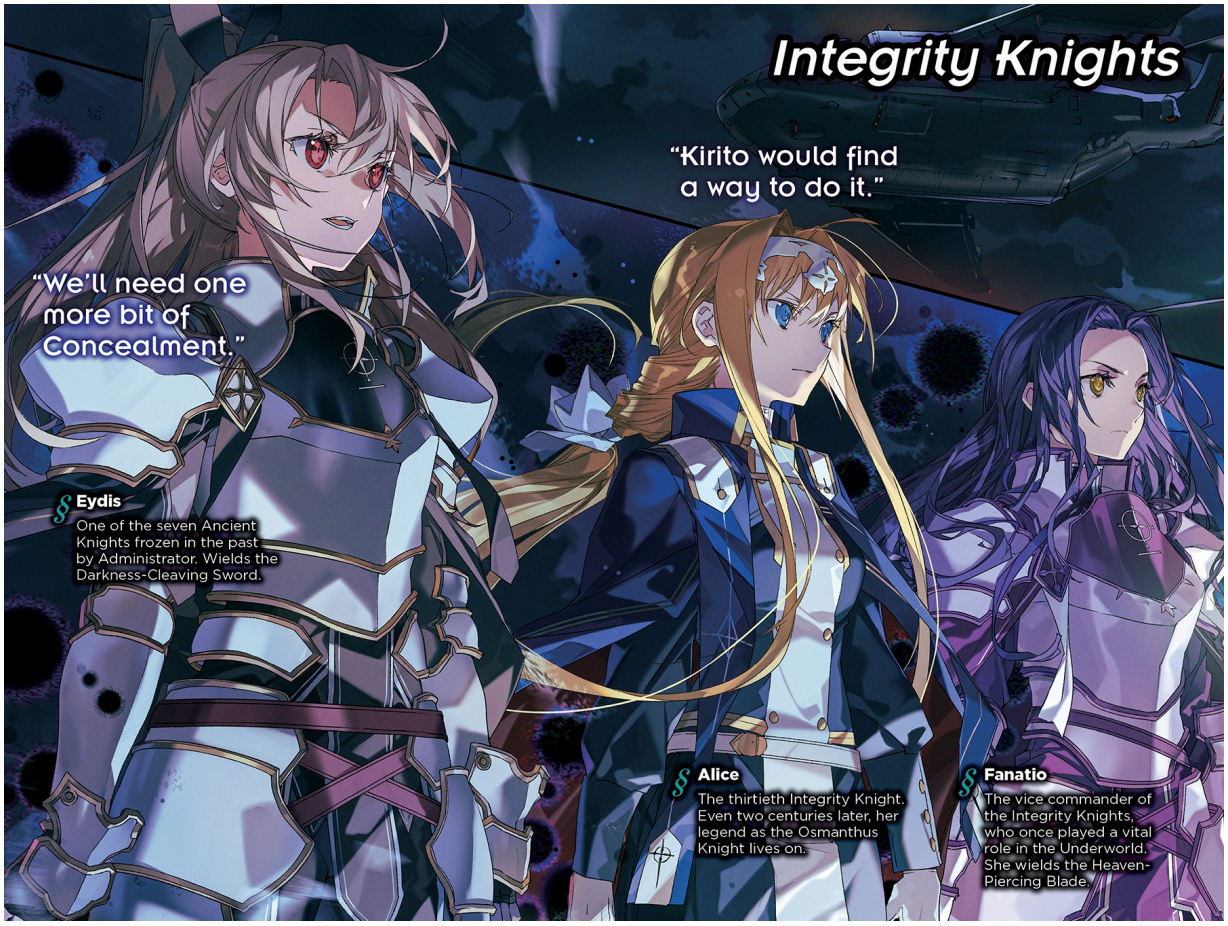

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028




Integrity Knights
"Kirito would find a way to do it."
"We'll need one more bit of Concealment."
Eydis
One of the seven Ancient Knights frozen in the past by Administrator. Wields the Darkness-Cleaving Sword.
Alice
The thirtieth Integrity Knight. Even two centuries later, her legend as the Osmanthus Knight lives on.
Fanatio
The vice commander of the Integrity Knights, who once played a vital role in the Underworld. She wields the Heaven-Piercing Blade.


"Could it be…?"
"There's someone I want you to meet, A-chan…"
"…Asuna."
Tomo Hosaka
A beta tester and talented informant in *SAO* popularly known as Argo the Rat. She helps Kirito and his friends with their quest in Unital Ring.
Asuna Yuuki
Kirito's girlfriend. After surviving *SAO*, she attends the returnee school with him and continues to fight in both Unital Ring and the Underworld.

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UNITAL RING CHARCTER STATS

Here are the stats for Kirito's crew upon reaching the second tier. SP stands for stamina points, and TP stands for thirst points.





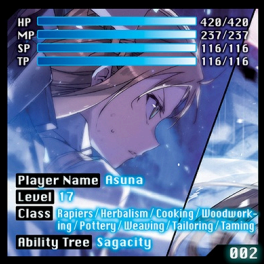


















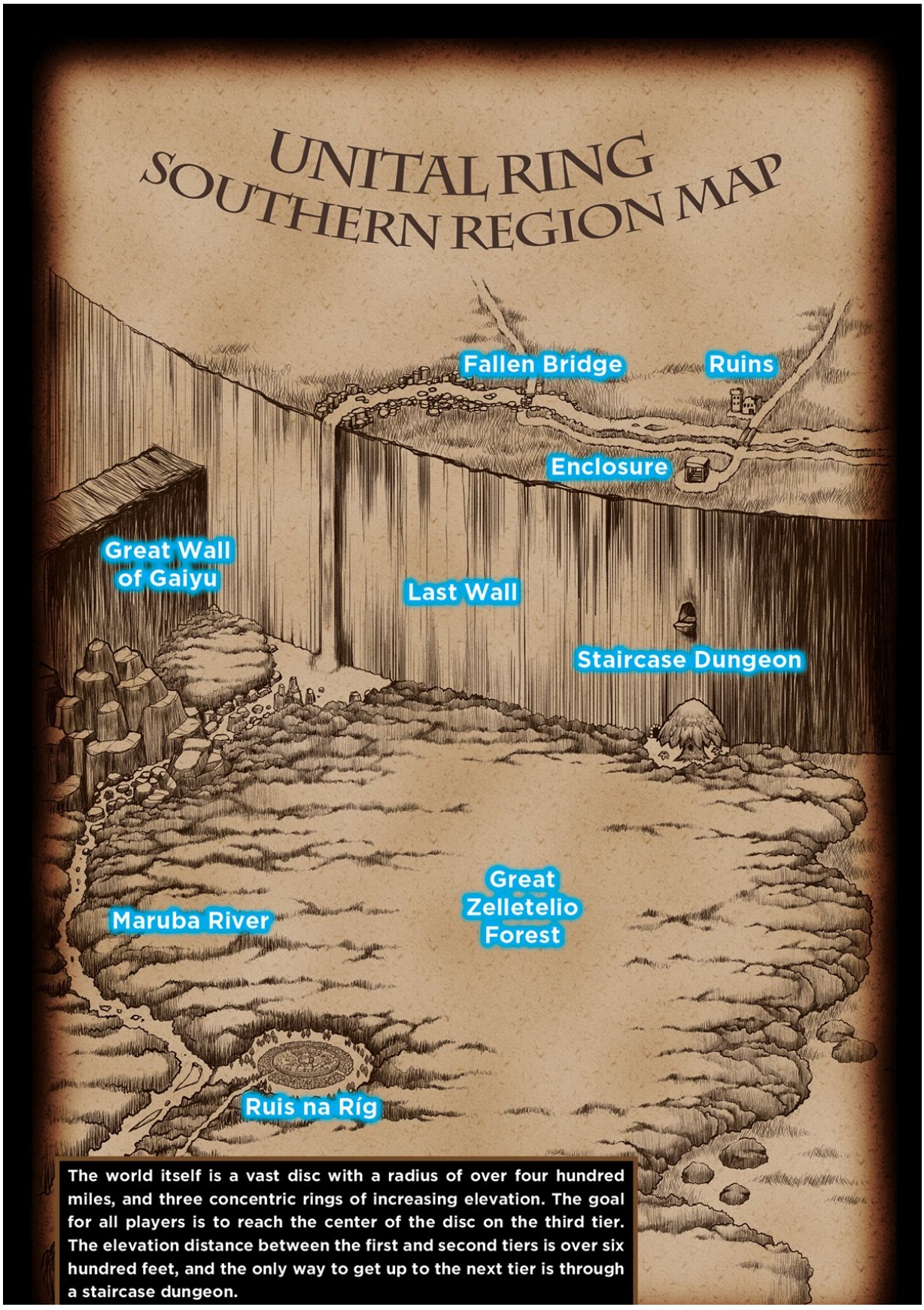

UNITAL RING
SOUTHERN REGION MAP
Fallen Bridge
Ruins
Enclosure
Great Wall of Gaiyu
Last Wall
Staircase Dungeon
Great Zelletelio Forest
Maruba River
Ruis na Ríg
The world itself is a vast disc with a radius of over four hundred miles, and three concentric rings of increasing elevation. The goal for all players is to reach the center of the disc on the third tier. The elevation distance between the first and second tiers is over six hundred feet, and the only way to get up to the next tier is through a staircase dungeon.


Illustration: Reki Kawahara

SWORD ART ONLINE
UNITAL RING VII

VOLUME 28

Reki Kawahara

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Translation by Stephen Paul
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Afterword
Yen Newsletter

“THIS MIGHT BE A GAME, BUT IT’S NOT SOMETHING YOU PLAY.”

—Akihiko Kayaba, *Sword Art Online* **programmer**

SWORD ART ONLINE
unital ring VII

Reki Kawahara

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[redacted]

1

"I'm here to rescue you, Eo."

The swordsman propped up in my left arm wore a white leather mask that was stained with sweat and blood.

In the Underworld, bringing up a Stacia Window was the most surefire way to know someone's status, but just looking into his eyes told me all I needed to know.

Eolyne Herlentz, commander of the Integrity Pilots, blinked back agony. His eyes were hidden behind plates of thin glass in the eyeholes of his mask. There was still strength in those blue eyes, but it was clear he was reaching the limit of his abilities, both physically and mentally.

I would have cared for him right away, but there wasn't time to stand around generating elements. The very person who had inflicted such damage on Eolyne was still standing just seven or eight yards away, smiling arrogantly.

Searching out Eolyne's presence, I created a door of Incarnation, which took me to what looked like a large office. Bookshelves lined both walls, and a large, heavy-looking wooden desk lay ahead of me. Leaning against the desk was a black-haired, gray-cloaked figure with a beautiful face I recognized. It was the mysterious gunner I'd encountered in the secret base on the companion star of Admina: Tohkouga Istar…

While Eolyne was battered and bruised, Istar had not a single strand of hair out of place. The freakish bodies strewn about the office spoke to why. They had sharply jutting heads and unnaturally long arms. Their skins, as well as the blood that dripped from their wounds, were as black as ink. There were six of these bodies.

I had fought monsters before that bore a very close resemblance

to these—but not in this era. They were called minions, and I had dealt with them on the outer wall of Central Cathedral two centuries before, during the reign of Administrator. The fine details differed, and these were wearing metal armor, but they were clearly the same species.

It wasn't clear why Istar had minions under his command, but after seeing the hideous experiments being performed on the Divine Beasts in the base on Admina, I wasn't surprised. The minions were surely stronger than they had been two hundred years ago, so the fact that Eolyne had defeated six of them on his own explained his exhaustion.

I could also guess at the reason why he chose to stay here and fight alone, rather than seek to rejoin his subordinates as the commander of the Integrity Pilots.

There was another space force member in the room. I recognized his bold features as belonging to the man who drove me from Centoria to the mansion in the forest: Operator Second Class Lagi Quint. He was standing with the support of the bookshelf at his back, but there was a deep wound on his right shoulder, and he had been exposed to the minions' toxic blood. Eolyne had been fighting on his own to protect Lagi while he was immobilized.

I couldn't let that heroic effort go to waste. Some light element arts would purify minion blood in just five seconds, but Tohkouga Istar was a formidable foe. Not only was his saber work a match for Eolyne's skill, but the real danger was in the Perfect Weapon Control arts he could execute with the black gun on his right hip. If he created that Incarnation nullification zone again, I would instantly lose half—no, 70 percent of my combat ability.

On the other hand, Istar himself would be unable to use Incarnation within the nullification zone, too, but I didn't know if I was up to the task of fighting a master combatant of the Underworld using only pure fighting and sacred arts ability.

Noticing my moment of hesitation—perhaps fear, perhaps concern—Istar's red lips formed an even deeper smile.

"I figured you would appear either at the base or at the cathedral…So this was your choice."

As usual, Istar's voice was husky and melodious in an androgynous way. Those pale purple eyes, framed by long lashes, held a chilling light that seemed to sap my body temperature at a glance.

It was about 11:40 PM on October 3rd at that moment in the real world. Istar had vanished from Admina after four o'clock in the afternoon. Only seven and a half hours had passed since then. It was hard to believe that in that amount of time, he had gotten four large dragoncraft ready and flown them the 300,000 miles between Admina and Cardina. He must have been planning this invasion of Cardina for a while; Eolyne and I neutralizing a base and a dragoncraft was just the trigger to launch that attack.

Sensing he was going to try to say something, I squeezed Eolyne's shoulder a bit harder and said to Istar, "There are knights stronger than I am to protect the cathedral. Are you sure you don't want to go there, though? That craft belonging to Wesdarath VI or VII or whatever might have crashed already."

I was half bluffing, but Istar did not bat an eye. His narrow smile widened.

"If so, it is of no concern to me. I doubt it, however… If even a single Avus is shot down, Centoria will become a sea of fire."

"So he's taking the populace hostage, then. Impossible to believe someone who fancies himself an emperor would act that way."

This time, I was sure I would at least get him to frown, if not snap in anger. However, that little mocking smile still did not budge.

"You should know these imperial families and noble families haven't a shred of dignity among them—assuming you *are* the real Star King Kirito."

"…Why do you think that?" I asked. I hadn't spoken my name in his presence yet.

Istar countered, "The female pilots you summoned to Admina called you Kirito."

"……Ah. Good point."

Yes, I did recall Asuna and Alice calling me by name close to Istar and Eolyne's showdown. But even still…

"The Star King vanished from the Underworld over thirty years ago," I said. "Wouldn't you assume I was just a different person with the same name?"

"Ordinarily, yes. But after witnessing that preposterous intensity of Incarnation, one certainly has to wonder," Istar noted. I glanced at his right hand.

For him to activate his Incarnation-nullifying Perfect Weapon Control arts, he would need to draw the black gun from the holster on his hip, aim it, and call out, "Enhance Armament." That would take at least three seconds, all told, but I could immobilize him with Incarnation faster.

On the other hand, if he sealed my Incarnation ability, I would have to fight him with my sword.

"…What are you people after? Do you really think you can conquer the Integrity Pilots, the space force, and the ground force with just four dragoncraft?" I demanded, my voice a few hertz lower than usual.

Istar's smile didn't waver. "At the very least, the emperor thinks so. If he's able to command all floors of Central Cathedral and drive out the Stellar Unification Council, then the entire ruling system has toppled. That tower is the very symbol of power… If the Star King Kirito made any mistake, it was not toppling that monument at once," said the delicate beauty, his eyes boring through me like ice crystals.

I had no memory of my time as the Star King, so I didn't know why I…why *he* hadn't destroyed the cathedral. But I could imagine. It was probably because there were too many memories in it. There was just no way to destroy the great staircase, where I'd run with Eugeo; the ninety-ninth floor, where we crossed blades; and the top floor, where his blood was shed for good…

For an instant, I glanced down at Eolyne under my arm. He had lost consciousness, and his eyes were closed behind the mask. I swept aside the unnecessary mental distraction and retorted, "That self-styled emperor never had any plans to conquer Central Cathedral in the first place. He was firing missiles at it like he wanted to raze it to the ground."

"Missiles…? You mean the heat element projectiles? I suggested he at least use traditional ballistics rather than Incarnate projectiles, but the emperor fears the return of the Imperial Knighthood above all else. He intends to eradicate the ninety-fifth floor and upward, regardless of how much the people of Centoria might protest," said Istar, shaking his head and shrugging.

I glared at him. How did the emperor learn the Integrity Knights and their dragons had been frozen in cold sleep atop Central Cathedral? And why was Tohkouga Istar freely revealing the intentions of the emperor—surely a sensitive secret if there ever was one?

To buy time? Why? The minions were powerful, but it was simply impossible for them to completely take over the space force base with the number a single dragoncraft could carry.

The objectives of Emperor Agumar Wesdarath VI and his ambush troops were, first, to eradicate the top floors of Central Cathedral and the Integrity Knights held there, and second, to kidnap or kill Eolyne, commander of the Integrity Pilots, and throw the military command structure into chaos, as I saw it. But the defenses of the cathedral—between the offensive and defensive excellence of Alice Synthesis Thirty and the now awakened Fanatio Synthesis Two—would be difficult to break through, and they had nearly succeeded at abducting Eolyne, but had been foiled.

Given that the ambush had failed, buying time was meaningless, because their position would only worsen. Istar had demonstrated a remarkable willingness to flee on Admina, so he had to realize these facts. Whatever was happening right now, he seemed to know they had other means of potential victory.

Before teleporting to the base, I had given the newly awakened Fanatio as much information as I could and promised her I would return by midnight. I had another twenty minutes until then, but there was no way staring each other down and wasting time was in my best interest. On the other hand, Istar might've been waiting for me to make my move.

Should I try apprehending him with Incarnation right now? Or continue our conversation, waiting for help to arrive?

In the world of *Unital Ring*, I didn't hesitate to use my sword to rescue Yui when she was kidnapped by therians. That wasn't even an hour ago—and this situation bore some similarity to that—but I just couldn't cut through the hesitation roiling within me.

When I held my silence, Istar narrowed his eyes and said, "It seems you are *not* the Star King."

"…Why do you think that?" I managed to reply. An even crueler smile twisted his red lips.

"Because you are missing the stern edge the legendary Star King is said to possess…and because you do not understand the lack of mercy among all those who share an emperor's blood."

His utterance was like a signal.

Suddenly, the darkened sky behind Istar burst into pure white, and the windowpanes behind him rattled and shook.

"…?!"

I held my breath and watched the light fade outside the windows.

Straight ahead and to the left—the southeastern sky, to be precise—there was a red glow in the sky. Upon further examination, it was clear, even from six miles away, that there were massive flames rising from Centoria in the distance.

They were not rising from the city itself but from the top of the white structure that towered over the center of it.

Central Cathedral was burning.

2

To Alice Synthesis Thirty, Commander Bercouli Synthesis One was a treasured mentor and a doting father figure. But Vice Commander Fanatio Synthesis Two was less an object of reverence and more an awkward, antagonistic figure. When she lived in Central Cathedral, there were times it seemed she felt more at odds with Fanatio than with any other knight or priest.

But once the war with the Dark Territory began and they fought side by side at the Eastern Gate, Alice learned of Fanatio's greatness and the depth of her love. She could still hear the words Fanatio had said when she caught Alice slipping out of Amayori's saddle after spending all her willpower performing the reflective cohesion beam.

That was incredible spellwork and Incarnation, Alice. The enemy has retreated. You guided us to victory.

After that, Alice joined the decoy squad charging into the Dark Territory, while Fanatio stayed behind to defend the human realm. Ultimately, she left for the real world through the World's End Altar without speaking to her again. When she next returned to the Underworld, two hundred years had passed, and she had to confront the reality, in her mind, that she would never be reunited with Fanatio or the other knights. Until…

"……Fanatio."

The air just barely escaped her throat. It was all Alice could do to keep her eyes open wide enough to see past the tears.

The hundredth floor of Central Cathedral, which was about ten mels above the levitating disc Alice and Airy now rode, was a terrace surrounded by delicate silver railings.

She could never mistake the tall, slender knight standing there—the black hair flowing in the night breeze, the lilac-colored armor

and violet cloak, and the rapier-thin sword in her right hand. It was the second of all the Integrity Knights, Fanatio Synthesis Two.

She had been petrified on the ninety-ninth floor of the cathedral with fifteen other knights. Kirito must have brought her back with the thawing solution. After seeing she had returned, he opened a door, said, "When I get back, I'm going to force them to land, so hold tight until then," and then left for the space force base.

There were still three large dragoncraft looming in the sky west of the cathedral. Barely a minute or two earlier, they had fired eighteen missiles, all of which Kirito's Incarnation wall blocked, but that did not mean they didn't have more.

Most likely, the man calling himself Agumar Wesdarath VI in the center dragoncraft intended to wipe out the knights stored on the ninety-ninth floor. He had said that if they opened the defensive shutters and indicated surrender, he would stop firing missiles, but that was not trustworthy. He could very well fire them all the instant they opened the shutters—in fact, that was almost certainly what he would do.

The emperor had surely loaded enough missiles that even if the "illegitimate occupiers" demonstrated resistance, he had enough to destroy the top of Central Cathedral, defensive shutters and all. Even still, the fact that none in his impressive volley of eighteen had reached the cathedral was an unpleasant surprise to him. The dragoncrafts' missile launchers remained silent for now, without loading new projectiles.

This would be the point at which the emperor wanted to threaten them again, but the light from Fanatio's Heaven-Piercing Blade had destroyed the disc on the center craft that created that three-dimensional projection. There could be no negotiations or threats without a means of communication, which left the emperor's only remaining options either all-out attack or retreat. It was impossible to tell which it would be.

Anticipating a stalemate of two or three minutes, Alice sheathed the Osmanthus Blade and murmured, "Airy, can you get up to Lady Fanatio?"

"Yes," she replied, increasing the flow of air from the bottom of

the flying platform. The steel disc ascended powerfully, heading for the hundredth floor.

