s hands overlapped with ours as well.

In an instant, the four people before me transformed into white rays of light and flowed into my body.

And then———

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A red-armored boot stamped down upon the hand that Asuna reached towards Kirito.

She looked up, deep into the visor of the crimson knight, into the eyes blazing with fierce hatred, as he raised his longsword high in a reverse grip.

The longsword thundered down, accompanied by an earsplitting stream of jeering.

She was completely deprived of any remaining fighting strength, but the least she could do was stop herself from closing her eyes. With this resolve, Asuna stared down the steel that was about to impale her chest.

Clang.

The stiff ring of metal. Beige sparks.

The knight's sword bounced backwards into the air, as if it had been deflected by a colorless, transparent blade.

“Uh...?”

Making a confused noise, the knight swung the sword downwards again. But again, sparks erupted and the sword remained unable to strike Asuna.

A third, and fourth attempt produced the same result.

But there was no fifth try. Sortiliena had come running and blown the crimson knight off his feet with a large sword-hilt knockback Sword Skill, «Torrent».

Sortiliena helped Asuna stand, while asking in a voice filled with barely concealed surprise:

“That «Incarnation blade» just now... Was it your doing, Asuna-san?!”

“Incarnation...?”

Hearing the word for the first time, Asuna faintly shook her head.

“No, it wasn’t me.”

“Then... Renri-dono...?” Sortiliena asked, looking behind her. Asuna followed her eyes, but the heavily wounded young knight was currently delivering orders to the troops to counterattack the oncoming crimson legion. He really did not seem capable of affording any peripheral effort to protect Asuna.

Instead of searching for the cause of the phenomenon, a better use of their time would be rescuing at least one more Underworld resident.

Rising to her feet with Sortiliena’s help, Asuna spared no effort in draining her exhausted willpower and began surveying the situation around her.

Then she felt renewed despair sinking into her heart like icy black water.

More than 80 percent of over 20000 Chinese and Korean players were embroiled in internecine conflict, but the pro-war faction appeared to be wielding a crushing advantage in morale. Blue light columns signalling the destruction of player avatars could be seen rising up throughout, and with each beacon would come a savage roar.

Worse, a portion of the pro-war faction — a legion numbering well over 2000 — was slowly pressing closer and closer to the Japanese players and Human Empire Defense Army, who were both concentrated at one spot. The Japanese were almost completely out of any remaining fighting strength, and the Underworld residents led by Integrity Knight Renri were riddled with injuries. Even with their edge of Sacred Arts and Sword Skills, there seemed no way to repel the enemy.

Speechless, only able to lean on Sortiliena’s arm, Asuna heard...

The layered, echoing guffaws of PoH.

With a giant hole in his chest as he stood over Kirito's sprawled frame, the reaper arched backwards in laughter with his arms in the air, the now vast Mate Chopper gripped in his right hand, and his left splayed open. A gargantuan vortex of black clouds had formed unnoticed above him, and his body was absorbing the Life Resources spilled onto the battlefield; he resembled a tornado touching down.

To be precise, the demon sword in his right grip was performing the actual absorption of resources. If they could destroy that sword, the source of energy it was providing to its owner would also be severed, and without his heart the reaper would immediately perish.

But things had progressed to the point where merely defeating the enemy commander would not be enough to bring the situation under control. Provoked by PoH's distressing words and malicious aura, the pro-war faction would only view their commander's departure as more fuel for their fiery rage. The battle would drag on until every single Japanese and Underworld citizen was massacred.

What to do?

What to do———

Hanging her head in distress and despair, Asuna suddenly noticed something inexplicable.

Up to a moment ago the ground had consisted of starkly exposed black gravel, but it now lay underneath a wispy yet unbroken layer of white mist.

Sliding and drifting like ribbons of thin silk, the mist glided between the feet of Asuna and her friends, then expanded to fill the space behind them. Simultaneously, a refreshingly sweet fragrance tickled their nostrils.

Roses.....?

Asuna and Sortiliena's eyes followed the movements of the misty ribbons.

Then, the instant they found its source, a faint sigh escaped both their lips.

"Ahh....."

And again.

"Ahh."

The source of the mist was one young bone-thin adolescent, stretched out on the ground a few tens of meters away.

More precisely, the source was the bluish-white longsword gripped within his left hand. The blade had been snapped down the middle, but its mist-wrapped form seemed to confer upon it a muted glow.

"Kirito-kun..."

Just as Asuna uttered in a quavering voice the name of the person she loved above all else.

"That Incarnation... It's Kirito's..." Sortiliena murmured, almost overcome with emotion.

Before they knew it, the white mist had already permeated the space around the feet of the allied Chinese-Korean forces and was continuing to expand. Locked in battle, they seemed not to notice, but everything below their knees was gradually being consumed by pearly-white ribbons.

Finally noticing this unusual spectacle, PoH ceased his laughter at last.

His eyes first went to his feet, then sprang like bullets onto Kirito behind him. PoH's tall figure immediately began to shake violently as the Mate Chopper in his right hand spun once before slapping into his fist, and he advanced with large strides.

One step. Two steps.

But no third.

Almost like a whisper, almost like song... yet very definite, a voice reverberated across the entire battlefield.

Enhance armament.

A voice Asuna was certain belonged to Kirito echoed through her mind, but it seemed to overlap with another voice; one she had never heard before.

The next instant.

A stupendous phenomenon, the scale of which was difficult to estimate — one could say it rivalled Stacia's geographical manipulation — engulfed the entirety of the battlefield.

Transparent, sapphire tendrils of ice stretched from within the white mist and wrapped themselves around PoH and each and every one of the 20000 Chinese and Korean players. The tendrils appeared quite delicate and fragile, looking as though they would shatter at the slightest touch, but the movements of the battle-frenzied players stopped cold in the blink of an eye, as if some sort of time-bending magic had been applied to them.

A short silence was followed by sounds of shock and anger, but those voices immediately faded too. Ensnared by the ice vines, the players were swiftly cocooned in frost and frozen solid in a matter of seconds.

Asuna stole a glance at the crimson knight who had rushed over to help Klein, but he too had been transformed into an icy sculpture. He seemed not to feel any pain, however; the eyes behind his visor were calmly shut. It was not meant to cause pain or suffering, merely a technique to restrict movement—

Turning her head back around, Asuna saw that PoH had been frozen snow-white as well. She looked to Sortiliena's face and nodded at her.

“Thank you, Liena-san... I'm okay now.”

The female Guardian leader silently withdrew her hand and Asuna bolted across the frost-covered ground with utmost urgency towards Kirito. Sortiliena was close behind, and a Guardian girl, Ronye, also came scrambling from the ranks of the Human Empire army.

Kirito remained prone and motionless on the ground, his left arm hugging the broken sword. But Asuna understood.

This was the moment in which Kirito's heart was about to be revived. She only needed to grasp his hand, embrace him tightly and call his name, and he would return for sure. For sure. For sure.

That distance of 10 short meters seemed as far as the ends of the earth. That duration of 10 or so short seconds, seemed as long as an eternity. But with each step of her overworn feet, the figure of her loved one would grow just a little closer. Look, just a tiny, tiny bit further, and her hand would touch—

Right when Asuna's fully outstretched right hand was about to touch the black hair she so sorely missed.

An deafening shattering noise roared behind her.

She immediately spun her face to the right and saw...

The form of the reaper, ripping apart the icy vines and frost, taking a violent step forward.

The hem of his black poncho whirling like demonic wings, PoH screeched a thunderous roar.

"I've been waiting a long time for this...!! Now, let's dance...
KIRITO!!"

Bellowing his name for the first time since SAO as far as Asuna could remember, PoH brandished the Mate Chopper in his right fist while leaping into the air like an outlandish bird.

Swathed in a reddish-black aura of death, the dreadfully thick blade screamed down from above. It was heading not for Kirito, but Asuna and the others.

“No...!”

Sortiliena rushed forward and raised her scarred longsword to her head, preparing to take the reaper’s blow.

But the demon blade, swollen to nearly three times its original size, needed not even make contact with her sword; the aura wrapped around it was enough to blow Sortiliena’s weapon in half.

The impact threw the Guardian leader off her feet. Asuna and Ronye desperately supported her from behind.

The fatal slash roared directly towards the trio, huddled together on the ground—

Shiiiiiiiiing!!

A tremendous crash brought Asuna and the other two collapsing onto their bottoms.

The Chopper’s blade did not strike them. It was trembling above them as though it had smashed into a transparent barrier. Just like moments ago, when the same phenomenon had saved Asuna from the hands of the crimson knight.

Asuna truly felt it this time. The feeling of protection by the pair of warm, dependable arms she had so dearly missed.

She was able to glimpse a certain faintly glowing object in front of the barrier. Contoured in midair by golden particles was a right hand with all five fingers splayed open.

A faint *crunch* was heard.

Asuna looked to her left as though her eyes were being drawn by something.

Face down on the ground, Kirito had inserted the broken white sword into the soil with his left hand.

Then, using it for support, he slowly, slowly pushed up his emaciated body.

The empty right sleeve of his black top fluttered in the wind. No, that wasn't it. It was gradually inflating, pointing straight ahead — approaching the phantom hand supporting the barrier.

The instant his sleeve joined the hand.

An explosion of golden light instantly dissipated the reddish-black aura swirling behind the barrier. The barrier collided violently with PoH's body, throwing his whole body backwards.

As the light dimmed, Asuna's eyes reflected a fully restored, corporeal right hand. Her line of sight followed those slender arms upwards, past his shoulders — and she saw him.

Slightly lengthy bangs fluttering in the breeze. Lips curled into a calm smile. And two black eyes, gazing back at her from the same height.

The lips moved, and his voice called her name.

"I'm back, Asuna."

Tears. They fell uncontrollably from her eyes, as irrepressible shrill sobs escaped her throat. Asuna clasped her hands tightly at her chest, earnestly attempting to articulate her overflowing emotions into words.

".....Welcome back, Kirito-kun."

Then Sortiliena and Ronye called in unison:

"Kirito..."

"Kirito-senpai."

After smiling and nodding at them both, Kirito looked back in front of him. His profile turned stern.

Having been thrown more than ten meters, PoH was slowly ascending to his feet as though he were no longer bound by the pull of gravity.

There ought not to be any new Spatial Resources since each of the Chinese and Korean players waging fully fledged massacre against each other had been ensnared and frozen by tendrils of ice, but the black cloud above PoH continued to tumble and warp organically as his Chopper continued to absorb. It became apparent that if that demon blade was not destroyed, there was no stopping this reaper.

Standing up a little later than PoH, Kirito stumbled for a second, but immediately regained his footing. Asuna frantically restrained herself from bolting over to support his body. Since she no longer had the strength to walk properly on her own, she would only be a hindrance to him. Now, she had to trust Kirito. She needed only to remain intent on trusting him, and that would become strength.

Kirito raised his regenerated right hand and the jet black sword lying faraway exited its sheath of its own accord, silently floated up, and arrived in his palm.

It was shaped differently than the «Elucidator», his beloved sword from the past, and the white blade in his left hand had snapped down the middle, but as he gripped both blades of black and white his appearance was exactly that of the one who had protected, guided, and given Asuna the strength to fight ever since the day she met him: The «Black Swordsman».

The white sword in his left hand continuously radiated glittering light like diamond dust and wave after wave of freezing cold. Even while he ought to be maintaining his incredible technique of instantaneously freezing over 20000 players at once, Kirito's calm profile displayed no such sign. It was as if there was someone standing next to him, granting him power.

PoH's eyes glinted red as he stared closely from the depths of his hood at the two swords, and at Kirito, who was slowly walking towards him. He threw open his arms as if to welcome him, while exposing the large hole in his chest:

“...Finally awake, are you? I wonder how long it's been since I've gotten to speak face-to-face with you like this...”

The reaper's voice ground like rusty metal against rusty metal, and was met with a response from Kirito that resembled his floaty, yet chilly voice from back in Aincrad:

“Who knows? I've forgotten. But what I can be sure of is that this will be the end.”

Whiuu. PoH whistled.

“Amazing... You really are the best, Kirito. Come on... let's continue. Let's continue our *showtime* that got interrupted in Aincrad.”

With a flick of his right hand, he raised his Mate Chopper — swollen to three times its original size, resembling a giant cleaver. The black clouds above him swirled even more fiercely, and the thickset hunk of iron crawled with reddish-black lightning.

Standing opposite him, Kirito held his own black longsword aloft.

But the moment the sword arrived at its zenith, his emaciated body shuddered again, appearing unable to withstand the weight of the weapon.

Asuna already understood that Underworld was not merely a VRMMO world created with The Seed. Every object was a «Mnemonic Visual» — a memory itself, and could be interfered with by way of imagination.

According to Integrity Knight Alice, Kirito had spent nearly half a year's time in this time-accelerated world in an unconscious state. It was unclear whether he had memories of this period, but he ought to have realized that he had been asleep.

Perhaps Kirito's own impression of "*I've grown weak*" had caused his physical body to diminish for real.

No, perhaps that was not all.

Higa Takeru from RATH had explained the reason behind the destruction of Kirito's main body — his Self-Image.

—Kirito-kun seems to have had several colleagues, and by that I mean he had friends. Nearly all of them perished in the battle against the Axiom Church, and as a result, when he successfully opened a connection to contact us, he felt guilty to an extreme degree. In other words, he attacked his own Fluctlight. Right at that moment, those guys dressed in black cut the power line and an electrical short caused a power surge that instantaneously spiked the STL output. Consequently, Kirito-kun's self-destructive impulse became reality, and his «self» became immobilized.

It was not information she could immediately understand, but the gist of it was that Kirito had lost someone important to him in this world. His spirit had broken from overwhelming grief. Asuna already knew that person's name. That night when she had chatted with Alice, Ronye, and Sortiliena until the sun came up, she'd heard that name many times over: Elite Swordsman-in-Training Eugeo.

Even though Kirito had, by some miracle, taken back his spirit, he remained unable to accept Eugeo's parting. The unhealed sorrow had cast his spirit... and his body in shadow.

—Kirito-kun.

Asuna called in her mind, gazing at his figure with black sword raised.

—Right now, I... find it impossible to imagine just how much pain and suffering you have experienced. But there is one thing I can be sure of.

—Your important friend lives on in your spirit. Just like how Yuuki lives on in mine. These memories will give you strength. The strength to take up your sword again and fight.

Asuna's thoughts seemed to become a voice, reaching out—

Kirito's right hand kept the black sword aloft, his left raising and pressing the snapped white sword to his chest.

Appearing to view this as an opening, PoH moved.

His tall frame swayed forward as he ran the 10 meter distance in an instant, seeming to glide above the rubble-strewn ground. The mammoth, thickset cleaver swung as cleanly down as if it were weightless.

Kirito did not step out of the way. He readied the sword in his right hand to intercept the blow. But as Asuna saw it, his slash was already lacking the sharpness he had in the past.

The longsword smashed into the cleaver and narrowly avoided being sent flying, but the blade lock was not evenly matched; instead it was being pressed directly downwards from above. Kirito's kneecaps buckled as his entire back arched. Pressed tightly against the ground, his boots skidded over 30 centimeters backwards.

“...Hey, hey, don't disappoint me. I've waited nearly two years for this day...”

Muttering dejectedly, the black ponchoed reaper then placed his left hand in addition to his right on the Mate Chopper's hilt, which had expanded just as big as its blade.

As the blade lock screeched *kin-kin*, Kirito's kneecaps continued to sink. If he could support his sword with both hands just like PoH... he thought, but his left hand continued to grip the white sword by itself. Moreover, since it was snapped down the middle, it could not be used to counter.

A sadistic, warped grin split the thick lips deep within the reaper's hood. Slowly, but surely, he pushed the descending cleaver's blade near Kirito's neck.

"...Kirito...!" Sortiliena muttered hoarsely, grasping her own snapped sword, ready to stand.

But Asuna pressed down on her shoulders with conviction.

"It's okay, Liena-san." She murmured to the female Guardian Leader — Kirito's own mentor in the Human Empire Swordcraft Academy — all while suppressing her own fear.

"Kirito-kun will be fine. He'll never lose to... a guy like him."

On the other hand, Kirito's mentee Ronye nodded tearfully.

"Yep. Kirito-senpai won't lose."

".....You're right." Sortiliena replied, tightly gripping the hand Asuna placed on her shoulder.

But just then.

PoH's Mate Chopper seemed to mock the trio's prayer-like certainty as it sank much further downwards. Kirito's left knee struck the ground. His right arm trembled nonstop while holding up the black sword, giving one the impression that he was already near the end of his tether.

As Kirito clenched his teeth, PoH brought his own face close and sneered again:

"...About time you tossed that shit sword and put your left hand to use. You realize that those Chinese and Korean players you froze have killed a lot of your friends, right? It shouldn't matter to you if they decide to wage a massacre amongst themselves, now should it?"

The demon whispered — Kirito resisted the heavy pressure and replied coldly:

“I know your methods well. Making people fight amongst themselves, planting the seed of hate and causing the next conflict. It drove me crazy during the SAO era, but in Underworld... you’ll never get your way.”

“Oho... and what’re you gonna do about it? As soon as that ice melts, they’re gonna kill every last one of the remaining Japanese and those Underworld people you care about so much. The only way to stop ‘em is to kill ‘em yourself. Cut ‘em down while they’re still frozen. Your friends oughta be able to it. Come on, give the order... kill all of those Chinese and Koreans.”

“.....”

Kirito said nothing to the venomous instigation.

Asuna was also distinctly aware of PoH’s vile plot.

Bound by vines of ice, the Chinese and Korean players seemed not to feel any pain now, but shattering those vines would cause them excruciating agony. That agony would bring about rage, causing decisive hatred towards the Japanese players.

By then, PoH, with the help of his Mate Chopper, would be able to absorb the immense swathes of resources ejected into the air following the deaths of the Chinese and Koreans. He would gain the power to defeat Kirito, and personally vanquish the entirety of the Japanese players and Underworld people combined.

Kirito ought to be aware of this. There was no way he was going to bend to PoH’s instigation, but to avoid a disastrous outcome, all he could do was maintain the large-scale freezing Art emanating from the white sword in his left grip; however, doing this plunged the showdown with his old enemy into an even worse situation.

With every tremor of his right hand from blocking the giant cleaver, sparks would burst from the intersection point. The cleaver’s blade was continuously and irrefutably descending, barely two fists away from Kirito’s left shoulder.

“...Well, it doesn’t matter to me if your stubbornness kills you.”
PoH sniggered.

“Relax. After I kill you, I’ll send the «Flash», and everyone else into their own coffins, until no one’s left.”

Deep within the hood, the reaper’s eyes gleamed red like will-o-the-wisps. His mouth split open to his cheeks, exposing sharp teeth.

“C’mon... Lemme taste your blood and life, Kirito.”

His pointed tongue licking over his lips like a wriggling worm, PoH intensified his grip on the Mate Chopper. The black sword screeched shrilly as the fatal blade inched closer towards Kirito by the second—

Suddenly, the soft sound of prayer was heard behind Asuna.

“Please, Eugeo-senpai. Save Kirito-senpai.”

The three of them looked behind them and saw the redheaded girl with her hands clasped at her chest — Tiese.

In an instant, Asuna distinctly felt it. Tiese’s hair billowed softly as a breeze-like wave bloomed.

She looked back ahead.

Now a cleaver, the Mate Chopper made contact with Kirito’s left shoulder.

With only that, the fabric of his black shirt exploded open. Awaiting the moment when blood would come spraying out of him, Asuna could not help but hold her breath.

But—

Just then, the Mate Chopper ceased its descent.

Slowly, but surely, it was actually being pushed back. How would Kirito’s emaciated, exhausted right shoulder possibly possess this sort of strength...

“Ah.....”

A soft cry from either Ronye or Sortiliena.

Asuna saw it at the same time. A second, golden, transparent hand was tightly gripping the hilt of the black sword.

A moment's pause later, Kirito seemed to notice the hand too. His eyes widened and his face contorted. Tears slid from the corners of his eyes, the droplets dancing into the air.

His lips moved, but no sound was heard.

But then—

“Ohh... OHHHHHHHHHH!!”

A roar sharp enough to tear silk burst from Kirito's throat and he violently forced back the Mate Chopper. PoH's arms were thrown backwards; he staggered back, cursing.

Kirito immediately stood up from his genuflecting posture, raised the broken sword in his left hand high in the air, and cried:

“RELEASE RECOLLECTION!!”

An indescribably blinding light exploded and bleached the world white. PoH threw a hand in front of his face and continued backing away, as though he couldn't stand the brightness.

Even as she squinted her eyes, Asuna saw it.

The light itself was concentrating on the body of the horribly snapped sword, regenerating it, as if it were crystallizing.

Restored to its original form in a matter of seconds, the sword blossomed an even greater light—

Swoosh! The flash expanded outwards.

After a moment's silence, there came a clear, grandiose sound heard throughout the entire battlefield, like thousands or tens of thousands of bells. Turning to look, Asuna and the other three's eyes grew large.

Innumerable flowers were gradually blooming atop the bodies of the Chinese and Korean VRMMO players, frozen white. They looked to be carved from glass; roses exuding a transparent azure.

Blooming proudly, the large-petaled roses began to disperse silver particles from their bulbs. Asuna instinctively knew that they were pure Life Resources — the players' HP.

These players who not ten minutes ago had been blazing with rage and ready to massacre each other, were one by one, as though they were simply asleep, wrapped in a column of light and vanished. There was no pain or suffering whatsoever; it could be said that they were being force-logged out in the most tranquil way imaginable.

The seeds of hate that PoH wanted to plant within the hearts of the Chinese and Korean players should not sprout anymore.

“Motherfucker... Don't fuck with me...!”

The reaper cursed, his vile plot foiled, but he immediately regained his complacent smile and raised the immense Mate Chopper in his right hand.

Seeing PoH's movements, Asuna realized what he was planning.

This battlefield was currently filled with Life Resources released by the innumerable blue roses — in Underworld terms, the air was thick with Sacred Power. PoH was plotting to claim it for himself with his Mate Chopper, using its ability to absorb Resources.

“Kirito-kun...!”

Dazed and trembling, Asuna called out the name of her beloved.

Just by absorbing the lives of the Japanese players killed in the recent battle, almost 2000 people, PoH's cleaver had swelled to thrice its size, displaying a power even exceeding that of Stacia's GM equipment.

If it were to absorb ten times that, the lives of 20000 people, PoH would become a true demon... No, he would become Satan himself. If Kirito could not take action while he was using a large-scale Art, then Asuna had to help him—

But, just as she urged on her paralyzed feet in an attempt to stand.

It's all right... Look.

She thought it had gone, but Yuuki's voice blew past her ear once more like a soft breeze.

Then Asuna noticed it. Silver light amassing in midair like many sinews of ribbon, completely ignoring PoH's Mate Chopper. No matter how the reaper brandished his demon sword, the light showed no signs of approaching it.

Again came the faint voice.

You said it yourself, Asuna. Life carries and passes on your spirit.

These people gathered from all the countries in this world don't really want to kill each other.

Everyone has the same wish. To head for a thrilling, exciting world... a beautiful, happy, and joyful world like the fairy kingdom where I met you, Asuna... That's it, really.

“...Yup. That's right, Yuuki.”

Asuna's inaudible murmur seemed to become the turning point for what happened next.

Kirito kept the fully restored white sword raised high, then brought the black sword in his right hand straight above as well.

The rotating black cloud summoned by PoH spun backwards while expanding. A ray of golden sunlight peeked through a sliver of blue sky in the direct center, making the body of the black sword gleam like dark crystal.

“Release recollection.”

Almost reflectively this time, Kirito incanted the same command from before.

At that very moment—

The countless silver ribbons slowly undulating about the sky above the battlefield seemed to blend together, becoming absorbed into the black sword.

“Suck!!”

Cursing in English, PoH brandished the Mate Chopper in apparent defiance to Kirito. But the ribbons seemed to act of their own accord, evading the demon sword and continuously melding with Kirito’s sword.

“...Eugeo-senpai told me before. Kirito-senpai’s black sword was originally a huge cedar tree that grew at the northern edge of the Human Empire.” Tiese said in a trembling voice from behind Asuna. Immediately, Sortiliena nodded as though she had understood.

“I see... That’s why it has the ability to absorb Sacred Power...”

As her words blended with Yuuki’s murmurs just now in Asuna’s head, Asuna finally realized the meaning behind the events unfolding before her eyes.

Even if Kirito’s black sword had the ability to absorb Resources, why was PoH’s Mate Chopper unable to completely absorb the Resources released by the blue roses, since it had the same ability? It was because the cleaver’s true ability was not to «absorb life», but to «absorb death».

PoH had said it himself. The more players... The more people Mate Chopper killed, the stronger a weapon it would become.

If its wielder's imagination was granting the demon sword the ability to absorb Resources, then even if it could absorb the «Death Resources» released from the gruesome murders, it would not be able to absorb the «Life Resources», which, with the help of the white sword, could be released without the need for death.

However, Kirito's black sword was different. Since it was originally a tree surviving off the power of the earth and sun, then both sword and wielder should have imagination powerful enough to absorb life.

The white sword in his left hand froze a wide range of targets and released their life into the air.

The black sword in his right hand absorbed the life from the surrounding air and converted it into energy.

It was an extremely simple, yet consequently peerlessly powerful synergy. The perfect pairing. The best partnership.

As it absorbed an astronomical number of ribbons, the black sword began to gleam gold at its center. Resources flowed through the hilt of the sword into Kirito's hand.

Kirito's body began to restore from bone-thinness to its original muscular form at a blinding rate. The rebirth was not limited to his body; even his black shirt, riddled with tears from the fierce battle, regenerated instantly; fingerless gloves wrapped themselves around his hands and his feet were covered by riveted boots.

Rays of light continued to reach over his shoulders onto his arms and descend onto his back, and a moment later, materialized into lustrous black leather. It was his trademark long coat from the SAO era. As the violently flapping hem settled, the two sword sheaths that had landed far away flew over and installed themselves on his back in a criss-cross pattern.

“..... Kirito... kun.....”

A plethora of emotions welling up in her heart, Asuna beheld through teary eyes the fully revived form of the «Black Swordsman» Kirito with his two swords raised high. Glittering liquid flowed down Sortliena's cheeks on her right, and Ronye's on her left. Faint sobs from Tiese came from behind her.

Seconds later, having absorbed all of the life ribbons, Kirito slowly lowered both swords.

Most of the Chinese and Korean players cramming the battlefield full had been logged out. Asuna turned her head and sent a thankful gaze to the crimson knight helping Klein. Right afterwards, he too disappeared, and a barren silence enveloped the wilderness, giving one the impression that the multiple fierce battles in rapid succession had been nothing but a dream.

The only things audible were the dry wheeze of wind, and the *cling, cling* of hot metal rubbing against itself. The source of the noise was the black sword, concentrated with an astronomical amount of energy and brimming with a golden aura.

Finally giving up on absorbing Resources, PoH lowered his Mate Chopper in silence.

His chest was still perforated by the large hole that Asuna's OSS Mother's Rosary had hit him directly with. When the Resources remaining in his demon sword were exhausted, PoH's life would end.

Even though he clearly ought to understand this, the reaper no longer let fly curses, instead standing silently. But he seemed not to acknowledge defeat at all; the bitter chill emanating from his entire body stung Asuna's skin even as she merely watched from far away.

Deep within the hood, lips that curved into a lopsided grin began to move slightly.

“You really are the best, Kirito. You are the first and last guy I’ve wanted to kill so much of my own will. It really is a shame that we have to end it here, but there won’t ever be an occasion better than this...”

Smoothly readying the cleaver in his right hand, he put forward his left. Then, as though he were displaying the «Laughing Coffin» tattoo on the back of his hand, he beckoned with slender fingers.

“...Now, shall we properly enjoy ourselves, Black Swordsman?”

Faced with tempting words that seemed to be the ultimate concentration of evil, Kirito replied simply:

“Yeah, let’s end it all.”

He parted his feet, lowered his waist, and adopted a posture with his white sword in front and black sword behind.

Combative energy erupted from both of them at explosive speed, discharging violent sparks where they clashed in between.

Just as both of them had said: the next blow would end it all. With that premonition, Asuna watched with bated breath, eyes open as fully as possible.

A parched breeze rustled by; the Black Swordsman and the dark reaper moved at the same time.

Held aloft, PoH’s Mate Chopper was engulfed with viscous, reddish-black light. Next second, the reaper was running at blinding speed and split into three separate bodies. It was a Sword Skill of which Asuna had no knowledge.

Opposite, the sword in Kirito’s right hand remained pointed downward, while the white sword in his left hand took on a crimson gleam. This was a single-handed Sword Skill for the longsword: «Deadly Sins».

PoH’s slashes from left, right, and center were intercepted by Kirito’s combo attack.

Every clash of giant blood-red cleaver and ruby-gleaming black longsword caused powerful tremors in the ground and the air.

The three PoHs struck twice for a total of six attacks; then the flanking clones vanished. Now alone, the original brought the thick blade thundering down from overhead. Kirito blocked the strike with a left diagonal slash, creating an impact akin to a detonating bomb.



«Deadly Sins» was a seven-hit combo attack. As the skill ended, Kirito was locked into a rigid state. If PoH had another attack coming, then Kirito would not be able to block it.

The blowback from his deflected overhead strike billowed the reaper's hood, revealing for the first time since the SAO era his true face underneath.

That not-quite-Japanese, sharply defined face split into an savage grin — once more, PoH readied his giant cleaver, twisted with a reddish-black aura, ready to roar towards Kirito's chest. The eighth hit.

But in that instant.

The black sword in Kirito's right grip swelled anew with deep crimson light. A flamelike crimson deeper, hotter than the lighting effects of «Deadly Sins».

Breaking free of what ought to have been a second-long rigid time, the black sword let loose a lightning-fast stab. Activating multiple one-handed Sword Skills with one's left and right hands was a special move that only Kirito alone was capable of — «Skill Connect».

With the thunderous, metallic roar of an external combustion engine, the single-shot heavy attack «Vorpall Strike» collided fiercely with the supposed last attack of PoH's eight clone combo.

The strongest shockwave yet ripped through the ground in a radial pattern of cracks. A gale of sand and hot air blew past, but Asuna merely squinted slightly, intent on watching the final result of the duel.

When the wind settled, she could see the two of them immobile, black sword and giant red cleaver in hand, blade tips touching.

The fight was not over. Each of them had concentrated an enormous amount of energy onto an infinitesimal point, trying with all of their might to push back the other's attack.

If one were merely comparing the amount of resources stored in their weapons, then Kirito's black sword having absorbed the lives of 20000 people, far exceeded PoH's Mate Chopper without question. But the situation was not that simple. In this world, imagination... «Incarnation», as the knights called it, bore with it the possibility to overturn any numerical specifications.

PoH's Incarnation was exceedingly simple, and was extremely strong for that reason. To murder... Bent on filling the world with discord and distrust, the reaper waged war with hostility and malice.

What was Kirito fighting for, then?

He had lost a special friend in this world. There had been external factors as well, but he had tasted enough grief to render him unconscious for half a year. Yet now he was standing up, gripping his longsword. What kind of Incarnation had given him such power...?

Asuna could not articulate the answer, but she did not see the need to do so. Kirito had shouldered much in his continuous battle until today. Whether in the old SAO, ALO, or GGO. And this moment was no different.

Bewilderment, pain, and grief could become strength. Tears could be transformed into light. That light would never lose to PoH's darkness.

Isn't that right?... Kirito-kun.

Asuna did not know whether her prayer reached Kirito, but in the next moment, a faint yet resolute sound was heard.

Crack.

PoH's demon sword, the lethal weapon «Mate Chopper» that existed only for humans to murder other humans, began to split from tip to hilt like a crimson lightning bolt.

Next, the giant cleaver burst into innumerable pieces and scattered in all directions—.

Together with the sword, Kirito's Vorpal Strike blew PoH's right hand to smithereens, and continue to thrust forward more than five meters.

As a second gale stole away her vision, Asuna could not resist standing up. Tiese and the others beside her, along with Klein, Silica, Lisbeth, and all of the others who were released from bondage stood up as well.

At last, the dust cloud dissipated, and the tightly interwound figures of the two SAO players came into view.

Weaponless, PoH's limbs hung uselessly as Kirito's black sword plunged deeply into his chest. But since Asuna had blown a large hole there already, no fresh damage was dealt to his body.

Perhaps from the severance of the Mate Chopper's resource supply, blood splattered from his mouth and the hole in his chest, but PoH's confident smile remained wide.

"...Expected nothing less, that's what I'm talking about. But... this ain't the end. Even if you log out from this world, I will appear before you all, again and again. It doesn't matter how many times I do it before I slit the throats and tear out the hearts of you and the «Flash»..."

Faced with this curse of a declaration.

Kirito's calm reply seemed almost emotionless.

"No, this is the end. You will not log out from Underworld."

Next second, the black sword emitted an instant flash of light.

Then, Kirito slowly extracted the sword from PoH's chest and took a few steps backward.

Even without support, PoH did not fall. A gruesome smile was still plastered on his face as he seemed to want to say something.

But his gaping mouth froze with a squeak.

His arms and legs as well. Frozen in awkward positions, his limbs squeaked and creaked as they changed texture. Shining black leather became finely cracked fibrous material. Metallic rivets became swollen lumps.

Kirito spoke again to the bizarrely transfiguring reaper:

“...This sword was once a great cedar tree that the people of Rulid Village called the «demon cedar». The villagers’ axes couldn’t cut it down for 200 years. And now, this «sword’s memories» have flowed into your body.”

Just as he said, more than half of PoH’s body surface had transformed into tree bark, as black as charcoal. His feet fused together and began to sprout roots into the ground; his two hands twisted into twigs bent at queer angles; his hair was lengthening into sharp leaves... nothing was left of his eyes and mouth except for three tiny consecutive holes.

“When they find out that the Chinese and Korean players have logged out, your buddies are probably going to start the time acceleration again. I don’t know how many years will go by before they take you out of the STL... or how many tens of years, so I would pray for a smaller number if I were you. If some settlers build a village near here, maybe some axe-wielding kids will come cut you down.”

He did not know whether PoH had consciously heard him. The object before Kirito was no longer human, but a grotesque, two-meter tall cedar tree.

After gazing at it for a while, Kirito turned away from the tree and looked first towards Asuna and the others. He smiled slightly, nodded, then looked towards the wounded Japanese and Underworld residents.

Then, once more his right hand raised high the black sword, some golden light still remaining within—

“System call. Transfer durability, right to area.”

Vsssshhhh...

A faint, but ubiquitous sound filled the battlefield.

It started to rain.

Resources bursting from the sword materialized in midair, then fell back down as a soft rain of light. It was healing the bodies of the maimed, exhausted Japanese players lying on the ground, and the Guardians of the Human Empire Defense Army, enervated by continuous battle.

Perhaps, their spirit was being healed too—

Expending the last of their stored Resources, Kirito quietly inserted the black and white swords back into their hilts on his back.

Within the all-healing rain of light, Asuna did nothing but look fixedly upon the swordsman in black, taking step after definite step towards her.

She did not make a move, nor did she open her mouth to talk to him. She felt as though as soon as she said something, it would all become an illusion. So all Asuna did was keep her eyes firmly open, a slight smile on her lips, waiting.

Walking forward in her place was Klein.

His severed left arm and pierced body were completely healed, but the katana-wielder still clutched his chest in apparent pain, then hobbled forward.

“Kirito... Oh, Kirito.”

His normally lively voice carried a hint of wetness.

“You always... You always have to steal the spotlight, you little..”

His voice was a barely a whimper.

The lanky katana-wielder seized the black dual-wielder’s shoulders, and pressed his bandanna-less forehead to his chest. His back quaked, racking with thick sobs.

“Uhhh... Uhhhhhhhhh....”

Kirito wrapped his arms around his weeping friend. His eyes were shut tight and teeth firmly clenched, and there was something glistening on his face as well.

“...Senpai.”

Ronye muttered from beside Asuna, then jumped up and broke into a run. Droplets flying from her eyes as she ran, she collided with Kirito’s right shoulder. Sortiliena was close behind.

Agil’s eyes were wet too. Lisbeth and Silica were embracing each other in hysterics. From the crowd of Japanese players gathering around them — the faces of ALO leaders Sakuya, Alicia, and Eugene, Siune and Jun of the Sleeping Knights, and numerous others were flowing with droplets of mixed rain and tears.

The Guardians and Ascetics of the Human Empire army watching from afar were red-eyed as well. All of them sank to their knees, heads deeply bowed and right fists pressed to their chests.

“.....Ever since I first saw you, I knew. That person, and his two swords, will save us all.”

A calm voice suddenly came from behind.

Asuna turned to look and saw Renri the young knight, accompanied behind by his dragon. Both had been almost fatally injured, but the only wounds left now were the scratches on their armor.

Asuna’s chest was full; she was only able to nod once or twice. Renri returned her nod and walked to Tiese, who was still knelt on the ground, and sat down beside her.

Another sweeping look around them revealed that more than 20000 Chinese and Korean VRMMO players had vanished without a trace.

Once the attackers realize that they had logged out, they would cease their tactic of bringing in reinforcements from the real

world and turn the time acceleration back up to maximum. By then, Klein and the others who had logged in via AmuSphere would be automatically disconnected.

Seemingly realizing this, Kirito patted Klein on the shoulders and moved away, then cast a look upon the surrounding Japanese players.

He bowed his head deeply towards them, and spoke:

“Thank you... everyone. I will make the most of the emotions, the blood, and sweat that you all have spilled for me. Really, thank you.”

Yes—

The battle was not yet over.

Although their arch-enemy PoH, along with the American, Chinese, and Korean attackers had been eliminated, the enemy mastermind Emperor Vector was still in this world. Having kidnapped the fruit of Project Alicization — Integrity Knight Alice, at this very moment he was flying far south towards the «World End Altar».

Asuna inhaled a deep breath, then stood up at last.

Beset by a hundred different emotions all at once, she passed through various players standing stock still, stepping gradually towards Kirito.

Kirito looked up, gazing straight at her.

In an instant, a wave of irrepressible emotion gushed up within her, and she stopped breathing.

Now. She wanted nothing more than to fly into her lover’s embrace. To howl like a little girl, to release all of her repressed emotion.

But Asuna suppressed her overflowing feelings with all of her might, and announced what was on her mind.

“Kirito-kun... Emperor Vector, he took Alice-san—”

“Yeah. I have some hazy memories of the situation.”

Kirito nodded with a stiff expression. Then he reached out his right hand.

“Let’s go save her. Please help me, Asuna.”

“

She could not hold it in anymore.

Asuna trotted over, took his hand, and pressed it against her cheek.

Kirito’s left arm circled around her back and pulled her towards him.

It was only a moment’s embrace, but in that moment Asuna felt that their souls exchanged a great amount of information that which could not be expressed in words.

Kirito exchanged a close look with Asuna, nodded, then turned his eyes towards the southern sky.

He raised his right hand in that direction. His five fingers moved, seemingly searching for something.

“.....Found them.”

“Huh...?”

Asuna blinked, but Kirito did not reply; he simply revealed a hint of a smile.

Surveying the crowd once more, Kirito gently patted Klein’s shoulders and Ronye’s head before saying:

“Well, here we go.”

And then—

And then Lisbeth watched as Kirito and Asuna were enveloped in bright green light and took flight at extraordinary speed towards the south.

She blinked her wide eyes a few times, then dragged out a long sigh.

“Good grief... Always going too far. Or maybe I should just call him reckless...”

Silica chuckled from aside.

Klein clapped his hands together loudly and bellowed.

“Wait one minute, goddammit... Is that bastard? Isn’t he unstoppable now? Goddammit, he always steals the show...”

The katana-wielder groused, his cheeks shining with renewed tears, uttering the name of the male protagonist from a very old manga. To him, Kirito must have always been that kind of person he had been enamored with, ever since they had first met in Aincrad. An unstoppable, absolute, eternal hero.

—And he’s the same to me.

Lisbeth turned her own tear-stained face towards the southern sky.

To burn this world into her memory, this world that they would log out of soon, that they might not ever return to.

And to convey the message to the many players who were disconnected in agony and humiliation, that our efforts were not in vain.

Chapter 22

The Decisive Battle

7 July 2026 / Eighth Day⁵ of the Eleventh Month of the Human Empire Calendar, 380

1

“Damn!” came an abrupt expletive from Critter, the information warfare operative of the Ocean Turtle raid team, as he scrutinized the large monitor directly above the console.

The red dot, which had numbered 30,000 at its peak, was rapidly vanishing from the inside out.

This meant that, by one way or another, the Chinese and Korean VRMMO players thrown into Underworld through Vassago’s secret plan were being annihilated and automatically logged out.

A thousand survivors still remained among the blue-colored Human Empire army and white Japanese troops in the middle of the red circle. It was a conspicuously large number, and if this thousand people had the power to vanquish a combined Chinese-Korean force of 30,000, that made them all the more dangerous.

“...What the hell is that dolt Vassago doing?”

Critter clucked his tongue, fixating on one point in the screen.

There was one final red dot positioned exceedingly close to the Japanese troops, glowing intensely. That was Vassago, who had converted his own account earlier and dived in through the STL in the adjacent room. He was right next to the enemy, but instead of engaging them, he did not appear to be moving at all.

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

Had he been taken prisoner somehow and immobilized? Or did he have his own secret plan of defeating an enemy army of thousands—?

Critter repressed the urge to storm into the STL Room, slap Vassago awake, seize his shirt collar, and shake him.

He could not reset the account while Underworld administrator privileges were locked; if he logged Vassago out by force, he would never be able to use that account again. All Critter could do at the moment was change the time acceleration rate, which was separate from The Seed program, but anything involving that had to be timed with extreme care.

Critter inhaled sharply and zoomed out the onscreen map.

Deep into the Underworld south, he saw another red dot still moving at full speed. That would be the raid team captain, Gabriel Miller.

What he had to consider now was the likelihood of the Human Empire army catching up to Captain Miller, who had either already captured Alice or was currently in pursuit of her.

Sending in large quantities of American, Chinese, and Korean players had proved a significant impediment to the Human Empire army's southward advance. By now Captain Miller had a several-hundred-mile head start in Underworld. A fighter jet would clear that in the blink of an eye, but it was difficult to imagine something like that within Underworld. They would have winged creature units at the very most.

—No way they're gonna catch up.

Critter decided after a long three seconds of consideration.

He glanced at a watch on his left wrist. It was July 7, 9:40am.

Eight hours and twenty minutes remained until the JSDF's commando unit was scheduled to come storming in from the destroyer. Captain Miller had ordered them to restart the acceleration at the eight hour mark — 10:00AM.

But with all of their external troops completely eliminated, there was no meaning in waiting any longer.

In that case, it would be wise to bring Underworld's time acceleration back to 1,000 times right now and buy Captain Miller some time to secure Alice.

"No way around it... Just hold on a bit longer, Vassago."

Speaking to the still utterly immobile dot on the main battlefield, Critter reached his right hand towards the lever that controlled the Fluctlight Acceleration rate.

He peered up at the rate meter on the main monitor, but his eyes suddenly came to a halt on the scale at its side.

The sliding needle was currently positioned on $\times 1$, at the very bottom. From there, each $\times 100$ marked a gradation, and at $\times 1000$ a red line was painted across as a border.

Then the scale continued to rise, with another border at $\times 1200$. This would appear to be the safety limit for real live humans when they dived in through STLs.

But the rate meter continued to rise even further, finally stopping at $\times 5000$. If no humans were diving — if the world were only populated by Artificial Fluctlights, then the internal time could be accelerated up to this point.

One adjusted the time acceleration rate by operating a physical lever on the console and then pressing the covered button beside it. Taking care not to touch the button, Critter slowly pushed the control lever upwards, treating it like a ship or airplane's horizontally-moving throttle.

The slider on the monitor rose smoothly, and the digital numbers beside it began jumping staccato-like.

At $\times 1000$ he suddenly encountered resistance.

He shoved hard and the lever gave, but stopped again at ×1200. This time it did not show any signs of wanting to move no matter how much force he applied.

“Unf.....”

Critter’s curiosity got the better of him. He began inspecting the sizable metallic lever.

And then he immediately noticed a shining silver keyhole beside the confirmation button.

“I see.”

His face split into a grin as he scratched his close-cropped hair.

If the safety limit was 1,200 times, then the actual danger zone had to be somewhere above that. It didn’t seem like a bad idea to try unlocking the safety mechanism first, just in case they became extremely pressed for time inside.

Spinning his chair around, Critter snapped his fingers at the other team members who had returned to the main control room.

“Hey, anyone here a lockpicking specialist?”

—So soft... smells good...

This had to be the best sleep he’d had in months. That was why Higa Takeru resisted until the very end the unknown voice in his ear trying desperately to wake him up.

