



000-02

# *Sound of Water, Sound of Hammer*

*S* Aincrad 48<sup>th</sup> Floor  
August 2024



# 水音、槌音

みずおと、つちおと

アインクラッド第48層 2024年8月



九里史生

“Please reinforce it.”

I stared hard at the face of my client, who placed a long sword in a white scabbard onto the counter while calmly uttering that line, for roughly two seconds.

“...Wh-What is it?”

Upper body leaning away, the other party finally responded with a single cough.

“It-It’s nothing. ...It’s just that, I was wondering how long you’re intending to drag this sword along with you.”

It was a line meant as a light jab at that display of bashfulness, but with a—

“It-It’s fine, isn’t it, me dragging it about. I like it, after all.”

I was rendered once again speechless at that reply. If we were to continue looking at each other face to face like this, that near unnoticeable reddish tinge on my cheeks would be exposed, so I hastily averted my face and spoke.

“Well, it’s just like you to not even update your equipment though. Well then, please come along to the workshop.”

Reaching my hands towards the counter, I lifted the long sword with my fighting spirit, going “Yoisho!”.

The reason my face turned red was simple.

It was because three months ago, this slender long sword in my arms right now, «Dark Repulser», was what I— Lisbeth the smith, forged by swinging my smith hammer: a player-made weapon; also, the black-haired, black-clothed one-handed sword user -Kirito, who just made the “I like it” comment, was the person I am in love with. Ever since the day we met, without ceasing.

\* \* \*

My shop, «Lisbeth’s Equipment Shop» stood in the southern district of the main town area on Aincrad’s 48th floor. It was somewhat average among the manufacturing-class player shops, with the sales area and workshop situated on the first floor, and the second organized into four rooms for the kitchen and bedrooms.

As for the reason it was valued highly despite that house plan, it was due to the fact that it was furnished with a large water wheel at the back of the house, connected to a waterway. Various large-scale devices could be connected to the power transmitting axle that pierced through the wall, reaching into the workshop. For a bakery, a flour mill; for a tailor, a weaving loom; and as such, for a smith, bellows or a sharpening wheel. Considering the merit of automating these tools that would originally require a player to push and turn them by hand, the thumping sound of its rotation that rang out regardless of day or night could be said to be rather pleasant.

Kirito appeared at the shop early in the afternoon, in the second summer of Aincrad. As it was a time when steadfast players secluded themselves in the hunting grounds or labyrinth areas, while the converse sipped away at iced drinks after a meal at bars or restaurants, there were no other customers within the shop.

I left the NPC, Hanna (female, estimated to be fifteen years old, surname, Heinemann) to tend to the shop, and moved towards the workshop while carrying the heavy sword. After Kirito, who came along, opened the door without requiring any additional prompting, the sound of the water wheel's rotation became remarkably louder.

“...It's such a relief that Aincrad's summers aren't that hot, really.”

His impression was probably due to spotting the furnace burning red hot in a corner of the room, I thought, as I heard him speak behind me. I lowered myself onto the chair beside the anvil and unintentionally broke into a wry smile.

“If you care about the heat, you should just take that off when you're within the area, at least.”

The trademark of Kirito, who possessed the cool second title of «The Black Swordsman», was that black leather coat of his that extended below his knees; if one were to take up that sort of appearance in the real world during August, it would probably eventually result in heatstroke. Leaving the sheathed Dark Repulser on the anvil for the moment, I shifted my view to Kirito, who was leaning against the wall, and he had a bitter smile on while scratching his head.

“It's like, well, aside from sleeping, I just can't calm down without this on nowadays, you know...”

“That said, don't tell me you actually had the same one equipped since the first floor?”

Previously, when I was chatting with my close friend, Asuna, at this very spot, the topic ended up being Kirito's only set of clothes. According to her, it seemed that he had the same appearance ever

since he got his hands on a unique rare, «Coat of Midnight», from the floor boss on the first floor.

At my question, Kirito smiled once again and shook his head.

“I do have to update my armor every now and then. This «Blackwurm Coat» is the... fourth generation, I guess?”

“Oh... That’s a monster drop too?”

“Nope, it’s player-made...”

That somewhat complicated expression that flashed past Kirito’s face as he replied did not escape my gaze. Maintaining my smile, I pressed on without a moment’s delay.

“Oh. Which shop is it from?”

“Well, that’s... it’s just something from A-«Ashley’s»...”

“Ohh. Hehh. Is that so.”

As I dragged my words out, Kirito made the truly conspicuous motion of averting his eyes.

Ashley was a charismatic seamstress, widely said to be Aincrad’s number one. Although it wasn’t like she was a business rival to me, a smith, she set up shop in Lindas like me, in the northern section and it was thrice the size of mine (with two water wheels), not to mention the shop’s name, «Ashley’s», was one most could not help but notice. In addition, the person in question was a considerable beauty in her early twenties.

Likely due to being aware that the defensive line-up in my - Lisbeth Equipment Shop- included lightweight armor for swordsmen using one-handed swords as well, Kirito babbled on with an expression on the verge of letting out a cold sweat effect.

“Nah, it’s just that my build is based on leather armor and all, and the only tailor I knew that could handle a high grade raw material like black dragon leather was Ashley-san, so I really had no choice at all, you see...”

“I didn’t even say anything, did I. But still, if I’m not wrong, wasn’t it Ashley-san’s policy on custom-made items to only take up requests that interested her?”

“Re-Really? I was, you know, referred there by Asuna, her regular customer... oh right, that’s just like the first time I came to Lis’s shop, isn’t it. That time was a real disaster, eh, smashing that sword you were selling when I tried swinging it and...”

Upon getting to that point, he froze up with an expression that said “Oh-crap-I-stepped-on-a-land-mine”, and I ended up bursting out in laughter, unable to suppress it any further.

“Ahaha... there’s no need to make a face like that, that’s nothing more than a good lesson to me now. Back then, I did make swords only focused on Accuracy and Quickness, without much care for their durability, after all. Swords that are strong with the system assistance are popular, but I realized that the swords that’ll protect my customers’ lives in a pinch are the durable ones...”

After my laughter settled down and I turned back to the anvil, I lifted Dark Repulser up once again. I gently pulled the sword out from its sheath, it was heavy enough for me to have no proper way of swinging it in actual combat even if I could carry it around with my STR.

The blade that was fairly slender for a one-handed long sword was silver, with a faint bluish tint. Asuna’s beloved sword, «Lambent Light», was of translucent silver much like a crystal, but in contrast the

appearance of this was exactly like that which often appears in fantasy works, «Mithril Silver».

“If I’m not mistaken, this is +39 at the moment, right?”

“Yep. In short, I’m challenging for that +40 today.”

Kirito assented to my question without hesitation, but having a number of +40 as a reinforcement value wasn’t quite common.

Every piece of equipment that existed in Aincrad possessed a property named «Reinforcement Attempts Count». As its name implied, it was the number of times one could challenge for a reinforcement on it, and that number fell by one each time, regardless of success or failure.

The value of the attempts count for «Dark Repulser» was 50, far more than the rest, among the swords I forged. And now, the remaining count was 8. In other words, the results of reinforcement thus far was 39 successes, compared to a mere 3 failures. Putting it into a success rate, it was at, erm... approximately 93 percent. This was a figure that could already be said to be a miracle, and if the information brokers were to get wind of it, they would likely come here straight away, sniffing for the trick to it. But still, even if they were to come, it’s not like I knew the reason for it.

In any case, the reason why this sword that was forged three months ago could still be used by Kirito on the frontlines (currently the seventieth floor), was mainly due to this terrifying reinforcement value. Players uninterested in weapon reinforcement mostly updated the arms they mainly used with each floor, but Kirito equipping the sword that I made for this long was a cause for happiness, and conversely, concern, as well.



As for why that was so, if one planned to boost the success rate of reinforcement to its maximum value, the quality and quantity of the raw materials required simply became outrageous. Even if he was a solo player, laying claim to all of the drop items, it was not difficult to guess that an immense amount of time was needed to gather all those raw materials.

—How about abandoning this sword, and advancing to a rare weapon dropped on the frontlines?

I wonder if I should be giving such advice, as a smith myself.

Probably, if it's a rare weapon at the class of the 70<sup>th</sup> floor's, by getting to around +20, its cumulative properties should be able to match this Dark Repulser +39. And considerably fewer raw materials would be required for reinforcement compared to the present.

As I stared at the sword, I took in a breath of air, and opened my mouth.

However, the words that came out were—

“...The raw materials, you made sure to get all of them, right? If you're challenging for +40, I have no desire to do it without the probability fully boosted.”

Stifling my inner thoughts, I spoke with my lips pouted, and Kirito nodded with a broad grin.

“Of course.”

The right hand fitted into a fingerless glove (of course, made from black leather) nimbly manipulated a window. What materialized was an excessively large leather bag. Laying the sword down and peeking into the bag I received, metal plates that appeared undoubtedly high

grade, along with fangs and horns of monsters, various types of jewels and such were tightly packed within.

Spreading those onto the floor to confirm their quantity would require a dreadful amount of time, so I tapped the bag with my finger, displaying a small window indicating its content. Tapping the sword atop the anvil next and hitting once again, on the reinforcement value shown on the small window, a sub-window with the information on the raw material items needed for reinforcement floated out.

If I were to drag the bag's window with my fingertip, the moment it got into contact with the sword's, it would automatically go into comparison mode, informing whether both contents are the same. If the items' names and quantities all turned blue, it was a complete match.

"Looks okay. But really now, it's amazing how you manage to gather this much every single time!"

After I voiced out a line that went against my actual thoughts again, Kirito casually shrugged his shoulders.

"Most of the items drop even at the frontlines, so they naturally pile up while mapping. There's only a small portion that I have to gather over at the lower floors, you know."

I knew just how difficult it was to gather the required amount of that «small portion», with me doing the same for my one-handed mace on occasions. But as expected, words opposing that left my mouth.

"Don't let the news that the clearers are rampaging about the lower floors get tattled on to the information brokers. I'm totally against getting onto the newspaper as «That Mr. Big Shot Bastard's favorite shop» or anything like that!"

“Hahaha, I limit myself to only hunt at the lower floors late at night, so it’s fine.”

“...Is that so. Well, that’s fine, then.”

Mapping the frontlines’ dangerous labyrinth areas in the day, and after taking a mere short nap, switching to the tiresome work of gathering materials. That meant Kirito had kept up that sort of lifestyle for these three months. I checked his complexion with a sidelong glance on reflex, but that smoothness on his avatar was just like that of a girl’s, without any sign of the fatigue that must have accumulated within him.

Chewing over the silent discord in my mind, I cleared away all of the windows with a single wave of my right hand.

“Well then, let’s get started right away. What’s the property you want?”

“Sharpness, please!”

My perpetually positive client gave a slight nod in return, and after I reached my hands out to the large forge, what could be said to be the main fixture of the room, I changed the menu from «Production» to «Reinforcement». Setting the details to Sharpness, I poured the raw materials for reinforcement, stuffed in the bag, into it.

Actually, there was a need to operate the bellows until the furnace burns bright red, but thanks to the water wheel, that process was currently automated. The small hand-carried furnace meant for street stalls used fuel, so bellows were unnecessary, but it did not have the capacity to take in this large quantity of raw materials.

The large furnace that easily swallowed down the objects, which numbered over a hundred, somehow appeared delighted as it burned

ever stronger, and the mass of raw materials was liquefied in mere seconds. The blaze, which was orangey-red in color, turned into the silver used to represent the Sharpness reinforcement mode.

Without further delay, I thrust Dark Repulser, extracted from its scabbard, into the furnace. The silver-tinted light wrapped around the blade, and right as it started gleaming brilliantly, I moved the sword to the anvil.

All that was left was to hit it with the smith hammer for the required number of times.

Although I really had no choice but to swing the hammer for close to two hundred and fifty times back when this sword was meticulously forged from the ingot, for reinforcement, whether challenging for +1 or +40, the number of hits needed was fixed at ten.

I unfastened my beloved «Zoringen Hammer +20» from the belt on my waist, and firmly held the grip, wound up with red leather.

Smith hammers were classified as tool items while being blunt-type weapons at the same time, so they naturally could be reinforced. That said, it was impossible to hit it with itself, so I had a sub-hammer exclusively for the sake of reinforcing it.

I matched my breathing with the lifting of my beloved hammer, the so-called *beloved sword* of my own, that though not at the level of Kirito's tenacity, still took a good two months to reinforce. I held it still for a moment at its peak then brought it down in one go.

\*Kaan!\*, a clear hammer sound. The sound I loved. Silver and orange mingled in the scattered sparks, springing onto the floor and vanishing.

Two times. Three times. When producing my goods for sale, or reinforcing the weapons of other customers, I was able to achieve a state of nothingness on the very first hit—or rather, I became entirely absorbed in the sounds and lights, but only when working on Kirito's sword did I end up getting my personal feelings involved.

Do protect that person; be sure to come back to this workshop with him; I would swing my hammer as I speak.

Four times, five times. As long as this sword stayed on Kirito's back, we were connected by a unique bond. I was unable to guard his back during the boss clearing battles like Asuna, but I could assist him by repairing his sword's durability, and increasing its reinforcement value.

Six times, seven times.

...However.

This bond would not last forever. Dark Repulser's reinforcement attempts count would decrease by one yet again today, with 7 left. If it were to continue being reinforced at this pace, there would be two months left... it would wear out before the arrival of winter. If that happened, there would be no choice but to switch over to a new sword to continue fighting at the frontlines.

When that time came, it was not certain that Kirito would request for me to produce a new sword once again. No, that possibility was unlikely. To forge a sword with high specifications, overwhelmingly rare... in other words, extremely highly priced ingots were necessary, but a monster drop wouldn't cost even a single col. To Kirito who was always fighting at the frontlines, participating in all of the boss battles, not to mention having a rather high chance at obtaining the last attack

bonus, there should be plenty of opportunities for him to get his hands on a rare one-handed sword.

Eight times. And the right hand of mine that caused the ninth hammering sound to echo out—stopped in midair.

I felt Kirito's confused gaze on my left cheek. But I could not bear to look in that direction.

Instead of swinging the hammer down, I embraced it close to my chest. «Dark Repulser», engulfed in a silver brilliance atop the anvil, was waiting for that final hit in silence. The duration of the reinforcement effect was three minutes. If that time passed by, the glow wrapping up the blade will extinguish, and the reinforcement would result in a failure automatically.

“...I...”

What escaped from my lips was a quivering voice unfitting of the ever cheerful smith, Lisbeth.

“...I-I won't hit it anymore... Because... be-because when the attempts count runs out, this sword's role will... it will then...”

End.

Honestly— Honestly, if I really were thinking for Kirito's sake, I would have thought it better for that day to hurry up and arrive. If he were to advance to a new sword, reinforcing from +1 again, gathering materials will get much easier. My mind understood this, but my arm refused to move. With the hammer clutched to my chest, I could only tremble softly.

Then, I felt Kirito parting from the wall. Step by step, I could hear his muted footsteps stopped right beside me. The hem of that black

coat fluttered as it spread out, the swordsman went down on his knees at my side.

“...Hey, Lisbeth. I... have a hunch.”

It was a situation where it would have been perfectly fine for him to go, “Hurry up and hit it!” with anger as the client, but Kirito’s voice was gentle. Since that night of the day we met, when he recounted various stories to me at the bottom of that dragon’s nest; nothing has changed.

“...A hunch?”

I turned apprehensively, and those black pupils shyly blinked once, right in front of my own.

“Yeah. The frontlines are still on the seventieth floor, and there’s still thirty left above... but I wonder why. I have a hunch-no, a belief that when I fight the last boss of this castle, what I will be holding, is this Dark Repulser.”

“...Why exactly, do you think so...?”

“Well, you see, the Cardinal System’s the one who decided the title for this sword, right? «Dark Repulser», that which will repel darkness... there’s no way such a name will be labeled onto anything aside from «end equipment».”

—Having said all that, he looked on at me with that impish grinning face for a bit, without any further words.

Normally, this would have been the point when I took a deep, looong breath, or jab in with a “Why are you running your mouth off like that”. But for just this time alone, my lips too, twisted into a meek smile. I answered in a voice that was soft, but trembling no more.

“...That might be right. No... it will, definitely happen...”

“That’s right. ...So, come on, that one last hit, finish it off with a klang.”

“Yeah. I have a hunch too. This time too, will be a success.”

I gently lifted the hammer that I was embracing up once again.

I inhaled a deep breath, stopped, shut my eyelids, and whispered to the sword.

—Sorry for the suspense. You, with your master, have always driven away the darkness from around me, haven’t you? I’ll believe too... that one day, a time when that light of yours shines upon all of the people imprisoned in this castle will arrive.

Tenderly, and thus, strongly, the hammer swung down.

Ten times.

\* \* \*

The right hand clothed in a black leather glove firmly gripped the hilt of the «Dark Repulser +40» I held out.

\*Swish, swish\* the blade flashed with nearly no hint of its weight, dispersing a prismatic display of radiance into the air. Finally, the sword blade slid into its scabbard with a fluid sound, and its owner smiled, seemingly pleased.

“Yeah, with this, the 70<sup>th</sup> floor boss can just come at me.”

“If you’re going to say that, don’t you dare go tumbling over accidentally right in front of the boss, like on the 69th floor. That



report got on the front page of the newspaper, and even I got ashamed over it, you know.”

“Y-Yes... Sorry about that...”

Before the smith, Lisbeth, with her arms folded, was the swordsman, Kirito, scratching his head. We had completely returned to how the two of us usually were; it felt somehow comforting, yet just a little lonesome.

Stifling those feelings, I stretched out vigorously.

“O-Oof... Haah, well, anyway, I’m glad it succeeded. Even if the probability was fully boosted, there are still times when it fails. No way will I be accepting another reinforcement attempt this stressful for a while.”

I mentioned those lines casually, but upon hearing it, an awkward expression surfaced onto Kirito’s features for some reason.

“...What’s the matter?”

“N-Nah, that’s... actually, just how should I say this, the timing just happened to cross over today...”

“...The timing?”

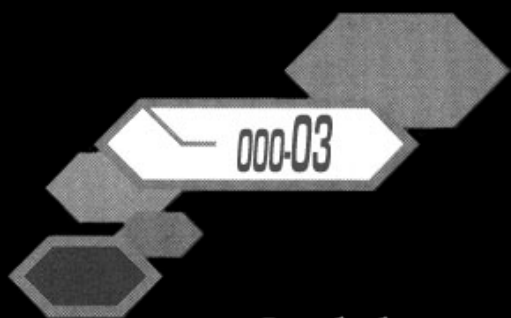
With that, the swordsman opened his storage window and stored Dark Repulser. Following that, with some swift manipulation, what materialized above the window was wrapped in a scabbard of black leather, a long sword that gave off an intense presence that I could feel, even from where I stood.

“...I was thinking that it would be nice if I could entrust the +40 for this guy to you as well...”

Those words, along with the sword which was brought before me, «Elucidator», another one that was precious to Kirito, made me gaze at him in silence for several seconds.

*Haa*—— And I let out a deep, long sigh.

(END)



000-03

# Caliber SS

§ Alfheim  
December 2025



## Chapter 1

“Onii-chan, look at this.”

With that sound, Suguha handed me a thin tablet terminal. I looked at it sleepily.

I went to sleep like normal last night, but it seemed like I had a long dream. Maybe it was due to that, this morning at the breakfast table, I had to use strong coffee to forcefully turn my thinking gears that refused to move. However in this situation, a small warning lamp lit in part of my head, and I hesitated whether to accept the tablet or not.

Because about two weeks ago, in a similar situation and timing, when she handed me a hard copy, it was my secret misdeed—not exactly that serious, but Suguha silently collected evidence of my character conversion from flight type VRMMO «ALfheim Online» (ALO) to the gun battle VRMMO «Gun Gale Online» (GGO). ‘Is this the same as that time, but what have I done recently’, while thinking that, Suguha said with a bitter smile.

“I am not going to hang you, this time. Just look at it!”

I fearfully accepted the tablet that was held out again, and took a peek.

It displayed the same thing as the previous hard copy, a news story from the country’s largest VRMMORPG information site «MMO Tomorrow». However, the page category was not GGO but ALO. When I

looked at the first article screenshot, I saw not a player avatar but a landscape. So it was true, it wasn't a story of a certain Spriggan dressed in black.

Relieved, I read the headline of the article.

However right after, I suffered a different kind of shock, and raised my voice when I finished.

“Wh... Whattt!”

[The Strongest Legendary Weapon «Holy Sword Excaliber», Discovered At Last!].

It was written down on the article like that.

I forgot my previous fatigue and read the text as if devouring it, and a long moan escaped from my mouth.

“Uh—huh... they found it at last...”

“Well, I still think it took them a long time.”

Opposite of me, Suguha spread blueberry jam on her toast, and responded with a pout.

«Holy Sword Excaliber».

It was the only weapon in ALO that is said to surpass «Demonic Sword Gram» which the Salamander general Eugene had. However for a long time, other than a small description and picture at the bottom of the weapon introduction section on the official game site, how to obtain it in the game was unknown.

—No, to be exact, there were only three players that knew, that's not right, four people. Suguha, Asuna, Yui, and me. We found it at the

beginning of this year, in January 2025. Since it was now December 28th, the secret of Excaliber had been kept for nearly a full year.