In the Central Cathedral of old, Administrator had placed defensive arts of all kinds around the tower to prevent even birds from reaching the top floor, much less dragons. Surely someone had undone those protections over the last two centuries, but if they were still active, perhaps they would have blocked a missile attack…

Alice swept aside that distracting thought. The flying platform went past the fence of the terrace. She jumped down, not waiting for it to stabilize, and raced toward her one-time comrade, footsteps clanking loudly against the shining marble tiles.

When she saw the smile on Fanatio's face, lit by the pale starlight and just the same as when she had caught her all those years ago at the Eastern Gate, Alice felt something hot and fierce surging up in her chest.

She wanted to throw out her arms and hug her, but held just enough restraint to keep her hands at her sides. Through trembling lips, she managed to say, "It has been far too long, Lady Fanatio."

She put her right hand on the lapel of the pilot's uniform and her left hand on the pommel of the sword in a proper salute.

But Fanatio whispered, "It really has been too long, Alice," and reached out to grab her shoulders, pulling her close. Alice ended up on tiptoes, and Fanatio's hands circled her back, hugging with enough force to make her armor creak.

In subjective time, Alice's farewell to Fanatio at the Eastern Gate had been only about three months ago, but Airy said Fanatio's decision to undergo the petrification art was in the year 475 HE. To her, this was a reunion ninety-five years in the making.

Alice returned the gesture, squeezing hard. She started to say the words she'd always known she *must* say if they were ever reunited.

"…Lady Fanatio, forgive me. It was my failure in being captured by Emperor Vecta that caused Lord Bercouli to—"

"Alice," Fanatio said, firmly but gently, pulling away. Her gold-tinted brown eyes stared right into Alice's. "I understand. You both did what you needed to in order to protect the Underworld. Now is the time to stand up against this new threat—and we'll be carrying

on his will, as well as Eldrie's, Dakira's…and every other brave soldier who perished in that war."

"…Right," Alice said, trying her best to hold back the searing sensation that threatened to burst from her chest. Emperor Agumar wasn't going to give up on his quest to eliminate the frozen knights. They had to protect Central Cathedral until Kirito got back. That was their onus.

"Lady Fanatio, do you know the situa—?" Alice started to ask.

"Yes, I heard from the Star Ki…from Kirito," Fanatio interrupted. "He said he believed he had defeated the last of the Black Emperors and had the Undying Heart—the jewel that was the repository of their souls—destroyed. So how did this one come back…?"

"……"

Alice hadn't lived through the Rebellion of the Four Empires or the Black Emperor War that followed it. But when she was placed on watch over the city of Centoria during the Axiom Church's rule, she had seen plenty of the wanton, arrogant ways of the imperial families. In a sense, the emperors were manifestations of greed even beyond Administrator, and it did not surprise her one bit to hear they would turn themselves into inhuman monsters in their attempts to control the Underworld.

If Agumar was one of the Black Emperors, returned through some unknown means, and he possessed the memory of his "previous life," then he would naturally hate and fear the Integrity Knights who had struck him down before.

When the missile attack against the cathedral began, Selka had completed five doses of the thawing solution. If she'd used one of them on Fanatio, there were still four more remaining. So Alice quickly suggested, "I believe Emperor Agumar's top priority is the eradication of the sealed Integrity Knights. Perhaps we should seek to revive some of the others, even if it's not possible to bring them all back at this moment."

"Yes…but…," Fanatio murmured slowly. "If there is a powerful mage or Incarnation user on the enemy's side, they should be able to detect the knights reviving, even through the cathedral's walls. We can't rule out the possibility that the emperor will go on an

unprecedented rampage if he learns the knights are awakening."

"Unprecedented…? Meaning he has an even more powerful means of attacking than the Incarnate missiles…?" Alice asked, aghast.

The one-time vice commander of the Integrity Knights nodded and cast her gaze toward the three dragoncraft. "The Black Emperors I knew always had a trick up their sleeves, if not another one even beyond that. You could call them strategic planners; I think it's simply that they learned from past mistakes. In the Rebellion of the Four Empires, they hurled troops at the cathedral with no real plan. That they lost to a Unification Council that was vastly outnumbered and led by a mere boy in Kirito must have wounded their pride in a way that could never be forgotten or forgiven."

"I see," Alice murmured, looking to the west.

Over three minutes had passed already since the missile barrage, and the dragoncraft remained eerily still. This side had no recourse to attack, either, since they would only crash into the city below. But once Kirito returned from the base, he could force them to land on the lawn of the cathedral. It was hard to imagine Incarnate Arms powerful enough to move such monstrous crafts, but if he said he could do it, it had to be true.

In the worlds of *ALfheim Online*, *Unital Ring*, and even in the Underworld, she felt she was at least his equal in her skill with the sword and sacred arts, but he had a commanding lead when it came to Incarnation. Despite the way it rankled her, she would have to ask him for lessons once this was all said and done…

She was broken out of this distraction by the approach of soft footsteps. A voice sounded, potent with pained emotion.

"I am so glad to see you, Lady Fanatio."

The knight turned around, then broke into a smile and stepped forward. She hugged Airy gently, careful not to hurt her against the ornate armor she wore, and murmured, "I'm glad to see you too, Airy."

"Please forgive me, that you had to be awakened into such a situation…"

"Don't apologize. If anyone is at fault for this, it's me, for

choosing the Deep Freeze art knowing it would leave you alone in charge of the sealed floors," Fanatio replied, releasing Airy. She glanced toward Alice and continued tensely, "I'm certain Emperor Agumar is either going to unleash his best attack now or retreat to build his strength for another attempt later. Our job is to prolong his indecision until Kirito returns…and, if necessary, to limit the damage to a minimum. Airy, you return to the ninety-fifth floor and assist Selka."

"Yes, ma'am," she said at once, turning on her heel. How was she going to get back down into the cathedral? The answer was a square hole off to the side of the terrace, which apparently went down to a set of stairs.

"What is that, Lady Fanatio…?" asked Alice, who didn't recall such a passage in the old version of the cathedral.

The vice commander grimaced a little and said, "As you may know, the one-time prime senator, Chudelkin, created a hidden staircase in the walls leading from the ninety-sixth to the ninety-ninth floor. When we were debating renovating the old senate chamber into a dragon roost, we were split on what to do with the staircase. Ultimately, Kirito decided we should make use of what was already there, and Asuna's terrain manipulation connected it to the roof."

"…Ah, I see."

Alice could clearly remember the hidden staircase, too. It felt like just yesterday that she and Kirito had run up the stairs, chasing Chudelkin.

If Kirito asked for the stairs to be preserved as the Star King, perhaps it was meant as a remembrance of Alice and Eugeo, whom he assumed he would never see again. Kirito had irreversibly lost his memories of being the Star King, so there was no way to know anymore.

Once Airy had rushed down the steps, Alice asked, "What is Selka doing?"

"I have her making all the thawing solution she can with the materials she has," the vice commander said simply, though Alice did not miss the note of concern in her features. Fanatio clearly felt the

emperor was more likely to order an all-out assault than a retreat. If they started awakening the knights one after the other, he might detect the activity, prompting him to go ahead with the attack. So her plan was to have Selka work on making more solution while things were in a stalemate in the hopes they would finish enough solution to awaken all the knights and their dragons. This way, they could use them all at once in case the enemy attempted to use his secret attack.

This brought a third question to mind. Alice asked, "Lady Fanatio, why did Kiri…why did the Star King hide the thawing art of Deep Freeze and its solution's recipe on Admina? Given the matters of safety and urgency such as in this situation, wouldn't it have been better to keep it here at the cathedral…?"

Ten hours earlier, Alice had asked Asuna the exact same question in the bath. But as she had lost her memory of being Star Queen, just like Kirito, Asuna couldn't give her an answer. Belatedly, she had realized Airy might know the reason why, but that meant Fanatio might, too.

The vice commander just gave her a conflicted look. "Well…I suppose that's a natural question. I said the same thing to Kirito."

"And what did he…?"

"He said it wouldn't be fun if it were that easy to find."

"……"

Alice was certain she had the same expression Fanatio did back then. She had never interacted with the Star King, but this was clearly a sign Kirito would always be Kirito. Maybe there was a careful reason hidden behind that flippant rationale, but this wasn't the time to sit around pondering riddles.

The vice commander shook her head briefly and said, "Let's just focus on the enemy at hand. Not that we should be attacking and provoking them."

"Indeed," Alice agreed, staring at the formation of dragoncraft. They were still stationary, but there was no way to tell if they were hesitating to make their next action or waiting for the right timing for something.

"How many more times can you shoot the Heaven-Piercing

Blade's laser…er, Perfect Weapon Control arts?" Alice asked, keeping her eye on the enemy. She sensed Fanatio looking up.

"It's night, so perhaps four times."

"Four…"

Alice stared into the sooty darkness, too. Perfect Weapon Control arts drastically consumed a Divine Object's life with each use, and the only way it could be restored was over time, in a place replete with spatial sacred power. Each relic had an affinity to certain sources of power. As the Osmanthus Blade had previously been the oldest tree in the world, it enjoyed sunlight and lush soil most, while the Frostscale Whip preferred pure, clean water, according to Eldrie, as it had been a Divine Beast that lived in a lake.

Fanatio's Heaven-Piercing Blade was previously a weapon Administrator had created out of a thousand mirrors, reflecting the sun into a single beam of light to create superheated flames. Apparently, there was a real-world power generator that worked on the same principles known as a heliostat solar power plant, but whether Administrator knew about such a thing was another question.

In any case, that being the Heaven-Piercing Blade's source, it preferred the light of Solus more than any other Divine Relic did, and it was clearly slower to recharge during the night, as Fanatio had said back in Alice's knighthood days. The sky above was half-shrouded in clouds.

"My sword might be able to block another twelve of those projectiles, at best," Alice said. "If the emperor's last-ditch effort involves more shots than those at once, then…"

I might need you to shoot down at least one of those crafts, Fanatio, she left unsaid in the chilly air.

The thought that they might lose the fifteen sleeping Integrity Knights just below them on the ninety-ninth floor was unbearable. But if they shot down even one of those dragoncraft, far more than fifteen citizens of Centoria would perish in the crash. Before she broke through the seal of her right eye, Alice would have been racked with anguish, caught between her emotions and her duty.

She glanced sidelong at Fanatio, wondering what she was

thinking. There was no way to tell if the seal was there or not from her external appearance, but Fanatio seemed to know exactly what was on Alice's mind. She said, "We can't drop the dragoncraft onto the city. We will have lost, even in protecting the cathedral. Don't worry—I'll knock down all the projectiles you can't block."

"…But…"

Like the light-based Piercing Ray attack from *ALfheim Online*, the Perfect Weapon Control art of the Heaven-Piercing Blade was a penetrating laser attack. Given the curtain of missiles the enemy could shoot, a defense that could only hit one point at a time was too inefficient to be entirely useful.

But Fanatio was already aware of that. If she said she could handle it, then Alice had no choice but to trust the companion she'd shared battle with before.

"Understood. I'll let you handle the rest."

"It's on me. I suppose I'm asking you to do the impossible again."

"No…"

Alice shook her head, intending to protest that it was merely the duty of any knight—when she caught the faint sound of machinery in motion.

Her eyes darted in the direction of the noise. The weapons bays on the underside of the hovering craft were bristling with missiles again. Emperor Agumar had chosen to gamble on a last-ditch attack after all.

Fanatio placed a hand on her sword hilt and said, "If we can defend against their projectiles, we win… Otherwise, they win."

"Yes," Alice agreed. Thinking quickly, she asked, "How will we contact Selka below, Lady Fanatio…?"

She had forgotten because voices and writing could be sent instantly in the real world. But here, no matter how loudly Alice shouted from the exterior of the cathedral, it would not reach the ears of Selka and Airy, even with voice-enlarging arts. They didn't have time to run down all those stairs to inform them of the need to unfreeze the Integrity Knights.

But despite having just been awakened from a nearly hundred-year sleep, Fanatio seemed ready for this.

"I already gave her the order to stop producing the solution and begin thawing the knights the moment even a single projectile hits Central Cathedral," she said.

Alice was momentarily impressed until she wondered, "But…what about the order of thawing…?"

"Starting from the highest-numbered knights," Fanatio said instantly. For a moment, Alice gave her a look.

The highest-numbered knight sealed on the ninety-ninth floor was Fizel Synthesis Twenty-Nine, the closest in number to Alice. If they started from that end of the numbers, then they might not even get to Deusolbert Synthesis Seven, whom Fanatio had known for two centuries, or the Seven Ancient Knights, whose names Alice didn't even know.

But even if they were able to somehow get Deusolbert's opinion on it, he would surely want them to evacuate the younger knights before him.

"Understood," Alice replied, focusing on the dragoncraft again.

The missiles were being prepared to fire again—six for a craft, eighteen for all three. He was going to fight them with his maximum firepower, then. She gripped the hilt of her sword.

The Osmanthus Blade still had 80 percent of its life remaining, but the more the explosions of those Incarnate missiles overlapped, the more the overriding effect would increase their power. As she'd said earlier, twelve was probably the maximum she could block. The remaining six would have to be the responsibility of Fanatio, who could only shoot her laser four more times.

Kchunk… The final missiles were deployed to their launchers.

Alice and Fanatio drew their blades as one.

"Enhance Armament!"

Alice activated her Perfect Weapon Control first. Golden light shone from the Osmanthus Blade as it frayed into hundreds of tiny petals. Each was less than a cen across, shaped into a rounded cross like the flowers of the osmanthus tree in their base form. In terms of real-world game concepts, this was the balanced form, 50 percent attack power and 50 percent defense, but that was not suited to stopping Incarnate missiles like these.

She focused hard, and the flower petals floating in space sharpened audibly. The points of the crosses became actual points, with 90 percent focus on attack power.

At that moment, Emperor Agumar would be raising his arm to give the command from the control room of the center dragoncraft. She felt like she could hear him roar *Fire*!—though that wasn't possible—and thus she swung the sword hilt in her hand in one big motion.

With a loud swoosh, the swarm of petals spread out to the sides.

The next moment, eighteen missiles launched together. With a sound like a monster's roar, they leaped through the air and bore down on a single point of the cathedral's exterior wall.

Alice felt a brief pang of concern, of wrongness, but had no time to think about it. She split the petals into four groups and launched them toward different targets at full power.

In the initial clash, the petals were heavily damaged from the blasts of the Incarnate missiles. This time, she would attempt to pierce them instantly with a spear formation rather than block them with a shield formation.

The petals shot forward as golden spears, intersecting with the tips of the missiles. It looked like they passed through them without any resistance, but moments later, ruptured by the sharp petals, the missiles lost their poise and began to explode. By then, the petal swarms had already flown past, but not enough to entirely escape the furious flames, and some fluttered and fell.

The pain of her sword was like an injury to herself. But Alice formed new spears from the surviving petals and continued to fight back against the missiles. Seven, eight, nine…ten. She needed two more to reach the twelve she had promised Fanatio to stop.

"*Haaah!*" she cried, swinging her arm down. Two spears flew, leaving behind a golden trail.

They struck true—it seemed.

But like living creatures, the missiles twisted and spun out of the way of the spears.

Stunned, Alice followed up by changing the formation of the petals, barely even conscious of what she was doing. They

transformed from narrow throwing spears to birds with large, flapping wings, spinning quickly to pursue the missiles. The two massive birds closed the distance and snapped at the missiles with sharp beaks, but the missiles danced from side to side to avoid them.

There was no way projectiles flying with the pressure from sealed heat elements could move like that. It was probably the same kind of guided projectile that had shot down the X'rphan Mk. 13 craft Kirito and Eolyne were riding—a bio-missile engineered to have one of the Divine Beast babies inside.

On closer inspection, she realized that unlike the missiles she had already shot down, these were covered in black scales, not a metal shell. This was the detail that had seemed off to her earlier.

But she couldn't lament the delay in realization. The other six bearing down on them were also bio-missiles, like the two evading her. Fanatio didn't seem panicked yet, but it was obvious these would be harder to aim at than the normal projectiles, so Alice felt she had to do something about the two closest ones, at least.

Controlling the petals with her right hand, she thrust her left outward and grasped with all the Incarnation power she had.

Alice's Incarnate Arms were a technique she'd learned directly from Commander Bercouli. She didn't have the sheer output of Kirito, but she felt she was his equal in precision. Once the bio-missiles were within a mel of her weapon, she quickly snapped her left hand shut like a claw.

According to Kirito, the bio-missiles being manufactured at the base on Admina had both the mobility of flying animals and the ability to tear through Incarnate walls. The Incarnate Arms Alice created were enough to catch the missiles, but there was a slippery sensation to them, like trying to grasp a wriggling fish coated in slime.

But it was enough to briefly slow the missiles down. That was all the opening Alice needed to slice her right hand downward.

The two mammoth birds bolted downward in a dive, piercing the bio-missiles with their beaks. The missiles writhed violently, then disintegrated into black flames. It was a burst of umbral energy, not

thermal; the Osmanthus Blade had greater resistance to darkness than to flame, but it couldn't emerge unharmed from the center of a blast like that. The petals turned dark and sooty, losing their luster, and dropped like rain.

Returning the few petals left to her hand, Alice cried out, "The rest are up to you, Fanatio!"

"Understood!!"

Fanatio stepped forward in her place and pulled loose the Heaven-Piercing Blade from her left hip.

The remaining half dozen bio-missiles bore down on them, three from the right and three from the left. She only had four shots of her laser, so it seemed impossible that she could hit all six of them, spread out as they were. Still, Fanatio raised her sword, absolutely assured, and cried, "Release Recollection!!"

It wasn't Perfect Weapon Control arts. It was the Integrity Knight's greatest technique, Memory Release…

Bwwwom! With a heavy pulse, the Heaven-Piercing Blade shot out a vertical beam of pure light. This was not a laser, but a sword of light that was perhaps fifty mels long.

Alice had only seen this once before, and from a great distance. It was during the battle against the Dark Territory at the Eastern Gate, in the early stages of the Otherworld War. She had used her sword of light to cut apart Sigurosig, chief of the giants. Back then, it was more like ten mels long, however. The sword extending from Fanatio's hand was five times that size. It wasn't a sword but something much thicker… Kirito would probably call it a Laser Pillar or something.

The air shook again.

The pillar tilted to the left, wreathed in a pure white halo, then pulled on a diagonal to the rear.

"*Haaaaaa!*"

Fanatio roared and took a step, then swung the pillar forward.

The bio-missiles, now within thirty mels of the cathedral, reacted to the fierce light and attempted to evade. Perhaps they could have avoided a laser that was just a small, direct point, but the pillar swept through space with a large diameter. The three on the left

were swallowed up in its light and disintegrated without a sound.

An instant later, they exploded in sequence. The vast stores of dark elements were unleashed, forming holes that devoured the night sky. The voids that ensued caused a sucking blast wind, drawing everything toward them.

Alice planted her feet against the shift in balance, switched her sword to the left hand, and used her dominant right to grab Fanatio's sword belt, holding her steady.

"Thank you!" the vice commander shouted, swinging the Laser Pillar again toward the three on the right this time. The trio of bio-missiles darted along irregular paths like winged insects, trying to evade the superheated slashes.

But Fanatio employed ultra-precise hand motion, causing oscillations of light that brilliantly caught the fourth and fifth missiles.

The two projectiles melted into pieces and exploded at the same time. Alice once again dropped her center of gravity to brace against the gust of wind.

The sixth bio-missile—technically the eighteenth of the entire wave—began leaping about wildly, sensing it was the last of its group, but it could not escape the nearly weightless Laser Pillar and finally allowed contact. The obsidian scales instantly evaporated in the blaze of white light…

But then the lightsword flickered and went out.

The last missile had been gouged halfway through the torso, but did not explode, and plunged straight toward the cathedral. Alice's Osmanthus Blade and Fanatio's Heaven-Piercing Blade had been utterly spent, and could no longer support perhaps a single slash, much less another round of Perfect Weapon Control.

But just then, a milky, pale glow spread around them from behind.

The light expanded, forming a thin film that enveloped both Alice and Fanatio. There was no impact, no sense that anything had touched them, but they were aware of a gentle warmth that caressed their skin.

Within a second, the film of light formed an enormous sphere

that covered the entirety of the top of Central Cathedral. A moment later, the bio-missile struck it, sending out translucent ripples, and came to a stop. It was just two mels away from the wall of the ninety-ninth floor.

Because of the impact, the partially torn part of the bio-missile's body cracked and finally split in two, spilling forth a mass of black and purple energy that surged and exploded.

Alice instinctually turned her face away, but the film of light blocked the burst of dark energy, too. That was the limit of what it could do, however, because it melted into thin air just after that.

"Was that you, Lady Fanatio…?" Alice asked hoarsely.

Fanatio shook her head. "No…I thought it was your Incarnation…"

They shared a look, then turned around—and gasped.

The circular dome presiding over the terrace of the top floor of Central Cathedral was faintly glowing. It faded and went out just as they watched, but it was no illusion.

That dome was the place where Administrator's chamber had been. The place where Alice had joined Kirito, Eugeo, and Cardinal in fighting against Administrator.

The underside of the domed ceiling was decorated with frescoes depicting the mythological creation of the Underworld, with crystals embedded in the surface that glittered like stars. They weren't merely jewels, however, but crystal structures containing the extracted fluctlights of those who became Integrity Knights through Administrator's synthesis ritual…

Alice stood stock-still, her mind racing wildly.

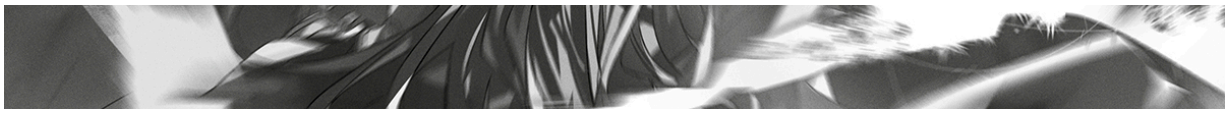
And she was distracted enough to be late to notice.