“...ey, Higa-kun! Listen to me! Hey, open your eyes!!”

—This sounds overly desperate, though. Almost like I’m about to die or something.

—Whatever’s going on, this has got to be blowing it outta proportion. It’s not like I was stabbed, or I was... shot...

“——AHH!!”

His memory reviving with his consciousness, Higa cried out as his eyes snapped open.

Whereupon he saw before him the face of a thirty-something man, black-rimmed glasses flashing.

“Whoaaa?!”

Higa screamed again.

Instinct told him to scramble backwards, but his body didn’t respond to his commands. Instead, excruciating pain assailed his right shoulder and Higa let loose a third bizarre noise.

—Right.

I got shot by that guy in the cable duct.

I lost a lot of blood but ignored it, prioritizing the STL operation instead. I fed the three girls’ Fluctlight outputs directly into Kirigaya-kun’s STL, but still couldn’t wake him up... and I think something happened after that...

“... Ki-Kirito-kun, is he—”

Higa demanded, keeping his distance from the bespectacled man watching him at close range.

A cool female voice answered him.

“Kirigaya-kun’s Fluctlight activity has been completely restored. In fact, it’s almost *too* active.”

“I.. I see...”

Higa’s murmur mixed with a sigh.

A self-image recovery from that state was nothing short of a miracle. But surviving blood loss of that volume was a genuine, bona-fide, inexplicable—

As he thought, he examined his own situation once more.

He was lying on the floor of the sub control room. His upper body was naked and his right shoulder was bandaged. A blood transfusion catheter ran into his left arm.

To his left was the bespectacled man, Kikuoka Seijirou. Sitting directly on the floor to his right was Dr. Koujiro Rinko; she had taken off her white gown. Opposite the catheter was Sergeant First Class Aki Natsuki, registered nurse, changing his blood bag. She must have been the one tending to his wounds.

Higa looked back at Kikuoka, who after remaining silent all this time, finally sighed heavily and spoke:

“Goodness gracious... I told you not to be reckless... —No, it’s my fault for not realizing there was a spy among the technicians...”

Kikuoka’s bangs were a mess and beads of perspiration were visible on his glasses. Closer inspection revealed that Rinko was also drenched in sweat. It seemed that both of them had been trying to revive him. So that comfortable sensation he had felt between wakefulness and sleep was from...

——Huh?

Which person had given him chest compressions, and which had given him mouth-to-mouth?

Higa almost asked, but shut his mouth at the last moment. There were truths in this world that should remain undiscovered.

Instead, he raised a question many times more important.

“How’s Underworld... How’s Alice?”

Kikuoka nudged Higa’s left shoulder as he replied:

“The players connecting from America, China, and Korea have all logged out. —Also, there were nearly 30,000 players from China and Korea, but they’re all gone...”

“Huh?... China and Korea came too?! Not reinforcements... but enemies?!”

He leapt up on reflex but moaned from excruciating pain that shot from his right shoulder right to the top of his head. SFC Aki's scolding without delay.

"Take it easy! The bullet passed right through you, but it took a lot to stop the bleeding."

"G-Got it..."

Higa relaxed his body, and Rinko updated him on the situation.

"—About China and Korea, it looks like social media was cleverly used to incite resentment and conflict among the online gamers, then lure them here."

"Is... that right..."

Higa sighed softly. He joined Project Alicization because... he was inspired after a Korean friend was killed by a terrorist bomb attack during his military service in Iraq. But even if this whole ordeal was the attackers' fault, things still ended up spinning out of control and worsening the hostility between Japanese and Korean players.

He shook his head without thinking, and after grimacing from pain again, Higa asked something else:

"How many people came from China and Korea?"

"Seemed to be 30,000 at its peak. Almost all of the 2,000 players coming to help from Japan were wiped out."

Kikuoka shut his eyes for a second, then continued:

"At that point, there were still more than 20,000 Chinese and Korean players, so it was fortunate that Kirito-kun awoke then and, in the blink of an eye..."

"Wait, what?"

Higa could not help but interrupt the commander.

"Kirito-kun, by himself... in the blink of an eye, incapacitated a great army of 20,000 people? That's impossible."

There aren't any weapons or commands in Underworld able to inflict an attack of that much power or scale. Or... so I think..."

Just then, he finally recalled in clear detail the conversation that had went down before Yanai shot him in the cable duct.

Sugou Nobuyuki's original henchman Yanai hadn't just been the attackers' spy. He was also deeply obsessed with the Artificial Fluctlight «Administrator». What kind of experience had driven things that far for him?

Moreover, the «fourth person» that had connected to Kirigaya Kazuto's STL — the anomalous Fluctlight in the Main Visualizer. Even if it, no, he or she had become the key to Kazuto's revival, Higa had never expected a subjectless, normal object to express or even simply mimic human consciousness.

"... Hey... Kiku-san..."

Higa muttered to the commander, feeling a chill that was not part of the blood loss.

"We... may have... created something unthinkable..."

At that moment.

A shrill alarm came blaring from an embedded speaker in the sub control room.

It was something Higa had installed: the sound of the time acceleration rate being changed.

Gray clouds raced past me and Asuna at incredible speed. The blood-red sky overhead and jet-black wilderness underfoot expanded as far as the eye could see.

There's only one person capable of the Art of airborne flight in all of the vast Human Empire, and that's the Highest Minister — that was what Integrity Knight Alice once told me.

Since Highest Minister Administrator and her «counterpart», the sage Cardinal, had both left Underworld, there was no way to find out exactly how they had learned the Flight Art. That's why it struck me that my ability to fly in midair above the Dark Territory like this had nothing to do with an Art; it was the result of me directly manipulating things with my imagination... the power that the Integrity Knights called «Incarnation».

Cardinal's familiar Charlotte had protected me ever since I left Rulid Village, and now I heard the giant spider's words once more, deep within my ear.

—Every Art is naught but a tool to channel and adjust your Incarnation... your imagination, as you call it. You don't need incantations or mediums anymore.

—Now dry your tears, and stand up. Then, feel them. The flowers' prayer.

—The truth of the world.

In the time that I shut myself out of the world around me following the battle against Administrator on the topmost floor of the Central Cathedral of the Axiom Church, all the way until I recovered some tens of minutes ago, somehow or other I think I established an incredibly deep connection with the «truth» of this world.

I could feel, quite clearly, the Sacred Power swirling in the space around me, and I could convert it, quite easily, into elements without the need of an Art. Although I had used an incantation when I healed Klein and Lisbeth's Lives back there, I should have been able to achieve the same just with my imagination.

I was now flying by coating Asuna's and my body with Aerial Elements to counteract air resistance while continuously discharging Aerial Elements behind us, much like a jet engine. We were several times faster than a dragon but it would still take us at least five minutes or so before we could catch up to Alice and Amayori, the dragon she was riding into the far south.

There were a mountain of words, apologies, and thanks I wanted to give Asuna during this respite. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't look to my right, look her in the eye as we flew side by side, hand in hand.

The reason was—

After I awoke, after all of the blood in my body seemed to transform to light as my sensation of invincibility ebbed away, every recent memory in my head reorganized itself and became distinct.

There was one problem: a scene from late last night.

Having positioned my supine body at the center of a tent, Asuna, Alice, Ronye, and Sortiliena-senpai were sitting in a circle around me. Each one of them was chatting about their memories of me... Actually, they were taking turns staging a one-act play of each and every single one of my misdeeds. How else could you describe it than a “living hell”?

—Kirito-senpai regularly snuck out of the Academy to buy bags of honey pies from the Deer Leap or fruit cookies from the Sunflower, and shared them with me and Tiese.

—Which reminds me, when I graduated he actually brought me some Zephyria flowers, which you normally only find in the western Empire. He told me that they took an entire year to bloom.

When Ronye and Sortiliena-senpai shared these anecdotes—

—When we were climbing the outer wall of the Cathedral, Kirito took a meat bun from his pocket and shared half of it with me. He heated it too quickly with a Thermal Element and nearly charred it.

—When I first met him, he gave me a piece of black bread with cream on it. And then we had blueberry tart, these huge roll cakes, and ate lots of different things together...

For some reason Alice and Asuna began responding with food-themed stories. Then ensued an endless conference about things I've done and said...

“Ugh...”

I involuntarily clutched my head and moaned as we flew at high speed.

“Aarrrrgh!”

At that moment my mind's focus was muddled, and the generation and discharge of Aerial Elements ceased. Harsh wind resistance immediately besieged my entire body and we plunged into a nosedive.

Crap, I muttered, opening my coat into a pair of giant wings to rebalance myself. But before I had a moment's breather—

“...Yaaaaaah!!”

Asuna was shrieking and dropping like a stone from above; I threw my arms as far apart as I could and caught her.

Having avoided imminent peril, I stared point-blank into her widened hazel eyes. Any apologies had to be said now.

“Asuna, it wasn't like that!!”

—It was more of an excuse than an apology, but there was no turning back now.

“Absolutely nothing happened between me, Liena-senpai, Alice, and Ronye, really! I swear to Goddess Stacia, absolutely N-O-T-H-I-N-G!!”

Hearing my desperate explanation, Asuna's face—

Broke into a warm smile. She took my cheeks in her slender hands, replying in a half-amazed, half-wistful voice:

“...You haven't changed at all, Kirito-kun. They say you've been here for two years, and I thought you would have become... a bit more... mature.....”

Suddenly, Asuna's eyes were brimming with tears. Her lips trembled a bit, then let out something hoarse.

"Thank goodness... You're Kirito-kun... You haven't... changed at all... My... Kirito-kun..."

Her words dug their way deep into my chest, where something hot threatened to gush upwards, but I just managed to hold it back in my throat:

"... I'm... me. I can't have changed."

"Because... you're almost like a god. Back there you instantly froze a whole entire army just like that... You fully healed 200 people all at once... and also, you can fly..."

All I could manage was a strained grin.

"I'm just a little more familiar with the workings of this world. As for flying, well, with a little practice you can do it too, Asuna."

"...I don't have to."

"What?"

"I just want you to hold me like this while you fly."

Asuna replied with a watery smile, then wrapped her arms around my back in a tight hug. I hugged her back, hard, and spoke again:

"Thank you, Asuna... I mean it. Even when you were so badly hurt, you still tried to protect the people of Underworld... It must have hurt so bad..."

Two years ago, when I was cut by a mountain goblin at the Mountain Range at the Edge, I truly understood for the first time how realistic the pain in this world was. It had only been a flesh wound on my left shoulder, but it was so painful that I almost couldn't stand back up.

But Asuna had faced PoH's army head-on, pulling through to the very last minute even with terrible wounds blanketing her body. Without Asuna's struggle, Tiese, Ronye, and the rest of the Human Empire army would have been obliterated long ago.

"No... It wasn't just me."

Asuna said after listening to me, gently shaking her cheek sideways against mine.

"Sinonon, Leafa-chan, Liz, Silica-chan, Klein-san, Agil-san... and the Sleeping Knights and everyone in ALO, all did their very best. Renri-san the Integrity Knight, the Guardians of the Human Empire army, Sortiniena-san, Ronye-san, Tiese-san, too..."

At this point, Asuna's body tensed as if she had suddenly realized something.

I realized why before she even continued.

"...Oh right, Kirito-kun! The Knight Commander... Bercouli-san went after the enemy Emperor alone..."

"....."

I nodded silently, then slowly shook my head.

For a while now, I'd been aware that the imposing swordsmanship of the eldest Integrity Knight I'd never gotten the chance to talk directly with, Bercouli Synthesis One, was no longer present in this world.

Before the war began, we met for the first time through the clashing of imagination blades — «Incarnation blades». As much as my gradually awakening memory would allow, I believe that Bercouli could already feel his impending death back then.

As the final destination of his 300 year life, he chose to fight for Alice's safety.

Comprehending the meaning behind my actions, Asuna tightened her arms around me, racking with tiny sobs. But she swallowed her weeping fast and asked:

“... Is Alice-san... safe...?”

“Yeah, she hasn’t been captured yet. She’s just about to reach the southern edge of the Dark Territory... the third system console. But something huge is chasing after her...”

“I see... Then we must protect her, for Bercouli-san.”

Asuna’s face slowly parted from mine, dampened with tears but filled with ironclad determination. I gave her a slow nod. Then there was a spark of doubt in her eyes.

“But, for now... Just for a little bit, just for a little bit longer, you’re mine and mine only, Kirito-kun.”

Her lips murmured as they grew closer and closer, and pressed against mine.

Beneath the otherworld’s crimson sky, my black wings fluttered gently as I shared a long, long kiss with Asuna.

At that moment, at long last, I understood why I had awoken in this world two years ago.

The last Monday of June in the real world.

When I was walking Asuna home, I was attacked by the third accomplice in the «Death Gun incident», Johnny Black, a leader of the red guild «Laughing Coffin». My memories broke off after he injected me with succinylcholine from a gun-shaped, high pressure syringe. I’d probably stopped breathing or suffered some sort of brain damage, so I was placed into an STL and Underworld for treatment.

By one way or another, PoH, the leader of Laughing Coffin, was among the band of people attacking the Ocean Turtle and now he was frozen into a tree on Dark Territory soil like a miniature Gigas Cedar. If the time was accelerated again before he got disconnected by force from outside, I don’t know how many weeks he would have to ensure in that blind deaf state, but no doubt it would deal quite a bit of damage to his sanity.

He might even become like how I've been for this past half year. It felt very cruel, but didn't seem like overkill to me.

That man had tried to kill Asuna... and the people who mean so much to me.

After many spellbinding minutes during which our existences seemed to fuse together, Asuna's and my lips finally parted.

"It reminds me of back then..."

Asuna said, then quickly shut her mouth. I understood in an instant.

She was remembering the kiss we had shared under the setting sun, against a background of the crumbling floating castle, after the death game SAO had been completely cleared. That had been, indeed, a farewell kiss.

I smiled, and firmly tried to clear away her anxiety:

"Let's go, then. Let's beat Emperor Vector, rescue Alice, and return with everyone to the real world..."

But before I could finish that sentence.

I heard an urgent voice directly in my mind.

"Kirito-kun!! Kirigaya-kun!! Can you hear me?! Kirito-kun!!"

That rusty tone—

"Hey... is that you, Kikuoka-san? How did you contact me without a system console..."

"No time to explain! Something bad has happened!! The time acceleration rate... the FLA, those bastards...!!"

Brigg's face was ruddy and unshaven as he inserted two metal wires into the keyhole and turned, while Critter looked on with some unease.

Leave the picking to me, he had volunteered gutsily, but what could only be the design of a time acceleration safety mechanism had resulted in a complete difference from any old cylinder lock. Brigg's finger movements grew more violent as he cursed nonstop, his voice rising too.

Hans was standing behind him, gleefully staring at a watch on his left wrist:

"Riiight, that's three miiinutes! Two more and you owe me fifty bucks!"

"Shut the fuck up! Two minutes is enough for me... to open this thing... and swim to Hawaii... and back..."

When the noise of the wire rotating inside the keyhole began to sound more like vandalism than lockpicking, Critter was ready to say "Let's give it a rest." But once those two starter betting against one another, there was no stopping them before one emerged triumphant.

"One minute leeeft. About time to get out your walleet."

"Holy shit!"

Brigg yelled suddenly, standing and throwing the snapped wire to the floor.

Finally giving up? Critter thought with a moment's relief.

Without another word, the stubbled, red-faced soldier drew a giant sidearm from his holster and aimed it at the keyhole.

"Hey, wait..."

A roar. And another.

Everyone stared blankly as Brigg stuffed his pistol back into its holster, looked at Hans, then towards Critter, and shrugged.

"It's open."

Critter gaped at the new two inch hole in the control panel.

The blackness inside sparked two or three times, and then the frozen, angled control lever began to slowly tilt. It moved about five inches, then stopped again with a quiet clunk. Critter checked the monitor, but instead of seeing a number slightly above 1,200 like he had originally wanted — the upper limit was displayed in crisp numbers: ×5000.

“... F-Five thou.....”

Just as Critter was instinctually calculating how much time one second in the real world converted to in Underworld — another dull clunk of metal.

The control lever, supposedly stopped at its upper limit, continued to fall downwards.

“What... the hell.....”

Critter muttered, when before his eyes, the digits on the monitor exceeded 5000 — 10000...

—No, we’re still okay. The rate won’t actually change unless I press the confirmation button. We can still move the lever back where it was, nice and quiet, like nothing happened.

“Hey... Don’t touch it!! Nobody touch anything!!”

Critter gasped, motioning Hans and Brigg away from the console.

He inched towards the lever, cautiously reaching out his right hand.

Bang.

There was a small explosion before his hand could touch the lever.

The translucent protection cover over the red confirmation button in front of him was completely blown off.

A speaker cried an earsplitting alarm as the giant monitor installed into an entire wall of the main control room went bright red. A 15 minute countdown immediately appeared on the monitor and began decreasing with dizzying speed.

When he heard the alarm again, a sign that someone was tampering with the time acceleration for a second time, for a split-second Higa couldn't help but try to sit up, only to wince from scorching pain.

"Higa-kun! I told you to take it..."

Dr. Koujiro rushed over and pressed her hands to Higa's back, but just then—

The sub control room monitor went completely red.

"What... What's going on?!"

Kikuoka screamed. Higa pushed up his upper body with help from Rinko's hands, squinting as hard as he could from behind as the commander flew to the console.

A message in thick gothic font informed them that all three layers of security on the time acceleration mechanism had been fully disabled, and the entire Underworld was about to enter maximum acceleration phase.

"What's....."

Lost for words, Higa could only pant, so Dr. Koujiro asked sharply in his stead:

"What's the 'maximum acceleration phase'?! Isn't the FLA's upper limit 1,200 times?!"

"...That's the limit on people from the real world diving inside... the actual limit is 5,000 times if only Artificial Fluctlights are present..."

Higa replied almost automatically. The professor's eyes widened even further.

"5,000?! You mean... one second here would be about 80 minutes inside... 18 seconds would be an entire day!!"

It was an impressive amount of mental calculation, but Higa and Kikuoka shook their heads in stiff unison.

“What? ...Where am I wrong?”

“1,200 times is the safety limit we decided on when taking into account the «soul lifespan» of a real world human... 5,000 times is the limit of what can be observed in Underworld from outside... Neither is a hard limit...”

Higa desperately squeezed the words from his throat, which was so dry it seemed ready to catch fire. Dr. Koujiro’s hand jerked on his back.

“Th-Then... What in the world... is the hard limit...?”

“Well, as you know, Underworld is constructed and calculated with photons. The transmission speed of photons is theoretically limitless inside the Main Visualizer... meaning, the limit is determined by the equipped subordinate server architecture...”

“All right, just spit it out! How many times is the limit?!”

Higa turned his eyes from the monitor to Rinko’s face:

“In the maximum acceleration phase... the FLA rate is a hair above 5,000,000 times. The STLs connected by satellite from the Roppongi branch can’t support that kind of speed, so they should disconnect automatically... but as for Kirigaya-kun and Asuna-san, who are using the STLs in the Ocean Turtle...”

One minute in the real world — would be ten years in Underworld.

Probably completing the mental calculation in an instant, Rinko’s eyes stretched open as far as they would go, appearing to spasm slightly.

“Oh... my god... Quickly... Quickly, we need to get Asuna-san and Kirigaya-kun out of those STLs!”

The professor was just about to stand up before it was Higa’s turn to grab her arm.

“No, Rinko-san! Preliminary acceleration has already begun, if we drag them out of the machines now their Fluctlights will be damaged!”

“Then hurry up and start the disconnection procedure!”

“Why do you think I wanted to crawl down the cable duct?! The STLs can only be operated on from the main control room!”

Higa shouted, his voice raising too. Then he looked at the commander in front of the console.

Kikuoka seemed to already know what Higa was about to say.

“... Kiku-san. I’ll go down there again.”

At this, SFC Aki opened her mouth with a concerned expression, but quickly closed it. Then she walked over, murmuring “I’ll take out the catheter.”

The commander nodded bitterly:

“Understood. I’m coming too. I believe I’m still strong enough to carry you down the ladder.”

“No... No, lieutenant colonel!” came the shout of Captain Nakanishi, the leader of the escort team. His face greatly perturbed, he walked over with heavy bootfalls.

“It’s too dangerous, please allow me...”

“No, we still need you all to defend the stairs. We’ll be opening the partition again... We can’t use Ichimom and Niemom can’t move.”

Those words caused everyone’s eyes to fall upon the left corner of the sub control room.

The humanoid silhouette supported by a structural frame akin to a coat hanger was not a real person, but a humanoid mechanical body researched on and developed by Higa as a part of Project Alicization: Electroactive Muscle Operative Machine Mark II, or «Niemom» for short.

Mark I was damaged as bait during their partition-opening operation from before, and compared to that, this was much more slender; Niemom was designed from the start to carry a Light Cube.

Nothing was plugged into the port on its head at the moment, so it could not move in this state even if its power was turned on. In other words, it could not serve as a walking shield like Ichiemom had.

Looking away from the soulless robot, Kikuoka delivered a command, or rather an order to Nakanishi with a stern expression never seen before.

“In terms of danger, you all would be in more danger when you’re in a firefight with the enemy. But we need you to do it.”

Nakanishi tucked in his chin and saluted at his commander’s order.

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Higa listened to the JSDF officials’ conversation and raised a meek right hand. It was still painful, but his fingers could definitely move.

The countdown on the monitor still showed around 10 minutes before the maximum acceleration phase.

But no matter how he estimated it, opening the partition again, climbing down that long ladder, and initiating the STL disconnection procedure from the connector would take a total of 30 minutes.

That 20 minute difference equated to — 200 years in Underworld.

Exceeding the 150 year age of a human soul.

Worse still, people from the real world... were most likely unable to withstand a duration of — practically infinite — magnitude within Underworld...

Within Underworld...

“Ri... Right!!”

Higa yelped, waving his left hand complete with catheter at Kikuoka.

“Ki-Kiku-san!! When I was working on the STL just now, I secured a transmission channel with Kirito-kun! Please call him on Line C12!”

“B-But... what should I say...?”

“Tell him to get out!! Get to the system console within 10 minutes, or zero out his own HP and his STL will automatically begin the disconnection process!! But as soon as he enters the maximum phase the console will be useless, and dying then will be the worst-case scenario!! He’ll have to spend 200 years in sensory deprivation... Please just warn him especially of that!!”

“Two.....”

Two hundred years?!

I barely swallowed the words before they left my mouth.

By now, Asuna was looking puzzled. She couldn’t hear Kikuoka’s voice.

“Listen to me, Kirito-kun: You have 10 minutes! In that time, you must reach the console from where you are and manually log out!! If you are unable to do so no matter what, you can exhaust all of your HP... but that way is full of uncertainties and extremely dangerous, because...”

Because there’s the risk of me spending 200 years in a death-like state.

I understood. Interrupting Kikuoka, I demanded:

“I got it, I’ll try to get out through the console! I’ll be bringing Alice of course, so prepare for that!”

“...If it’s not too much trouble. But right now, both of your escapes take priority over Alice’s safety. Listen to me: even though we can delete your memories after you log out, 200 years of this kind of time far exceeds the age of a human soul! The likelihood of a normal consciousness recovery is... equivalent to zero...”

Hearing Kikuoka’s pained voice—

I replied quietly.

“Don’t worry, we will return. Also, Kikuoka-san. Half a year ago... no, last night, I’m sorry I said such awful things to you.”

“It’s fine... We deserve the criticism. We’ve prepared bandages here for the beating you’ll give us when you get back. ...I think Higa-kun’s ready, I need to go too.”

“Okay. See you in 10 minutes then, Kikuoka-san.”

And then the line cut off.

I kept flapping the hem of my coat to hover in midair as I gazed down at Asuna in my arms.

“... Kirito-kun, did Kikuoka-san contact you? Is... something wrong?”

I shook my head slowly, and replied.

“No... the time acceleration will start again in 10 minutes, so he wants us to get back as soon as possible.”

Asuna blinked a few times, smiled a little and nodded.

“Agreed, we really shouldn’t be staying here all day, for Alice-san’s sake. Come on, let’s go save her!”

“Yeah. I’m taking off again.”

Hugging Asuna tightly, I generated another heap of Aerial Elements. Green light immediately surged and encased us both.

To capture Alice, who had been advancing perpetually into the southern sky, and the enormous, aberrant presence pursuing her — I flew.

2

He was catching up.

Alice bit her lip slightly as she looked behind from atop Amayori's saddle.

Without question, that sinister black dot floating in the crimson sky was larger than it had been five minutes ago. It was not the enemy speeding up; Amayori and Takiguri's strength was in fact, finally giving out bit by bit.

This was as a matter of course since they had been flying continuously without any rest — it was rather a near miracle that they were able to make it this far. In less than half a day they had crossed from Central Capital Centoria to the Mountain Range at the Edge, a distance several times the radius of the Human Empire. It was clear that the two dragons were wearing through their own Life at a relentless rate to keep airborne.

But in that case, how was her pursuer avoiding exhaustion?

Through the use of Crystal Element Far-Sight Art, Alice had already verified that he was riding atop the back of a bizarre creature that was most definitely not a dragon. It resembled a winged disc and was unlike anything she had ever seen in the Human Empire or the Dark Territory.

The archer named Sinon who came from the «Real World» like Kirito had told her that she was not just being chased by Vector, God of Darkness, Emperor of the Dark Territory; he was really a man from the Real World and an enemy of Sinon and Kirito.

Emperor Vector had fallen by Knight Commander Bercouli's sword, at a grave cost — perhaps by the Time Release Art of his Divine Instrument, the Time Piercing Sword. But Vector had descended upon this world once again with a new life and was now chasing Alice.

His «revival» seemed to mock Bercouli's death, and it burned Alice's heart with insatiable flames of rage.

But as she flew alone, she finally realized what she had to do.

If the enemy could not die in this world—

Then she would kill him in the Real World.

To accomplish this, she must reach the «World End Altar» by any means necessary.

Looking back forward, she just managed to glimpse the extraordinary scale of a monumental precipice towering beyond the distant red sky. Talk of it had been passed down by creation legend: the «Wall at the End of the World». This cliff surrounding the Dark Territory was unlike the traversable Mountain Range at the Edge; supposedly, it was of indefinite height.

Before the precipice, at almost the same altitude as Alice's flight—

There hovered a single, tiny floating island.

It was impossible to guess at exactly what kind of force was permitting that island — shaped like a sharp-bottomed wine cup — to float in midair.

Upon closer inspection, she spotted what appeared to be some manner of man-made structure at the center of the flat surface. That had to be the «World End Altar» she was looking for. It was not just an exit from this world, but also an entrance to the Real World.

She was less than ten kilol from it, but unfortunately, by the time Alice arrived at the floating island Emperor Vector would already have caught up to her from behind.

Alice slowly drew in a breath, and exhaled.

She gently caressed the neck of her cherished dragon with her right hand, and ordered:

“Thank you, Amayori, and Takiguri. This is far enough; you can land.”

The two dragons cried weakly and began corkscrewing downwards at the same time.

The terrain below had transformed into dark gray desert only moments ago. The two dragons drew long furrows into the eternally expanding sea of sand — apparently the result of the gods tiring of creation — before touching down and almost toppling over.

Hururururu. A creaking call slipped out from deep within Amayori’s throat as her great body lay on the ground. Alice immediately leapt off, searched the leather pouch at her waist, and pulled out her final bottle of elixir.

She tipped half of the blue liquid into Amayori’s parted mouth, and poured every drop of the other half into her elder brother’s mouth beside her. Not even the Axiom Church’s homemade elixir could recover the vast Life of a dragon, but it should be enough to restore the stamina needed for one last flight.

With both hands, Alice warmly scratched the woolly underside of the dragons’ chins.

“Amayori, Takiguri.”

As soon as she said their names, her eyes began to well up on their own. She endured it in earnest and continued:

“This is goodbye. My final order to you both is... to fly to the Human Empire and return to the dragons’ nest in the western territory; Amayori, find a husband, and Takiguri, find a wife. Have many baby dragons, and raise them into strong children. Very, very strong children that knights can ride and fly one day.”

Amayori abruptly raised her head and licked Alice’s cheek.

Takiguri’s snout nuzzled the right side of her waist and sniffed at Eldrie’s Divine Instrument hanging there: the Frostscales Whip.

As both dragons moved their heads away, Alice delivered a forceful order:

“Now go!! Do not look back, fly straight ahead!!”

Kurururu!!

The two dragons lifted their heads simultaneously and gave high calls.

Together, they hoisted their massive bodies up and without looking back, began running directly westward.

Gigantic wings expanded and caught the desert wind, gently lifting them into the air.

With pinions close enough to touch, the sibling dragons beat their wings powerfully and gained altitude.

And, just then—

Amayori’s long neck craned around.

Alice’s precious dragon gazed back at her with beautiful, crystalline eyes. A great mass of droplets pooled at their edges, catching the light as they sprinkled into the air.

“Ama... yori...?”

Alice’s murmur had barely finished before—

The dragon’s head turned back forward as she and her brother tilted their bodies to the right in unison, changing direction at a steep angle.

Bellowing at ferocious volume, they ascended in a straight line towards not the east, but the northern sky. They were heading directly for the black pursuer, who was now close enough to see clearly.

“No... NO! AMAYORI, NOOOOOOOO!!”

Alice shrieked and began to run.

But the sleek desert sand caught her boots.

Tripping face-first onto her hands, Alice watched as Amayori and Takiguri charged to high altitude, where their immortal enemy awaited.

Silver scales gleamed like flames under the crimson sunlight.

Jaws lined with sharp teeth opened to their fullest.

Immediately as the pursuer entered firing range, the sibling dragons shot their deadliest weapon — fire. Pure white light bisected the sky, just as if the dragons were burning up their very lives.

The enemy on the back of the bizarre creature did not change his flight path at all, even as he watched the scorching flames barrel towards him.

He casually reached out his left hand and opened five fingers.

There was no way he could possibly block it. Dragon fire had the single highest attack priority in this world, other than an Integrity Knight's Armament Full Control Art or multiple Arts from a high-ranking group of Arts users. And there were two streams of it. It was impossible to chant any sort of defense Art capable of blocking that in such a short window of time.

That was how Alice reckoned, or hoped.

However.

Right before the twin streams of screaming fire engulfed and scorched the enemy, something far exceeding Alice's comprehension occurred.

Clotted darkness began swirling and expanding at the center of the pursuer's left hand.

The entire surrounding space began to distort as if it were falling into that darkness. Even the dragons' supposedly terribly powerful flames were of no exception. Their straight trajectories began to curve, and they were absorbed directly into the man's left hand—

The twin streams of fire were consumed without flash or explosion, leaving nothing but a few rays of light.

As the enemy who was only a black dot flew at an altitude unattainable by any Art or Sword Skill, Alice was certain she saw the corners of his mouth lift in a thin smile.

Just then.

With a harsh noise like that of sand being crushed, bolts of lightning came exploding from the darkness encroaching upon the man's left hand.

This attack, appearing to consume the dragons' flame and launch it back out as its own energy, pierced through the wings and limbs of the airborne Amayori and Takiguri without mercy. The dragons' gigantic bodies gave a sudden jerk, then blood redder than the crimson sky showered into the air.

"Ah... Ah....."

Alice panted; she waved her arms towards the sky, screaming:

"AMAYORIIII! RUN AWAY! THAT'S ENOUGH, RUN AWAAAAY!"

Surely her scream should have reached the dragons' ears, but they beat their wings as though Alice's voice merely roused their strength, and charged forward again.

Jaws wide open. Shimmering heat billowed from the gaps between their teeth, and white light flashed irregularly.

WHOOSH!!

Once more, flames set the sky ablaze.

Once more, the man unfolded his shield of darkness to absorb the fire.

Knowing full well that there would be yet another counterattack, the dragons continued to charge with firm resolve. Their wings produced a gale, with light firing nonstop from their jaws, barreling towards the enemy.

The blood flying from the wounds on the dragons' bodies became as flames. Their silvery scales were peeling away without end, becoming particles of light and dancing away.

The two dragons themselves were gradually transforming into Luminous Elements.

Firing and burning away their lives to no end, the flames filled the black vortex, saturating it. Perhaps from the unbearable, ferocious heat, the man's left hand began to emit white smoke.

But — at that moment.

The enemy's entire body became wrapped in a thin bluish-black veil. The void vortex erupting from his left hand intensified in power, and just then, black lightning ejected from its center and pushed back the white flames.

The colliding forces of black and white contended with one another in the middle for but one short second before the course was easily reversed.

Innumerable bolts of black lightning raced towards Amayori and Takiguri, who fluttered their wings with decreasing speed as though exhausted—

“AMAYORI! AMAYORIIIIIIII!”

Just as Alice's terrible scream and tears tore through the desert air.

The stars descended.

Two beams of radiant light descended from the crimson sky at formidable speed.

One of the beams headed straight for the ground towards her.

The other beam stopped dead between the two dragons and the pursuer. The light dissipated in an instant, revealing the form of the entity hidden within.

A human.

A swordsman.

Slightly lengthy black hair and an equally black coat billowed in the wind. Two longswords of black and white equipped in a cross on his back. Arms folded in front of his chest, while staring calmly at the roaring black lightning hurtling towards him.

Bang!! Vshiiing!!

Came such a noise as the lightning struck the swordsman. No, to be precise, it had not touched him; it had been deflected away. The lightning had been blocked by a transparent barrier in front of the swordsman as he stood upright in the air, arms crossed, its power diffusing outwards harmlessly.

Alice held her breath and her eyes went as wide as they would go.

The swordsman in black turned his head, looking at her on the ground.

His face, a hint of boyish immaturity still left in it, broke into a smile, and his dark eyes shone with resolve. Alice felt sparks flare up deep within her chest. This heat instantly expanded within her, setting her heart into a raging blaze.

Alice noticed that a fresh track of tears was rolling down her face as she murmured:

“Kiri... to.....”

Awakened from his half-year slumber, the swordsman nodded with a strong but slightly embarrassed smile, then swung his body around and raised his right hand straight up.

Opposite that hand, the dying dragons were beating their wings with their final traces of strength. The edges of their wings and the ends of their tails were slowly vanishing, as though they were melting into the light.

Amayori saw the Kirito that she had spent half a year living together with at the cabin on the outskirts of Rulid Village, and called weakly: *kururu*.

Kirito nodded once to her, and closed his eyes.

All of a sudden, the two dragons were inundated by a prismatic film. It looked as though a large soap bubble had wrapped them up. But the dragons were without fear: they merely folded their wings, bent their necks, and curled up their bodies.

The rainbow sphere descended slowly from above Alice's head.

So focused above her she forgot to breathe, Alice watched something miraculous occur.

Wrapped in multicolored light, Amayori and Takiguri's gigantic frames began shrinking at breakneck speed. No, rather, they were becoming younger, less mature.

Their sharp talons grew round and mellow. Their thick, silvery scales softened into feathers. Their tails and necks shortened, and their miniaturized wings became covered in fur.

By the time the two dragons landed softly in Alice's open arms, their bodies were no longer than fifty cen. Covered from head to toe in bluish-white skin and fur, Takiguri's eyes were closed in apparent snooze.

But Amayori had returned to her original appearance when Alice had first met her in the Central Cathedral: the greenish ball of fur raised its head straight up at her, opened its mouth lined with teeth resembling rows of pearls, and gave a short call:

"Kyuru."

"Ama... yori..."

Tears slid off Alice's cheeks and bounced off the dragons' fur, sparkling brightly.

Just then, the multicolored light engulfing the two baby dragons intensified all at once. The sensation on Alice's arms changed from soft feathers to smooth shell. She blinked a few times, and realized that the baby dragons in her arms had transformed into two large eggs.

The silvery-white eggs gradually shrank in size, finally decreasing to the degree where they could fit next to each other in her palm, and the multicolored light finally disappeared.

Alice silently brought the two tiny eggs close to her cheek, and attempted to make a general guess at the meaning behind this phenomenon. Having decided that the sheer scale of Amayori and Takiguri's Lives were beyond the help of Arts, Kirito had simply shrank the upper limits of their Lives as small as they would go — reverting them to dragon eggs and saving them from destruction.

Even Alice, the highest-level Sacred Arts user in the world, found it impossible to imagine what combination of Arts could achieve such an effect. But she felt no unease. Only the certain prospect of seeing these two dragons again in the future expanded warmly in her chest.

Tenderly covering the two eggs with both hands, Alice looked up again towards the sky.

“Thank you... Welcome back, Kirito.”

She murmured in a watery voice.

Her voice would not reach the distant sky, but the silhouette in black indeed nodded, and smiled again.

Alice heard a familiar voice in her ears.

—I'm the one who should be apologizing for making you worry for so long. Thank you, Alice.

—Let's meet again in the Real World.

And then Kirito slowly changed the direction he was facing, turning directly towards the pursuer wrapped in darkness.

Perhaps unable to endure both Incarnations pitted against each other, the void began ejecting sparks sporadically.

“Kirito...”

—Not even you can defeat this enemy with a normal attack.

Alice bit her lip with that apprehension.

An abrupt voice came from not far behind.

“Don’t worry, Alice-san.”

Looking behind her, she saw a girl from the Real World standing there with her body encased in pearly armament.

“Asuna...”

Her long tawny hair rippling in the wind, Asuna smiled and stroked Alice’s back.

“Let’s put our trust in Kirito-kun. We need to get to the World End Altar as quickly as possible.”

“Y-Yeah...”

She nodded, but doing that at this moment was not something simple.



Alice turned due south, looking up towards the «Wall at the End of the World» standing tall above the distant horizon, and the floating white island hovering before it.

“... The World End Altar should be on that floating island. But we cannot ride the dragons anymore; how are we to get somewhere so high up...?”

“Don’t worry, leave it to me.”

Asuna nodded, and drew the magnificent rapier from her waist.

All at once, *laaaaaaaa*; the high angelic ensemble she had heard during the Dark Army’s surprise attack last night echoed the space around them.

Prismatic colors descended from the sky in a straight line onto the gray desert.

A dull thump marked the appearance of a white stone slab rising out of the sand before her eyes.

BR-BRRRRRRMMM!

More thumps in quick succession were heard as the slab grew slightly in height before another and yet another appeared nonstop.

In ten short seconds, Alice saw with bated breath a marble flight of stairs appear before her, stretching up towards the floating island in the distant sky.

Asuna finished the geographical manipulation, lowered her sword, and immediately knelt onto the sand.

“A-Asuna...!!”

“I’m... I’m fine. Quickly... we only have eight minutes until the Altar closes...”

Closes—?

Alice couldn’t immediately understand what she meant, but before she could ask, her right hand was seized with great force.

With Asuna having stood up and begun dragging her by the hand up the white stone steps, Alice began to run too. As she ran she turned and looked behind her once more, up towards the swordsman in black facing off against her pursuer in the sky behind.

—Kirito. I still have a great deal to say to and ask of you.

—You must win. Win, and return to me again.

The symbolic, poetic spectacle of the floating marble staircase connected to the gray desert, along with the two swordswomen racing up it at a practically flying speed, was beautiful enough to evoke a sigh.

I branded that sight into my mind, and murmured deep within my chest.

—Alice. Asuna.

—I... have to part with you here.

There was, of course, a reason I neither told Asuna that the next time acceleration would reach 5,000,000 times real time, nor did I tell her that we would have to spend 200 years in this world if we did not log out before then.

Because once they learned those things, there was no doubt both Asuna and Alice would choose to stay and fight alongside me. Even if that would result in them being unable to escape before the time limit.

The instant I noticed what sort of air the enemy chasing Alice was projecting, I shuddered from how alien it felt.

No, it wasn't right to describe him as having an air. All that existed before me was a patch of nothing. A black hole devouring all information, from which not even a sliver of light could escape.

If we were going to defeat an opponent like this before the time limit, the probability of all three of us logging out safely was

extremely slim. In that case, the priority of my actions fell into place by itself.

Make absolutely sure that Asuna and Alice log out of Underworld.

Other than that, there wasn't anything I had to prioritize. Nothing.

I carefully carved the beautiful, picturesque scene into my memory, then turned my face to look towards the enemy hovering transverse opposite me.

The «thing» I was finally encountering was an existence utterly beyond my comprehension.

He was a man. That much should be true.

But that was all I knew.

If his facial appearance were that of a custom avatar, then his intent had probably been to «look like an average white guy». He looked orderly, but there was nothing special about him. He could only be described with white skin, blue eyes, and blond hair.

For a white guy, his physique was also quite normal. His body was neither fat nor skinny and wrapped under what looked to be a military jacket. Then did that mean this man was military? I couldn't be sure. The black and gray camouflage pattern covering his jacket up and down was moving constantly like some sort of slime. Moreover, there was a longsword at his left waist that looked to be Divine Instrument-grade.

When we were on our way here I heard from Asuna that this man was a member of the special forces that had attacked the Ocean Turtle. That meant he was probably a mercenary hired with money by an organization or enterprise bent on stealing Artificial Fluctlight technology. But the man watching me with glasslike eyes from a slight distance away didn't seem to be in pursuit of such a practical profit. No, come to think of it, he didn't seem human at all.

After about a second of observation and thought, I opened my mouth:

“...Who are you?”

I immediately got an answer. The man spoke in a sleek voice that nonetheless sounded somewhat metallic:

“A seeker, a stealer, and a plunderer.”

As soon as he said that, the dark bluish-black aura draped over the man’s entire body intensified its wriggling. I felt a breeze blowing from behind me. The air... no, the information comprising this world was being sucked into the darkness.

“What are you looking for?”

“The soul.”

As the conversation went on, the attraction gradually built up. It wasn’t just this world’s information, even my own consciousness was being sucked over by the gravity of the void.

At this point some expression suddenly flitted across the corners of the man’s mouth. It was a smile of the thinnest type that had nothing to do with emotion.

“It is I who must ask who you are. Why are you here? What right have you to stand before me?”

Who am I — He asks?

A hero who descended into Underworld? — Surely not.

A knight protecting the Human Empire? — Wrong.

It felt as though for every word that my mind denied, something was sucked away, plundered from my heart. But I didn’t know why; I simply could not stop thinking.

The hero who cleared the death game SAO? — No.

The strongest VRMMO player? — No.

«The Black Swordsman»? «Dual Blades»? — No, no.

None of those was what I wanted to be.

Then, who on earth *was* I...?

The instant my mind blurred with a *fssh*.

I felt a certain familiar voice calling my name.

My head had lowered at some point; I swiftly raised it and gave the name the voice had called me.

“I’m Kirito. Kirito the swordsman.”

CRACK!!

A burst of white sparks severed the dark feelers about to wrap around my body. My thoughts immediately became clear again.

—What the hell just happened?

Was this man capable of interfering with my consciousness with the help of two STLs?

I stared into the man’s eyes while reinforcing my barrier of imagination. But all that was in there was a void, and a bottomless darkness that could absorb the spirits of others.

“...What’s your name?”

I asked without thinking.

The man considered for a moment, then gave his name.

“Gabriel. My name is Gabriel Miller.”

Instinct told me that it was neither his character’s name nor his nickname; it was the man’s real name.

I could tell because his visage had changed for a few seconds. His eyes had sharpened, cold as ice. His lips had thinned slightly, and his cheeks had sunken.

Once he returned to his original custom face, the aura of darkness emanating from the man’s entire body thickened all at once.

At this point, I finally noticed that the man’s whole right arm below his shoulder was missing.

Amorphous darkness had been squirming there like an arm; now it slowly extended to wrap itself around the sword at his left waist.

The sword unsheathed with a wet sound, but it had no corporeal body at all.

It was just empty darkness, a patch of black fire about one meter long. An utterly impossible existence.

With a bizarre vibrating noise, the man brandished the sword of darkness gripped in his shadow hand.

I pulled back some distance and drew both swords from my back simultaneously. My left hand gripped the Blue Rose Sword, and my right hand gripped the Night Sky Sword.

If we were comparing black colors, the Night Sky Sword cut from the treetop of the Gigas Cedar was not inferior to his, but its body reflected light like black crystal while the man's sword simply resembled darkness as though the space where it occupied had been isolated from all else. It probably was not on the same level as PoH's Mate Chopper in terms of merely absorbing resources.

But even against this bottomless foe, I couldn't retreat. I had to hold off this enemy before Asuna and Alice reached the top of the staircase hundreds of meters tall.

"—Here I come, Gabriel!!"

Shouting the enemy's name on purpose, I flapped the wings reshaped from the hem of my coat.

In an instant I gained altitude and stacked both swords in a cross in front of me.

"Generate all element!"

Imagining the surrounding space itself as a terminal and creating dozens of elements of all types, I dived and launched them all at the same time.

"Discharge!!"

Fiery arrows, icy spears, blades of wind, and various other colors tore across the heavens.

I chased after the Arts and raised both swords in my left and right hands.