“Ah... if it is like this, we should have challenged it again...”

While complaining, I shoved my spoon into the jar of homemade jam which Suguha gave me and scooped the purple jelly onto my toast. Then I spread some whipped butter, making a marbled design. Recently trying to control her calorie intake, Suguha discretely watched me prepare my toast and tried to endure while comparing the toast in her right hand, but her willpower’s saving roll apparently failed, and without a word she pulled the butter jar toward herself.

Trying to show that she could at least control the amount, she carefully spread the butter sparingly. Suguha took a bite of that toast and corrected my misunderstanding.

“Keep reading, it has still only been found. It seems that no one has acquired it yet.”

“What.”

I who was going to take a big bite into my toast, stopped my hand and stared at the tablet on the table again. It was written in the article that the existence of Excaliber was confirmed, but there was nothing saying that somebody had gotten it. Thinking about it, if a player had acquired it, the article picture would be a screen shot of those guys proudly holding that golden sword.

“I see, don’t scare me...”

I mumbled as I took a big bite of my toast this time, and let out a cry of relief. Seeing that, Suguha laughed at my impatience, took the milk carton and poured it into the glass in front of me.

Today is Sunday, December 28, 2025, 9:30AM. For both Suguha and me, it was the start of winter break, so we were having a slightly late breakfast. Mother seems to have some proofreading left to complete this year, so she flew out of the house earlier with a toast in her mouth. The e-books without the need for a printing office had both advantages and disadvantages.

Father, whose job took him to New York, was busy as usual, sent an e-mail saying that he was returning home on the 30th. When it was just Suguha and me at the table, our conversation naturally drifted toward ALO, as usual.

After finishing my first piece of toast, I spoke of my doubts as I spread my second toast with tuna this time.

“But, then how did they find it? Flight is impossible in Jötunheimr, but Excaliber is at a height where it can only be seen with flight.”

A year ago, after departing from the Sylph capital and while aiming for the central city Aarun, Suguha (Lyfa) and I (Kirito) finally saw the world tree. But we were immediately swallowed by a giant worm monster, and passed through its digestive tract, then dropped into the Underworld, Jötunheimr.

We fell into a field populated with giant evil-god class monsters which we could not possibly defeat, and as we tried to reach the stairs to above ground, we came across a very strange scene. A humanoid type evil-god with four arms was attacking an evil-god that looked like a jellyfish with a long nose and the head of an elephant.

Lyfa had shouted “Help the one being bullied!”, and I who had drawn the four armed one into a nearby lake, and when it reached the water, the jellyfish evil-god won. Far from attacking us, that fellow who Lyfa named «Tonkii» took us on its back, and carried us to the center of

Jötunheimr. Tonkii, who underwent an «emergence» from a pupa, flew while carrying Lyfa and me to a walkway leading through the canopy to above ground—in the middle of that, we saw it. A huge inverted pyramid dungeon wrapped in the roots of the World Tree hung from the canopy, sealed in a sparkling crystal at the very bottom was a golden sword.

Suguha seemed to have relived that memory along with me, and with upturned eyes, said with a smile.

“Onii-chan, at that time you were really at a loss. Whether to return to the ground or jump off Tonkii and try to go through the dungeon and get Excaliber.”

“W... Well, I hesitated... But I dare say it, people who don’t hesitate there, I won’t recognize them as real net gamers!”

“Those words are not very cool.”

Suguha made that assessment while smiling, and looked down seemingly lost in thought. Apparently she was not at a loss on what to spread on her second piece of toast though, for she reached for the tube of tuna spread and whispered.

“...Tonkii will only come if Onii-chan or I call. ...I have not heard of anyone finding another way to fly in Jötunheimr. Does this mean, someone has saved another elephant jellyfish evil-god like us and succeeded in obtaining the quest flag...”

“It might be like that... That disgusting... no, unique form evil-god being saved by a whimsical... no, philanthropist person other than Sugu, I am surprised they exist.”

“He isn’t disgusting! He is cute!”



While glaring at me, my supposed-to-be 16 year old sister declared that and continued speaking.

“But, with this, I think it is just a matter of time before someone successfully breaks through the dungeon and gets the sword. It was not discovered until today because it is hard to understand the conditions for the flag activation, but a year has passed and there was the update that introduced Sword Skills, so the degree of difficulty of the dungeon itself should have decreased.”

“You... are right...”

Taking a sip of my milk, I nodded.

It was January this year that we found Excaliber. After that, the administration of ALO was transferred from RECTO Progress to its current venture company, then there was the addition of the Floating Castle Aincrad, causing a huge change in the game. When things finally calmed down in June, Lyfa, Asuna, Yui, and I got on Tonkii’s back again and challenged the dungeon to obtain the Holy Sword Excaliber.

And failed miserably. That aerial inverted pyramid dungeon was full of the boss type of giant four-armed humanoid evil-gods that had bullied Tonkii, they were so strong as to make us want to cry out “No way—!”. The three of us plus one had gone ahead of time, not to challenge it but to scout it out. At that time we determined that it was impossible, so we swore we would “Challenge it again after we became stronger.”—But.

The first ten levels of Aincrad were opened when it was put into the game, with up to the 20th level opened up until September, so our plans were focused there. We sometimes went to Jötunheimr to collect materials, and incidentally called Tonkii to play with it, but about

Excaliber, since no one else was going after it—or more like no one has found it, a year had passed by like that.

However, in MMORPGs, it is impossible for items to never be found. The details were still unclear, but since the location of the sword appeared on the news site like that at last, a lot of players would be rushing to Jötunheimr, some of which might have already entered the aerial dungeon.

“...What are you going to do, Onii-chan?”

Suguha asked, lifting her glass of milk with both hands after she finished off her second toast.

Against that, I cleared my throat to respond.

“Sugu, pursuing rare items isn’t the only pleasures of VRMMOs.”

“...Yeah, that’s true. Even if the weapon specs are strong...”

“However, I think we must answer the feelings of Tonkii, who showed us the sword. As for that fellow, surely he hopes we will break through the dungeon. Because to us, Tonkii is a friend, right.”

“...Earlier, you said he was disgusting...”

I asked my younger sister with damp eyes, and the biggest possible smile.

“So, Sugu, are you free today?”

“...Well, my club is on break.”

Good! I punched my right fist into my left palm. And changing the gears of my thoughts, I started talking about the capture strategy really quickly.

“The maximum number of people Tonkii could reliably carry is seven. So, with Sugu and me, Asuna, Klein, Silica, and Liz... that leaves one more person. Agil is busy with his shop... Chrysheight is unreliable, Recon is at the Sylph capital...”

“...How about try to invite Sinon-san.”

“That’s it!”

I snapped my fingers and immediately took out my cell phone, scrolling through the phone book.

Earlier this month, I was involved in a certain case in GGO - «Gun Gale Online», and converted Kirito, I met a female player named Sinon there. After solving the case, Sinon became friends with Liz and Asuna, who invited her to make a character in ALO.

But since it is a new character that has only been used for two weeks since it was made, for an all skill system like ALO, the average of many of her numerical stats was still low. But with Sinon’s senses, she should be able to stand tall even in very difficult dungeons.

Opposite me, who was sending e-mails at maximum speed, Suguha quickly stacked the plates and glasses, and took them to the kitchen. It might be just my imagination, but her footsteps had a bounce to them. Perhaps, no matter what she says, she was planning it to turn out like this when she showed me the news.

Diving into the other world with my companions, challenging a difficult and thrilling mission. Something more fun than this would be hard to find.

Once I had finished sending an invitation to five people, including Sinon, via e-mail, I did a short run to the kitchen to help Suguha.

Even though it's a Sunday, to so easily gather a seven people party in the year-end morning, it must be the inviter's natural virtue—no, it must be the result of the «Holy Sword Excaliber» strongly calling out to their gamer souls. Compared to half a year ago when Asuna, Lyfa, Yui, and I challenged it, this time we have more people and our individual stats are far higher.

Our meeting place was at Yggdrasil City's main street, where a signboard stating «Lisbeth's Arms Shop» was. The Leprechaun storekeeper was sharpening everyone's weapons in order on a whetstone wheel. Before a large-scale quest, it was common sense to revive the durability of our equipment to the max.

To that Salamander katana user, Klein, who was sitting on the bench next the wall with legs crossed, with the excuse of «cheering up», and tilting a wine bottle back in the morning—of course, even so not one milliliter of alcohol entered his real body—the Cait Sith Beastmaster Silica, who had the fluffy blue dragon on her head, asked him.

“Klein-san, are you already on New Year vacation?”

“As of yesterday. There are no loads at this time even if I want to work. Our president is proud of our super white company having a week of vacation before and after year-end!”

Even looking like that, Klein is a proper member-of-society employee that works at a small import company. He always speaks ill of his company President, but he was taken good care of during his two years of imprisonment in SAO, and after Klein returned alive, he was immediately able to return to work, so it must be a good company. Klein also seems to feel indebted to him, and recently developed a long distance presentation system using a mobile camera and «the seed»

package. For me who helped a lot in modifying that camera, only treating me to all-you-can-eat roasted meat once was a bit hard to swallow, but I will call it even for him helping me with today's quest—.

Leaning against the wall while I thought, the object of my thought, Klein, looked at me and said.

“Hey Kirito, if we succeed today in getting «Holy Sword Excaliber», next time you can help me get «Spirit Katana Kagutsuchi».”

“What... that dungeon is damn hot...”

“If you say that then Jötunheimr we are going to today is damn cold!”

While we were having our low-level argument, a subdued voice came from the left.

“Ah, then I want that «Light Bow Shekhinah».”

I looked at the person who stopped talking. Leaning on the wall with her back same as me, standing with arms crossed, from short light blue hair, grew sharp triangle shaped ears, was a female Cait Sith player. If Silica was a friendly munchkin type, then this was a cool Siamese cat—no, she would be a ferocious wildcat.

“You only made your character two weeks ago, and you already desire a legendary weapon?”

In response to my question, the wildcat's slim long tail moved in a waving motion and answered.

“The bow Liz made is wonderfully constructed, but I would like it to have a little more range if possible...”

At that moment, from the workbench deep in her workshop, Lisbeth who was just then changing the string on that bow turned around and replied with a forced smile.

“You there, the bows in this world, are a weapon with more range than a spear but less range than magic! Aiming at more than 100 meters away is just not normal!”

In contrast, the wildcat just shrugged, and put on an unruffled smile.

“What I would really like is double that range.”

At her home base in GGO, she was an over 2000 meters ultra long-range sniper, knowing that, I could not help but make a stiff smile. If she really got that bow, in duels without area range limit, before you can bring a sword into range, you would be shot with arrows like a hedgehog and that would be the END.

The water color haired wildcat—is a new friend, Sinon that came to ALO two weeks ago, with just one day of practice, she fully mastered the hard to use bow. Speaking of archers in ALO, it can be mobile Sylphs with short bows, or Gnomes who excel in endurance and strength using a heavy ballista as a mobile battery, she totally ignored those theories and instead focused on range with a longbow, choosing to be a Cait Sith, the race with the best eyesight out of the nine for her build. Thinking of letting her do what she wants at the beginning and other things, but seeing her arrows hitting in longer range than fire-attribute magic, and killing monsters before they can approach her, I ended up kneeling to her inside my heart.

The arrow from bows in this world, under normal distance, has system assist like magic attacks for target hit support, beyond that distance, wind and gravity influence will make the arrow miss the

target. However, GGO used a common engine to simulate «the effects of wind and gravity», so it was like Sinon had been training on manual correction for years. It's the same as when I went to GGO and used «view detection» skill that is not in the system, this means the similarities for VRMMO made using The Seed, still has things in it that I did not think of—.

While I was thinking about various things, the workshop door to my right was flung open forcefully.

“I am back!” “Sorry for the wait.”

The owners of those voices were Lyfa and Asuna, who had gone potion shopping. It seems they did not put the objects into their item slots, but carried them back from the market in the baskets they carried, they dumped various small bottles and nuts onto the table in the center of the room.

A little fairy flew from Asuna's shoulder—she was a Navigation Pixie named Yui, landed on my head and sat down. My Avatar, the Spriggan «Kirito», had long pointed hair, at Yui's request now I have my old hairstyle. The reason was it was «hard to sit on».

On my head, Yui started speaking in a voice like a bell.

“I gathered some information while we were shopping, there was not any player or party that have reached that aerial dungeon, papa.”

“Oh... Then, why is «Excaliber»'s location known?”

“Apparently, a different quest than the Tonkii one we discovered was found. That quest's reward seems to be the NPC showing Excaliber's location.”

Hearing Yui's words, Asuna, who was organizing the potions, turned around with her Undine's only long blue hair waving, made a small frown and nodded.

"And apparently, it wasn't a peaceful quest either. Rather than errand or guard type, it was a slaughter type. Now, thanks to that, it is a brutal fight to claim re-pop monsters in Jötunheimr."

"...That surely won't be calm..."

I twisted my lips, too.

Slaughter type, as the name indicates, «Defeat over xx number of xx type monster» or «Gather xx number of drop items from xx type monster», that kind of quest. Naturally, because it is a quest that requires a party to keep hunting a certain type of monster in a certain area, when other parties on the same quest is in the same small area, the scramble for the best re-pops, that is the re-spawned monsters inevitably leads to PvP battles.

"But, isn't that strange?"

Klein who finished his bottle of brandy, wiped his lips and opened his mouth.

"«Holy Sword Excaliber» is sealed in the deepest chamber in an aerial dungeon guarded by powerful evil-gods right? What does it mean to have a quest reward from an NPC reveal it?"

"Now that you say it, it does seem so."

Silica too, while hugging Fina who came down from her head to her chest, tilted her head.

"If it's a reward for transportation to the dungeon, that's understandable..."



“—Well, we’ll understand once we get there, I’m sure.”

Next to me, the comment from Sinon was as cool as ever, and Lisbeth cried out from deep in her workshop just after that.

“Great! All weapons, full recovery!”

“Thanks for your hard work!!”

Everyone sang a chorus in appreciation. Then took their shining like new, loving sword, katana, bow and other weapons back and equipped them. Next, from the table, Asuna divided the potions into seven portions by inherent command capability, we took them and put them in the belt pouch at our waists. Then stored the items we couldn’t carry in our item slots.

Taking a quick glance at the real world time display in the lower right hand corner of my view, I saw it was just 11:00 AM. We would take a lunch and restroom break at some time, but probably can make it to the first safety zone in the aerial dungeon.

Looking around, I saw that preparations were complete by all seven + one + one dragon, and cleared my throat to get everyone’s attention.

“Everyone, thank you for coming today in response to my urgent call! I’ll repay you for this one day, in spirit! Well then—let’s do our best!”

Ooo! It might have been my imagination, but there seemed to be slightly wry smiles mixed into that chorus. Turning around and opening the door of the workshop, I aimed for the secret tunnel which led from Aarun that is below Yggdrasil to the underworld, Jötunheimr, and started my boots forward.

## Chapter 2

The narrow alley, which wasn't shown on the map of Aarun's back streets, split left and right, the stairs went up and down until it reached a door at the garden of a private house we passed previously.

It was an unremarkable rounded wooden door, it actually lead people to think of it as a decorative object, which could not be opened. Lyfa put a small copper key from her pouch into the key hole, and turned it, causing a clear *Clink* unlocking sound. The key was added to our storage without my knowledge when Tonkii carried us through the tunnel for the first time. So it could be said that it was impossible to open the door from the Aarun side.

I grabbed the iron hoops and pulled, the wooden door slid open in the middle to the left and right, revealing the interior descending stairs. Once the line of all seven people went past, and Klein, who was at the end of the line, closed the door, it automatically locked itself again.

"Uwahh.....What are these steps for?"

Lisbeth, who came here for the first time, couldn't help but exclaim loudly. The descending stairs which was the floor of the tunnel had a diameter of around two meters, it was illuminated by the small lamps on the wall, emitting a pallid phosphorescent light, and the length of the stairs seemed to continue into the limit of resolution.

"Hmm, it is like part of the Aincrad's labyrinth tower zone."

The answer came from Asuna who was at the start of the line and had already stepped down the stairs; Liz, Silica, and Klein's faces

showed surprise at the same time. I made a wry smile, then stressed my gratitude toward this tunnel.

“Well, if you think about going to Jötunheimr using the normal route, first you have to find the stairway dungeon, which is located on the unknown location on the Aarun plateau, advance inside while fighting the monsters, and lastly, defeat the boss guarding the place. One party would still require at least two hours to do that, but this route only takes five minutes! If I was Lyfa, I’d start a business here collecting toll of a thousand Yurudo per entry.”

“Hey, Onii-chan, exiting here without Tonkii will drop you to an unavoidable death at the large underground hollow in the middle of Jötunheimr though.”

Lyfa said while making a tired face, she was always too straight.

At the very center of the large underground world, Jötunheimr was a big bottomless hole with a diameter of around 1.5 kilometers, it had been given names like «Deep Central Hollow» or «Great Void». The holy sword Excaliber was sealed within the air maze inside the upside down pyramid, which protruded from the canopy right above that void. The exit of the stairs we were running down was close to the air maze, and was also located high up in the sky over the void, jumping over will certainly result in going down that bottomless pit and to our deaths, returning to the save point above the ground with no question asked.

*Ahem*, I cleared my throat and said with a strict face.

“Well, for that reason, let’s take each step with appreciation and without complaining, gentlemen.”

“It wasn’t you who made this though”

Sinon who was walking in front of me immediately responded. *Still as cool and straight as ever, I should express the gratitude for this Tsukkomi properly.*

“Thanks for the Tsukkomi.”<sup>2</sup>

Saying thanks, and at the same time grabbing hold of the light blue tail swaying in front of me to substitute a hand shake.

“Fugyaa!!”

Suddenly, the wildcat archer made a loud scream and jumped. She turned around, and skillfully ran back up, but I pulled my face back with ease before both her claws could make a scratch.

The triangular ears and tail unique to the Cait Sith race were of course organs human don’t have, however, they could sense the feeling using an unknown mechanism. Being grabbed hard by a player who wasn’t aware of the fact would cause a «super weird feeling»——Silica’s explanation——for that reason, the reaction was always very amusing.

“You, the next time you do this I’ll shoot a fire arrow straight up your nostril!”

Hmph! In front of Sinon who turned around quickly; Lyfa, Liz, Silica, Asuna, with Yui sitting on her shoulder all shook their heads in a flawlessly synchronized motion. Klein who was behind them groaned in admiration, “You just don’t know fear, huh.”

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<sup>2</sup> A traditional style of stand-up comedy in Japanese culture, which usually involves two performers—a straight man (tsukkomi) and a funny man (boke)—trading jokes at great speed.



Just under the expected five minutes, as the party was passing through the outer crust of Alfheim via the tunnel stairs, a dim white light could be seen at the end of the tunnel.

At the same time, the coldness of the virtual atmosphere increased with each step. The sparkling ice crystals started glittering in front of their faces.

After a few seconds, we were finally out of the crust, our vision caught sight of the bird's eye view of Jötunheimr. The stairs which were carved into the thick tree root continued on in midair for about fifteen more meters before it ended.

“Uu.....waah.....!!”

“Wow.....”

Sinon and Silica, the two cats who saw Jötunheimr for the first time raised their voices at the same time. Even the small dragon Pina on Silica's head flapped its wings energetically.

Spread below the eyes and covered in the massive amount of snow and ice was the beautiful and harsh world of eternal night. Illumination came from the huge ice crystals protruding from the canopy surrounding us, which refracted a small amount of light from the ground above. Other light sources were from the yellow-green or purple-blue burning bonfires at the castle and fortress of the evil-god tribes scattered here and there on the surface. The height from the ground to the center of the canopy could reach one kilometer, the countless numbers of evil-gods on the field couldn't be seen from this height. And right below was the huge bottomless pit, inhaling all light, the «Void».



Returning the gaze from below back to the front, it was a terrific scene difficult to describe with words.

The countless roots crept about——the roots of Yggdrasil stood tall above Alfheim ground—— it seemed like they were supporting the thin blue ice block protruding sharply from the canopy, which was our destination, the «Aerial Dungeon», that was shaped like an inverted pyramid. Its base was three hundred meters on each side, and its height was about the same. The myriad of rooms and passages which had been dug inside the ice could be seen from this distance, as well as the huge shadow hovering there.

Finally, my vision moved to the sharp tip at the bottom of the inverted pyramid.

Even with the increased night vision of the Spriggan race's special trait, it was still hard to see the shining gold light which blinked briefly. At the depth of that shining light resided the strongest incentive, ALO's strongest legendary class weapon, the «Holy Sword Excaliber», was sealed there.

After the general status confirmation had been completed, Asuna then held her right hand up and started reciting the smooth spell words. At that moment, the body of all members were wrapped in a thin blue light, and a small icon lit up under the HP gauge at the upper left of their vision. Immediately, the chill went away as if we wore a first class down jacket. It was the freeze resistance boost supporting spell.

“Okay.”

Lyfa nodded after hearing Asuna voice, her right fingers were applied to her lips and she whistled a high pitch.

Several seconds later, *Kwooo—.....n*, a distant cry mixed with the sound of the wind slowly approached. Contrasting the dark void background, a white shade could be seen ascending.