The air was trembling. It was a roar not of dark energy, but of heat elements.

Once again, they spun around, brushing shoulders. Beyond the remnants of the burst that still rattled the air around them, crimson flames were roaring brightly.

The source of the flame was the rightmost of the three large dragoncraft, from the tower's perspective. The six heat-element engines stored behind the sturdy main wings were operating at full output.





For a moment, Alice thought Emperor Agumar had decided he didn't stand a chance of winning and was using his subordinates as a shield to escape…but he was on the center craft. Was the crew of the right craft mutinying and escaping on its own…?

No, that wasn't possible. Even now, two centuries after the end of the Axiom Church, the citizens of the Underworld were trapped by the nature of their artificial fluctlights, which prevented them from disobeying the authority of a higher being. The full output of the engine was on the emperor's orders, which meant…

"Oh no…it's going to crash into the cathedral!" Alice shouted. Fanatio twitched in horror.

"No, it can't be!" she moaned, thrusting out her hand. Alice put out her own to join it.

Fwahhh! The large dragoncraft propelled forward with a deep and heavy roar. Once it began accelerating, the dark craft quickly picked up speed, rushing toward them like a landslide.

An Avus-class dragoncraft was twenty mels long and forty mels from wingtip to wingtip. The total weight was unfathomable, and even more frightening, there had to be at least ten crew members on board. The emperor had ordered them all to die.

It was an incredibly cruel and ruthless decision. Crashing the dragoncraft wasn't just an option because they had used up all their missiles. The exterior wall of the cathedral was imbued with the highest priority level, which meant it wouldn't budge even when hit by a massive dragoncraft—which was why they were loaded with Incarnate missiles instead—but it wasn't impervious.

Even a human being who has not learned to wield Incarnation is able to produce powerful bursts of it in extreme circumstances, such as the moment of terror before death. Sigurosig, chief of the giants, had managed to paralyze Fanatio just as he was on the brink of death in the Battle of the Eastern Gate. Agumar VI was going to use his dragoncraft crew as Incarnate weapons.

If not for the city below them, Alice herself would have shot down the dragoncraft to protect the cathedral and the knights inside; she didn't want to claim unique moral sanctity of thought and motive. But even still, her insides boiled at the thought of a commanding

officer using his subordinates like sacrificial pawns.

That sudden surge of anger from her gut turned into Incarnation she could wield. From Fanatio's hand, held in her own, she could sense a radiating determination in kind.

The nose of the charging dragoncraft made contact with the defensive Incarnate wall they deployed.

Without even a hint of weight or hardness, the wall shattered into nothing.

A moment later, the dragoncraft collided with the outer wall of the ninety-ninth floor of Central Cathedral. The hull of the craft cracked, split into pieces, and shattered in all directions, and Alice could momentarily see nothing but a crimson swell of flames.

3

"Dad, please! Take me to Roppongi!"

Asuna clapped her hands together in front of her face. Her father—Shouzou Yuuki, chairman of the RCT Group—stopped in the act of removing his golfing jacket and lifted one eyebrow with concern and another with skepticism.

"Roppongi? At this hour? Asuna…you're not getting into any sketchy entertainment over there, are you?"

"Noooo!" she protested. Then she considered that the base layer of the Underworld was constructed from the Seed program, like so many other VRMMOs, so to her father, it probably seemed like it was just a game anyway. But the people who lived there were real people with souls just like her own, and the Soul Translator she used to dive into the Underworld was a distant descendant of the NerveGear, which RCT had helped develop.

Still, it was already eleven thirty at night. Any parent whose teenage daughter was begging to go to a hangout area at this hour would either stop her or scold her. She needed to leave as soon as humanly possible, but first she had to explain herself to him.

Asuna sucked in a deep breath of chilly air at the doorway and said, "Dad, you know I've been doing a test internship at the Roppongi branch of Rath…the Marine Research Facility, right?"

The frown on Shouzou's face deepened when he heard the name. "So it has to do with *that* place? Your mother told me about the observation period there, but if you're looking for a job, I'm against it. That place put you and Kirigaya through enough hell already."

It made sense that he bore a grudge against them. In early July, Asuna and Kirito had fallen into comas while on a dive into the Underworld and did not emerge for nearly a month. If not for the

arguments of Kazuto's parents and Asuna's mother, Kyouko, Shouzou would have pressed for criminal and civil charges against Rath.

Now that two months had passed, his attitude toward Rath was showing signs of softening slightly. Asuna had reminded him again and again that it had been her idea to travel to the *Ocean Turtle*. But there was another reason for this: A.L.I.C.E.

Alice, who belonged to Rath, was the first and most likely only "strong" AI in the world. With classic AI being so widely adopted in not just industrial processes, but also education, entertainment, and even government services, Rath's technology had the capability to revolutionize modern industry and social systems. They were the target of intense worldwide interest. Naturally, RCT was no exception, but at the moment, Dr. Rinko had ordered no further authorization of press events or interviews for Alice.

So the RCT Data Science Laboratory (RDSL), RCT's AI research division, took aim at the publicized friendship between Alice and Asuna, and asked Shouzou if they could gain a connection to Rath from that. Asuna had heard about this not from her father, but from her brother, Kouichirou. Shouzou had apparently spurned the suggestion, but RDSL persisted, and there was a widespread belief among all—not just Shouzou—that the next generation of AI could either sink or float the company's future. He was trapped between a rock and a hard place.

It pained her, knowing the difficult position her father was in, but there was no helping it at that exact moment. Alice was normally so strict when it came to protocol. That she had said, "We need your help, Kirito and Asuna," at that hour was a sign of how big an emergency was taking place in the Underworld.

"…Listen, I understand you have negative feelings toward Rath, and I don't blame you," she said, doing her best not to jabber, "but I think that's because you don't really know what kind of group Rath is, or the research they perform."

"Well…I can't deny that," he grunted reluctantly.

Asuna nodded and continued, "Well, um…I'm helping Rath investigate the Underworld right now. There's no one who knows it better than me and Kazuto."

"And the Underworld is the virtual world stored on that research vessel, right? The one that has tens of thousands more AI, just like Alice…It's just so hard to believe it all…"

Shouzou's understanding of the situation was 90 percent correct but 10 percent mistaken. The only true artificial general intelligence that had conquered the weakness of artificial fluctlights—that they could not disobey rules or orders—was Alice. No one else had reached her level yet. Interacting with Eolyne, Ronie, Tiese, and Airy didn't make you think their thoughts were limited in any capacity, but that was only because they weren't bound by the majority of the rules and laws that existed in their world. This would all take too much time to explain, however, so she just went along with his statement.

"That's right. The *Ocean Turtle* is off-limits now, though, so we can't bring any other AIs to the real world. And there's a problem in the Underworld…"

"A problem? It's not under attack from more miscreants, is it?"

"No, no, it's all within the virtual world. It's a complicated situation, though, so it's hard to explain…but I just got a message from Alice, who dived in a little while earlier, and she's asking for rescue at once."

"…Hrmm…"

Shouzou's gaze traveled to the analog clock fixed into their natural rock accent wall. It was 11:35… Her mother would be returning soon, and then she'd have to start her explanation all over again.

"Please, Papa! Alice is a precious friend of mine!"

Asuna put her hands together, acting like this was her last attempt and she would give up if he resisted. Inwardly, though, she knew she would just have to find a way to sneak out later instead.

Shouzou was a man who valued personal connections—it was how Nobuyuki Sugou had managed to take advantage of him, in fact—and he had always instructed Asuna and Kouichirou to treasure their friends. It was also why he couldn't ignore the RDSL's demands, as the person in charge of the overall group. On top of that, Asuna was bringing out the biggest gun she had: the magic

"Papa" word. He sighed heavily.

"I haven't driven a car myself in half a year, so don't complain if it feels unsteady."

"Thank you, Dad!" Asuna cried, pulling the Chesterfield coat off the hanger he'd just placed it on and putting it back over his shoulders. She had her own Saxony peacoat to wear, and she slipped on some sneakers.

It was 11:25 when Kirito told her about Alice's call for help in *Unital Ring*. She had prepared herself in three minutes, activating the taxi app on her phone, and she was rushing down the stairs when she ran into her father, who was coming in the door after being out at golf.

It took seven minutes to explain and persuade him, but it would have taken longer than that for a taxi to arrive even if she'd called for one instead, so all was well that ended well…not that anything had ended yet. For now, the main concern was to rush to Roppongi.

Inside the Yuuki family garage was her father's SUV, her mother's hatchback, and her brother's two-seater. Asuna walked over to the still-warm SUV, but her father grabbed her shoulder and said, "Let's use Kouichirou's car. A full-size vehicle is going to be tough for the driving I need to do."

"Oh, right. Sorry, I know you're tired."

"I'm fine. We only did a half course today."

"What was your score?"

"Don't ask."

Shouzou grinned and pressed the unlock button on the key fob.

A pure gas engine sports car was getting rarer by the year. It was a little bit bumpy, but it accelerated nicely as they rushed down Setagaya Road and got onto Route 246.

They were going in the reverse direction of the road Seijirou Kikuoka had driven her down six hours earlier. The car made its way under the Yamanote Line bridge in Shibuya; the traffic in that direction late on a Saturday was clear, and her father seemed relaxed in the driver's seat.

The leather seat was comfy, and the warm air from the AC was pleasant, but she strangely didn't feel sleepy. Maybe that was just because of the adrenaline coursing through her veins, but she didn't think Alice's emergency request was the only reason.

In the world of *Unital Ring*, she had done battle alongside some therians from the VRMMO called *Apocalyptic Date*—though it was Kazuto who had done almost all the fighting—and gotten Yui back. The other AD players who had been kidnapped along with her revealed some shocking information.

Their group had ascended to the second tier of the three-tiered *Unital Ring* map from the south, but the AD players, who came up from the west, were ambushed by an NPC group in the dark of the forest and had to run for their lives.

And those NPCs were dark-skinned elves who wielded bows with perfect accuracy and called themselves "Lyusula."

Lyusula Kingdom: the name of a country of dark elves that existed on a different continent, long in the past. Along with the forest-elf kingdom of Kales'Oh, they had a flourishing magical civilization until the two countries were torn apart and plunged into war, right before they were separated from the land entirely and banished into the distant skies.

After losing their magic, the elves sought a way to return to their landmass. They sent their most talented knights out on dangerous search missions. Many of them perished.

"Kizmel…"

Unconsciously, she murmured the name etched into her memory. Thankfully, it did not rise above the engine noise to reach her father's ears. She told herself now was the moment to focus on rescuing Alice, and she stared through the windshield.

Eventually, Roppongi Crossing came into view ahead. Shouzou followed the old-fashioned car navi and turned left. In less than a minute, the destination icon appeared on the map.

"Just a minute, I'll get the parking garage entrance opened," Asuna said. Shouzou turned on his hazard lights and pulled over on the left.

Thankfully, Rinko was still in the office, so she saw the message

and opened the shutter to the basement garage from up there. The car rolled down the darkened slope and stopped in the guest spot on the second level. Asuna thanked her father and opened the door.

Shouzou got out of the car, too, looking like he was ready to charge into enemy territory. Asuna nearly told him to *stay cool*, but she knew he wasn't the type of person to start trouble, and she headed toward the automatic doors.

She had access to unlock all the doors in the building aside from the classified areas, so a phone code and facial scan were enough to get them inside. They took the elevator to the fifth floor, passed through another security door, and then saw Rinko walking at the end of the hall ahead of them.

"Good evening. I'm sorry to bother you so late," Asuna said, bowing.

Rinko shook her head. "I've heard a bit about the situation from Alice. I'm so sorry you had to come in at this time of…"

She trailed off when she noticed Shouzou; her eyes went wide, and she bowed deeply and formally.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Chairman Yuuki."

"I'm the one who should be apologizing for the late visit, Dr. Koujiro. My daughter was insistent, but I couldn't just let her go out alone this late at night."

"Of course. I apologize for our lack of forethought that led to this situation," Rinko said, lowering her head yet again.

Shouzou held out his hands. "Please, please. This was all my daughter's selfish request; it's not your fault."

"Father, I'm not being selfish, I'm…," Asuna started, but reconsidered. This argument wasn't important. "May I use the STL, Rinko?"

"Yes, I've got the one you usually use powered on and in standby mode."

"Thank you so much!"

She trotted down to the end of the hallway. She was curious about what Shouzou and Rinko would talk about, but at least it didn't seem like it would be a hostile conversation, based on the current interaction.

She burst into the STL room and noticed Alice on the reclining chair in the center. Naturally, her clothing and even position were exactly as when Asuna had left this room earlier in the evening.

The STLs on either side of the chair were unoccupied. Kazuto's home over in Saitama Prefecture was at least an hour away, whether by taxi or his motorcycle, so she'd just have to hold out until he arrived, whatever was happening in the Underworld.

Asuna removed her peacoat, placed it on a hanger, eschewed the usual wardrobe change into a clinical gown, and then lay down on the right Soul Translator. She didn't like diving in her school uniform, but she was in a cotton knit top and stretchy jeans, so a little wrinkling of her clothes wasn't a big deal.

She placed her head on the lower block of the inactive STL, and the upper block automatically began to lower. The inside of the groove in the blocks sparkled with an ultra-dense light-node matrix made of the same material as the lightcubes. It was a beauty that belonged more to a work of art than to a precise machine.

RCT had been the leader of the consumer XR device market, but it had lost some of its ground to Kamura, which had entered the market with its Augma AR device. Now RCT was trying to win back its share with the AmuSphere 2, its third-generation device. Naturally, research was proceeding toward even more advanced tech; the current directions were an ultra-small unit that promised even more wearability than the Augma and a large unit with greater fidelity and expression than the NerveGear.

The former would require many innovations still, and the latter already existed in the form of the STL. It might be too big to fit in the average home, but the mnemonic visuals created by the STL, which were fundamentally different from the classic polygonal graphics in other virtual worlds, would have at least as much of an impact on the public as the original full-dive revolution in the early 2020s. In other words, between the artificial general intelligence and the Soul Translator, Rath had two revolutionary technologies that promised to be the future cornerstones of world commerce.

So was Rath—Rinko Koujiro, Takeru Higa, and their founder, Seijirou Kikuoka—planning to keep both of these things under lock

and key forever? According to Kikuoka, their reason for developing a small cat-shaped robot was to "acquire an independent cash flow," but if they wanted money, they could make astronomical fortunes by licensing and partnering with a major tech company on either the AGI or STL.

The thing was, Rath was half-public, half-private, so Kikuoka couldn't decide to partner with businesses on his own. Maybe the situation would change if the battle for control over Rath ever settled between the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Defense. If they were lucky, it would be sold off to a private company. At worst, the Underworld could be shuttered and scrapped for good, which was a very real possibility…

Asuna exhaled, trying to release that pessimistic thought from her mind.

The upper block of the STL reached its standard position, and the motor stopped whining. It was replaced by a mysterious and melodious vibraphone sound that caressed her head—no, her soul itself.

Buoyed by the sound and the easing of Earth's gravity, Asuna uttered a silent message to the void.

I'm on my way, Alice.

4

The dragoncraft that crashed into the side of the ninety-ninth floor turned into a brilliant fireball, thanks to the vast stock of eternal-heat elements stored within it.

The flames were massive enough to completely envelop the top of Central Cathedral, billowing outward. Alice tried to silently produce as much frost element as she could.

But the spatial sacred power that should have filled the area was not responding to her call at once. Between the breaking of the Incarnate wall by the dragoncraft's crash and the contact with the Incarnation bursts from the dying crew, she was having trouble focusing her mind. She tried to chant the art out loud instead, but that only allowed a gust of fiery air into her throat and lungs. She tried to pay the pain no mind.

"System Call!" she cried, at the exact moment as Fanatio did the same.

But the flames raced up the walls of the cathedral and reached them before they could continue with the proper command. It was obviously too late to generate the frost elements, but she was wearing the armor-like Integrity Pilot uniform, which would help her survive being engulfed in flames. If she could just fight through the burning of her exposed skin and hair to create an ice wall before all her life was extinguished…

"Generate Cryogenic…"

The roaring flames reached the tips of Alice's hair, instantly turning it to ash. Imagining the agony of being burned to death, Alice froze.

But a second passed, then another, and she felt neither heat nor pain. The onslaught of fire retreated a mel and stopped there.

She thought Fanatio had created an Incarnate wall, but the vice commander looked just as shocked as Alice was. Then she noticed a very strange phenomenon beyond the terrace.

The raging flames, seemingly furious at being unable to burn them alive, were being blocked by a very thin gray veil… no, they were being absorbed by it. This was not a wall of Incarnation. A shell made of darkness elements was neutralizing the energy of the flames.

Darkness elements had the ability to neutralize all other elements, and heat and flames were no exception. But ordinarily, only frost elements could cancel out heat elements one to one; a single darkness element could not absorb the full energy of an entire heat element.

The number of eternal-heat elements expended in the dragoncraft's blast was well over a hundred. Not all the flames produced by the crash had gone toward Alice and Fanatio, but the caster who had protected them managed to generate more than ten darkness elements—the most fickle of all—turned them into a massive spherical shell, and maintained it, consistently feeding it more darkness as it canceled out the flames. There could not have been even a handful of knights in the original Integrity Knighthood who had the skill to pull off such a feat with darkness elements, especially under such extreme circumstances…

Alice fought the urge to spin around and look for the figure she expected was right behind her. She had to focus on the flames in front of them. She lifted her hands and focused the Incarnation in her head, now that she was regaining control of it. She raised a hand, generating more darkness elements from the roiling flames and adding them to the sphere. Converting fire directly into darkness was a high-level technique, but she couldn't be an Integrity Knight without being capable of such a feat.

For ten seconds, she and Fanatio focused on generating as many elements as they possibly could.

The raging fire gradually lost force, dwindled longingly, and finally went out.

Satisfied that the job was done, Alice dispelled the shell of

darkness. A burst of heated air gusted through the top of the tower, but it wasn't hot enough to cause any life loss.

Alice breathed in deeply and focused her mind again. All the released eternal-heat elements had been converted to spatial sacred power, but flames still clung to the wall of the cathedral. If the dragoncraft's oil and lubricant got stuck to the wall and ignited, those fires wouldn't go out easily. The marble of the wall had self-repairing arts in it, but the heat could pass through the stone into the tower, and the impact of the dragoncraft against the wall had to have caused some damage. What was the status of the frozen knights…and Selka and Airy down on the ninety-fifth floor?

As much as Alice wanted to return to the stairs, there was no turning away from the craft that carried Emperor Agumar. He might still have missiles, and he could also give the same order to the remaining companion craft.

But she at least had enough time to glance at the unseen caster of the darkness elements that saved her. Alice made sure the two hovering dragoncraft weren't moving, then quickly turned to see.

The answer was as shocking as when she first saw Fanatio on the terrace with her, if not even more so.

It wasn't an artician. It was a tall woman dressed in the same style of armor as Fanatio's, silver with an ink-black accent, with a thin, curving sword at her waist. Her long hair, the color of cofil tea with plenty of milk, was tied with a black ribbon.

It was an Integrity Knight…but Alice didn't know her name or number. She had never seen this face, with its cool and pristine features, before in her life.

There was a faint mental image of a proudly standing figure in her memory, however, so it was clearly one of the knights frozen in sleep on the ninety-ninth floor. But the fact that Alice didn't even know her name meant this could only be one of the Ancient Seven, the Integrity Knights Administrator had frozen and locked inside the hidden room herself in the distant past…

With eyes the color of a sunset, the knight looked first at Fanatio, then at Alice, blinked, and grinned. Her face was so gallant, but the expression was shockingly kind and gentle. Alice felt she couldn't

breathe.

When she didn't say anything, Fanatio spoke in her place.

"How many centuries has it been…? I'm delighted to see you again, Eydis Synthesis Ten."

"It's good to see you well, too, Fanatio Synthesis Two."

She didn't recognize the name Eydis, but the number ten was obvious. She was one of the Ancient Seven Knights, of course, but the question remained: Why had she awakened from her eternal sleep?

Fanatio had instructed Selka to immediately stop producing the thawing solution and begin using it on the knights if a single missile hit the cathedral, and to start from the larger-number knights first. It was a dragoncraft that had actually hit the building, not a missile, but even if she had stopped at that point and climbed from the ninety-fifth to the ninety-ninth floor and begun the thawing as quickly as possible, it was still much too early for Eydis to have arrived. And the largest number of the knights belonged to Fizel, the twenty-ninth, so she should've been the first to thaw.

But whatever the reason for her awakening, if not for Eydis's protective shell of dark elements, Alice and Fanatio would have been charred alive. Alice let out the breath she'd been holding in, intent on finally expressing her gratitude to the forebear who had saved her.

Before she could do that, however, Eydis raised an eyebrow and asked Fanatio, "W-wait a minute. How many centuries did you say it's been? What year of the Human Era is it?"

"It's 582, as I understand it. And the calendar has turned from the Human Era to the Stellar Era."

"……582……"

Eydis was aghast. Alice thought better of speaking. There was no way of knowing the year she was frozen, but at the very least, in the five years Alice had served since being made an Integrity Knight in 375 HE, she had never once heard the name Eydis. If enough time had already passed that no one remembered her well enough to discuss their memories of her, then Eydis could have been frozen for over three hundred years.

According to Airy, the souls of the Ancient Seven were in an unstable state—which is why Administrator had frozen and locked them away, presumably—and even Kirito in his Star King days decided he wasn't able to safely restore them. Whatever the reason for her awakening, that situation shouldn't have changed, so it was possible Eydis's fluctlight might crumble under any kind of mental shock.

Despite Alice's concern, Eydis slowly turned and examined the hovering dragoncraft.

"…No wonder such an unfamiliar object was floating in the sky. What is that? It was created by people, I presume. How does it fly?" she asked in quick succession.