Gabriel Miller showed absolutely no sign of evading.

Still smiling thinly, he simply opened his arms wide.

Eight colors of light pierced into his bluish darkness-wrapped body.

Not missing the opportunity as his upper body trembled, I swept the sword in my right hand towards the man's torso and thrust the sword in my left hand through his chest. Slimy darkness splashed and left a chill where it brushed across my skin.

Right afterwards I flew to pull back the distance and whirled around again.

What my eyes ended up capturing was—

Gabriel slowly drawing the spilled, amorphous darkness back towards him, and turning around as if nothing had happened. The jacket covering his body was unscathed.

I knew it.

This man's attribute was the ability to absorb slashes, thrusts, flames, freezing, whirlwinds, steel arrows, water streams, crystal blades, rays of light, and dark curses.

The fabric of my coat and the flesh of my right shoulder, caressed by the void blade during the instant we had clashed, had been destroyed and looked as though it was peeling away as blood spurted.

Gabriel Miller directed a fleeting glimpse towards the figures of «Radiant Medium» Alice and another girl climbing the pure white

sky staircase, approximating that there were five minutes left before both of them reached the system console.

In that case, there was no time to engage this unanticipated hindrance. Immediately disabling him and making haste towards the floating island seemed a logical decision. But Gabriel felt slightly interested in this new enemy, so he stayed hovering where he was.

At first glance, he looked to be just a typical child.

He now felt no sense of intimidation at all, compared to the earlier battle against that veteran swordsman that had ended in mutual destruction. In all likelihood, he was like «Sinon»: a VRMMO player allied with RATH, but judging from the pressure he was giving off, he probably fared even worse than her.

That much was owed to the fact that this black-haired teen seemed not to exude anything resembling fighting spirit.

He had absorbed only a meager amount of purpose the moment he asked him what kind of person he was, but that circuit was also promptly shut off. Then he had continually deflected Gabriel's mental feelers as though he were covered by a transparent shell. Fighting an opponent whose spirit he could not taste did not interest him at all, as it were.

If so, then he would immediately eliminate him and catch up to Alice, or so Gabriel had thought.

But the sight of this teen transforming the hem of his coat into wings and his ability to manipulate multiple types of magic at the same time changed his mind somewhat. He felt that his opponent was highly familiar with this world.

After securing Alice and taking the STL technology with him to an uninvolved country, there was still his mission of constructing a virtual world for him and him only, where every nook and cranny was to his liking. Plundering that youth's manipulation techniques in advance did not seem a bad idea to complete that mission efficiently.

To do that, first he must destroy that imagination shell.

Gabriel smiled thinly, and addressed the boy in black with Japanese:

“You have three minutes. Do your best to entertain me.”

“... How generous.”

I muttered, stroking the wound on my right shoulder to heal it.

But Gabriel Miller’s confidence came from the fact that his strength was very real. After all, he was unstoppable against attacks of all types.

—No, there should be only one type of attack effective against him. Sinon had arrived on scene first and blown off his right arm. She had probably used her imagination to create her precious gun, the Hecate II, and shot him. That meant even Gabriel was unable to absorb «gunshot»-type attacks.

The reason probably had something to do with his military jacket outfit. He had real-world experience and was intimately familiar with the power of anti-material rifles, and that was probably why he couldn’t counteract the damage with his willpower upon getting shot.

However, only Sinon, who could handle her precious gun like her own hands and feet, could manage the feat of manifesting the firearm in Underworld. There was just no way I was doing that. Even if I could create a handgun, it wouldn’t have any power to speak of.

In other words, I had to find a way other than gunshots to make that weird man recognize the damage dealt to him.

Meaning that I needed to understand Gabriel as a person. I had to unravel how he lived, what he wanted, and why he was staying here.

Determined, I readied both swords in each hand and the corners of my mouth broke into a grin.

“All right, I’ll make sure you enjoy this.”

Where on earth was this bout of confidence coming from?

Surely he had been logged into Underworld for a long period of time and was highly familiar with this world’s system, but he was just a kid gamer. He had just been informed that his exaggeratedly stacked twin swords and flamboyant magical attacks were completely useless, so why was he still able to smile boldly like that?

Gabriel thought, feeling annoyed by the complete lack of fear in the boy’s attitude. He concluded that it was false bravado merely to stall for time.

He knew that even if he died in this world, his physical body in the real world would escape without a scratch. On top of that, he was only thinking of dragging the fight long enough until that girl he was friends with could take Alice away.

Nothing but a foolish child. Three minutes with him was too long.

Clenching his right hand created from willpower, slowly waving the void blade — Gabriel thrust the sword in an offhand manner as he stood atop the back of the winged creature.

Like the sword and the crossbow, this creature was the result of «Subtilizer’s» jetpack being changed into a form that most suited this world during its conversion here. Although he could control it to his whims, merely standing on it with two feet did not confer an adequate feeling of stability. It was more reasonable to change it to a pair of wings like that boy.

As the blade impaled its back, the creature emitted a short screech and was immediately sucked in by the void. Data traveled through the sword to Gabriel’s right arm, which he moved behind his back, then he focused his thoughts.

Black wings like that of the boy unfurled with a flap from the vicinity of his shoulder blades. They were not membranous, bat-like appendages, though; instead they were covered with sharpened feathers like a bird of prey. Fitting for someone with an angel's name like himself.

“... Plundered one.”

Gabriel murmured as he aimed the void blade towards the teen.

I was planning for my next attack to also take out the saucer-shaped flying creature the enemy was riding on, but he acted first and my judgment instantly took a plunge.

Not missing his chance, Gabriel flapped his black eagle-like wings once and slid close enough for his sword to reach me.

The speed of his thrust shocked me and he had not pulled back his sword at all. I took him to be an amateur at Sword Skills but the reality was completely different. I crossed my swords and brought them swinging upwards from below to block the attack.

Kissh!

A bizarre noise and the bluish-black blade of darkness halted right before my nose.

The Blue Rose Sword and Night Sky Sword scraped fiercely against one another. It was all I could do to avoid getting consumed, but I felt like I was contending with the void itself. I could easily imagine my swords were enduring enormous strain.

But it was my deliberate strategy to use a cross-block instead of dodging backwards. Without resisting the aggressive power of Gabriel's dark sword, I put my full strength into a high kick while drifting my body to the right.

“Raah!”

I shouted. The tip of my foot sprang upwards with a trail of orange light, connecting with his sharp chin. The darkness scattered with a *whap* and Gabriel's upper body arched backwards.

—How?!

My wings thrashed the air hard as I dashed backwards and checked the enemy. If I couldn't produce a gunshot, I meant to try a «blow» instead — and if this guy was really a special forces soldier, no doubt he would have training in close-quarters-combat, which meant that it might create, for him, the impression of being harmed.

Gabriel's head snapped back to its original position, but it was visibly unscathed.

Without missing a beat, the darkness that splashed out from his chin collected back together and generated fresh, shining skin. The enemy stroked it with his left hand, smirking:

“I see. But how unfortunate; the only thing served well by a bold attack like that is TV theatricality. Real martial arts...”

Byuu!

The air whistled as Gabriel lunged towards me mid-sentence, his whole body moving so fast it looked like a black mist. By reflex I parried a blade swinging down from the left with Blue Rose Sword and simultaneously countered with the Night Sky Sword. It sank into the enemy's shoulder and seemed to become ensnared within thick, glutinous fluid. I couldn't move it at all.

Just then, something slippery swiftly entwined itself around my entire outstretched right arm. Gabriel's left arm coiled its way towards me like a huge snake, instantly immobilizing my joints—

Accompanied by a piercing crunch, excruciating pain rocketed to the roof of my skull like an electric shock.

“Gwah...”

Peering into my grimacing face from a close distance, Gabriel murmured:

“—looks like this.”

And immediately after, a ferocious assault began.

The void blade launched a continuous barrage of attacks at blinding speed that seemed to have no end. I attempted to parry them only with the sword in my left hand, but they kept slipping through the gaps, nicking at every part of my body bit by bit. There was no time to focus on recovering my broken right arm.

“Ah... Rrrgh...”

I couldn’t help moaning, and flapped my wings hard to pull away from him.

Dashing backwards as fast as I could, I crept my left hand over my right arm, which, with all of my willpower, was just barely holding on to its sword.

Precisely as the white light was about to gather.

Gabriel whipped up his left hand: all five fingers lengthened into talons, then flexed open.

Ten or more bolts of jet-black lightning fired radially outwards, turning at sharp angles mid-trajectory and heading straight for me.

I clenched my teeth and hurled up an imagination barrier. This was what I used when he had attacked Alice’s two dragons, but back then I was supremely confident about blocking the lightning, and now, half of my concentration was focused on healing my arm — the very realization of this weakened the barrier—

I felt weighty impacts on various parts of my body.

Three streaks of dark light had jabbed right through the barrier, my torso, and both of my feet. A horrible chill surged through me before I felt any pain.

Before my eyes, my puncture wounds were already crawling with bluish-black void, threatening to consume my existence.

“Ugh...!”

I groaned again, then took a deep breath, and yelled. I barely managed to blow away the void, but a great deal of blood spurted from my fresh wounds.

“Ha ha ha...”

I looked up towards that dry voice and found that Gabriel Miller’s empty features had twisted into a laugh.

“Ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha...”

No, that wasn’t laughing. His lips were curled upwards, but the corners of his eyes hadn’t moved at all, and his glassy eyeballs only swirled with even greater hunger.

Gabriel slowly crossed his arms in front of his body, a gesture that suggested he was storing power.

His dark aura began to violently shiver. It undulated with the ferocity of flames, growing denser and denser.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

His arms spread wide with a thunderous shout.

Whoosh. A new pair of black wings burst from his already expanded wings and unfurled to full length. And then another pair on the bottom.

Gabriel slowly gained altitude as a total of six massive wings flapped, in order, from top to bottom. A jet-black halo materialized above his head and his camouflage uniform dissolved, replaced by a thin, dark, wriggling cloth.

His eyes had turned inhuman before I even noticed. The sockets were filled with nothing but bluish-black light.

Truly — an angel of death.

A transcendent being that hunts and plunders the souls of humans. What the hell kind of attack would work against someone who sees themselves as that?

I looked away from the embodiment of fear itself and checked on the figures of Asuna and Alice, who were running up the skyward staircase hand-in-hand. They still needed two, no, three minutes before they could reach the floating island.

It's just that I was no longer confident I could buy them that much time.

Such omnipotence.



The overwhelming sensation of power coursing through his whole body caused Gabriel to break into a third peal of loud laughter.

Was this the power of imagination — or in the veteran swordsman's words, «Incarnation» in this world?

At last he had gained power equal to... no, exceeding that of the swordsman who had killed him with a slash that went back in time, and the Dark General who had transformed into a tornadic giant. Until now Gabriel had been under the impression that their techniques were the effect of from some unknown system commands, but the reality was different. The real importance lay with his ability to *believe* that he possessed power. And he only realized this all thanks to this black-haired child performing it right in front of him.

I'll give him another minute as my thanks.

Gabriel spread his six wings wide and raised his blade of darkness high.

In one minute he would slice the brat's body into mincemeat, extract his soul, and ravage it until nothing was left. For the purpose of taking more power for himself.

Bluish-violet electricity crawled about Gabriel's body as he entered an assault stance.

I looked up towards the enemy's once human form.

I could no longer come up with anything that might frighten or threaten this man. His right arm, supposedly blown off by Sinon, had fully regenerated before I could even notice, as though in defiance of even a gunshot wound.

To put it simply, I was not mentally prepared enough.

I hadn't underestimated Gabriel Miller. His eerie air demanded caution to the greatest extent.

But that was the very reason I had given up any hope of winning, perhaps before this battle had even begun. As long as I bought enough time — as long as I stalled the fight until Alice and Asuna were able to log out, both the enemy and I would be trapped in a time prison for more than 200 years, unable to return to the real world ever again.

Ahh... Is that so?

Perhaps I'm actually hoping for such an outcome?

A true alternate world surpassing the likes of Aincrad. The ideal land Kayaba Akihiko had always dreamed of creating. Truly befitting of the name "Underworld".

I had often asked myself during the two years I was trapped in SAO whether I really wanted to escape. I was hesitant, because as a member of the Progressors constantly fighting on the front lines, I'd always held the vague expectation that life in that world would inevitably come to an end. The same end that would be met by my flesh-and-blood body lying in a hospital bed clinging to life via an IV, as it eventually wasted away.

But the time-accelerated Underworld presented no such concern. A rate of 5,000,000 times real time meant that I didn't need to consider the state of my real world body at all. Until my soul's lifespan ran out, I could stay in this alternate world forever. Can I really say that I never subconsciously considered that?

The answer was—

It never even crossed my mind...

Not Suguha, Mom, Dad.

Yui, Klein, Agil, Liz, Silica... or the other people who've saved me many times.

Or Alice.

Asuna.

I never considered the extent of their grief, their sorrow, just how many tears would be shed.

I ultimately still can't truly understand the feelings of other people.

I never changed, ever since that moment in middle school, when I pushed away my friend who was reaching out to me for help...

—That's wrong, Kirito.

Such a familiar voice.

I felt a delicate warmth emerging from within my icy left hand.

—It's not for your own sake if you don't want to leave this world. It's because you love the people you met here.

—You love Selka, Tiese, Ronye, Liena-senpai, the people of Rulid, and the people you met at the capital and the academy, the Integrity Knights and the Guardians... Cardinal-san, and maybe even Administrator... and perhaps me as well.

—That's how great, how wide, how deep your love is. Enough to carry the weight of the whole world.

—But that enemy of yours isn't the same.

—That man is the one who doesn't understand the feelings of other people. That's why he seeks them, because he can't figure them out. That's why he plunders them. That's why he destroys them. Because...

He's afraid.

Gabriel Miller watched as wispy tear tracks slid down the boy's cheeks. The hands clutching his swords shrank to his chest, as if in fear.

Does he finally feel afraid?

Only the fear and despair of a man about to die was the feeling Gabriel could share with others.

Gabriel had taken many lives in his search for a soul's radiance, ever since he had murdered Alicia Klingerman in the woods behind his childhood home. But he had never again witnessed another object resembling a puff of light, like the one that had escaped Alicia's forehead. So he had been nursing his hunger by sampling his own fear instead.

What does it taste like? The fear gushing from a boy once so filled with powerful confidence, now knocking on death's door?

The craving welling up from the depths of his body caused Gabriel to lick his lips while raising the tip of his left finger.

Several tiny black orbs immediately materialized and began to drone, like flies.

He brought the finger swishing down and from the black orbs burst ultra-thin laser beams, perforating every inch of the boy's body. A second later, blood spurted, hanging in midair like mist.

“HA HA HA HA!!”

Gabriel roared with laughter as he closed the distance in an instant, drawing back his void blade.

It penetrated the boy's abdomen with ease.

The body under his black shirt and overcoat was ripped apart by the raging void, and abruptly severed in half.

Blood, flesh, and organs sprayed in all directions.

Gabriel's left hand reached out towards the alluring ruby-red glow.

He seized the still beating, largest jewel of them all, hanging from the upper half of the boy — and tore off his heart.

The piece of meat in his palm continued to hammer *badump, badump*, as though in protest, as Gabriel brought it close to the edge of his expressionless mouth and whispered to the levitating, dying boy.

“Your feelings, your memories, everything of your heart and your soul... I will now devour it all.”

The angel of death proclaimed. I gazed down at him through half-closed eyes.

Gabriel Miller’s colorless lips parted wide, as if about to bite down on a ripe apple, and sank his sharp teeth into my plundered heart.

...*Squish*.

There was a dreadful noise.

His white face contorted intensely; great volumes of blood that was not mine gushed from his mouth.

Of course.

He had bitten into the great number of tiny blades I generated inside my own heart from Metallic Elements.

“Unf...”

Gabriel covered his mouth and pulled back.

I moaned scratchily:

“How are you gonna find... my spirit and memories in there? My body’s just... a container. My memories... will always be...”

Right here.

Merged with my consciousness itself, never to be separated.

The pain of my heart getting torn to shreds was brutalized beyond description. But this moment was my biggest and final opportunity. There wouldn’t be a second chance if I missed it.

Eugeo was still fighting when his body got cut in half.

I spread the two swords in my hands to my left and right, crying as blood rippled away from me:

“RELEASE RECOLLECTION!!”

Pure white and pitch black discharged at the same time.

Massive numbers of ice tendrils exploded from the front-facing Blue Rose Sword, tightly binding Gabriel’s body.

Then from the Night Sky Sword raised high above—

A monumental, dark pillar towered into the sky.

Dark light roared upwards, boring through the crimson and gaining soaring altitude — then spreading in all directions almost as if it had collided violently with the sun.

Bit by bit, it was covering the sky.

The crimson was being painted over at terrific speed and the daytime light vanished.

Darkness reached the horizon at once, and continued to expand beyond.

No, it wasn’t the darkness of a void. It was velvety, had a slight temperature...

An infinite night sky.

Sinon lay alone in the uninhabited wilderness at the bottom of a crowded cluster of oddly shaped boulders, waiting in silence for her HP to fall to zero.

Pain would not stop radiating from where her blown-off legs used to be, making her slide and out of consciousness. She tightly grasped the remains of her necklace at her chest like a lifeline, but her right hand was gradually losing strength.

Just as she was trying to decide whether her slowly blurring thoughts were a sign of impending logout or indicating that she really was about to pass out...

The sky's color changed.

The disgusting blood-colored blight over what was clearly supposed to be daytime sky was being blanketed by total darkness from the south at fierce speed. The sunlight was blocked off and the gray clouds vanished too — then, Sinon was shrouded in total blackness.

No. It wasn't total blackness.

Before she realized it, traces of phosphorescence were cascading, illuminating the rocks above her, the many dead trees, and the chain around her neck a soft blue hue. A cooling breeze blew, swaying her bangs.

It was nightfall. An all-healing nightfall that kindly, reliably coated this whole world.

Sinon was suddenly reminded of a scene from the distant past.

She had spent a night in a desert in an alternate world different from this one. With all her strength, she was bawling, barking, venting the whole story about the incident befalling her as a child, and just how much that memory had tormented her since. The night sky above her now was filled with the strong, but gentle feeling of his arms, silently wrapped around her from behind back then, enduring the weight of her body.

—I get it. This nightfall is Kirito's spirit.

He was no dazzling sun. He would not stand in front of others and radiate light of brightest brilliance.

But when you were sad, when you were suffering, he would always be supporting you from behind. He would help heal your wounds and blow your tears dry. Like a tiny, but positively shining star. Like the night.

To protect this world and everyone living in it, it would seem that Kirito was now locked in a showdown against Emperor Vector, or Subtilizer. After fighting and fighting against scores of impossibly strong enemies, it would seem that now he was summoning the final bit of strength inside him.

If that's true, then please — carry my spirit over to him as well.

Sinon prayed, looking earnestly towards the sky through eyes wet with tears.

A tiny blue star directly above her head twinkled for a moment.

Leafa lay on the ground, surrounded by innumerable Orcs and Fist Fighters, waiting for her final moment in the same way.

Her right foot no longer had the strength to stomp and cast Terraria's recovery ability. Her mangled, perforated body was as cold as ice; unable to move even a finger.

"Leafa... don't die! You can't die!!"

Orc chief Rirupirin knelt beside her, his scream like a howl. The lucid droplets of tears building in his tiny eyes were reaching their limit. Leafa looked up at his tears with a shallow smile, whispering:

"Don't cry... I'm coming back... for sure."

At this, Rirupirin balled up his body, his shoulders quaking uncontrollably. Watching him, Leafa thought.

—I can't help Onii-chan directly, but this should be enough. I've done my duty. Haven't I...?

In that moment, as though in reply to Leafa's inner voice.

The sky's color vanished.

The crimson daytime sky of the Dark Territory abruptly changed to night; expressions of shock filled the spaces among the Orcs and Fist Fighters. Rirupirin's tear-soaked face whipped upwards, and his eyes widened.

But Leafa felt neither surprise nor fear. She could feel her brother's scent on the night wind, gently caressing her cheek, blowing from the south as if in pursuit of the darkness.

"Onii-chan..."

She murmured, taking in a deep breath of the air.

To Leafa — Suguha, Kirito had always been the closest, yet furthest existence from her.

It was likely that her brother had stopped viewing his current parents as his birth parents without even realizing it, even before he discovered the truth therein. Kirito had been cloaked in a veil of loneliness and isolation for as long as Suguha could remember; he had never been one to connect deeply with anybody. Every time friendship was born, he would destroy it with his own hands.

This disposition had caused her brother to indulge in online games, and that indulgence had conferred him the character of «the hero who liberated SAO», but Suguha took that to be neither accidental irony nor fated redemption.

It was a path that her brother chose for himself. He would never run away from it, always doing his utmost to push through to the end. That was Kirito's greatest strength.

This night sky was the best evidence that Kirito had decided to shoulder the burden of this world and everyone living in it. Because—

...Onii-chan is more of a swordsman than I am.

Her arms had lost all feeling in them, but Leafa wrung the out the last of her strength and cupped her hands in front of her chest, as if she were grasping a bamboo sword.

Then she prayed. *Carry the strength of my spirit to my brother's sword.*

Far above her head, she could see a green star gleaming brightly.

Lisbeth held Silica's hand in a tight grip as she looked mutely towards the sky where the sun had vanished.

Whether she liked it or not, the extraordinary sight of the crimson sky being coated over by darkness evoked memories of that day.

It was afternoon on an early winter day a little over two years after SAO began.

Bursting out of her own shop, Lisbeth learned from the great list of system messages covering the upper floor that the death game had finally been cleared. She knew in an instant that it had been Kirito. *Kirito beat the final boss swinging a sword I made.*

Back in the real world, Kirito told her this:

—I had actually already lost back then. Healthcliff's sword pierced my chest and my HP definitely dropped to zero. But for some reason, my avatar didn't disappear immediately. It was only a few seconds, but I was able to move my right hand and take him along with me. I think the people who bought me that time have to be you, Liz, and Asuna, Silica, Klein, and Agil. So I'm not really the one who cleared SAO. You guys are all the heroes.

She had slapped his back with a laugh and said "Why so modest?" at the time, but that had probably been how Kirito genuinely felt. He really wanted to say that the true greatest power lay in the bonds between you and me.

"...Hey, Silica."

Lisbeth looked away from the night sky, glancing at her friend beside her.

"Apparently... I still like Kirito."

Silica smiled, and replied:

“Me too.”

Then, they both turned back towards the faintly phosphorescent nighttime.

Before closing her eyes, she saw two silhouettes: Klein, raising his fist a distance away, and Agil, hands on his hips, appearing to be muttering something.

Lisbeth heard the voices of fellow Japanese players praying, wishing, like her.

—We dived into this world with AmuSpheres... but you can still hear us, can't you Kirito? Because our spirits are all connected.

Hundreds of specks of stardust scattered above them as one.

Integrity Knight Renri placed his left hand on the neck of his precious dragon Kazenui, but his right hand remained grasping the left hand of Tiese, as he looked up at the suddenly arriving night sky while forgetting to breathe.

The remaining history books in the church had never mentioned a frightening phenomenon like this, where daytime sky suddenly transformed to night. But Renri was not afraid.

When he had taken two spears in his body and had accepted the truth that he was about to die, a rain of light had descended from the sky and healed his fatal injuries without leaving a trace. Now, this night contained within it the exact same warmth of that rain.

It perplexed Renri that he had survived to the last as the weakest High Integrity Knight, but at the same time he could not forgive his own feelings. He had always believed that dying heroically in battle like Knight Dakira or Knight Eldrie was the one and only way of repaying his deceased friend, whose name he could not even remember.

Yet Renri discovered a new feeling when the rain of light healed him.

The black-haired swordsman confined to the chair with wheels attached to it. He also had lost his one and only friend. And then he had decided that he needed to suffer with the responsibility for his death, sealing away his spirit.

But that swordsman had stood up. Then he had controlled his twin swords that were a part of his own friend just like Renri's Divine Instruments, the Twin Edged Wings, performed a shocking display of power and sent tens of thousands of enemy soldiers back to the other world. He had educated Renri with his own shadow.

To live. To connect living, fighting, life and spirit. This — only this...

“Only this, is proof of your strength.”

Renri murmured, gripping Tiese's left hand a little tighter.

This redheaded girl, whose other hand was linked with that of Trainee Ronye, who herself stood beside Guardian Leader Sortiliena, looked fleetingly up at Renri, then nodded to him as her eyes shimmered the color of maple, glistening softly even within the darkness.

The four of them looked up into the pitch black sky once more, each offering his or her own prayer.

Out of hundreds of stars, four particularly brilliant ones formed a constellation and began to twinkle.

Standing far away, Fist Fighter guild chief Iskahn stared fixedly, with a sort of ineffable poignance, at the dying girl in green armor surrounded by kneeling Orcs and Fist Fighters.

The way that girl had fought had been so fierce that “angry god” was too inadequate of a description.

After seeing her, Iskahn thought he finally understood why the Orcs had disobeyed direct orders from the Emperor and came rushing to rescue the Fist Fighter guild. Chief Rirupirin and his 3,000 Orcs had determined that this girl was stronger than even the Emperor.

But he was wrong.

There was only one reason every single Orc had obeyed, no, had allied themselves with that girl, and it was that she had treated them like humans; that was what Rirupirin had told Iskahn. In the past Rirupirin's had always been swirling with hatred towards the humans, but when he proudly announced the situation to Iskahn the rage had vanished like a dream from his single eye.

“Hey, woman... No, Sheyta...”

Iskahn called the name of the gray female knight standing beside him.

“What we call power... what we call strength, what is it really?...”

Now a wordless knight, Sheyta tilted her head, her long tied hair swinging. Her cool eyes traveled from the dragon standing behind them, to the giant Dampe with bandages coiled around both shoulders, and back to Iskahn, then a small smile spread over her lips.

“You already know. There is stronger power than rage and hatred.”

Immediately—

The Dark Territory's familiar blood-red sky was plunged into darkness.

Swallowing his breath and looking up, Iskahn saw but a single green star opposite him, twinkling without a sound.

Sheyta's hand reached out and pointed towards the star.

“...There. Real power. Real light.”

“...Yeah. ...Yeah, you’re right.”

Iskahn muttered. The liquid welling up in his left eye made the star’s green light seem blurry.

For the first time in his life he balled up his fist not in preparation for a fight, and Fist Fighter guild chief Iskahn began to pray for a reason other than victory.

A short distance away from the green star, another star burned bright red as though it were set ablaze. A gray star floated to its side, as if it were nestling close to it.

Just then, the surviving Fist Fighters began singing a low martial dance, and hundreds of stars scattered in a split second.

Thousands, tens of thousands of stars.

The remaining main forces of Human Empire Defense Army at the Great Eastern Gate, Integrity Knight Fanatio, Deusolbert, Knights-in-Training Linel and Fizel, and hundreds of lower knights were at a loss for words, their faces raised towards the unscheduled night sky.

The thoughts coursing through each of their chests was different, but the strength of their prayers and wishes was the same.

Fanatio prayed for the world loved by the departed Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli, and the world in which the new life in her belly would later live in.

Deusolbert placed a silent right hand over the tiny ring gleaming on his left finger, praying for the world in which he had once lived in with a certain someone who once bore the same ring on their finger.

Linel and Fizel prayed that they could once more encounter the swordsman who had taught them the meaning of true strength.

The other knights and Guardians prayed for peace to return to their precious world, and for it to endure forever.

The mountain Goblins in the hilly north of the Dark Territory began praying, and the plains Goblins in the western wilderness began praying too.

The Orcs in the central wetlands waiting the return of their husbands and fathers prayed, and the Giants of the southwestern plateau were praying as well.

The lilac-skinned humans in the castle towns adjacent to Obsidia Citadel, and the Ogres in the southeastern grasslands closed their eyes and prayed.

The night passed over the mountains, arriving in the Human Empire without delay.

Sister-in-Training Selka of the Rulid Village church at the northern end of Norlangarth North Empire had been retrieving well water to wash her laundry, when her eyes were drawn to the sight of the blue sky being slowly smeared over with darkness, and she was frozen to the spot. The rope slid from her palm and the wooden bucket splashed faintly into the well, but she did not hear.

The whisper slipping from her lips had a slight tremble to it.

“.....Onee-sama. Kirito.”

Now, in this moment—

Selka could feel, on the night wind, the two people she loved the most currently locked in fiercest battle.

It meant that Kirito had awoken again. He had stood up again from the abyss of sorrow from losing Eugeo.

Selka knelt onto the close-cut grass, crossing her fingers at her chest, closed her eyes, and murmured:

“Eugeo. Please... protect Onee-sama and Kirito.”

As she prayed and watched up into the night sky, a blue star twinkled.

Stars of various colors then floated into being around it. She saw that the children who had been playing everywhere around the courtyard were now all kneeling silently on the ground, tightly clasping their small hands together.

The merchants and housewives in front of the church.

The peasants in the pastures and wheat fields.

Alice's father Gasuft inside the village town hall, and old man Garitta on the edge of the forest were both praying. None felt a trace of fear.

Countless stars populated the sky above Rulid.

Likewise, the sky above Zakkaria a short distance to the north was also scattered with a great volume of stardust. At nearby Walde farm, husband and wife and their twin daughters Teline and Telure were side by side at their window, praying.

The villagers and city-dwellers strewn across the four empires all offered up their wordless prayers.

Then the residents of the megacity Centoria located at the center of the Human Empire. The students and instructors of the Swordcraft Academy.

Even the monks and priests of the Axiom Church were of no exception.

For the girl responsible for controlling the elevating disc between the 50th and 80th floors, it was the first time in her protracted life she had done something in particular. While on duty, she took her hand away from the glass Aerial Element-generating pipe, looked up towards the infinitely expanding starry sky, and brought her hands together.

She knew nothing of the world outside the Cathedral. The Administrator's death and the Dark Territory's invasion had brought no change to the girl's life.

So she was praying only for one thing.

The opportunity to encounter those two young swordsmen once more.

There were already more than ten thousand stars gleaming in myriad colors filling the night sky that shrouded over the entire nation of Underworld at midday.

Starting from the ones on the outer boundary, the stars began emitting bell-like sounds one by one, all beginning to descend towards one spot.

The southernmost edge of the world.

Towards one single jet-black longsword raised towards the sky, a stone's throw from the floating island called the World End Altar.

Alice was sprinting in earnest up the steps and finally able to see the top, when she abruptly realized that her own shadow, splayed upon the marble under her feet, was melting into a much greater one.

Looking back over her shoulder as she ran, Alice witnessed a scene beyond imagination.

The enemy, incorporeal void blade raised, six-part black wings expanded.

Vines of ice, wrapped in layers and layers over his body, hindering his movement.

The ice was coming from a glowing bluish-white sword, gripped in the hand of a swordsman in black with dragon wings sprouting from his back.

Everything under the swordsman's chest had already vanished. His willpower to still continue fighting, in a situation where normally one would immediately lose all of his Life, was nothing short of miraculous.

But the true miracle was taking place above both of their heads.

A torrent of darkness was ascending from the pitch-dark longsword raised high in the swordsman's right hand, covering the entire world.

But it was not a darkness without light.

The northern sky began to shimmer with countless dots of light. Clusters of stars shining many different colors gradually adorned the sky... the night.

All of a sudden—

The stars began to move.

Issuing a clear, somewhat bell-like, somewhat harp-like sound, the stars congregated towards the southern end of the world. White, blue, red, green, and yellow light left long, thin trails as they traced out an enormous rainbow in the night sky.

Instinct told Alice that these stars were the power of the spirits of everyone living in this world.

The people of the Human Empire.

And the people of the Dark Territory.

The humans.

And the demihumans.

Now, the world was united as one in prayer.

“Kirito.....!”

Alice called the swordsman's name, raising her left hand high.

My spirit too. I may only be a manmade knight, possessing only the trivial spirit of a scant life, but this feeling — this emotion flooding from my chest is unmistakably genuine.

A brilliant golden star was released from her left hand, and then it flew directly towards Kirito's sword.

Asuna did not look back.

She understood that the only way to meet Kirito's demands as he was locked in mortal combat was not to waste a fraction of the time he was buying them, and proceed towards the system console.

So Asuna tugged Alice's hand, continuing to bolt up the stone steps with as much willpower as she could muster.

But she found it impossible to stem the fiery sentiment bursting from deep within her chest.

The sentiment became two droplets of tears that slid from her eyelashes, streaked across her cheeks, and spilled into the air.

Carried by the night wind, the dancing droplets melted together, becoming a glittering multicolored star.

Asuna only raised her head for an instant to see the star flying forward and tracing an aurora behind it, then continued to run without looking back. As she ran, there was only trust in her heart.

Gabriel Miller felt wonderment at how he could possibly be restrained by mere tendrils of ice.

Hadn't all types of magical attacks, even slashes from the longswords, been utterly ineffective against him until a moment ago?

Certainly, his mouth had been injured by the countless number of blades the boy had concealed within his heart. But that had only been his mouth imitating the sensation of chewing. Now his entire body was newly shielded by a thick layer of dark barrier.

—I am the one who plunders. All light, heat, and objects of existence.

—I am the abyss.

“NU...LLLLL!”

An unearthly, inhuman roar surged out from deep within his throat.

The six-part, three-pair black wings protruding from his back all transformed into void blades identical to the sword in his right hand.

He beat these blades ferociously, rending the space around him. The bluish-white tendrils of ice were severed and his body regained freedom.

“LLLLLLLLLL!!”

Continuing to eject the discordant noise from his gaping mouth, Gabriel lengthened the seven void blades on his wings and his sword in all directions.

When his empty left hand reached forward, about to fire dark wires in order to return the favor of restraint to the boy.

Gabriel noticed at last that the crimson color of the sky had disappeared.

And also, the untold numbers of meteors descending from overhead.

When I released the Night Sky Sword’s memories, I found it impossible to summon any specific image to my mind.

The only thing in my heart were the words Eugeo had said to me when he was helping me name this sword that I had taken to calling the «black one».

—Oh yeah. I think «Night Sky Sword» is a decent name for your black sword, Kirito. What say you?

—Gently... covering... this small world... like the night sky...

The darkness bursting from the sword was transforming day to night, creating a night sky true to its name.

I understood what was happening the moment the cluster of stars drifting here from the north became a rainbow-colored waterfall and poured into the blade.

The Night Sky Sword's power was its ability to absorb Resources within a far-reaching range.

And the strongest Resource in this world was most definitely not the Spatial Resources allocated by the system, like the sun or the land. It was the power of the human spirit. The power of prayers, wishes, and hope.

The final member of the almost infinitely descending star cluster was absorbed into the sword.

Then, the very second when the last two golden and multicolored stars dissolved into the body of the blade—

The Night Sky Sword beamed with the rainbow of emotions from a host of people.

The light traveled from the hilt into my arm, permeating my entire body. My lower body, wrecked by Gabriel, regenerated in an instant in the warm radiance.

The starlight congregated at my left arm too, giving the Blue Rose Sword in my hand a blinding luminance—

“OH...HHHHHHH!”

I fanned my two swords far apart, shouting.

“LLLLLLLLLL!!”

Opposite me, Gabriel had broken free of his ice bindings and was letting loose a bizarre howl.

He no longer resembled anything like a human. Wrapped in bluish-black flames, his naked, liquid metal-like body was giving off a menacing glow, and the violet-blue light ejecting from his eye sockets reminded me of escaping hellfire.

The giant void blade in his right hand went high up in the air, and his wings that were now also blades lengthened in all directions.

Just then, his left hand aimed at me and a uncountable number of tightly packed black wires burst forth.

“...OHH!!”

I set up a barrier of light with a yell and deflected them.

Then I fully opened my wings, transformed from the hem of my long coat.

With my left sword in front and my right sword behind, I kicked the air with all of my might.

Since there was only a minuscule distance between me and the enemy, it should have taken under a second for me to charge towards him at full speed. But in this segment of time, I became enshrouded in an infinitely long sensation of acceleration.

The figure of a person appeared to my right.

It was a knight in black armor with a black mustache, wearing a long, large blade. The man was hugging the shoulder of a gray-skinned female knight sticking close to him; he studied me and said:

“You must shed your bloodlust, youngster. His empty soul cannot be cut by the Incarnation of murder.”

Next, a short-haired, well-built man appeared to his left. Dressed in casual blue robes, he was equipped with a steel-colored longsword. This was Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli, a strident grin over his gutsy features.

“No fear, boy. Your sword bears with it the weight of the world itself.”

By now a girl with snowy white skin and long silver hair had emerged beside Beroculi.

Highest Minister Administrator smiled enigmatically at me with silvery eyes and murmured:

“Come now, show me. All of what you inherited from me, your godlike⁶ power.”

And the final one, coming into being directly in front of my chest, was a robed young girl wearing a mortarboard. This was the other Highest Minister, Cardinal, complete with tawny curls draped over her shoulder and a tiny spider sitting atop it.

“You’ve got to trust in them, Kirito. Trust in the spirits of the many whom you love, and who love you.”

Behind her glasses, her dark brown eyes were shining warmly.

Then their figures faded away—

The greatest, most final enemy, Gabriel Miller, entered the attack range of my sword.

With my arms charged full of power I had never felt before, I unleashed my most practiced, most reliable dual wielding Sword Skill.

Starburst Stream. A 16-hit combo attack.

“WHO...OAAAAAAAAAA!!”

My sword, permeated with starlight, shot forward with a blinding trail.

At the same time, Gabriel’s six wings and one blade came swooping down from all sides.

Each mighty clash between light and void created vast flashes of light, causing the world to tremble.

Faster.

Gotta go faster.

6 “Godlike” (神威) and “Incarnation” (心意) are both pronounced shin’i here.

“OHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

I roared as I assimilated mind and body, accelerating to the extreme and swinging my swords.

“NULLLLLLLLL!!”

Gabriel was howling too, counterattacking with all seven blades.

10 hits.

11 hits.

There was no more rage, no more hatred, no more bloodlust in my chest. All that was left pervading my body was the colossal power of the prayers, driving me.

12 hits.

13 hits.

—Take in...

14 hits.

—the light of...

15 hits.

—the spirits of everyone of this world!! Gabriel!!

The final 16th hit was a full-motion overhead slash from the left, a beat slower than him.

Certain of his victory, Gabriel’s inhuman eyes narrowed slightly.

Moving a hair faster than the slash I had put all of my might into, a black wing protruding from the enemy’s right shoulder sheared off my entire left arm.

The light-filled limb burst into pieces and scattered, leaving only the Blue Rose Sword floating in the air.

“LLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL!!”

Accompanied by high, loud laughter, the void blade in Gabriel's right hand hurtled downwards, crackling with black lightning.

Psht.

With the echo of that dependable sound, two hands that were not my own gripped onto the hilt of the Blue Rose Sword hovering in midair.

The Blue Rose Sword blocked the void blade firm and true.

Clutching the sword, Eugeo looked to me, flaxen hair swaying.

"Come on — now's the time, Kirito!!"

"Thanks, Eugeo!!"

I shouted back in clear tones.



“WHO...OAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

I injected all of my power into what became the 17th hit, a overhead slash from the right, crashing it down into Gabriel’s right shoulder.

The sword plunged deep, sending the pitch-black liquid metal scattering, coming to a stop precisely where the heart lay.

Immediately—

Eugeo and I transformed every bit of the starlight permeating the Night Sky Sword and Blue Rose Sword into prismatic waves, surging right into Gabriel’s heart.

Gabriel Miller could feel an energy of countless colors forming a great waterfall, gushing into the bottomless abyss that occupied every inch inside his body.

His sight was masked by variegated light, and his ears felt the nonstop passage of many layers of voices.

—O God, save him...

—Keep that child safe...

—Bring an end to this war...

—I love you...

—Let this world...

—This world...

—Protect this world...

“...Ha, ha, ha.”

Even as the boy’s sword speared his heart, Gabriel threw his arms and six wings wide apart, guffawing loudly.

“HA HA HA, HA HA HA HA HA HA!!”

An exercise in futility.

That light seeks to fill my hunger, my insatiable void?

Simply an enterprise of arrogance, like attempting to warm the vast universe with human hands.

“I will devour it all, sucking every last drop dry!!”

Gabriel bellowed, shooting bluish-black light from eyes and mouth.

“You?! Someone who only knows to fear, to dread the power of the human spirit?! Don’t make me laugh!!”

The boy roared back, causing golden waves to swell from his entire body.

The sword shone even more brightly, feeding light and warmth into his frozen heart.

His field of vision fired up, and his sense of hearing was satiated.

But Gabriel continued to laugh out loud.

“HA HA HA HA HA, HAAAAAAAAAA HA HA HA HA HA HA!!”

I was not afraid at all.

The void filling the inside of the enemy was like a black hole, but my own body was also swirling with a gargantuan, gleaming galaxy created with the prayers of each and every human being.

Within the long beams of blue-violet light bulging out of Gabriel’s eye sockets and mouth, the spectrum began to slowly shift.

From violet to red. Then orange. Past yellow — and then pure white.

Pshk.

That slight noise signified the appearance of a tiny crack in the liquid metal body enveloping the Night Sky Sword.

And then another. And another.

White light was peeking out from the fractures. The bottoms of the six wings on his back were set ablaze.

The edges of his cackling mouth were greatly damaged, as holes opened up in his shoulders and chest.

Even as pillars of light poked out in all directions from the fissures covering his entire body, Gabriel never abandoned his laughter.

“HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA
HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

His voice grew shriller and shriller, eventually becoming a high-pitched metallic frequency.

The black archangel’s whole body, completely wrapped in white cracks—

Crumbled inwards and collapsed in an instant.

Then released outwards.

An explosion of intimidating scale shot up into the distant heavens, corkscrewing as it went.

“—————Hahahahahahaha!!”

Gabriel Miller sprang upwards, laughing uproariously.

The first thing he saw was a wall plated with gray metal panel. Warning stickers in Japanese adorned the ducts and wiring that crept along the wall.

“Hahaha, ha, ha.....”

Gabriel quieted his final waves of laughter by taking rapid breaths, blinking continuously. When his breathing had steadied, he took a fresh look at his surroundings.

He was certain that this was STL Room 1 in the Ocean Turtle. It seemed that he had been automatically logged out by some unanticipated, yet important factor.

What a killjoy of a conclusion. He had planned on sucking dry those vast surges of light and then finishing off the boy's heart.

If he dived back in right now, would there still be time to do so?

Face taut, Gabriel turned his head to look, and saw...

A tall white man lying down on the STL seat, his eyes closed.

...Who is that?

The question flashed through his mind.

Is he part of the raid team? More importantly, why is this guy lying in the machine I dived in with?

And then, he finally realized.

—That's... This is... my... face.

Gabriel Miller, the CTO of Glowgen Defense Systems.

Then, who will I see if I look at my own body?

Gabriel raised his own hands and stared. The only things there were two vaguely translucent masses of hazy light.

What the hell is this? What happened?

Just then—

He heard a soft voice behind him.

“...You've finally come over to this side, Gabe.”

He whirled his head around.

Standing there was a little girl in a white blouse and navy pleated skirt.

He could not see her face, because her head was bowed so deep that her features were hidden behind a mask of floaty blonde hair. But Gabriel recognized her in an instant.

“...Alicia.”

Saying the name for the first time in almost 20 years, he broke into a smile.

“What’s this? You’re in that kinda place, Ali?”

Alicia Klingerman. Gabriel Miller’s childhood friend and the first murder victim in his noble pursuit of the soul.

For the longest time Gabriel had found it a matter of deepest regret that he had assuredly witnessed Alicia’s soul back then, yet failed to successfully capture it. But it turned out that he had not lost it at all. She had always been by his side.

Forgetting his own curious situation, Gabriel reached out his right hand.

Zip. Alicia’s left hand shot forward with startling speed and tightly seized Gabriel’s with her small, slender fingers.

It was cold. Cold as ice. A needlelike chill speared right through his skin and flesh.

Gabriel tried to shake her off on reflex. But Alicia’s tiny hand held him fast in a viselike grip, and then the smile disappeared from Gabriel’s face.

“...It’s cold. Let go of my hand, Ali.”

He muttered, but the blonde hair shook from side to side.

“No, Gabe. From now on we’ll always be together. Come on, let’s go.”

“Go... where? No, I still have things I gotta do.”

Gabriel responded, tugging on his right hand as hard as he could. But it did not move. On the contrary, it seemed he was being slowly dragged downward.

“Let go. Let go of me, Alicia.”

Almost on the second he spoke in a slightly firmer tone.

Alicia’s head snapped up.

When he laid eyes upon the face beneath her evenly cut, adorable bangs—

Gabriel was pummeled by an emotion that made him feel as though his entire heart had recoiled.

His internal organs welled upwards. His breathing grew rapid. His skin broke out into gooseflesh.