From the side of the body, it looked like a spatulated fish, or a shamoji, with four pairs, eight fins resembling white wings stretched out. Hanging from the lower side of the body were numerous ivy-like tentacles. Its head had three black eyes on each of the three sides, and an extended long nose. The evil-god which «emergence» from the elephant-jellyfish into this strange yet beautiful form, was Tonkii.

“Tonkii-saaaaan!”

From Asuna’s shoulder, Yui called out with all her voice, the strange evil-god cried *Oo—n* once again. It ascended in a spiral movement after flapping its strong wings. With its shape becoming larger, the four new comers retraced their steps back up the stairs.

“It’s alright, this guy is herbivorous.”

After I said that, Lyfa turned around and grinned.

“But, the other day I gave him fish I brought from above ground, he ate them all in one bite though.”

“.....H-Heh.”

Klein and the others took another step back, but the narrow stairs had no more room for them to retreat. Once Tonkii was right in front of us, it stretched its long nose from its face which still resembled an elephant’s, and with its bushy haired tip —— stroked Klein’s standing hair.

“Ubyrho!?”



I pushed the back of Katana user who made an odd sound without mercy.

“Hurry, go ride on its back.”

“E...Even you say that, I, not riding American cars and flying elephants was the last will of my grandfather.....”

“The other day at the Dicey Café, your grandfather just gave me handmade dried persimmons, didn’t he? It was delicious too, please bring me more next time!”

I pushed his back again after saying that, Klein fearfully stepped on Tonkii’s shoulder and moved to its flat back. Subsequently was Sinon, who had no fear as usual, followed by the animal lover Silica who seemed to have included Tonkii into her target. Lisbeth said in an unexpected girly voice “Yokkorasho!” while following, then Lyfa and Asuna who weren’t first timers jumped on, lastly me, lightly scratching the base of Tonkii’s nose before jumping onto the back of the evil-god class monster, which had a total length of more than ten meters.

“Alright, Tonkii, please bring us to the dungeon entrance!”

Lyfa who sat right behind its neck shouted, Tonkii raised its long nose and cried again, then slowly flapped its eight wings to move forward.

For me, this was the fifth time riding on the back of «Tonkii», the flight type evil-god, including when we were just playing around . Even if I didn’t mention it, I thought about it every time. It was——

“.....Hey, what happens if we fall from here?”

That, was what I thought, frankly asked by Lisbeth who sat right behind me.

That's right. It was the principle of Jötunheimr that all the fairy tribes couldn't fly here, and damage would be applied upon falling from a high altitude. Depending on the skill value, damage would occur when falling from over ten meters, and falling from more than thirty meters would certainly lead to instant death.

However, Tonkii's current flight altitude was in the region of a thousand meters. There was no need to think about what would happen if we fell from this height. Of course there were some safety measures —— like grabbing the tentacles below its belly —— but I'd rather not have to do so.

While everyone seemed to have the similar concern in their minds; only Lyfa, the «Speed Holic» who sat in front, along with Yui who moved to sit on her head, and Pina who was embraced by Silica, were feeling comfortable.

The one who answered Liz' question was Asuna who sat stickily beside her. With a somewhat stiff expression, she looked at me and smiled, then said,

“There was a person who climbed the pillar connecting to the next layer in the old Aincrad and fell down, I'm sure that person would experiment falling from here in the future too.”

“.....Falling from this height, aren't cats more suitable for that?”

The two felines immediately made a serious look and shook their heads repeatedly.

During the exchange, Tonkii was still flapping its four pairs of wings, slowly gliding through the air. Up ahead was the terrace entrance to the aerial dungeon made out of ice, the entrance was

located at the top side of the inverted pyramid. Hopefully it'll be a safe ride until the end——

I secretly wished that. At that moment,

Without any warning, Tonkii folded all its wings into sharp angles and broke into a rapid dive.

“Uwaaaaah!?”

Was the loud yell by the two men.

“Kyaaaaa!”

The high scream by the girls group.

“Yaho—————!”

That was Lyfa.

Both my hands desperately grabbed at the hair, which grew thickly on its wide back, to withstand the rushing wind pressure. The diving angle seemed to be almost vertical, the ground below progressively approaching. But why did it suddenly do this? Every ride up till now was always a slow patrol course between the tree root stairs and the ice terrace.

Was it tired of being used as a taxi? Or did the fish Lyfa gave it before weigh heavily in its stomach?

While thinking about things which wouldn't be beneficial to my health, the details of the ground covered in ice and snow was getting much higher precision. It seemed Tonkii was aiming for the southern border of the huge pit, the «Void». Yes, it was the place where Lyfa and I once fought with the Undine raid party trying to kill Tonkii.

Immediately after that, the sudden decelerating G caused our bodies to bend over and stick to the evil-god's back. Tonkii spread out its folded wings, applying the brakes to the nose dive. At least it looked like it didn't want to litter the ground with its luggage. I lifted up my body while exhaling in relief.

I looked downwards from Tonkii's back once it started cruising horizontally again, the altitude was already at about fifty meters. Now the state of the ground was clearly visible, like a high detailed aviation photo. Dead trees with sharp icicles hanging. Frozen rivers and lakes. then——

“.....Ah.....!?”

Lyfa who sat on Tonkii's head raised her voice sharply and stretched her body. She then pointed to a spot on the ground as she squeezed out her voice that sounded almost like a scream.

“O..Onii-chan, look there!!”

Hearing that, the other five and I gazed to the front left, in the direction Lyfa pointed her finger.

Suddenly a dazzling flash effect burst up, and shot into my eyes which was accustomed to the dim light. Then, a bass sound followed after a slight delay. Based on this, it was a large scale attack spell, no doubt about it.

Tonkii made a sad *Krrru—n* cry. The reason for the cry was found shortly,

The attack was focused on the manjū-like body sitting over the long tentacles, with the long nose and big ears of an elephant, it was a large jellyfish monster. The same type as Tonkii before undergoing «emergence», no doubt about it.

Then, the attack was from a large scale raid party with more than thirty members. With colorful hair color and the varying body sizes, it seemed to be a force of mixed races. If looking at just that, it could be said that it was just the normal «Evil-god hunt party». But what Lyfa saw which we didn't, was the fact that it was not only the players that attacked the elephant-jellyfish.

With the height of about six or seven times that of the Gnome's, while having the form of a human, it had four arms and three faces lined up vertically. Its skin color was like pallid steel, its dull red eyes had the reminiscence of burning coal.

It was the same as the humanoid evil-god monster which tried to kill Tonkii the first time we met. Each of its arms held a steel-like crude sword, the blunt blades repeatedly slammed into the elephant-jellyfish's back. Its hard shell cracked and the bodily fluid gushed out while the players continued firing spells, arrows, and sword skills into those cracks.

“What's.....going on there? Did someone tame that humanoid evil-god?”

Asuna whispered as she panted. Silica shook her head vigorously and answered,

“That's impossible! The tame success rate on evil-god class monsters, even with maximum skill and full equipment boosts is still 0.00%!”

“That means.....”

Klein stroked his bristling red hair while groaning.

“That was, how to say it.....«Hitch a ride» is the term? Attacking the elephant-jellyfish along with those attacks from the four arms and taking credit of the final blow at the end.....”

“But I wonder about the hate control in that situation.”

Sinon commented calmly despite her eyebrows drawing tightly together. Certainly it was as Sinon said, for the evil-god’s action patterns, it would be no surprise if it turned its attention to the players if they fired a spell or skill nearby, even if they did not cause any damage.

Unable to understand the reason, we bit our lips while looking at the scene, finally the large body of the elephant-jellyfish evil-god trembled and fell down on its side to the snowy field. At that point, the iron swords and the large spells rushed on——

“Hyrrrrrrrruuuu.....”

The elephant-jellyfish screamed in agony before its body turned into a large amount of polygon pieces and scattered away.

*Kwoooo.....* Tonkii made a sad sound again. Lyfa, who sat on its head, was trembling, and on her head, Yui also faced downward with a sad expression.

Unable to find any words to comfort Lyfa and Yui, my glance remained fixed on the raid party down below.

Suddenly, my eyes widened in surprise.

The four armed giant that was not under tame, incitement, or dazed state, raised its foot and roared in victory; the several dozen players also lightly made a guts pose, then both sides started to move to claim the new target.

“W..Why don’t they fight each other!?”

A hoarse voice leaked from Asuna who was beside me, she then seemed to notice something and lifted her face,

“Ah.....there, look!”

She pointed at the hill on the far right side. The battle effect also flickered violently from there. I focused my eyes and could see the large group of players, this time with the assistance of two humanoid evil-gods. It looked like they were hunting the alligator type evil-god with many legs.

“What the heck is going on here.....?”

To Klein’s confused question, Lisbeth murmured in a low voice,

“.....Maybe it was what Asuna said above just now, the new slaughter type quest in Jötunheimr.....? The assistance from the humanoid evil-gods to exterminate the animal type evil-gods.....it seemed.....”

“.....!”

Upon hearing that, all of them inhaled at the same time.

It was probably so. If it was during the quest, it was possible to have a joint force with specific mobs. But what was the reason for the quest reward being related to the «Holy Sword Excaliber»? That sword was sealed inside the humanoid evil-god’s stronghold, which means, one couldn’t get it without defeating those humanoids.....

Thinking up to this point, I looked up due to the reflection from the big ice pyramid above.

However, that was not where the source of light was. Because at the furthest end of Tonkii’s back, where no one sat, particles of light

appeared without a sound, and condensed —— to produce a human shape.

The long garment in the shape of robe. The wavy blond hair flowing from the back to the feet. The lady with elegance and a transcendental beautiful face.

But a word surged out of my mouth, and at the same time, Klein's, who had quickly turned around, which wasn't supposed to be said to a woman.

“Hu.....”

“.....ge!”

However, that could be forgivable. The height of the lady was, based on our estimation, more than three meters.

Fortunately, the first words from the mysterious huge lady to us sounded like she didn't appear to be hurt by our words, her serene expression remained as she opened her lips. The flowing voice, unlike that of a player's, was tinged with a solemn effect.

“I am «Queen of the Lake» Urðr.”<sup>3</sup>

The huge blond onee-san continued talking to us.

“Ye fairies who bonded with our kin.”

*Kin?* I twisted my neck with doubt in my mind. It seemed those words were directed toward us, who were hovering on Tonkii, *Was this*

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<sup>3</sup> Commonly known as Urd or Urth, one of the three Norns in Norse mythology.



*lady the friend of those animal type evil-gods inhabited in Jötunheimr?*, I thought that, but.....

At that point I finally realized the huge lady who called herself «Queen of the Lake» in front of me was 100% not human. The skirt of her long blond hair was like tapered, divided, and undulated tentacles; The limbs inside the robe that could be seen were covered by pearly scales. Similar to Tonkii, the strange form of large creature which chose to borrow human appearance — But even so, I was still impressed.

“To you, my two sisters and I have but one request. Please save this country from the invasion of the «Frost Giant Tribe».”

What I thought while listening to the story was *Firstly, this giant lady is «What»?*

The color cursor didn’t come out even when focusing on the vision, and it was certainly not the figure from a player’s enchanting spell. Was it a harmless event NPC? Was it a trap set by the aggressive quest Mob? Or was it an avatar controlled by a human GM? I couldn’t make a conclusion.

Then unexpectedly, I felt a modest weight on my left shoulder. And at the same time, in a cute whisper from Yui.

“Papa, that person is an NPC. But it’s a little strange. It seems not to talk based on the fixed response routine like NPC usually do. Its core program is connected to the language engine module.”

“.....So, it’s a kind of AI then?”

“Yes, Papa.”

While thinking about what Yui said, I continued to listen to the lady's story.

NPC —— the «Queen of the Lake Urðr» turned her pearly sparkling right hand toward the vast underground world and said,

“This «Jötunheimr» was once like your «Alfheim», with the blessings from the world tree Yggdrasil, covered in the beautiful water and greenery. We, the «Rock Giant Tribe» and those beast kin lived together in harmony.”

At the same time as those words, the surrounding scenery covered in snow and ice soundlessly shook and dimmed. Appearing as if it was a layer of illusion, was the scene in Urðr's story. The world filled with plants, flower fields, and pure water. It could be said it was even richer than the Gnome or Salamander territories up above.

Even more surprising, behind Queen Urðr where the bottomless pit «Great Void» was, in this other world it wasn't there. Instead, there was a lake filled with sparkling transparent water. The thickly huddled roots of the world tree from the canopy in this world reached the lake without spreading in other directions.

On the summit of the roots over the water surface existed houses made from logs, no, a town was probably more suitable. The scene was similar to the central capital Aarun up on the surface.

Urðr lowered her right hand, and the illusory scene disappeared. The chilled ice world of Jötunheimr returned, she looked indifferent, but I might have imagined seeing her with sadness filled eyes, as she continued to speak.

“——In addition, on Jötunheimr's lower plane, the country of ice «Niflheimr» existed. The land was ruled by the king of frost giant tribe

«Prym»<sup>4</sup>, he once transformed into a wolf and did infiltrate this country, then stole the Excaliber, «The sword which cut all of steel and tree», forged by the god of blacksmith Völundr<sup>5</sup> and threw it into «Urðr's Spring» at the center of this world. The sword severed the thick roots of the world tree, and in that instant, Jötunheimr no longer received the blessings from Yggdrasil.

This time Urðr lifted her left hand, and the illusory screen regenerated. We could only wordlessly watch the overwhelming scene.

The roots of the world tree which expanded over the surface of the huge lake — «Urðr's Spring», shook and floated over the surface, then shrunk toward to canopy. The town which was built atop the roots collapsed all at once.

At the same time, all the leaves of the tree fell, the grass withered, and the light faded. The rivers were frozen, the frost condensed, as a snowstorm raged. The huge amount of water in «Urðr's Spring» froze momentarily and became the large mass of ice, which was wrapped and pulled up by the roots of the world tree as they retracted back into the sky. The large number of lake inhabiting creatures snapped off the ice mass and fell down. Among them was the elephant-jellyfish type, like the old Tonkii.

The roots of the world tree ascended and reached Jötunheimr's canopy or Alfheim's crust before long, and half of the huge ice mass it carried pierced into the canopy. That ice mass was no doubt, set up and honored as the «Inverted Ice Pyramid» in the current Jötunheimr. At the bottom-most of the ice mass, a sharp edged icicle, a glittering golden light could be seen. It was from the sword thrown by the frost

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<sup>4</sup> The king of Jötunheimr, known as Thrymr or Thrym in plain English.

<sup>5</sup> Or Wayland the Smith, is a legendary master blacksmith in Norse mythology.

giant king Prym, the sword which severed the connection between the world tree and Jötunheimr, it was, without a doubt, Excaliber.

When all of the water was lost, the once beautiful lake turned to a huge bottomless pit.

Urðr lowered her left hand, causing the illusory screen to disappear. However, this time it didn't make a large change to the scenery. The most change was the mass of ice in the sky, which had undergone restructuring into the linear dungeon. The existence of Excaliber at the bottom of that pyramid had also been confirmed by Lyfa and me with our own eyes too.

“King Prym's subordinates, the «Frost Giant Tribe» is preparing a big plan to invade Jötunheimr from Niflheimr, many of us, the «Rock Giant Tribe», had been captured and imprisoned in the various fortresses and castles they had built. The king built the castle «Prymheimr» in the large mass of ice once called «Urðr's Spring», and ruled over this land from that castle. No longer having the power we once had, my two younger sisters and I had to escape to the bottom of a certain frozen spring.”

Urðr's eyelids were half-downcast, she resumed the tale which was probably nearing the end. We had partly forgotten that she was an NPC, and the tale was just an in-game quest, wordlessly listening.

“The frost giant tribe wasn't satisfied with just that, but also wants to massacre every one of my kin, the beasts living on this land. That way, my power will completely vanish, and it would allow Prymheimr to float up to the plane above, Alfheim.”

“W-What! If it happens, Aarun will be destroyed!”

Klein, who seemed to be deeply immersed into the story, yelled. The non-fixed response routine and partial AI, Queen Urðr nodded at Klein's words and said,

“King Prym plans to enclose Alfheim in ice and snow, then continue attacking until reaching the top of the world tree Yggdrasil, where the «Golden Apple» exists, his objective is to obtain that fruit.”

*.....something like that exists up there?* I thought for a moment, then suddenly realized, near the summit of the world tree, there was an impossibly strong eagle, a named mob, guarding an inaccessible area. It could be possible that the golden apple existed inside.

Urðr gazed at the ground, her eyebrows still bated with sadness.

“Being irritated by being unable to easily destroy my kin, Prym and the frost giant generals started to use the power of ye fairies. Inviting them to hunt my kin, using Excaliber as a reward. However, it is not possible for Prym to bestow the sword to others. Once Prymheimr loses Excaliber, the blessings from Yggdrasil will return to this land, and that castle will melt.”

“Eh.....then, then, Excaliber as the reward is all lie!? Is it possible to have a quest like that!?”

The queen generously nodded at Lisbeth's wild voice and said,

“When the god of blacksmith Völundr forged the sword, he discarded the one in which he slipped when striking with the hammer, which looks just like Excaliber, but it is actually the «Fake Sword Caliburn». Prym is probably going to give that fake sword as the reward, while it is strong enough, it doesn't possess the true power of the real one.”

“S-Sly.....is it alright for the king to do this.....?”

Lyfa murmured in confusion. Urðr nodded again and exhaled deeply.

“That cunning is Prym’s strongest weapon. But he was too impatient in destroying my kin, and committed one mistake. In order to cooperate with the fairy warriors they lured in using the fake reward, almost all of the giant subordinates are down on the ground. So, the defense in the castle is now thin.”

Arriving at this point, I finally realized the future of this quest — no, this «queen’s request».

The queen of the lake Urðr stretched forth her large arm toward «Prymheimr» in the air and said,

“Ye fairies, please invade Prymheimr and remove Excaliber from its «Plinth».”

## Chapter 3

“.....Somehow, that was an amazing tale.....”

Was the first thing Asuna murmured after «Queen of the Lake Urðr» melted into shiny water droplets and disappeared. Tonkii ascended again — this time gradually.

Her words were followed by Sinon’s, who seemed to have recovered her thoughts, talking as she moved her light blue tail,

“This is...a normal quest.....right? But isn’t this assignment, the story too great? .....Once all the beast type evil-gods had been annihilated, the frost giants will invade the surface next, did she say this?”

“.....Yes, she did.”

I nodded, then twisted my neck while folding my arms.

“But, would the management’s side go that far without any updates or event notices? For any other MMOs, any «Boss Invasion Event» would normally come with at least one week of advance notice though.....”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Then, Yui who sat on my left shoulder flew to hover in the middle of us and said in a volume everyone could hear,

“Well, This might be just a guess, but.....”

With a slight pause as if to think about what to say, she then continued,

“——This «ALfheim Online» has one major difference from other standard VRMMOs from «The Seed». That is, the game operation isn't based on the feature reduced version of the «Cardinal System», but uses the same full specs version as the one used in the old «Sword Art Online».”

That was certainly correct. It wasn't a story I wanted to remember, but ALO was created by a man whom was possessed by greed, in order to use some of the old SAO players in his illegal research, he copied the whole original SAO server. So the autonomous system operating the world «Cardinal» in ALO has the same capability as the one used in SAO, of course.

Yui looked around at our attentive listening faces, then added,

“The original Cardinal System has a few functions which had been cut out in the shrunk version. One of them is the «Automatic Quest Generation Function». It will collect legends and folklore of the world through the network, and continue to generate infinite amount of quests using proper names and story patterns.”

“W-What?”

Klein's stubbly jaw dropped abruptly as he groaned.

“That means, that disastrous quest from pacific we did in Aincrad was created by system-sama?”

“.....I can recall too many of them. At the time we reached the 75th floor, just those listed in the quest database of the information shop exceeded ten thousand.....”



At one time, in order to earn the management fund, the guild had to seriously take on many of those quests, the KoB sub-leader said as she shook her head. Silica who was next to her stared to the distance and muttered,

“Also, I could hear this sometimes-myo. It was probably on the 30th floor, the slaughter quest to kill the ogres wearing strange masks and using chainsaws, but no matter how many times they were killed, the next week the quest would pop up on the bulletin board again. What legend did it come from though.....”

For quests like those, I too have a lot in my memories, but at this rate, until we reach the ice pyramid, it'd be a meeting to complain about old Aincrad. So, in order to steer the topic back, I cleared my throat and said,

“That said, Yui, is this quest also created by the Cardinal System?”

“Judging from the behavior of the NPC earlier, the probability is high. It might be possible that the automatic quest generator that stopped until now had been restarted from the management's side.”

Yui continued with a difficult face after she nodded to my question.

“If the story keeps progressing like this, the situation will end up in the worst state. That ice dungeon floats up to Alfheim above, Aarun collapses, the evil-god class monsters popping up on the surface..... No, even worse.....”

Her lips closed for a moment —— the AI girl then continued with a frightened expression,

“.....According to the data in my archive, as ALO has included parts of the Norse mythology in the quest, it'd certainly lead to the so-

called «The Last War». Not only do the frost giant tribe from Jötunheimr and Niflheimr invade, but those from the lower plane «Muspellsheimr», the flame giant tribe would also appear, and burn down the world tree..... That is.....”

“.....«Ragnarök».”

Suguha —— Lyfa, who loves legends and mythology, also has those kind of books in her room, said quietly. Immediately her emerald pupils widened and she shouted “But!”.

“Something like that..... The game system shouldn’t be able to completely destroy its own managed maps though.....!”