Fanatio smoothly answered, "Dragon aircraft, which are called dragoncraft. Heat elements are trapped inside their wings, and they fly using that pressure."

"Dragoncraft… I see. And that was the cause of that heat-element explosion. If they're attacking the cathedral, then are they from the Dark Territory's army? Did you allow them to reach all the way to the middle of Centoria?" Eydis asked with a hint of accusation.

Fanatio was unfazed, and calmly explained, "That is not the Dark Territory in that craft. Although I don't know if it's true or not, he claims to be a descendent of the western imperial family. I was just awakened from Deep Freeze myself not long ago, and I'm not entirely certain of the situation, either."

"…Umm," Alice ventured, summoning her courage. There was no reason to be afraid of Fanatio anymore, and Eydis wasn't intimidating in the least, but she couldn't help but feel her breath coming shorter when both of them looked at her.

But she couldn't change her mind and back out. She tensed her gut, lowered her voice a little, and explained, "The commander of the enemy troops calls himself Emperor Agumar Wesdarath VI. He demands control of Central Cathedral, but I believe his true goal is the destruction of all the frozen Integrity Knights."

"Agumar VI," Eydis said, curling up the fingers of her right hand one by one. "The western emperor I know is Aldares III, and his son

is Agumar IV, so it would go Al IV, Ag V, Al V, Ag VI…meaning six generations later. That doesn't seem like very many generations for three hundred years to have passed while I was asleep…but as long as we can drag him out of that 'dragoncraft' so I can get a good look, I'll know if he's real or fake."

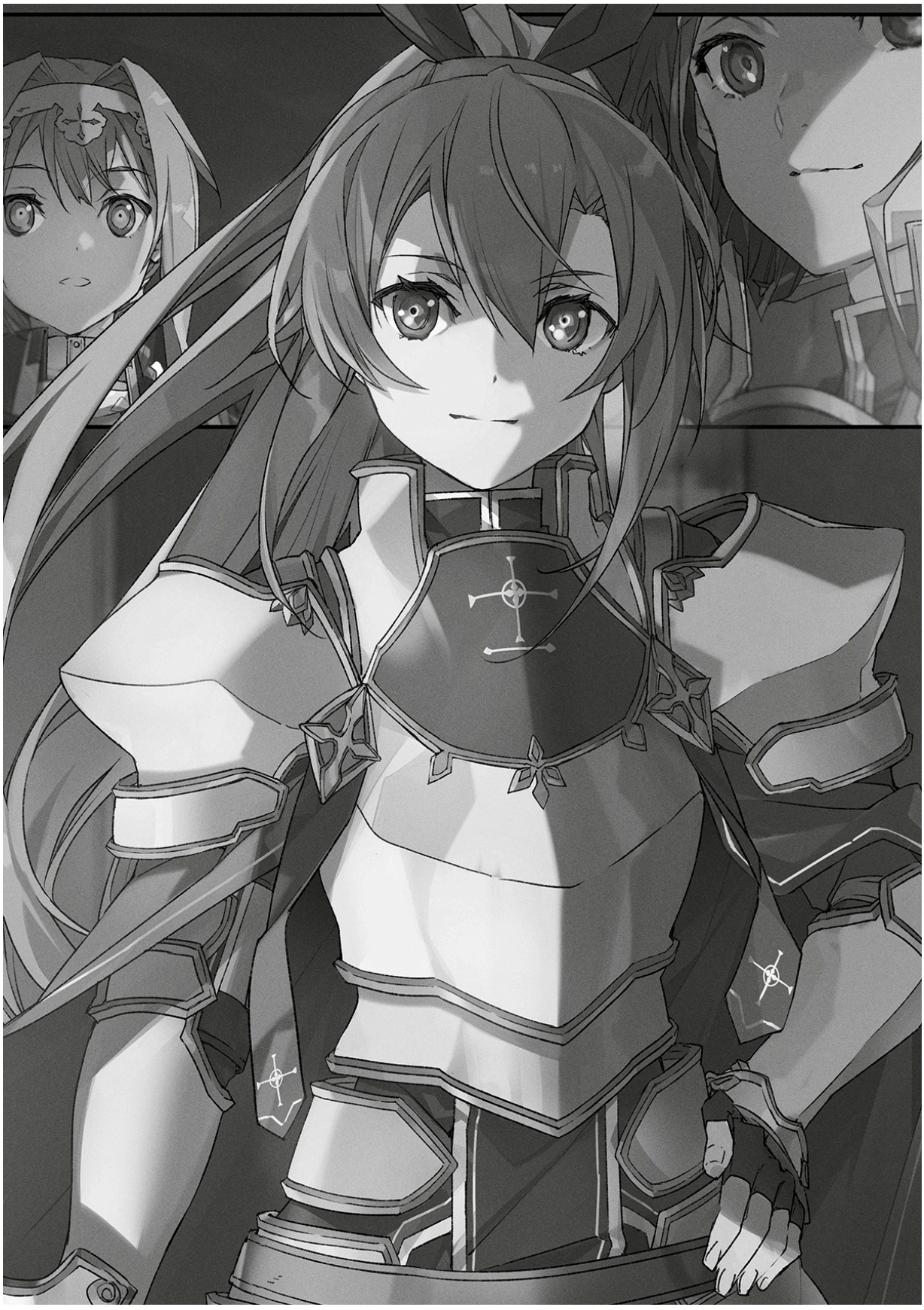
Eydis reached for her longsword, which was very similar in make to the katana of the real world. She stopped in the midst of that action, however, and gave Alice a piercing look.

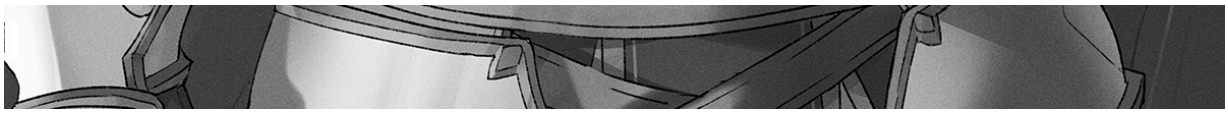
"And who are you again?"

"I…I am Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty."

"Thirty?!" Eydis squawked. She leaned closer. "So you're the thirtieth knight? How many years have you been one? How many are after you?"

"A-about five years…after me was Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-One, but he perished in the fight against the Dark Territory in 380 HE," Alice said. She brushed the Frostscale Whip on her right hip before continuing, "After his death, Tiese Schtrinen Thirty-Two and Ronie Arabel Thirty-Three were promoted to knights, and from what I was told, the Integrity Knights were disbanded in 441 HE."





"Disbanded?!" Eydis shrieked, even higher-pitched this time. She glanced at the circular structure in the center of the terrace, then rounded on Fanatio. "So does that mean the Integrity Knights are no more?! Did Administrator agree to this?! Or was it on Her Excellency's orders?!"

"The pontifex is…"

Fanatio trailed off, and Alice instantly understood why. The chalk-white cylindrical chamber was masterless. That holy figure had perished in the flames of madness after a tremendous battle there two centuries ago. Prime Senator Chudelkin's obsession had been the direct cause of her death, but there was no denying Alice had turned her sword against the ruler to whom she had sworn an oath of loyalty.

If they were to explain Administrator's death and the details surrounding it to Eydis, they would have to discuss Alice's rebellion, and that was what caused Fanatio to hesitate.

Alice was grateful for the vice commander's consideration, but if Eydis was going to mourn Administrator's death and rebuke Alice for her treachery, that was an outcome she needed to face.

With determination in her chest, she took a step forward.

But before she could open her mouth, a most unexpected interruption occurred.

"Rats lurking in the halls of Central Cathedral."

A booming voice swept through the swarms of sparks that choked the night sky.

Alice instinctually spun around to look at the dragoncraft floating to the west.

As if on cue, the right dragoncraft projected a bright light that revealed the portrait of a forty-something-year-old man. Between the exaggerated epaulets and the numerous medals on his military coat, the receding forehead, and the chiseled features, this was clearly the so-called Agumar Wesdarath VI.

The three-dimensional projection flickered rapidly. He must have had a subordinate fix the projector after the Heaven-Piercing Blade broke it. Fanatio drew that weapon again, uninterested in hearing any more of his insults, but Eydis reached out to stop her hand.

“Let him talk a bit longer.”

5

Alice, Selka, Airy…Fanatio.

I envisioned the faces of the four people who should be protecting Central Cathedral right now.

But it wasn't just them. There were a dozen-plus Integrity Knights on the ninety-ninth floor, plus an equivalent number of dragons in the stables below that, all in Deep Freeze, plus Natsu the long-eared wetrat.

Even from the space force base six miles away, I could clearly see the crimson flames wreathing Central Cathedral. The marble walls of the tower had the highest possible priority rating, so they couldn't be actively burning, but the heat and impact would transfer to the inside, and on top of that, Alice, Airy, and Fanatio were on the outer part of the tower.

"…A hundred Incarnate missiles couldn't cause that explosion…," I said hoarsely, turning my gaze back to Tohkouga Istar, who leaned against the desk.

Istar had just told me I was not Kirito the Star King—because I did not understand the mercilessness of those who had the blood of the imperial lines. At last, I realized what he meant by that.

"It wasn't missiles… They rammed it with a dragoncraft," I said, barely above a whisper.

Just before teleporting there, I had managed to guard against eighteen missiles from three dragoncraft with an Incarnate wall. While their power was tremendous, the explosions themselves hadn't lasted long. The flames licking Central Cathedral showed little sign of abating, so there had to be way more than twenty or thirty heat elements being unleashed. An Avus-class dragoncraft had three heat-element engines on each wing, and I had to assume the

eternal-heat elements locked in their canisters, over a hundred in all, had been released and exploded at once.

Alice and Fanatio wouldn't have shot down the dragoncraft hovering over Centoria, so there was only one possible answer: Emperor Agumar had ordered his faithful subjects to fly their craft directly into the cathedral.

Underworlders couldn't disobey their superiors, but their hearts, the parts of their fluctlights that governed emotion, were no different from ours in the real world. How much terror and despair must the commander who received the suicide order from the emperor and the pilot who pushed the thrust lever down have felt at that moment?

"…Weren't the crew who performed that suicide run also *your* subordinates?" I accused Istar, my voice as cold as it could be.

After a few more seconds of silence, the handsome figure in black responded in kind. "They took part in this operation knowing they would not be returning."

"Took part? Don't you mean, had no choice?" I shot back, staring Istar dead in the face.

I wanted to take the unconscious Eolyne and injured Lagi back to the cathedral as soon as possible, but I couldn't make the gate to travel back until I dealt with Istar, who was a supremely capable gunman. Plus, Stica and Laurannei were still on the base, as were Tiese and Ronie, who had gone to rescue them.

One way or another, I'd have to use all the Incarnation I had to apprehend Istar.

His voice was colder than ever. "Even still, not a single one of them wasn't prepared to sacrifice his life. Neither the crew of Ship Three, nor I…nor the crew of Ship Four, which waits above this base."

As if on cue, the walls and ceiling of the office began to rattle and shake.

My first thought was *earthquake*, but I had never once experienced a quake in the Underworld. Plus, the source of the shaking wasn't below, but above. It was the sky itself that was shaking.

……It can’t be.

I reached above myself and sent out a wave of Incarnation. The minimal density wave held no physical power, but it passed through virtually all objects while still providing sensory feedback to me, giving it radar-like properties. It wasn’t something to use incessantly, because other Incarnation users might sense it, but that wasn’t my concern at that time.

The Incarnation pulse instantly passed through the material of the ceiling and the roof beyond it, spreading through the sky.

Instantly, I discovered that my fears from a second before had come to pass.

The large dragoncraft floating over the command building was slowly tilting forward, flames spouting from the stabilizing reverse thrusters on the front of its wings. As the nose of the craft pointed toward the ground, it was clear what their purpose was.

“You goddamn fool!!” I swore, both at the emperor for not having the slightest concern for the lives of his followers and at myself for failing to anticipate this. Instantly, I pushed my Incarnation as far as I could. The space before my right hand warped like heat haze, and the ceiling and the support beams of the roof behind it burst into tiny pieces. The sky yawned, deep purple, through the gaping hole I’d created.

In the middle of that hole was a dark, triangular shape. The reverse thrusters glowed red against the darkness of its hull, pushing it into an inverted position. The movement it was making would’ve been impossible for a bomber plane in the real world, but the heat-element engines could put out maximum power even from a still position, and they forced the bulk of the craft into a nose-down vertical shape.

Once it was perfectly vertical, the reverse thrusters stopped. It was momentarily still, and then the main nozzles on the rear of the wings belched fire, transitioning it to full acceleration.

A direct collision from a vehicle well over a hundred feet long, laden with eternal-heat elements and missiles, would surely destroy the entire command building without a trace and knock down any adjacent buildings, too. With a smaller Incarnate wall barrier, Eolyne

and I would survive, but it would mean abandoning Lagi, the girls, and the hundreds of pilots and technicians fighting minions around the base—and that wasn't an option.

"*Rrraaaahhhh!!*"

I bellowed from the bottom of my gut, placing an Incarnate wall before the nose of the dragoncraft. A split second later, the nose hit the wall, causing huge ripples to spread across the sky.

An impact rivaling what I felt when stopping the energy attack from the Abyssal Horror ran through my arm to the top of my head.

But it wasn't enough pressure to crack the defensive wall. As long as I could maintain the super-hardened wall built from imagination, the dragoncraft would crush itself and explode under the force of its own weight and propulsion.

However…

The instant a crack spread through the craft's nose—technically, the moment I sensed the ten-plus crew members beyond the broken outer hull—I made the unconscious mistake of altering the defensive wall. It went from the absolute hardness of diamond to the resilience of thick rubber.

The wall gave way into a funnel shape, slowing down the dragoncraft while preserving its hull. But the power of those six large engines was too great, and they pushed the wall's shape farther and farther downward. The distance from the top of the command building was down to one hundred and fifty feet.

I could intuitively sense the wall alone couldn't stop the downward force. In my head, I said, *Sorry, Eo!* and let go of him to reach up with my left arm, too. Another wave of Incarnation traveled upward, seeking to make contact with the eternal-heat elements inside the engines, but the thick armor and sturdy canisters rebuffed my grasp.

Eolyne's slender body toppled backward. I would've used Incarnate Arms to give him a soft landing on the floor, but with two forms of imagination employed at once, I couldn't spare the attention. A tiny thought in the back of my mind reassured me that I didn't have to worry about concussions for him like in the real world, and I focused instead on honing the Incarnate waves to their

greatest sensitivity.

There were six orange lights lined up along the dark silhouette of the dragoncraft. The unseen eternal-heat elements in those engines were overlapping with my actual vision.

"Hnng…!!"

I held my breath and connected imaginary lines to all the hundred-plus heat elements in those engines. My left hand felt as hot as though it were being seared over an open flame. I could feel the temperature of the sealed canisters, turned red by heat elements fed with the greatest possible amount of sacred power.

Eternal elements were reinforced with sacred arts to continue existing without the control of their caster and were harder to harness than regular elements. Trying to contain them brought the risk of an explosion, so I tried to enclose all the heat elements in a shell of Incarnation to cut them off from the sacred power that was their energy source.

Maintaining a rubbery defensive wall and isolating over a hundred elements at the same time was like trying to split my brain into two halves. But if I failed, the entire base would end up under a sea of flame. The emperor had clearly wagered sacrificing a dragoncraft and a dozen-plus crew members was a price worth paying to neutralize the space force and Integrity Pilots. I couldn't let him be proved right.

My conscious mind was accelerated to its limit, turning everything around me into slow motion. Eolyne's hair waved gently as he fell, and I could even see the sparkling droplets of sweat out of the corner of my eye while I focused on locking the heat elements into their own capsules.

When I had isolated about half of them, the forward push of the engines rapidly dropped. My Incarnate wall was already stretched to its limit; the nose of the dragoncraft was just sixty feet over my head. Ninety percent of what I could see was taken up by the black shape of the craft. I could even see the rivets of the hull flying loose as the nose steadily crumpled.

Stop! I commanded, working at full force on isolating the heat elements.

Sixty percent…70…80. The flames emerging from the rear of the wings grew shorter and shorter and began to flicker intermittently until they were out.

But it was too early to relax. If the capsules shutting out the sacred power vanished, the eternal-heat elements would begin burning again. I maintained the isolation and put more strength into the Incarnate wall.

The cone of the dragoncraft's nose crumpled into a nasty mess. But that was the end of its vertical descent.

Through the cockpit window just a few dozen feet away, I could see the face of a young-ish pilot. Was the look in his eyes shock at the stillness of their gigantic craft in midair, or was it terror at the feat I had just achieved?

No matter how much they feared me, I wasn't going to allow them to carry out Emperor Agumar's hideously cruel orders—or allow them to die, either. I summoned more mental strength and carefully lifted the dragoncraft higher, making sure it didn't crumble into more pieces.

Because maintaining the capsules and controlling the defensive wall took all my concentration, I hadn't heard Eolyne's body falling. Half a second later, I felt a gust of wind on my left cheek, and Eolyne's slack body slid across the ground.

He wasn't awake. He was being pulled by ESP—or Incarnate Arms.

"Eo…!" I shouted, trying to pull Eolyne back in the same way, but black-sleeved arms were already wrapped around my friend's body.

"Don't move," ordered a cold voice. There was a brief flash of light as Tohkouga Istar held a knife to Eolyne's throat. It was less than four inches, but thin as a razor, and would easily split the pilot commander's delicate windpipe—if the wielder felt like it.

Istar's ice-blue eyes looked up for a brief instant, then back at me. "Once again, the strength of your Incarnation is preposterous. I can't believe you stopped an Avus-class in full descent."

I ignored his comment and said tersely, "You can't hurt Eolyne, can you?"

"Really? That's your comment? You saw me and him locked in

battle back on Admina," Istar said mockingly.

"I take that back," I said promptly. "You cannot harm Eolyne when he's unconscious."

"…You want me to test that?"

Istar's smile vanished, and he pressed the knife to Eolyne's skin. That was all it took to break it, causing a tiny red droplet to form.

"Stop it!!"

That wasn't me. The voice came from Operator Second Class Lagi Quint, leaning wounded against the bookshelf. The minion blood had permeated his body, making even speech difficult, but he managed to drag his legs toward Istar, one step at a time.

That was the best he could do, however. Lagi slumped to his knees.

Istar gave him a cold glance, then looked back to me and said, "The emperor gave me three orders…to abduct the Integrity Pilot commander, kill him if necessary, or buy enough time for Ship Four to commit a suicide bombing, joining it in the process, if neither of the other two options are possible. I'm sure you know how it works, Kirito. That as an Underworlder—as an artificial fluctlight—I don't have any choice but to obey."

"……!"

I sucked in a sharp breath.

He was aware that he was an artificial intelligence created by real-worlders. And not only that, but he understood the structural destiny of artificial fluctlights—their inability to disobey orders and laws.

When Alice learned those facts, her rage at the ones who created the Underworld activated the seal in her right eye and ultimately burst her eyeball. Istar's eye looked unharmed, and if he couldn't disobey orders, then his seal was clearly still intact. So how did he feel about the fact that his own free will was a victim of this structural limitation?

The questions were overflowing; I had to push them all down. The only thing that mattered was getting Eolyne back.

Istar's right hand held on to Eolyne, while his left hand held the knife. In that position, he couldn't immediately draw the large pistol,

which was his most dangerous weapon.

If I used my Incarnation to the fullest, I could immediately turn the knife pressed to Eolyne's throat into a liquid if I wanted. But 99 percent of my power was committed to the dragoncraft over our heads, and I couldn't guarantee the remaining 1 percent would get the job done. If Istar was prepared to give his life to fulfill the emperor's orders, then the instant I tried to do anything, he could deliver a fatal blow to Eolyne's throat.

Suddenly, my vision was full of crimson light.

It was not a real light. It was a color pulled from my memory. The color of blood…freshly spilled blood, pouring from a wound to pool on the floor.

The warm, fading blood of Eugeo.

I shivered, unable to withstand the memory, and the dragoncraft resting atop the wall of Incarnation above tilted onto its back and began to crackle like lightning.

I shifted my attention to the wall, trying to restore balance to the dragoncraft. Istar leaped away on a diagonal, still gripping Eolyne around the chest, to the other side of the massive desk. It was a tremendous jump, but the window behind the desk was fixed with a sturdy lattice, and only a drop of over seventy feet awaited him beyond that.

Even if he somehow destroyed the window and used that wind-element cushion he demonstrated on Admina to land safely, he still had to escape from the middle of the space force base while carrying an unconscious Eolyne. And the Avus-class dragoncraft that brought Istar there had a split hull and bent frame, and would not be flying on its own anymore.

Even still, I continued rebalancing the dragoncraft and sent a projectile toward the knife at Eolyne's throat—not an Incarnate Blade, but an even smaller and faster Incarnate Bullet.

The invisible bullet struck the knife right on target, knocking it loose from Istar's hand with a loud *clang!*

But once again, it was followed by something I did not expect.

The window frame behind Istar broke in two places simultaneously and then burst outward, metal lattice and all. For a

second, I thought Istar had destroyed it with Incarnation, but that was not the case; someone had grabbed the window frame and wrenched it loose from the outside.

Istar seemed to have known it would be destroyed ahead of time and instantaneously leaped into the void beyond the window, Eolyne in hand.

"Eo…!" I shouted, my voice drowned out by a violent buzzing.

Something like a black rope clung to Istar and Eolyne as they fell. The way it tapered down suggested it wasn't a simple rope, but the tail of a living creature. I followed it up into the dark sky, where I could just barely make out the form of a winged humanoid—a minion. This wasn't the warrior-type like those dead in the office, but a much more delicate flying-type minion.

It must have been lurking outside the office from the start, prepared to lend a helping tail once Istar approached the window. The minions did not have true intelligence, so it surprised me to learn they could understand such complex commands, but either way, I couldn't let them escape. I loaded another Incarnate Bullet into my imaginary gun and took aim for the base of the leathery, batlike wings flapping in the distance. If I caused enough damage to prevent *one* of the wings from moving freely, I could at least avoid a headfirst free fall.