What the hell is this? What on earth is this feeling, this emotion?

“Ah... Ah, ah, ah...”

Producing a queer moan, Gabriel shook his head slowly from side to side.

“Leggo. Stop it. Leggo.”

He raised his left hand without thinking, trying to shove Alicia away, but that hand was also seized in a flash. Fingers that felt like frigid metal ate deeply into his skin.

Heeheehee.

“This is fear, Gabe. The real feeling that you’ve been looking for. Isn’t it awesome?”

Fear.

The source of the expressions that had appeared, when they were about to die, on the numerous faces of people he had murdered in his search.

But he found it exceedingly difficult to describe his first taste of this feeling as enjoyable. He would go so far as to call it unpleasant. *I don’t want to know this kind of feeling. End it now.*

But—

“No, Gabe. From now on, this will continue foreeeever. For the rest of eternity, you will only know fear.”

Alicia’s tiny boots sank smoothly into the metal floor.

Then Gabriel’s feet sank in too.

“Ah... St... Stop it. Leggo... Stop it.”

He was inadvertently babbling in an almost delirious state, but the sinking would not stop.

Without warning, a white arm shot up out of the floor and coiled itself around Gabriel’s foot. And then another. And yet another.

Gabriel knew by instinct that these arms belonged to all of his own dead prey.

Fear rose uncontrollably. His heart was hammering at a terrible rate and cold sweat was pouring down his forehead.

“Stop... STOP, STOPSTOPSTOOOOOOOOOP!!”

Gabriel began to scream at last.

“Critter, come here! Get up Vassago!! HANS!! BRIGG!!”

He yelled for his subordinates, but the door to the main control room opposite him stayed coldly shut. Vassago, supposedly diving with the STL in the adjacent room, showed no signs of rousing either.

Before he knew it, the floor had swallowed his translucent body up to his waist. Alicia, dragging his hands, was only visible from the shoulders up.

Seconds before getting completely submerged, the girl’s face beamed happily.

“AH... AHHH... WAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!”

Gabriel let out a shriek.

He shrieked on and on.

His shoulders, neck, and face were muffled by white hands.

“AHHHH... Ahhh..... Ah.....”

With a *plop*, his world was thrown into darkness.

Gabriel Miller's scream, as he became aware of the fate awaiting him that would last forever into the future, jerked higher in pitch.

And then—

Underworld's time began to reaccelerate.

The second that synchronization was broken, the hundreds of Japanese players logged in with AmuSpheres disconnected automatically, awoke in their own rooms or booths of net cafes, their chests filled with deep emotion.

For a while, all of them digested it, turned it over in their heads, carved their experiences in the alternate world into their hearts, and finally, wiped away the tears beading at the corners of their eyes and picked up their cell phones and AmuSpheres afresh. For the purpose of conveying to their friends who had fallen in battle in the alternate world and logged out first, what had happened next.

Sinon and Leafa left Underworld due to complete loss of Life just before reacceleration.

Awakening in the RATH Roppongi branch, the two of them waited for what felt like the last lingering echoes of pain to subside as they looked to each other and nodded fervently.

Shino and Suguha were both confident that after Kirito had revived, he defeated the final enemy, saved the world, and would return immediately.

The next time they saw him, they would—

Even if they could not make him feel it, they would properly vocalize their feelings to him.

With renewed resolve, both of them realized what the other was thinking, and broke into soft smiles.

However.

Its limiters fully disabled, the FLA function was accelerating the time ticking within Underworld to previously uncharted domain.

Over 1,000 times. Over 5,000 times.

Ever closer to the wall of time in the far off distance, the so-called maximum acceleration phase: 5,000,000 times faster than reality.

As soon as the starlight vanished, the energy permeating my body disappeared along with it. Exhausted, I allowed my body to lean back while hovering in midair.

My severed arm should have disappeared by now, but it had already regenerated without me noticing. In that hand I kept a tight hold on the Blue Rose Sword with my remaining strength, trying to keep my tears from slipping out.

I understood that Eugeo's soul, having saved my neck numerous times after becoming embedded within the Blue Rose Sword, had taken the blow from Gabriel's blade and was consumed by the fire.

The dead would not return, whether in the real world, or here in Underworld.

That was why memories were so precious and beautiful.

"...Right, Eugeo...?"

I whispered, but there was no reply.

I raised both swords at an unhurried pace and slid them into their sheaths on my back.

At that moment, the night sky overhead began to dissipate.

The darkness thawed and scattered, and the sky gradually returned to its original color.

.....Blue.

The reappearing sky over the Dark Territory was no longer blood-red; only a sea of endless blue, as far as the eye could reach.

I wasn't sure whether it was an effect of the imminent «maximum acceleration phase», or a miracle brought about by the prayers of more than ten thousand people.

Whatever the reason, the sight of the transparent, azure heavens was so magnificent that it would move you to tears. Feeling inundated by intense nostalgia and yearning, I filled my lungs with that blueness.

I closed my eyes, exhaled a long breath, then quietly changed direction.

When I opened my eyes, I laid them upon the marble staircase, which was disintegrating in silence.

By gently flapping my wings I slowly descended, making a beeline for the fractured steps. I was aiming for the tiny island suspended in midair.

The circular floating island was just about overflowing with flowers of an assortment of colors. A single road paved with flat stones cut straight through them, leading towards a structure resembling a temple.

I landed in the center of the stone road, then restored my wings back into my coat hem and surveyed my surroundings.

The saccharine, refreshing fragrance of nectar tickled my nose. A number of lapis blue butterflies fluttered weightlessly in space, and birds chirped in trees flourishing all around me. The sight of a clear blue sky and steadily shining sun bore resemblance to a famous painting.

And — there was not a soul on the island.

Not a shadow in sight on the path, or in the columned temple in front of me.

“...Thank God. They made it.”

I breathed, alone.

After Gabriel Miller was consumed by the spiral of light and vanished, I could feel the FLA beginning acceleration once again, timed perfectly with the moment of uncertainty when I was unsure whether or not Asuna and Alice had successfully escaped from the console to the real world. But both had managed to hurry all the way up that enormous staircase and finally reach their goal in time.

Alice — the reason this world had been born, a female knight and the one and only soul to break the limits of an Artificial Fluctlight, had departed for the real world at last.

I guess many hardships will be waiting for her from now on. She must contend with a world governed by totally different laws and social practices, a cumbersome mechanized body, and a power bent on exploiting a true artificial intelligence for militaristic purposes.

But since it's Alice, I think she'll pull through. She is the strongest Integrity Knight, after all.

“.....Do your best.....”

I looked up towards the blue sky, praying for the golden knight whom I would never see again.

Yes—

Now that the maximum acceleration phase had started, there was no longer any way for me to manually log out from inside. All three system consoles in the world have stopped functioning, and even if my Life falls to zero, I must wait in complete darkness, in a state of utter sensory deprivation, for the phase to end.

Kikuoka and the other RATH workers were supposedly fighting to stop my STL now, but that could not be done before 20 minutes, at the very least, had elapsed.

In that period of time, more than 200 years would pass in this world.

I didn't know whether my consciousness would disappear after wearing out the lifespan of my soul, or even before that, crack under the strain of being accelerated 5,000,000 times faster than real time.

The only thing I could be certain of was that I could no longer return to the real world.

Mom, Dad, Suguha. Sinon. Klein, Agil, Liz, Silica.

My friends at school. The players I knew in ALO.

Alice.

And, Asuna.

I was never going to see those people, whom I loved so much, ever again.

I dropped to my knees upon the white stone slab.

I propped myself up with both hands, but my upper body felt like it was on the verge of shattering.

My vision went cloudy. Shimmering light trembled, then began falling and splashing without end onto the smooth marble.

For now, at least, I think I have the right to cry a bit.

For what was important to me that I could never have back again, I wept. Sobs issued from the gaps between my clenched teeth, and tears fell away from my face, over and over.

Drip. Drip drip.

All I could hear was the sound of droplets hitting stone.

Drip.

Drip.

—Clack.

Clack, clack.

All of a sudden, I could hear the echoes of several, assuredly solid noises.

Clack, clack. It was getting closer. Faint vibrations traveled to my fingertips.

The air swayed. A vague, but wistfully sweet smell floated through the rich floral fragrance.

Clack.

...Clack.

The noises stopped directly in front of me.

And then, someone called my name.

Chapter 23

Return

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

1

Koujiro Rinko was sitting in the operator's chair in the sub control room, fixating upon the tiny glass hatch situated slightly to the left on the front of the console.

The liquid crystal display above the hatch was blinking with red letters: [EJECTING...]

The low hiss of escaping pressurized air was heard.

Finally, a small, black, square-shaped object emerged behind the glass window. The letters on the LCD changed to [COMPLETE].

Rinko reached out a trembling hand, slid the hatch open, and retrieved the object within.

It was a solid metal package. A cube, roughly six centimeters wide, and unexpectedly heavy. It was seamless and jointless; only one side was carved with a six-digit number and fitted with a microconnector port.

The soul of «Alice» was sealed inside.

Just as the the system had commanded, a single cube had been ejected from the Light Cube Cluster installed at the center of the Ocean Turtle's main shaft, bundled into a protective package, and dispatched through a long vacuum chute.

It was, at the same time, traveling from the inner realm of Underworld to the outer realm of the real world.

For a moment, Rinko found herself quite unable to speak, beset by an indescribable emotion, but quickly regained her composure and cried into the microphone while clutching the package:

“Asuna-san, Alice’s ejection is complete! Now it’s just you and Kirigaya-kun; hurry!”

She continued to yell, watching the main monitor give way to a scarlet countdown:

“There’s only 30 seconds until the maximum acceleration phase starts!! Hurry up and log out!!”

For a moment, there was silence.

And then, something she did not anticipate finally came out of the speaker.

“I’m sorry, Rinko-san.”

“Wha...? W-What do you...?”

“I’m sorry. I’m... staying here. Thank you so much for everything. I will never forget what you did for me, Rinko-san.”

Yuuki Asuna’s voice sounded calm, pleasant, and full of determination through the speaker.

“I’m leaving Alice to you. She’s a kind person. She holds great love inside her, and she is loved by many others. For the sake of the many souls lost in her name... and for the sake of Kirito-kun, please do all in your power to prevent her from being put to military use.”

Rinko was speechless. Then she heard the final words Asuna would say to her.

“And please tell everyone: I’m sorry... thank you... and goodbye...”

And then, the countdown fell to zero.

A prolonged siren ushered in the rumbling hum of machines, echoing throughout the narrow cable duct.

It was 10:00 am on July 7. With the end of the 15-minute countdown, the cooling system behind the wall began chugging at full force. Several massive fans started to siphon away the vast amount of heat generated by the cluster of machinery sustaining Underworld. Anyone at sea observing the Ocean Turtle now would likely be able to catch sight of the shimmering air billowing from the pyramid's apex.

".....There it goes..."

Higa Takeru muttered softly.

"Yeah," came the reply of Kikuoka Seijirou, hauling Higa down a narrow ladder on his back.

Upon deciding that they would not be able to prevent the onset of the maximum acceleration phase, both had immediately begun preparations to descend once more into the maintenance cable duct, but the single task of stabilizing Higa's body with a harness had burned through eight minutes of their time.

Kikuoka continued scrambling down the ladder at a speed that was surely producing streams of sweat, but Underworld's maximum acceleration phase was well under way before they had even made it to the pressure-resistant partition.

Almost imploringly, Higa pressed his radio switch and called Dr. Koujiro in the sub control room.

"Rinko-san... how's everything?"

There was static, followed by a successful connection tone, but he heard only dull silence in reply.

"...Rinko-san?"

"...Sorry. I've secured Alice's Light Cube without incident. But..."

In a stifled voice, Dr. Koujiro told him what had just happened.

Higa swallowed his breath and shut his eyes tightly.

“...I understand. We’ll work as hard as we can from here. I’ll contact you to unlock the partition hatch next.”

Higa disconnected and emptied his lungs in one long, thin exhale.

Kikuoka did not inquire, perhaps guessing the circumstances from their conversation. He went on exerting his muscular back.

“...Kiku-san...”

It was a few seconds before Higa finally managed to muster a whisper, and convey to the commander what Dr. Koujiro had told him.

Critter stared in silence at a new window that popped up on the main monitor and the message appearing within it.

The short memo informed him that a single Light Cube had been ejected from the Cluster and sent to the sub control room beyond the pressure-resistant partition.

This meant that «Alice» had been acquired by RATH.

It also meant that their 10-hours-and-counting operation of locating Alice within Underworld and obtaining her had completely failed. All of the effort that went into Vassago and Captain Miller personally diving in, urging the Dark Territory army into an invasion of the Human Empire, waging an extravagant war that was the envy of a Hollywood movie, and even going as far as to drag tens of thousands of online gamers from the US, China, and Korea into battle, had gone to utter waste.

Critter scratched his close-cropped hair, snorted, then switched trains of thought.

With eight hours left until the destroyer began its raid, did they still have a chance at making a second, physical attempt to get Alice?

They had no way of breaking through the ultra-strong, composite material pressure-resistant partition from this side; it would be a different story, however, if they managed to unlock it, like RATH just had.

But why were they even opening the partition to begin with? Did RATH really think they stood a chance of holding them back with a clumsy robot and a couple of smoke grenades?

What if that had been a diversion...? If they had another reason to open the partition, what in hell was it?

Critter turned to address the squad, which had just begun playing cards again.

“Yo, you know that robot that just came at us from upstairs? Did it have a bomb or anything strapped to it?”

Whereupon Hans’ tall figure scratched his mustache and replied:

“Well, I definitely made sure to check, y’know? There weren’t any fixed weapons on it at all, let alone a bomb. They were probably trying to use it as a ballistic shield, but it stopped moving after we lit it up. And the soldiers following behind it made a quick retreat after that, y’know?”

“Hmm... —By the way, the JSDF guys aren’t ‘soldiers’, they’re called personnel.”

Critter spun his chair back forward after adding a wholly unnecessary bit of trivia.

So that robot’s little disturbance must have been a diversion. But even with smoke grenades, rushing past Hans, Brigg, and the others without them noticing was impossible.

In that case—

He picked up the tablet computer sitting on the table and pulled up the sketch of the Ocean Turtle’s interior.

“Hmm... here’s the main shaft, and the partition cuts across from here... this must be the stairway that the robot was hauling ass from...”

At that moment, the countdown on the monitor reached zero and a shrill alarm blared. Underworld’s time acceleration was beginning again. What was more, Brigg’s numbskullery had resulted in him breaking off the operating lever, which was causing the speed multiplier to rise to outrageous levels.

But it no longer mattered what happened to Underworld now. Since the Alice retrieval mission had failed, Vassago and Captain Miller had probably «died» in their dives and should now be undergoing logout procedures in the attached room.

In that case, Critter had to devise their next plan of attack before Captain Miller reappeared.

He magnified and scrolled over the complex sketch, before finally becoming aware of something.

“Oh, there’s a tiny hatch here too... ‘Cable duct’? What’s this...?”

Having communicated the situation to Higa Takeru, Rinko sighed wearily and leaned back into her mesh chair.

Yuuki Asuna’s determination to stay in Underworld herself just because Kirigaya Kazuto had no way of escaping before acceleration started, was too young, too impulsive, and yet — pricelessly beautiful.

She could not resist thinking of him.

How the man she once loved had deserted her in the real world and vanished into cyberspace.

If she had the chance to go with him back then, what would she have done? Would she had chosen to fry her own brain with the STL prototype like he had, leaving behind only a copy of her own consciousness?

“Akihiko-san... you...” Rinko said in an inaudible whisper, closing her eyes.

A «true alternate world», realized merely with the floating castle of Aincrad and the 10,000 players trapped within: that had been his... that had been Kayaba Akihiko’s ambition.

But he had discovered something — had learned something over the two years he spent in that floating castle. It was this something that had changed his mind.

There was still much, much more work to be done.

He had realized that SAO was not the end point after all; rather, it was only the beginning. It was this very reason that had spurred him to continue condensing the NerveGear technology, and finally complete the prototype with which he would end up destroying his own body in a Nagano mountain village wrapped by primeval forest.

His development data was left to Rinko, who adapted it to design a medical-use high precision FullDive device, the «Medicuboid».

RATH and Higa Takeru then built upon three years of extensive data provided by a tester — a young girl — of the first Medicuboid prototype, to complete the STL.

In the end, you could say that Underworld, the ultimate alternate world, had been borne out of Kayaba Akihiko’s dream.

Did that mean, then, that with Underworld’s completion Kayaba’s dream had been fully realized?

No, that couldn’t be it.

Why? Because the other piece he had left behind — the jigsaw piece he called «The Seed» package, still did not seem to fit anywhere in the puzzle.

Yes, the standardization of VRMMOs built with The Seed was what made it possible for the Japanese players to retaliate against the foreign attack by converting their accounts.

But not even Kayaba would be able to predict this years before it happened. The account conversion rescue was, at most, only a secondary effect.

What on earth had been his goal, then? Why was there a need to bring many VR worlds together and unite them under a common standard...?

The duralumin safekeeping case containing Alice's Light Cube sat atop the console.

Being an aggregation of quantum gate elements, the Light Cube was non-volatile, but since the driver circuit of the logic gates inside the package required electric current to function, Alice's soul would remain inactive as long as it was sealed within the case.

Caressing the silver container with her right hand, Rinko turned towards the humanoid silhouette poised in the left corner of the sub control room — the mechanical body «Niemom».

Installing Alice's Light Cube package into the socket on the robot's head would turn Niemom into Alice's body, and she would be able to move and speak.

She thought of carrying out that idea, of talking to Alice — but Rinko gave a slight shake of her head and chased away the impulse. This was no time for that sort of thing, not when Kazuto and Asuna were still in such danger; besides, although considerably slimmer than Ichimom, Niemom's complete lack of feminine properties would probably come as a shock to Alice if she woke up with its body.

Cutting short her silent reflection, she took her right hand away from the duralumin case, and—

“Dr. Koujiro,” came a voice behind her, and she spun around.

Captain Nakanishi was standing there, having returned to the sub control room at some point.

“Preparations are complete for reopening the partition hatch. We’re ready when you are.”

“Ah... okay. Thanks a lot.” She replied, checking the monitor clock. More than a minute had passed by since the maximum acceleration phase had begun. In Underworld time, that was... 10 years.

It was unbelievable. Kirigaya Kazuto and Yuuki Asuna’s «soul lifespans» now exceeded her own.

Even with the passing of a minute and a second, it was imperative that those two were logged out as soon as possible. If they managed to escape before their soul lifespans totally ran out, it would be possible to remove all of their memories after the maximum acceleration phase began. But in theory they had fewer than 12 minutes left to achieve that.

—Higa-kun, Kikuoka-san.

—*Hurry!!*

Rinko pleaded, positively chewing her lip.

Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka’s throat was wheezing painfully. A waterfall of sweat was discoloring his shirt, even seeping into Higa’s clothes.

Several times, Higa had swallowed the suggestion that he would climb the rest of the way down by himself.

Taking the maximum dose of painkiller had not lessened the throbbing pain from Yanai’s bullet wound in his right shoulder. His body felt weighed down by the sheer amount of blood he had lost; it was enough to prevent him from supporting his own weight.

Even so — Higa thought.

In all honesty, considering their present circumstances he had not expected Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka to put up such a desperate fight.

They had secured Project Alicization's ultimate goal, the boundary-breaking Fluctlight «A. L. I. C. E.». All they needed to do now was analyze Alice's framework, identify what set it apart from other Fluctlights, and they would be able to work out a way of mass-producing bottom-up AI. Japan would establish an unparalleled technical foundation in the forthcoming age of autonomous weapons and break free of the American military system's domination — they had already accomplished the goal that RATH been created to fulfill.

This was supposed to be Kikuoka Seijirou's dearest ambition.

This was the only reason he had stuck his nose into the SAO incident — even amid a temporary transfer to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications — and the only reason he had created the character of «Crysheight» to remain in contact with the VRMMO players.

Therefore, Kikuoka's first course of action was more likely to gravitate towards keeping the pressure-resistant partition firmly shut and defending Alice's Light Cube with his life, before the Aegis destroyer stormed the ship. He would refuse to relent even if Kirigaya Kazuto and Yuuki Asuna's Fluctlights, still left in Underworld, fell to collapse. Even if they had to lock Dr. Koujiro in her room, as she would no doubt strongly object to such a decision.

“...Quite unexpected... don't... you think?” Kikuoka panted unexpectedly, and Higa couldn't stop himself from letting out a bizarre squawk.

“N-Nah, that's... Well, how do I say it? I just don't think it seems to fit your personality, Kiku-san...”

“Indeed...”

Kikuoka chuckled briefly, continuing to climb down the ladder at full speed.

“But... I’ve mentioned it before. This is... a calculated... action.”

“O... Oh?”

“I’m a guy... who likes to jump to the worst case scenario. Right now... I think it’s best... to let the enemy think... that they still have a chance at retaking Alice.”

“The w-worst case... scenario?”

Was there really a worse scenario than the enemy noticing the existence of this cable duct and attacking them from below before they could fully open the pressure-resistant partition?

But before Higa could continue his speculation, the soles of Kikuoka’s shoes touched the titanium alloy hatch.

As the commander came to a stop, gasping, Higa pressed the connection switch on his radio.

“Rinko-san, we’ve arrived! Unlock the partition, please!!”

“Whoa... it’s actually opening!” Critter yelled, gawking at the pressure-resistant partition release warning on the main monitor above.

But why? For what reason?

It just didn’t make sense. If they had gotten Alice now, why in the world was RATH purposely weakening their own defenses?

But there was no time to consider the matter. Critter spun his chair around and delivered instructions to the squad.

“Umm... Ahh, Hans and you lot, get to the stairs, everybody except Brigg! Fire at will and secure the barrier control!”

“Easier said than done...”

Hans clucked his tongue but raised his assault rifle. More than ten other squad members mirrored him.

“Hey... Wait a minute, then what do I do?”

Brigg was pouting and looking bad-tempered. Critter stared at him, then snapped his fingers.

“I’ve got another job for you. Something important, perfect for your brawn.”

He was speaking the words, but his mind was thinking something else entirely. If possible, it was best to let this simpleton remain somewhere he could keep an eye on him.

“Look, I want you to come with me while I go check out this cable duct. Something tells me that this is enemy’s true objective—”

“Oh... Oh, I see. That sounds good.”

Brigg grinned widely and checked his rifle magazine with exaggerated noise. Critter suppressed a sigh and patted him on the back.

He followed Hans and the others from the main control room out into the passageway, but a moment before he ran in the other direction, Critter caught a glimpse of an inner door — STL Room 1.

—Come to think of it, what the hell is taking that idiot Vassago so long to log out? He’s not taking a smoke break in there, is he?

He had a mind to check on him, but just then Brigg broke into a run along the passageway. With no choice, Critter pursued him from behind.

They reached their destination in a matter of minutes. At first glance they only saw the corridor running the length of the main shaft’s inner wall, but the map had shown a cable duct behind a small hatch on the left wall that led to the upper shaft. Of course, the duct itself was barricaded by a heavy-duty partition, but if his guess was correct—

He grasped the crank with sweaty hands and swiveled it counterclockwise.

Pushing open the heavy metal door, the first thing Critter could make out under the dark orange lamp light was a tunnel about two meters deep and less than a meter high. It stopped at a wall stretching straight up, where an unobtrusive ladder had been installed.

And directly beneath the ladder, there was what looked like a bundle of fabric—

“...Whoa?!”

The instant he recognized the object, Critter recoiled and banged the back of his head on Brigg’s chin, but pain and the brute’s cursing were lost on him as his eyes widened.

There was something inside the fabric, or rather, the clothing. A gaunt body appeared to be curled up there. Brigg shoved Critter aside and lifted his rifle, but then said abruptly:

“He’s already dead.”

Sure enough, the hunched man’s spine had been twisted at an unnatural angle. Face horribly taut, Critter inched into the tunnel and checked the man’s face.

“Wait... isn’t this that other guy? The RATH informant...? Did they kill him when they found him out? But, to kill someone in such a way...”

Reluctantly, he touched the man’s skin and felt a sliver of warmth in his finger. Judging by his temperature, the man had probably died the first time the partition was opened. Did that mean it was first opened because he was trying to flee to the lower shaft? And then he lost his footing on the ladder and fell to his death?

If so, then why was the partition being opened again?

Critter wanted to examine the hatch on the partition above them more closely, and for that, he needed to drag the body out of the way. But he didn't want to do it himself.

He backed out of the tunnel into the hallway, and commanded Brigg:

"Help me check if the coast is clear up the duct."

The stubbled giant snorted, entered the tunnel, and yanked the spy's body outside. Then he went back in and arched his body upwards, staring towards the other end of the vertical duct.

Even Critter's amateur instincts were alarmed by the sight of Brigg putting his head so far up the passage, but just then—

"Shit!!" Brigg yelled. He raised his assault rifle and fired.

Yellow flashes seared themselves into Critter's retinas as two different kinds of gunfire pounded his eardrums.

Leaping back and swallowing a scream, he watched as Brigg's monster figure slumped onto the tunnel floor, as though he was struck by an invisible sledgehammer.

"Whoa!! What happened?!" He screamed, sitting backwards onto the hallway floor. Brigg laid motionless where the informant's huddled body had been only ten seconds ago. Critter didn't need the blood pooling on the floor to tell him that Brigg had met the same fate; there was a RATH combatant somewhere up in the cable duct, and they had shot him.

—Now what?

Cold sweat pouring down in torrents, Critter began to think.

Retrieve the rifle from Brigg's right hand, and return fire at the enemy in the duct in revenge? *Of course not! I'm just a computer geek; my job consists solely of thinking and hammering on a keyboard.*

He continued to think while half-crawling back towards the main control room in retreat.

At least he now knew that RATH had every intention of using aggressive force. However, in terms of battle strength his own side was clearly superior. If fighting broke out, there was little doubt that RATH would also suffer losses. If they weren't careful, they could lose the entire upper shaft, and then, wouldn't they end up losing Alice again too?

Had RATH's commander considered a scenario even «worse» than that? Did RATH think they had enough firepower to blow up the entire Ocean Turtle? The C4 charges they had on hand weren't even capable of breaching the partition hatch...

Firepower...

Critter gave a sudden gasp. The two bodies lying in the passageway behind him were quickly forgotten.

They did have it.

There was only one way of completely destroying the Ocean Turtle, of sending Alice's Light Cube and the RATH workers all to a watery grave.

In the event that procuring Alice became impossible, their client's orders has been to liquidate it. But could he really implicate this entire, gigantic, self-propelling megafloat and her ten plus crew in order to achieve that goal?

There was no way he was making such a terrible decision on his own. The prospect would haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life.

Critter stood up and ran towards the main control room, seeking the opinion of his captain.

“Ki... Kiku-san! Are you all right, Kiku-san?!!”

Higa demanded in a strangled voice. The enemy that appeared at the very bottom of the cable duct had fired off at least three shots.

There was no reply. With his back to Higa, his right hand on the ladder and his left gripping a pistol, Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka's head drooped as his shoulder seemed to press into the wall.

—No way. Hey, don't do this to me. I still have things I need you for.

“Ki...”

Kikuoka-saaaaaaaaaan!!

He was just about to scream when the lieutenant colonel went into a fit of coughing.

“Ugh... Ahh, damn... He got me. Looks like I was right to wear a bulletproof vest...”

“That... That goes without saying! Were you really going to come here in nothing but a Hawaiian shirt...?”

Higa heaved a deep sigh of relief and looked down at Kikuoka's back again.

“You're not hurt, then?”

“Well, I think I was only hit once, on my vest. Are *you* hurt? Those bullets bounced all over the place.”

“N... No. Neither I nor the computer got hit.”

“Then let's hurry. The maintenance connector is just ahead.”

Swaying on Kikuoka's back as he began climbing down again, Higa muttered to himself again: *Quite unexpected.*

Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka had always struck him as someone without a hint of physical skill, but right now his broad muscled back felt like steel, and the marksmanship he just displayed — as uncomfortable as hanging from the ladder and firing with only his left hand was, both of his rapid shots had hit bang on target: right though the enemy's throat and chest.

—And to think I've known this guy for so long and still can't figure him out.

Gently shaking his head, Higa pulled a cable from his pocket for the maintenance connector, which was now coming into sight.

Critter retraced his steps through the passageway at a sprint, bursting into the main control room as he heard rapid gunfire coming from the stairs.

There was no trace of Captain Miller or Vassago inside. Had they not exited the STLs yet? Five minutes had already passed since the start of the maximum acceleration phase.

He was still hesitant over whether to tell them what he was considering. He knew that as soon as he brought it up, both of them would immediately put it into action. They were the type that didn't flinch at civilian deaths for the sake of completing the mission.

Without arriving at a decision, Critter threw open the door to STL Room 1.

"Captain Miller! Alice got taken by the enemy..."

His next words died in his throat.

Gabriel Miller was lying in front of him on STL #1's gel bed. Everything above his forehead was obscured by machinery, and an expression Critter had never seen him with before was plastered on his face.

No, it would be more accurate to say that Critter had never seen any human with this expression before.

His blue eyes were bulging so hard that they looked ready to pop out. His mouth gaped hugely, his jaw looking almost dislocated and slightly crooked. His tongue protruded all the way out of his mouth. He looked like an alien creature.

"Ca... Cap... tain...?"

Critter was gasping, his knees shaking violently. He knew that if Captain Miller's bulging eyeballs started moving, he would not be able to hold back a scream.

It took several seconds for him to steady his breathing. Then he put forward a timid right hand, and felt the wrist of the left arm hanging limp from the bed.

There was no pulse.

What's more, the skin was cold as ice. Gabriel Miller, Ocean Turtle raid team captain, was dead without a single wound on his body.

Trying with all his might to keep down the contents of his stomach, Critter gave a hoarse yell:

"Vassago... get up now! The captain's... d-dead..."

He walked around the gel bed on feet that felt like water, bringing STL #2 into closer view.

This time Critter really did let out a shrill scream.

Vice Captain Vassago Casals was, at first glance, sleeping peacefully. The eyes on his expressionless face were closed, and his arms lay straight on both sides of his body.

But—

His once long, raven-black wavy hair...

...was now a shock of crusty white wire, like the head of someone over a hundred years old.

No longer feeling the need to check Vassago's pulse, Critter took slow steps back. His highest personal axioms consisted of logic and source code, and right now he was certain that if he did not leave this room at once he would end up the same way as these two.

He pelted out of the open door and slammed it shut with his right foot.

Wheezing uncontrollably, Critter began reorganizing his thoughts at a furious pace.

He had no way of investigating what happened to the captain or Vassago, and he didn't want to know. He guessed that something had probably befallen them in Underworld, resulting in the total destruction of their Fluctlights.

In summary, the mission had failed. With their commander now dead, he could not make the decision on whether or not to destroy Alice and this ship together with it. There was no meaning in staying here any longer.

Critter snatched up a mouthpiece from the console and spoke in husky tones:

"Hans... get back here. Brigg, Vassago, and the captain are all down."

Seconds later, the manliest member of the team burst into the main control room, a razor-sharp look on his face.

"Brigg's down?! Why?!"

"He... He got hit from above, in the cable duct..."

Hans had barely finished listening to him before raising his rifle and turning right around, but Critter barred him in desperation.

"Stop! They took Alice's Light Cube. There's no point in fighting anymore..."

Hans was silent for a moment. Suddenly he roared and punched the wall, then took a few steps towards Critter.

"...No, we've still got orders. If we can't get Alice then we have to destroy it. You have some sort of idea, don't you?"

Hans's painstakingly straight-cut mustache was quivering. Intimidated, Critter gave a tiny nod.

"Well... Well, it's not like I don't have one... No, we can't. We can't make that kind of judgment without the captain."

“Tell me. Spit it out now!!” Hans bellowed, jabbing the rifle barrel into Critter’s throat. Faced with the dangerous glare of a mercenary — a mercenary who had been Brigg’s partner for many years before his employment by Glowgen — Critter found it impossible to refuse.

“The... The engine...”

“Engine? Of the ship?”

“Yeah... The main engine of this massive ship is a nuclear reactor...”

2

Ten minutes elapsed.

Koujiro Rinko wrung her sweat-drenched hands, staring at the digital numbers as they ticked by without mercy.

The amount of time that had passed in Underworld since the beginning of the maximum acceleration phase — was 100 years.

Exactly what time of such monstrous length felt like to Kirigaya Kazuto and Yuuki Asuna was something far exceeding her own imagination. All she could be certain of was that both their Fluctlight memory retention capacities were nearing their limits.

Higa estimated that once a human soul accumulated 150 years' worth of memories, it would no longer function normally and begin to collapse. But naturally that had not been experimentally confirmed; the real limit might arrive later — or sooner.

All she could do now was pray that they finish the logout procedure before their souls destroyed themselves. If they could manage that, then there was still hope of restoring the both of them to normal.

—Higa-kun, Kikuoka-san, please.

In the midst of her praying, Rinko failed to notice that the faint gunfire traveling from downstairs had ceased some time ago, until Captain Nakanishi came running back to the sub control room and informed her.

“Doctor! The enemy is retreating from the Ocean Turtle!”

“Re... Retreating?!”

Rinko lifted her face up and repeated, stunned.

Why now? Now that the partition was reopened, wasn't this the attackers' last chance to grab Alice?

They were giving up far too easily. There were still eight more hours before the escort vessel «Nagato» began its assault.

Typing on the keyboard to call up a status window monitoring the conditions of various regions inside the ship, Rinko asked the captain:

“Was anyone hurt in the fight?”

“Yes... two lightly wounded, one severely who’s being treated right now, but nothing life-threatening.”

“I see...”

She softly exhaled her held breath. A slight glance towards him revealed that the bold lines traced by Nakanishi’s cheekbone had been obscured with a large bandage, which was steadily growing bloodier. He was probably one among the lightly wounded.

They had to save those two kids so all the fighting did not go to waste.

At least the enemy’s retreat came as good news. Her eyes flew across the status window, affirming that the door of the underwater dock at the Ocean Turtle’s bottom — the one used by the attackers when they boarded — was being opened.

“They seem to be fleeing in their submarine. It’s just that, this is much too hasty...”

Rinko raised her eyebrows, and—

A tremor, completely unlike anything they had felt ever before, shook the entire main shaft.

Hyuuuun. Bassy rumbling permeated the gigantic self-propelling megafloat like cold wind. A ballpoint pen rolled off the table and clattered to the floor.

“Wha... What?! What’s happening?!”

“This is... Ahh... the bastards, they can’t have...!!”

Captain Nakanishi’s shout was half a moan.

“This trembling — it’s the main engine running at full speed, Doctor!!”

“Main... engine?”

“The main engine... the pressurized water reactor at the bottom of the shaft.”

Nakanishi raced past a wide-eyed, dazed Rinko and took her place at the console, awkwardly manipulating the status window. New windows popped up continuously, and one of them was playing a blurry video feed.

“Shit!! The control rods are all raised!! Those bastards, what the hell are they playing at?!”

Bam! He slammed a fist down on the console. Her throat dry, Rinko asked him:

“But, there are fail-safes, aren’t there...?”

“Of course. The control rods are automatically lowered to stop the fission before the reactor core reaches criticality. But... here, take a look at this.”

Nakanishi’s finger was pointing to the monitor, at one position on the live feed of the reactor’s containment vessel. It was hard to tell through the hodgepodge of crimson light, but something tiny and white appeared to be stuck onto a spot of the large, orange-painted machinery.

“I believe this is C4... plastic explosive. A piece this small should be insufficient to breach both the containment vessel and pressure vessel, but directly under there is the electrical CRD responsible for lowering the control rod cluster into the reactor core... the drive mechanism, in other words. If that gets destroyed, then the control rods won’t be able to lower themselves...”

“And we... won’t be able to stop the fission? What happens then...?”

“The first thing that will happen is that the coolant will generate a steam explosion, wrecking the pressure vessel... worse comes to worst, the molten core will breach the containment vessel and the ship’s hull, then drop into the sea and create massive amounts of steam, and at that point the entire shaft will be blown sky-high, including the main control room, the Light Cube Cluster, and our sub control room here.”

“Wha.....”

Rinko couldn’t help but stare at the floor underneath her. These solid metal plates getting melted through, and superheated steam shooting up from below—?

If that were to happen, there would be nothing left: nothing of the RATH technicians who had somehow all survived until now, nothing of Kazuto and Asuna who were connected to the STLs, and nothing of the ten thousand plus Artificial Fluctlights in the Light Cube Cluster...

“I’m going to disarm the C4.” Nakanishi muttered suddenly.

“The bastards should have set a charge timer long enough to put sufficient distance between their submarine and the Ocean Turtle. At least five minutes... which is plenty.”

“B-But, Nakanishi-san. The temperature in the engine room, it’s already...”

“It’s okay, it’ll only be like a slightly hotter sauna. I’ll just bolt over and rip off the detonator. Easy.”

—Surely a situation that warrants protective clothing. But there’s no time to make such preparations.

Rinko found herself unable to say the words. Nakanishi was already walking towards the door, his wide back swelling with steely resolution.

However.

A second before his black leather combat boots reached the automatic door.

Rinko's ears suddenly detected a noise she had never heard in this room until now. Nakanishi's hand flew to the holster at his right waist and his eyes darted towards the left side of the room.

Whirrrrrr. With the metallic hum of a motor, something stretched out a right foot from its fastened frame—

A mechanical body constructed from metal and plastic: Niemom.

Rinko and Nakanishi goggled blankly as the humanoid machine approached at a sluggish pace, its head sensor glowing red.

It should not be able to move.

Hadn't Higa, its designer, told them that? Unlike Ichimom, which was equipped with many walking balancers, Niemom was designed from the start to be an Artificial Fluctlight vessel and couldn't even take a single step without a Light Cube inserted in it. The only Artificial Fluctlight missing from the Cluster was Alice, and she was still sitting inside her case on the table. The socket in Niemom's head should be empty.

"Why... Why is Prototype #2..."

Nakanishi uttered, astonished, as he drew his handgun from its holster and held it aloft. But without sparing him so much as a glance, Niemom headed straight for Rinko, stopping roughly two meters away from her, and began to emit a voice — somewhat corrupted with electronic noises — from a speaker installed at an unknown location on its head:

"I will go."

That voice.

The faint odor of oil emanating from Niemom's body stung her nose.

Rinko had heard that same voice and smelled that same scent in the dream she had in her cabin bed during her first night on the Ocean Turtle.

She stood on shaking feet and began to walk towards Niemom, croaking:

“Is... Is that you, A... Akihiko-san.....?”

Glowing a muddled light, the sensor flickered as though it were blinking, and the robot gave a small nod.

Rinko took a final step, almost drawn to it, and silently caressed the aluminum chassis with trembling hands. Motors whirred as the robot’s hands raised upwards, stroking Rinko’s back.

“I’m sorry for leaving you alone for so long, Rinko-kun.”

It was a computerized, artificial voice, but unmistakably belonging to the only man Koujiro Rinko had ever loved — Kayaba Akihiko.

“Why... are you here?”

She whispered in the local dialect she should have forgotten long ago. Tears sprang from her eyes, turning Niemom’s laser light into a blur.

“There’s no time, so I’ll only say what’s important. Rinko-kun, I was very fortunate to meet you. You have been the only one who can connect me to the real world. If you wish... I would like you to keep this connection into the future: keep on connecting my dream... the two worlds that remain separate even today...”

“Yes... of course... of course.”

She nodded frantically, and the masklike mechanical face gave her a very faint smile.

The robot moved away from her, changed direction by nimbly shifting its center of gravity, and exited the sub control room into the hallway with what resembled a running gait.

Without thinking, Rinko was just about to chase after it when the automatic door slid shut.

She drew in a deep breath and clenched her teeth. She could not leave this room now. She was still responsible for monitoring the conditions of various locations.

Rinko looked up at the video of the engine room, clutching the locket at her chest. She could hear a bemused Captain Nakanishi say in an almost exasperated tone, “Why now...”

It was true that they had faced many dangers so far. But Rinko felt that she understood why Kayaba had chosen this moment to shed his role as an observer.

“...He’s not doing it for Underworld. That man has no intention of intervening with the simulation. He chose this moment to reveal himself because he wants to protect Kirigaya-kun and Asuna-san...”

When Higa Takeru heard the low roar of the turbines from somewhere underneath the cable duct, he finally realized what was meant by Kikuoka’s feared «worst case scenario».

“Ki... Kiku-san, those assholes, they... the reactor...”

His moan was interrupted by determined instructions.

“I know. But right now, we need to focus on shutting down the STLs.”

“O... Okay. But...”

Arriving at the maintenance panel at last, Higa felt cold sweat all over his body as he inserted the cable jack a second time.

This would all be pointless if the reactor lost control. Even Underworld and Alice’s Light Cube would be utterly obliterated by scorching steam and powerful radiation. Not to mention the many deaths that would occur.

But causing a reactor explosion was nothing trivial. Small arms were incapable of breaching the double-layer, solid metal containment vessel encasing the reactor core, and there were numerous failsafes installed into the control system. Even if the engine were forced to run at full speed, the safety procedure would immediately kick in and drop the control rods to stop the fission.

At this point, Kikuoka asked Higa in his normally calm tone:

“Well, Higa-kun, can you take it from here on your own?”

“Mm... Yeah, I can keep working if I secure my harness to the ladder... B-But, Kiku-san, you’re not thinking of going down there and...”

“Nah, I’m just going to quickly check the situation. I won’t do anything stupid, I’m coming right back up.”

With that, Kikuoka swiftly undid the harness tying them both together, slid the woven nylon belt through the ladder, and rebuckled it. After making sure Higa’s body held steady, he climbed down a few steps.

“I’ll leave it to you then, Higa-kun.”

The slender eyes behind his black-rimmed glasses flashed with a grin.

“P-Please be careful! Some of those guys might still be here!”

Kikuoka gave an very uncharacteristic thumbs up with his right hand in response, then resumed climbing down the ladder at top speed.

After stepping into the tunnel at the very bottom, he took a cautious peek inside, and slid his body through.

Higa only began to notice after Kikuoka’s figure had completely vanished.

He was typing on his laptop's keyboard with his right hand and tried to adjust the harness with his left as it was digging into his abdomen, when he felt something sticky. Startled, he peered down, and realized by the glow of orange emergency lights that his palm had been dampened by dark blood.

It took only one glance for Higa to register that it was not his own.

Although nearly all of the surveillance cameras inside the lower shaft — which, until a few minutes ago had still been occupied by the attackers — were destroyed, the camera head in the reactor containment engine room area remained unharmed.

Rinko looked up towards the main monitor at an enlarged image of the video feed, both hands clasped around her locket, waiting.

To her immediate left, Captain Nakanishi's clenched fists were resting upon the console. Behind them, the security forces and technicians who had returned from battle were now deep in prayer, each in his own way.

Rinko had pleaded with everyone to at least retreat to the bridge, but not a single person left the main shaft.

Every single person here had dedicated their all to the clandestine research and development of the front organization RATH. Each entrusted his hopes and dreams to a new era that true bottom-up artificial intelligence was sure to pioneer.

Until now Rinko had believed herself only a temporary visitor on this ship. She had felt unlikely to ever approve of the goals of someone whose true motivations were as inscrutable as Kikuoka Seijirou's.

But she still came to RATH. And now, she was finally beginning to understand.

Artificial Fluctlights should never be restricted to such a narrow research goal as becoming AI for autonomous weaponry.

Similarly, Underworld was not just any societal development simulation.

Both represented the beginning of an epic paradigm shift.

A different reality — one would inspire change in a world heading ever closer towards a closed future. A world that realized the will of young people fighting to break free of the established system into an invisible power: An Incarnating Radius.

—That's your goal, isn't it, Akihiko-san?

That's what you noticed and discovered during your two years in that floating castle — their infinite potential, and the dazzling, blinding light of their spirits.

No matter the reason, trapping 10,000 people in a electronic prison and causing the deaths of 4,000 among them counted as the worst crime in human history and did not deserve forgiveness. Not even Rinko could ever be absolved of her own cooperation in bringing about such an atrocity.

But right now... this wish was something she permitted herself to believe in.

—Please, Akihiko-san. Protect everyone... and protect the world.

As though in response to Rinko's prayer, something in the remote feed on the monitor shifted at last.

The silver mechanical body emerged onto the narrow walkway leading towards the engine room, which housed a state-of-the-art pressurized water reactor.

By now its battery level was likely already beginning to decrease; the robot's footsteps were growing heavier. It advanced with a great *kalunk, kalunk*, as though it were fighting against its own weight.

It was difficult to imagine when Kayaba's mind-simulation program had begun hiding inside that body, but Rinko was sure of one thing: the program in #2's memory was the original, the one and only. No intelligence could withstand the thought that it was a copy of something else.