What she said made sense. But Yui gently shook her head.

“.....The original Cardinal System has the authority to completely destroy the map. Because, the old Cardinal’s final duty was to destroy the floating castle Aincrad after all.”

“.....”

This time we sank into complete silence, unable to say anything.

The next person who opened their mouth was Sinon, whom up till now was mostly listening.

“——If that «Ragnarök» really happened and it wasn’t the management side’s intention, isn’t it possible to do a roll back?”

“O.....Oh, that’s it, that’s right.”

Klein nodded repeatedly. Simply speaking, «Roll back» was used to overwrite the current situation with backup data. It was mainly done when players gained unexpected benefits due to bugs or programming oversights. In this case, if Alfheim had been turned into scorched earth, although it wouldn’t affect individual player’s exp or

items, nobody would want the whole place to be like Salamander territory's «Burnt Land».

However, for some reason, this time Yui didn't nod in agreement.

"It would be possible if the management's side did backup all the data manually and kept the physical media in a separated location..... however, if they used Cardinal's automatic backup function, depending on the configuration, it could be possible that the roll back would only affect player data and not include the fields."

"....."

Again, all members went silent for two seconds. Klein suddenly shouted "Oh yeah!" then opened the system window. But just after that, he held his head and said "No good!".

".....What did you do?"

Lisbeth asked while turning to the katana user's miserable face.

"Well, calling a GM, just wanting to confirm if they know about this situation . But it's off hours for human support now....."

"End of the year, Sunday, in the morning too....."

I sighed, shook my head, then looked into the sky.

The huge ice pyramid was quite close now. It's three hundred meters wide on each side, if it pierced up through Aarun it would certainly cause a great clamor. While half of its population had migrated to «Yggdrasil City» at the top of the tree, with the raiding base for the advanced dungeon on Aarun plateau, the central trading market for all races, and the familiar crowded weekend nights, it was a town full of my profound memories.

“.....When it comes down to this, there’s nothing but to do it, Onii-chan.”

Lyfa held a big medallion hung on her right hand up high.

It was given by «Queen of the Lake Urðr», a cleanly cut large jewel was inlaid in it. But now, more than sixty percent of the cut surface had sunk into pitch black darkness, not reflecting any light.

When the jewel was dyed in total darkness, it meant all of the beast type evil-gods had been completely annihilated without a single one left, and Urðr would be stripped of all her power. At that time, «Frost Giant King Þrym»’s Alfheim invasion would begin.

“.....That’s right. Initially we gathered today to raid that castle and get «Excaliber» anyway. It’s in our favor when the defense is currently weakened too.”

I nodded, then opened the system window and operated the equipment figure.

Long swords appeared hanging crossed on my back, one was humbly made by Lisbeth’s equipment shop, and the other was dropped from the 15th floor boss we defeated the other day in the new Aincrad.

Looking at my nostalgic back carrying two swords, Klein smiled from ear to ear and yelled,

“Alright! This is this year’s final big quest! I’ve decided, let’s get on the tomorrow’s front page of MMO Tomorrow!”

The target was somewhat realistic, so this time Lisbeth didn’t make a wry smile. “Oo—!” Everyone said in chorus, Tonkii under our feet moved its wings violently and cried “Krrr—n!”.

The aviation type evil-god increased its ascending speed and crossed the pyramid at once, its big body hovered along the entrance at the top of the pyramid. Lyfa, who was the last person, jumped to the ice terrace, stroked Tonkii's big ear and said,

“Just wait, Tonkii. We'll surely take your country back!”

She then turned about and pulled the long sword hanging loosely on her waist. At the same time, we took our weapons out too, in front of the big twin ice gates which stood tall in front of us.

Just as Urðr had said, there was no first guardian here like always, and the doors began to open. Exchanging glances with each other, we quickly set up a formation, with the front row being Lyfa, Klein, and I; Liz and Silica were in the middle, while on the back row were Asuna and Sinon, we kicked the ice floor to begin running, and broke into the huge castle «Prymheimr».

In ALO, the upper limit of a party size was, strangely, seven people. The reason why it didn't use six or eight like most other titles, until now, has never been officially told. That way, the maximum size of a raid party was 7x7 or forty nine people. The currency obtained from the monsters would automatically be distributed by the system function, as manual distribution would be very troublesome to calculate.

Well, from the seven people slot, if filled with only close friends, five would be pretty much fixed. With Asuna, Liz, Silica, Lyfa, and I. All were high school students, furthermore, four went to the same school, and two even lived together, so the timing was easy to set.

The sixth and seventh slots could still be smoothly filled up, by the company employee Klein, coffee shop and bar master Agil, the senior bureaucrat Chrysheight, or Lyfa's real life friend Recon. Recon

was also a high school student, he was part of the olden day's «Yggdrasil Capturing Operation» and had been recruited by the Sylph lord Sakuya to help with scouting duty. Currently he was a permanent member of the Lord manor staff in Sylvain town, I had played together with him for a brief period of time when Aincrad was over the sky of the Sylph territory.

This time, I was glad the slot was filled with the bow user I met in GGO ——— Sinon, however, there was still one unresolved problem for the party.

It was the lack of a mage. The only permanent member who had increased their magic skill was Undine Asuna, and as half was spent on her thin sword skills, her master leveled skills were only for support and recovery purposes. Lyfa was also a spell fencer but her spells were only for enfeebling during combat. Then Silica had a little magic but her main focus was on support duty; Liz, of course, had spent more than half of her skills on smithing; Agil also had more than thirty percent on trading skills; then Klein and I had all our skill points focused on physical close combat, the so-called «Brain muscle» type. There was no one capable of casting attack spells.

Occasionally, when Recon, the Sylph dagger wielder with a mysterious build of very high dark magic; or Chrysheight whose freezing attack magic was at the lord class; joined as the seventh slot, the flexibility in combat was much wider. So lacking the fire power of a mage was really our weak point.

But that couldn't be helped. Because most of us had migrated from SAO ——— a world where magic didn't exist. My one-handed straight sword, Asuna's thin sword, Liz' war hammer, Silica's dagger, Klein's katana, Agil's axe, then Lyfa's long sword and Sinon's bow, were all not just mere weapons, but could be exaggerated into considering

them as proof of our existence. At this point, discarding our weapons to raise our magic skill was already impossible. Even knowing it wasn't efficient, but all we could do was to trust our battle style that focused on physical attack, we managed to come this far with it anyway.

Still, we encountered dangerous situations occasionally.

"This is bad, Onii-chan, that gold one has high physical resistance."

Lyfa at my left side whispered quickly.

Before I could say anything after nodding to Lyfa, «That gold one» brandished its extraordinary huge battle axe up high.

"Shock wave attack in two seconds! one, zero!"

Yui who sat on my head exuded a loud voice despite her small body. Following the countdown, the five people from the front and middle rows split up to the left and right, creating a gap. The blade of the axe swung roaring down, and created a shock wave, cut in a straight line, which passed through the gap and hit the wall on the other side violently.

It had already been twenty minutes since we broke into the ice castle «Prymheimr».

It was just as «Queen of the Lake Urðr» said, the number of the enemies inside the dungeon was quite thin. The encounter rate of the small fry mob was almost zero. Half of the floor's sub-bosses were also absent. However, the boss defending the hall in front of the stairs to the lower floor was there as expected, it was time to show our overwhelming attack power to the boss once which once forced Asuna, Lyfa, and I to say "No way—!".

Nevertheless, we somehow defeated the one-eyed boss on the first floor without twisting our hands, ran through the second floor, and managed to reach the boss room again, however——

What awaited for us there was the giant humanoid with the head of a bull, a large evil-god of the so-called «Minotaur» type. Moreover, there were two of them, the one on the right had its whole body in pitch black, the body of the other one on the left glittered with gold, the weapons they both used were battle axes with blades as large as dining tables.

As the first floor's Cyclops boss was defeated easily by the icicle in the center of the room, even without magic attacks, I first thought that we were fine, but there was one problem. Apparently, the black one resisted magic, while the gold one would be physical resistant, and thinking that it was fine resulted in an unexpectedly high price to pay.

Then we should defeat the black quickly and after that, attack the gold with carefully set up battle tactics; however, the two bull heads, unexpectedly, seemed to be connected by strong bonds, when the black's HP decreased, the gold would ignore the hate and come to protect it. During that time, the black behind it would curl up its body, it seemed to be some form of meditation power that could recover its HP.

After they did that once, we concentrated our attacks on the gold while the black was meditating, but as it had high physical resistance, its HP barely decreased. And of course we had problem with our HP, even though we could avoid the instant death attacks, the ranged attack's splash damage was impossible to avoid; with the healing only by Asuna, it was obvious she wouldn't be able to support us for long.



“Kirito-kun, at this pace, my MP will only last for about one hundred and fifty seconds!”

I heard Asuna shout from behind me, so I held up my right hand sword in reply.

In such an endurance battle, if the healer’s MP ran out, what awaited the party was total annihilation —— in other words a «Wipe». If someone managed to survive, it was possible to collect and resurrect the Remain Lights one by one, but it would require a lot of time and effort. However, in case of a wipe, of course we would have to restart from the save point in Aarun. But the problem was how much time we had left——

As if she could read my concerns, Lyfa who was next to me whispered again.

“The medallion is more than seventy percent in darkness now, we won’t have enough time if we «Death warp».”

“Understood.”

Nodding, I deeply inhaled and enclosed it in my stomach.

If this was the old Aincrad, I’d issue a withdrawal without a second thought. In that world «Betting on the possibility» was not allowed. But now in ALO, it was no longer a Death Game. Even if the Cardinal System turned the entire Alfheim into a scorched field, it would affect only one thing, which was the «game enjoyment». So in this case, I had to believe in my companions strength.

“Everyone, when it comes down to this, there’s only one thing we can do!”

Avoiding the gold Minotaur's axe swing and affirming the gauge of the black Minotaur recharging its HP in the back, I shouted,

"This is all-or-nothing, concentrate our attack using Sword Skills on the gold!"

«Sword Skill».

Just that, was the game system that distinguished the former SAO from the others.

In March of this year with the «Aincrad implementation update», the management team had introduced Sword Skills into ALO. However, there were some modifications, one of them was the «Additional damage property». The current high ranked Sword Skills no longer have only pure physical property, but are equipped with magical properties of earth, water, fire, wind, darkness, or holy. Therefore, it would be able to pass through the gold Minotaur's high physical resistance.

Of course, there were risks involved. Most of the consecutive Sword Skills had a long stun duration after finishing the move. If we took a direct hit from those battle axes in that time period, the HP gauge would be completely reduced to zero. There was a case where the front and middle rows could be instantly eliminated from the horizontal ranged attack as well.

However, everyone understood those risks and nodded immediately.

"Oh yeah! That's what I'm waiting for!"

Klein, at the right wing, held his beloved katana high above his head. Jumping to my left was Lyfa who also set up her long sword at

her waist. At my back, Liz and Silica tightened their grip on their weapons in preparation.

“Silica, use «Foam» on the count of three! ——Two, one, now!”

I instructed based on the gold’s action, Silica then shouted,

“Pina, «Bubble Breath»!”

Normally, issuing a command to the pet didn’t ensure one hundred percent success rate regardless of the taming mastery. But I have never seen Pina ignoring Silica’s command before. This time too, the small dragon dancing in the air above Silica opened its mouth and released rainbow colored bubbles.

The bubbles slipped through the air and burst in front of the gold bull’s nose which was preparing its big attack using its battle axe. The bull with weak magic resistance went under a confusion effect for just a second, and stopped its movement.

“Go!”

As a response to my shout —— all the party member’s weapons aside from Asuna’s went into dazzling multi-colored light effects.

Why did the floating castle Aincrad’s creator Kayaba Akihito create the system of «Unique Skills» with such deviated power?

Until now I still couldn’t grasp the real reason behind it.

The skill «Holy Sword» that person possessed could be clear example. Being the leader of the strongest guild Knights of the Blood, the paladin who stood in front of many players with his absolutely unbreakable crossed shield, and those legends would be turned up-

side down at the 95th floor, when that man would turn himself into the worst demon king of all RPG last bosses in existence.

In that moment, the «MMORPG with the main story driven by player's action» would be realized. An **Incarnating Radius** — realized world. In order to achieve his purpose of the world creation, it was necessary for him to continue being the absolutely strongest paladin. Even with «Holy Sword» and «Immortality properties», he also had to depend on the irregular power that was the «Over Assist».

But if just the unique skill such as the holy sword were sufficient, it would not be necessary to have an MMO where 'The Hero was the only one who could confront the demon king'. Of course, it would lead to a difference in the player's battle power, which wouldn't be appropriate based on the rules of fairness.

Yet, he still gave «Dual Blades» and probably a few other unique skills to the players.

Those abilities outside of rules resulted in the unequal distribution of the resources, that guy even understood that it could distort how the world would progress along his plan. In fact, during my duel with Heathcliff for Asuna's withdrawal from the guild, if I didn't have the «Dual Blades» skill, he could have won without having to use the Over Assist. Recalling that moment of irregularity caused me to realize Heathcliff's true identity on the 75th floor. By giving me the unique skill, his imagined world — his story had to end at just three-quarters of the way.

In ALO's world, in the rare moments that I held two swords, I always had a thought in a corner of my mind, *Why?*

At the same time, there was also a bit of guilt. Of course, I defeated Heathcliff on the 75th floor — It was a victory I didn't

regret. If the game hadn't cleared at that point, the victims of the incident would certainly have increased even further. Among those might be people dear to me. Or perhaps, even myself.

However, I couldn't stop thinking about it. 'Was it alright like that?' and 'Mustn't we climb to the 100th floor and fight with the demon king Heathcliff there?' No, not 'must'. It was what I wanted to do, it was just my egotism, the worst egotism. That was why I hesitated equipping two swords in Alfheim.

——However, there was no «Unique Skill» in this world. The new management team had verified the enormous number of sword skills and removed some suspicious conditional skills from the system —— rumors said about ten skills were removed.

So I couldn't use the dual wielding sword skills such as «Double Circular» and «Starburst Stream» anymore. While I could reproduce its movement without System Assist to ninety-nine percent, and I had proven it against both human and monsters, however, it couldn't be used here. Because my self-made dual wielding skill version, although it could reproduce the technique's power, it didn't contain any magical attribute, so it was ineffective against the high physical resistance gold Minotaur.

However, «Using one handed sword skills while equipped with two swords» had one advantage —— as Lyfa said «A lead tipped shinai was like terribly cheating a hundred fold».

Being hit by the special move «Bubble Breath» from the little dragon Pina, the gold Minotaur was stunned for about a second, in front of it was me, Klein was on the right, Lyfa on the left, and from

both sides Liz and Silica were also there, we all charged in at the same time.

“U.....ooo!”

Everyone roared, then drew the highest leveled sword skills we learned. Klein’s katana was wrapped with a rampaging flame, Lyfa’s long sword created a flashing gale, Silica’s dagger had water spray moving around it, Liz’ mace emitted a groaning lightning flash. In addition to that, from behind, the arrows glowing with its ice arrowhead flew in rapid succession, accurately piercing at the tip of the nose which seemed to be the bull’s vital point.

At the same time, my right handed sword glowed in an orange light, and I assaulted it with all my power.

Five high-speed continuous thrusts then cut downward, upward, before another full force upward cut. The one-handed sword eight combo sword skill «Howling Octave». Its attributes were forty percent physical and sixty percent fire. Within the one-handed sword category, it was in a high tier. So of course, the stun after the move — the skill delay was also long, however,

“.....!!”

With a voiceless yell, my consciousness had detached from my right hand after releasing the attacks. The movement command output from my brain to the AmuSphere was to cut off everything for a moment. My next command was to start transmitting commands to the left hand.

The right hand was on the auto-pilot thanks to the System Assist, it went on with the final upward cut. And, parallel to it, my left hand

moved, drawing the sword backward. The blade released bright blue lighting.

The right sword made a deep cut at the exposed abdomen of the bull headed humanoid. Originally, this would impose a delay, causing my avatar to become rigid. However, the parallel activation of the sword skill of the left sword had overwritten the delay. The slash drew a horizontal arc and cleaved at the bull's right abdomen.

It was not normal for my body, no, my left and right half of the brain to think of separate things at the same time. But here, my consciousness stopped its integration to the sword skill, leaving the right hand's skill to the System Assist, while concentrating on the left hand.

The sword causing the horizontal cut and buried in the enemy avatar rotated ninety-degrees. I then pushed down on the grip in my hand, the blade jumped up and dissected the enemy vertically from the belly. Once the blade exited, this time I slashed down from above. It was the three hit heavy attack, effective against large type monsters, «Savage Fulcrum». Fifty percent physical and fifty percent ice.

On the verge of finishing the attack from the left hand——

I switched the output from my brain once again.

This timing, if it were too late or too early, could cause the skill to misfire, and cause the avatar to become rigid. The window of error allowed was less than one-tenth of a second. I noticed this skill combination by chance around three months ago, and I wouldn't want to recall how much I have been practicing since then, but the success rate was still below fifty percent. With feeling and half praying, the sword in my right hand started to move.

“Ku.....oo!”

Mounted on a short fervor, the blade glowed in light blue. From the vertical cut without a backward motion, then up and down combination, followed by a full powered upper cut. A high speed four hit combo «Vertical Square»——

Up until this point, the total number of hits was already fifteen. Approaching the number of a high rank Dual Blades' skill. While it continued to be hit, the enemy would be under a delay so there was no need to think about the defense.

When Vertical Square started, the skill delay of my companions were already over.

“Zeeryaaaaa!”

It was obviously a war cry from Klein, as the second wave of concentrated attacks engulfed the gold Minotaur. The dungeon floor trembled, a large amount of the enemy's HP gauge was suddenly shaved off.

Just before the final upper slash, I challenged the fourth «Skill Connect» without any hesitation.

This didn't mean that any one-handed sword skill was suitable to lead in. The movement by the System Assist, and the movement of the non-attack arm, all needed to be in continuous motion to the next skill.

At the time the Vertical Square from my right hand unleashed, my left arm was folded toward the shoulder. From there, with just a slight twist of my body, the «pull the shoulder carrying the sword, the other hand moves forward» form was completed. The sword in my left hand was wrapped in a crimson light effect. The blade roared like a fighter jet and approached from behind, my arm shot out at an ultra high-





speed. A heavy single strike attack «Vorpal Strike». Thirty percent physical, thirty percent fire and forty percent darkness.

*Zgaaan!*, a loud burst of sound emitted out, the sword penetrated the enemy's abdomen. The huge body five times my size was knocked back violently. At that time, the second attacks from Klein and the others were already completed. This time, everyone's avatar, including mine, was struck by the long skill delay.

The HP gauge of the gold Minotaur stained in deep red and decreased toward the left edge——

Then stopped and was left with only two percent remaining.

A cruel smile emerged from the bull head. The enemy had recovered from the delay, it drew its huge axe back horizontally. That must be a ranged attack using a high speed revolution which would result in an instant death if hit. A “jump back!” command resounded in my awareness, but my body wouldn't follow. The axe heartlessly shone, the whirling wind occurred at the boss' feet.

“No.....oooooooo!”

While my spirit screamed sharply, a blue gale ran past from my right side. The rapier held in its right hand released five consecutive thrusts at a speed so high our eyes couldn't see it. It was the high ranking extreme speed thin sword skill «Neutron». With the damage properties of twenty percent physical and eighty percent holy, the remaining HP of the gold Minotaur, who was readying itself to swing its axe, was silently robbed.

The movement of the evil-god halted. From behind, the black Minotaur which had completed its HP meditation brandished its axe in triumph. However, the partner who had been protecting it up until

now was screaming in a high pitched sound —— its huge body blasted in all directions with a stiff sound effect.

.....Eh.

The eyes of the black Minotaur widened in surprise, and looked at the seven people who had recovered from their skill delay.

“.....Alright, in front, that’s the seat of honor.”

Klein said quickly while baring his teeth.

## Chapter 4

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

“Oi Kiritard! What did ya do just now!?”

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

“.....Do I have to say it?”

“Course! After seeing something like that!”

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

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

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

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

“It’s just your imagination.”

I shrugged my shoulders and clapped my hand on our healer-sama’s back, whom despite her support duty in the back row, had

sneaked in during the battle with the gold Minotaur to deliver the killing blow.

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

“Ah, right.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you.”

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

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

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

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

Anyway——

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



to the boss room, we stopped, as in front of our eyes —— a scene came into view.

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

Behind the fence caused by the stalactite growing sharply from both the ground and the ceiling, was a single figure. It was not of a giant's size. As it had collapsed on the ground, its accurate size was difficult to tell, but its body should be about the same height as the Undine Asuna's.

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

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

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

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

“Please..... Help me.....out of here.....”



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

“It’s a trap.”

“Trap.”

“That’s a trap.”

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

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

“O-Oh.....it’s a trap. ....A trap, right?”

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

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

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

“A trap.”

“It’s a trap.”

“I think it’s a trap.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Standing at the end of the path were two wolves carved into the massive ice gate. So this was the throne room of King Prym. About 10

meters away from the gate, I cautioned everyone to slow down, as I turned to gaze at the medallion Lyfa was wearing. The delicate light orbs which once adorned the medallion were now 90% tainted black. We probably only had around 30 minutes left.