But the instant I was about to place my finger on the imaginary trigger, Istar's words repeated in my head.

To abduct the Integrity Pilot commander, kill him if necessary, or buy enough time for Ship Four to commit a suicide bombing, joining it in the process, if neither of the other two options are possible.

What if Istar was prevented from making his minion-aided escape and activated his Perfect Weapon Control art—an Incarnation nullification zone—and it reached me on the seventh floor?

The capsules containing the heat elements and the Incarnate wall holding the dragoncraft aloft would vanish, and the Avus-class craft would plunge into this building a second later. Even still, I would probably be able to save Lagi, who was on his knees just nearby, but Ronie, Tiese, Stica, and Laurannei, who were fighting elsewhere in the command tower—and Eolyne, who was no longer in my sight—

would be beyond my ability to protect with an instant barrier.

In one brief, soul-tearing moment of indecision, I lowered the aim of my Incarnate Bullet from the minion's wing to the large pistol on Istar's hip.

The bullet fired in silence, striking the pistol squarely, cutting through the leather holster, and destroying its firing mechanism. The minion began flapping its wings wildly, vanishing from sight through the rectangular window, with Istar and Eolyne wrapped up in its tail.

Don't give up. Eolyne's still just a few dozen feet away, I told myself, and unleashed all the Incarnation I had at my disposal.

I changed the rubbery defensive wall into Incarnate Arms that clutched the body of the upright dragoncraft, this time tilting it onto its underside. The devastated body screeched in pain again, little pieces of metal and bolts falling off left and right, but it went back into a horizontal position without completely falling apart.

Once there, I slid it sideways until it was over the runway beneath the command tower's window. I tried to set it down as gently as I could, but in my haste, the landing gear was unable to withstand the impact, and it all broke off. I hastily added a bit more lift and gently nestled the underside of the body against the ground. This time it was fine, I told myself—just before the left wing snapped off at the base and landed on the runway.

Fortunately, it didn't set off the missiles or cause an engine explosion. The landing was rougher than I intended, but now the dragoncraft couldn't move, even if the eternal-heat elements came back.

At last, I released the two forms of Incarnation I'd kept running at close to full power. The rebound made me dizzy, but I took off running, calling over my shoulder to Lagi, "Just hang on a bit longer!" and jumping over the desk. I reached out to grab the frame of the broken window and leaned out to get a good look at the sky.

It was less than twenty seconds before that Istar and Eolyne went out of my sight. Even if that minion had evolved to be a flying specialist, it was still just a living creature, and it could only have gotten a few hundred yards away at most carrying two grown men like that.

"……"

And yet, all I could do was grit my teeth and stare around the sky, unable to spot even a glimpse of the minion's silhouette. Frustrated, I leaped out and used Incarnate Flight to rise another hundred yards. After another rotation, I hadn't found anything that looked like them, so I expanded my active radar in a spherical shape.

The wave of Incarnation burgeoned outward at incredible speed, catching every human and minion inside the building. I could even identify the people I knew the instant the wave passed through them. In less than a second, I discovered Ronie, Tiese, Stica, and Laurannei were in the hallway leading to the office. They were trying to get past the solid nets blocking the corridor.

On the floor below the command room, the fighting was fierce, but the minions inside the base were being steadily wiped out. The enemy soldiers manning the dragoncraft resting on the runway were not attempting to leave yet.

The Incarnation wave reached the limits of the base, which was almost two miles to a side, and picked up the signals of a great many animals living in the surrounding forest, before it faded out.

But I never sensed Eolyne's signal.

The wave expanded in a sphere, so it wouldn't have mattered if the minion had pretended to fly upward and then shot back down to earth; I would have caught them anyway. That left only one reason—actually, two—why I couldn't detect them.

One was that the minion had reached speeds faster than a dragoncraft, moving two-thirds of a mile in just twenty seconds.

The other possibility was that Istar knew the Hollow Incarnation technique Eolyne used in the secret base on Admina, which erased oneself and whatever one touched from others' consciousness. If he could use that, then I wouldn't even notice if the Incarnate sensor found them.

A minute had passed since I'd lost sight of Eolyne.

I clenched my hands as hard as I could and admitted I was a far more arrogant and self-satisfied fool than I realized. In the Underworld, I had an extreme level of Incarnation that allowed me

to manipulate all manner of events using only my imagination. Compared with the Kirito in the world of *Unital Ring*, who struggled just to light a fire, I was almost a godlike figure here.

And because of that, I assumed I could do anything. Even when the Black Emperors and their rebel armies and whatnot appeared, I assumed that if I just tried a little harder, they didn't stand a chance against me. In Aincrad, Alfheim, and even the Underworld, that arrogance had led to disastrous consequences, time and again…

But this wasn't the time to blame myself. There were still pilots and operators fighting with minions across the base, and the cathedral was still on fire.

I'm going to find you and save you, Eolyne.

The thought practically burned through my fluctlight; it was so powerful. I descended the same hundred yards at a free fall, then changed my angle just slightly to slide back through the office window.

As I landed, I generated twenty light elements and hurled them toward Lagi, who was curled up on the floor. With light-element antidotes, it was best to convert them to liquid for ingested poisons or apply them directly to the skin for contact poisons, but Lagi had been poisoned for too long and had lost too much blood. I converted the light elements into a mist and shrouded his body with it.

Fortunately, the room was full of minion blood from those Eolyne had defeated. Even poison blood created spatial sacred resources, so I could create more light elements easily if I needed them.

As Lagi breathed in the mist of light, his face started to regain color. Satisfied, I took off for the door, yanked on the well-used knob, and pushed it open, only to be greeted by a bizarre sight.

Despite the lights being on, the wide hallway was dim. A dark, stringy substance stretched from ceiling to floor and from wall to wall, like a gigantic spiderweb that completely blocked the corridor. I grabbed a nearby strand and tried to tear it loose, but it was as hard as reinforced plastic and barely budged even with all my weight on it.

My next step was to lift my hand to use Incarnation—but I stopped short. Relying on Incarnation to do things I could do

manually was the kind of arrogance that had led me to this point. Even Alice had said I shouldn't try to solve every problem with Incarnation.

Instead, I drew the Night-Sky Blade.

"Sir?! Is that you, Kirito?!"

From the other side of the hallway came the familiar voice of Ronie. That was right; I'd just detected their presence with my Incarnation radar earlier.

I couldn't see them at all through the spiderweb, but they had somehow detected it was me over here.

"It's me!" I shouted. "All four of you, get out of the hallway! I'm going to clear out the webs with a secret art!"

"It won't work! The nets are hardened with minion blood, and even our best techniques couldn't affect them!" cried Tiese.

"And neither wind nor flame nor ice work!" added Ronie.

"…Are you serious…?"

I'd never examined their swords closely, but they were both elite knights, so their weapons had to be Divine Object-level priority. That meant it was very likely the Night-Sky Blade would be deflected as well.

So I'd have to use Incarnation to rip it loose after all. I lifted my hand again, but once again held myself back. If this net was made of hardened minions, creatures of darkness, then maybe I could weaken it with the opposing element: light. In fact…

Suppressing my urge to rush for the cathedral, I gazed closely at the spot where one of the netting strands connected to the wall. The spattered minion blood had hardened the instant it touched the stone of the wall and ceiling, and seemed to be pulling with an incredible suction, yet the material did not appear to have permeated the interior of the stone at all. Which meant…

"I'm gonna try something! Everyone, step back!" I called out. Ronie replied, "All right." Then I held my sword up. I was going to try the simple slicing sword skill, Vertical.

Shak! A blue slash ran from top to bottom with a crisp sound, not toward the black string or the spot where the string connected to the wall, but the tiniest bit closer to me along the wall. I wasn't

trying to use Incarnation, but using sword skills in the Underworld inevitably infused them with a bit of it. The range of Vertical, which would only expand a normal swing by a few inches in *ALO* or *Unital Ring*, expanded it by more than fifteen feet here, delicately carving the surface of the wall.

I straightened up. A crack ran along the entire right wall, and a fragile layer of rock just an inch wide came loose. It was still attached to the strings, but after I repeated the feat along the left wall, more of the strings started to droop without the tension supporting them. The strings attached to the floor and ceiling were still intact, but nearly 40 percent of them were loose, leaving enough slack for a small person to squeeze through the gap.

But no sooner had the thought occurred to me than the girls in their pilot uniforms began to make their way over. They easily managed to wriggle through the narrow space and were on my side in less than ten seconds.

Integrity Pilots Stica Schtrinen and Laurannei Arabel promptly saluted me and asked, "Is the commander…?"

"Is Lord Eolyne all right?!"

I paused, at a loss for words, then bowed deeply and answered, "I'm sorry. Tohkouga Istar got away with Eolyne."

They gasped. When I looked up, Stica and Laurannei were frozen in shock, their eyes wide.

I couldn't blame them. It was clear from our day spent together how much they revered Eolyne with all their hearts. They had clearly raced all the way up to the seventh floor of the minion-infested command building solely out of a desire to protect him.

I waited for them to speak, ready for whatever insult or disappointment they were going to hurl at me.

But Stica and Laurannei were more mature than I gave them credit for being. They were pilots, and they were knights.

"Understood, sir. Leave the cleanup of the remaining minions and the rescue of Lord Eolyne to us," Laurannei said quietly.

Stica blinked back pain, then said bravely, "Lord Kirito, please return with Ladies Ronie and Tiese to Central Cathedral. We must not allow these savages to run rampant any longer."

The shock and consternation in their eyes were gone, replaced by the fires of pure determination.

"…All right," I said, glancing down the hall. Ronie and Tiese were having a bit more trouble getting through the spiderweb due to their armor, but they had heard the conversation and were ready to act.

I nodded back to them, then trotted back into the office and found Lagi getting to his feet again.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes…I'm so sorry," Lagi said. "I let the Pilot Commander be taken away on my watch…"

"We'll air out all our regrets once we get Eolyne back. Tell the girls about everything that happened here."

"Yes, sir."

Lagi saluted, and I saluted back. I'd never performed the salute in the real world, but I found my arm strangely comfortable making the motion. I didn't have time to interrogate that sensation, however.

Lastly, I glanced out the window into the sky once more, then lifted my hand toward the center of the room. I'd have to rely on the Incarnate door to return to the cathedral, as there was no real substitute. Of the six minion corpses in the room, I left one for research purposes, then converted the other five directly into crystal elements, condensed them into one large door, and placed that on the floor. I had maybe a minute until the deadline of midnight.

"Ronie, Tiese, let's go back!" I called out, wrenching open the door with my mind. A wave of dizziness hit me, but I still had more to do before I could give in.

The area beyond the portal looked like empty space. There was only neatly arranged marble tile flooring that reflected blue starlight and red flames. It was probably the rooftop of Central Cathedral. Straight ahead, facing away from me, were three knights.

My leg refused to step through the doorway. I had followed Alice's presence when creating the door, so she was one of them, and another was Fanatio, brought back from petrification. But who was the third?

Whoever it was, the armor was unmistakably that of an Integrity

Knight, so I didn’t need to be on guard. I nodded to the girls and strode through the crystal portal this time.

The next instant, the night sky overhead blazed crimson red.

6

"Keep him talking," Eydis urged.

"…I know," Fanatio replied, taking her hand off the hilt of the Heaven-Piercing Blade.

The vision of Agumar looked smug once again, as though he could see exactly what they were doing.

"I believe you have now seen the depths of my selfless patriotism and the martyrdom of my best and brightest soldiers. But my mercy is granted equally to all my subjects. Even traitors to my rule will be granted one opportunity for clemency. Before the midnight bell, cast off that hoary old sword and armor, throw them from the tower, and press your head against the floor to demonstrate your fealty to me. Otherwise, the flames of purification will lick at your heels once again, and this time you will all perish in their midst."

The projection flickered and went out.

Alice imagined that if Kirito were there, he'd probably have some snappy response like, "Where do I even start?" Agumar's words were so arrogant, so hypocritical, that it was impossible to take them seriously.

To her right, Eydis murmured, "I think that's the real thing."

"Why do you say that?" asked Fanatio from the left. Eydis shrugged lightly.

"I have no hard evidence. But I've talked to Aldares III several times, and he looks and sounds exactly the same. If he's a fake, then he should make for a grand stage actor in South Centoria."

"The Galacheon Theater closed about thirty years after you went to sleep. Chudelkin complained their newest play was inappropriate."

Eydis clicked her tongue in a magnificently loud way and swore, "The next time I see that white tsuruko, I'm going to pound him

flat."

Despite also being from the Underworld, Alice couldn't help but be curious about that unfamiliar word, and she was unable to resist asking.

"Lady Eydis, what is a 'white tsuruko'?"

Instantly, the knight in the black ribbon stopped scowling and smiled. "You don't know tsuruko mochi, Alice? Then I *have* to take you to this great place in District Five of East Centoria once all this dies down. The best, in my opinion, are the ones with sweet boiled azura beans and the ones with entire chestnuts inside."

Fanatio couldn't hold back from opining, "Beans and chestnuts are all fine and good, but my favorite are the chocol-stuffed ones."

"Chocol?! Listen, I like chocol, too, but that's not a proper filling for tsuruko mochi, is it?"

"If you're going to talk about proper, the true experience is just plain white tsuruko."

They continued to argue. Alice was stunned. If Agumar were listening to this, an ugly purple vein would be pulsing on his forehead. The bickering would do them no good, and only served to waste time until the midnight deadline.

The ever-present status monitor that Alice could see while in her machine body in the real world was obnoxious, but she had to admit that the perfectly accurate clock—and the weather forecast and map overlay—was quite useful to have. Even at that point, the main method of knowing time in the Underworld was via bells every thirty minutes. There was a large wall clock in the Arabel mansion, but pocket-and wristwatches that could be carried around hadn't yet been developed. Naturally, none of the three there had a watch.

In other words, they just had to use their own internal clocks to conservatively estimate how many minutes were left until the deadline. It was probably just fifteen—if not even fewer.

"Um, my ladies?" Alice said, summoning the courage to interrupt their tsuruko mochi argument. "What shall we do about the emperor's demands? I believe if we do not surrender by midnight, he will send a second dragoncraft to crash into the cathedral…"

The outer wall was still violently aflame after the first

dragoncraft's collision. Eydis was only fine because it hadn't damaged the inside of the tower, but there was no guarantee there would be no damage after a second time. However…

"Huh?" asked Eydis, startled. She gave Alice a very piercing look that lasted several moments, then shrugged and said, "We'll just have to get onto that dragoncraft thing and go take the head of Agumar VI, right? Then the other soldiers will surrender."

"Huh?" Alice replied in kind. Yes, if they removed the emperor's power from the equation, the subordinates would likely see *them* as the higher power next. But they didn't have a means of getting onto the dragoncraft; that was why they were forced to stay and fight a defensive battle instead.

Fanatio followed up with some rapid-fire questions of her own. "How do you intend to get onto a dragoncraft almost an entire kilor away? Even you can't jump that far on your own. And even if you had some means of flying, the emperor is monitoring us. If he detects our intentions, he might send the dragoncraft in anyway."

All these points were valid. At best, there was the practice of wind-element flight in this era, but Alice hadn't learned that, and Tiese said it made a lot of noise, so it wasn't good for espionage. Still, Eydis was unfazed.

"Have you forgotten I'm the best darkness-user in the knighthood? There are plenty of ways to blend into the blackness and approach at night."

"And how are you going to get over there?"

"On my dragon, obviou—" Eydis paused, sucking in a sharp breath, and took a huge step toward Fanatio. "My dragon! Where's Kirimai?! Is she still asleep in the basement of the dragon stables?!"

"The stables were torn down long ago."

"No…then…is Kirimai…?"

"Don't worry. Like my Fujiyui and Her Eminence's Yukiori, your dragon was moved to the ninety-sixth floor in a frozen state."

"…Oh…"

Eydis exhaled with obvious relief, though that didn't clear up every question she had.

"The ninety…sixth? Why are they in the Senate?"

"It's a long story…but right now, we can't use the human thawing solution on the dragons, so we can't bring them back anytime soon."

"Then what were you planning to do?" demanded Eydis, taking another step closer. Over her shoulder, Alice waited for Fanatio's answer, too. The vice commander looked at them both and calmly but firmly said, "His Majesty…that is, Kirito, promised to return before midnight. That means he *will* be back, and we merely need to last until then."

"Kiri…to…," Eydis murmured awkwardly, frowning. "Was there a Kirito in the knights? Or is that someone like Alice, who was made an Integrity Knight after I was frozen?"

"He's not a knight. Kirito is the entire Underworld's…"

Fanatio stopped there. She was interrupted by a tremendous, bassy rumble that shook the cathedral like several hundred thunderbolts sounding at once. The trio spun to the north-northeast.

Beyond the circular walls that surrounded Centoria, even beyond the dark forests and lake on the other side, a jet of crimson flame was rising into the air. It almost seemed like a volcano had erupted, but there was no such feature just outside Centoria, and there wasn't one pillar of flame but six, all in a row.

"Are those…dragoncraft heat-element engines…?" Fanatio murmured, just barely audible above the booming.

There was no doubt. The large dragoncraft stationed over the space force base had all six engines at full throttle. But the jets were roaring upward, meaning it was pointing straight down. Or in other words…

"…Another suicide bomb!" Alice cried, just before realizing another detail. The dragoncraft was doing a headstand at a height of just a few hundred mels. If it had all its engine at full blast, it would crash into the base in a split second. But the craft had been blazing like that for well over ten seconds. Something had to be stopping the propulsion created by over a hundred eternal-heat elements and the massive weight of the craft itself. There was only one possible answer: Kirito's Incarnation.

Alice and Fanatio shared a look. The vice commander's stunned eyes held the same doubts as her own did. If the dragoncraft at the

base had been given a suicide crash order, and Kirito was there stopping it, then he might not be able to return to Central Cathedral by midnight.

"Um…that's not good, is it?!" cried Eydis, who didn't know the context of the situation.

"It's *very* not good!" Alice replied, then focused for all she was worth. The pillars of fire nearly reached the clouds above, but their red glow was enough to illuminate the pointed, tail-like end of the dragoncraft and the pyramid shape of the base's command tower.

There was no way the command structure could have the same priority level as the materials making up Central Cathedral. If the dragoncraft hit it and exploded, it would blow the building into a smoking hole in the ground. If it broke through Kirito's Incarnate wall, he would suffer greatly as well, and Ronie, Tiese, Stica, Laurannei, and Eolyne would be in even more danger.

But Kirito would find a way to do it.

In the battles against Administrator and Dark God Vecta in the Underworld, and in the battles against the Life Harvester and Mutasina the witch in *Unital Ring*, Kirito had always faced off against seemingly unstoppable foes without giving up. No matter how much pressure he was under, he would surely come through in the end, saving not only his friends but the enemy soldiers as well.

I have to do the same, Alice thought vigorously, squeezing the hilt of her trusty sword.

Despite the passing of the ages, Alice Synthesis Thirty was still an Integrity Knight, a protector of the human realm. Even if the man calling himself Agumar Wesdarath VI was the descendent of the western empire's imperial bloodline, anyone who would do harm to innocent people was her enemy. She would never succumb to his threats or cast aside her sword, and she would neither stand to see the cathedral damaged any further nor allow him to force his subordinates to kill themselves to further his aims.

Alice's Incarnation couldn't stop the charge of a gargantuan dragoncraft, and her sword only had a tiny sliver of life left. She couldn't sneak on board in the darkness without a means of flight, and she couldn't just shoot them down to crash into the city.

Was there even a way to land the two craft without causing damage to the homes below?

In the real world, airplanes flew by burning fuel processed from oil. If the fuel began to leak during flight, they had to make an emergency landing. But the dragoncraft of the Underworld flew not with fuel stored in tanks, but using the spatial resources from the air outside the craft. To stop the flow of resources in a way that was invisible and undetectable by Incarnation…

That was when she heard a faint voice in the back of her mind.

But sunlight does not reach the floor of that ravine, even in midday, and there is not a blade of grass in the ground. In other words, the sacred power there is weak. If we can consume all of it before the battle, the enemy should be unable to utilize their powerful attack arts.

It was from the battle at the Eastern Gate with the Dark Territory, which seemed like a lifetime ago. At their strategy council before the battle, Vice Commander Fanatio had come up with that advice.

The desolate ravine that passed through the End Mountains couldn't be compared to Centoria, the richest and lushest land in the human realm, but according to Laurannei's brother Phercy, a sacred power drought around Centoria had been a problem for the last several years. And in the middle of the night, the natural replenishment from the environment would be at its weakest.

If they could strip all the resources around the cathedral with a massive sacred art, the same way Alice did in the battle at the gate, the dragoncraft would no longer be able to fly. And the output of the heat-element engines would drop gradually, giving them enough time to make an emergency landing outside the city.

The question was which sacred art to use. If the emperor was monitoring them, he would obviously notice a reflective cohesion beam using a massive sphere of mirrors. It would be just as hard to conceal the flashing of all the elements being generated for any other major art, too.

Only darkness elements were virtually without light…but nothing was more frightening than a great mass of darkness elements. If she lost control of them and they all burst at once, it would eradicate

everyone and everything around them, without leaving so much as a hair behind.

But then, Eydis had just said she was the greatest darkness-user in the knighthood. Alice had only known her for about ten minutes, but somehow she already believed it.

"Lady Eydis," she said softly to the knight in the black ribbon, staring down the two dark shapes in the western sky.

"What is it, Alice, dear?"

"How many darkness elements can you generate at once?"

"Umm…twenty at most, I'd guess. Why?" Eydis asked.

"Ah, I see. You want to do the same thing as at the Battle of the Eastern Gate," Fanatio whispered, before Alice could explain her reasoning.

This only seemed to confuse Eydis more. "Eastern Gate? Who was fighting who out there?"