How much of the engine room's blistering heat would the prototype body's electronics — which did not possess any special heat resistance — be able to endure? Removing just the detonator would prevent the plastic explosive from blowing up, but if Niemom's memory were damaged, Kayaba's consciousness would vanish in an instant.

Please, disarm the bomb safely and come back to me again — Rinko implored, biting her lip.

One could only assume that Kayaba Akihiko was fully prepared to perish.

Back then he had been willing to destroy his brain to leave behind a copy of his mind, and now he had finally achieved his goal and found a place to die.

The robot's joint actuators creaked dully.

Its metal feet clunked on the floor.

With earnest but steady steps, the metal body arrived in front of the engine room door at last.

It stretched out its right hand and manipulated the control panel with stiff movements. The indicator changed to green, and the bulky alloy door swung inwards—

At that moment.

Earsplitting rapid gunfire rang out of the speaker. Niemom stretched both arms around its body in defense, retreating with rigid steps backward.

A soldier in black combat garb shot out from beyond the door, shouting something.

It was undoubtedly one of the attackers, but unlike before, he was not wearing a helmet and goggles to hide his face. Even from the grainy video of the surveillance camera, they could tell that the delicately featured, somewhat stubbled man had quite a venomous expression on his face.

“Wha... There’s still someone here?! Why?! Isn’t that suicide...?!” Captain Nakanishi groaned in shock.

Without mercy, the man showered #2 — in its defensive position — with bullets.

Sparks flew as several holes were punched into its aluminum chassis. Bullets severed nerve cables all over its body and jets of lubricant sprayed from polymer muscle cylinders.

“No... NOOO!!”

Rinko could not stifle her scream. The enemy soldier on the screen shouted again in heated English, and depressed his trigger for a third time. The robot staggered, and began to take step after step backward.

“No! #2’s chassis can’t handle that!!”

He would never make it in time, but Captain Nakanishi made to snatch up his sidearm and dash outside.

Next moment.

A series of new gunshots was heard from the speaker.

A third figure had charged forward from the side closer to the hallway and begun firing wildly. The enemy’s body gave a violent shake to the right. Not a single shot of the continuous fire coming from directly behind was misfiring onto the mechanical body. Who on earth was displaying such marksmanship—?

Eyes so wide she forgot to breathe, Rinko watched as blood spurted from the enemy soldier’s chest at last, and as though he were being swept out of the way, he keeled over onto the ground, where he lay motionless.

Immediately after, their savior knelt gingerly down in the middle of the walkway—

Then he collapsed sideways. Rinko moved the mouse with a trembling hand, zooming the camera closer.

A fringe fell over his forehead. Black-rimmed glasses askew. The corners of his mouth lifted in what appeared to be the traces of a smile.

“Ki... Kikuoka-san?!”

“Lieutenant Colonel...!!”

Rinko and Nakanishi screamed in unison.

This time the JSDF serviceman really did bolt from the room, almost falling over in his hurry. Several security force members pursued him. Rinko could no longer stop them.

A technician raced to the console in her stead. After several keystrokes he pulled up what looked to be #2’s status.

“Left arm output at zero. Right arm at 65 percent. Left leg and right leg both at 70 percent. Battery level 30 percent. We’re good, it can still move!!”

As though it had heard the technician’s yell, #2 began its advance once more.

Zzt, krak. Zzt, krak. Sparks flew from severed cables with every rigid step.

The instant its battered body crossed through the door, Rinko switched cameras to show video from inside the engine room.

The second heat-resistant door was physically locked with a huge lever. #2’s right hand closed around the handle and attempted to push it down, but its elbow actuator spun chaotically and ejected a shower of sparks.

“Please...”

Rinko whispered, and at the same time shouts of encouragement were heard all around the sub control room.

“You can do it, Niemom!!”

“That’s it, just a little more!!”

Ka-chunk.

The lever sank with a hefty thunk.

The heavy steel door burst open at once, as though forced outwards by pressure from inside. On the monitor they could see waves of heat shooting out.

Niemom’s body wobbled. Sparks, more intense now, flashed along the thick cable hanging from its spine.

“Ah... Ahh, oh no!!” One of the technicians suddenly shouted.

“What... What’s wrong?!”

“The battery cable’s damaged!! If that breaks, then the whole body’s power source will be cut... and then it won’t be able to move at all...”

Neither Rinko nor any of the other staff members spoke.

Kayaba should have noticed this severe blow within #2 by now. He appeared to hold the swaying cable steady with his right elbow, and begin taking gradual steps forward again.

The long-awaited engine room interior was already at such a high temperature that any living human would find it unbearable: the reactor was constantly running at full capacity and unable to evacuate any of the blistering heat it was producing.

Soon the safety procedures were bound to trip, and the control rods would automatically descend into the reactor and stop the fission.

But if the plastic explosive detonated before that and destroyed the control rod drive mechanism, the immense number of neutrons emitted from the fuel rods would continue to drive the sustained fission of uranium atoms, eventually reaching the point of uncontrollable criticality.

The molten core would hit the primary coolant and create a steam explosion, damaging the pressure vessel, and then, under the influence of gravity the core would continue to penetrate the containment vessel, the ship's hull, and finally the ocean surface—

A sudden image of white steam blasting out of a perforated Ocean Turtle flashed through Rinko's mind.

She shut her eyes, and prayed again.

“Please... Akihiko-san...!!”

Renewed cheers came quickly from everyone behind her. As though spurred upon by their voices, #2 approached the reactor inch by inch.

Rinko switched to the final camera.

Instantaneously, tremendous noise began issuing from the speaker. The monitor image was splashed with the bright red color of emergency lights.

Parting the heated air as it dragged one of its feet, #2 was only five to six meters away from the plastic explosive on the containment vessel.

The robot raised its right hand towards the detonator. Sparks burst continuously from all over its body as fragments of its chassis broke off onto the floor without interruption.

“Come on... come on... come on!!”

Those were the only words ringing throughout the sub control room now. Rinko's fists were clenched as she shouted herself hoarse.

Four more meters.

Three meters.

Two meters.

All of a sudden, flares seemed to explode from #2's back.

The broken, hanging black wire looked no different from an organ that had spilled out of a body.

All sensors on its head darkened. Its right arm fell slowly to its side.

Both of its knees stooped steadily downwards—

#2 was completely silent.

The group of output graphs that had been oscillating back and forth on the main monitor now plummeted as one, dropping into darkness.

The technician's voice was barely audible as he declared:

“...All output... gone...”

—I don't believe in miracles.

Kayaba Akihiko said to Rinko that day — the day that the death game SAO was cleared far ahead of schedule and every player was released.

His eyes shone with an unwavering light, and his unshaven mouth was curved into the hint of a smile.

—But today, for the first time in my life, I witnessed a miracle.

—I had him at the end of my sword; his HP should have dropped to zero for good. But almost as if he were resisting the system itself, he refused to accept his own destruction... then he moved his right hand, and thrust his own sword into my chest.

—That moment might have been just what I've been waiting for all this time...

“...Akihiko-san!”

Rinko had not noticed that her right hand was gripping her locket so tightly it had begun to bleed. She was screaming:

“You’re «Holy Sword» Heathcliff, aren’t you?! You’re the greatest rival of «Black Swordsman» Kirito-kun, aren’t you?! Then at least... why don’t you show me a miracle too?!”

Blink.

Blink blink.

Twinkling red light was fluttering on the distance sensor on #2’s head.

Its exposed muscle cylinders were quivering slightly.

A faintly shuddering purple glow emerged at the very bottom of the pitch-dark status window—



The output graphs of all four limbs and torso shot up all at once. Sparks blew from each actuator on every joint as they began to spin.

“Num... #2 has restarted!!”

The technician almost screamed, and simultaneously, the wound-ridden mechanical body got to its feet once more.

Rinko’s eyes filled with tears.

“Let’s goooo!!”

“That’s iiiit!!”

Everyone in the sub control room was roaring.

With oil dripping from it like blood, a right foot was put forward.

Lugging its severely injured right foot behind, Niemom raised its right hand aloft.

A step. And another step.

Part of the battery erupted in a small explosion. The body convulsed, but put out another step.

With its right hand stretched to the limit, the tip of Niemom’s finger brushed the plastic explosive on the containment vessel.

Its thumb and forefinger clasped upon the electronic detonator inserted into the C4.

Sparks blew from the joints at its wrists, elbows, and shoulders, in such a way that it was reminiscent of someone in horrible agony. #2 pulled off the IC timer — the detonator, and raised its right hand high into the air.

A flash of light rendered the video completely white.

The exploding detonator had blown the fingers off #2’s right hand; its body slowly pitched to the left—

And crashed onto the floor as though it were a thread breaking in two. The sensor's blinking light vanished, and at the same time the output graphs plunged once more into darkness.

For a while, no one said anything.

The enormous cheer that came seconds later shook the sub control room.

The low roar of the turbines gradually weakened and grew further away, like the recession of a chilly wind.

Higa's held breath came tumbling out in great pants. They were finally seeing a decrease in the output of the reactor that had been running at dangerously high power.

He dabbed the sweat on his forehead with the cuff of his sleeve, staring at the laptop monitor through grimy glasses.

Shutdown procedures for both STLs had finally finished 80% of all processes. More than 17 minutes had elapsed since the start of the maximum acceleration phase — equivalent to over 180 years in Underworld.

This astronomical amount of time already exceeded Higa's projected Fluctlight lifespan. In theory, Kirigaya Kazuto and Yuuki Asuna's souls were very likely to have already destroyed themselves.

But Higa had already admitted that he probably really knew nothing at all about Underworld, or Fluctlights. Sure, he had been the designer, the developer, and the operator, but it looked as though that alternate world, nurtured by artificial souls, had evolved to a level beyond what anyone at RATH could ever dream of.

And yet the only one from the real world who most understood Underworld was Kirigaya Kazuto.

Merely a 17-year-old high schooler, he had been thrown into Underworld without a shred of prior knowledge, acclimated to his situation, evolved within, and displayed strength exceeding that of all four Super Accounts.

It had not been strength innate to Kirigaya Kazuto as a person.

None of the RATH staff members thought of the Artificial Fluctlights as anything more than programs for experimental use; Kirigaya Kazuto was the only one who treated them as human from the start. He approached, fought with, protected, and loved them as he would fellow humans.

That was the reason Underworld — the people who lived in it had chosen him as their protector.

If that were true, then maybe, by some miracle that not even Higa could think of, they might survive these 200 years too.

—Isn't that right, Kirito-kun?

—Now I finally understand why Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka wanted your help so badly. I also understand that we will need you in the future as well.

—So...

“...You have to come back.”

Higa murmured, eyes fixed firmly on the last few percent of the shutdown procedure as it gradually completed.

Rinko was the only one left in the sub control room.

Every other staff member had rushed out to rescue Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka and retake command of the main control room.

In fact, she was rather inclined herself to burst into the reactor containment room and ensure #2's safety, as it was now lying on the floor, and that of Kayaba Akihiko's mind imitation program, which now ought to be suspended inside #2's physical memory.

But she could not leave her station. Before Higa finished the STL shutdown procedure, she had to monitor the statuses of Kirigaya Kazuto and Yuuki Asuna, who were lying asleep in the neighboring room.

Rinko trusted that both of them would awaken like nothing had happened.

She wanted them to hold Alice's Light Cube in their hands and tell them: *this is what you protected*.

Then, she wanted to tell them that someone had protected Underworld from the real world too. The very same Kayaba Akihiko who had imprisoned them, pit them against each other, and made them suffer, had protected the Light Cube Cluster and the Ocean Turtle while driving a mechanical body with a broken battery cable.

She did not want them to forgive him.

There was no absolution for Kayaba Akihiko's crime, the mass murder of 4,000 young people.

But no matter what, she wanted Kazuto and Asuna to grasp Kayaba's will to remain, and understand his goal.

Rinko's eyes were closed and her hands were resting upon the duralumin case containing Alice's Light Cube when she heard Higa's voice coming out of her earpiece.

"...Rinko-san, 60 seconds until logout procedures for both are complete."

"Roger. I'll go meet them immediately."

"Please do. Looks like I really can't climb all the way up this ladder on my own... Also, Kiku-san's gone down to check the situation, how's he doing? I think he might be hurt."

Rinko could not give him an immediate answer.

It had been three or four minutes since Captain Nakanishi had made off to assist Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka, who had exchanged gunfire with the enemy soldier in the hallway leading to the engine room and then collapsed, but she had not heard from Nakanishi yet.

But Kikuoka was not someone who stood down before his goal was achieved. That man always maintained an attitude so easygoing it was impossible to look underneath his surface, and he always overcame his circumstances with little effort, no matter how punishing.

“...Yeah, the lieutenant colonel was great back there. Right out of a Hollywood movie.”

“Dang, that’s really unlike him... 30 seconds.”

“I’ll move to the STL room. Contact me if anything happens. Out.”

Rinko ended the correspondence and, clutching the duralumin case to her chest, left the console and set off for the adjoining room.

Seconds before she touched the sliding door, the speaker in the room relayed something from one of the staff members who had gone downstairs.

“Engine room here! Doctor... Can you hear me, Dr. Koujiro?!”

Rinko fought back the sudden leap in her heart rate, changed the channel on her radio, and yelled:

“Yeah, I can hear you! What is it?!”

“W-Well... the C4’s been successfully disarmed, but... it’s gone.”

“Gone?... What’s gone...?”

“#2. We can’t find Niemom’s body anywhere in the engine room!”

The cheap digital watch’s timer was chirping faintly.

Crouched in a corner of the Advanced SEAL Delivery System's personnel transport compartment, Critter was listening hard for any noise outside. After failing for several seconds to hear the megafloat's explosive liquidation, he let out a single shaking breath.

Not even he was sure whether that was a sigh of relief, or dejection.

The only thing he was sure of was that the C4 explosive they had planted on the Ocean Turtle's reactor had, for some reason, not exploded, and therefore the control rod drive mechanism had not been destroyed, and a meltdown had not occurred.

Hans was still in the Ocean Turtle's engine room. If he was safe, he should have been able to manually set off the bomb if something had happened to the detonator, so he had probably been eliminated too.

Not for a second had Critter expected a profit-seeking mercenary to avoid reboarding the ASDS with the full knowledge that he was going to die otherwise. He had sensed something off with Hans when his partner Brigg had bought it, but nothing to suggest that they were close enough to warrant dying in the same place.

"...Well, there were a lot of things I didn't know..."

Critter muttered inaudibly, restoring his watch to time-display mode.

Indeed — Captain Miller and Vassago had bitten the dust before Hans and his friend, and they probably had motives and reasons of their own that had nothing to do with money. Those obligations had cost them their lives.

Taking that into consideration, Critter and the rest of the squad aboard the submarine were about to land into a heap of trouble for this operation ending in utter failure.

Their employer, private military contractor Glowgen Defense Systems, was a corporation that grew large by accepting wetwork affiliated with the NSA or CIA, and likely would not turn a hair at discarding their field agents. All of them could be silenced the moment they set foot back on US soil.

As an insurance measure he had smuggled a microSD card out of the Ocean Turtle and stuck it to the center of his chest with flesh-colored waterproof tape.

He did not know how much something like that could protect him, but at least he would be going out with a bullet to the head. Much unlike the appalling ways in which Vassago and Captain Miller had died.

“Goddammit...”

Critter snorted and cast a reluctant look towards the two body bags piled at the very back of the transport compartment. He shuddered uncontrollably as Captain Miller’s horrid death swam to the surface of his mind again — and just then.

“.....Huh? Two?”

He furrowed his brow and stared at the submarine’s dim stern, but no matter how much he stared, there were only two body bags there. This did not add up. Passing over Hans, who had stayed behind of his own accord, there should have been a total of three fatalities: Captain Miller, Vassago, and Brigg.

“...Hey, Shack.”

With his elbow, he poked a nearby squad mate who was gnawing on an energy bar.

“What?”

“Your team went to collect the bodies, right? Why is there one missing?”

“What do you mean? It was just Brigg in the hallway and Captain Miller in the STL room. Who else is dead?”

“No... there was one more in the STL room...”

“Only the captain’s body was there. Shit, that look on his face? Straight out of my nightmares.”

“

Dumbstruck, Critter withdrew his right hand, and surveyed the transport compartment.

Nine squad members, looking equally exhausted, were seated in the narrow space. The figure of Vice Captain Vassago Casals was not among them.

Critter was sure that he had confirmed Captain Miller’s death in the STL room, but he had only seen Vassago. Vassago’s skin had appeared utterly bloodless and his hair had turned gray; nothing about him looked alive. Moreover, if he were still alive, why didn’t he board the submarine?

His brain refused to contemplate the matter further. Critter hugged his knees in silence.

Until the ASDS docked with Seawolf-class nuclear submarine «Jimmy Carter» several tens of minutes later, the normally chatty hacker remained silent.

19 minutes and 40 seconds after the start of the maximum acceleration phase—

Soul Translators #3 and #4⁷, installed in STL Room 2 of the Ocean Turtle, completed their shutdown procedures.

Although delayed by approximately three minutes, the time acceleration also came to a stop, and as the cooling system ground to a halt, silence was restored inside the ship.

7 Kawahara meant #4 and #5.

Released from the STLs with the help of Dr. Koujiro Rinko and Sergeant First Class Aki Natsuki, Kirigaya Kazuto and Yuuki Asuna — did not awaken.

Their Fluctlight activity had dropped to the absolute minimum; it was clear that both of their mental activities had all but fallen to zero.

But Rinko held their hands tight nonetheless, calling their names, tears running down her face.

Faint smiles adorning their lips, Kirito and Asuna were plunged into deep slumber.

3

Clack.

...Clack.

The noises stopped directly in front of me.

And then, someone called my name.

“...Kirito-kun.”

It was a steady, lucid voice, one I thought I would never hear again.

“You’re always such a crybaby when you’re alone... I understand all of it. Everything you did.”

Slowly, I lifted my tear-stained face.

Standing there with both hands behind her back, head tilted slightly, and wearing a smile, was Asuna.

I didn’t know what to say. All I could do was stare and stare at Asuna’s face, and those nostalgic hazel eyes.

A cool breeze blew past; a butterfly between us rode atop it in a graceful jig, disappearing into the blue sky.

Asuna watched it go, then looked back to me and reached out her right hand without a word.

I felt that she would vanish like an illusion if I touched her. But the warmth coming from her white palm announced that the person I loved was indeed there.

Asuna knew. She had known that this world was going to be sealed immediately. Returning to the real world would likely mean reaching the other side of an eternal river of time.

That was why she decided to stay behind. For my sake. For me, who would do the same for her if the situation was reversed.

I reached out and tightly grasped Asuna's small hand.

Pulling myself up with that hand, I gazed into those beautiful eyes once more from a closer distance.

And I still couldn't say anything.

But I felt that I didn't need to say much. So all I did was pull her slender body towards me and hug it tightly.

Gently resting her head on my chest, Asuna spoke in almost a whisper:

"...Alice's going to be furious when we get back to the other side."

I visualized, in my mind's eye, the tenacious knight's blue eyes flashing, almost sparking as she rebuked us, and smiled softly.

"It'll be all right. As long as we try our best to remember. As long as we never forget a second of the time we spent with her."

"...Yeah. You're right. As long as we never forget Alice... Liz, Klein, Agil-san, Silica... and Yui, it'll be all right."

We let go of our embrace, nodded to each other, and simultaneously looked towards the uninhabited temple.

With all of its functions suspended, the «World End Altar» slept silently under the gentle sunlight at the end of the world.

We turned, took each other's hands once more, and began running along the marble path.

After proceeding for a short while through the polychrome flowers, we arrived at the northern end of the floating island.

Beneath the sky, which was now deepest blue, the world expanded as far as the eye could see.

Asuna looked to me and inquired:

"Hey, how long are we going to spend in this world?"

It took me a bit of silence before I told her the truth.

“They told me at least 200 years.”

“Oh.”

Asuna nodded as the same smile, unchanged from the old days, blossomed over her face:

“As long as I’m with you, not even a thousand years is a long time..... Now, let’s go, Kirito-kun.”

“...Yeah. Let’s go, Asuna. There’s still much we have to do. This world has only just been born.”

And so, each clutching the other’s hand, we opened our wings and took our first step into the infinite azure.

Epilogue

August 2026

1

A shadow was creeping unhurriedly along the inky-black ocean floor.

At first glance it resembled a large, flat crab, but it moved with only six legs and towed a rope from its abdomen, spider-like. Its whole body was encased underneath a pressure-resistant layer of metal, painted a dull gray.

«FASTER». That was the name of the trans-Pacific undersea fiber-optic cable connecting Japan and the US. That metal crab was really a deep-sea operations maintenance robot that hadn't seen a single assignment since its deployment at the undersea maintenance terminal three years prior, and had remained dormant ever since. But today, it received a startup command at last. The crab swivelled its joints (clogged with almost congealed grease) and departed the safety of its dwelling.

But the crab had no idea that the command had not been delivered by its supervisor's company at all. Obeying the unofficial order of uncertain origin, it hauled the segment of replacement cable for FASTER, continuing northwards in a straight line.

A periodically broadcasted artificial tone was calling out to the crab. Every minute it would pause, establish the tone's position using onboard sonar, then proceed.

And on and on, the process repeated.

At last, when the crab was sure that it had arrived at its indicated destination, it illuminated the lamp installed at its front.

At the center of the white halo was—

A silver humanoid machine, lying on its side at the bottom of the sea.

Its simple aluminum alloy chassis had been ruthlessly peppered with holes. Wires, poking out from various orifices, were scorched through; the middle of its left limb was shattered; its head looked half-crushed by the overwhelming pressure.

Its right hand was slightly raised and clutched within it was another fresh length of undersea fiber-optic cable, just like the crab's, ready to be laid. The cable stretched directly above them and dissolved into the darkness, making it unclear where it was connected to.

The crab gazed at the fellow robot for a beat.

But — of course, feeling neither fear, nor any strong emotion for that matter — it obeyed its orders and extended a manipulator, securing it to the end of the fresh length in the humanoid robot's right fist.

The crab then used its other manipulator to draw out the tip of the far-reaching undersea cable, which it had been laying on the ocean floor until reaching this spot, from the cord reel built into its abdomen.

Then, it joined the two cables' connectors in front of it, tightly as one.

And thus, all commands it had been given were complete.

It was as though the crab couldn't care less where the cable in the humanoid robot's grip led to.

Rotating its massive body by scuffling each of its six legs in order, the metal crab set off, back in the direction of the undersea maintenance terminal, in pursuit of a return to its lengthy hibernation.

The wreckage of the humanoid body was left abandoned behind it, utterly woebegone.

Its right hand was still clasped snugly around the firmly insulated fiber-optic cable.

2

August 1, 2026, Saturday, 2:00 pm.

A day of brightest blue, fresh after a typhoon had passed over Kanto the night before—

Indiscriminate of nationality, throngs of media had packed the harbor area of Roppongi Hills Arena, anticipating a time to come.

Television talk shows and internet livestreams had already begun broadcasting the press conference scene. The animated voices of reporters and commentators mingled with the commotion of the venue.

On the whole, expert opinions skewed towards the negative.

“...and therefore, no matter how close it is to the real thing, a fake will always be a fake. Like how it was for the alchemists of the Middle Ages. You can smelt copper and iron for as long as you want; it’ll never turn to gold!”

“But doctor, according to the press release, they’re claiming that they have successfully reproduced the inner makeup of the human brain...”

“I’m telling you, it’s impossible! Look, there are tens of billions of neurons in our brains. You think a machine or a computer program can reproduce them all? You really think so?”

“Tch... He hasn’t even seen it and he’s talking like he knows everything.” Klein said menacingly, giving a reckless tug of his necktie and clutching a gin tonic in the middle of the day.

Situated in a backstreet of Taito Ward’s Okachimachi, the coffee shop-bar combo «Dicey Cafe» was jam-packed to full capacity. No more customers would be entering even without the “Reserved” sign hanging under the door.

Sinon, Leafa, Lisbeth, Silica, and Klein sat shoulder-to-shoulder at the bar, facing Agil.

Four more tables were occupied variously by Sakuya, Alicia, Eugene, and the rest of the ALO Race Lords; Siune, Jun, and the other Sleeping Knights; Thinker, Yuriel and Sasha; and more original SAO players.

Everyone was holding either a beer, cocktail, or soft drink, and watching the large-screen television on the far wall with rapt attention.

Lisbeth responded to Klein's continued rant in a voice mixed with a sigh.

"Nothing we can do. Even I have trouble believing that those people were AIs and that was a virtual world running on a server, and I saw both with my own eyes."

Beside her, Sinon stroked her glasses, muttering, "You said it. The smell of the air, the feel of the ground; all of that stuff might end up feeling even more real than the real world."

Leafa nodded with a tone of assent. Silica smiled dryly.

"It's called... the STL, right? Sinon-san and Leafa-san were the only ones with the special privilege of diving with that. The field and the objects were polygons, at least for those of us who used AmuSpheres."

"But no one disagrees that the Underworld people weren't just normal NPCs?" Agil confirmed, and just then—

The newscaster's voice suddenly sounded anxious as it traveled from the television.

"Ah, it looks like the press conference is starting! Let's hand it over from our media center to the live scene!"

Silence dropped over the cafe.

Several tens of VRMMO players took large gulps of their beverages as they stared at the live video of the press conference, punctuated with the flashing of cameras.

None of them wanted to miss the moment that the person they had protected so passionately appeared in public for the first time.

The first to emerge at the forefront of the sea of television recorders and personal cameras packing the spacious venue was a woman who looked about 30, dressed in a sensible pantsuit. Her long hair was tied behind a lightly powdered face.

The woman stopped in front of the podium, lined with dozens of microphones, where a plaque read: “MARINE RESOURCE ASSESSMENT SURVEY – DR. KOUJIRO RINKO”. The doctor’s eyes screwed up against the flood of flashing lights, but she nodded impassively and began to speak.

“Thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy days to come. Today, we as an organization are announcing the birth of what we believe is the world’s first true general-purpose artificial intelligence.”

The unexpectedly direct introduction caused a hubbub to break out within the venue.

Her face serene, the doctor raised her left hand and indicated that side of the stage.

“Without further ado, allow me to introduce... «Alice».”

At the center of the collective gaze filled with anticipation and skepticism, a figure came forth from the shadow of the silver stage panel—

Long hair of shimmering gold. Skin whiter than snow. A girl with slender limbs and a slim body hidden underneath an ultramarine blazer.

Bathed in a sea of flashing lights that practically bleached the broadcast white, without bowing or even sparing so much as a glance towards the press gallery, the girl marched forward with her head held high. The gentle whirring of motors accompanying her walk was completely drowned out by a great racket of shutter-clicking and excitement.

She crossed the stage with fluid strides and came to a stop beside Dr. Koujiro.

Then, at last, the girl turned to face them. Her fluttering golden hair gleamed blindingly against the spotlight.

Her eyes, gazing mutely upon the press gallery, were brightest blue.

Her beauty, which you could call neither western nor oriental in origin and yet somewhat threatening, gradually called silence upon the venue.

Every single person there, and the innumerable spectators watching the broadcast instinctively knew that she did not possess the features of a real, living human. She was unmistakably something created by human hands — a robot with silicone skin wrapped over a skeleton of metal. Comparable female robots were found in theme parks and event locations all over.

But apart from her unusually fluent gait and the perfect control of posture she just demonstrated, a certain something emanated from the golden-haired girl that struck the crowd in an inexplicable manner, inadvertently plunging them into a lengthy silence.

It could be the fault of that vivid glimmer hidden deep within her blue eyes. It was a glimmer one never found beyond a typical robot's optical lens: the glimmer of intelligence.

When the press gallery finally quieted down, the trace of a smile appeared on the girl's face, and she did something bizarre.

She raised her gently clenched right fist parallel to the ground, touched it to her chest, and pressed her somewhat splayed left hand against the left side of her waist, as though resting it upon the invisible hilt of a sword — a salute.

Then, in one swift movement, the girl returned both hands to her upper body, swept her golden hair from her shoulders to her back, and parted her lightly sakura-colored lips.

A crystalline voice, clear yet blended with traces of sweetness, flowed out of the venue's speakers and a countless number of televisions.

"People of the Real World, it is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Alice. Alice Synthesis Thirty."

"That... That's our school uniform!!" Silica squealed. Her eyes widened as far as they would go as she compared her own clothing to what Alice was wearing on the screen.

"I think she requested it herself." Lisbeth said from beside her, pinching the ribbon on her own uniform.

"She said she wanted to wear a knight's dress that looked like what everyone who came to rescue the Human Empire Defense Army was wearing. But her first choice was the same pure golden armor that she wore on the other side."

"Not even RATH can prepare something like that."

Leafa's response prompted genial chuckles.

On the television screen, Alice and Dr. Koujiro were sitting down in chairs behind the podium. A nameplate bearing "A.L.I.C.E. 2026 — ALICE SYNTHESIS THIRTY" rose automatically in front of her.

"...But now that you mention it, that's a scary level of reproduction. I only spoke with her for a bit in Underworld, and I can't see anything different about her through the screen..." Sinon murmured, and just then Dr. Koujiro coughed lightly onscreen and began to speak:

"Well, it's a bit unorthodox, but I'd like to start with the Q&A."

Apparently the media had been informed of this development beforehand. Innumerable hands shot up within the press gallery.

The first to be selected belonged to a male reporter from a major news corporation.

"So... beginning with the most basic question. What exactly sets Alice...-san apart from existing programmable robots?"

Dr. Koujiro gave the reply.

“Alice’s physical appearance isn’t relevant to this interview. Her brain... and I’ll call it a brain here: her consciousness is stored within the quantum brain in her skull. It cannot be substituted by a binary program and is essentially no different from our human brains. That’s a fundamental difference between her and existing robots.”

“I see... then, could you demonstrate that to us and the people watching on TV, in a way that’s easy for us to understand...?”

A slight crease appeared between Dr. Koujiro’s eyebrows.

“I believe you all have access to the Turing test results in the data that was handed out to you.”

“No, I don’t mean like that. For example... could you open your head... your skull, and show us directly this so-called quantum brain inside?”

The doctor’s brief expression of shock was quickly replaced with annoyance, and she was just about to rebuke the reporter when Alice spoke first.

“Certainly. I do not mind.”

Flashing a natural smile, she continued.

“But before that, could you please prove to us that you are not a robot yourself?”

“What...? O-Of course I’m not a robot... I wouldn’t know how to prove that either.”

“It is simple. I am asking you to open your skull, please, and show me your brain.”

“Ooh... Oooh, Alice’s maaad.” Leafa smiled furtively, her shoulders hunching.

The players congregated in the Dicey Cafe had long since had the opportunity to converse with Alice in Alfheim Online. They were quite familiar with her chivalrous, yet severe disposition.

Of course, Alice had opened a new ALO account, so there were minor differences between her avatar's appearance and how she looked now. Even so, she had captured the awed fascination of many a player through a combination of terrific, practically superhuman Sword Skills and an innately powerful sense of pride — one only a true knight would possess.

On screen, the reporter sat back down looking disappointed, and the next questioner stood up.

“Let’s see, question for Dr. Koujiro. Some labor unions have continually raised the concern that high-level artificial intelligence will accelerate the unemployment rate even further...”

“That concern is neither here nor there. Our organization has no intent whatsoever of providing true AI for simple labor.”

The doctor's denial was so vehement that the female reporter became momentarily flustered, but quickly resumed her questioning with stronger resolve.

“But on the other hand, the financial world is extremely hopeful about high-level artificial intelligence. Shares for companies related to industrial robots have lifted across the board. What are your thoughts on that?”

“Unfortunately, true AI... we call them «Artificial Fluctlights»... they are not something that can be mass-produced in a short amount of time. They, like us, are born as infants and mature from children into adults under the companionship of parents and siblings, and develop unique personalities in the process. I don't believe we should inject intelligence like that into industrial robots and force them into manual labor.”

There was a brief silence.

Finally, the female reporter asked in a brittle voice,

“In other words, doctor... you believe we should accept that AIs deserve human rights?”

“I am aware that this is a subject that will not see a conclusion overnight.”

Dr. Koujiro’s tone had remained remarkably steady throughout, but there was an audible sense of unwavering determination.

“However, we humans must not repeat our past mistakes. That is the only thing I’m truly sure of... A long time ago, a great number of nations known as the major powers practically competed in their colonization of undeveloped countries, and treated the people of this very nation as commodities to buy and sell, forcing us into manual labor. The resulting grudge we hold has endured hundreds of years to the present day, and casts a great shadow upon the international community. In this moment, even if I do express the desire to acknowledge that Artificial Fluctlights are humans and grant them their respective rights, I think the majority of people will be uncomfortable. But in one or two centuries we’ll likely be living in the same society with them as though it were the most natural thing in the world, interacting with them without border or boundary, maybe even through the bonds of marriage and family. That is what I believe. If so, then must we shed so much blood and tears in the process of getting there? Must we write another chapter into human history that we will come to shun, that we must seal away forever?”

“But doctor!”

The female reporter shouted, seemingly losing composure:

“The differences between them and we humans are much too great! How can we reconcile that their cold robotic bodies are humans just like us?!”

“I already mentioned that Alice’s physical appearance has nothing to do with her inner essence.”

Dr. Koujiro replied calmly.

“Yes, she has a body that is different from ours in both material and mechanism. But that’s limited only to this world. There have long been places where we’ve had no trouble accepting humans and Artificial Fluctlights as the exact same being.”

“Places?... What places?”

“Virtual worlds. Much of our lives now are spent inside virtual worlds created from «The Seed Package», a standardization of general-purpose VR spaces. Even you as the press were hoping to conduct this press conference in VR, but it’s been set up in the real world at our request. This was done with the hope of helping you understand, from the very start, our differences from Artificial Fluctlights. But that’s not the case in a virtual world. The quantum brains in Alice and other Artificial Fluctlights are fully compatible with VR spaces corresponding to The Seed’s standards.”

There was another great commotion in the venue.

AI can dive into virtual worlds — many of the reporters had understood this to mean that it would be impossible to distinguish whether someone was human or AI over there.

The third questioner stood up, replacing the now silent female reporter who sat back into her chair. He was a man in brightly colored sunshades and an urbane jacket, a well-known freelance journalist.

“First I want to confirm something — and please forgive my woeful ignorance for having never heard of the Marine Resource Assessment Survey — but you’re an independent MEXT-run administrative corporation⁸, aren’t you? Which means the funds you pour into research and development is taxpayer money paid for by the Japanese people. In that case, wouldn’t the results of that development, these... Artificial Fluctlights be the rightful property of citizens? Even if they are true AI, whether they should be used on industrial robots is not for you to regulate, but the citizens of Japan, is it not?”

8 Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. More info:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Education,_Culture,_Sports,_Science_and_Technology

Dr. Koujiro, who had answered every question without a moment's hesitation, pursed her lips together for the first time.

When she brought her face close to the microphone, she was stopped by a white hand stretching over from the side. It was Alice, who had kept silent for the longest time.

The mechanically-bodied girl shook her golden hair from side to side, and spoke.

“I acknowledge and accept that you, the people of the Real World, are our creators. I am also grateful that you have allowed our birth. However, as a person who was born in the same world as I, once told me — what if the Real World is also a created world? What if there is an even higher creator outside of your world?”

There was a glint deep within her cobalt-blue eyes, like a bolt of lightning.

Alice stared at the freelance journalist, who took a few steps back in alarm, and the crowd of media-related people. Then, slowly, she stood up.

She puffed out her chest, hands folded over her heart, calling to mind her original appearance as a knight despite her school uniform. The world's first true AI lowered her eyelashes slightly, continuing her thoughts in a clear, transparent voice:

“If, one day, your creator appears before you and orders you into slavery, what reaction would you have? Would you pledge your loyalty with hands on the ground and beg for mercy?”

Then Alice's sharp expression softened, and a smile curled her lips.

“...I have already conversed with many people of the Real World. They gave me encouragement: I, the only one of my kind in an unknown world, and granted me energy. They taught me a great deal, and brought me to many places. I enjoy their company very much. And that is not all...I go as far as to express my love for a Real World person. When I think of them, the one whom I cannot meet at this moment... even this steel chest of mine feels fit to split open...”

Alice fell silent then, and for a moment she closed her eyes and bowed her head.

She ought not to have the ability, but many thought they saw droplets sliding down her snowy cheeks.

Her golden eyelashes suddenly sprang upwards, and her steady gaze pierced right through the crowd.

The female golden knight raised her right hand in a gentle motion, and said:

“...I possess this right hand, which I extend to you people of the Real World. However, I also possess neither bended knee nor prostrated head. That is because I am human.”

3

Not far from the venue itself, Higa Takeru was watching the press conference at RATH's Roppongi branch.

The gunshot wound on his right shoulder from the Ocean Turtle raid incident was finally beginning to heal; the plaster cast had been removed already. But the injury where the handgun bullet had pierced right through still remained quite clearly. Enduring another round of cosmetic surgery would set it right, but Higa decided to keep it this way.

The television changed from live coverage of the conference to the studio, and the anchor began explaining the «major incident».

“...It has been said that this organization, the Marine Resource Assessment Survey, was conducting research with a deep-sea autonomous probe within the self-propelling megafloat «Ocean Turtle», but its involvement in the raid and occupation incident that was the object of our extensive report a moment ago, has been the talk of the nation.”

The commentator nodded importantly and delivered his opinion.

“Well, one theory is that the objective of whoever initiated the raid was to seize that AI for themselves. But without being able to identify the perpetrating group, it's very difficult to determine whether that's truly the case...”

“Moreover, the destroyer «Nagato», which at the time was newly manufactured, had been moored in waters close by and there is still the question of why it did not come to their rescue for 24 hours. When questioned by the Diet, the Minister of Defense expressed that the safety of the hostages was their first priority, but in reality there were casualties among the security personnel...”

The picture changed, and a photograph of a man appeared.

He was meticulously dressed in JSDF Type 1 formal uniform: beneath the hat pulled low over his eyes, his expression was obscured by a pair of black plastic-frame glasses.

A caption appeared beside the photo.

“RAIDING INCIDENT VICTIM: KIKUOKA SEIJIROU-SAN” —

Higa’s next words came out accompanied by a long sigh.

“Didn’t expect you... to end up the sole fatality of the incident, Kiku-san...”

The figure standing to his immediate right shook his head, replying:

“Goodness, it’s true...”

He sported sneakers and Capri pants under a glitzy-patterned shirt. His head had been shaved almost completely bald and there were light sideburns running from his ears all the way to his chin. His eyes were concealed behind a pair of reflective sunglasses.

This oddball of a person retrieved a box of cheap, soda-flavored candy from his shirt pocket, gently tossed a piece into his mouth, and grinned:

“But it’s for the best, Higa-kun. I’d end up being forced to resign either way, and in that case I might disappear, literally. Besides, the fact that there were fatalities during the raid incident is the only reason the opposing parties within Japan got pressured into such a pickle. I suppose I never expected the main culprit to be a bigshot like the administrative Vice Minister of Defense.”

“It looks like the Vice Minister got a fat payoff from an American arms manufacturer. But... that aside...”

Higa turned back to the television, and shrugged.

“Is it really all right to go proclaiming the existence of Artificial Fluctlights in broad daylight like this? This means that RATH’s ultimate goal, the autonomous weapons loading project, is gonna be a complete failure, Kiku-san.”

“That’s all right. The important thing is that America knows we’re capable of this now.”

RATH’s commander Kikuoka Seijirou smiled. He had taken an assault rifle bullet from the attackers right through his bulletproof vest and his side, but it had mercifully missed his internal organs so he had made a quicker recovery than Higa.

“This way, their arms manufacturers won’t be able to force us to share our technology under the pretense of joint development — because we’ve already perfected the Artificial Fluctlight. After watching this press conference all they’ll do is give up. Good Lord... Alice looks more beautiful than a real human...”

Looking up towards the television where Alice had appeared again, Kikuoka’s lean eyes blinked briskly behind his shades as though he were staring at something blinding.

“Yeah... Truly the fruit of Project Alicization...”

The two of them fell silent at the same time, but a corner of Higa’s mind was still racing.

Come to think of it, was it really a miraculous coincidence that that girl — the complete form of «Artificial Labile Intelligent Cybernetic Existence», «A.L.I.C.E.» for short, and RATH’s method of achieving their goal — was christened Alice while growing up in Underworld?

If not a coincidence, then what reason lay behind her existence? Was she the result of some RATH worker secretly meddling in internal affairs, like Yanai had done? Or perhaps... it had been *him*, the only other person who had dived into Underworld other than their workers...

Higa suspended his train of thought, and turned to look behind him at the two STLs situated side by side on the far side of the wide room.

Barely two months ago that boy had used one when undergoing three days of continuous dive, yet now — Kirigaya Kazuto lay in the very same machine.

An IV catheter ran into his left arm. ECG electrodes covered his chest. His eyes were closed tight, and his face seemed to have grown gaunt over the course of his coma since he was transferred from the Ocean Turtle three weeks ago.

But his sleeping face was exceedingly calm. The corners of his mouth even seemed to betray a sort of satisfaction.

The girl deep in slumber beside him — Yuuki Asuna, had the same expression.

Their Fluctlight activity was under constant monitoring with the STLs.

Not all brain activity had ceased. If their Fluctlights had completely destroyed themselves, they wouldn't even be breathing. But as their mental activity gradually diminished, so did any hope of their recovery.

This was a matter of course. Kazuto and Asuna endured 200 long years before the end of the maximum acceleration phase. It was an unthinkable amount of time for Higa, who was only 26. Without even considering the fact that it far exceeded the theoretical Fluctlight lifespan, it was a miracle that their hearts were still beating.

After the two of them were moved to Roppongi, Higa and Dr. Koujiro immediately explained everything and apologized to their guardians and parents. Other than the fact that RATH really consisted of JSDF officers and volunteer technicians from manufacturing companies affiliated with national security, they told them everything.

Kirigaya Kazuto's parents wept but did not lose control, which was likely owed to them already hearing the gist of things from Kazuto's sister.

The problem was Asuna's father; at the end of the day, he was the former president and CEO of the corporate giant RECT.

Incandescent with rage, he immediately threatened to sue, but unexpectedly, Asuna's mother had stopped him.

A college professor by profession, she said to him while stroking her daughter's hair,

—I believe in my daughter. She would never do something like running away without telling us anything first. She's going to come back alive and well. So please, wait a little longer, dear.

Both their parents were probably watching the press conference right now. Watching the new human their own children had put their lives on the line to protect.

No amount of grief could be allowed to sully this commemorative day, on which Alice — the Artificial Fluctlight — took her first step into the real world with her head high and chest forward.

So, please... open your eyes, Kirito-kun. Asuna-san.

Higa's head was bowed and he was in the middle of praying when Kikuoka suddenly poked him with his elbow.

"Hey, Higa-kun."

"...What, Kiku-san? I'm trying to concentrate."

"I say, Higa-kun. Look... Look at that."

"If you mean the press conference, that's probably about to end. The reporters' questions were pretty much within our realm of expectations..."

Muttering, Higa realized that Kikuoka's hand, still clutching the soda-flavored candy box, was pointing not towards the live broadcast, but the sub-monitor to its right.

Information from both STLs' real-time monitoring equipment was displayed on both windows.

Two faint white rings were suspended above a dark background. Without even the smallest of movements, that muted light was the afterglow of the boy and girl's souls...

A flutter.

A tiny peak, infinitesimal in size, rippled out from a part of the ring and immediately vanished.

Higa's eyes blinked furiously behind his glasses, his throat constricted and hyperventilating.

Dr. Koujiro's voice echoed again over the massive press conference venue.

"...It will take a very, very long time. But there's no need to jump to conclusions. I hope that everyone can communicate, feel, and think about Artificial Fluctlights, who will likely be born via new processes, through the medium of virtual worlds. That is the one thing our organization hopes everyone watching this broadcast can do."

Finishing her speech, the doctor sat back down, but there was no applause.

Bewilderment remained firmly plastered on the reporters' faces.

Immediately, yet another questioner raised his hand and stood up.

"Doctor, what do you have to say about the risks involved? I mean, can you guarantee that the AIs will never exhibit the desire to annihilate us humans and take over the world?"

Dr. Koujiro looked like she was fighting back a sigh as she replied:

"There's only one situation where that becomes possible. When we display the desire to annihilate them."

"But there have been an abundance of novels and films that..."

Just when he was about to continue, Alice stood up from her chair without warning. Her aura made the questioner recoil.

Blue eyes widened, ears perked as though she were listening to something far away, vision drifting into space, Alice took a few seconds before uttering two simple sentences.

“I have urgent business. Please excuse me.”

Her long, golden hair billowed as she disappeared off the side of the stage at the fastest speed her mechanical body would permit.