I took a deep breath, and said:

“Based on the dungeon design, the BOSS should be behind those doors. This BOSS will be harder than the previous ones, we’ll need to do everything we can to defeat him. Before engaging, we’ll first identify his attack pattern and focus on defense. I’ll give the signal to counterattack. When the BOSS’s HP bar drops to yellow or red, his attack patterns will likely change again, so please be careful everyone.

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

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

“Yeah!”

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

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

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

grabbed our attention was the dazzling reflection from the left and right wall lined along the interior.

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

“.....How much Yurudo are all these worth.....?”

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

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

“..... A bug flew in.”

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

“I hear an annoying buzz. Where is it? I’ll crush the bad bug.”

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

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

Giant —— wouldn’t be a suitable word. The humanoid evil-god was huge even compared to the bosses we fought in this castle so far. Its height must be at least fifteen meters. Even if I jumped with full

force, I wouldn't be able to reach the knee of those giant tree trunk sized legs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They might not be legendary class equipment, but all of them either carried the name of ancient class weapons, or were carved to a satisfactory level by the master smith Lisbeth. However, the daring smile under the long moustache of the Giant King Prym didn’t fade due to the light from our weapons. Maybe it was natural, as our weapons to him were just slightly longer than toothpicks to him anyway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

but a low delay skill also had low attribute damage. The result was an unpleasant response, like hitting an indestructible object.

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

“Pattern changed! Be careful!”

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

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

“.....”

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

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

As if seeing the moment of my impatience——

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

An overpowering wind occurred, sucking in the five people in the front and mid rows. It’s bad, this is surely the harbinger of a full force wide area of effect attack. For evading, first of all, the sucking power of



the wind magic must be neutralized. While I was thinking this, to my left, Lyfa started reciting a spell.

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

“Lyfa, everyone, take defense!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Nuuu—!”

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

Gaching! the frightening sound of breaking echoed throughout the hall, those of us covered in ice shattered. My eyes went dark due to

shock. My body slammed hard on the floor while the damage effect light continued on.

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

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

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

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

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

“Munuuuun!”

Prym raised an angry voice and changed his direction to target Sinon. Flashy attacks on the enemy's weak point from the back row's damage dealers caused a massive amount of hate, taking over the hate

of the vanguards, resulting in the enemy switching targets. It was a mistake beginners always did, but of course, this wasn't the case this time. Sinon acted as a decoy, knowing it would likely lead to her death, to buy us time for recovery.

“Sinon, give me thirty seconds!”

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

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

“.....Prepare the attack.”

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

## Chapter 5

“Onii-chan!”

Lyfa’s trembling voice vibrated from my side.

“It’s too late... The lights in the medallion, are gone...”

“What...?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Uwa... Uwahaha..."

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

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

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

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

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

His brethren? Who?

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

**\*CRASH!\***

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

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

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

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

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

Our kingdom, The Fairy Kingdom Alfheim.

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

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

"ROAR!!!"

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

“Prymheimr ——— ATTACK!!”

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

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

“..... What's going to happen... next.....”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“W-Why should we thank you, you bastard?”

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

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

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

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

“Waah!?”



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

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

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

“I’LL GET YOU FOR THIS YOU OLD GEEZER  
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

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

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

“..... We're gonna fly! Get your wings ready!”

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

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

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

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

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

Taking a deep breath, I turned around.

“...Oh... Ohhh.....”

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

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

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

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

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

The queen of the lake Urðr had used her powers to keep Prymheimr sealed, but as her kind perished, so did her power. The castle had then broke free of its chains and revealed its true form. It was about 300 meters wide, and the height from the tip to the base was approximately 300 times  $\sqrt{2}$ , around 424 meters. Only about one tenth had pierced through the rubble, the tip pushing upwards lunging greedily for the world tree's core. The world tree still held strong with its remaining 10 or so roots, but even then it seemed it would eventually fall.

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

The original inhabitants of Aarun were scattered around the valleys. Looking like ruin excavators, countless players stood there transfixed, their gaze upon the ice castle which had caused the city's ruin. If a player was running a shop in Aarun or simply taking a rest in

their own house, the sudden emergence of a huge block of ice that laid waste to the entire city would certainly be quite a surprise. Because the city was a designated safe zone, none of the players had their HP reduced, though after going through such a shock it wouldn't be a surprise if their lives were shortened in the real world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This explanation came from Yui, who stuck her head out from my shirt pocket. Normally immovable objects could be converted into

scrolls through the banker NPC. It seemed that even the Cardinal System wasn't cruel enough to remove players' items in an instant. It felt oddly heartwarming.

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

Just as Lisbethh was speaking.

A huge shrill scream from behind us interrupted her.

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

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

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

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

However, a rectangular frame appeared at the top right corner of my vision, accompanied with a soft sound effect. This frame displayed the cursor information, and meant that the target was either a player or a monster. I nervously scanned her name. "Marinca", spelled entirely using alphabets. Wait, the ALO system shouldn't display names





of unaccustomed players. No matter how much I racked my brains, I couldn't recall where had I met her before. If so, how was I able to see her name...?

“Ahh...”

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

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

“GAME MASTER”

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

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

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

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

Ymir, this was the name of the company running ALO. After RECTO's dissolution, ALO was supposed to be shut down too. Ymir though decided to purchase the servers despite declining player population, just like gods who descending to save a doomed planet.

However this wasn't revealed to the players. Even I didn't know much about the company, save that one of the employers was an old friend of Egil's.

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

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

"Err——Erm... To be precise..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

As Asuna berated Marinca, Klein and I both tucked our heads away in fear, a habit inherited from attending her strategy meetings in



the past. It was fortunate that Asuna didn't notice our gestures, as she moved a step forward—her shoes made a sound as they scrapped against the ground, this might just be me imagining things—and yelled in an enraged voice:

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

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

Even though we had took up “Urðr's request” to avoid complete destruction, we failed at the last moment. It should be dawning on the players who had taken “Prym's quest” now, that they had indirectly caused Aarun's destruction, and the holy sword promised as a reward was nothing but the “Fake Sword Caliburn”. Since things had progressed to such a level, a rollback was inevitable, and most players should be able to understand. Now to hope that the time lost was as minimal as possible. That was what I thought as I awaited Marinca's reply.

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

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

“W-What????”

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

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

"By the skin of your teeth"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Forgot to turn the settings OFF, right?”

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

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

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

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

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

“...Anyway, at least we now know the reason why the Cardinal System’s quest suddenly accelerated.”

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

“This fits the saying ‘You can’t hate a crying GM’ pretty well”

“Yeah... Even the Cardinal System wouldn’t be able to sit idly in dummy mode forever. Putting it in another perspective, it seems that the Cardinal System’s finally shown its true potential...”

“It must be a desire that’s been accumulating for months, finally exploding all at once.”

We all agreed to Silica’s words. If we treated the Cardinal system as a living being instead of a regulating program, it wouldn’t be too hard for us to understand its feelings. The question was, just how much

power did the Cardinal System have? Even though the world was supposedly based on the Norse Mythology of Ragnarök and the «Twilight of the Gods» seemed to be a fitting final battle, but...

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

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

“E-Ehh?!”

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

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

“Say, Lyfa.”

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

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

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

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

“Then Midgard... Should probably refer to Aincrad...”

“W-WHAT??”

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

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

“Final act?”

“Of course... The ‘Legendary Samurai Klein’ Act”

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

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

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

“H-How can that...”

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

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

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

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

“No worries, there's a way!”

“.....”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stunning silence.

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

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

A minimal amount of Winter Sunlight poured through the window into the room, landing on the surface of my alarm clock next to my bed before warmly reflecting off. The time was one thirty. The second chapter in our quest would continue only at three, hence it was



vital that we ate and did any other things in the meantime. Due to this, we checked in an inn situated in the Aarun valley and logged out.

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

“...Things sure have gotten bad huh...”

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

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

“Please come in.”

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

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

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

Suguha looked very nervous, as if she was seeking assurance. I nodded and replied unsurely “Ahh... Okay, yeah”. She quickly closed the

door and hopped lightly across the floorboards, sitting on the other side of the bed.

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

“.....Will it be alright?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah... That’s right. Thank you Onii-chan, now I can finally be at ease.”

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

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

“Uwaa...”

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

“Oi oi, Suguha...”

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

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

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

“...Unbelievable.”

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

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

“Yeah... To an extent, I understand.”

I continued speaking, momentarily forgetting my nervousness.

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

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

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

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

“If this is a dream...”

—If this is a dream?

“...Then let’s redo the failed mission.”

—So that’s it.

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

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

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

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

(End?)

A cluster of several grey hexagons of varying shades and sizes, some overlapping, located in the upper left corner.

000-04

# *Versus*

*S* Roppongi  
April 2026

A single grey hexagon located to the right of the text "April 2026".

“Heh..... So this is the «4th-Generation FullDive Experimental Unit».”

I muttered while looking up at the huge enshrined hexahedron in front of me.

The bare aluminum surface was shining dully, with growling sounds from several of the large cooling fans that were lined up . One side of it was linked to the gel bed, the headrest was covered by a protruding crude helmet-based interface.

“So huge, weren’t the machines used in the early days of the amusement parks smaller than this, Higa-san?”

I turned around and said to the man at the control console. The operator raised his face, shrugged and replied,

“Even so, Kirigaya-kun, this is already compact compared to the original estimate. Besides, the specs of the first generation at the olden days’ game centers weren’t much different from Mega Drive or Dream Cast.”

“.....I never saw either of the real machines though.....”

“Well, then let’s have life songs! This time at my apartment, it’ll be a strictly reggae camp.....”

And the man who blurted out strange things was —— Higa Takeru, the researcher responsible for the development of the world’s state-of-the-art VR machine. Looking at him from the outside, it would be hard to believe, as his hairstyle stuck out thinly like a pin holder, he

wore big rounded glasses, and his T-shirt had a game character printed on it. It would be 100 times more matching for him to be in the vicinity of the shops in Akihabara than this gloomy hi-tech room.

But even though I say that, I was still in uniform after school time too.

Why was I —— Kirigaya Kazuto, here at the harbor ward in Roppongi, in the laboratory of a certain venture company? The reason was simple, it was just a part-time job.

From the first-generation of the large scale amusement machine, to the 2nd-generation Nerve Gear or AmuSphere, then to the 3rd-generation medical equipment, the FullDive machines have evolved. Of course, anyone can use it, but there were some with a certain degree of adaptability. That is, their brains could connect to the machine with a high efficiency rate. And in addition to the innate aptitude, the experience could be improved during a long Dive.

Then in Japan, no, the entire world, the group of people who held the longest Dive time was without a doubt, the «Survivors» from «SAO incident» which concluded one and a half years ago.

This 4th-generation machine has been developed under the leadership of Higa Takeru, the level of connection precision was overwhelming compared to the machines up until now. That high specs led to the unexpected problem. Because the amount of information that had to be exchanged with the brain was too great, even with all the staff including Higa-san himself, they were unable to collect data from the test Dive to a satisfactory level due to the «VR Sickness» —— was what he said.



At that point, Higa-san used a certain connection to request one of the «Survivors», me, to be a test Diver as a part-time job, I came here to Roppongi after I confirmed the daily wages, and that was it.

“——Anyway, I am to FullDive with this, then once in there I just move here and there, right?”

I asked for affirmation while stroking the chilled aluminum exterior, Higa-san nodded in consent.

“Oh, I need to warn you that I can see the graphics inside just as you do, like a voyeur. As I’m still developing the mechanism to adjust the connection depth in accordance to a Diver’s ability, someone has to dive, or else I can’t get the data, hahaha.”

“.....Well, because I get paid, doing anything is fine.....but before that, I need affirmation for one thing please.”

I glanced at the strong headgear interface and continued,

“Erm, there won’t be any danger during the Dive..... Is that right?”

“Of course of course of course!”

Higa-san nodded deeply after saying that three times.

“Kirigaya-kun is an SAO survivor, I understand your feelings. It’s alright, danger from the machine developed by me, there’s only a little!”

“Is that so, I’m relieved to hear tha...”

Swallowing the words I was about to say, I looked at Higa-san again.

“.....«there’s only a little»?”

“Nonono, It’s alright It’s alright It’s alright!”

After saying that three times each, Higa-san continued in a rapid whisper.

“.....Just that, if the power dropped during the Dive, then ‘that’ for a moment.....”

“What is ‘that’ .....?”

“Nono, no problem! We have two support power sources, and an emergency battery is already equipped too!”

“Please explain ‘that’ instead.....”

“Nonono, no problem! There’s no real harm! It just, erm, a bit, how to say it.....”

Higa-san rolled his eyes behind the rounded glasses while stepped closer, my glance was fixed on him.

“.....How to say it, well, it might appear, just that.”

“.....What will appear?”

“Hahaha, it’s not good Kirigaya-kun. There are things we must not talk about, like bonuses or toilets. In a place like this, the thing that will appear is of course ‘that’, hahaha.”

After saying that, Higa-san hung both hands loosely in front of his chest. That behavior finally let my brain realize what ‘that’ means.

“Hah.....? G..Ghost.....?”

*What is this person saying?*, I thought while still staring at Higa-san, who shook his head again and said,

“It’s real, very real, Kirigaya-kun! I actually saw it! .....Well, as you can see, this experimental unit is still the only machine in the world, so there is only a single person during the Dive. But..... the staff saw a

silhouette of a person on the grass many times during the test field dive.”

Higa-san said with an expression that should have the thin vertical lines over his forehead if this was a manga.

I had a serious look for a moment, then it was replaced by a bitter smile. I shrugged my shoulders.

“It must be because of the VR sickness, probably the illusions from light effect? Or it could be a bug in the shader program.”

“No—! There is no way such a bug could appear in the program this genius Higa had participated in creating!”

For some reason, his tone suddenly changed to be like a foreigner’s, but I ignored it and moved my shoulders again.

“Still, the ghost didn’t even come out to this room..... About ghosts appearing in the VR world, while in Aincrad when I heard rumors and went to check, it was just an NPC anyway.”

That of course, was about the existence of the top-down AI «Yui» who was my and Asuna’s «Daughter». She would get angry if I tell her that I was searching for a ghost at first.

“.....In other words, everything seen in the other side is all digital code, the existence must be written somewhere in the memory address. By examining the log of the corresponding test Diving time, you can see what the Diver saw.....”

After I said that, Higa-san made a pointed mouth like a child.

“Of course I checked it, but there was nothing in the log. Which means, it was certainly not an object from the main program of the experimental machine. Then it was really a ghost, or.....”

“.....Or?”

“.....Err, this talk is at the level Kirigaya-kun is not supposed to know, so don't let anyone know you heard it, alright?”

With a strict preface, Higa-san continued,

“At the heart of this experimental machine is «Quantum Operation Circuit», the so-called quantum computer.”

“.....That was also Higa-san's creation?”

“Oh yea, was what I wanted to say, but its basic foundation was actually what Kayaba-senpai left behind. Well anyway, it is possible that the quantum computer could interfere with a parallel world , well..... the Sci-Fi world.”

“.....That..is really true?”

The tone in my question had changed, Higa-san, half agreeing and half disagreeing, shook his head.

“I hope I know that for certain too, but if it's true, then it would explain the ghost phenomenon. That is, this experimental machine, for some reason....., interfered with the same kind of the machine in the past or the future from a different time flow, then it could be possible to see the shadow of another Diver.....”

“.....Somehow this is very different from a real ghost, isn't it”

I shrugged my shoulder again, then glanced at the clock at the wall.

“Appearing or not, we will only know during the Dive anyway. ....Today my little sister will make something, I will be in trouble if I came back after dinner time. So let's start.....”

“Heh, Kirigaya-kun has little sisters!? How many!?”

Higa-san’s reaction made me feel a strange sense of déjà vu, I ignored the question and sat on the bed of the experimental machine. I lay my body to fit its recesses then slid my head inside the headgear.

“OK, I’m ready.”

I said to Higa-san, whose face still showed lingering disappointment. Closing my eyes, the sound of a motor could be heard, the final explanation reached my ears,

“.....Then, commencing connection. Avatar will be Kirigaya-kun’s «Self-image» that is automatically generated, so it won’t cause discomfort.”

“Understood.”

I raised my left thumb in response. At the same time, a low growl could be heard from the back of the experimental machine.

\* \* \*

—————*Again.*

Feeling strange fluctuations in his field of vision, Arita Haruyuki narrowed the eyes of his pink pig avatar.

«Burst Link» command allows one to enter the world dyed in transparent blue, the basic accelerated space «Blue World».

Equipped in Haruyuki’s neck was the quantum communication device «Neuro Linker». And installed even deeper inside was the mystery application «Brain Burst». When FullDiving in this transparent blue field, the BB program accelerates Haruyuki’s command reactions one thousand fold.

The basic accelerated space was for searching the matching list to find opponents, or to start external applications to do various work, the reason for Haruyuki being «Accelerated» was for the latter. That was —— for the submission of today's homework, to be more precise, the postponed time left was fifteen real life minutes. The Japanese history class during the fifth period had given out the report homework, and of course, the storage region of his brain had forgotten about it even after he registered it in the scheduler application.

Because this was neither mathematics nor English homework, the last resort of asking Takumu or Chiyuri for their homework photograph in order to copy it wasn't an option —— Even though the costly loan, without a doubt, would be collected later —— it was better than having to write the essay report.

Therefore, consuming a precious 1 burst point to «Accelerate», he battered intently at the holographic keyboard. However,

His thoughts shook and swayed when he lifted his face due to the odd observation reflected in his field of vision, in the middle of the empty blue classroom,

“.....What.....?”

He muttered when his avatar dropped from the chair. He stared ahead a few steps between the rows of the desk, and part of the blackboard waved faintly again. It was —— like there was something transparent moving between Haruyuki and the blackboard.

In fact, this wasn't his first time coming in contact with such phenomenon. Recently, here —— about a month ago, sometimes during FullDive he could see the strange fluctuations as well. Moreover, it wasn't in the normal VR world, only while «Accelerated».

However, today's clarity of the phenomenon was unusual. Haruyuki had forgotten about his homework, he stared intently.

Then he immediately noticed something.

“.....A person?”

Yes, a fluctuation at the spot in the classroom looked like the silhouette of a human, as if there was a completely transparent human standing there.

But that shouldn't be the case.

The blue basic accelerated space was, as a general rule, the world only for a person who uttered the «Burst Link» command. For two or more to Dive at the same time, both sides must be using a direct connection on the Neuro Linker and use the accelerate command at the same time. But of course, at the moment, Haruyuki wasn't directly connected to anyone.

.....That means.

“.....G..Ghost?”

Scared by the word he inadvertently murmured. Haruyuki tried to retreat to the back of the classroom, but at that time.

The clear shadow started approaching him at the same time!

“Hi,hiiii—!!”

Screaming, while dashing back at a high speed, he unconsciously tried to shout the acceleration halt command.

“B-B-B-B-Burst Ou.....”

But he stopped his steps at that point.

*This is not the real world, it is the polygon world created by the image of the Neuro Linkers from the social cameras. Everything reflected in the eyes are all the digital data which could be substituted with the code. Therefore, there must be a reason for the existence of that shadow too, there is no ghost, ghost is just a lie.*

Haruyuki thought recklessly while hiding behind the last row of the desk. *Something that looks like human shadow — what is it? There must be a way to verify it. Assuming it is just other human, this is not a normal VR space but the accelerated space, I didn't Burst Link with that «Someone». Then if I connect to the network with the same Burst Linker——*

“T-That's right..... T-T-The name will come up from the Matching List.”

Haruyuki murmured with dry lips. He then quickly hit the «B» icon displayed at the top left of the virtual desktop, the Brain Burst Console screen expanded, he moved the tab to open the Matching List.

*On top of the list is my name, then it should be the classmates Takumu «Cyan Pile» and Chiyuri «Lime Bell». In addition, at the lounge of the school cafeteria, is KuroyukiHime «Black Lotus». These four are the only existing Burst Linkers in this Umesato middle school.*

Yet.

Floating on the fifth row, the wriggled set of dots was blurred like it was written in ink.

That spot of light, for some reason, didn't take form of the characters immediately. Haruyuki held his breath and watched while trembling intensely, then, he blinked — a few alphabets finally formed.



There was a fixed form to the Duel Avatar's name, but that name didn't take the «Color Name» form, it was just a row of six characters.

“K.....I, R, I....., T.....O.....?”

——*Kirito?*

*Who is he.....?*

As if to trace his thoughts, Haruyuki's right hand automatically moved.

He hit the mysterious Burst Linker name, «KIRITO», causing the «DUEL» option to pop through the window, then touched the «YES» affirmation dialog.

The blue classroom melted and disappeared as if it collapsed.

While passing through the space of darkness, Haruyuki's pig avatar was surrounded by the light and changed its shape, The big helmet with thin limbs, silvery white Duel Avatar «Silver Crow».

On both sides of the upper part of his vision, green stamina gauges extended, and the «1800» time count was engraved in the middle.

And finally the flaming text «FIGHT» shone brightly before exploding.

Once his stiff feet touched the surface of the battlefield, Haruyuki quickly raised his face.

‘Someone’ stood in front, slightly away from him.

*Duel Avatar —— no, that isn't it.* He thought.

As far as Haruyuki knew, the avatar of each Burst Linker had the appearance of a robot-like hardness. While some wore cloth, there were no flesh and blood faces across the board.