"You'll just have to roll with it for now; we'll have plenty of time later to explain everything that happened while you were asleep. Alice is thinking that by generating a great number of darkness elements, you can exhaust all the sacred power around the cathedral," Fanatio explained quickly. Alice nodded to back her up, but that didn't seem to satisfy Eydis.

"Why darkness elements? If you want to make a ton, it's easier to handle light elements or water elements…," she said, trailing off. "Oh! Because you don't want them to see the light and realize what we're doing. Yes, then darkness elements will be able to hide in the dark of night, but you'll need more than twenty to use up all the sacred power for a kilor, more like around two hundred…But considering the heat elements that were unleashed, even three hundred won't be enough. All three of us could work on them and not come close, right?"

Eydis's calculations were correct. Alice had been able to exhaust the sacred power at the ravine of the Eastern Gate because she used a reflective cohesion beam made of light elements locked inside a sphere made of mirrors. But as far as Alice knew, there was no container that could safely hold darkness elements, which by their nature carved away all matter. Even in the thickest steel,

darkness elements would simply eat away at the container from the inside, and enough of them would eventually open up a hole.

All this was basic information Alice already knew.

"You are correct, Lady Eydis. Just creating and maintaining darkness elements will not nearly be enough to exhaust the power in the area. But if we repeat the cycle of generating darkness elements, harvesting them, and then generating more…"

It was admittedly a rather simplistic explanation, and it unfortunately didn't pass the scrutiny of the veteran knight, who was also a master sacred artician.

"When you say harvest it, you do realize releasing them will just put the sacred power back into the air, right? You need to either lock them in something or neutralize them. But there are only one or two containers for capturing darkness elements in the cathedral's treasure repository, and the only objects nearby we could use to make them react is the armor Fanatio and I are wearing," Eydis pointed out without missing a beat.

Alice was surprised to learn containers for holding darkness elements actually existed, but the treasure repository itself probably no longer existed. And no matter how high a priority level their armor was, it wasn't going to be enough to neutralize hundreds of darkness elements.

But there was *one* thing with the mass and the priority that would do the job. Something that could easily handle not just hundreds, but thousands of darkness elements at once. The oldest and greatest creation of the human realm.

"There might not be a way to contain the darkness elements, but there is a way to neutralize them," Alice prefaced before revealing her idea to the two senior knights. "We use Central Cathedral itself. The floor beneath our feet is set to be ultra-high-priority and has automatic regeneration arts cast upon it. Throwing a few darkness elements at it won't destroy it. On top of that, the regeneration consumes spatial resources as well, so it will eat up far more sacred power than just generating the elements themselves."

"…But Central Cathedral is the shining symbol of the Axiom Church and the pontifex…"

Eydis sounded horrified, her casual attitude completely gone. She turned to gaze at the rounded enclosure behind her. Alice noticed the look of realization that crossed her face.

In an instant, however, it was gone, replaced by red, resolute eyes and a swaying ponytail as she turned to face Alice and Fanatio.

"I'm sorry. It's the people inside Central Cathedral we should be saving, not the building itself. I think your strategy will work, Alice… but we'll need one more bit of Concealment beyond the dark of night."

"Concealment…?" Alice asked, furrowing her brow.

Eydis removed her scabbard from her sword belt and placed it at her feet. The emperor would likely see it as an act of surrender, or preparation for it. Stuffy old Deusolbert would probably say something like, "A knight's holy weapon is his soul! You cannot place it on the ground!" in righteous fury, but he was still a statue on the ninety-ninth floor.

When Fanatio took off the Heaven-Piercing Blade's scabbard, too, Alice reached for hers as well. She pulled the small, metal loop on the scabbard off the little clasp they called cat-claws in the Underworld and a swivel hook in the real world. In her mind, she told her exhausted weapon that it was only a temporary separation, and she laid it on the cold marble floor.

Then she straightened up and glanced to the north for just a second.

The six pillars of flame shooting toward the heavens from the space force base seemed even longer. It must have been going on for nearly three minutes by that point. Kirito's Incarnation was simply astonishing—not only stopping the furious charge of the craft but also protecting it from the extreme forces that should have torn it apart. It had to be taking an astounding amount of stamina from him. They had to prevent a second suicide bombing of the cathedral, if for no other reason than to allow him to maintain his focus on defending the base.

Alice, Eydis, and Fanatio formed a line, shoulder to shoulder, and stared down the dragoncraft before them.

They placed their hands behind their backs and proudly puffed

out their chests. They could remove their weapons, but as knights, the thought of removing their armor and uniforms was an unbearable blow to their pride—or so the emperor would think.

There were probably five minutes remaining until midnight.

Alice steadied her breathing to match the others' and silently generated ten darkness elements with her fingers behind her back. She tossed them three mels behind her and cut them loose, allowing them to fall.

Splak, splak. Dry little bursts sounded behind them. The darkness elements touched the marble floor of the terrace, carving out little chunks as they disappeared.

The same sound came from her left and right. Alice and Fanatio could make ten at a time, while Eydis could do double that, making for a total of forty. With that many landing at once, it sounded like a little hailstorm behind them, but that sort of sound wouldn't register all the way over at the emperor's dragoncraft.

Through the chaotic popping of the darkness elements, she could also hear a high note, like crystal being plucked; that was the sound of the marble blocks regenerating their life. Central Cathedral was already busy repairing the outer wall that had been damaged by the first dragoncraft bombing, so the amount of sacred power being expended had to be massive. The only question was if they could get the exhausted zone to reach the dragoncraft a kilor away within the next five minutes.

We'll make *it reach.*

Alice grasped for all the Incarnation she possibly could, creating dark elements and tossing them behind her. If someone were to watch them from a distance, they might be able to see a faint purple glow around them, as though they were about to transcend to some higher plane of existence.

One long, soul-whittling minute passed, then a second. Alice realized the city below was not as bright as it had been two centuries ago. The eternal light elements they used for illumination were going out due to lack of power.

It wasn't just the streetlights, but the mechamobiles, coolers, and blowers—all machines that used elements would stop, so the

confusion and panic would become greater among the citizens attempting to evacuate. They'd just have to deal with it, though. The darkness spread, swallowing up the government, then commercial, then residential districts of West Centoria.

Right around when Alice produced her hundredth dark element, the dragoncraft on the left—the one not carrying the emperor—produced a red burst of flame from its wing engines. There was a quake-like rumbling, and the massive body moved forward. It was nearly two minutes to midnight, but the emperor clearly wasn't foolish enough to ignore the anomaly happening on the ground.

This would be the knife-edge of their gamble.

Eydis was on the same wavelength. She cried, "Haaaaah!"

Alice and Fanatio joined her. If Ayuha Furia the sacred arts master were there, she would probably say something like, *Shouting only interferes with your arts*, but it could also draw out power you didn't know you had.

There was no point in hiding, so Alice brought her arms forward and started shooting the darkness elements into the floor before her feet. With little pops and faint bursts of light, they gouged tiny holes in the marble, which steadily filled back in as the regenerating art worked its spell. With three of them coordinating, the erosion was a bit faster than the regeneration, but they would clearly run out of spatial resources before they could actually get a hole through the other side of the massive blocks of marble.

And in just seconds, that moment arrived.

Just as the dragoncraft was reaching maximum acceleration, its thrusters flickered unsteadily. The darkness elements growing at Alice's fingertips blinked a little and went out.

The distance one could harvest spatial resources corresponded to the SC (Sacred Control) level listed in the Stacia Window. Alice's SC level had jumped mightily to over 70 after defeating the mythic spacebeast Abyssal Horror, but Fanatio and Eydis were close to 60 as well. As she recalled, the distance reached one kilor at level 50, so at that moment, the radius of the dead zone around the cathedral could easily be one and a half kilors. Even the finest absorber on those dragoncraft couldn't pull in enough resources to work six

whole engines at once.

First, the craft moving forward on the left lurched, losing composure, and only managed to recover its balance by converting power to the hover-control thrusters beneath the wings. Then the craft on the right began to tilt forward and used downward propulsion to lift itself.

"You better pull back before you crash!" Eydis taunted—not that Agumar could hear them. The two dragoncraft kept their upward thrust steady and began to fire their reverse thrusters from the front of their wings, slowly backing away. The engines were not steady, and each momentary loss of power caused the craft to slump. At that point they *were* rooting for the ships to get away, because if they crashed there, they would set fire to the residential area.

The trio lowered their hands and watched with bated breath as the two craft steadily peeled back over the city. Thirty seconds later, they crossed the walls of Centoria. Beyond them were the same farmlands and meadows that had been there two centuries before.

The reverse thrusters stopped, and the upward thrusters weakened. Slowly, awkwardly, the craft descended, wings waving, until they practically fell onto the grassland below. It was dark and far away, so they couldn't make out details, but it was clear the dragoncraft had suffered damage. They wouldn't take off again anytime soon, even if the resources came back.

Alice refused to let herself breathe out yet, though. She turned to the north once again.

The pillars of fire over the base were gone, and the command tower still stood. Kirito had not only stopped the all-out charge of the dragoncraft, but had managed to make it land somewhere.

This time, she felt at liberty to exhale. Alice glanced at Fanatio, then at Eydis. She wanted to thank them, but they were Integrity Knights with the same duty she had. They wanted to protect the cathedral and Centoria just as much as she did.

"…That was brilliant work," she said, opting for praise over gratitude. Fanatio reached out and clapped a hand on Alice's shoulder.

"Same to you, Alice. I would never have thought of attempting to

exhaust all the sacred power of Centoria. It's the sort of thing Kirito would dream up…"

Just then, Eydis looked down, sensing something.

"…What's…that…?"

Distracted by the tone of her voice, Alice followed Eydis's gaze.

The middle of the night sky was a spotless, starless black. It was like something was blocking the starlight behind it, but no matter how much she stared and squinted, it was impossible to tell at what height the object was floating, or even if it was living or artificial.

For an instant she tensed up, thinking it might be a new dragoncraft, but there was no engine sound and no thruster fire. Plus, it was long and wedge-shaped, not at all like the boomerang-esque Avus. Whether in the Underworld or in the real world, there were no dragoncraft or aircraft without wings.

Until suddenly, the tip of the shadow glowed red.

The light rapidly grew in intensity, bursting outward in a cross shape, as though unable to withstand its pressure. Soon after, the low rumble of distant thunder followed.

Alice frowned, confused. Then the dark clouds trailing through the night sky were touched by the red light in a circular pattern around it.

It wasn't just light, but a ball of superheated flame.

Meaning the long, thin, wedge-shaped shadow in the sky was a dragoncraft. But if it was really that far above the clouds and still clearly visible, the size had to be way larger than just a hundred mels or two. A mass of steel so gargantuan, and yet without wings to hold it up. How was it maintaining elevation without thrusters to push it upward?

But this wasn't even the time to focus on that. At the very least, a fireball of about fifty heat elements was bearing down on them. It would do terrible damage to Alice, and with the effects of what they'd done to the rooftop of Central Cathedral using dark elements, it might just cave the whole terrace in.

Alice held out a hand toward the fireball, just as Fanatio and Eydis did the same. The sacred power around the cathedral had been completely consumed, so they couldn't make a shell of

darkness anymore. They'd have to stop it using a wall of Incarnation, but after the battle thus far, she felt like she'd already used up just about all the Incarnation that existed in her head.

…It's all in my head, she told herself, gathering strength from every corner of her consciousness. *The souls of Underworlders are contained in lightcubes, not brains, so it's not possible for exhaustion to build up.*

Then, between Alice and Eydis, a fourth hand rose to the sky. Five fingers blessed with suppleness and strength caused ripples to spread in the empty air.

An Incarnation that was terrifyingly powerful, but somehow warm and inviting, enveloped the three and melded with their own, creating a massive defensive wall that spanned the entirety of the cathedral's roof.

An instant later, the fireball came roaring down onto the defensive wall and caused an explosion so great, it lit up all of Centoria. Through the circuit of the Incarnation, Alice felt heat and impact surge back through her hand.

She had estimated that fifty heat elements were used to generate the fireball, but she realized that was wrong. The scale of the explosion was just about the same as when the first dragoncraft had exploded. In other words, the energy contained in the fireball was equivalent to at least a hundred heat elements.

The billowing ball of fire that lit up the sky raged for over ten seconds, as though incensed that it hadn't destroyed anything, but gradually abated and went out.

Alice released her Incarnate wall and turned to thank their late helper. But before the words were even out of her mouth, the figure dressed in black just over her shoulder toppled forward.

"Kirito!" she cried, grabbing his left arm. Eydis held him up from the other side.

He had done it. He'd returned before midnight, just as he'd promised Fanatio. After a moment resting his full weight on them, he put his foot forward and rose, straightening up.

"Sorry about the wait," he rasped to Alice. Then he looked to his right. "Umm…"

Eydis looked at him with about as much confusion as he felt. "Who are you?"

"I'm Kirito."

"That's the knight uniform Djarmier designed, isn't it? Are you an Integrity Knight?"

"Who's…Djarmier? And who are you…?"

Fanatio decided to step in before they confused each other even more. "Kirito, Eydis, we'll have time for introductions later," she said. "For now, we need to do something about that."

Alice's attention was drawn to the sky once again. It was still difficult to gauge the distance to the wedge-shaped dragoncraft, but the fact that it was behind the clouds and that the dead area without sacred power was about a kilor and a half meant it had to be around two kilors away. Yet it was visibly larger than her extended index finger, meaning it had to be at least three hundred mels in size. It completely dwarfed the forty-mel Avus-class dragoncraft. The scale was difficult to fathom.

Naturally, its hull would be far thicker, and it was simply impossible to estimate its total weight. When their own Incarnation and sacred arts couldn't reach that far, was there any way to do something about it?

As she stood there, at a loss, the gentle sound of bells filled her ears. It was the melody of midnight, the quietest of the day.

They had reached Emperor Agumar's deadline, but they had already forced two of the Avus-class craft to land, and the mega-sized dragoncraft overhead had lobbed an explosive fireball, so there was no room for dialogue anymore.

A number of white beams shot from the belly of the mega-sized dragoncraft, crisscrossing and building a huge, three-dimensional image. Once again, it was the picture of Emperor Agumar Wesdarath VI. So the emperor was not on the dragoncraft they'd forced to land, but on the mega-sized craft hiding at high altitude. Fanatio twitched, reaching for her weapon, but even the Heaven-Piercing Blade's laser couldn't reach two kilors away in the sky.

From above, the emperor glared at them, then spoke.

"You have my compliments for defeating all my escorts," boomed

his gloating voice.

From Alice and Fanatio's arms, Kirito spat, "When you were the one who ordered them to crash."

Of course, the emperor couldn't hear that. He continued haughtily, *"But if you struggled with an Avus-class, then you will not put a scratch on the* Principia*. And my generosity has been expended. In the few seconds remaining until you burn to cinders, you may rue your own shortsightedness."*

His thin mustache perked upward in mockery, and the projection of the emperor melted into the night. Once again, Kirito murmured, "*Principia*…principle. I assume he meant that to be a contrast to the 'Axiom' Church, but who gave him the…?"

Eydis and Fanatio just looked confused, but Alice understood what he was saying.

The common tongue of the Underworld was known as Japanese in the real world, while the vocabulary of the sacred tongue was English. But in the real world, a myriad of languages existed—over five thousand, apparently. Alice was still learning English and German, but based on the sound of it, she suspected *principia* came from Latin, an ancestor to many European languages. Naturally, it was not used in the Underworld.

In other words, Kirito was wondering who had taught the emperor's faction the Latin word for "principle."

It could be the real-world intruder Kikuoka had hired Kirito to investigate. If so, then the intruder could be close to the emperor… perhaps even on board the mega-sized dragoncraft…

Alice wanted to relay this hypothesis to Kirito. But before she could even open her mouth, another burst of dazzling crimson light filled the sky.

The mega-sized dragoncraft was preparing a second fireball attack. But this one looked different from the first. The glowing red spot was the same as before, but the initial brightness of this round was far greater than the first, and they could even hear a high-pitched resonance before it had even launched the projectile.

"…How many heat elements…?" Fanatio murmured.

"A thousand," Kirito said hoarsely.

"A…a thousand?!" shrieked Eydis. He turned and nodded to her.

"Yeah. That dragoncraft has around six thousand heat elements stored inside it, but it doesn't use them to fly. A thousand of them are being pressurized in steps. We've probably got five minutes until they're fired."

"Five minutes…," Alice repeated quietly. She lifted her head to stare at the *Principia* again.

The light of heat elements leaking through the cannon illuminated the underside of the craft. In the center of the long wedge shape, there seemed to be two massive symbols arranged vertically. The upper symbol looked like a shield and a dragon—the onetime sigil of Wesdarath, the western empire. And the lower symbol was an octagram with eight sharp spindles. She had never seen that before, neither then nor two centuries before.

The light was clearly growing in strength. It was already bright enough that it made the back of her eyes hurt. What would it be like in three minutes?

With this much time, they could take Selka and Airy and evacuate the cathedral. No doubt the idea had occurred to Fanatio, Eydis, and perhaps even Kirito. But no one suggested fleeing. They were in unanimous agreement that they would never run away and leave the frozen knights behind.

Selka and Airy were busy thawing out the Integrity Knights on the ninety-ninth floor, but two or three were the best they could hope for in such a short period of time. Without a means of attacking the *Principia* two kilors up, all they could do was defend. In other words, their only options were to rebuff or deflect a massive fireball made of a thousand compressed heat elements…but Alice had no idea how to do that.

In principle, they could create a shield of a thousand frost elements to neutralize the fireball, but all the sacred power around Central Cathedral was spent, so without replenishing that power somehow, they couldn't even make ten elements, much less a thousand. It was another situation that required the use of Incarnation, but they were all nearing their limit—even Kirito.

"…Hey, Fanatio," said Eydis, who was clutching Kirito's arm and

glancing over her shoulder at the rounded enclosure. "If Administrator still isn't waking up through all this…does that mean she's no longer…?"

"……"

Fanatio looked down, not answering. Then she straightened her backbone with resolve. But just before the vice commander could speak, a pair of hurried footsteps approached from behind.

"Sister!!" cried a nervous voice.

Alice wanted to turn around, but as she was supporting Kirito's arm, she could only manage ninety degrees. Kirito considerately said he was fine, so she took her hand off him and turned to look behind her.

Two people leaped from the tower entrance. The rooftop was dark due to the blackout, but it was obvious at a glance that they were Selka without her long robe and Airy, who was holding Natsu. Near the opening stood Tiese and Ronie, who had presumably teleported with Kirito from the base.

The moment she saw her beloved sister flying toward her, the thought crossed Alice's mind that this might be the last chance she ever had to feel her touch again. If Alice died then, it wouldn't affect her lightcube, because it was stored in the machine body in the Roppongi office, but it would probably destroy her unit ID and leave her unable to ever dive into the Underworld again.

It would be beyond tragic for something like that to happen, but she would be able to bear the pain—as long as it was the price she paid to save Selka and the others.

All she wanted to do was hold out her arms and hug her sister with all her being. But Alice had to be strong. She controlled herself, took a deep breath, and said, "Listen closely, Selka. There will be a fireball with the power of a thousand heat elements bearing down on us in just moments. You and Airy should take the flying platform and escape."

"I'm not going to leave you behind!" Selka cried immediately, spurning her older sister's request. "Now *you* listen to *me.* That dragoncraft collision earlier unlocked the cathedral's highest commands."

"Highest…commands?"

"Airy can give you the details!" Selka said, pushing Airy forward. The girl stumbled a little. Natsu the long-eared wetrat was curled up in her arms, still sleeping peacefully despite the chaos around them.

Airy gave them a salute. Slightly faster than usual, she said, "We have no time, so I'll be brief. Earlier, the continual loss of life for Central Cathedral reached a certain threshold that unlocked the highest level of system commands."

"And is that different from the Emergency Mode you activated?" Alice interjected.

"Yes," Airy replied. "Emergency Mode enables a defensive wall and strengthens the regeneration function, but with the highest-level commands, we can make use of attack and evacuation systems."

"Attack system…? Can we take down that mega-sized dragoncraft with it?"

"Most likely. But we cannot fine-tune its power, so if it is downed, I anticipate massive damage to Centoria."

"……"

She glanced at the others, who all shook their heads. They had been so careful not to let the Avus-class craft crash; they certainly couldn't let the massive *Principia*, nearly ten times the size, smash into the city.

"We can't attack them. When you say evacuation system, will that evacuate everyone inside the cathedral? Including any frozen knights and dragons?"

"Yes, that is possible."

"……"

Once again, Alice was speechless. It was probably a function to create teleport gates within the tower, but how would they pass the petrified dragons through it, as big as they were?

But this wasn't the time to be getting into the finer details. Airy had been protecting Central Cathedral for ages and ages; they would just have to take her word for it.

Fanatio was on the same page and said, "Activate the evacuation function at once, Airy. We only have about three minutes until that fireball is hurled at us."

"Understood."

Airy handed Natsu over to Selka, then spread her arms and stretched them forward a bit. She sucked in a deep breath, then said loudly, "System Call! Activate Supreme System Supervisor Order!"

There was a low hum, and a massive window, glowing lavender-blue, appeared in the air. This one looked different from every other window Alice had seen in the Underworld. There were no letters or numbers, only glyphs: two swords arranged vertically, then roses and osmanthus flowers arranged on their four sides…the insignia of the Star King.

Below the diamond-shaped symbol were three rectangular frames with nothing inside them. Airy fixed the window in place and took two steps backward.

"The Supreme System Supervisor orders, known as Triple-S orders, will only be unlocked when Kirito, Asuna, and one of the knights are identified. Please place your palms inside the boxes here. It doesn't matter where."

"…But Asuna's not here," Alice started to say, causing Airy to go wide-eyed. She stared at Eydis Synthesis Ten, who was standing a short distance away. Her brow furrowed with suspicion—and then her eyes bolted wide.