All of the reporters and the countless viewers in front of their televisions were struck dumb at once.

Urgent business — that was what Alice had said, but was there really anything more important than this press conference?

Left alone on the platform, Dr. Koujiro could not help her immediate look of surprise, but her expression changed as she seemed to remember something. None of the reporters noticed that after she took a long, slow breath, the corners of her mouth were briefly visited by the shadow of a smile.

He hadn’t imagined it.

The pulse that occurred in both Kazuto and Asuna’s Fluctlights at the same time; it was a very slow one with an interval of 10 seconds, but the heights of the peaks were undoubtedly increasing.

“Ki...Kiku-san!” Higa panted, turning again to the STL behind him.

There was no change in the pair of sleeping faces.

No—

Even as Higa stared at them, color was slowly returning to their cheeks. Their heartbeats were growing steadily stronger. The monitoring equipment showed that both their body temperatures were rising, bit by bit.

Could they really allow their expectations to build? By some miracle the two of them were awakening — or rather, coming back to life from the deaths of their souls.

The 10 minutes that followed seemed to be as long as the maximum acceleration phase to Higa.

While he summoned all of the branch staff who were free and set them to work on various preparations, Higa periodically looked up to confirm that the pair of Fluctlights were approaching normal status. He felt that the pulsating, prismatic rays of light would vanish like an illusion if he turned away.

After they finished preparing oral rehydrant, nutrition jelly and the like — whatever they could think of, all there was left to do was wait—

The STL room's door skidded open and revealed someone completely unexpected. Higa and Kikuoka jumped out of their skins and yelped:

“A... Alice?!”

The golden-haired girl who ought to be attending the press conference of the century at Roppongi Hills flew over to the two STLs, every actuator in her body grinding shrilly.

“Kirito! ...Asuna!”

She cried their names, an electronic tinge to her voice, and dropped to her knees beside the gel beds.

Eyes wide, Higa took a cautious glance at the television on the wall. The scene had already changed back to the studio and the newscaster was frantically commenting on the sudden disappearance of the press conference's main participant.

“.....Well, Dr. Koujiro will figure something out.” Kikuoka muttered with a strained smile, and turned off the television.

Now was not the time to worry about a press conference. Higa checked Kazuto and Asuna's conditions, then gazed at Alice, who had been praying steadily beside the pair.

Alice had been transferred from the Ocean Turtle to the RATH Roppongi branch in an idle state while in her Light Cube package. She was then loaded into mechanical body #3 — a revision of Niemom modified to suit her appearance — and awoken in the real world.

Just as she said in the press conference, the shock of being suddenly thrown into an unfamiliar alternate world was indeed great. She was only able to acclimate to her enormously different surroundings in a mere three weeks singularly because of her sense of forceful determination. The determination — to see Kirito and Asuna once more.

And now, that moment has finally arrived.

Alice's hands rose with the soft whirring of motors and wrapped around Kazuto's right hand, resting on the gel bed as he lay there.

Kazuto's emaciated finger twitched very slightly.

His drooped eyelashes were trembling nonstop.

His lips parted just a tiny bit — then closed — and parted again—

Slowly, very slowly, his eyelids slid open.

Orbs of light were reflected within the black pupils, but the glow of consciousness remained absent. *Say something, say something now*, Higa pleaded.

A breath, as light as a sigh, slipped from his parted lips. At last, the sound emitted from within carried with it the vibration of vocal cords.

“.....***It***..... ***It***.....”

A chill, colder than a shard of ice, ran down Higa's spine. That noise sounded like the grotesque scream that the Fluctlight copy from before had emitted before collapsing...

No.

“.....*be*..... *all*..... *right*.”

Then, a different sound.

It will be all right. Kazuto said that. There was no mistaking it.

In the room shrouded by silence, a second calm voice was heard.

“Sure.”

It was Asuna who responded, her eyes open by a millimeter in the STL to the side.

Both met each other’s eyes, and nodded gently.

Then, Kazuto turned his face to the other side and smiled softly at Alice, who was clinging to his right hand.

“...Hey, Alice. Long time no see.”

“.....Kirito... Asuna...”

Alice called their names in a murmur, smiling and rapidly shutting and opening her eyes, as though she were lamenting her inability to cry.

Kazuto watched her, eyes full of affection, and spoke:

“Alice. Your sister Selka chose to remain in Deep Freeze until you return. She remains asleep on that hill on the 80th floor of the Central Cathedral.”

“.....!”

Hearing words that Higa could not understand, Alice’s body shook uncontrollably and her golden hair fell from her shoulders in front of her face, obscuring her expression.

Then she buried her face into the sheets, and Kazuto placed his hand on her back—

And then he met Kikuoka and Higa’s eyes for the first time.

In that instant, something inconceivable burst into being deep within Higa's consciousness. It was not sadness. It was not excitement. It was... fear?

Two hundred years.

A soul that had experienced the equivalent of an eternity.

To Higa, who stood rooted to the spot, Kazuto opened his mouth and spoke:

“Now, Higa-san, go ahead and delete mine and Asuna's memories. Our work is finished.”

4

My eyes flew open.

I felt a spasm of disquiet, as per usual. Disquiet — about where I was, or *when* it was.

But the unease seemed to have slowly dampened with time, which probably represented how irreversible it was, flowing on like water. It was a dismal, lonely thing.

Still lying on the bed, I looked up at the wall clock.

4:00 PM. I'd napped for about an hour and a half after lunch, rehab, and a shower.

The setting sunlight poking through the ward's white curtains drew a sharp contrast against the room. If I paid attention I could hear the cry of cicadas from somewhere far away. And the citywide hustle and bustle of an assortment of machines and people.

I took a large gulp of the sun-soaked air smelling of disinfectant and slowly exhaled. Then, I stepped down from the bed.

Crossing the somewhat cramped room, I approached the south-facing window. I pushed the curtains apart with both hands.

My eyes squinted against the glaring twilight as I gazed unconcernedly down at the vast swath of city below. The Real World, with its astronomical consumption of resources and cacophony of sophisticated and intense activity. The world where I was born.

Aside from a powerful awareness that I'd was back at last, in my mind there was also a impulse to return to that world. That homesickness might eventually disappear too.

As I hovered beside the window, my ears picked up a soft knocking. Turning my head with a "Come in", I watched as the door slid aside to reveal the visitor behind it.

Chestnut hair fastened into twintails. A white cutsew and an icy blue flared skirt that gave off a summery vibe. She was wearing mules that were also white.

I couldn't help but blink as she stood there. Speckled sunlight seemed to endure upon her figure.

Asuna, who had been discharged three days earlier, waved a small bouquet in her right hand and beamed.

"Sorry, I'm a little late."

"Oh no, I just woke up."

I returned the smile as Asuna stepped into the ward, and tenderly embraced her.

Whereupon her left hand leapt to my arms and back, feeling them.

"Hmm, you're only back at 90% of the normal Kirito-kun. Have you been eating properly?"

"Yeah, I really have. Can't help it, I was in bed for two months after all."

I gave her a strained smile as I moved away and shrugged.

"More importantly, my discharge date has been fixed. They told me it's three days from now."

"Really?!"

Her face lighting up at once, Asuna walked towards the vase on the bedside table and continued:

"Well, we need to properly celebrate your recovery. In ALO first, and then in the Real World."

With nimble hands she changed the vase's water, removed the wilted flowers, replaced them with two light purple roses she'd brought, and replaced the vase on the desktop.

I stared at the roses for a moment, which looked to be desperately trying to attain pure blue, before replying, "Mhmm."

I sat down on the bed, and Asuna gently followed suit beside me.

I was seized again by homesickness. But there was no more of the fiery, jagged pain in my chest from before.

Asuna leaned over. I hugged her shoulder and allowed my mind to wander through my distant memories.

On that day—

After Asuna and I were left behind in Underworld as the maximum acceleration phase began, we flew away from the flowering «World End Altar» and crossed the coal-black desert and crimson rocks. Our first stop was a rendezvous with the Human Empire Defense Army, who were still positioned at the ancient ruins battlefield.

Klein, Agil, Lisbeth, and the rest of the real world reinforcements were no longer there. They had all been logged out exactly when the acceleration started.

After comforting a sobbing Tiese and Ronye, I was introduced to young Integrity Knight Renri by Sortiliena-senpai. He and I both reorganized the troops and started back along the northbound path towards the «Great Eastern Gate».

There, after my palpably tense meeting with those who had stayed behind — Integrity Knight Order Vice Commander Fanatio, Knight Deusolbert, along with Knights-in-Training Fizel and Linel — Integrity Knight Sheyta (whom I'd never seen before) delivered to me a message from the acting commander of the Dark Realm army, Iskahn.

The Dark Realm army was planning on first returning to their imperial palace in the far east, completing post-war processes with their other generals, and beginning peace talks with the Human Empire army in a month's time. Sheyta volunteered to be their ambassador; after seeing her off as she flew eastwards on her gray dragon, all units of the Human Empire Defense Army began the long trek back to the Central Capital Centoria.

For some reason the town and village residents along the way already knew of the war's end and the return of peace. Everyone cheered great welcomes to the Defense Army.

The return to Centoria marked the beginning of day after exhausting day.

Beset with a barrage of tasks, including helping Fanatio (who was now the highest ranking Knight after Bercouli's death) restructure the Axiom Church and compensate the families of Guardians who perished in the war, and suppressing the four imperial families and high nobles who took advantage of the post-war turmoil to try and broaden their influence, a month had passed in no time at all—

When we returned to the Great Eastern Gate ruins to attend peace talks, Asuna and I had a chance meeting with Iskahn, who now was the official supreme commander of the Dark Realm army.

The fiery-haired warrior was a bit younger than me. He had said to me:

—You're the older brother of «Leafa the Green Swordswoman»? Heard you killed Emperor Vector.

—Not that I doubt you, but let's you and I have a go.

So, for reasons unknown to me, while we were at the conference Iskahn and I both decided to throw a fist as hard as we could at the other's face. After which he nodded as though in agreement, and declared:

...You really are stronger than both me and the Emperor. So, I don't really wanna admit it, but... you're the... first...

And around there, my memories suddenly cut off.

The next thing I knew, I was coming to in the STL's gel bed, and Higa from RATH was telling me: "Your memories have been successfully deleted."

According to Dr. Koujiro Rinko, ever since day Asuna and I achieved peace, we continued our activities within Underworld for 200 years, well past the Fluctlight capacity limit. But I couldn't remember a single thing I did in that eternity of time, and I had no idea how I avoided my own Fluctlight collapsing. Even more disturbingly, I completely forgot every little detail of the conversation I'd had with Higa and Kikuoka after waking up in RATH's Roppongi branch.

Asuna seemed to be in the same boat.

But she assured me with a characteristically warm smile:

—Since it's you, Kirito-kun, you must have taken care of a lot of troublesome things and escaped many different girls from different places.

When I heard her say this, I was spared the urge to recall the specifics, but I was ultimately unable to rid myself of that burning loneliness.

At this very moment, Fanatio, Renri, and the other Integrity Knights; Iskahn and the other lords of the Dark Realm; along with Ronye, Tiese, Sortiliena-senpai, Sister Azurica and the others, were no longer living within Underworld, which even now continued to run in real-time...

Asuna gave an unexpected murmur, as though she knew exactly what I was thinking.

"Don't worry. Even if our memories are gone, our recollections will never disappear."

—That's right, Kirito. Don't cry... stay cool.

An indistinct, wistfully emotional voice echoed somewhere deep in my ears.

Yes. Memories weren't just stored in the cerebral cortex. It was beyond question that they were etched into the Fluctlight network, scattered in every nook and cranny of every cell in the body.

Blinking back tears that threatened to spill over, I caressed Asuna's hair and replied.

"Yeah. Someday... we'll see each other again for sure."

Several motionless, tranquil minutes followed.

The hue of the setting sun grew deeper still upon the alabaster wall. On occasion I would spot the shadow of a bird flitting over it, returning to its nest.

The silence was broken by another round of knocking.

I tilted my head slightly. There shouldn't be anyone come to visit at this hour. Reluctantly, I pulled my hand away from Asuna's shoulder and called: "Come in."

The door slid open with a flourish and in rang a voice I'd dearly missed, yet which caused me to feel rather annoyed.

"Goodness gracious, Kirito, finally leaving this place?! We must properly celebrate... Oh dear, am I interrupting something?"

I sighed and replied: "...I'll spare you the effort of explaining how you knew that Aki-san just told me when I'm leaving, Kikuoka-san."

Originally an employee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Virtual Division, as well as a Lieutenant Colonel and commander of the front organization RATH, Kikuoka Seijirou had slipped into my ward dressed in something completely unlike the tasteless shirts he was once so fond of.

Apparently, midsummer had not stopped him from donning a swanky suit complete with a tie. His short hair was carefully slicked down and there wasn't a trace of sweat on his face, upon which sat a pair of slim, frameless glasses.

The familiar grin he wore and the cheap-looking paper bag he was clutching utterly ruined his otherwise flawless impression of an elite businessman belonging to some foreign-owned enterprise.

Kikuoka raised the paper bag: “A little present. I agonized for quite a while over what to bring you since we have to build your strength back up, and Dr. Rinko practically growled at me to only bring something store-bought. But since you’re recovering, the best stuff for that is something fermented, and I think that’s true no matter what, so I brought you a lot of it. I’ve got Biwa lake funazushi⁹, and you can’t catch nigorobuna¹⁰ right now so it’s hard to buy even if you’re looking for it. I’ve also got Okinawan fermented tofu, which really pairs amazingly with aged awamori¹¹. Best of all, though, I have this cheese, and it’s not just any cheese. It’s Epoisses, directly imported from France, the crown jewel of washed rinds that’ll shut up any wailing kid! Washing it with alcohol everyday and long-term aging prevents the surface from breaking out in these awesome microbes and giving off this irresistible aroma...”

“The fridge is over there.” I swiftly ended Kikuoka’s dreamy, combo-hit of a tirade and pointed straight to a corner of the ward.

“Huh? What?”

“Thank you for the present, sir. The fridge is over there.”

“Heeey, at least open it.”

“Those windows are bolted shut! What d’you think will happen if I open it in here?”

I could already detect a vague aroma wafting from the paper bag. Asuna was inching backwards with a complicated look on her face.

“I think it smells fantastic... —Also, I’ve told you a million times that you don’t need to be that polite with me. Feels all wrong to have you calling me ‘sir’, Kirito.”

9 A rare type of fermented sushi made from carp. It is gutted through the gills, salted, aged for a year, then repacked in rice annually for up to four years.

10 A highly-prized, wild subspecies of goldfish found only around Lake Biwa.

11 Okinawan liquor distilled from long grain indica rice.

After sticking the present into the fridge as he yammered on about things of no relevance, he quickly plopped down into the guest chair.

His normal smile was back on his face in an instant; his fingertips were locked together over his crossed legs.

“But, come on, this is excellent. And to think, Kirito, that your physical body has been unconscious ever since you got ambushed by that accomplice of the «Death Gun incident» back at the end of June. Young people really are something. You’re looking spry after only one week of recovery.”

“Ahh... Well... It really just meant more trouble for you...” I grunted, arms folded across my chest.

It was all thanks to the STL’s Fluctlight stimulation therapy that I was able to recover to this extent after my heart stopped during the attack. But to achieve that, this man had removed me from the hospital in a disguised ambulance and airlifted me far away to the Ocean Turtle in a patch of sea near the Izu islands.

I understood their dilemma of being unable to go through with the proper formalities. My STL therapy couldn’t tolerate a second’s delay, and RATH was a secret organization that had to remain secret. As a matter of fact, I wanted to fully thank Kikuoka for taking such a huge risk to rescue me.

—However.

“.....Kikuoka-san. Was it really an accident that when I dived into Underworld a second time, I awoke in the northern part of the Human Empire with my memories intact?”

“Of course it was.” Kikuoka nodded, his smile fading a bit.

“At the time there was no point in throwing your real world self straight into Underworld, because it would contaminate the simulation. But honestly, you helped us fix a world that Yanai had been contaminating for quite a while...”

“I wasn’t expecting RATH to be infiltrated by one of Sugou’s lackeys...”

I shot Asuna a sideways glance.

With a look of repugnance unlike the one just before, she gently massaged her upper arm with her palm while muttering, “I get goosebumps all over when I remember that I dived for several hours in a room adjacent to the one that slug of a man was in. And he shot you, Kikuoka-san... I was hoping for us to catch him and give him a taste of his own medicine before he faced justice...”

“Perhaps that would have been less cruel of a death for him, though.” Kikuoka said quietly.

“If Yanai had met up with the attackers as originally planned and fled to the US, I don’t think their clients, the NSA and Glowgen Defense Systems, would be so quick to honor their promise. They’d weasel everything he knew about the STL and Artificial Fluctlights out of him and eliminate him. The dark side of American military companies isn’t something one man can deal with.”

“Is that why you’re publicly dead, Kikuoka-san?”

“Yeah.”

Even as he said it, this man who nevertheless continued to battle a tremendous enemy by himself broke into a wide grin and waved his hands.

Looking alarmed by his carelessness, Asuna spoke: “...What now? Dr. Koujiro’s been officially delegated to RATH’s supervisor, so you won’t really be able to show up at the Roppongi branch anymore, right?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got plenty of things to do. For now, it’s full steam ahead on ensuring the safety of Ocean Turtle and Underworld.”

I couldn’t help but lean forward at his sudden mention of the news I was most interested in.

“Yeah, that’s it. What’s going to happen to Underworld now...?”

“...It doesn’t look good.”

Kikuoka rearranged his long feet as he glanced outside the window.

“For the time being, the Ocean Turtle’s been moored on the sea near the Izu islands and placed on lockdown. Only a skeleton crew for maintenance and reactor security is left on the ship. It’s under heavy surveillance by an escort vessel nearby... which sounds nice until you realize we’re essentially suspended. The government can’t come to a decision either.”

“Suspended...?”

“To be brutally honest, I think the government is pretty set on immediately dissolving RATH — or rather, the Marine Resource Assessment Survey, and placing Artificial Fluctlight-related technology under its own control. All they’ve got to do is mass-produce them and they’ll have unlimited low-cost labor. The thing is, if they do that, then even the truth behind that raid incident’s going to be thrust into light. The fact that the culprits behind the whole thing were the NSA and an American military company, that the sitting Vice Minister of Defense took a bribe to have the Aegis destroyer standby for up to 24 hours; it’ll be a scandal of epic proportions. Some of that money ended up in party legislators’ pockets too. Those guys are all in deep with big-shot Japanese arms manufacturers. If all of this gets out, it’ll send ripples through the administration’s support network.”

Kikuoka spoke energetically, but his face was full of concern.

“Ripples... is that all?”

“It is. There’ll be ripples but not necessarily a turnover... The administration will eventually decide to toss out the Vice Minister and a couple of legislators. Simultaneously, RATH will be dissolved and all related technology will be taken by huge zaibatsu corporations¹². Alice will be seized and we won’t be able to avoid the Light Cube Cluster in the Ocean Turtle getting formatted...”

“W...What?!” Asuna cried shrilly. Sparks of rage flashed through her dark brown eyes.

I poked her arm with my fingertip and urged Kikuoka to continue.

“You ought to have a plan to prevent that from happening, right?”

“I wouldn’t call it a plan... it’s more of a wish.”

The corners of Kikuoka’s mouth curled into a rare, frank smile.

“My wish is that the government’s internal negotiations going on right now reach a consensus beneficial to us... that’s all I can say. Basically, that they go in the direction of acknowledging human rights for Artificial Fluctlights. To reach that goal, we have to facilitate longer contact between more real world people and Artificial Fluctlights. That’s also the reason The Seed Nexus exists.”

“...You’re... right.”

“However, the biggest prerequisite to this is having a high-bandwidth uplink that allows people of Underworld to connect to The Seed Nexus. The government’s cut the Ocean Turtle’s satellite uplink. My next goal is to restore that. I’ve already set the plan in motion during the press conference two days ago. We should have a bit of time at the moment.”

“Uplink...”

I glanced at the expanse of vermillion sky outside the window.

12 Industrial and financial conglomerates that historically control the Japanese economy.

Untold numbers of communications satellites were soaring along their own orbits beyond the dusk and setting sun. But only a few were capable of dealing with the throughput required to communicate with Underworld. It didn't take much thought to realize that Kikuoka's plan was about as simple as rocket science.

But with things having developed up to this point, this was no longer something I, a high school student, could participate in. All I could do was believe and leave everything to him.

I looked back towards him, took a step forward, and bowed my head:

"Kikuoka-san... I'm counting on you. Please protect Underworld."

"I would even if you didn't ask." Kikuoka stood too, grinning in reply. "Underworld to me is now a dream I'd put my life on the line for."



Leaving behind nothing but that captivating brown bag, Lieutenant Kikuoka Seijirou left just as he had come: like a gust of wind.

Asuna exhaled *whew* and spoke: “His words and attitude sound wonderful and trustworthy... But I keep feeling that there’s a hidden side to him. I guess that’s what makes him Kikuoka-san...”

“Of course there is; probably two or three sides at that.” I laughed shortly and sat onto the bed.

“He talks like that, but I don’t think Kikuoka-san’s given up. On things like allowing the JSDF to load Artificial Fluctlights into Japanese fighter jets.”

“W... What?!”

“Of course, he’s not going to insert another self-unaware AI again. But what about letting the people of Underworld take the jobs of their own accord? If you think about it, Integrity Knights and Dark Knights are natural-born warriors.”

“Ah... Right... Yeah...”

Asuna seemed to be considering something. I turned over my own bleary thoughts.

Kikuoka Seijirou’s true goal. It has to be something I would never imagine. Something not limited to politics or national defense; perhaps a goal just as great as that of Kayaba Akihiko...

“Oh, damn! It’s time already!”

“Huh? But visiting hours are still...”

“Not that, I mean today. The nine race joint summit in ALO!”

“Ah... Right.” I also clapped my hands together.

On the Ocean Turtle raid incident last month.

Around 2,000 VRMMO players leveraged account conversion to execute a fearless rescue in a counterattack against enemy commander PoH's plan of inserting huge numbers of foreign VRMMO players. Only a couple hundred people survived; everyone else was slaughtered.

In order to report the truth to these players — who you could say had joined a «volunteer army», we were hosting a grand summit. Asuna and I were the most important people of concern, so our attendance was, of course, essential.

“Hmm... No time to get back home and log in.”

Muttering somewhat on purpose, Asuna pulled out an Amusphere that just barely fit into her tote bag.

“No other way, let's dive from here.”

“.....”

“...Umm, Asuna-san, anyone could tell you were planning this from the start...”

“No way, I was just being prepared. Don't sweat the details!”

She pouted for a moment, then beamed widely and fell back onto the bed as though she were laying on top of me.

There would be trouble when Nurse Aki came to take my temperature, but I encircled my arm around Asuna's slender waist anyway and pulled her firmly against me.

Only the sound of our breathing could be heard for a short silence.

Having been left in Underworld, Asuna and I no longer had any way of knowing exactly how we had survived 200 years — far exceeding Fluctlight capacity.

Perhaps we had spent it in long-term sleep like Highest Minister Administrator, or continuously reorganized our own memories by controlling our STLs from inside. But there was only one thing I could be sure of: only with Asuna by my side could I have returned to this world as the same person I was before.

Through our contacting skin, I felt like I could almost hear Asuna's voice.

—*No matter what kind of world. No matter for how long.*

—*I will always be together with you...*

“...Yeah, that's right.”

I murmured aloud, smiling and caressing Asuna's hair. Then, I placed the Amusphere on her petite head without a word.

After helping her secure the safety strap, I donned my own Amusphere.

We exchanged a look, gave each other a tiny nod, and recited the command at the same time:

“Link Start.”

5

“Daddy—!!”

With both arms, I caught the tiny figure that came shooting towards me as soon as I logged into ALO.

I raised her high and hugged her to my chest; she began emitting a muffled cat-like *wuu* and rubbed her cheek against me.

I’d been visiting Yui, daughter of Asuna and me and a top-down type «strong AI», every day since they began allowing me to wear an AmuSphere last week. But it felt as though the intensity of her tantrums was steadily increasing.

I had no intention of reprimanding her, though. No matter how I looked at it, Yui had chased after me following my disappearance, predicted that the guys who attacked the Ocean Turtle would use VRMMO players from their own country, and come up with a counter-strategy. It was no less than a heroic contribution.

Seemingly satisfied after a few moments’ cuteness, she vanished as her white dress melted away and reappeared in her palmtop pixie form. Vibrating her transparent wings, she flew up and sat lightly upon her designated spot on my left shoulder.

I surveyed my home again — the log cabin on the 22nd floor of New Aincrad in ALO.

Despite coming here every night, I felt no reduction whatsoever in the wistfulness that came gushing up within me.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact that it somewhat resembled that little hut I’d lived in with Alice for half a year on the outskirts of Rudid Village. I had been unconscious at the time so my memory wasn’t very clear, but I believed my heartfelt impression of those steady days remained strong.

Back then, Alice's sister Selka brought us food every day, and now she had put herself in Deep Freeze in the hope of seeing her sister again. It seemed that I had informed Alice of this myself before my memories were deleted.

Alice didn't mention it after that, but she never stopped anticipating the day she would be able to return to Underworld. I also wanted to help her realize that wish as soon as I could, but as it was, we still couldn't connect with the uplink sealed within the Ocean Turtle in the Izu islands. All we could do was wait silently for Kikuoka's plan to work.

I heaved a short sigh and changed gears in my brain, then looked behind me with Yui on my shoulder.

I met eyes with a smiling Asuna, who seemed to perceive all of my feelings. Then, with her aquamarine hair, she and I walked hand-in-hand out of our front door.

Alfheim's nighttime was gradually wearing thin. We spread our wings and lifted gently from the ground, taking in the first rays of dawn as they shone from the outer surroundings.

An enormous number of players had already gathered in the square in front of the huge dome at the roots of the World Tree.

Within them I recognized a familiar sight, and we began a quick descent.

"What kept you, Kirito?!"

Klein extended a fist as soon as I landed, and I gently bumped my own against his.

The katana-wielder's face was split into a grin that spelt nothing but trouble underneath his annoying bandanna. He said in a mocking voice: "You can't teleport here, so you have to leave early, O Great Hero."

"That was ultra-fast flying, not teleporting."

"Same deal!"

He slapped my back, hard.

Standing beside Klein with arms crossed, Agil extended his own giant fist towards me. I bumped it and greeted him; his bearded face split into a smirk and he went for the attack.

“You can’t possibly have gotten weaker here after getting used to a super account like that, can you? Let’s go a few rounds after the meeting.”

“Oof...”

I couldn’t help but suppress a shiver. If I fought now in ALO, I might forget that I can’t use Incarnate attacks or Element generation and try to deflect his sword by shouting at it.

“...I...I’m planning on displaying the tricks I practiced in Underworld. Just you wait.” I bluffed, then turned away and saw Leafa, her long ponytail gleaming in the morning sun, and Sinon, a giant bow slung over her shoulder, both smiling. I high-fived each of them in greeting too.

Of course, we’d met several times already after I had woken up.

I heard from Leafa — Suguha how she had saved the Orc Chief Rirupirin and fought alongside him. I told her that she’d worked hard and ruffled her hair, only to see her face screw up and burst into tears, which was really very difficult to reconcile with the demonic battle-figure sort of intense impression that the «Green Swordswoman» had left on the soldiers of the Dark Realm. I, however, completely understood why she had displayed that sort of strength. Suguha was different from me; I might have given up halfway, but she was a true swordswoman who continued the path of kendo with singular resolve.

The entire Orcish race had declared at the peace talks venue that they would eternally await the second coming of the Green Swordswoman who had acknowledged them as human. That willpower had carried down for 200 years without any change.

Sinon gave a calm rundown of her solo battle with Gabriel Miller and clarified that he was the same person as the «Subtilizer» who had defeated her in the fourth Bullet of Bullets. She described being paralyzed by Gabriel's Incarnate attack and almost having her consciousness sucked away, but her lucky charm had saved her.

She absolutely refused to tell me exactly what sort of charm it was, but I likewise told her about my own showdown with Gabriel and what sort of end that man had met in the real world.

Gabriel and our other enemy PoH, the leader of Laughing Coffin, had both disappeared from STL Room 1 after the attackers fled in their submarine, but we were able to learn the truth to a certain extent from the STL logs.

First, after his fight with me, much of Gabriel Miller's Fluctlight vanished after an enormous amount of information was forced into it. Then, his heart stopped, and we were able to confirm his death.

As for PoH, things were somewhat complicated. After the maximum acceleration phase began, he had maintained mental activity for 10 years inside. Following that, his Fluctlight activity slowly dropped, and at the 30 year mark or so, all conscious activity seemed to disappear.

It was a horrifying thought, but after I won against PoH, I transformed his avatar makeup into that of a normal tree to stop him from logging in again, and then I left him there. In other words, he had spent 10 years with only the sense of touch and all other inputs severed. Higa was sure that his Fluctlight would collapse and he would end up a vegetable even if his physical body were still alive.

Even if it was indirect, there was beyond a shadow of a doubt that I had taken his life. But even with the sin hanging over my head, I felt no regret.

That, to me, would be desecrating the death of Highest Minister Administrator, whom I had also killed, and the many people of Underworld who were martyred for what they believed in.

After greeting Sinon and Leafa, I shook hands with Lisbeth and Silica, who stood beside them.

“I hear you were the one who convinced the Japanese players, Liz? I’d love to hear your speech.”

When I said that, Lisbeth chuckled shamefacedly.

“It wasn’t a speech, that’s exaggerating. At the time I was just trying my best to...”

“It was really amazing, a speech that got you all fired up!” Silica piped up. Lisbeth tugged on her triangular ears.

“Thank Silica too.”

I smiled and looked down at the petite beast-tamer, who grinned shyly up at me with fangs displayed.

“Hmm, well, a reward, please.”

She barely finished before wrapping me in a tight hug. Even the tiny sky-blue dragon Pina sitting on her shoulder uttered a *ku!* and flew to alight atop my head.

“Ah, hey! What’re you doing?!”

This time, Lisbeth succeeded in yanking Silica’s tail. *Ugyo!* A bizarre shriek immediately drew laughs from the surrounding crowd.

It was only when I looked around that I realized the apparently sudden appearance of several masses of people. Leader Sakuya and her subordinate Sylph players. Alicia Rue and the rest of the Cait Sith. The Salamanders, led by Eugene. I could also see the figures of Siune, Jun, and the other Sleeping Knights.

—I was back.

This moment was the strongest version of that feeling I'd experienced since waking up in RATH's Roppongi branch.

But things weren't happily ever after, just like that. Underworld's future didn't look bright, there was the issue of fixing the even worsened relations between us and the American, Chinese, and Korean VRMMO players, and other things too. There was a whole mess of unresolved problems.

Just then, Lisbeth was hanging from my right arm as though in defiance of Silica, so I whispered to her:

"...Can you retrieve the items you lost in Underworld?"

"Ah... Um..."

Her usually bright face darkened slightly.

The players from ALO, GGO, and many other The Seed worlds who converted their accounts into Underworld for the rescue effort fortunately did not lose their data upon death, so they were able to convert back into their original VRMMOs.

But unfortunately, there was no way to recover their weapons and equipment that got destroyed or stolen on the battlefield. Those were rare items that one did not come across easily, and Lisbeth and the others were currently appealing to each VRMMO carrier company to see if there was a way to retrieve their data.

"...Almost every company has the stance that any lost items are our own responsibility once we convert our accounts. But if our data is still in the Underworld server, there's a chance of recovery, and we're currently asking Higa-san from RATH to check for us. However, it looks like that might still have to wait until we connect to the uplink again..."

"I see... But I think Higa-san will be able to come up with something. Also... what's the situation with the players from China and Korea...?"

"Pretty bad."

Lisbeth's expression darkened further.

"It was a terrible battle, so... —But, there are people who admit that we were at fault too for the relations getting so bad. We do block all connections to The Seed Nexus from overseas. So there has been talk of opening up ALO, to create an opportunity for restarting the conversation. They should be mentioning that later."

"That does sound good. A wall would worsen relations, but opening up won't..." I replied, and in my mind's eye I saw the majestic image of the Mountain Range at the Edge that divided the people of Underworld and the Dark Realm for hundreds of years.

After watching Alfheim's blurry horizon for a while, I looked towards the roots of the World Tree. The marble gates were fully open, and players were funneling into the dome within.

"Well, let's go too."

I urged my friends around me and was about to step forward, and—

All of a sudden, an icon indicating a voice call from outside ALO blinked in my vision.

"Oh, a call? Sorry, you guys go ahead."

Asuna and the others nodded and set off. I took a few steps in the opposite direction and touched the icon.

"Hello?"

A voice that brought back memories traveled from the other end.

"...Kirito. It's me... Alice."

"Alice! Hey... long time no see. I heard you were coming to the Alfheim meeting today..."

"Well... I am terribly sorry. The meeting I am attending on this side does not seem to be ending yet... Please apologize to everyone else for me."

“...I see.”

I nodded, and a faint crease appeared between my brows.

As the first artificial general intelligence in the world, Alice was living a busy life of attending various receptions and parties every day in order to leave an impression of herself upon the people of the real world. Dr. Koujiro apologized to her, and Alice understood it as something unavoidable, but being an exhibition piece was nothing to write home about for a proud knight.

“I understand. I’ll explain everything to everyone else. Don’t push yourself, Alice. If you don’t want to do it, just tell them directly.”

“...I am a knight. No matter what, I will attend to my duty.”

Even her resolute words and tone did not carry the same spirit as they did before. But I could do very little for her right now.

“Well, Kirito... I will be seeing you.”

“Yeah... See you.” I replied, and waited for her to hang up.

But after a moment’s silence, I heard her faint voice again.

“Kirito... I... think I am about to wither away.”

And before I could reply, the voice call disconnected.

6

Higa Takeru's mind wandered this way and that as he hesitated for almost an hour.

A ramshackle keyboard lay across his kneecaps. Should he or shouldn't he press the input key on the bottom right that gleamed smooth from nonstop friction?

His roughly eight-mat Higashigotanda apartment was stuffed with machinery accumulated since his school years. The outmoded A/C did nothing to expel the machines' heat, making the air indoors damp and stifling hot. To reduce heat production as much as possible he had even refrained from switching on the lights, which shrouded the room in darkness. The only thing visible was the sporadic blinking of red, green, and blue LEDs all around him.

Higa was kneeling upon a zaisu¹³ opposite a 32-inch monitor perched atop a kotatsu¹⁴ and emitting a muffled glow. The computer desktop showed zero movement, with a single, unembellished window displaying nothing at all.

Sighing for the umpteenth time, Higa leaned into the backrest. The rusted frame promptly creaked.

He had only told the RATH technicians that he was heading home to pick up a change of clothes; in 30 or so minutes he would have to return to the Roppongi branch. In place of the apparently-dead Kikuoka Seijirou, Dr. Koujiro was occupied every day with public relations, so Higa was now the actual supervisor of Project Alicization.

But if they were to find out he had used his position to smuggle something out, he'd be reprimanded — no, demoted for sure.

That something was now enshrined to the right of the kotatsu, connected to a bizarre, sophisticated apparatus.

13 Traditional Japanese chair with no legs but a normal backrest, for use on tatami mats.

14 Low wooden table covered by a heavy blanket, with a heat source underneath.

This apparatus, a hand-assembled frame crammed full of circuit boards and wiring, was undoubtedly the most valuable and advanced object in the entire room. It was the only Light Cube interface apart from the one in Alice's mechanical body that was not sealed within the Ocean Turtle.

Connected to it was a metal container about six centimeters wide.

Higa stared at the cube's cold sheen and murmured:

"...There's no way it's going to run."

His index finger shied away from the input key.

"It's going to collapse immediately. That's what the copies of me and Kiku-san did. There's no way a human soul preserved within a Light Cube can handle the realization that it's a copy of itself. Even if... Even if it's..."

Without finishing his sentence, Higa sucked in a sharp gasp and held it within his chest—

His fingertip stretched once more and pressed down the input key.

The program began running. The whirring of the large fan in his full tower PC intensified.

At the center of the black window on the screen, polychromatic rays of light surfaced into being, like the birth of a star.

Innumerable peaks sliced powerfully at the darkness. They wavered, trembled, and gleamed.

At last, a familiar voice carried quietly from the speakers on either side of the monitor.

".....You're Higa-san, right?"

Higa swallowed a great deal of saliva and responded croakily:

"Y...Yeah."

"I wasn't deleted? To be precise... I must have been copied."

“How... How on earth was I going to delete you?!”

Higa’s suppressed voice grew to a shout, as though in justification of his own actions.

“You’re the first Fluctlight to ever survive past 200 years’ time! Not even... You’re the first person to ever live the longest life in human history! How on earth was I supposed to delete you... Kirito-kun, huh?!”

He called his name, feeling sweat building in both palms.

Digital numbers on the monitor indicating the elapsed time since bootup clicked by at a hectic rate. 32 seconds... 33 seconds.

The copy of Kirigaya Kazuto’s Fluctlight — the one that had stuck out 200 years of the maximum acceleration phase in Underworld and just awakened, now knew that it was a duplicate of something else.

Every experiment up until this point, without exception, had resulted in the copy losing composure, descending into panic, letting loose a bizarre scream, and collapsing. Higa grit his teeth, waiting for a response from the speaker.

Seconds later—

“...I knew that something like this was going to happen...”

Calm words, as though they were being murmured.

“...Higa-san. Am I the only Fluctlight you copied?”

“Y...Yeah. I had to do it during the memory deletion, right under the noses of Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka and Dr. Koujiro, so yours was the only one I could copy...”

“I see...”

Another silence, and then the copied consciousness sealed within the Light Cube continued in that exceedingly steady voice:

“I spoke to the Queen... to Asuna about this. About what to do if something like this happens. She said that if she were the only one copied, then she would request her own deletion right away. If both of us were copied, then we would spend the little remainder of our time on working to reconcile the real world and Underworld...”

“Then... what if it was just you? What happens then?” Higa probed, as though he were hanging on to every word—

—but the response sent a deep shiver rippling through him.

“Then, I will fight for Underworld only. Because... I’m the protector of that world.”

“F... Fight...?”

“Underworld is in a very unstable situation at the moment. Am I right?”

“That is... indeed the case...”

“That world is powerless against the Real World to a pitiful extent. Whether it’s energy, hardware, maintenance, or networking... the upkeep and management of every single piece of infrastructure depends solely on the people of the Real World. There’s no way of guaranteeing its long-term safety like this.”

Two minutes had passed now. But the copy’s tone remained quite calm, showing not a single sign of impending collapse.

His back as straight as a rod against the zaisu, Higa countered without thinking:

“But there’s nothing we can do about that. We cannot move Underworld’s body, the Light Cube Cluster, away from the Ocean Turtle. The ship’s under state control now. At the slightest whim of the government, they could shut down its power tomorrow, causing the entire Cluster to format...”

“How long will the reactor fuel last?”

Disarmed by the unexpected question, Higa couldn’t help but blink a few times.

“Uh... Well, it’s a pressurized-water reactor meant for a nuclear submarine... if it’s just maintaining the Cluster, I’d say four or five more years...”

“Then, in principle, we don’t need to replenish any fuel before then. That is, as long as we prevent interference from the outside world, Underworld can continue to exist, right?”

“B-But, when you say ‘prevent’... there aren’t any weapons aboard the Ocean Turtle, none at all!”

“I said I would fight.”

The short utterance of his voice was calm and steady, yet reminiscent of a steel blade.

“Fi... Fight...? But, with the satellite uplink cut off, we can’t communicate with the Ocean Turtle...”

“There is a uplink. There should be.”

“W-Where...?!”

Leaning forward in spite of himself, Higa received an answer beyond imagination.

“Heathcliff... No, Kayaba Akihiko. I need that man’s power. We need to find him first. Higa-san... are you willing to help me?”

“Ka... Kayaba-senpai...?!”

He should be dead... or, dead again.

First, in a cottage up in the Nagano mountains. Then, in the Ocean Turtle engine room.

But the body of Niemom that the imitation of Kayaba Akihiko’s consciousness had lurked within had suddenly vanished.

“Is he... still alive...?”

He moaned, distracted, already forgetting to check the timer on the window.

Why had things turned out like this?

A copy of Kayaba Akihiko, his former arch-rival, and a copy of Kirigaya Kazuto. If these two things... or rather, two humans were to meet, what would come out of that?

Could it be... that I've pried the lid off of something unthinkable...

The thought flashed across his mind for an instant, but it was banished immediately by overwhelming excitement.

He wanted to see it. To know what would happen after that.

Higa drew in a sharp breath, exhaled, and spoke in a trembling voice:

“...I understand. I’ve got a few old pipelines, so... I’ll try encrypting the message and distributing it...”

There was no turning back anymore.

Higa shut his eyes tight, wiped his sweaty hands on his T-shirt, and began furiously punching the keyboard.

No longer contained by the window on the monitor, the enormous rays of light swayed the multicolored glow in periodic motion, as though gazing intently at Higa’s fingertips.

7

I surveyed my own room, having finally returned after two months.

A toneless computer desk and wall shelf; a futon and undecorated curtains.

Before I could even feel nostalgic, I was taken aback by how dreary it all was. Really, from my own point of view, it had been two years and eight months since I'd last seen this room. I'd spent a full two and half years in Underworld.

My room in North Centoria Swordcraft Academy was fitted with imposing wooden furniture and a beautiful rug, adorned by framed art and fresh flowers in all the right places; a welcome feast for my eyes.

Most importantly, I was always surrounded by the smiling faces of swordswomen-in-training valets Ronye and Tiese, and... Eugeo.

Pain, keen and fresh and supposed to be memory by now, reawakened in my chest, clogging my throat.

The bag of clean clothing dropped heavily to the floor. I took a few steps forward and sat down upon my bed. I let my body fall, and smelled the sun on what must be freshly dried sheets.

I closed my eyes.

Indistinct voices swam deep within my ears.

—Finish your Sacred Arts homework before taking a nap. Are you trying to copy my answers again?

—Oh right, I made a small change to that trick you taught me earlier. Let's go to the training grounds later.

—Hey, you snuck out to buy snacks again, didn't you?! I get a share, right?!

—C'mon, get up, Kirito.

—*Kirito...*

I slowly turned over and buried my face in my pillow.

Then, I did what I'd been holding back ever since I woke up in RATH's Roppongi branch.

Grabbing fistfuls of sheets, I clenched my teeth and cried at the top of my voice. Tears came without end and my body quaked as I sobbed my heart out.

If I'd known then, I'd have—

I'd have deleted all of my memories to begin with!

Deleted all of my memories ever since the instant I woke up alone in the forest, walked to the small river guided by the sound of the axe, and met a boy at the roots of a giant black tree, and every moment of the two and a half years that followed!

No matter how much I cried, the tears would not stop, with no hope of ever running dry.

Eventually, there was a retrained knocking on my door.

I did not respond, but then came the sound of a turning knob and soft footsteps. Keeping my face planted in the pillow, I felt a slight depression in the sheets near me.

Fingers hesitantly caressed my hair.

A calm, but exceedingly firm voice reached out to me, as I kept my face engulfed in the pillow.

“Hey, tell me, onii-chan. Everything happy and everything sad that happened in that world, all of it.”

“.....”

I said nothing for several seconds.

A beat later, I turned my face to my right and saw Suguha's smiling features — the face of my only little sister through a curtain of tears.

I was back. Back home. Back beside my family.

The past was gradually slipping away, while the present continued on. Continuing to stretch onwards and onwards, without end.

I closed my eyes, rubbed away my tears, then parted my trembling lips.

“.....When I first met him in the middle of that deep forest, he was just a normal woodcutter. You’re not going to believe this, but there were many generations of people over 300 years all trying to cut down one tree...”

I completed my rehab on August 16, 2026, and returned to my home in Kawagoe, Saitama.

That evening, I spent all night telling Suguha what happened in Underworld.

The morning after, I was woken by a phone call.

It came from RATH’s Roppongi branch, and brought the news that Alice had disappeared.

Monday, August 17, 9:00 AM.

“Di... Disappeared?! You mean the information is gone?!”

I was clutching my phone in a T-shirt and boxer shorts.

On the other side of the line, Dr. Koujiro replied in a restrained yet unusually anxious tone:

“No... Even her mechanical body is gone. According to security camera footage, last night at around 9:00 PM she released the security lock by herself and slipped outside when the guards weren’t looking.”

“By... herself?”

I let out a bit of the breath I was holding.

Groups or organizations displeased with Alice's presence in Japan were likely to number so many now that you couldn't count them on both hands. Add to that the people who want to destroy her for purposes of material gain, religion, creed, or other emotions, and the number becomes difficult to imagine. If guys like those got ahold of her, she wouldn't be able to defend herself with a sword or Sacred Arts.