But this ‘someone’ who stood in front of him clearly had a human’s appearance.

A male, with slightly long hair, his sharp eyes were jet black. He seemed to be slightly older than Haruyuki, wearing a black leather longcoat, thimble gloves on his hands, and boots on his feet. Then —— suspended on his back were two long swords.

“.....Swords!?”

Murmuring in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki put some more distance between them.

There was no mistake, it was familiar in the fantasy game genre, the so-called «Long Sword». The handles were black and silvery white respectively, although they were polygons, he could tell from the radiance of the texture that they would be very heavy. He felt that the presence of blades within those scabbards were genuine.

That was not a Duel Avatar, but he didn’t think it was the harmless FullDive avatar either.

While cautiously observing his opponent, Haruyuki took a deep breath and shouted,

“Who are you.....!? How exactly did you connect to the Umesato Local Network!?”

The voice tinged with effect echoed throughout the field, but the black dressed swordsman was still motionless.

Disregard that —— rather, it was as if the voice wasn't received in the first place.

Looking closely, the outline of the swordsman avatar was misted like smoke, was it disembodied? —— Was it just the image being sent from somewhere? Haruyuki thought that, and to verify it, he took a step closer.

At the same moment, the swordsman made his move too. The black shiny boot made a step forward, it stepped on the small pebble on the stage ground, causing a sound.

“——!!”

*Not the virtual image!*

Haruyuki jumped backwards in panic again, he raised both hands in a guarding stance.

As if being induced by that movement, tension ran through the face of the swordsman, his right hand quickly grabbed the handle of the black sword behind his back.

\* \* \*

——*Where exactly is this place?*

——*And, who is that!?*

I earnestly kept repeating these two questions in my mind.

The prior lecture from the operator, Higa-san, was that the Dive field would be a peaceful grassland, but the scenery spread around me was the complete opposite.

The cracked ground, the concrete buildings that had partly collapsed, flames came out of their openings, And —— the starless night sky. It was just like the world after civilization had collapsed.

If the only existence here was me, it would be just an error in the quantum circuit, which I suspected caused my consciousness to jump to the future Tokyo. But fortunately, there was a human shadow just a few meters in front of me.

The silhouette was surely human's, the head was like a big helmet, all of the body was covered in metal armor. The reflection from the bonfire sparkled on that silvery body, which was very slender compared to its big head. It was unthinkable that there would be a human inside it. Further more, its back was carrying something that looked like the radiating fins.

“Robot.....?”

I murmured. As I stepped closer to verify it, the sole of my boots stepped on some rubble causing a sound.

At that moment, the silvery robot quickly jumped backwards —— both hands moved forward into a guarding position.

*It had no weapons, but the tip of its sharp fingers glittered. It would be plausible that it had some strong weapons hidden.* When I thought that, my right hand moved automatically over my shoulder, grabbing the grip of the sword hung on my back.

——*Sword?*

Then I finally realized that I wasn't Kirigaya Kazuto, the high school student in the real world, but Kirito, the swordsman from the nostalgic SAO period.

Higa said that when I dive, the avatar would be created from my self-image. In other word, currently I wasn't in my own flesh and blood body, but the «Black Swordsman» which shouldn't exist anywhere anymore, I almost made a bitter smile at this thought. However, I wasn't in the situation to do that. Why did the mysterious robot make that stance with both hands? Right, I also grabbed the handle of my sword. I was in a somewhat dangerous situation with this robot.

*If I pulled out the sword like this, the robot would attack without a doubt. But it would be hard to prevent that while I'm standing in this awkward form anyway. The fighting spirit is emitting from it and such things don't exist in soulless NPC or monsters. In other word, there must be a real human moving it.*

Within the intense atmosphere, I decided to take a chance with words,

“.....Um, who are you? This place is my company's closed network. Where are you from and for what purpose are you connecting here?”

*But there was no answer, Looks as if that thing can't hear my voice, then how about gesturing? But to do that in this situation would be difficult. If I move my right hand even slightly, the robot in front of me might jump immediately. The tension of the atmosphere in the space between us is so tense.*

*——Yeah, I was in the wrong the moment I grabbed my sword, but you are a bit too aggressive too!*

That was what I complained in my mind. The silvery robot had penetrated the company's protective firewall into the experimental machine, it was clearly illegal hacking. Then wouldn't it be more appropriate to be a bit more sneaky.....

When I thought to this point.

After a long time, I finally noticed the indicators fixed at the top of my field of vision.

At the center was the digital figure, the current [1740] had been decreased by one second. Then on both sides, the green shining bars, lined up in parallel with the thin blue bars.

Under the left side bar was the engraved character string [KIRITO]. No matter how I look at it, it was my name —— The Login ID I passed to Higa-san before the Dive.

Then under the right bar was the brightly shining [SILVER CROW] name.

“Silver.....Crow.....”

I soundlessly murmured that, it was no doubt the name of the silvery robot in front of me.

*The components of this ‘screen’, and this situation.*

I widened my eyes to the revelation that I suddenly realized.

*This is —— this world is clearly not the peaceful test field at all.*

It was a «Battle Field». Currently I was in a nostalgic fighting game, I Dived into the so-called KakuGē!<sup>6</sup>

*Higa-san said there was a certain degree of possibility that the quantum circuit mounted within the experimental machine could interfere with the world on a different time flow. If so, then this place may be the world in 1990’s era when fighting games were at its peak? No,*

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<sup>6</sup> 対戦型格闘ゲーム(taisengataKAKUtoGE-mu), ‘fighting game’, short for カクゲー

*it can't be. For that era, the 'F' of the FullDive didn't even exist yet. Then is this the future? I don't know how many years into the future, but fighting games will be back in the spotlight in the future?*

"Hey, You.....Silver Crow."

Forgetting the fact that my voice wouldn't reach my opponent, I continued saying,

"Is this place within a fighting game? What is the title.....?"

While I was asking,

I carelessly stepped forward while my hand was still on the grip of my sword.

The reaction was —— immediate.

The left foot of the silvery robot avatar kicked the ground, and while I was surprised, the thin body closed in on my bosom like a streak of lightning.

\* \* \*

The left foot had decided due to its own reflexes, and a corner in Haruyuki's head yelled *Crap*—.

The approaching action of the opponent might not have been for attacking purposes, as the sword wasn't pulled out, and he wasn't even in a proper stance with his bosom wide open.

But it was no longer possible to cancel the ultra high speed attack command set by Haruyuki's consciousness. The Silver Crow avatar rushed in at full speed, and threw a preemptive right middle kick aimed towards the flank of the swordsman dressed in black.

Originally, Haruyuki's fighting style wasn't this decisively aggressive. Looking at how he fought his early opponents, he seemed to be gradually changing based on attributes and techniques he gained over time.

In addition, the one in front of him, the strange duel avatar without a color name and with his exposed flesh and blood face, his only feature was the black covering his entire body. If it were red or blue, he might have been controlled from somewhere close by, however, this wasn't the case for black. He should have asked KuroyukiHime-senpai for the characteristics of «Black», but since he was already in the confrontation, it was too late now.

Even against an opponent with unknown characteristics, Haruyuki's preemptive attack with just an insignificant action was —— — clearly, the swordsman in black, «KIRITO»'s tremendous pressure's fault.

If anything, his slender physique, the still developing face that could be called a boy's, but just how he was standing with his hand on the sword grip made Haruyuki's throat dry from the constant feeling of intense pressure. It was likely from a level 7 or 8 High Ranker —— no, higher than that, probably the tension of facing those «Kings» one-on-one.

If the mysterious swordsman had opened a small chance, Haruyuki would rather retreat to hide and ascertain the situation in the narrow path of the «End of the Century» stage. But there was nothing that could be called an opening from the swordsman —— «Kirito». Haruyuki was afraid that his head might fly off from a sudden attack if he tried to retreat, however slightly.



Therefore, as soon as Kirito had taken a casual step, Haruyuki charged ahead with all of his outburst energy.

*—But, things have already reached this point, then there's no other choice!*

Haruyuki swallowed the depressing thought the moment he drew up the kick.

When facing a fellow Burst Linker, do not «Battle» earnestly. That was what his teacher, and at the same time his 'parent', Black Lotus had taught him. If the middle right kick strikes, it would disrupt the opponent's stance, then the rest would be just to continue rushing at close range without giving any chance for him to pull the sword from his back. And finishing him off with an aerial dive attack when the special move gauge had accumulated to the halfway point.

The first attack loaded with those kind of intentions passed through the opponent's abdomen like a silvery arc in the dark night—  
—

With a light sound, only a button of the coat went flying into the sky.

“Wh.....”

While adjusting his balance, Haruyuki forcibly exhaled.

*It's impossible. Given the short interval, and that he wasn't in a proper stance, blocking should be difficult enough, but he evaded it completely.*

Haruyuki eyes wide opened in confusion. At the same time, the boy's right arm flashed, and with a bright metallic sound, he drew out his jet black long sword.

\* \* \*

It was at an amazing speed.

The silvery white avatar «Silver Crow»'s rush with his middle right kick slipped past my abdomen, its movement was ultra smooth as if it had been repeatedly practiced thousands of times.

However, due to its smoothness, I could feel where the first attack was aimed at.

The one moving Silver Crow was a living human, there's no mistake about it. Then, when the human operates the avatar, there will be the tiny bits of information exposed from its movement which didn't exist in monsters. The significant ones are heart beats, toe direction, waist height, and gaze.

For a duel in SAO, it would be fatal to get hit by a single strike, so it was very important to read the opponent's movement in advance. Therefore when needing to fight with an evenly skilled person, any move fired from a long distance must be avoided at almost a hundred percent rate. Jumping moves need to be blocked, as evading might leave an opening, and a favorite special move is sure to be inserted in between the flow of continuous attacks that followed.

From that perspective, the Silver Crow's middle kick speed was, without a doubt, marvelous. But its movements gave out too much information at the initial moments, I could feel the intention to hit my left flank, so I dashed backwards with all my strength. Settling it with just a single coat button sent flying was already considered lucky.

It seemed like Crow didn't expect the attack to be evaded, the swing caused the upper part of the body to lose its balance. That was a

good opportunity, because, even though I positively thought it wasn't a situation I should fight in, my right hand automatically moved to pull out one of my beloved swords — «Elucidator».

“Shi.....”

While feeling the nostalgic weight in my hand, I quickly swung down the sword. With a thin band of blue light, the blade cut into Silver Crow's right shoulder.

\* \* \*

“Ah.....”

Haruyuki let leak a weak sound, staring at the looming sharp edge.

Unable to evade, and it couldn't be blocked with an arm either. Kirito's motion from drawing the sword until slashing didn't look powerful at all, it looked so natural, yet the enormous amount of power that was put on the blade made Haruyuki feel like receiving an electric shock through his avatar.

The metallic colors, like Silver Crow, had some resistance to slashing attacks. But he felt it was of no use against this sword, so in that case, he had to make sure to take minimal damage from it.

Although the battle had just begun, Haruyuki's consciousness had started to «Hyper Accelerate» as if he was already at the edge of the jaws of death. The closing blade seemed to slow down slightly, Haruyuki bent his knees, dropping his avatar down at the same time as the incoming slashing vector. The black shiny blade touched his right shoulder's armor, causing pretty orange sparks to fly in all directions. As he had expected, the sword wouldn't stop there, the crack ripped apart Haruyuki's silver armor faster than the speed at which he

descended, one centimeter, two centimeters was cut by the blade. At this rate even if he fell down to the ground, the sword wouldn't stop and his right arm would surely be cut off. ——But,

“.....Now!!”

The HP gauge was reduced by the damage to the shoulder, and a similar proportion of the special move gauge had filled up with a shiny glow. Haruyuki then converted it to flying force, the silver wings took shape in the form of commas on his back.

At that time, the falling posture gained backwards thrust——

Silver Crow body had only slid by fifty centimeters, but the sword had separated from the cut in the right shoulder.

“.....Oooooo!!”

Roaring, Haruyuki kicked the ground with all his might, and jumped a large distance back.

\* \* \*

——*What happened!?*

Feeling the impact from the point of sword biting into empty ground, I held my breath.

The black blade of the Elucidator had caught the shoulder of Silver Crow, there was no mistake about it. It hit the seams of the armor I aimed at, and I was sure just a breath more and it would have been cut off. But the silvery robot suddenly gained backwards momentum and fled away with a cut wound about two centimeters deep.

Such behavior wouldn't be possible in that situation. That completely different movement, it was as if it was being pulled from the back with some wires.

I looked up quickly, staring at the more than ten meters in distance the avatar took in just the blink of an eye.

Of course, there were no wires attached to its body, and I couldn't see any opening Jet holes either.

—No.

Folded on the back of Crow were thin metal fins. Did they tremble a split second before the back dash?

*If the secret behind the impossible maneuver was those fins, then my initial assumption that they were radiating fins was incorrect — It must be some sort of propulsion system. But if that was the case, why didn't it use them from the start?*

When I thought up to that point, I noticed a slight change from all sorts of information displayed in my field of vision.

First, the Silver Crow's stamina gauge on the upper right had decreased a little, around three percent.

Then, my stamina gauge on the upper left was still full, and the thin blue gauge beneath it had slightly emitted light.

So this field was in compliance with those antique fighting games like I expected, the meaning of the blue gauge was obvious. The «Special Move», no doubt about it. Then this gauge probably charges based on the amount of damage taken. In other word, when Silver Crow was damaged by my sword, the gauge began to accumulate at the same moment, I suspect consuming it created a driving force from the

fins on its back. Conversely, if it couldn't charge the special move gauge, Silver Crow wouldn't be able to use those fins anymore.

——But, in that case, what was my «Special Move» when I didn't have that kind of equipment on my back?

Now that I was using the avatar of «Dual Blades» Kirito and with the two beloved swords, my self-image —— In other words, it was created from my memory. If they worked in this fighting game's system, the special moves should be awakened from my memory as well. Then, asking what I will take as special move, I can promptly reply. It's nothing other than «Sword Skill».

I put my right foot forward, set the sword behind, and assumed a basic one-handed straight sword skill «Sonic Leap» stance. Doing so caused the sword to growl faintly, at the same time the shining part of the special move gauge blinked, and then abruptly stopped. This meant the gauge wasn't enough to use the move.

“.....I get it now.”

I murmured while looking again at the opponent in front of me.

From the reaction of Silver Crow, and from the scene composition, I was apparently the trespasser in this situation.....no, «Intruder» was a more suitable term. It seemed Crow played in this game stage daily, and I, no, the 4th-generation experimental machine's quantum circuit had interfered. I wanted to immediately log out and complain a great deal to Higa for making such a dangerous thing, but there was no log out button in the field of vision, and I didn't know any commands for those purposes either.

But since this was inside a fighting game, once the «Battle» had ended, the connection should be cut off.

If that was the case, it wasn't my hobby to stand still eating the attacks until my stamina gauge was completely depleted either.

Why? I was the «Intruder». It is an appropriate manner to break through using my full power, isn't it?

Since I have been thrown out into this stage, my mouth made a faint smile for the first time.

The switch inside my head made a 'click' changing sound.

\* \* \*

The moment the unknown identity Burst Linker «Kirito» made a little smile, Haruyuki felt goosebumps on his virtual skin. The pain from his right shoulder's wound suddenly disappeared.

Holding his ground against the intense pressure that blew by, the desire to retreat rose up within him.

Kirito had intruded the Umesato Local Network, but it was Haruyuki who saw the name in the matching list and applied the duel mode. Picking the fight then retreating wasn't an option for him, as a member of the legion «Nega Nebulas».

*—This is not a situation to be scared of! If we can't talk, then the only way to collect information from him is to use fists directly — but since that side has a sword — is there any other way?*

At the same time he heard himself saying that, he felt something burning deep inside him.

Kirito's reaction to avoid his full speed middle kick was the fastest he had ever seen fighting with duel avatars up until this point. Wanting to see that movement again, and then surpassing it.

Clenching both his fists hard, Haruyuki decided to rush in again while lowering his body.

The big moves from long distances absolutely wouldn't hit. In addition, the sword had the advantage in reach. If he could slip into the zero distance, he could use small moves to disrupt the opponent's stance.

The sword which looked very heavy shouldn't be able to be swung consecutively. There should be a chance to close in if he could avoid its attack and match it with a counter.

*—Keep focusing. Prepare to evade the attack coming from the point of the sword.*

The gear in Haruyuki consciousness stepped up, at the same time, his field of vision narrowed down to focus on just the center. All his senses focused onto the tip of the shiny black long sword.

“.....Nowww!!”

Yelling, Haruyuki kicked the ground.

Lowering his posture to the limit, he shortened the ten meters distance at once.

Kirito's sword slid down halfway from the beginning middle position.

*From the bottom.* The point of the sword sent sparks flying over the ground while it slashed upwards to intercept Haruyuki, who was leaning forward. It was like the lethal fangs of the jet black snake——

Haruyuki opened only his left wing, causing his body to rotate almost 90 degrees and avoiding the attack. Even without the gauge, he can still use it to control his posture.



The sword groaned as it was raised, as it made a shallow cut on Silver Crow's chest armor. Heat and light that were at the tip of the sword disappeared shortly. At that moment Haruyuki stepped using his right foot with all his strength, his body raised for a right uppercut, a silvery light covered fist went straight for Kirito's abdomen——

It was parried just before it could strike. The right fist flowed to the outside, only grazing the shoulder.

But that was still within the calculations. Now both Kirito's hands couldn't return in time. The left short hook was thrown into the body that was left wide open. 'Don', he felt positive feedback. The body wrapped by the coat had stopped.

——*It hit!*

*Now rush!!*

"Oooo!!"

Haruyuki shouted and at the same time attacked using his right knee, which also hit. The damage wasn't good as the result of the distance which was too short, but it was good enough. Judging the conditions using consecutive moves while the opponent's movement was sealed, then deciding with a blow.

Pinning opponent's left arm with his right, and aiming short strikes with his left. The long sword was useless at this close range, in other words, the opponent's right arm was already considered dead.

At least, that was how it was supposed to be.

The smashing sensation that came from his left fist had dissipated because something pushed it from above. It was Kirito's open right hand, with all his fingers spread.

“Wha.....”

*W-Where is the sword!?*

When that question arose, the next phenomenon had already happened.

The smooth, but terribly fast movement of Kirito’s right fist, now touched Haruyuki’s chest, suddenly emitting an orange light.

*S-Special.....move!!*

*But, without a weapon——!?*

The development was far beyond his expectations, his reaction was just a moment late. But it was too slow in the ultra speed battle.

Don!! With a great impact against the chest, Haruyuki was repelled backward.

However, there the damage was no big deal. It was probably just a move to create some distance. *Just to use this, he chose to drop the sword? Then, I won’t give him a chance to pick it back up.*

To Haruyuki, who was hastily closing the distance back in, a further unexpected development happened in front of his eyes.

The empty handed Kirito made a big jump forward. While in the air, Kirito’s right hand brandished over his head.

*He is trying to pull another sword from his back? No, there is not enough time for that. Then he’s going to attack using his hand to chop? Such an attack won’t be able to pierce my armor.....*

*No.*

The light which wrapped the right hand still didn’t disappear. It meant the special move was still ongoing——

Both Haruyuki's legs went stiff, stopping the retreat he succeeded in earlier. In front of Haruyuki's eyes, Kirito's right hand grabbed on to something.

It was the sword grip. He didn't drop the sword on the ground. He threw it up above.

By the time Haruyuki realized it, the long sword was already wrapped in the color of blinding flame, and it cut down in a straight line.

He couldn't avoid or guard this time. A huge shock went through his chest from the attack on the left shoulder, Haruyuki was swallowed by a light effect and an explosion, then flew diagonally to the back and right.

\* \* \*

"Body-sword composite sword skill, «Meteor Fall». .....But even saying so, he wouldn't hear it anyway."

I muttered while rubbing my abdomen which was hit earlier.

While it wasn't at the same level as if it happened in real world, the strength of the feedback from the pain should be enough to be considered illegal. Just from this pain alone proved this place wasn't in any game operated in year 2026 Japan.

But, with the big move finally making a clean hit, Silver Crow who was blown away in a flashy fashion and whose body was currently half buried under the rubble should have felt more pain. Of course, if a nervous system existed under that metal armor, that is.

Confirming with a glance at the stamina gauge, eating the punch and the knee at that close range took about 15 percent, and Crow's was reduced by nearly 30 percent. Even though it looked like a metal robot, its defense wasn't that high, just like how fighting games were supposed to be.

Then for the fighting game, this difference in damage isn't enough to decide the outcome of the battle. It is not the situation I can relax in just after I got an attack in. Once I decided that, I kicked the ground to follow up with a sneak attack.

Suddenly the silvery body trembled——

The round metal helmet quickly lifted.

I could feel the strong light emitting from both eyes inside it.

Immediately after that, the rubble which buried half the silvery avatar had scattered violently in all directions.

Curling clouds of dust blown up by the wind covered the surroundings. I corrected my sword stance at this distance, waiting for my vision to clear up.

The chilled wind from the bottom of the stage carried the dust away.

Several seconds later, the trace of collapsed buildings appeared again —— but there was no trace of Silver Crow.

“What.....?”

I quickly looked left and right, my sides and my back was a huge open space, in front of me was the wide three-storey building. If it wasn't so tattered and decayed, this could be seen as a small scale school.