"L…Lady Eydis?!" Airy gasped.

"That's right," Eydis said. "You're the levitating operator. I remember you."

"It…it has been quite a long time. But…how…?"

Airy was completely stunned by this development. Alice considered a few possibilities.

Because of the darkness, Airy had probably confused Eydis for Asuna. Which meant it wasn't Selka and Airy who woke Eydis up. It wasn't possible for a frozen knight to rouse herself on her own, so who could have done it, and how…?

But that wasn't important now.

"Airy, can it still work with just Kirito and two knights?!" Alice wanted to ask, except Fanatio did it first. Airy just shook her head, however.

"Both Lord Kirito and Lady Asuna's presence is required."

"……"

Alice bit her lip and looked up again.

The *Principia*'s heat-element cannon was glowing like molten magma. In less than two minutes, a blaze like a thousand heat elements compressed into one would descend upon them.

Kirito had already passed on the request for help to Asuna, but in the real world, her family home was over seven kilors away—that is, miles—from Rath's Roppongi office. It would take her twenty minutes just to travel there, and probably twice as long when you factored in all the preparations that needed to be done.

On that topic, then, it didn't make sense that Kirito could dive faster than Asuna, given that he was thirty kilors away, but Alice could find out the reasoning later. It was frustrating that they had a supreme-level command and couldn't make use of it. They would just have to come up with an alternative.

Maybe she could hop onto the abandoned flying platform and rush the *Principia* on her own, giving up her life to destroy the heat-element cannon, at least…

Kirito had been maintaining his silence, but without warning, he bolted for the stairs down into the tower at near-teleportation speed. He wasn't fleeing, of course; he stopped just short of the opening, then reached his hand out and activated Incarnate Arms.

"Aaaaah!" someone screamed, and then a figure literally flew onto the rooftop: a girl with chestnut-brown hair, wearing the same pilot uniform as Alice.

"…Asuna!" Alice cried, but Kirito was already catching her sideways as she fell. Asuna promptly stopped screaming to stare at him.

"What…?! K-Kirito?! Why are you here?!" she shrieked.

"I'll explain later!"

He sprinted back to the window with her and stood her up next to it.

"Put your hand on one of those squares in the window, Asuna! Whichever one!"

Asuna had no idea what the situation was, but she immediately intuited its seriousness from his expression and reached out her

hand. When she pressed her palm against the rightmost square, the window buzzed briefly, and the square glowed a faint purple.

Next, Kirito pressed the left square and quickly backed away. Alice slid in to take his place and slapped her hand on the center square. All the spots flashed together, then went out.

In the center of the logo, between the two swords, a trio of large S letters appeared in succession: *bam! bam! bam!*

"One minute to go!" Fanatio shouted.

Alice quickly stepped back, which gave Airy room to leap in. The symbol on the window disappeared, and a number of sub-windows popped into being. She quickly ran her fingers over them and cried, "Petras, are you ready?!"

…Who?

But no sooner did the question occur to her than a deep, muffled voice emerged from one of the smaller windows.

"All engines and resource tanks are checked. Ready when you are."

"Good. Begin countdown!"

Airy smacked another sub-window, and the main screen displayed the number *20*, which quickly turned to *19*.

"W-wait…engines? Where…?" Kirito asked.

But Airy cut him off. "Lord Kirito, use your Incarnation to fix everyone here to the floor!"

"F-fix?!" he yelped, but held out his arms. Instantly, Alice felt an invisible cushion envelop everything below her waist.

As the number on the window counted down, a rumbling from much farther below traveled up through the tower, rattling the marble floor beneath their feet.

The fireball was going to launch in thirty seconds. The countdown was down to five.

It was at that point at last that Alice understood what was happening. The evacuation function Airy mentioned was not some teleportation gate. It was referring to Central Cathedral itself…

"Emergency escape sequence, initiating stage one!! Three, two, one…liftoff!!" Airy shouted, just as the countdown hit zero.

The rumbling grew much louder, and red light filled the spacious

grounds of the cathedral. The entire tower was rumbling, and everything suddenly felt much heavier.

In the real world, they called this "g-force."

Central Cathedral was lifting off the ground and accelerating upward like a rocket. As they looked over the low parapets at Centoria, the further parts of the city outside the power outage zone, still lit up at night, were getting noticeably smaller.

"Wait…are we f-flying?!" Asuna shrieked.

Even Airy couldn't hide the agitation in her usually calm voice. "Yes! There are thirty-six large heat-element engines stored in the tenth basement level that will lift the cathedral to an altitude of thirty thousand mels!"

"Thirty thousand?!" screamed Eydis. She came from an era before dragoncraft, so that was a height beyond her imagination. But Alice had never experienced that altitude, either, save for the time Stica's dragoncraft took her back to the surface from space. And they were standing out in the open on a terrace with no roof or walls. If they tumbled off, there would be no saving them.

It also meant that if they were rising, they would be getting closer to the *Principia*, which was hovering at two thousand mels.

Bracing herself against the tremendous acceleration and ear-splitting roar, Alice saw Fanatio, Kirito, Tiese, and Ronie were all staring intently upward. She looked up, too, and found the shadowy wedge shape waiting in the sky.

The tip of the shadow, which was twice as big as before, featured the aperture of the heat-element cannon, which burned like the fires of Hell just before it released its shot. At this point, she could easily make out the shape of the cannon itself. It wasn't just a hole in the hull, but a thick, squat barrel sticking out of a semispherical turret. The barrel could swivel, and it was keeping its aim directly trained on the rising cathedral.

"A-are we going to hit it?!" Selka yelped.

"We'll be fine," Airy said calmly. "We should pass twenty mels to the enemy's starboard."

"Twenty mels?!" wailed Eydis this time. It was understandable—the *Principia* was four hundred mels in length, and Central Cathedral

was five hundred mels tall. To two objects that large, a gap of twenty mels was almost nothing.

But the thirty-six engines powering the tower continued to roar without end, pushing the white monument up into the void. The shadow of the *Principia* blotted out the sky, and the dazzling flame shooting from its cannon's mouth burned their eyes.

It seemed unavoidable to Alice that the tip of the cathedral—the domed roof of the circular enclosure—was going to ram into the underside of the *Principia*. But at that very moment, the cannon that had been tracking their ascent clunked as it reached the limit of its angle range.

With a deafening shudder, the bladelike edge of the *Principia*'s wing passed just to the right of the tower.

As Airy had anticipated, the two mammoth structures passed just twenty mels apart. In two or three seconds, the bottom of the cathedral would pass out of the firing range of the heat-element cannon. If the cannon fired on it during that time, it would either split the tower in two in midair or simply eradicate the entire structure.

"It's gonna fire!!" Kirito warned. Alice could feel the cushion of invisible Incarnation around her getting firmer.

Crimson light filled the twenty-mel gap. A tremendous *bwow!* sound erupted, like an infinite supply of metal strings all breaking at once.

A thrill of horror colder than any frost element shot through the pit of Alice's stomach—and after a second that felt like an eternity, someone, probably Tiese, shouted:

"It missed!!"

She craned her neck to the left to see. An enormous ball of scarlet fire was shooting across the sky. It was already over a kilor away from them on the roof of the cathedral, but she could still feel its heat faintly on her exposed skin.

After five seconds of flight, leaving a vermilion trail behind it, the fireball was no longer able to maintain its shape, and a thousand heat elements' worth of energy erupted in empty space.

As a single explosion, it was far beyond the scale of anything

Alice had witnessed before in the Underworld. It was a burgeoning ball of flame, like its own small Solus, brightly illuminating the surface from a height of two thousand mels, followed by an overwhelming roar and a shock wave that rattled the entire cathedral. On the surface, it probably only kicked up a big gust of wind, but it might have been enough to cause damage to a fruit garden.

When the rumbling subsided, Alice breathed as much cold air into her lungs as she could and took her time letting it trickle out. Eydis was enjoying a similarly deep breath.

"…If that had actually hit the cathedral, I bet the explosion would have blown up that *Prin*-thingy, too…"

"No…the *Principia*'s armor completely blocked out my Incarnation. It's not just thick; I think it's protected by something similar to Incarnate weaponry," Kirito replied. It almost sounded like he was reproaching himself; it made her give him a searching look. She wanted to ask him what had happened at the base, but Airy was already speaking.

"We have reached an altitude of five thousand mels. In one minute, we will escape the atmosphere. I hate to ask, Lord Kirito, but if you could engage a light-element barrier…"

"No, we'll do that," interrupted Ronie. She and Tiese silently generated ten light elements each, then transformed them into a half sphere that surrounded everyone on the roof.

The temperature, which had been rapidly dropping, steadily recovered. In the Underworld, outer space had breathable air, but was tremendously cold. You would freeze solid if you didn't have any kind of protection. Naturally, the temperature inside the tower would drop, too, which wasn't a problem for the Integrity Knights and their dragons that were already petrified, but anyone alive and well would freeze to death before long.

Belatedly, Alice began to worry, and asked Airy, "Are there any people on the lower floors? Like Unification Council staffers or security guards…"

"No. All employees at the cathedral are instructed to leave work by six o'clock in the evening. Even Chairman Herlentz is no

exception."

"Oh. I see…"

What would Dr. Koujiro and Takeru Higa say? They were often working well past midnight… The thought put an idea in Alice's head, so she added, "But who was the person you were talking to a minute ago? Umm…"

"Petras isn't a member of the Unification Council. He was once a guard of the cathedral's underground cells."

"What?!" Kirito exclaimed.

Alice was just as shocked. She remembered that Central Cathedral had an underground prison, and that there was a very large man who stood watch all the time, but she had no idea he was still around two centuries later. Apparently, he had changed positions from jailer to engine maintainer, but was still living underground.

After committing an assault at North Centoria Imperial Swordcraft Academy, Kirito and Eugeo were taken to the cathedral and handed over to the underground cells. It felt like ancient history, and it felt like it happened yesterday. If not for that incident, they would have graduated the academy as first and second seat, won the Four-Empire Unification Tournament, and passed through the cathedral's gate as apprentice knights, not criminals.

If that had happened…would everything have taken a different path? Would Alice never have turned her back on the Axiom Church? Would Eugeo have survived it all…?

She brushed aside that brief, painful thought and asked Airy, "Is Petras going to be all right outside the atmosphere?"

"Yes. The tenth-basement engine room was outfitted in anticipation of outer-space flight. If anything, they need to vent the heat from the engines, or it gets too hot down there," Airy replied, then turned back to the big window. "Atmosphere escape complete. All engines are shutting down and entering inertia mode."

Her delicate fingers activated some commands on a sub-window, and the sound of the heat-element engines gradually died down.

The g-forces trapping Alice's body against the floor vanished, and a moment later, Kirito's Incarnation cushion disappeared, too. Her body was suddenly as light as air, and she felt her boots actually

start to leave the floor. There was almost no gravity up here.

"Aah! W-what's going on?" Eydis yelped; she must have pushed off the ground. Fanatio quickly reached out and grabbed her. Selka, Tiese, and Ronie didn't seem flustered, as if they had prior experience with weightlessness.

Lastly, there was Asuna. Her hazel-brown eyes were locked on the sky above, or more accurately, on the void of space. Alice followed her gaze and was bowled over by the incredible canopy of countless stars around them. She barely ever saw the stars in Tokyo, so it had been a long time since she'd seen a sight like this.

The Underworld was a virtual world, so those stars might have only been a background image, but when they flew dragoncraft to visit the star they called Lunaria, it turned out to be a real planet covered in yellow grass and flowers. So maybe if they were able to actually visit the thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of stars out there…

She had to rein in her thoughts before they wandered any further. Alice carefully pushed off the ground to move next to Asuna and said quietly, "Thank you for coming, Asuna. I'm sure it was difficult to get to Rath from your home at this time of day."

Asuna tore her gaze away from the stars, held out her arms, and gave Alice a gentle hug. "It's totally fine. I'm just glad that you're all safe…and all I did was put my hand on that window, in the end."

"You did more than that, Asuna. If you hadn't been there, the cathedral and all of us would've been charred to bits by that cannon blast," Alice said, hugging her back. For some reason, Asuna had the same subtly sweet smell as she did in real life. The moment she picked that up and felt the warmth of her embrace, Alice finally felt the tension in the core of her being ease up. Asuna's ability to make people feel at ease was practically a kind of magic all of its own. She let go and exhaled softly.

She'd never expected Airy's "emergency escape" was actually shooting Central Cathedral itself into orbit like a rocket, but at least for the moment, they'd escaped the threat of the *Principia*. But it was a dragoncraft capable of flying between stars. Knowing the stubborn determination of Emperor Agumar, he would not rest until

he had wiped out the Integrity Knights.

Airy said she would take the cathedral to an altitude of thirty thousand mels, or thirty kilors. It was a phenomenal height, but the planets Cardina and Admina were five hundred thousand kilors apart. The *Principia* had presumably flown there from Admina, so thirty kilors was like a stroll down the block to it.

If the enemy chased them outside Cardina's orbit, then they didn't have to worry about falling on Centoria and could attack them back, but after seeing that mega-blast earlier, an all-out firefight didn't seem like a winning proposition. Unless the Triple-S Order attack method had even greater power and range than that heat-element cannon.

Alice watched Airy work the control window, questions swirling through her mind.

Eolyne called her "Airy Trume, original yardmaster of Dragoncraft Yard One." Once upon a time, she had been simply "Operator." Over two centuries of serving the Star King and Star Queen, she must have learned and experienced many, many things. Things no knight or artician had ever learned…perhaps things even greater than Administrator herself could do……

"Bearing, angle, speed—all green. Emergency escape sequence, initiating stage two," Airy said calmly, her voice filling the inside of the light-element wall. All the others silently watched her operate the window. "One minute to reverse thrusters, Petras."

"Deployment gear and resource tank levels are all green," said the muffled voice again. The onetime jailer had a metal helmet over his head at all times; perhaps that was one thing that hadn't changed.

"Roger that. Begin operating reverse thruster engine," Airy said, fingers flying. Far below, a heavy machine rumbling traveled upward. There was no way to tell what was happening at the base, but it seemed like a number of engines were deployed outward and pushing in the opposite direction to slow the building's speed.

"Engine deployment complete. Ready to go," Petras reported. Airy glanced around at them. Kirito promptly gave her a thumbs-up before she could say anything.

"I'll hold us down."

"Please do, Lord Kirito."

Once again, an invisible cushion gripped Alice around the waist and legs. If not for this situation, being grabbed around the lower half by Incarnate Arms would not be a pleasant sensation, but now she was nothing if not grateful for it.

"Thank you once again, Kirito. I know you must be exhausted," Alice told him. He turned and gave her another thumbs-up and a big smile. There was no hiding the exhaustion and worry on his face, however.

It occurred to her that it was unnatural that he had returned from the space force base accompanied only by Ronie and Tiese. The goal of the dragoncraft attacking the base was to capture or kill Eolyne, commander of the Integrity Pilots. It didn't make sense that he didn't come back with his guards, Stica and Laurannei.

She didn't know if it was right to ask him about that now. But she lost her chance to ask when Airy turned back and shouted, "Ten seconds to reverse thrusters! Brace yourselves!"

Everyone else let their weight rest against the cushion. A number *10* appeared in the window and began to count down. When it hit zero…

A great rumbling, softer than during takeoff but still enough to rattle the tower, passed through Alice's body and lifted her up. If the Incarnate cushion weren't holding her to the floor, she would have jettisoned into empty space.

The reverse thrusters lasted over ten seconds, then stopped without warning.

"Thrusters complete, speed good… Initiating stage three," Airy reported. Alice was surprised by this. If taking off and accelerating were stage one, and slowing down to stop was stage two, shouldn't the emergency escape be complete?

But the cathedral hadn't stopped yet. It was still ascending, albeit much slower than before the reverse thrusters had been engaged.

Airy glanced in the direction they were moving, then opened a new sub-window and said, "This is White Cosmos 01. Black Lotus 02, do you read me?"

A few moments later, a relaxed, husky female voice replied, "*This is Black Lotus 02. You're coming in loud and clear, Airy. I can't believe this moment has actually come.*"

The voice somehow sounded familiar to Alice, but she couldn't place where she'd heard it before.

Ahead and to her right, Kirito's body tensed up slightly. It seemed he recognized the speaker, but she didn't have time to ask before the conversation continued.

"Proceeding to docking in three minutes. Please deactivate stealth mode."

"Roger that. Black Lotus 02, deactivating stealth."

Asuna lifted her face again, so Alice followed her lead to look where the cathedral was going. As usual, it was just a brilliant canopy of stars…except…

A bluish light was flickering somewhere out there. A pulsing wave of light, like a beating heart, spread out and vanished. With each beat, it seemed like something…something unbelievably *huge* was coming into view.

"…A lotus flower…?" Asuna gasped.

It did look like that. Elliptical flower petals extended in all directions, like a lotus blooming in space. Of course, it was an artificial construction; the base was an octagon, a square that had its corners sanded down. In the center was a similarly shaped hole. Based on the mention of docking, Central Cathedral was probably meant to fit into that hole to become one with the lotus.

In other words, each side of the hole was fifty mels, just like the cathedral. Each side of the base was about five times the length of the hole, meaning it was about two hundred and fifty mels to a side. And because one petal was about twice as long as the base, that meant the entire breadth of the lotus was somewhere around twelve hundred mels.

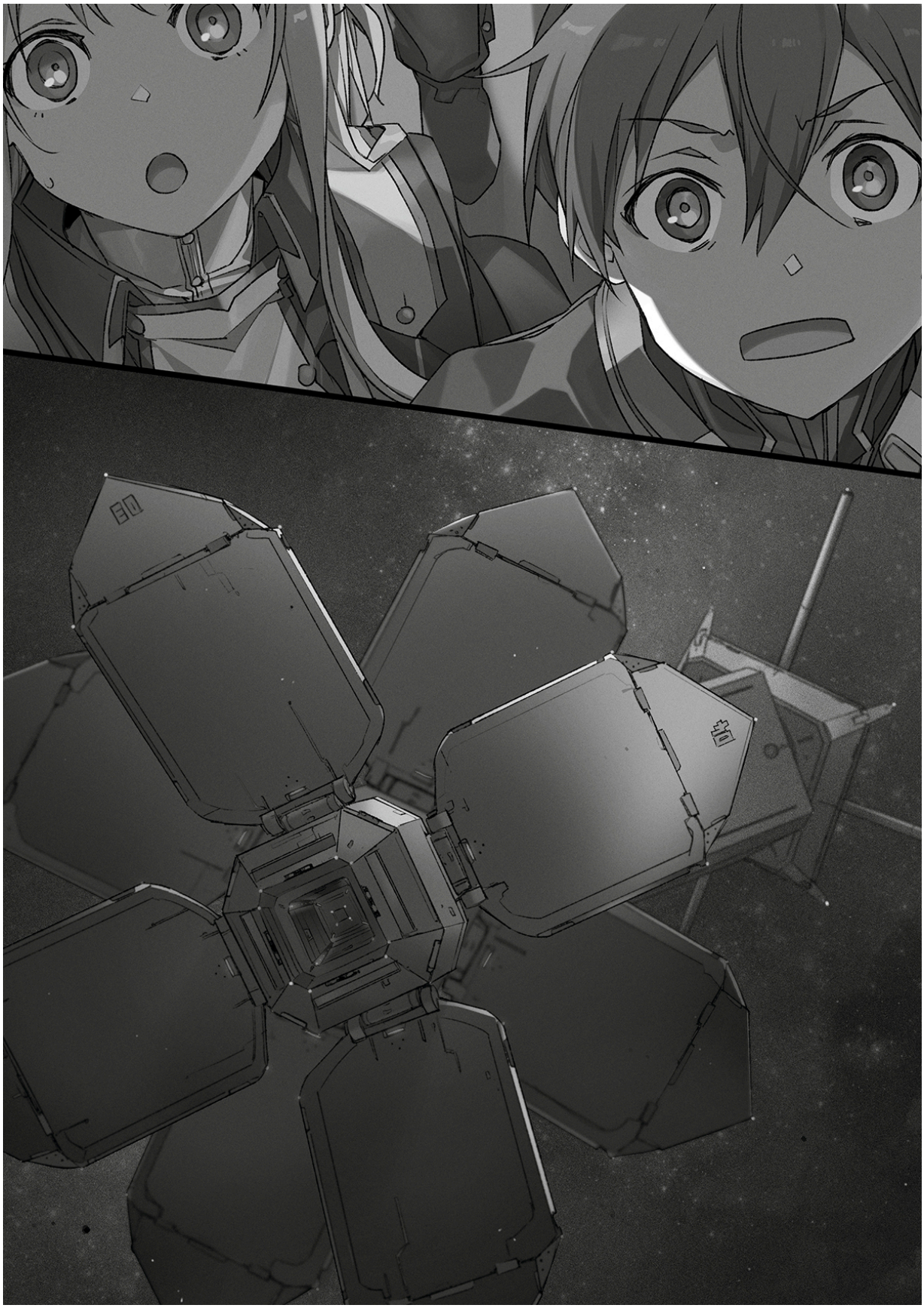
"What…*is* that…?" Alice asked, astonished.

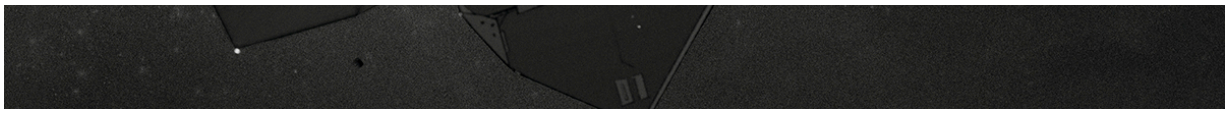
Airy turned her head to say, "It's the Type-Two space fortress, call sign Black Lotus 02."

"……"

No one spoke for several moments. Why was it built? How did

they lift it into space? What happened to the Type-One? So many questions swirled in Alice's mind, but she didn't even know which to ask first.