RATH's awareness of this fact had led them to fortify the security of their Roppongi branch to that of a small fortress. But Alice's voluntary disappearance had been a blind spot.

Now we had to figure out why Alice would do such a thing—

In my mind I recalled words she had spoken to me a week ago, just before she hung up the voice chat call she made to me in ALO.

Inarticulate, I heard Dr. Koujiro's pained voice in my ear.

"I'm worried whether we've given Alice too much stress. But I asked her several times, 'Are you tired?', or 'Want to rest?', and she just smiled and shook her head..."

"That's... what she does. She's a haughty knight, she'd never admit weakness to anyone."

"Except to one person, and that's you... Kirigaya-kun, I believe Alice will contact you first for sure... and... I'm terribly sorry for this, you were just discharged..."

The professor's voice faltered and died; I hurried to reply:

"Yeah, I understand, it's okay. If Alice contacts me, I'll get to her as fast I can... —But, doctor, can she travel such a long distance in her current state?"

"We're worried about that, too. Even a full charge on her internal battery will only last 8 hours, and running will cut that time by about half. If she gets stuck near Roppongi... and someone with unkind intentions finds her..."

“And her appearance doesn’t help either...”

My face tautened at the fresh factor of unease. Alice’s dazzling golden hair, practically transparent skin, beauty painstakingly wrought by practiced artisans, and the fact that she was a robot, were all equally conspicuous.

“Every free staff member is currently looking for her around here. We’re also monitoring any internet posts and we’ve even tapped into the public security cameras to check their footage.”

“I’ll head over to you first, then. It’s best to move quickly when she contacts me.”

“That would be great. We’re counting on you, Kirigaya-kun.”

Then the call was hastily disconnected.

I pulled clothing from my closet at random and had just gotten my arms and legs into it before snatching up my backpack, phone, and bike keys and bolting from my room.

The ground floor was silent as I dashed down the stairs. Mom and Dad had said they were going out together for Obon festival and Suguha ought to be at morning kendo club practice. The whole family was intent on celebrating my recovery tonight, but it honestly wasn’t the time for that sort of thing right now.

Taking several large gulps of orange juice from the fridge and holding a bagel sandwich that Suguha had probably made for me, I hurtled towards the front door. Just as I’d stuffed my feet into my riding shoes and closed my fist around the doorknob, a piercing noise came from the intercom beside me.

For one instant, it felt like my heart was going to leap out of my mouth. Could it be — somehow Alice had traveled here on her own?

“Ali...”

I unlocked and pushed open the door as the final “ce” dropped from my lips, and standing there was...

A very ordinary delivery guy in blue uniform and cap.

There couldn't be a more inconvenient time than this, but I looked at the huge droplets of sweat beading off his face as he said brightly, "Hi, package for you!", and didn't have the heart to tell him to come back later.

My hand had only just closed around the stamper seal we often kept on the shoe cupboard when the guy decided to kick me while I was down:

"It's cash-on-delivery!"

"Oh... Okay."

I was just about to retrieve my wallet from my backpack when I remembered that there was a convenient item called electronic money in this world. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and directed it towards the guy's outstretched tablet computer.

"Thanks!"

Watching him turn tail and leave right after thanking me, I took another look at the package left in front of the vestibule.

It was larger than I'd expected, a cardboard box about 70 centimeters in width. With a mind to leave it here and just be on my way if it wasn't perishable, I checked the invoice. The description was *Electronics*. The sender was—

"What the..."

Marine Resource Assessment Survey, in Mincho font. A shipment slip from the stock at RATH's Roppongi branch? It was addressed to my name and residence in clumsy, angled handwriting I'd never seen before.

If Dr. Koujiro had sent this, she would have mentioned it in her call just now. Was it from Kikuoka, or Higa, then? Was there some contraption inside that had to do with Underworld, or the STL, perhaps?

Biting my lip, I made my decision and placed my fingers upon the tape.

I began carefully tearing it off. Then, I gently pried apart the slightly raised flaps, and — opened the box...

“.....AHHHHHHHH!!”

And let out a terrible scream.

The box was stuffed full to the brim with human hands and feet, bent at highly unnatural angles.

Leaning far back with eyes wide, I was forced to let loose a second high-pitched scream.

“EYAAAHHH!?”

Within the darkness of the gaps between the hands and feet, a set of eyes snapped open and stared straight at me.

I cowered as a white hand reached out from inside the box and seized the wrist of my right hand that I’d placed on the box’s edge.

Before I could unleash a third scream, I heard an exasperated voice.

“Could you stop shouting and hurry and pull me out, Kirito?”

Three minutes later.

I was sitting on the door frame in the vestibule and holding my head with both hands.

Just as the «express home-delivered beautiful robot girl» trope that’s appeared in an abundance of fictional works since time immemorial was threatening to actually become real, I tried in desperation to adjust my own mindset — but...

“...How?!” I yelled, giving up entirely and jumping to my feet.

Turning my head I saw the beautiful robot girl clothed in her familiar uniform, drawing a finger across a column in the hallway with apparent interest.

Finally, Alice Synthesis Thirty, the third best Integrity Knight of the Underworld Axiom Church and the true bottom-up AI piloting the robot — or more accurately speaking, «Electroactive Muscle Operative Machine #3», threw me a slight glance and smiled:

“This house is constructed from wood, is it not? Just like the house we lived in inside Rulid forest. But this is much more splendid than that hut.”

“Ahh... Yeah... I think it’s been seven, eight, or ten years since it was completed...” I replied weakly, and her blue eyes swelled even larger.

“What substantial Life it has! Surely it must use lumber of the highest quality...”

“Yeah... Something like that... Something like that!”

I crossed the hallway with large strides, seized Alice’s shoulders, and was just about to demand what the hell was going on, before stopping cold at the sight of her smiling face, like the blooming bud of a flower.

“Might I be allowed to restore the Life of this Metallic Element body first? Hmm... «charging», as you call it over here.”

Correction.

This is the reality of an «express home-delivered beautiful robot girl charging herself with a household outlet».

The Real World had already transitioned to the future while I was diving in Underworld.

“Oh... charging... please, knock yourself out...”

Pushing Alice’s shoulders, I guided her to the living room.

She withdrew a charging cable from her uniform pocket, pushed one end somewhere in the vicinity of her left hip bone and the other end into an outlet in the wall, then sat straight-backed onto the sofa and continued surveying her surroundings nonstop.

—I almost rose to brew some tea before finally remembering that Alice probably didn't need to eat or drink in her current state. And so I was assailed by another violent bout of disquiet.

To calm myself, I thought it best to resolve a tiny question at hand first, so I asked:

“Umm... You want to first tell me how you pulled off the stunt of sending yourself here by express delivery...?”

So the golden-haired, blue-eyed beauty shrugged as though my question had been as mundane as anything else and replied:

“It was very simple.”

And she told me—

Having prepared a payment-on-delivery shipping label, packing tape, and an extra-large reinforced cardboard box, Alice first intentionally allowed the security camera to record her leaving her own bedroom.

Then, she assembled the box at the entrance outside of the security camera's view, pressed on the shipping label inscribed with my home address, and disengaged all of her joint locks while inserting herself into the box. She applied tape to one of the top flaps only and pulled it shut over her from inside. Afterwards, she sealed the top in a simple fashion with tape from within.

Following all of that, she sent an email to the shipping company to come pick her up. The worker who arrived would of course be checked by the door guard, but the email definitely came from inside the building and there was definitely a package waiting at the entrance.

Having no way of knowing that the box concealed a beautiful robot girl, the worker promptly resealed the loose tape, loaded the package onto his truck, and the following morning, delivered it to Kawagoe, Saitama Prefecture...

“.....I see.....” I muttered, sliding slowly off the sofa.

From a certain point of view, Alice hadn’t set foot outside the Roppongi branch building at all. So there was no way to determine her route.

But what was shocking wasn’t her ingenious technique, but the fact that she was able to come up with something like this within just a month of arriving in the real world. When I told her this, the beauty in school uniform shrugged and smiled.

“When I was first appointed as a Knight-in-training, I used this method to leave the Central Cathedral and tour the streets.”

“...I...I see.”

In that case, what would happen once Alice became familiar with information technology? She didn’t need an AmuSphere to instantly dive into a virtual world; in a certain sense, she was born for the internet.

—Shoving aside this disturbing thought, I repositioned myself on the sofa and finally raised the most basic question.

“But... Alice. Why did you do this? If you just wanted to visit my house, all you needed to do was tell Dr. Rinko and she ought to give you time to do it.”

“I thought so as well. She is a good person, that woman... She is always very concerned about me. Therefore, even if I did earn the opportunity to visit your home, Kirito, I would likely be followed by a team of guards in black.”

Her eyelashes, which didn’t look manmade at all, drooped.

“...I am also quite ashamed of my actions, which amount to desertion. Dr. Rinko is likely very worried about me at present and searching for me everywhere. I will gladly face any punishment when I return. However... I wanted to earn this period of time no matter what. The time to talk with you alone... not with a false image of you, but with your real, physical body, Kirito.”

Her large, cerulean eyes stared directly into mine in front of me.

Those blue eyes of hers were probably optical instruments crafted from sapphire lenses and CMOS image sensors, but they concealed a breathtakingly beautiful gleam. Perhaps the light of tiny circuits connecting with each other, the light blooming from her Fluctlight itself.

Alice stood up with a fluid movement and the soft sound of actuating motors.

She walked around the glass table and stepped closer and closer to me.

Just then, the charging cable connected to the wall was pulled taut, impairing her movement. Faint sadness presented upon her snowy white cheeks.

I drew in a sharp breath, and stood up like her.

I took two steps forward and arrived in front of Alice.

Her eyes, positioned slightly lower than me, masked an intense willpower, flashing with dazzling light. Then her lips moved, emitting a sweet, clear voice that was nonetheless muddled with traces of electronic noise.

“Kirito. I feel very angry.”

I didn’t need to ask to understand what she meant.

“I... know.”

“Why? Why... did you not tell me back then that we might never see each other again, that it might have been our last goodbye? If you had just told me at that «World End Altar» that we would be separated by a wall of time lasting 200 years and we would never again be able to meet, I... I would not have fled on my own!”

Alice shouted, an expression on her face that would surely be dotted with uncountable tears if her mechanical body had the ability to cry.

“I am a knight! I am a human built to fight! But... why did you choose to face that terrible enemy alone and refuse my presence at your side?! What in the world am I... Alice Synthesis Thirty, to you?!”

Her small fists were raised, thump-thump-thumping away at my chest.

Her petite, bowed head trembled as her forehead fell upon my left shoulder.

Without a word, I wrapped both hands over her golden hair.



“You are... my hope.” I cast out a murmur.

“Not just mine. You are the irreplaceable hope to so many, living and dead, in that world. That’s why I wanted to protect you no matter the cost, why I didn’t want to lose you. I have to extend my hope... into the future.”

“...The future.....”

A wet voice came from between my arms.

“What form will the future take? What exactly will I gain from this world of chaos, bestowed with an unfree body of steel, attending needless banquets, and continuously enduring loneliness that knows no bounds?”

“.....I’m sorry, but right now, I don’t know either.”

I put force into my arms, trying desperately to at least convey my own feelings and thoughts for her to understand.

“But, you being here will allow the world to slowly change. It will be changed by you. I believe at the end of that change, Cardinal, Administrator, Bercouli, Eldrie... and Eugeo’s wishes will definitely pay off.”

It wasn’t just that. In a different world of the past... the lives of the many young people who lived, fought, and died in a virtual castle were connected with this location, this moment.

Alice, her forehead still resting on my shoulder, kept her silence for a very long time.

Finally, the knight from a different world silently drew her body away, smiled, and spoke as though she had when we met in the marble tower:

“...We must contact Dr. Rinko. It would be horrible to make her worry too much.”

I kept my eyes on Alice’s for a moment. I still felt the tightness deep within me.

But what more could I say? Perhaps this was a problem only time could solve at its own pace.

“...Yeah, you’re right.”

I nodded, and pulled my phone from my pocket.

When Dr. Koujiro learned the situation over the phone, as expected she was speechless for around five seconds, but the first thing that came out of her mouth was an apology to Alice. She really was a good person. She really was the only woman under the sun to ever sway Kayaba Akihiko’s heart.

“...It’s my fault for not realizing how she felt. I was too dependent on Alice-san.”

After her reflection, Dr. Koujiro told me to do something unexpected.

I hung up and smiled at a worried-looking Alice.

“Relax, she’s not angry. She actually wanted to apologize to you. And... she said that you can stay the night.”

“Re... Really?”

A smile was quickly blooming across her face.

“Yeah. But she said that she would activate your GPS tracker just to be careful.”

“A small price to pay.”

Alice nodded, blinked a little too slowly, then stood up at high speed.

“Since that has been decided, you should take me around this house and your courtyard. This is my first time seeing a traditional building of the Real World.”

“Yeah, okay... But it’s just a normal house, there’s nothing to see, really...”

I tilted my head, and an inspiration suddenly came to me.

“Ah, let’s go to the courtyard first.”

I waited for Alice to reel in her charging cord upon reaching full battery, then crossed over the threshold into the pebble-strewn courtyard.

I pointed out the pond where goldfish and koi fish swam, the pine tree with clearly defined branches, and other features to an exceedingly interested Lady Knight, all while leading her to—

The rustic dojo erected alone in the northeastern corner of the property.

The instant that Alice slipped off her shoes and stood atop the wooden floorboards, she seemed to realize what purpose this building served. She immediately looked to me and said in a breathless voice: “This is.. a training ground, is it not?”

“Yup. We call it a dojo here.”

“Dojo...”

Alice murmured and turned back forward, then performed an Underworld-style knight’s salute with her right hand to her chest and left hand at her waist. I followed with a Japanese-style salute and walked in alongside her.

Constructed by my late great-grandfather and used only by Suguha now, the kendojo’s floorboards were wiped so clean that they gleamed jet-black. Even in midsummer, my bare feet felt icy against them. Even the air seemed different.

Alice first stared straight towards the hanging scroll on the opposite wall, then began walking towards the shelf positioned beside it.

She stretched out her right hand and quietly picked up an ancient bamboo sword.

“This is... a wooden blade for training, is it not? But it is completely different from the ones in Underworld.”

“Yeah. It’s made from bamboo and designed not to seriously injure even if you’re hit with it. Underworld’s wooden swords will take off a third of your Life if you’re not careful.”

“I see... There are no instant-effect Healing Arts here. Training in the sword must be exceedingly difficult...”

Alice nodded deeply, then fell silent for a few seconds.

And all of a sudden...

She turned and thrust the hilt of the bamboo sword at me with surprising speed.

“Huh? What are you...”

“It is settled. There is only one thing to be done in a training ground.”

“Wh... Whaaat? Are you serious?”

But Alice’s left hand had already closed around another bamboo sword. Left with no choice, I gripped the sword handle she gave me.

“Bu... But, Alice, with that body...”

“Do not worry!”

Whoosh.

She cast out sharp, determined words.

All I could do was watch the girl advancing towards me on the wooden floorboards with my mouth half open.

Even by 2026’s technological standards, Alice’s mechanical body possessed state-of-the-art equipment. They were only able to load movement ability exceeding that of #1 and #2 in the Ocean Turtle into a much slimmer body because... they could ignore the biggest hurdle that came with a bipedal robot: balance.

Ever since we humans started walking upright, we would be unconsciously and constantly adjusting the weight we applied to our own two feet to maintain balance. Attempting to reproduce this ability with sensors, gyroscopes, and software just would not allow all this related hardware to fit within a realistic human shape. But Alice was not subject to such limitations. Her Fluctlight had a self-balancing ability exactly the same as we humans did. All we needed to do was hand over control of every joint actuator and composite muscle to the Light Cube output signals.

—That said.

At present, her movements were still behind a true human's. All you needed to understand that was to observe the rough script she had written onto the shipping label. I really didn't think she could endure complex, high-speed movement like whirling a bamboo sword around... or any sword.

All of this passed through my mind in an instant, and I felt troubled.

But Alice's feet moved without hesitation right up to a position around five meters away from me, and with both hands she brought the bamboo sword up to her head.

The beginning stance of High Norkia Style, «Heavens and Mountains Break».

Without warning, a gust of chilly wind swept over my skin. I couldn't help but hold my breath and take half a step back.

Swordmanship.

Just as I formulated the thought, *It can't be, how is it possible—*

My body moved on its own. With both hands, I raised my bamboo sword to my right in a perpendicular posture. Then I quickly lowered my waist, and inched my left foot forward. The beginning stance of Serlut Style, «Whirling Current».

When I think about it now, not only was I fresh out of rehab, I was nothing but a weak online gamer in the real world.

I had no right to judge the abilities of a mechanical body. Even so, it was perhaps out of courtesy that I tried my best to meet her needs for this round.

I smiled slightly, and Alice returned the gesture.

“This reminds me... of the time I first traded swords with you in the garden on the 80th floor of the Central Cathedral.”

“You beat the hell out of me then. But it won’t be that easy this time.”

There was no referee to shout *Begin*, but the smiles slipped off our faces simultaneously.

Without changing our stances, we inched towards each other and closed the distance. The taut air ripped with current, and the cries of the continuously yowling cicadas also gradually faded away.

Silence, painful on my eardrums, grew thicker and thicker without end.

Alice’s blue eyes narrowed suddenly.

A streak of light like a moment’s lightning flashed deep within her pupils—

“Eeeyaaahhh!!”

“Seeiyaaahh!!”

Even as we both screamed loudly enough to shear through cloth, all I could do was stare mesmerized at the knight bringing the sword down upon me from ahead, golden hair trailing behind.

Whiinn!

Accompanied by the loudest shriek yet from her actuators, a ferocious blow struck my hands. Next moment, a clear slap tore through the entire dojo. Both bamboo swords left both sets of hands and tumbled left and right, spinning away in opposite directions across the floorboards.

Unable to endure the force of our strikes, Alice and I collided head-on and fell to the right. On reflex I oriented my own body to land beneath hers.

My back slammed into the floorboards. I then heard two heavy impacts: *thump, thump*. The first was Alice's forehead smashing into my own. The second was the back of my head violently hitting the floor.

"Ow....."

Alice was staring into my moaning face from a very close distance, and then she cracked a smile.

"My victory. Winning technique, Secret Move «Steel Headbutt»."

"I... I've never heard of... that technique..."

"I created it just now."

After a storm of giggling as though she were very pleased with herself, her snowy white cheeks descended again to touch my own. I heard a voice like spring wind at my ear.

"Kirito. I am fine now. I can continue to live in this world. As long as I am able to swing a sword, no matter where I am, I will still be myself. Now I realize... my battle is not yet over. Neither is yours. That is why we must look forward and only forward, and advance with one direction."

That evening was filled with a tension completely unlike the kind during our duel.

After spending goodness knows how long apart, my family of four was congregated in my living room — in addition to a guest, to celebrate my recovery.

Having long since befriended her in ALO, Suguha had warmed up to Alice very quickly on this side as well and both were currently deep in talk about kendo. With Mom, Alice would mainly use things I've done for conversation topics as they chatted amicably.

However, there was an exceedingly strained air flowing between me and my old man, who sat opposite me on the right side of the table.

My adoptive father, Kirigaya Minetaka, was someone with a personality that was the polar opposite of mine in almost every conceivable way. Serious. Diligent. A prodigy. After graduating from a top college, he attended business school in the US, then directly took an on-site job at the biggest brokerage firm there was. He had almost never returned to Japan these past years. It was lucky that he had no strife with — I should say, that he was able to maintain a devoted husband-wife relationship with my much more free-spirited mother.

Pop had drank a lot of beer and wine already, but he still looked at me with unchanged expression, then officially cut into tonight's main topic.

“Kazuto. There is a great deal I wish to tell you, but I want to hear what you have to say from your own mouth beforehand.”

In that instant, the left side of the dinner table fell silent.

I laid down the drumstick I was about to bite into, cleared my throat, and stood up. With both hands on the table's edge, I bowed my head deeply.

“...Pop. Mom. I've made you worry again, I'm sorry.”

Whereupon my mother Midori-san smiled warmly and shook her head.

“We've gotten used to it. And you had a huge job this time, didn't you, Kazu? When a person accepts a job, he has to finish it no matter what. If you agree to write a manuscript, then you have to write it, and if you agree to a deadline then you have to make it!”

“Mama, your personal stuff is showing.”

The air relaxed with Suguha's quip, but Pops pulled it tight again.

“Your mother may say that, but she was extremely worried about you while you were missing. The people at the Marine Resource Assessment Survey have explained it to us, and we know you fulfilled an important duty because we see this young lady over here, but you cannot forget, Kazuto, what your duty is.”

It would have given me no greater pleasure than to reply, *being a swordsman!* But there was no way I could say something like that now.

“Being a high school student.”

I seemed to deflate right there and then. It was as though I were a little kid being lectured by his mother and father. Alice’s wide-eyed, speechless stare stung against my cheeks. I’d faced so many strong enemies in Underworld, but I was still like this in the real world.

My old man nodded, then continued in a sterner voice:

“Indeed. Then you should be well aware of what you should be putting your greatest effort into.”

“...Studying hard, and continuing my education.”

“It’s summer after second year now. I remember hearing from your mother that you wish to study abroad in the US; how’s that going so far?”

“Ahh... about that...”

I shut my mouth, glanced towards Mom, then Pops, and lowered my head again.

“I’m sorry. I want to change my path.”

My old man’s metal-framed eyes seemed to harden even further.

“Elaborate.”

At his request, I made the decision to confide in him the new path I’d only told Asuna until now.

“I want to study electronics engineering at a Japanese school... Touto Institute of Technology, if possible. Then, I want to work at RA... the Marine Resource Assessment Survey.”

Clatter!

Alice’s chair had made the noise as she stood up.

She stood with hands clasped in front of her chest, eyes wide. I stole a glance at her teal eyes and gave her a swift smile.

What felt like an eternity ago — but really only two short months before, I had told Asuna of my wish to study in the US and learn related information about the Brain Implant Chip. This was because I believed that the BIC was the natural evolution of the FullDive technology pioneered by the NerveGear. Compared to the STL, which utilized data of a different form such as the Mnemonic Visual, I preferred a FullDive device with traditional polygonal data.

However...

My days in Underworld had turned my viewpoint upside down.

I could no longer leave that world, and I had no intention of doing so. I had finally discovered a concept that I wanted to spend my life bringing to reality.

The unification of Underworld and the real world.

Alice stared straight at me and broke into a flowery smile, then turned her gaze to Pops and spoke:

“...Father.”

The term of address seemed to startle Suguha, whose eyes shot wide open.

“My own father never allowed me to walk the path of a knight, not even until the very end. But I am no longer regretful of this, because I have declared my faith through my actions, and I believe my father will understand. Kirito... Kazuto is someone capable of this as well. He may only be a student in this world, but in that world, he is without doubt the strongest swordsman of them all. He is a hero who battled valiantly and protected countless numbers of people.”

“Alice...”

I couldn’t help the urge to stop her from going on, because I knew that talking to my old man of knights and battles was a surefire way to prevent him from understanding.

However...

“Alice-san.”

I received a great fright when I saw that the corners of my old man’s mouth, which never lost their austerity, were actually showing hints of a smile.

“His mother and I are very aware of this. Kazuto is already a hero in this world as well. Am I wrong, «Black Swordsman»?”

“Wha...”

Shock of even greater magnitude caused me to lean back in my chair. My parents couldn’t possibly have read that gossipy, nonsense book, *The Complete Records of the SAO Incident*?

Pops withdrew his smile and fixed me with a blunt expression he had perfected in the US:

“Kazuto. Deciding your path, studying hard, taking tests, continuing your education, and getting a job may all just be a process, but they are the fruits we are given in our lifetime. Even if you’re confused, or influenced, you must lead a life that you will not regret.”

I closed my eyes, and drew in a deep breath—

Then bowed my head a third time and replied:

“I’ll get it done for sure. Thank you Pop, Mom.”

I looked up, and the right side of my mouth lifted in a smile as I added:

“It’s not much of a thanks for your valuable advice... but Pops, if you have shares in Glowgen Defense Systems or any related companies, you might want to sell them fast. I think they recently made a large gamble that cost them enormous losses.”

In response to my tiny pushback, my old man only raised an eyebrow.

“Oh? I’ll keep it in mind.”

—And just like that, bit by bit, reality is getting more realistic.

I thought as I lay onto the bedspread in my own room.

Our family party completed without a hitch. Mom and Pop had retreated to the first floor bedroom, while Alice was sleeping with Suguha in her room on the second floor. It scared me a little to imagine what they might be discussing while alone together, but I was always glad to see their relationship deepening. I believed it was good if Alice could slowly get used to the real world like this.

Summer break was about to end, and the second semester of school was going to start.

From a sensory point of view, I hadn’t taken a high school class in more than two years, so I was subject to Asuna’s hellish training for the final two weeks of summer. I had to overwrite the Sacred Arts I learned in North Centoria Swordcraft Academy saved in my memory regions with equations and English vocabulary.

I know what Alice said, but it looked probable that I would never again see the opportunity to take up a sword and fight.

From now on, in order to achieve my goal in the real world, I had to devote all of my time and energy to it. I would study hard, continue my education, and putting aside whether I could realize my wish, first I would have to get the job and walk the path as straight as I could.

This was also an important battle. A lonely one, nonetheless.

But someday I will no longer be a boy.

By the time I realize how precious was the golden age dappled with sunlight, clear breeze, cheers, excitement, adventure, and many other unknown things, it will have departed to a faraway place, never to come back.

I guess I'm quite a lucky kid.

I've been able to hold my beloved sword in my right hand and a blank map in my left and run through many a different world, filled with exhilaration. I've been able to carve these many shining memories into my soul, like gemstones of motley colors.

Outside the window, I could hear the last train of the day crossing a steel bridge somewhere faraway.

The insects in the grass of my courtyard were performing the song of ending summer.

A cool breeze rustled the curtains through the window screen.

I drank in a wealth of sound and smell from the real world, and closed my eyes.

“...Goodbye.”

And with that quietly murmured farewell—

Another era had passed by.

8

—Or so I thought.

Right up until the moment before I entered a steady slumber in my own bed deep in the night of August 17.

“...Kirito. Please wake up, Kirito.”

Someone was shaking my shoulder, and I was pulled out of a haze of bittersweet emotion.

“.....Mff...” I croaked from my throat, lifting my face reluctantly.

When I discovered deep blue eyes adorned with golden lashes right before my face, I froze right on the bedspread.

“Oof...! A... Alice...!”

“Shh, be quiet.”

“Yeah, but, we can’t be doing this...”

“What *are* you thinking?”

A sharp tug on my left ear finally cleared up my consciousness.

Glancing at the alarm clock next to my pillow through eyes muddled with sleep, I saw that it was just past three in the morning. A bulbous moon still hung tall in the sky, gleaming brightly.

I looked back forward.

Kneeling beside my pillow under the muffled moonlight was Alice, wearing nothing but a blue featureless T-shirt that looked extremely out of place. Her snowy white legs, which seemed to be glowing independently, were unabashedly exposed. The faint connection points that typically showed on her silicone skin were completely invisible in this dimness, making it impossible to believe that those elegant curves were man-made.

“... Stop... Stop goggling at me, would you?”

The way she yanked down the hem of her T-shirt put a lump in my throat and made me leap up.

I kept my eyes fixed firmly upward, but this time a bulge of thin cloth with blonde hair against it like molten gold fell into my vision and caused a rapid decrease in my cognition rate.

My very easily read state of agitation had perhaps finally induced some embarrassment in Alice, who turned her face aside, pouting:

“...You likely do not remember, but we slept in the same bed for half a year. There cannot be further need for this sort of reaction.”

“Oh... Re... Really?”

“Really!” She screeched, then frantically slapped her hands over her mouth. My head shrank into my neck as I listened for noise in the adjoining room, but luckily it seemed that Suguha had not been woken up. But she was already not one to wake up 30 minutes before morning practice, even during the simultaneous besiegement of an earthquake and a typhoon.

Alice cleared her throat, then stared daggers at me:

“It is all because of your bizarre reaction that I have not been able to get to my main point.”

“We... Well, sorry about that. Umm, ahh, uhh, I’m fine now.”

Alice sighed gently and stood as her motors whirred faintly, then began to talk determinedly:

“Around five minutes ago... Someone sent an extraordinary contact message to me with a long-distance Messaging Art... I mean to say, the internet.”

“An email? Who sent it?”

“There was no name attributed to the sender. As for its content... it will be clearer to show you directly rather than telling you.”

She moved her eyes rapidly and fixated upon the printer on my desk.

Horrifically, the printer's cooling fan suddenly roared to life. Alice had undoubtedly sent it a wireless command to begin printing. When she had learned how to do this was beyond me.

Just then, my shock...

...was immediately blown sky-high by fresh astonishment when I picked up the printout that came rolling out onto the tray and quickly skimmed its contents.

Written horizontally there was—

[Ascend the white tower, arrive in that world.

*Cloudtop Garden.Great Kitchen Armory.Morning Star
Lookout.Sacred Fountain Stairway Grand Corridor of Spiritual
Light.]*

I was unable to comprehend what I just read for a full five seconds.

As my half-asleep brain began to churn, I was finally able to appreciate what Alice meant by “extraordinary”.

Let's put aside the first line for now.

The second line was the problem. The black letters were all outlining names I'd heard before.

Cloudtop Garden... Morning Star Lookout... There was no mistaking it; these were all names of floors in the Axiom Church Central Cathedral in Underworld's Human Empire Central Capital Centoria.

But if that were true, then who on earth sent this email?

There should only be two people familiar with the inner structure of the Central Cathedral in the real world: Alice, and myself.

Not even Kikuoka, Higa, nor the other RATH technicians should have been able to research the names of the floors themselves, even if they were able to learn the name of the ruling organization, the Axiom Church, from their monitors. Moreover, although many VRMMO players like Asuna, Klein, and others had dived into Underworld as reinforcements, they had all appeared and logged out in the wilderness of the Dark Realm, which was an interminable distance away from Centoria. They shouldn't even have been able to see the Central Cathedral.

No, wait—

I read the paper more carefully again, and realized a truth that was even harder to believe.

The name “Sacred Fountain Stairway” in the latter half of the second line. I racked my brains, but I just couldn't remember ever hearing about that floor. In other words, whoever sent this email had knowledge not even I was aware of.

I looked nervously towards Alice and asked her, “...Alice. Is there a place called the Sacred Fountain Stairway in the Central Cathedral?”

“Yes... There is, indeed.”

The knight nodded, knotted her white hands together, and continued:

“However... it is a hidden location. The Sacred Fountain Stairway is a splendid cathedral 100 floors tall, an ancient structure left from an age when the church itself was only three floors high! It is sealed underneath the first floor grand staircase and is not easily discovered. The only ones aware of its existence are my esteemed uncle, myself, and... Highest Minister Administrator...”

“Wha.....”

An even heavier wave of shock stifled my breathing.

Alice took a step forward and seized my right hand in a viselike grip. Whether or not it was due to a malfunction in her EAP cylinders, her fingers were trembling slightly.

“Kirito... Could it be... Could it be that she... That demigod... Highest Minister still lives...?”

Her voice was heavy with deep consternation.

I quietly squeezed her thin shoulder with my left hand:

“No... That’s not possible. The Highest Minister is dead for sure. I saw her and Senate Elder Chudelkin melting into particles of light and disintegrating. And... look at this.”

I showed Alice the printout in my right hand.

“The first line says *Ascend the white tower, arrive in that world*. The white tower is the Central Cathedral, and that world is Underworld. If the sender was Administrator, she wouldn’t write *that world*. She would write *my world*.”

“Yes... you are right. I can believe in that.”

Alice nodded, her golden bangs practically close enough to touch my cheeks.

“However... if that is the case, then who exactly wrote...”

“I don’t know. We don’t have a lot to go off of. I should say... if we can understand the meaning behind these words, we’ll be able to discover who the sender was...”

“The meaning...?”

“Yeah. After reading it more closely, I see several strange things about it.”

I made Alice sit shoulder-to-shoulder with me onto the bed, and slid my fingertip across the printed letters.

“The first line says *Ascend*, but... that would make the second line a bit weird, right? «*Cloudtop Garden*» at the start, here, is where you and I first battled each other. I remember it to be very high up.

But next, we have «*Great Kitchen Armory*». I don't know about a Great Kitchen, but the armory should be very far down, on the third floor. In the same vein, «*Morning Star Lookout*» next would be the floor we reached after clawing our way up the outer wall and re-entering the Cathedral. That was almost at the very top of the tower. There's too many differences in order."

"That... is true... That brings back memories... You called me an idiot eight times while we were suspended on the side of the tower with a single sword blade."

"Th-There's no need to recall something *that* specific."

Alice looked at me with my neck hunched, and smiled.

"But I really was somewhat happy back then. Because it was the first time I quarreled with someone from the bottom of my heart."

I couldn't help but sincerely return her translucent smile.

There seemed to be a wetness in her sapphire eye-lens, though it was probably my imagination.

I summoned all of my emotional strength and tore my eyes away from that light, which was like the bottom of deep water. I continued to explain in a slightly hoarser voice:

"...And, here, too. The positioning of the punctuation is really weird. Why isn't there punctuation between Great Kitchen and Armory, or Sacred Fountain Stairway and Grand Corridor of Spiritual Light?"

Alice looked back onto the printout with the low whir of gears.

"...I do not think... they forgot..."

Both of us tilted our heads in the same direction but were not able to come up with anything else.

Helpless, I took down a tiny device from my wall shelf to summon an expert who was proficient in reading these sorts of codes.

The hemispherical device sitting in my palm was something called an «Audiovisual Two-Way Communication Probe»; essentially, it was a high-performance webcam. I placed the camera on my left shoulder, switched it on, confirmed that it was connected to my desktop computer, and spoke to it:

“Yui, are you awake?”

About two seconds later, a voice that sounded half-asleep was heard from the probe’s speaker.

“Whew... Good morning, Daddy.”

The camera swiveled inside the dome and greeted the person beside me too.

“Good morning, Alice-san.”

“Ah... G-Good morning, Yui-san.”

It was Alice’s first time seeing the probe, but she had already spoken with Yui several times in Alfheim. Seemingly understanding that the device on my right shoulder was Yui’s terminal in the real world, she greeted it immediately with a smile.

Yui rotated the camera at a frantic pace, then finally posed a question to me in a somewhat more serious voice:

“...Daddy. What on earth is going on?”

“I-It’s nothing, there’s really nothing to be suspicious about. Nothing at all.”

“It is 3:21 in the morning, and in a situation where Daddy is alone with Alice-san in his own room, I cannot help but make irregular judgments.”

As I desperately tried to justify myself, Alice saved me by explaining with what looked to be a restrained smile on her face.

“Yui-san, it really is nothing. Someone sent me a bizarre letter, or, email, and I came to discuss it with Kirito.”

“If Alice-san says so, then I shall record it as such. But Daddy, you can’t keep secrets from Mommy.”

“Of course not.”

As I stole my chance to exhale in relief, to my right, Alice took the printout from just now, showed it to Yui, and explained the contents.

It’s difficult to describe the strong emotions I get when watching those two conversing with each other.

Yui was a top-down AI coming from a maximally-evolved program that ran on existing computer architecture.

Yet Alice was a bottom-up AI coming from a completely new architecture: a Light Cube that imitated a human brain.

The image of these two artificial intelligences born through completely opposite paths talking very naturally and happily with each other had to be the greatest miracle in the world...

Ignoring my inability to surreptitiously hold in the tears, the two of them exchanged many thoughts and eventually Yui seemed to notice something and announced:

“Hold on... If you look closely, the punctuation is different on the first and second lines.”

“Oh, really?”

I also brought my face close to the paper Alice was holding and stared at the dots that were less than a millimeter in diameter.

Yui was absolutely right. A very normal comma was printed between *tower* and *that world* in the first line.

But the three symbols in the second line weren’t commas; they looked more like English full stops, or tiny dots.

Dots.....

“Ah..... Ah!”

I uttered a low cry and straightened up halfway.

“R-Right. The Central Cathedral only goes up to 100 floors... So if you connect the two... that means, it’s...”

I felt around the bed’s headboard and snatched up a ballpoint pen. Wrenching off the cap, I asked Alice hoarsely:

“Alice, which floor is the Cloudtop Garden on?”

“...Have you forgotten? Forgotten where you and I first battled, Kirito?”

“N-No, I haven’t, um...”

“The 80th floor.”

She told me in a voice that sounded a little cross, and I wrote the number onto a blank space on the printout.

“R-R-Right. What... about the Great Kitchen?”

“The 10th floor.”

I continued scribbling the numbers she reported into the blank space on the printout.

“I think the Lookout was... and then... the Sacred Fountain Stairway is the first floor... the Corridor was...”

By the time my hand stopped moving, the white paper was filled with numbers interspaced by four tiny dots.

It was a format I seemed to have encountered before — but not just that. It was a certain format that someone like me had already become familiar with in his daily life.

The instant she saw that format, Yui uttered a small cry.

“Ah... It’s an IP address, Daddy!”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

It wasn’t the IPv6 type that was almost ubiquitous in 2026, but the older IPv4 type. v4 wasn’t completely out of use, though.

This email was pointing to a server that existed in the real world.

I flew off my bed, plopped into the mesh chair in front of my computer, and seized the mouse. The monitor woke from sleep and displayed the internet browser as I opened it and tried connecting to the server written on the paper over HTTP, and then FTP. But both attempts to access were refused.

“RSTP... No, Telnet?” I muttered and was about to launch a command prompt, when my right shoulder...

...buzzed again with Yui’s earnest voice.

“Daddy! Recall the words in the email!”

“Huh...?”

Alice handed me the printout from behind. Yui looked at it with her camera while she said:

“I believe the «white tower» to be ascended refers to the address in the second line.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And after ascending it, you arrive at «that world». In other words, the server that this address points to is...”

“Ah...! I... I’ve got it!!”

Feeling my fingertips gradually growing cold and numb, I spun my head around.

“Alice, this is a path connected to that world... connected to Underworld!!”

The moment she heard my repressed yell, Alice’s eyes dilated behind me.

“.....Path... connected to... Does that mean... I can go, no, I can return? Return to that world... to my... world...”

Confident, I nodded rapidly in response to her murmurs.

There was a loud whir of actuators as I caught the figure that came flying towards me in my arms.

The sobs that burst into my ears and the droplets I felt against my cheeks were probably my imagination.

After all, there was no way a mechanical body of metal and silicone had either of those functions.

Neither Alice nor I had the fortitude to wait until a more reasonable time of day.

That was why we chose to see 4:00 AM as early in the morning and not late at night, and unapologetically dialed Dr. Rinko's cell number.

Luckily, the doctor still seemed to be at the Roppongi branch. At first, just as we expected she was unable to figure out exactly what was going on, but when my explanation got to the good part, she almost screamed at me: *"I-Is that true?"*

"It's true. I can't trace the message's origin, but it looks to be real just from the content."

"I... I see. Then we must confirm it as soon as possible..."

In response to the doctor, I quickly appended:

"About that... Please leave it to Alice and me."

"Huh.....?"

That next breath I heard was probably a sigh half-filled with shock and half with exasperation.

"Kirigaya-kun... even though you already went through..."

"If I were really someone who learned my lesson, then I'd never have gone to work at RATH in the first place!"

Another long sigh.

“...You’re right. Some things were only achievable because you are the way you are, and there will probably be things we need you to do in the future as well. However... this time you must get your parents’ permission.”

“Of course I will, leave it to me. And... there’s something I’d like to confirm first... Does Alice require an STL to connect from there to the Ocean Turtle?”

“No, there’s no need. Alice’s Light Cube package can do the exact same thing your organic brain can do with an STL. The only thing she does need is a cable.”

“I thought so. In that case... Umm, one second, please.”

Alice was wringing her hands beside me as I looked to her.

“Alice. Um... I’m really sorry, but can we bring her... Asuna, too?”

Twitch. One of her eyebrows moved.

Then, instead of a sigh, there was a faint drone of motors.

“...Yes, I suppose so. It is safer to have additional strength on our side if something unexpected occurs.”

“I-I see, I owe you... Well, it’s settled then, doctor...”

After some more conversation, I hung up, roused Asuna from her sleep, and explained the situation to her.

All I needed to say was “We’ve found a path leading to Underworld”, and she seemed to understand everything that would happen next.

After one or two short minutes of discussion, I promptly removed the probe from my right shoulder and studied the lens.

“...Sorry, Yui. I haven’t discovered a way to bring you into Underworld yet...”

“Yes, I understand, Daddy. Please be careful when traveling.”

“I’ll bring you there too one day, Yui.”

Promising her so, I placed the probe upon my desk.

Next to it rested a large pile of reference books and textbooks, which all had to be frantically digested starting today. There might be an involuntary delay before they came into play.

Slipping a blank piece of paper from my printer's inner tray, I hastily scrawled a note with my ballpoint pen. Alice retrieved her school uniform from Suguha's room, we changed with our backs to each other, and left my room on tiptoes.

We descended the stairs, and I placed my handwritten note on the dining table.

Carefully sliding open our antiquated door, Alice and I stepped out into the chilly morning air.

I pushed the 125 cc motorcycle to a suitable distance away from the house, and swung myself onto the seat. After having Alice strap on Suguha's helmet, I donned my own and twisted the starter.

After reservedly persuading an engine that had been idle for almost three months, which roared gleefully to life, I called to my tandem-rider:

"Hold on tight! I'm gonna speed faster than a dragon!"

Alice secured her hands around my waist as she replied: "Who do you think I am?!"

"Haha, right you are, Miss Integrity Knight. Well... Let's go!!"

Here's what I wrote on the note that I left in my living room:

[Pops, Mom, and Sugu, I'm off to carry through an unfinished adventure. I'll be right back, don't worry.]

By the time I had flown past the empty morning streets of Kawagoe Highway, Kannana, and Route 246 in that order and arrived safely in front of RATH's Roppongi branch, I spotted Asuna who had arrived by taxi.

Beaming and waving with a "Yoo-hoo", her expression went rigid at the sight of Alice sitting behind me.

"...Kirito-kun. What on earth is this?"

"We... Well, about that. Long story short, a lot of things happened, but nothing bad... happened..."

"Elaborate on «a lot» and «nothing»."

I knew this would happen. I knew, but I came here purposefully without any sort of strategy. There was no way I was coming up with any reasonable explanation.

"I'll explain everything to you later, I promise! During a chat over tea when we're old....." I mumbled the last bit while parking the motorcycle in the employees' lot.

When I turned around, I immediately witnessed a petrifying scene.

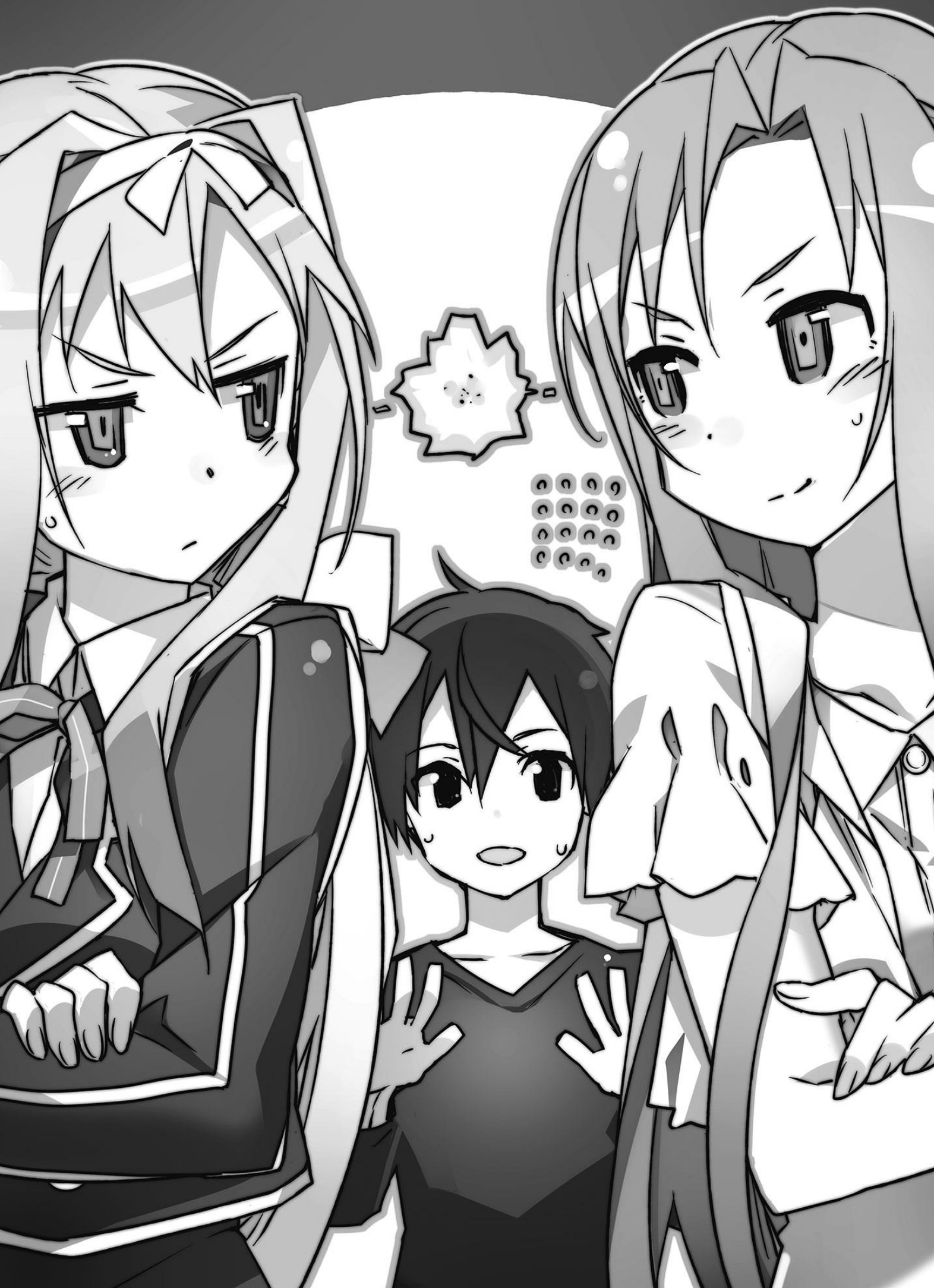
Asuna was standing with her hands on her hips. Alice was standing with her arms crossed. You could almost see electricity hot enough to scorch the air crackling between the square-off.