All the windows and entrances of the building were blocked with the metal plates, there were no stairs at the outer walls, so I'd notice if Crow cut across my left or right side. In other words, there should be nowhere to go during the brief moment my vision was blocked by the dust. In that case, where exactly did that silvery robot hide?

——No.

*It isn't hidden. The special move gauge below Silver Crow's stamina gauge is around 30% charged, and even now it's still slowly decreasing. It means he's using the special move. I guess it was the reason he disappeared from my vision. Probably the power to go under the ground? Or the power of transparency?.....*

I tensed up all my senses from below my feet, front, back, left, and right. Lowering my waist, softly setting up my sword, I readied my stance to intercept an attack from any direction, waiting for an action.

But.

Where Silver Crow appeared from was beyond my expectations.

Noticing something shining above my head, I quickly looked up

Then I saw it, the protruding sharp right toe, swooping down as if it was a spear from the silvery white avatar, with the big metal fins expanded to the left and right, shining dazzlingly on its back.

So that was really its propulsion equipment. But it shouldn't have the high-speed mobility to move its body above the ground to that degree.

*Then those fins are —— wings!*

I kicked the ground with as much force as possible to jump to the right.



But the Crow diving in a straight line used the stabilizers on both arms to change its angle, perfectly matching my movement.

“Guh.....”

While I let leak the voice, the sword in my right hand tried to parry the sharp toe.

But, defending against the attack with that degree of weight wasn't possible. Just like when receiving a heavy rush from the Salamander in ALO —— No, with greater force than the sword at that time, the dive kick directly hit my right shoulder.

\* \* \*

For Silver Crow, who spent all of his level-up bonuses on expanding his flying ability, his greatest weapon is a swooping attack from high altitudes.

Just that would allow it to hit? Over the long period of time, Haruyuki had earnestly researched the technique for the half a year since becoming a Burst Linker. Although it was still too soon to be considered complete, it had become a very important asset of his.

Power, or descending speed, and accuracy, or homing capability, both present together.

All the power of the wings was used for acceleration, while the arms and body did the orbit adjustment. To get the hang of it, he couldn't count how many times he had bitten the ground in vain.

However, the effort wasn't fruitless. He was able to capture Kirito, despite his formidable reaction speed.

——*No.*



Haruyuki shook the head in his mind. The dive kick directly hit the right shoulder, while on the ground, unable to escape, but his eyes could still follow Haruyuki's action.

Apparently, Kirito didn't know Silver Crow was an aerial type Duel Avatar. For those Burst Linkers he fought on a daily basis, the moment they lost sight of Haruyuki in the cloud of dust, they would be cautious above their heads, rather than the surroundings. But Kirito did the opposite, which opened the opportunity for Haruyuki's kick to hit. Thinking about it, the reaction ability to attempt to step and parry at that moment was really frightening.

Glancing at the HP gauge to confirm, Kirito's HP was just below 50 percent and had changed to yellow. Although the amount of damage had reversed the situation, but because the opponent already knows of his flying ability, it would be difficult for Haruyuki's kick to get a clean hit again. If that was the case, then he couldn't stop his hand now.

Haruyuki spread his wings for the second time, he started a low altitude dash towards the shadow crouching on the ground.

Kirito's sword manipulating arm was hit with the big move. The shock reverberating in his nerves should remain for at least ten more seconds, he wouldn't be able to swing the sword at full speed till then. Then, with this rush, the result of this battle will be decided!

“U.....oo!!”

With a short roar, Haruyuki got close to Kirito, then swung a big roundhouse kick diagonally upwards.

The method of using wings wasn't just swooping from high altitudes. At short range melee, the three dimensional actions, ignoring



the gravity and inertia, was possible. This kick was also impossible to deal with.

The growl released from his right feet, which looked like a laser cutting across the space.

Of course, Kirito's right hand didn't move.

*Sure hit——!!*

While Haruyuki felt confident, at that moment,

Both of Kirito's eyes behind his long bangs shone brightly.

The left hand wrapped behind the black leather coat became hazy and disappeared.

KIAaan!! The high-pitched crashing sound. The blinding spark. Then the searing heat sensation.

The mid-air kick was repelled, then Haruyuki slapped down to the ground due to the returning momentum. He understood what had happened at that point.

In Kirito's left hand, which was still on his knee, raised high with the bright white shining like cat's eye, was a second sword.

The swordsman dressed in black stood up while still swaying, in both of his hands were the white and black long swords moving in an arc——

With a JyaKiin!, Both hands let out the clear sound.

\* \* \*

I must admit.

I just had witnessed the opponent, Silver Crow's, endless power.

That name was so suitable with its meaning, the avatar's potential was mostly based on its flying ability. In other word, in ALO, it was what allowed me to press my advantage over the air raid ability specialists, Sylphs, in the aerial combat.

If that was the case, I would like to settle this battle with a mid-air combat. However, now my avatar isn't the Spriggan Kirito in ALO, but the SAO's Dual Blades Kirito. There were no wings on my back, and of course I couldn't fly.

In that case, if I don't squeeze all I have to use in this fight, there would be no chance of winning.

Thoughts about this battle being the result from the abnormality of the quantum circuit had disappeared from my mind. My whole body was wrapped around with the tension I've tasted dueling with truly formidable foes.

It had been one and a half years since feeling the trustworthy weight of the Elucidator in my right hand, and the Dark Repulser in my left. I slowly stood and stared wordlessly to the silvery white avatar.

The pale sparks scattered all over the deep wounds at its chest and left foot, around 40 percent of its HP bar remained. Thin smoke smoldered from the right shoulder, my bar had a similar amount.

However, there were still some tricks under the sleeves on both sides, the victor shall be decided by the following clash.

The wings on the back of Silver Crow stretched wide.

\* \* \*

Watching the mild silhouette of «Kirito», who was carrying two swords in standing position, Haruyuki finally realized the true identity of the pressure he felt since the beginning of the battle.

It was similar.

To the pressure from the Black King, «Black Lotus».

More than the form of both swords, or wearing color on the whole body, the most similarity was the «Immeasurable».

Truthfully, Haruyuki almost never watched KuroyukiHime fighting at her full power. From his memories, once conducted in the unlimited neutral field, in the battle against the similarly level 9 Yellow King, that time had left him with the impression that both sides still had spare energy left.

That feeling of bottomless strength. If this person had become seriously serious, just what kind of fury would be unleashed?

The same thing could be felt here, what this Burst Linker Kirito had behind his back.

—*What if this guy really is as strong as KuroyukiHime-senpai, I won't have any chance to win.*

Haruyuki's mind was so determined.

But why was the inside of his chest armor full of wounds burning hot? It wouldn't cool down at all. Far from that, it even blazed more and more, sending heat to the tip of his limbs.

*I want to fight. Burn all of Silver Crow and then all of Arita Haruyuki to the exhausting limit, I want to beat this strong foe.*

Recalling the moment when the slowly walking figure of the dual blades swordsman caused him to unintentionally shout Burst Out in fear, a subtle smile floated under the silver mask.

It might seemed like the difference in numerical potential of avatars was big, but he was bad at manipulating his consciousness efficiently. Kirito was one step ahead in the ability to analyse situation and ability to react. Even though it was just their first meeting, Haruyuki had ended up behind on everything.

In that case, the only way was to bet on the cornerstone of his humble self-confidence, his «Speed».

*Believe in the wings on the back, produced from the craving for speed. Concentrate.*

“.....Cross it. Go beyond it.”

Just as he murmured, the hue of his field of vision had shifted slightly.

The background noise disappeared, and the movement of the sparks drifting in the air became gradually slower.

However, he didn't sense these changes, as all of Haruyuki's spirit was focused on his dual bladed opponent.

\* \* \*

«Silver Crow»'s spirit's state had changed, I felt that fact.

Probably, the opponent also determined this as the climax of the battle. The wings on the back opened wide, but he didn't take off, just slowly lowering his waist and setting up both his hands, a natural posture to receive my attack.

Betting everything on the line, where all hope was placed.

I finally noticed I made a blurred thin smile on my mouth.

I really longed for this kind of battle. I might have been in many serious battles in ALO or GGO, and even have trouble surviving in a few of those, but up until now there was never a time I tasted the pain from the sense of tension before.

It was really strange. I wasn't sure why Silver Crow and I were fighting in the first place. It was only the experimental machine's troubles that had led to the accidental encounter with him but——

.....No.

That is why, how to say it? The battle wasn't in the well known game, and everything was wrapped under mysterious circumstances, causing me to feel excited.

It wasn't just that. Carrying the [KIRITO] name tag, holding my beloved swords in both hands, being half hearted was not allowed.

“.....From here on, you'd better go all out.”

I uttered in a low whisper——

My right foot made a big step forward, readying the sword skill motion.

Both swords were bathed in a vivid orange light.

At the next moment, I started a long distance charge, aiming at Silver Crow like a bullet fired from a cannon.

Dual blades rush sword skill, «Double Circular».

\* \* \*

The shape of Kirito, who was controlling the trajectory of the twin shining swords which penetrated the depth of the darkness, like a flame from a fire dragon.

He kicked his fear of wanting to flee to the sky away, Haruyuki just waited.

His consciousness had been geared up to the limit, but it all happened in just the blink of an eye.

In front of Haruyuki, Kirito's body rotated upward. The black sword in his right hand pulled the helix of the flame from below and slashed straight up furiously.

The point of the sword split Haruyuki's left hand's armor open and bounced it upwards.

Silver Crow's wrist armor possessed the highest strength of the entire body. Despite that, the sword ripped the arm apart in the middle, the pretty sparks from the slash wound flowed into the night sky.

"Ku.....!"

Haruyuki leaked a voice that came from his throat through his mouth, but the lethal attack would be the following strike.

Following right behind the slashing trail remaining in mid-air, the white sword in Kirito's left hand thrust in a straight line. The tip was aimed with fearful accuracy at his neck, it was much faster than the attacks from any previous confrontation with Burst Linkers — be it bullets or laser.

Haruyuki's aim was to catch hold of that blade.



However, he couldn't see any possibility of success at all. Even avoiding it wasn't allowed, it would be accurate to say it was an attack at the speed of god.

Therefore, Haruyuki decided to spread his palm, at the risk of losing his right hand — used the center of his palm to catch the tip of the sword.

He felt all the resistance of the sword piercing his hand, but continued stretching. The speed of the thrust dropped just slightly, however, it gave Haruyuki a moment of opportunity to twist his neck away. The weak vibration transmitted from the right side of his neck, the blade deeply cut there and split out at the back.

*Stamina gauge is, 10 percent remaining.*

*This bet is——*

*My win!!*

As his consciousness shouted, Haruyuki used his right palm which was penetrated by the sword to grab Kirito's left hand.

*"U.....oooo!!"*

Yelling, both feet kicked the ground, both wings slapped the air, Haruyuki's fully charged special move gauge was burnt to exhaustion to let him fly into the night sky.

In the midst of full acceleration, he turned his body around. The momentum of inertia was still positive, he then threw Kirito's body above down with all his might.

The sword was extracted from the palm, along with a thin line of sparks. Without the violently built up momentum, the dual blades swordsman without wings was no longer ascending.



In that situation, what surprised him was, there was no sign of struggle from the swordsman at all. His limbs weren't twirling, both hands and feet were spread out, trying to control his posture.

However——

*Once this happened, there was nothing he could do.*

Most Burst Linkers might not be aware of the basic rule governing physical attacks, which was the reaction to the action.

Be it a punch or kick, sword or blunt weapon, the foot must be firmly planted, without a ground of mass to place a foot onto, power wouldn't arise. This was the reason melee attacks were weak in the «Ice and Snow» stage, where the ground under the feet was abnormally slippery.

Then in mid-air, there was no ground.

Even if Kirito swings the sword, the blade will not have that formidable power anymore.

On the other hand, Haruyuki could use driving force from the wings to kick the air. So even if both strike each other, he should be able to do a lot more damage.

“Now.....”

Losing the ascending momentum, staring at Kirito's silhouette once it reached the topmost point, Haruyuki yelled.

“Is the endddddddddd!!”

Douuu, the sound of air rang in the ears.

He put his right foot as the pivot point for the rushing momentum, and shot off a long ranged roundhouse kick.

Kirito tried to intercept it using his left sword, however his defence was abruptly bounced back with a high-pitched sound, the kicked pierced deeply into his flank.

Haruyuki then dashed after the black dressed figure which flowed down through the air like a bullet. His next attack was deflected by the crossing hands, he then headbutt using his helmet. Along with a heavy impact, it violently hit the center of Kirito's chest.

At this point, the stamina gauge of both sides had 10 percent remaining.

The aerial gauge had less remaining. But it was just enough to spend on the next decisive attack.

Exerting as much power as possible in his right fist, Haruyuki began the final rush.

At that moment——

Both Kirito's eyes suddenly widened. Haruyuki noticed his longcoat which was streaming violently over the entire body, wrapped in a thin red aura.

The black long sword in the right hand was enveloped in a blood-like crimson light.

——*Special move!*

——*I don't fear it!!*

Haruyuki clenched his teeth, and continued straight in. *That was just a long range thrusting attack, but during mid-air with no ground to step on, with the body flowing backwards. That kind of move wouldn't go through Silver Crow's armor!*

“U.....o.....!”

Haruyuki roared. In front of his vision,

Kirito's body turned around.

Giiiiin! With a loud jet engine-like sound, the tremendous power could be felt vividly from the straight thrusting move fired from the right hand, brightly penetrating the night sky.

——Approaching Haruyuki, in exactly the opposite direction.

“Wh.....”

Kirito's body received reaction from the strong thrusting attack and retorted ferociously towards a gasping Haruyuki.

The sword in his left hand glazed the glistening pallid crescent moon in Haruyuki's vision——

Cut into the center of the chest. Haruyuki could feel both hot and cold at the same time where the point of the sword touched.

———*What's with this guy.*

All the remaining special gauge was used not on the attack but to get the driving force for a single moment.

Admiration crossed his mind. But at the same time, Haruyuki's consciousness attempted a final counterattack.

The right fist pushed straight across the sword trail. But the reach wasn't enough. He then reflexively stretching his fingertips, making the shape of a hand-knife. The sharp fingers lined up, glistening white like a sword.

———*Reach it!! At least, I'll convey my final struggle until the end!!*

The white sword pierced through Silver Crow's chest.

Silvery fingertips touched Kirito's coat.

At that moment, Kirito's avatar soundlessly changed into white light particles.

The sword which lost its substance went past Haruyuki's body, Haruyuki's right hand also passed through Kirito's body.

Both of them made contact in mid-air, the bodies blended together.

In the passing moment, Haruyuki felt a sound within his head. A soft, yet dignified, and comfortable voice resounded.

『It was a good duel. Someday —— let's fight again.』

Then, the mysterious Burst Linker «Kirito» body vanished from the imagination field.

In Haruyuki's center of vision, for the first time he sees, the system message [DISCONNECTION] blinking.

\* \* \*

".....iichan. Onii-chan!"

I raised my gaze to the source of the voice, on the other side of the table, from the sharp lips of Suguha.

"Ah, s-sorry. What was it again?"

"Since just now that your hand hasn't moved much at all, isn't the food good? That was what I asked!"

To Suguha who made a sully look once more, I quickly shook my head.

“T-That’s not it. It’s delicious, this oden.”

I filled my large open mouth with a potato, and showed a nodding gesture, but Suguha’s mood wasn’t getting better.

“.....This isn’t oden though, it’s Pot-au-feu.”

——*Pot-au-feu with whole eggs only, huh*, of course that thought didn’t leave my mouth. I quickly emptied the plate and asked for a refill, trying to settle the mood.

Our mother was late as usual, so today’s dinner was just me and Suguha. At that point I went back into silence, causing the table to be quiet again. But while eating seconds of the french-style oden, my thoughts were pulled back to the experience of the strange incident which occurred this afternoon once more.

It was about four hours ago, at the mysterious battle game field, the serious battle with the unknown avatar «Silver Crow» had unfolded, but regrettably just before the result would be decided, my connection was cut off.

I told Higa Takeru about what happened after jumping out of the experimental machine.

However, Higa had a doubtful face about the fact, so I connected back into that game, this time for the exchanging of information rather than sword and fist.

What I saw in the second Dive was —— as described in the beginning, just a scene of a lovely forest. There was no stamina gauge nor time count on the field of vision, the battle opponent also wasn’t present. After we took the data as planned, Higa and the other staff also Dived just in case, but no one saw the mysterious human shadow at all.

So, the quantum circuit of the experimental machine was somehow «Fixed». It could be said that the machine was thoroughly satisfied from my battle with Crow.....

That battle was probably just a dream I had from FullDiving in the 4th-generation machine for the first time. And for now, the part-time job was over, Higa told me that just as I was about to leave the laboratory.

However, I couldn't believe such explanation, from the Silver Crow's splendid movements, the flame of fighting spirit burning at an ultra-high temperature, to the duel which was like to burn each other down, it couldn't be just a dream.

“What are you thinking of for a while now?”

I woke up from my thoughts after hearing Suguha's voice.

So as not to offend her again, and also to get her involved in what was in my mind, I used my fork to pick a Vienna into my mouth, and said,

“Hmm..... Today, I dueled with an amazing opponent. But due to circuit irregularity, I can't say I won.....”

“Heh? Onii-chan's battle with an unknown player ended up in a draw? Does such a person exist?”

Attracted to my story, Suguha's body leaned forward. Apparently she thought it had happened in ALO, I left it that way in order to keep the contract I made to not disclose information about the experimental machine.

“How to say it..... Amazing, naturally flying. It was like seeing a real voluntary flight.”

“.....? What do you mean?”

Suguha tilted her head, while still holding her fork.

“Well, for the voluntary flight in ALO, you really don’t just use thoughts to control the wings, it actually requires the use of shoulder blade movement too. During acceleration would be like this.....”

I pulled both arms backward, causing both shoulder blades to get closer.

“Then, during deceleration.”

This time the arms was stretched out in front, the gap between shoulder blades opened wider.

“With experience, the actual movement can be minimized, but I don’t mean it can be completely eliminated. That’s why it interfered with the attack during the air raid.”

Suguha gave a big nod at my words.

“That’s right. When swinging the sword, stretching the arm cannot be avoided and at the same time, it acts as a brake command to the wings too. The attack which completely kills the momentum of a full speed flight, only the lance type weapon is an exception due to its stance being based on the waist. But that can’t be helped anyway, because humans don’t have real wings, so we have to substitute it with some part of the body.”

“Yeah..... But that guy could move his limbs without causing any conflict with the wings at all. Even during the fierce full speed dash, he could still accelerate while throwing the fist forward.”

“Ehh—, something like that can’t be possible.”

I show a slight smile to Suguha who made the rounded eyes.

“Yeah, it’s not possible. Maybe it was too fast to notice..... Or he wasn’t human but a birdman so he could operate the wings separately, something like that.....”

—————In that world, something exceeding my understanding of a man-machine interface existed.

Yes..... Perhaps, unlike the AmuSphere which picked up the body’s movement commands from the medulla oblongata, it read the image directly from the brain, no, the consciousness.

It couldn’t be possible. Consciousness, or rather, to access such things as the soul itself.

But without thinking that way, Silver Crow’s movements couldn’t be understood.

Changing the image power, that is the human mind, into data, which was the actual power in the real world. Yes, if we think about it, hadn’t that experimental machine read my «Self-image» and created the swordsman Kirito’s avatar? In other words, Higa’s 4th-generation FullDive machine communicated with the soul rather than the brain cell..... It could be said that, in that world, there’s the possibility that the Diver can pull out and use the ultimate kind of power, which is the «Mind Power».

I closed my eyes tightly once, then looked at Suguha and finally smiled.

“.....W-What are you smiling for, Onii-chan?”

Towards the discomforted Sylph swordswoman, who acts like a possessed speed-holic in the sky, I said,



“By some chance, one day.....no, in the surprisingly near future, we might be able to really fly. Not a pseudo-voluntary flight.....but flapping the wings created by the mind.”

Suguha blinked in surprise——

Her whole face smiled cheerfully.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

I nodded in return, and bit the Vienna, my mind returned to that figure once more.

Flying across the dark night sky, the beautiful silvery white crow.

\* \* \*

“.....yuki-kun. Oi, are you listening, Haruyuki-kun?”

He lifted his face in a hurry at the call, as KuroyukiHime emitted a perilous glare on the opposite side of the round white table.

“Ah, s-s-sorry! I was just thinking about something.....”

“Ho, I wonder what kind of important consideration has distracted you during this discussion with me.”

Haruyuki gulped, and drank iced latte from his paper cup to stall for time.

There were no other students in the quiet cafeteria lounge after school. But Haruyuki still looked around just in case, affirming the conversation wouldn't be heard by anyone else, before mumbling the answer.

“Erm, well, the truth is.....I had fought with a strange Burst Linker.....”

Those words intentionally omitted the ‘during today’s lunch break’ part. Furthermore, the lunch break when the unidentified enemy showed up in the school’s local network, was comparable to the big «Dusk Taker Incident» which happened in spring. Actually, after that battle, all the members of Nega Nebulas must be warned immediately, but Haruyuki didn’t do so as he felt the enemy wasn’t real.

Because he felt neither maliciousness nor hostility from that battle opponent. All he could feel from him was excitement and joy. Despite waging a fierce battle, Haruyuki was left with some sort of freshness in his mind.