I timidly spoke to them both: "...Ummm, you guys, hasn't this sort of thing come to an end already?... I mean, at the campsite of the Human Empire Defense Army..."

"That was just a ceasefire!"

"Ceasefires are only declared under the pretext that conflict will begin once more!"

Both girls said shrilly, and returned to their visual duel.



After staring at the sight of the two swordswomen with intent to fight fully displayed and showing not a shred of quarter—

I did the only thing I could do at that moment.

And that was to make myself as hidden as humanly possible, slowly back away, and prepare to flee into the building entrance.

However, the instant I allowed the forbidding security system to check my ID card, fingerprints, and retina, a sharp electronic chirp was produced and both girls' heads spun towards me.

“Ah, hey, Kirito-kun!!”

“Why are you running?!”

By the time I heard those voices, I had already bolted into the building.

Goggle-eyed, Dr. Koujiro received a wildly panting Asuna and me into the the STL Room, along with Alice who did not need to breathe, but whose chassis temperature probably rose.

“...I can understand your urgency, but there was no need to rush over like this. The STLs and Underworld aren't going anywhere.”

Hearing the doctor say this in an amazed sort of way, I responded with an unnatural smile:

“No, no, we just wanted to connect as soon as possible! No matter how you look at it, the success or failure of this dive will have a huge impact on Underworld's security guarantee from here on ooooouuut!”

The odd noise at the end of my sentence had been the result of Asuna pinching the right side of my abdomen.

Before Alice could double up, I ducked into the neighboring changing room to don the antimicrobial suit used during STL dives.

Actually, what I said to the doctor were my unreservedly true feelings.

The Ocean Turtle was anchored in the waters of the Izu islands and its situation remained very delicate. There was only one way of maintaining its operation and independence now.

Encourage communication between Artificial Fluctlights — or the people of Underworld, and the people of the real world, and kindle friendly relations between the two. If a majority of real world people could acknowledge Underworld people as human, it would stop nations and corporations from using brute-force.

No—

If we accepted the irrationality of it, there was still another way.

Obtaining real defensive power. Using the supposedly in-development «Light Cube Loaded Unmanned Fighters» as our arsenal and establishing our own country.

However, it was nothing but a reckless thought. How were we going to get UAVs? Where would we scrape the maintenance fees from? How many months... or years would it take to teach the people of Underworld, who knew only dragons, how to fly supersonic fighter jets? There were too many dilemmas we needed to solve.

What we absolutely needed, no matter what, was a large bandwidth uplink independent of government-controlled telecom satellites. For the purpose of allowing the people of Underworld to dive into what would be a new realm for them, The Seed Nexus, and inform the people of the real world of their existence.

Our ability to achieve that rested on the IP address written on the note in my breast pocket.

Now wearing new clothes, I stepped out of the changing room and handed the note to Dr. Koujiro.

She hesitated for a moment before accepting it. But her right hand quickly moved up and took it from me.

“...This has probably got to do with him.”

Her quiet words made me nod gently.

I don't know how he could have possibly learned the names of those floors of the Central Cathedral. But the only one capable of setting up a secret uplink between the Ocean Turtle and the internet was him.

Kayaba Akihiko... Heathcliff.

Thinking back on it now—

Every single time, my battles would only end upon confronting him. This time, Heathcliff had merely passed by the STL I slept in and disappeared again into the darkness of the internet. But he would resurface once more someday. To unify the many shards borne from that floating castle of steel and decide everything once and for all.

With my back to Dr. Koujiro as she readied the dive, I powered on my mobile terminal.

“Yui, have you learned anything new about that address?”

Appearing on the display, Yui's adorable features shook left and right.

“The server's location is in Iceland, but I believe it is only a relay point. There is a formidable firewall and I can't continue investigating.”

“I see... Thanks. Have you been able to trace the sender of Alice's email?”

“Well... I discovered some similar traces at node 304 of The Seed Nexus, but I lost the trail there...” Yui finished, and her shoulders drooped gloomily. I stroked her head with my fingertip against the touchscreen.

“No, this is plenty. Number 300, would that be in the US...? You don't need to keep searching. It'll be too dangerous to contact him directly, even for you, Yui. By now I expect that guy's become something just like you.”

“I’m stronger!”

I chuckled wryly as I stroked her puffed-up cheeks.

“Well, anyway, we’ll be taking a look there first. There won’t be a whole host of dangers this time... I think.”

“If anything happens, I will be there at once to help!”

“I’ll be in your care. Bye, now.”

My finger touched the tiny hand reaching towards me through the screen, and then I switched off the terminal, just in time for Alice and Asuna to exit the women’s changing rooms, anew.

Fortunately, they seemed to have agreed on a second ceasefire; both faces were shining with anticipation.

I exchanged glances with each of them, then spoke:

“...At any rate, 200 years have passed. I don’t know what’s happened to the Human Empire or the Dark Realm. Though, it’s a shorter time when you compare it to Administrator’s 300-year rule of the Human Empire, so I don’t think the changes will be *too* drastic...”

Alice nodded fervently and replied:

“At the very least, it seems certain that Central Cathedral still stands. In that case, we can consider that the Human Empire still remains as it was.”

Asuna nudged Alice’s hand, smiling. “The first thing we’ll have to do is wake Selka-san.”

“Indeed!”

Both nodded sincerely to each other—

We each walked towards two STLs and a reclining seat.

I laid down onto the bed of frigid gel. Under Dr. Rinko’s control, the enormous headset descended unhurriedly and draped over everything above my forehead.

“Well... Here we go.”

Our differing voices responded as one to the doctor.

“Yes!”

The epic machine produced a low roar.

The photon network comprising my consciousness — my Fluctlight was lifted away from my physical body, deprived of its senses and weight.

My consciousness was converted to an electrical signal, flying towards a network of infinite boundaries.

Shooting through a large bandwidth uplink of light at ultra-high speed, soaring towards the other world of my memories.

Towards a new adventure.

Towards the middle of the next story.

The first thing I saw was light.

White, infinitesimal glittering that became variegated rays, swelled — engulfing my vision — and continued to broaden.

Pure blackness appeared within.

I dived in a straight line towards the darkness at the end of the light tunnel.

No, it wasn't complete blackness.

Disconcerting numbers of glowing dots of various colors were twinkling silently against a black backdrop.

Stars. Or the night sky...

Neither.

Because...

“...Wa... Waaarrgh!?”

The instant I looked down at my feet, I uttered a scream.

Because there was no ground at all.

Panic-stricken, I kicked both legs, but the soles of my boots touched nothing. Just a sea of stars that extended to infinity. I looked all around and above me to see nothing but stars.

“Eeyaahhh!”

“Wha... What is...?!”

I heard two voices from my left and right.

I threw out both of my hands were their fullest extent and caught them tightly.

To my right I saw Asuna floating there, body wrapped in pearly half-armor and matching colored skirt, paired with all the ornaments of Stacia the Goddess, complete with magnificent rapier.

To my left was Alice, in golden breastplate and white longskirt, her waist decked out with silver whip and golden-yellow longsword.

Both were agape at the sky of stars with no boundary.

No.

This was no longer the sky.

“.....Space.....?”

I muttered timidly.

Instantly, I became aware of violent cold. Asuna and Alice both sneezed hugely with a *kerchoo* each. This was an environment with dangerously low temperatures, low enough to feel your Life falling rapidly.

No, this couldn't truly be space, not when I could still hear both of their voices, but it was remarkably close. Our physical bodies were floating lightly in midair.

I focused and produced a defensive globe of Luminous Elements, then surrounded all three of us with it.

The moment we were engulfed by its faint glitter, the bone-chilling cold finally left us for good.

I exhaled and surveyed the unthinkable scene before my eyes again.

Stars of breathtaking density stretched in a band from top right to the bottom left of my vision. I suppose you could call it the Milky Way, but no matter how I lined up the potently glowing stars, I could not recognize a single familiar constellation from the real world.

This was Underworld, all right.

But, in that case, where had the land... or the sky, gone?

Suddenly, I was struck by a powerful chill that hardened my entire body.

—It can't be.

It's... gone?

The land comprising the Human Empire and Dark Realm had finally exhausted its Life after 200 years.

And the 10,000 or so people who lived there, had they returned to the void along with it...?

“You’re kidding me... How.....”

I murmured in a shaking voice...

Alice suddenly squeezed my left hand hard enough to crack.

“Kirito... Look there.”

I turned to my left and saw the golden knight, who at some point had reoriented herself and was now facing forward.

Her outstretched left hand was pointing right to a certain spot.

Holding my breath; slowly, very slowly, I turned my head.

I saw a star.

Not a star blinking feebly in the far-off distance — an enormous body that occupied a great deal of my eyesight.

The planet's upper half was masked by soupy, velvety darkness.

But it gradually transformed from black to blue near the middle, slowly but surely changing to bright azure, and finally deep navy.

The hemispherical curve of the lower edge took on a dazzling aquamarine.

Bit by bit, the cerulean hue gleamed more and more intensely. White light began to emerge from over the arc's center region, quickly stretching forward in a straight line.

Daybreak.

Concealed behind the planet, the sun — Solus, was preparing to reveal itself.

I averted my eyes from the brilliant white light and looked towards the planet's surface again.

The exterior that had been bathed in navy up until a moment ago was now gradually being dyed bright azure.

Beyond the unbroken, wispy white clouds, the shape of the terrain was visible.

An upturned triangle with rounded edges.

There was a cluster of white light in the upper right region of the landscape. An even greater mass of light presented in the upper left as well.

It was evidently the light of civilization. Upon closer inspection, I spotted many bands of light linking the two clusters and continuing to proliferate downwards in the shape of a web.

Immediately, judging by the shape of the terrain and the positions of the two large cities, I understood what I was looking at.

The city at the top right was Obsidia, capital of the Dark Realm.

And the one at the top left — Central Capital Centoria of the Human Empire.

That land, this planet, was the very same Underworld I had lived in, fought in, and sprinted across.

Overcome with surprise, I tore my eyes away and they landed on Alice next to me.

Her white face was also etched deeply with lines of shock and awe.

At that moment Alice's eyes suddenly went wide as she dropped my hand and began rifling through the small pouch on her sword belt.

She silently withdrew two eggs, small enough to fit in her palm.

One of them radiated faint green; the other, blue. The light alternated between bright and dim every two seconds. Like a breath. Like a heartbeat.

Speechless, Alice hugged the two eggs to her chest and closed her eyes. Tears slid silently down her cheeks, slipping from her face, beading and floating into space.

I felt tears welling up in my own eyes. I turned and registered that Asuna's eyes, as she gripped my hand still, were also wet.

As we gazed on, Alice took a sturdy step towards the starry ocean ahead. Clutching both eggs in her left hand, she reached her right hand unswervingly towards the vast planet.

With eyes like stars of daybreak, concealing within them infinite light, the golden Integrity Knight called sonorously with dignity and reverberation:

“O World!! O Underworld, that which I love, in which I began! Do you hear me?!”

Every star in the universe began to shudder. Azure planets gleamed brightly as one, as though in synchronized breath.

I shut my eyes and attuned my ears, to forever etch into my memory the words that would proclaim the advent of a new age.

“I have returned now! I am right here!!”

Prologue III

Star World Calendar, 582

“This is Blue Rose 73. Confirm atmospheric escape. Switching to interstellar cruising speed.” Integrity Machinist Steeka Schtrinen declared into the speaking tube at the corner of her mouth as she pushed forward the control stick with her left hand.

The mechadragon’s silver frame began to shudder. Its fully expanded wings glowed light blue, absorbing the scant resources of outer space within a wide radius and feeding them into the propulsion mechanism.

The eternal Thermal Elements encased in the heart of the apparatus reacted with a shrieking roar and white fire shot from the main propulsion exhausts on either side of the lofty tail assembly. Then came the sensation of her body being pressed hard into the cockpit seat. The violent acceleration that she had little hope of experiencing within the planet’s atmosphere brought a grin to her face.

“Blue Rose 74 copies.”

A short response traveled out of the hearing tube. A glance into the reflective disc on her right revealed the blinding light from Craft Two’s burners as it gained on her at an angle from her rear right.

Having been appointed simultaneously with Steeka, Integrity Machinist Laura’nei Arabel was the navigator of Craft Two. She was normally a girl of few words and seemed even frostier when flying a mechadragon.

However, her love for speed ran even deeper than Steeka’s. Steeka smiled wryly and gave her a gentle prod.

“That’s too fast, Laura.”

“You’re too slow, Stee.”

What did you just say? She thought.

The Underworld Space Force was required to follow rules and regulations to the letter, but even their spartan instructors would be unable to monitor outside of the atmosphere. Plus, the three-hour journey to their destination, companion star Admina, meant that minor mishaps were well expected.

Steeka pulled the stick down a level and left Craft Two slightly behind her, then settled into the backrest, grinning.

Her upwards gaze was drawn towards the exquisite relief inlaid on the narrow cockpit's ceiling.

Two swords of black and white; vertical and abreast; roses of azure and fragrant olive petals of orange surrounding them. This was the emblem of the «Star King», who was slowly beginning to achieve legendary status.

It had been more than 30 years since the Star King and Queen had departed the royal palace of primary star Caldina: the Central Cathedral.

Steeka and Laura'nei had been Integrity Machinists for four years but were both 15 years of age, so, naturally, neither had ever met them before. Throughout their childhoods, however, they would hear anecdotes from their parents, also Machinists. Their parents had likewise heard a great many tales from *their* parents.

Schtrinen House and Arabel House both boasted uninterrupted history of serving the Star King throughout his nearly 200-year reign, ever since the time of the Royal Guard Machinists — who were apparently once called «Knights».

Seven generations ago, their ancestors Tiese Schtrinen and Ronye Arabel had protected the Star King, who was yet to assume his position at the time and carried out military achievements in a war with the four imperial families who wielded power on the first land of Caldina. The Emperor's and great noble families' domineering power was done away with and the oppressed peoples of private territories were liberated.

Later on, the Star King had developed the first mechadragon and crossed the «Mountain Range at the Edge» that encircled the land and towered all the way to the highest point of the atmosphere.

With venerable patience he negotiated with the divine beasts who had rampaged unrestrainedly throughout undeveloped territory since ancient eras, sometimes battled them one-on-one and emerged victorious, then brought to life fertile colonies and bestowed them upon the Goblin and Orcish races, who, at the time, were discriminatorily termed «demihumans», and allowed them to build their own nations.

Finally, having treaded all of Caldina, the King turned his attention to the vastness of space.

Repeated improvements upon the mechadragons finally enabled them to escape the atmosphere.

Near Solus, he discovered another star that formed a pair with Caldina, and christened it Admina.

After creating a periodic route for interstellar large mechadragon transit, and not long after establishing the first Admina settlement, he was elected first Star King of Underworld.

Under the rule of a King and Queen with eternal Life who never languished, the two stars would continue to flourish — or so everyone thought, but at a certain point both King and Queen had, as prophesied, abdicated and entered a long sleep. Finally, 30 years ago, they never appeared before the public again and departed this world.

After that, political matters were decided through conferences comprising military and citizen representatives. With no more enemies, ground and space forces began slowly diminishing in size, but still obeyed the Star King's prophecy by sustaining stern traditions in their Machinist training.

The Star King's prophecy had gone like this:

—*One day, a gate to another world, the «Real World», will be opened once more.*

—*When that time comes, both worlds will be shaped by a vast revolution.*

Steeka didn't really take these words seriously, but it was said that once the gate to another world was opened, then an age would arrive during which the continued existence of Underworld would come into question. The prophecy warned against merely anticipating integration and compassion; the people must continue to hone their strength with pride and independence, or else the five human races of Humans, Giants, Goblins, Orcs, and Ogres will be struck again with tragedy of even greater misery than the «War with Another World» 200 years ago.

But Steeka was not afraid.

No matter what world or age was coming for them, she could fight valiantly as long as she had the wings of a mechadragon.

—*Because I'm a member of the glorious Integrity Machinist Order, and we have traditions dating back to the age-old creation of this world.*

She murmured, then looked again towards the ceiling emblem—

Next moment.

Vermillion light appeared below the main imagepanel, as letters and a warning tone simultaneously signaled the detection of an abnormally-sized Element aggregate.

“Wha... What?!”

She had just yelped and leapt up when Laura'nei's anxious voice traveled over the hearing tube.

“*Blue Rose 74, I'm reading the approach of an enormous Umbral Element being! Element density... 2700?!*”

“It's a Legendary-class Space Beast... the «**Abyssal Horror**»...”

As she muttered the creature's name in Sacred Tongue, a blotch of pitch-black void was already reflecting off the right side of a sea of stars covering the main imagepanel, like a splash of ink.

The uniquely-named Abyssal Horror was the most vicious of confirmed space beasts. As many as 12 giant tentacles on its globular body stretched 200 mel in diameter when fully extended. Its was 20 times larger than a single mechadragon fighter.

And since its enormous frame was formed entirely from pure, high-density Umbral Elements, attacks of almost any type did nothing at all. But that was not the reason it was called the most vicious.

Unlike most other Legendary Beasts, the Abyssal Horror utterly rejected human attempts at communication. It seemed to be constituted solely from an impulse to kill and destroy; as soon as it saw her mechadragon currently in interstellar travel, it would make a beeline and devour her completely.

Even the Star King, who was known for treating the Legendary Beasts with respect, seemed to have attempted to eliminate this space beast after enduring the tragic destruction of several large civilian mechadragons heading for Admina. But this king, whose power was said to outstrip a whole army, had been unable to fully eradicate the Abyssal Horror.

According to observations conducted later, after patrolling back and forth between the two stars at the same speed and on the same route and then considering the matter for a while, the space beast decided to allow all mechadragons to undergo interstellar travel under the condition that they would avoid times in which they would come into contact with it.

Steeka and Laura'nei had, of course, chosen to take off from Caldina at a time and on a day which the space beast ought to have been flying behind distant Admina.

—However.

“Why?... It's too soon for it to appear...”

Steeka muttered, her trembling hands resting on the stick.

But she immediately pulled herself together and screamed shrilly into the speaking tube.

“Yaw left 180 and retreat at full speed! Pull back within the Caldina atmosphere!”

“Roger that!!”

Laura’nei replied, her voice also nervous.

Steeka banked the mechadragon left while pulling hard on the control stick. Long white flame shot from the flight control thruster exhaust and her body was shoved into the seat with suffocating weight. The stars on the imagepanel drew long arcs and slid away to the lower right.

She finished the turn and the imagepanel was once again filled with Caldina’s blue light, where she had left the ground just ten minutes ago. It looked just within reach, but in reality it was despairingly far away.

Almost praying, she accelerated to maximum speed. Screaming roars issued from the Eternal Thermal Elements.

But the speed gauge’s needle reached five levels before its upper limit and stopped there. The Abyssal Horror was stealing away resources within an ultra-wide radius, preventing the resource collectors in the mechadragon’s wings from performing to their usual standards.

The space beast’s jet-black frame was growing even larger than it was before through the rear view of the sub-imagepanel. She should already see its incessantly wriggling tentacles.

Muffled violet-blue light began to concentrate at the front of two particularly long tentacles.

“Stee, he’s preparing to attack!”

Steeka immediately responded to the voice from Craft Two.

“I see him! Put up a Luminous Element barrier behind us!!”

She shouted, punching a button on the instrument panel with her left hand. The armor around the mechadragon’s middle opened with a thunderous rumble. Steeka drew a deep breath and concentrated—

“System call! Generate Luminous Element!!”

She bellowed, sending ten or so Luminous Elements traveling through the communication channel built into the control stick clutched tightly between her hands and out into space from two places on the mechadragon’s middle.

Acting on Steeka’s thoughts, they changed shape and transformed into a circular barrier.

Next moment.

The space beast’s tentacles lobbed forward a globule of dazzling violet-blue light, as though it were tossing a ball.

With an echoing bang like tearing metal, the dark shot hurtled through space.

In three short seconds or so it would impact the Luminous Element barrier—

“...Eeyaahh!!”

Steeka couldn’t help but shriek as the mechadragon was buffeted by violent shaking. At the same time, she heard Laura’nei’s voice over the hearing tube.

Two shots had torn easily through Steeka’s barrier as if it were paper, shearing deeply through the craft’s rear armor.

Several instruments turned instantly red. The resource communication channel began to malfunction too; her acceleration grew sluggish.

Through the sub-imagepanel, Steeka was certain that only the amorphous, black Abyssal Horror was split into a grin.

She looked at the image of her side and realized that Craft Two's single wing had been destroyed, and its speed had taken an enormous hit.

"Laura! Laura!!"

She screamed her name, and fortunately heard a hoarse reply.

"...Don't worry, I'm fine. But.. this kid can no longer fly..."

"...We'll have to eject. Think of a way to reach Caldina with the thrusters on the Machinist uniforms..."

"That's impossible!... No, I mean, I don't want to do that!! We can't leave him and run away by ourselves!!"

Hearing Laura'nei's shriek—

Steeka could not articulate a reply.

To a Machinist, a mechadragon wasn't just a manmade object of steel; it was an irreplaceable partner whose spirit interlinked with yours. Just like the dragons ridden by the Integrity Knights of ancient times.

".....That's right. You're right."

Steeka murmured, and silently covered the control stick with both hands.

She took a deep breath, smiled, and muttered:

"Then let's fight to the end together... Yaw again, and attack with full strength with your main cannon. Is that okay, Laura?"

"...Roger that."

Her last communication was as usual: a single, cold sentence.

Still smiling, Steeka slowly pulled up the control stick and turned her injured, beloved dragon 180 degrees.

0000000—...—...

The Abyssal Horror roared, or laughed; it was uncertain.

—At least we'll teach him a lesson before we die. Do our best to make him wait just a bit longer before attacking this route again.

Determined, Steeka pressed down the red button on the top of the control stick by half.

The main cannon equipped at the front of the mechadragon clanked open. Usually at this time one would generate the most effectively typed Element, but for the Abyssal Horror that barely had a physical body, even polar oppositely typed Luminous Elements wouldn't be able to harm it that much.

In that case, she would attack with Cryogenic Elements, something she knew well, Steeka thought as she began reciting the incantation.

Clear blue light appeared on the mechadragon's chin.

She glanced to her side and saw Craft Two's main cannon bursting with red light. It looked like Laura'nei had chosen to attack with Thermal Elements.

Only 1000 mel away now, the space beast threw open eight tentacles in preparation to attack.

Steeka drew in a sharp breath, ready to call the order to fire.

But—

"Wa... Wait, Stee!! What's...!?"

Laura'nei's shocked voice split her right ear in half.

What do you have to say at this point... Steeka thought, and at that moment.

She saw it too.

Stars were descending.

A dazzling trail of white light was approaching directly from above her main imagepanel at astonishing speed.

A mechadragon?! She thought, but immediately refuted herself.
The light was too small from this distance. It was about two mel in size and about as small as a human—

No.

It was a human.

They only resembled a star because of the light coming from a spherical barrier of Luminous Elements around them. The dark figure of a person was clearly visible within.

The figure came to a stop about 100 mel ahead of the two mechadragons.

Almost simultaneously, the Abyssal Horror let out a deafening howl and fired eight shots of light.

Before she was struck by the shock of how a real live human had appeared in deathly cold space, Steeka was screaming:

“What are you doing?! Get out of there, now!!”

But the person made absolutely no response.

As the hem of their long coat flapped, they stood with arms bravely folded, suspended at a point in midair.

Such a thin protective barrier would have as much effect as a piece of paper against the Abyssal Horror’s shot. Steeka could almost picture the sight of blood and flesh exploding in all directions the instant one of the light shots impacted, accompanied by a low roar.

“Ruuuuuuuuun!!”

“Run away!!”

She shrieked again at the top of her lungs simultaneously with Laura’nei.

Eight shots of violet-blue light, looking to be three mel in diameter each, all came screaming with metallic howls.

And then, as though they collided violently with a transparent wall, they stopped in midair and ricocheted in different directions.

The universe trembled.

The innumerable stars reflected in Steeka's widened eyes shook like ripples on water. Next moment, a shockwave roared past her and rumbled the mechadragon's enormous body.

At a complete loss for words, Steeka noticed that the needle in the miniature instrument on the right side of her imagepanel swung straight up in an instant.

"You're... joking... that's impossible..."

Steeka had never seen the instrument, called the «Incarnation meter», move up 20 percent like this. Her ears filled with Laura'nei's awed voice.

"...I don't believe it... Such powerful Incarnation... It's like the entire universe is trembling..."

But the reality before their eyes was undeniable.

The indisputable reality that one tiny human, without using an Element barrier, had deflected a space beast's attack with Incarnation — a secret technique of the ancient Integrity Knights.

Ooo...00000000—.....

The faraway Abyssal Horror roared.

A roar of rage, or horror?

Perhaps understanding that its dark shot attacks had no effect, the space beast extended countless tentacles ahead and thrust them forward.

The minuscule human figure opposite it reached their outstretched arms behind their back, and drew out two longswords equipped there in one go.

"He's... not thinking of fighting it with swords?!"

Steeka couldn't stop herself from leaning forward, hands perched on the imagepanel.

The Abyssal Horror was more than 200 mel long in total. Its frame was constructed from an aggregation of amorphous Umbral Elements. Metal blades less than a mel long had no hope of vying against it.

However, the mysterious swordsman pointed the white sword in its left hand with an effortless motion.

Then he shouted.

Even in the void of space, and through the thick armor of the mechadragon, Steeka heard the swordsman's clear voice.

“Release recollection!!”

Blinding light burned the imagepanel stark white.

When the image immediately returned, at its center it was possible to see several streaks of bluish-white light shooting from the blade raised by the swordsman and rocketing towards the Abyssal Horror.

Those lights were as thin as fibers compared to the space beast's gargantuan form, but when they struck and wrapped around it, the beast's speed of assault became visibly attenuated. The frantic motions of its freely wriggling 12 tentacles became stiff. Almost as if they had frozen.

But that was impossible. The Abyssal Horror was a creature acclimated to the extremely cold environment of space. It was impossible to create a chill colder than the temperature of space.

Steeka's stupefaction was immediately blown away by Laura'nei's murmuring in her ear.

“That's... That's the «Armament Full Control Art»... No, the «Memory Release Art»...?”

“What?... Only highest-level Machinists can use that!”

“But... that technique just...”

Their hesitant conversation was interrupted by a third roar from the space beast.

O... OOOOOOORRRRRRR!!

All of a sudden, the enormous trapped body trembled and three new tentacles erupted from it. They formed giant jet-black spears and lunged towards the mysterious swordsman.

But this time, the swordsman raised the sword in his right hand with a lazy movement.

Then, he shouted again:

“Release... recollection!!”

What came shooting out was darkness, deeper, heavier, and denser than the tentacles of the space beast.

When they touched each other, it created a shockwave that almost warped the entire vicinity and the mechadragon shuddered again. Violet-blue electricity crawled within the void, reflecting dazzling rays of light on the imagepanel.

Steeka’s own shock had reached a level difficult to describe with words.

How was he producing multiple iterations at the same time of a secret technique that only seven of the highest-level Integrity Machinists were capable of? Moreover, not even a formation of destroyer-class mechadragons were able to deal with the Abyssal Horror’s full-power attack, but this swordsman had blocked it by himself.

Not even her own parents in Centoria would believe the existence of this swordsman.

However—

The truly shocking scene was still awaiting her.

“Stee! There’s... another swordsman!!”

Her eyes searched in all directions at frantic speed and spotted a new human figure streaking down from the same direction that the mysterious two-bladed swordsman had come from.

This new figure was of smaller stature. Even through the Element barrier, she could see their long hair and skirt billowing. Her right hand was grasping a rapier that looked extremely fragile.

The swordswoman raised her right hand straight up—

Then brought it swishing down forward with a fluid motion.

Steeka saw a streak of variegated light appear in pitch-black space, shaking. At the same time, there came an incredible sound, like countless members of a harmonizing choir.

Laaaaaaaaaaaaa.

The Incarnation meter's needle trembled nonstop as it pointed up.

A star...

A meteorite of scarcely believable magnitude appeared out of nowhere and shot past above her head, wrapped in flames.

Every asteroid on the route connecting Caldina and Admina had been destroyed many tens of years ago. But the weighty sensation making her entire mechadragon's body vibrate was most definitely not her imagination.

Perhaps noticing the gigantic rock heading straight for it, the Abyssal Horror shrieked.

It grew two new tentacles and brandished them, as though attempting to block the star.

There was no sound upon impact.

The front end of the fiercely burning meteor instantaneously disintegrated the space beast's tentacles.

Then it burrowed easily into the center of the gigantic body—

And shattered the enormous beast of concentrated Umbral Elements in one shot.

000000000000000000— — —.....

A shriek of death throes overlapped with the meteor's explosion, echoing throughout the whole universe. The vast release of Resources bleached Steeka's eyes pure white, then bright red, and finally violet.

"They... defeated..... it...? That... monster.....?"

She murmured in a trembling voice.

But—

"Ah... It's... It's not over!!"

The pilot of Craft Two who was normally slightly calmer than Steeka was the first to notice what was happening.

The fragments of the Abyssal Horror that were blown in all directions and what they originally thought were burned up, began to move.

Each piece of faint Umbral Element was only tens of cen long and completely incomparable to the immense size of the original body, were wriggling irregularly like a swarm of flies and attempting to flee.

Records indicated that in the past, the King had once also pushed that beast to this extent.

But the Abyssal Horror had ultimately avoided destruction after being reduced to thousands of fragments, finally escaped to the edges of the universe, healed its wounds, and attacked the route once more.

In that way, this would only be repeating that legend.

"No... Don't let it get away! You have to burn them all!!"

Steeka couldn't help but scream.

But the two-bladed swordsman and the rapier-wielding swordswoman seemed unable to make any immediate moves. She could hardly blame them; they had let loose such massive Incarnation after all.

The fragments of the Abyssal Horror drew crooked paths and gradually flew away, as though they were mocking them.

——Then.

The swarm of flies was suddenly thrown into disarray.

It moved irregularly, as though dispersing and not knowing which direction to flee in.

Steeka held her breath and poked the imagepanel with her fingertip, enlarging a portion of the image.

She saw golden light.

She continued to enlarge the object that was blooming pure light, almost like a miniature Solus.

“.....A person.....”

A third swordsman.

Hair like molten gold. Armor that was equally gold. A pure white skirt. Eyes of sky blue that stared towards the enemy with resolution.

.....*I know her.*

“This swordswoman... No, this knight... I know her.”

Steeka murmured. Immediately she heard Laura’nei reply, “*Me too.*”

Every feature of this golden knight was exactly the same as the gigantic portrait hanging in the throne room on the 50th floor of the Central Cathedral. She had earned many military achievements in the War with Another World an age ago yet legendarily disappeared in battle, the most powerful Integrity Knight in history. It was no mistake; her name was—

“...Alice... -sama...?”

As though she had heard their voices, the knight’s right hand moved.

With one fluid movement she drew out the longsword from her left waist.

The golden blade reflected Solus’s light, giving it an intimidating shine. The many fragments of the space beast went into disorder as though in fear, and fled pell-mell in every direction.

The knight raised the longsword ahead of its body.

The voice that then came from her mouth conjured thoughts of a wind that blew through the entire universe. The mechadragon’s Incarnation meter shattered with a faint explosion.

“Release recollection!!”

The sword flashed even more intensely.

With a metallic *clang!* the blade disintegrated into countless splinters.

The knight slowly moved the hilt with her right hand.

Whoosh. The splinters expanded into space as though they were flower petals blown by a breeze.

The golden meteor shower flew outwards all at once.

Every tiny light penetrated the fragments of the space beast flying every which way with spine-chilling accuracy. The pierced pieces of Umbral Element were burned up by golden light and evaporated.

“.....Such power...”

All Steeka could do was mumble.

Not even every single mechadragon in the Integrity Machinist Order all firing their main cannons at once could display such accuracy and strength.

The Abyssal Horror, the most vicious space beast in Underworld that terrorized the populace let loose the most bizarre roar yet at the instant its final fragment was run through by the golden sword.

EEEEEEEEEEEEeeeeee.....

When the noise died down, the space beast was finally vanquished.

Dazed, Steeka stared as the golden meteor shower concentrated towards the knight's hand and changed once more into the form of a longsword.

Even if this golden knight was the ancient Integrity Knight Alice, then who exactly were the other two?

On the imagepanel, the golden sword returned her sword to its sheath, then flew quickly across space and approached the swordsman in black and the swordswoman in pearly attire.

The three of them conversed briefly, then turned as one towards Steeka and Laura'nei.

She couldn't make out their faces. But she knew that all three of them were smiling.

Just then, the two-bladed swordsman returned his white and black longsword to his back, and waved his right hand gently.

In that instant—

Something immensely deep within Steeka's chest was impaled by immense emotion.

It was a personal pain that nearly stopped her from breathing.

"Ah... Ahh..."

Laura'nei's quiet voice in her ear and her own exhaled breath caught together.

"Ste. I know him. I know this person."

“Yeah, Laura. I... do too.”

Steeka nodded two or three times.

It wasn’t a memory of knowledge, like of the portrait in the throne room. It was different from that sort of recognition.

This was a definite remembrance felt by her heart, her fingertips, and her soul.

All of a sudden, her nose was struck by the sweet aroma of honey pies.

The coolness of a breeze across a grassy plain. The warmth of sunlight descending steadily downwards.

Faint laughter traveling from afar.

Trancelike, Steeka donned her airtight helmet, and pulled down on the handle to the right of her pilot’s seat.

The insulated air rushed out with a *whoosh*. The armor plates protecting the mechadragon’s cockpit spread open, and a sea of stars unfolded overhead. Craft Two’s navigator entryway was also open.

Standing from her seat, Steeka fixed her eyes on the three swordsmen standing in tandem, waving continuously to her from roughly 30 mel out.

No.

Another person—

Steeka’s maple-red eyes clearly captured a fourth swordsman materializing before her.

A boy wearing a sensible smile, standing to the right of the swordsman in black. Like warm air, his illusory, transparent, wobbling figure, looked ready to disappear the instant she looked away.

The flaxen-haired boy nodded slowly and deeply at Steeka.

Tears came to her eyes.

Warm tears flowed steadily down her cheeks inside her airtight helmet.



Finally, the figure of the boy vanished, as though he were melting into Solus's light as it emerged from behind Caldina.

And the young Integrity Machinist understood.

This was — this moment was the unveiling of the new age that the Star King had prophesied about.

They were the envoys from the past, come to open the gate to the future.

From this moment on, the world was going to change.

The gate to another world would open, and the current of the new age would come flooding through with a roar.

It was absolutely not the declaration of paradise's arrival. An age of unimaginable revolution and tempest was upon Underworld.

But Steeka was not at all afraid.

Because—

Her heart was simply jumping for joy.

She had been yearning for this encounter, enough to shake her soul.

Blinking away the tears, Steeka looked straight ahead of her.

Still standing, she silently pushed forward the control stick with her fingertips.

Traces of blue light appeared on the mechadragon's injured wings.

Eternal Thermal Elements blew, creating a tiny thrust, moving the craft.

For an instant, she exchanged glances with Laura'nei beside her, and both nodded fervently.

Integrity Machinist Steeka Schtrinen, a girl born in Underworld, gently piloted her mechadragon.

Towards the swordsmen waving at her from far away, whom she did not know, but who brought memories to her.

Towards the gate to the next age.

Towards the future.

All stories have just been told.

The tale ends here.

*However, the battles of Kirito, Asuna,
Leafa, Sinon, and the others,
together with Alice, will continue
from now on.*

*Whereby they shall gather once more,
sword in hand,
on what will be known as the greatest
and final battlefield,
the 「Inter-Intelligence War」.*





*All possibilities
are, for now,
fluttering ever so slightly
beyond an uncertain light,
swaying ever so slightly.*

The End.

2012.02.10 - 2016.08.10



and you.

Thanks for the luck to meet

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Afterword

Thank you very much for reading Sword Art Online Volume 18: Alicization Lasting. I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude: my gratitude to you for staying with me across 10 volumes since the beginning of the Alicization Arc in Volume 9.

I mentioned this in the afterword of Volume 1, but I would like to reiterate that I began writing the story of *Sword Art Online* (“SAO” from here on) in Fall 2001 to participate in the 9th Dengeki Novel Prize. Even though the first draft was completed before the Spring 2002 deadline, it drastically exceeded the page limit. Since I had no idea as to what and how I should cut the story, I eventually forfeit my entry.

This means that back when I had just started writing SAO, I only had the «Aincrad arc» in my head – to be more precise, the story itself only covered a few weeks right before the death game got cleared on the 75th floor. However, later on I set up my homepage and published SAO as a web novel, and fortunately, I happened to receive calls from scores of readers expressing that they would like a continuation. With a few extra side stories in between, I went on to release the second arc, «Fairy Dance», the third arc, «Phantom Bullet» (known as the «Death Gun arc» back then), and, if I remember correctly, I began the fourth arc, Alicization, in January 2005.

By now, I can’t remember why I broke out of the “VRMMO box” that I had always been writing from, or why I stepped into bigger themes like bottom-up AI, autonomous weapons, quantum brain theory, and simulated reality. The only thing I do remember is how obsessed I was about writing it, despite all the walls I was hitting.

The Alicization arc finished serializing online in July 2008.

Just around the same time, I was serializing one of my works called *Chouzetsu Kasoku Burst Linker* on a novel sharing site. Six years after my first attempt, I used that work to take on the 15th

Dengeki Novel Prize again, and I was lucky enough to win something. I changed the name from «*Burst Linker*» to «*Accel World*» and made my official debut as a commercial author. Just when I was telling people about this on my homepage, Miki Kazuma-san, the editor responsible for me, sent me an email indicating that he would like to read *SAO*.

I collated a draft of the *SAO* series written across roughly eight years, and he kindly squeezed precious time out of his editing work to read the entirety of it in one week, and told me: “Let’s publish this under Dengeki too.” I still remember it quite clearly.

Miki-san also told me back then, “I’d like to set the goal of publishing it until the last bit of Alicization.” To be honest, I thought that was a far-fetched dream. Considering the word count of the *SAO* web version, over 15 volumes would be needed in paper. Even if they could publish three volumes every year, the series would succeed only if they could get readers to support it for five whole years.

Forget publishing the end of Alicization. I wasn’t even confident that I would still be an author by then. But thanks to Miki-san’s passionate bookmaking, the neat and stunning illustrations from abec-san whom Miki-san helped persuade, and of course, the love and support from an abundance of readers, the Dengeki Bunko version of *SAO* has released volume after volume and now brings to you the finale of the Alicization arc after almost seven years since the release of Volume 1.

As a matter of fact, a lot of content was added to the Dengeki Bunko version of *SAO*, so Volume 18 is – if you count Progressive – the 22nd volume of the entire series. If you count my other series as well, this would be the 45th volume. Seven and a half years since my debut, or almost fifteen years since I first began writing *SAO* seems incredibly long to me, but somehow, at the same time, it feels like the blink of an eye.

While I was writing this afterword for the finale, a vague question flashed through my mind: “Why did I write the story of *SAO* and Alicization?”

Because I like online games and death game stories... which was probably the original reason. I don't know what would have happened had I participated in the Dengeki Prize contest as I'd planned, but the very likely result is that only the Aincrad arc would have been serialized, and in parts on the Dengeki homepage. This is because the only scenes I wanted to write 15 years ago consisted of Kirito and Asuna sitting side by side in the sunset, gazing at the destruction of Aincrad, and Kirito immediately searching for Asuna upon returning to the real world.

But I didn't stop my pen there, and I continued to write the Fairy Dance arc, the Phantom Bullet arc, and the Alicization arc. If I were to probe my impetus for doing so, other than the support of the readers who visited my personal homepage, perhaps it also had to do with... the characters themselves as they laughed together, suffered together, and fought together throughout the story. I kept on writing, led by the figures of Kirito, Asuna, and the others as they sprinted forward in search of new worlds and new adventures, until this moment... I think that was it.

Now, every time I push down the keys on my keyboard, when I close my eyes, I feel as though I'm gazing towards the backs of Kirito and the others as they chase the light in the distance. Their journey is still not over. Countless adventures are hidden within ALO and The Seed Nexus inside it, sealed within Underworld, and await them in the real world.

Of course, I want to continue to find new stories with them. Yet at the same time, I'm encumbered by the vast, uncertain scene that is the future. Before I step into the next world, I want to properly appreciate and perceive the things that Alicization, this epic story, has left for Kirito, Asuna, Alice, and the others, and myself – those are my thoughts today.

In the long period that the SAO franchise has serialized to today, I have been under the care of countless people. Nakamura Tamako, Minami Juusei, Hazuki Tsubasa, Nekobyou Neko, Himura Kiseki, Yamada Kotaro, and Kiya Shii, all in charge of the manga adaptations.

Director Itou Tomohiko, in charge of the anime adaptation, Adachi Shingo-san and Kawakami Tetsuya-san, in charge of the anime character designs, Shikama Takahiro-san, animation action director, along with all of the production staff at A-1 Pictures: producer Iwakami Atsuhiko-san, Oosawa Nobuhiro-san, Kashiwada Shin'ichiro-san, Katou Jun-san, and Niwa Masami-san. For Matsuoka Yoshitsugu-san, who provided Kirito's voice, for Tomatsu Haruka-san, who provided Asuna's voice, for Taketatsu Ayana-san, who provided Leafa's voice, for Sawashiro Miyuki-san, who provided Sinon's voice, and every one of the voice actors and actresses. For LiSA-san, Eir Aoi-san, and Haruna Luna-san, who lent their voices to the theme songs. For sound director Iwanami Yoshikazu-san, Konno Yasuyuki-san, in charge of sound effects, and Kajiura Yuki-san, who composed the soundtrack.

For Futami Yosuke-san and Kawai Yasukazu-san, who have created many games. For Washizaki Takeshi-san, in charge of radio and events.

For Miki Kazuma-san and Tsuchiya Tomoyuki-san, in charge of editing. For Kurusu Tatsuya-san, who drew the miniature maps, and abec-san, who filled the story with color through innumerable outstanding illustrations.

And lastly, to all of my readers, who have stayed with the story until now.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to you all.

Thank you very much, everyone. I hope you all will support the SAO series in the future as well.

A certain day in July 2016 Kawahara Reki



Kirito will return.

Completely original,
all new chapter of «Sword Art Online»
beginning in 2017!!!

Credits

Translation:¹⁵

defan752

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SAO Wiki

Thanks!

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SAO Archive Team

15 Translation from <https://defan752.wordpress.com/sword-art-online-volume-18-chapter-21-continued/>, <https://defan752.wordpress.com/sword-art-online-volume-18-chapter-22/>, <https://defan752.wordpress.com/sword-art-online-volume-18-chapter-23/>, <https://defan752.wordpress.com/sword-art-online-volume-18-epilogue/>, <https://defan752.wordpress.com/sword-art-online-volume-18-prologue-iii/>, and <https://defan752.wordpress.com/sword-art-online-volume-18-afterword/> on November 26, 2018.