*Maybe he won’t show up again.*

While he still didn’t know why he was so convinced about that, Haruyuki started speaking piece by piece.

“.....It was weird, but he was amazing. His weapons were two swords.....Which he could swing as if they were weightless, I was almost unable to track his special moves.”

“Two.....swords.”

KuroyukiHime furrowed her small eyebrows while murmuring to herself. But she stared blankly at Haruyuki then immediately returned to her normal facial expression while encouraging him to continue.

“No, there’s nothing. Then? Did you win?”

“Ah, well.....he was disconnected just before the conclusion.....but, if it continued, I am sure I would lose. My final attack probably couldn’t reach him.”

“Ho. Being able to defeat you in close combat. What’s the color and level of that person?”

Haruyuki shook his head with a troubled face to KuroyukiHime's question.

"About that, either it was a system error or he used some kind of a filter..... color name and level were both not shown. Just the color of his appearance was, well....., really black."

Towards the «Black King» who narrowed her eyes again, Haruyuki didn't think too deeply into her reaction, and threw the question he had thought of during the battle at her.

"Oh, senpai. I wanted to ask this for a long time now, what are the characteristics of the «Black»?"

KuroyukiHime blinked blankly then showed a big bitter smile.

"Suddenly asking such a question...Haruyuki-kun."

"Eh? No, erm, s-sorry!"

Haruyuki unintentionally shrank the upper part of his body, this time a smile which was like from an intelligent older sister towards her younger brother, floated on KuroyukiHime's face.

"No, there was no need to apologize. Because, to that question, «I also do not know»."

".....Heh?"

"That said, there will be a certain degree I'll have to guess."

The glass containing iced tea made a ringing sound, KuroyukiHime stared at the pale afternoon sunlight, then explained,

"The three primary colors on the upper part of the color circle..... «Neighboring Blue», «Remote Red», and «Indirect Yellow». And then there are properties in the middle «Green» and «Purple». With the

exception of metal colors, almost all of the Duel Avatars are classified somewhere between those links. As the purity of the color goes higher, the characteristic purity also increases.”

Up until that point was what Haruyuki already understood. For example, his friend Cyan Pile had a fairly bright blue color which slightly tilted in the purple direction. So his initial equipment «Pile Driver» was combined with the ranged attack power.

Seeing Haruyuki nod in response, KuroyukiHime continued,

“Conversely, as the color purity lowers so does the characteristic purity. For your friend «Ash Roller», he is more like the green than the grey type. That is because he spent most of his potential into strengthening the exterior of his unique bike. At the same time the purity of his color had declined. But why an avatar’s color is darkened, while another is brightened, I still can’t give a proper explanation yet.”

“Become darker.....or brighter.....”

Repeatedly murmuring, Haruyuki finally understood. When an avatar’s color rapidly darkened, the destination was surely black —— the «Pure Black». And conversely, white existed, the «Pure White», when going brighter as well. It was probably very unique on both extreme ends, but he couldn’t understand clearly the reason behind the divide of both black and white being the exact opposite.

While Haruyuki twisted his neck, KuroyukiHime suddenly murmured,

“«Black» is the «Rejected Color» —— It’s what I’ve been aware of for a long time.”

“Eh....., r-rejected.....?”

“Yes, refused to be dyed in any color, the color of possessing nothingness, it couldn’t go anywhere else other than that, the bottom of the deep well of color.....”

With those desolate words, KuroyukiHime shook her head before Haruyuki could speak. Then her light colored lips showed a faint smile.

“But....., just but. Maybe it isn’t really that way, recently I started to think like that, thus.....”

Suddenly she moved her delicate right hand over the luxurious table, and grabbed hold of Haruyuki’s left hand, causing him to be taken aback.

“.....Because you had held my hand many times. This me who couldn’t interact with other people, always reminding me.”

Haruyuki’s face was red to his ears from the unusually gentle pupils gazing at him, he gripped her cold hand in return and would not let go. His heart throbbing, but unable to say a decent line, he just grabbed her hand as if trying to pass his earnest feelings from his heart with the touch of the fingers.

——*Black is absolutely not the rejected color. Because it was you, without a doubt, who stretched her hand to me who was alone in the bottom of the well, who gently wrapped and healed my wounds.*

——*That’s right, that guy was the same.*

——*That black swordsman was also had a similar tranquility. Receiving everything, both giving great support and strength.*

Haruyuki felt the «Kirito» inside his mind was pushing his back, he timidly lifted his face, and somehow managed to speak.

“Erm....., well, black objects don’t reflect any light, causing it to looked black, it is what I learned in class. So.....so, it surely isn’t the lonely color. I think it’s the warmest color, more than any other color.”

KuroyukiHime widened her eyes for a moment—— then,


A beautiful smile floated on her face like a blooming lotus bud.



000-05

# *There is but one ultimate way*

§ Centoria, Underworld  
August 2026



## 〔ソードアート・オンライン：外伝X2〕

たったひとつの究極的なやりかた

2010年5月

**\*ご注意\***

この短編小説は、電撃文庫版『ソードアート・オンライン』において未出の情報を多量に含んでいます。

ネタバレにご注意ください。

イベント当日の午前2時から5時までの間に書き上げた作品です(笑) 内容は……いつものキリト氏といつものアスナさん  
いつもの直葉さんいつものリズさんいつものシリカさん  
いつものシノンさんいつものユイさんいつものアリス  
さんです。いやアリスはいつもじゃないが……

SAOという作品は、巻を増すごとにヒロインが増え、しかも主人公のキリト氏がまるではっきりした答えを出さないというまことにけしからん構造のお話なのですが、その状況にどうにか結論を見出すとすればこのような形しかあるまい。と思ってこの短編を書いてみました。

今回改めて再読したんですが……ひどいですねいろいろと。でもまあある意味これがSAOシリーズの本質なのかなとも思わなくもありません(笑)。

Web版の『アリシゼーション編』で導入された《主観時間加速》というアイデアは、その後『アクセル・ワールド』シリーズにも用いられています。あちらも、主人公ハルキ君を取り巻く女性数は増える一方ですが、キリト氏とは色々性格の異なる彼は状況にいったいどういう結論を出すのか、私も楽しみにしつつ今後もシリーズを続けていきたいです。





As I woke up from the bed, the gentle sun shone in through the white lace curtains at the window. This itself is a very ordinary scene without any problems or drastic changes. Just as I was ready to continue my deep sleep, my eyes that were about to be closed suddenly opened like a boom. ———— Hold on ... Hold on a minute!

This... this... this is too weird.

First of all, this bed is unusually large and soft.

I —— Kirigaya Kazuto should only be using a foam filled single bed in my bedroom.

But now, my back felt like it was coated by the highest grade of soft feathers. Even as I moved my left hand, It did not touch the wall that should exist. What covered me was not my ordinary fluffy blanket, but a smooth and soft silk one.

Also, the ceiling was inexplicably high, and I had no idea if the decorations were of the western style or Japanese style. In addition to that, a beautiful classical chandelier hung there in place of LED lights.

Finally, coming in from the gaps of the window covered by heavy curtains at the other side of the room —— It was so large, maybe it was a twin window —— was the light of the winter sun at a low angle.

Isn't this the middle of summer?

At the end of August, the summer vacations will just end in a few days, so I was filled with anxiety and despair, giving up, when I faced the facts: just yesterday morning, I had to withstand being scorched by

the violent sun, I recalled forcing myself to climb out of bed in that condition.

However, at this moment, I was in this unfamiliar luxurious room, and it was incredibly cold, such that if I was not well covered by the blanket, I probably wouldn't stand the cold. No matter how I looked at it, this is winter, a winter morning... what on earth is this...

At this time, I finally remembered.

Yesterday morning, I woke up in the middle of the heat, drowsily brushed my teeth and changed my clothes. While considering doing my summer homework, and reluctantly walking to the table, I received a phone call from the person who was the one responsible for the RATH development department — Higa, and the content was an official statement. The blockade in UW had some problems, and he wanted me to help solve the problem. Thus, on that ridiculously hot day, complaints came out of my mouth. However my heart was lively enough, as I took my bike straight to RATH's branch in Roppongi, following the instructions on the screen to go into the STL. Without even bothering to find out the circumstances, I Dived in — and woke up in that room.

In other words, this is probably a room in the building in UW's *Among the Stars* «Cardina», capital of Centoria. As long as I have used the STL, I was still a little afraid of the effects of the time acceleration function, as my memory before the Dive would be a little fuzzy. If I wanted to forget, why not simply forget even more things... for example in the real world, the fact that there were three days before summer vacation ends...

...While having these thoughts, I decided to get up before saying anything, then stretched my body wide.

Then, as my hands and fingers reached out, they met a soft and warm object, causing me to be taken aback slightly.

I slowly looked to my right.

There, with her left cheek buried in the large pillow, having a peaceful expression, and making gentle sleeping sounds, lay a chestnut haired girl. It was possibly a face I had more memories of than myself, it was Asuna, Yuuki Asuna's.

What on Earth happened?

After being called by Higa, the only person Diving should have been me. Even if after that they encountered a problem and Asuna Dived in as well, why would we be sleeping on the same bed?

But before going into that, I needed to confirm something else first.

I carefully turned around gently, this time to my left.

Suddenly, a radiant golden light pierced my eyes.

Even though the sunlight in winter was weak, it still reflected the brilliant glorious hair of gold radiantly. With similar colored eyelashes and translucent white skin, the girl lying in a posture face to face with Asuna on the right — Alice, the Integrity Knight - Alice Synthesis Fifty.

This situation was beyond my understanding. However, it was just the beginning of the shock that heaven delivered.

On Alice's other side, there was yet another person's figure.

I opened my eyes and mouth, and slowly moved my line of sight upwards.

There, asleep and curled up like a cat, was a aqua-colored short haired girl, the ice sniper, Sinon, Asada Shino.

If this is the case, maybe... ma-y-be——

I turned the right to face Asuna's direction.

Underneath the silk blanket, with her face facing upwards, in an upright sleeping posture was the yellow-green haired, pony tailed girl, the Green Swordsman, Lyfa... my little sister, no, actually my cousin sister, Kirigaya Suguha.

.....How big IS this bed?! Was what I asked myself in my heart.

Even if five people slept on top, there was still some extra space, so I wouldn't be surprised if the bed was about 8 tatami (or about 4 square feet). It would be really troublesome to change the sheets of a bed of this size.

At this moment, something pressed against my right foot.

Based on my angle of sight, it wasn't Asuna —— as I forced my brain to stop thinking, shifting my thinking pace to a slower gear, I raised my head again, to look at my feet.

Using my foot as a pillow, with pink hair covering the freckled face of the girl, was the master blacksmith —— Lisbeth, Shinozaki Rika.

And beside her, with her tea colored hair falling to both sides, a delicate girl sleeping with a small feathery dragon clinging to her chest, the beast tamer —— Silica, Ayano Keiko.

It wasn't 8 tatami, it was more like 10 tatami. The Arabian royal family was probably the only people who would think of using this kind of bed in the real world.

Despite being in a virtual world like UW, even those with administrative privileges would have no way to arbitrarily create items, so this bed would still require a woodcutter to cut the wood, then combined together by a carpenter, finally getting manufacturer to set it up before it could be called a bed. This should be extremely troublesome work.... just how much would this bed have cost?

While I was engaged in thoughts escaping reality, this time, covered by the blanket between me and Asuna, in the one meter space there, something slowly moved.

This source slowly climbed to my chest starting from my stomach, and from the edge of the blanket a head emerged.

8 years old, a young girl with gorgeous flowing dark hair, with her sleepy eyes, moved closer to look at my face, then blinked, smiled and said,

“Good morning, Papa!”

“En... Good morning, Yui.”

If this bed was 10 tatami, then the room must exceed 30 tatami.

An hour after I woke up, me, Asuna, Yui, Alice, Sinon, Lisbeth, Lyfa, Silica and Pina, a total of eight people plus one, sat together in a circle at the table in the southern part of the room.

Now, the girls stayed in the kitchen together to prepare tea and Siral water. While drinking the citrus drink with a familiar taste, I asked aloud,

“Hey, where are we?”

It was Alice who replied,

“Based on the visible scene outside the window, we should be in the north of Centoria’s outskirts, in what used to be the private territory of the «Aristocrats» of this area.”

After talking in an unchanging resolute tone, she pulled her golden hair closer to one side, while moving her teacup closer to her lips.

“Er... em... I’ve never came here before, moreover, we secretly crossed the border to this place, we will be locked in prison...”

After I said this, Lyfa opened her eyes wide and said, “Whoa, really harsh, Onii-chan can live for a few years in a secure place.”

“Ahaha, it is indeed like this, but challenging the rules and making the GM angry is a special ability Kirito is proud of.”

After Asuna’s comment, everyone laughed together.

Although it is kind of late to say this after everyone woke up on the same bed, all seven girls were dressed in white pajamas of similar design, so the situation now was full of an immoral feeling. Even though the clothes texture looked very thin, because there was a strong heater, the room was quite warm. Even I merely wore my ordinary black cotton pajamas.

If I was not at the table, it would have looked like a beautiful impressionist painting.

But even so, I couldn’t say “Now everything is up to you” and then escape out of the windows.

No... perhaps it was a situation that occurred by force... Even though I was afraid of my own foreboding, but something had to be clearly confirmed. I finished off the Siral water that was now lukewarm

in one gulp, then put the cup on the table. Everyone's attention was drawn to me. After clearing my throat, I finally asked this question,

“...That... this situation is really...? I totally did not know that everyone Dived in here together...”

Suddenly, the girls began exchanging glances, thus I understood.

They had already finished talking, and know why this happened.

In my heart, the fear I had of the foreboding earlier worsened.

*Ahem*, Lisbeth cleared her throat, then said,

“Then... I shall explain everything clearly.”

“S-sorry to trouble you.”

“This all began because.... Summer vacation is nearing its end.”

“Aha?”

In my surprise, I opened my eyes and thought — Indeed, to a student, it was a most dazzling summer holiday.

Three days more till it ended.

There's no need to mention the problem, no, the tragedy, as everyone would know it.

I completely agree with these words, but what does this have to do with our situation?

“...Ah, it's like this... because the summer vacation is about to end, so we should do our final activity together, so we visit the UW together?”

I tilted my head, speculating in my mind.

“This is a great idea, but couldn’t you have just told it to me in the beginning?”

The girls all shook their heads together, then Lisbeth opened her mouth and said,

“That is, the problem is not as simple as you think, Asuna and I are in our third year, this could be our last summer holidays!”

Indeed, of everyone here, the eldest would be the 20-year-old Alice, followed by the 18-year-old Asuna and Liz. Sinon and me are 17, Silica and Lyfa are 16, and the youngest is of course Yui. If I included the years I spent in UW, I would probably be at around Alice’s age. But in the real world I was only high school second year student.

Liz pointed at me with her finger, then continued.

“Our third year’s summer holidays are about to end, this means... emm... A stage in our life is coming to an end! If we use MMO terms, this means we are in the second round, which means we need to start on the long and difficult training period.”

——*University students or members of the community may have the right to talk about this* —— was what I wanted to say, but I could understand what the problem was now.

“Oh, oh... maybe.”

Seeing me nod, Liz forcefully stared at me, and said in a calm voice,

“You should understand during next year’s summer holidays.”

In short, I looked at the calendar, while thinking “After this summer holidays ends are the exams.”

Suddenly a thought came to me.



After that Liz blushed for no apparent reason, and looked down. Upon seeing this situation, Sinon used her cold tone, and continued to explain,

“Even though I’m only in my second year, I can understand Liz and Asuna’s feelings, after all, I intend to get a job. Even... even considering the real world, we need to start looking at reality. I’m not saying I hate or don’t want to grow up, but if it went on like this, another problem will surface.”

“P-problem?”

“Yes, it is, what to do with our «Alliance»?”

“Ah? Alliance?”

Hearing this unfamiliar word, once again my thoughts went astray.

*Is it an ALO association? But I’ve never heard of it...*

Sneaking a look at me while I was like that, Sinon said,

“Abbreviation —— KKA, the official name is Kirito Kataomoi Alliance.”<sup>7</sup>

“.....”

——In this kind of situation, being able to respond appropriately was a skill I have never practiced, so I could only stand there frozen, but thinking about it, this may be one of the only solutions...

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<sup>7</sup> Kataomoi means unrequited love.

On the other hand, for Sinon to say these things... I should say I'm not surprised that it was Sinon. With this level of willpower, it isn't surprising that she is GGO's strongest sniper.

Sinon's face maintained her grim expression, she spread both hands wide and said,

"Even though it is a little too late, but to be honest, me and Liz, Lyfa, Silica sneakily created the alliance together, protecting Asuna and you. After all, no one was confident they could fight against Asuna confidently."

At this point in the speech, Asuna who sat on my right, suddenly became 80% shy, and the remaining 20% formed an expression I didn't know, as her head shrank down, and to my left, Alice, behaving like a knight, suppressed her feelings, so that other people could not read her expression as she drank her tea.

The one who opened her mouth after Sinon was Lyfa. In contrast to Sinon, her face was red, and using a muzzled tone she said,

"T-that... I'm satisfied just being by Onii-chan's side. But while we were in ALO, while I was with Liz and Sinon drinking tea, everyone had a pensive look. Even just staying by your side was difficult, and one day will come, where you have to go for further education or get a job. And slowly leave our small circle, then go less often onto ALO. The environment around us would gradually change... and finally... it is possible that even this feeling would disappear... right?"

Suddenly, Lyfa's eyes had tears, and even I felt my chest tighten.

Silica, next to her, faced downwards as she held Lyfa's hands, and started to say,

“W... we also know that there is no easy way to solve this, but didn’t want it to be like “we can’t do anything about it” just before ending.”

At this time... sometime while we were crying together, Alice said,

“There isn’t only one real world.”

“Eh.....”

I looked at the knight’s face once again, a faint smile seemed to emerge on her white cheeks. Her originally drooping eyelashes moved upwards, as her cobalt blue eyes looked at me.

“——To me, the real world or UW, both are reality, and in reality we can’t change the flow of time.”

“Th-this... this truly is.....”

“I directly went to see Asuna, bowed and begged to her, to give them... no, “us” a chance to live in another reality, so that even in the real world, dazzling memories that last a lifetime will remain with us. And, if possible, also give us something that can be solid proof.”

Alice’s words were too difficult to understand, so I could only listen naturally, and finally faced Asuna, the girl I met the earliest, and the one I had many adventures with, who lifted her head, and used her hazelnut colored eyes to look at me.

“.....I’m quite worried, and have thought a lot, but... me and Kirito, Alice, Sinon, Lyfa, Liz, Silica, as well as Yui, if everyone can be happy... If this kind of thing really exists, then I would reach out my hands... and give it a try.....”

“Everyone... together.”

In front of me mumbling to myself, Lisbeth used the tone she started with to continue,

“Because of this, everyone Dived together into UW using 6 units of STL.”

After she smiled vibrantly,

“All of us can get married to you together because of this world!”

And Yui who was still sitting in my lap, suddenly turned around and said to me,

“Even though I’m a bit reluctant, since the ethics and rules in the real world do not apply to this place, this is not being unfaithful, Papa.”

For a few moments, all I could do was hold my mug as I sat slumped on the chair. I didn’t even think things this deep, and couldn’t tell apart clearly if this was reality or a dream made up by the STL.

But I can’t sit like this forever, so I’d best raise my head, and say,

“That... all in all, can you first start confirming beginning from the simplest facts.....?”

“Please ask,” was what Sinon answered.

“Based on what I know, the marriage system in UW... That, how do i say, shouldn’t it be a one husband one wife system?”

Alice was the one who answered.

“That is correct, but third ranked knights and above are not subject to this restriction, in addition to your, what is it... «Account»? Your authority should be even higher than the emperors.”

“.....I see.”

Nodding, even I discovered I had nowhere to run to.

I clumsily looked at the seven girls sitting at the table one by one, then used my most serious expression and voice, and slowly said,

“.....Memories... eh, that... to tell you the truth, I really don’t have that kind of qualification... but I am very happy for your feelings, even though this matter is too sudden, I still have no idea how to organize my feelings properly, but if it is good memories, that, marriage kind of thing, even needs, then there is not enough time... the problem is that Dive time should be past noon, if everyone wants to rush home at night, then about four or five hours still remain, should I hurry to get my clothes, or should I borrow the establishments?”

As I made this remark, I finally felt my heart’s consciousness.

Marriage in UW, compared to the marriage between players in the ALO system, the weight of representation was completely different. But in another reality, the real marriage, if by doing this, the girls would get dazzling memories that would last their lifetime, then I——

“...First of all, let’s all go to the largest church in Centoria! I’ll take...”

As I said that halfway and was getting up, Asuna pulled at my sleeve.

“.....?”

“That... Kirito, I think there is no need to hurry.”

“Eh, but we only have less than five hours left...”

“That, That is... I forgot to tell you at the beginning... but...”

Asuna continued,

“Right now, UW has an acceleration of 10000 times, so we have the remaining time of fifty thousand hours left, so...”

Yui finally said,

“Two thousand and eighty three days, which is about five years and eight months.”

(End)

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## Credits:

### Translation:

Black Cats of the full Moon

Thinklife

Tap

HolyCow

BeginnerXP

Pryun

**Thanks!**

### Compiled:

Baka-Tsuki (Sorry, I don't know who created v1)

Mamue (Recompiled)