Eventually, after losing her patience, Fanatio glared at Kirito and shouted, “Your Majesty!! When did you create such a thing?!”

“I—I don’t know! I don’t know!!” Kirito protested. His pained cries vanished into the infinite expanse of space.

7

"Wow…Wh…what a view…," murmured Lisbeth slowly.

"It really is," Silica agreed, taking a step forward. Lisbeth immediately reached out and grabbed the strap of her leather armor.

"Hey, watch it!"

"Look, I'm not a child," Silica protested, but stepped obediently back into her original position.

Barely two yards from where they were standing, the rocky ground was cut vertically clean away, revealing a sheer cliff that ran down for two hundred yards. In the world of *Unital Ring*, where players couldn't fly, falling was a death sentence.

But the view to the south of the cliff was so vast, so grand, it made her forget all about the fear of death. In the foreground was lush, thick forest, while in the middle distance on the right was a large, snaking river. In the distance was a seemingly endless plain, broken up by one abnormally sharp range of rocky mountains. And, of course, a pale full moon shone quietly down upon all of it.

The scale of the map felt like that of Alfheim, and there were plenty of two-hundred-yard cliffs all over that world. And hey, their home base of New Aincrad, where they tended to play and start their adventures, was floating over ten thousand yards in the sky.

But gazing at the landscape of *Unital Ring* seemed to speak to her soul in a way she never felt in *ALO*. It wasn't just a high level of fidelity and resolution. The way the breeze brushed her cheek, the smell of the earth and grass and water, the howling of the beasts in the distance—all that sensory information held such an overwhelming realism and made her feel like she was truly on a journey in another, equal world. She hadn't felt that kind of sensation since being trapped inside *Sword Art Online*.

Except for one other time. It was early in the morning of July 7 that year, a day she would never forget, when she accepted Yui's invitation and dived into the Underworld, a true alternate universe. They appeared in a barren hellscape called the Dark Territory, but she was stunned to see how each and every grain of sand was modeled in exquisite detail.

It had been nearly three months since then in the real world. Silica didn't know all the details of the Otherworld War, but as she understood it, blood was shed, and events continued to roil within the accelerated universe of the Underworld. Kirito and Asuna had stayed behind and worked very hard to bring about an age of peace, and she assumed it had managed to hold, but…

Silica turned and looked to the north.

On her left was a mostly collapsed stone enclosure that was the exit to the very long staircase dungeon that had brought them up there.

From there, a small, faint path wound through wild land to the north. After about ten minutes of running, it ran into a large river, though not quite as big as the Maruba River on the first tier below. On the far bank of that river was the remainder of a small town where all of Silica's and Lisbeth's companions were staying: Sinon, Klein, Argo, Leafa, Yui, Holgar, Zarion, Ceecee, Friscoll, their pets Aga and Kuro, and the then-logged-out Kirito and Asuna.

Silica and Lisbeth had gone back across the river and run almost two miles to return to this point to perform reconnaissance on the route from the staircase enclosure to the village ruins.

Though they hadn't seen the whole thing, their understanding was that the world of *Unital Ring* was a circular map made of three concentric steppes. The Stiss Ruins, where all the *ALO* players started, was at nearly the exact southern tip of the first tier. About twenty-five miles north of that was Ruis na Ríg, formerly known as Kirito Town, and another few miles north of that was the two-hundred-yard Last Wall. After ascending the staircase dungeon inside the cliff, you reached the spot where Silica and Lisbeth stood, the entrance to the second tier of the map.

The goal of all the players funneled into *Unital Ring* was to reach

the place revealed by the heavenly light at the center of the unseen third tier before anyone else did. Naturally, their group was trying for the same thing, but this world was too dangerous to simply rush straight ahead without thinking.

The existence of stamina points (SP), thirst points (TP), and an extraordinarily elaborate crafting system pointed to the focus of *Unital Ring* as a survival RPG. In other words, being able to replenish supplies was the highest priority. That meant their first objective after reaching the second tier should be to build a new base and establish a supply line from Ruis na Ríg, their main base. Running back and forth through the monster-infested staircase dungeon was a very inefficient method.

"It doesn't seem like any monsters pop up along the route from here to the ruined village," Lisbeth commented.

Silica reached up to pet Pina, who was sleeping on her left shoulder. "Agreed… I think making our second base in the village would be a good idea."

"Plus, we can make use of the buildings. The only question is how to connect it to Ruis na Ríg. I wonder if we could build a staircase on the outside of the cliff."

"Kirito was saying he thought there would be some gimmick that makes that impossible. Like a nest of super-strong monsters partway down the cliff…"

"Oh, I can see that happening. I mean, they already send bears and boars and stuff to attack you when you try to build a house. Hmm…"

Lisbeth grunted and turned back toward the cliff. She hemmed and hawed, then started walking. Silica noticed what she was doing and shouted, "H-hey! You just warned me about how dangerous that is!"

"Huh…? Oh, sorry, sorry," Lisbeth said, sticking out her tongue. She opened her inventory and pulled out a rope wrapped around a stick.

When they had first been sent to this world, they could only use Crude Thin Rope made of woven ubiquigrass, which was found everywhere. Now that Ruis na Ríg had developed quite a bit,

however, they had Sturdy Linen Rope made of three strands of hemp fiber, which the Bashin sold from their general store.

Lisbeth undid the much tougher rope and tied it around the trunk of a shrub growing near the cliffside, then passed the other end around her belt and tossed it toward Silica.

"Loop it through your belt, too, and tie it around that tree."

"…All right."

Silica did as Lisbeth said and pulled hard on the rope, just to test it out. Because it was a virtual world, she knew it would be fine as long as the rope, belt, or shrub never reached a durability of zero. But the prickly sensation of the hemp fiber was so realistic, she felt she needed to double-check.

"Well, it's tied… You're not thinking of descending the cliff, are you?"

"No, no! We don't have anywhere near enough length to get down," Lisbeth pointed out. She approached the edge and got down on her stomach so she could poke her head over the edge and look straight down.

Silica hoped she wasn't just trying to get a cheap thrill. She set Pina down, then lay down next to Lisbeth and inched her way forward until she was looking down the cliff, too.

She was instantly overcome with mild vertigo. Two hundred yards was about the same height as the observation deck on the Metropolitan Government Building in Tokyo. There were no streetlights, but thanks to the bright virtual moonlight and her Night Vision skill, she could clearly see the forest below.

The little part of the vast Zelletelio Forest that was glowing a warm orange was Ruis na Ríg. Looking straight down, she saw an especially large and round broadleaf tree. The domed space beneath its canopy was where they found the nest of dangerous gilnaris hornets. Despite having twenty-four people, they nearly suffered major fatalities, so hearing from Kirito's group that the hornet swarm hadn't repopulated afterward was a major relief.

But there was no guarantee the hornets wouldn't come back at some point, and there were more weakling monsters in the staircase dungeon hidden behind the nest, so they definitely wanted a detour

that would allow them to safely and reliably replenish supplies while avoiding the dome and the dungeon. Also, Misha, the thornspike cave bear Silica had tamed, was too big to squeeze through the dungeon, so they'd need a different means of getting up if they wanted it to travel to the second tier with them. Unlike Aincrad and Alfheim, this was the rare virtual world that allowed for free building, so they had to use the tools available to them.

"The wall is virtually vertical, so as long as we have the materials, we should be capable of building an external staircase," Silica murmured.

"Exactly," Lisbeth agreed. "But then, look…you see that?"

She leaned out another six inches so she could point out a spot on the cliff. It occurred to Silica that they were tied to the same rope, so if Lisbeth slid over the edge, she'd go down with her. But she inched forward a bit anyway and peered harder.

Around the middle of the cliff, a hundred yards from the ground, it looked like there was a divot in the wall, triangular in shape. The divot was about as tall and wide as a two-story house. They couldn't tell how deep it went, but based on the light and shadow, it seemed like it went in even farther than that.

"Why didn't we notice such a huge depression when we were looking up at the cliff…?" Silica grumbled.

Lisbeth waved away her concern. "Because the forest is so thick that there are no gaps in the canopy. You could barely even see the cliff while walking down there, and right at the foot of the cliff, the angle's too steep to see it, I bet."

"Okay…so how did you know it was there, Liz?"

"When we were going up the dungeon, I thought I heard this groaning sound while we were partway up the stairs. I was thinking it was the boss, but the boss turned out to be that golem, right?"

"Really? That's all it took for you to think it was on the outside of the cliff?"

"I mean, it just makes sense, right?" Lisbeth said with total confidence. She did have a point, though. In classic, pre-full-dive open-world RPGs, faint footsteps and groans were a classic hint and warning to the player. If you heard something making a sound, that

meant it was somewhere nearby.

"…I think Kirito's guess is right. There's probably a super-powerful monster in that alcove that attacks anyone trying to climb up the outside of the wall…"

"The only question is how far its reaction radius goes."

"I'm guessing it's not just a simple sphere, either… The cliff goes for hundreds of miles to the east and west. Each guardian probably has to cover a very wide area."

"I wonder if it'll attack once you climb about halfway up."

"Hopefully there's a way to figure that out without risking any harm…"

The pair stopped to consider this. Whoever created this game might have designed the Last Wall to be difficult to reach so players had to start over from scratch in the second tier. But according to the therians from *Apocalyptic Date* who tried to kidnap Yui, no one else aside from Kirito's team had been able to build a large base or town just a few miles from the wall yet. They had to press the advantage.

"I'd at least like to get a peek at this monster, you know?"

"Hmmm," mumbled Silica. She opened her inventory without a real plan and scrolled through the list of random odds and ends she'd collected over the week since the forced conversion into this game. Over half of them were materials like stones and logs, with the next most frequent being water and food. There wasn't a single fashionable piece of equipment. In *ALO*, she could have started her own shop; she'd had so many.

Nothing seemed like it was going to be useful here, she concluded, scrolling all the way to the bottom of the list ordered by recency. Among the narrow ropes and little stones, there was one item that said simply: *Bisque Pot*.

All their drinking water was stored in ceramic bottles they'd made at the log cabin in Ruis na Ríg; the item name was Water-Filled Bisque Bottle. She would have expected it to be an empty pot, but in that case, it would say Bisque Pot (empty).

Silica pushed herself backward, then sat up, tapped the name of the pot, and materialized it. A small pot appeared above the window,

its lid sealed with a material that looked like wax. She tapped it to bring up the properties window. Below the item name, weight, and durability was a small description.

A bisque pot with something inside. You can't tell what the contents are until you open it.

"What does that mean?!" she shouted, drawing a funny look from Lisbeth.

"What's that thing, Silica?"

"I don't actually know… Based on the order when I sorted by time of acquisition, I must have picked it up on the first day."

"Hmm…Well, go on and open it," Lisbeth said casually. Silica pushed the pot forward with both hands.

"Then you do it, Liz."

"Why me?! It's your thing!"

"If there's something nice inside, you can have it."

"Okay, you said it! No take-backsies if it's stuffed full of valuable jewels!" Lisbeth grinned, taking the pot. She took a knife from her belt—not a stone knife, but her own steel knife—and cut into the wax sealing the lid to the pot.

Once the tip had done a full circle around, the entire pot flashed faintly. The item name had presumably changed, too, but it would be quicker to just open it up.

Lisbeth slowly put the knife back in its sheath, taking her sweet time, then gripped the edges of the lid with her fingertips. After milking the moment for three more seconds, she popped the lid off. The reaction was instantaneous.

"It smells!!" they screamed together. Even Pina, who had been peacefully sleeping in the grass nearby, hissed, "*Kyupe!*" which was a sound they'd never heard before.

The stench was tremendous. It wasn't just a bad smell or a rotting smell. It was like an ultra-dense, fermenting stench of countless olfactory elements compressed to maximum saturation, all penetrating their nostrils at once and stinging them straight in the center of the brain.

"W-wad id diz?!" Lisbeth wailed. Silica was avoiding breathing through her nose, too.

"Wiz! De wid, de wid!"

"Wid? Whad do you mean…? Oh, lid."

Even after the lid was back on, the stink stubbornly hung in the air, refusing to move on in the breeze. It only went away after ten long seconds.

Silica took several breaths to clear out the smell, then reached forward to tap the pot again and bring up the properties window. As expected, the item's name had updated. It went from *Bisque Pot* to *Pot of Thoroughly Fermented Whither Soup*.

"Thoroughly Fermented Whither Soup…?" they said together in total disbelief. Whither was the name of a type of grass that grew on Giyoru Savanna…but that put another idea in their heads.

"Shirodatsu!" Lisbeth shouted.

"Niimoji!" Silica shouted back. They glared at each other.

According to Yui, both shirodatsu and niimoji were regional names for taro stalk. The Bashin people who lived in the basin of the Giyoru Savanna loved to boil woven whithergrass and eat it, and the resulting texture was identical to that of taro stalk. On their first night, Silica and Lisbeth and Yui met the Bashin and were invited into their tent to have whither soup. Silica even had seconds. She was willing to have more of it, it was true, but why was it in her inventory, and why did it smell so horrendous?

She read the descriptive text on the window.

Whither soup that has been sealed and fermented over a week. The fermentation process is rarely successful, and usually expands to shatter the pot. The Bashin consider thoroughly fermented soup to be the greatest of delicacies, and those who can eat an entire pot are hailed as heroes.

"…What would've happened if it exploded in my inventory…?" Silica wondered. The mental image caused her to shiver. "It's a mystery why I had a pot of whither soup in my inventory, but it seems like it fermented over the past week… I thought food in item storage wasn't supposed to go bad, but I guess fermentation works differently…"

"Is it just me, or is there a contradiction in the fact that it's the greatest delicacy, but it takes a hero to actually finish it?" Lisbeth

pointed out. They would have to ask the Bashin to figure that one out. In any case, Silica wasn't up for the challenge, and she wasn't going to put it back in her inventory, either.

"You want to have it, Liz?" she suggested. Lisbeth violently shook her head no, so Silica picked up the pot and set it down on a nearby rock. However long the durability would last in the open, there was always the possibility it might save some starving person later.

It was almost midnight. They didn't lure out the monster lurking in the cliff depression, but at least they confirmed the safety of the route to the village ruins.

"Well, we should get—"

Silica stopped herself from finishing that sentence. She stared at the pot she'd just set down, then turned to Lisbeth.

"Hey, Liz."

"You're gonna eat it after all?"

"No! I was going to say…what do you think will happen if we drop the pot into the cliff depression?"

"……"

Lisbeth considered this for a while, then said, "I think any monster with a sense of smell will be pissed off."

"Do you think it'll climb up here?"

"If it does, we can just cut the rope and run to the staircase down, right? It's not going to chase us down into the dungeon."

"…I'm going to take your word on that, Liz!" Silica said, beaming. She picked up the pot of fermented whither soup, made sure the rope tied to her belt was snug around the tree, tiptoed to the cliffside, and peered down.

The floor of the depression in the wall formed a stone lip that extended about one yard outward from the cliff. She could probably drop the pot right next to the cliff face and get it to land on the lip, but aiming was tricky enough that it might hit some little bump on the cliff face and either break there or deflect and shoot past the stone lip.

She stuck the pot out over empty space and carefully took aim. If she added any sideways force when dropping it, there was no telling where it would end up. She focused all her concentration on the

weight in her hands, willing it to fall directly vertically. When she felt the weight was equal on both hands, she carefully let go.

Immediately, her body lurched forward. But Lisbeth was behind her, ready for that to happen, and pulled on the lifeline, preventing her from plunging to her death.

The excitement was worth the trouble; the pot fell straight down with uniformly accelerated motion, then disappeared into the darkness. About four or five seconds later, they heard a faint crashing sound.

Both of them wrinkled their noses, sniffing for the smell. She didn't think they would be able to smell it from one hundred yards away, but sure enough, that indescribably awful fermenting stench reached them faintly on an updraft.

She had just taken a step back from the edge when there was a bizarre sound from below, like a long leather strap being swung around at high speed. It took a little while for her to recognize it as the roar of a living creature.

The girls shared a look, then peered down the cliff again.

At that very moment, a dark shadow flew out of the depression in the cliffside far below. It was more than three yards wide and nearly twice as long. The finer details were unclear, but it was not a mammal, a bird, or a dragon. The sides of its long, simple torso seemed to be rippling rapidly. Those were…legs. Small and short segmented legs, but still twenty inches long, located by the dozens on the sides of its body—and they gripped the rock face firmly. It looked like a gigantic sea roach or wood louse.

The giant arthropod stopped a few yards above the depression that was its nest, long antennae waving. It found what it was looking for, then roared, "*Byurrrruuuu!*" and began to race directly up the cliff with a speed that did not match its size.

"…That's not coming all the way up here, is it?" Silica said.

Lisbeth said, "I think it might."

Pina peered down between them and cried, "*Kwee.*"

Perhaps the fragrance of the fermented whither soup counted as an attack; there was a dark red spindle cursor above the giant sea roach's head. Its proper name was *Genoligia*, and, like the Life

Harvester they'd fought three days before, it had three HP bars. She had no idea what that meant.

The Genoligia raced up the cliff, its multitude of legs rippling in waves, and in no time at all, it had crossed the halfway point up to the top, with no sign of stopping.

"Let's run!" Silica cried, scooping up Pina. Lisbeth had no argument, pulling her knife free and cutting the rope. They turned and started to run for the stone enclosure that held the entrance to the staircase—but before they could run in, the wavelike sound of the Genoligia's feet stopped.

They paused in mid-run, listening carefully. But all they heard was the sound of the breeze rustling the shrubbery around them.

This is totally the kind of thing where you think you're in the clear, and then it jumps right in front of you, Silica thought, but against her better judgment, she approached the cliff and peered down.

The Genoligia was about thirty yards below her, stopped at a total of a hundred and seventy yards off the forest floor below. Its antennae, nearly half the length of its body, waved back and forth. From this distance, the moonlight put its features in much clearer relief.

The huge body was six yards long and comprised a myriad of segments with an uncountable number of legs. The rounded head had two curving compound eyes and a row of four simple eyes, and a set of huge, jutting jaws like steel cutters. Even Zarion the beetle-man and his thick body armor would be split in half in seconds by those things.

The Genoligia had clearly sensed Silica and Lisbeth. Not only that, but it seemed to recognize they were the culprits behind the hideous stink bomb dropped on its nest. But it would not move beyond the thirty-yard line. Within moments, it turned around in disappointment and slowly descended the cliff face.

Lisbeth exhaled with relief. Still clutching the knife, she said, "Looks like it can't go any higher than that…"

"I agree. I suppose it can't go more than seventy yards or so from its nest in either direction, vertically."

"Yeah. But I'm thinking it can probably go for miles horizontally. If you look at where it stopped, you can see how the color of the cliff—or more like the texture itself—is different above it, right?"

Indeed, the area below the line where the Genoligia stopped had a slightly brighter sheen to its surface.

"So you think…the area where it crawls is polished because the friction of its legs has worn it down?"

"Yeah, probably. If we check during the daytime from a spot in the forest with a good view, we might be able to narrow down its movement range."

"So if we stay outside that range, we might be able to build a staircase of our own…"

"I'm not sure. Maybe we can avoid that huge-ass wood louse's territory, but there's a good chance it'll just put us in range of some other monster guarding the cliff."

"Oh… Maybe the reason the Patter and the Bashin have a rule that you must not climb the Last Wall is because if you try to climb it, you'll always get attacked by a monster like that, no matter where you are."

"Yeah. It's disappointing, but I don't think we can build a resupply route on this cliff," Lisbeth said.

Silica agreed. A boss monster that could climb freely up and down a sheer cliff and had three HP bars was far too dangerous to fight when the only arena was a two-hundred-yard cliff. Maybe there was some other way—like pouring oil onto the nest from above and lighting it on fire—but you never knew if that would cause it to cross its territorial line and attack. It had been that angry over a pot of spilled soup that was a little stinky. Okay, a *lot* stinky.

"…Let's consider this a win for getting some information on the obstacle boss," she said, and lifted Pina onto her head.

Before they left, she took one more gaze at the forest below and the patch of orange light in the distance. If they were going to build a new base on the second tier, they might not be back in Ruis na Ríg for a long time.

It had been a lucky accident that the log cabin landed in a place surrounded by so many resources. Plus the fact that it hadn't been

smashed in the fall, that they had been able to protect it from various dangers, and that it had grown into such a big town. That was thanks to the hard work of the team, of course, but it was also a product of just about as much luck.

Kirito and Asuna were the owners of the house, but to Silica, and probably to Lisbeth and their other friends, that log cabin was home…their home in the virtual world.

We will *be back,* she said silently to Ruis na Ríg's lights, and turned away. Lisbeth was holding the severed ends of the rope and staring at them closely.

"…I'm sorry you had to cut the rope. I have some hemp fibers, so I can repair it when we get to the ruins," Silica apologized.

"Oh, no, it's not that," Lisbeth insisted, shaking her head. "I was wondering how long you can make ropes in this world."

"Huh?" Silica replied. This was not the response she expected. "Well…if the rope ends are the same type, you can use some material items to connect them together… So if it's like the real world, you can probably make it as long as you want. It's just…"

She imagined an impossibly long rope and tried to explain.

"The longer you make it, the heavier it will be, so eventually, I feel like the weight will surpass the rope's durability, and it might just snap once that weight is dragging on it in the air."

"True…," said Lisbeth, bobbing her head up and down. "But it means that if you have a suuuper-light, suuuper-long rope, you can probably hang it a suuuper-long way, right?"

"W-well, maybe… Are you talking about a distance of, like, a hundred yards?"

"No. Three miles."

"Th-three miles?!" Silica shrieked.

She'd heard the ropeway in Hakone was about four miles long, but that "rope" was made of thick steel and had over ten support towers. She didn't know the world record length for a suspended rope without intermediate supports, but three miles seemed simply impossible. If it wasn't possible with real-world science, then there was no way they'd get it done in *Unital Ring*, where they could only weave hemp ropes. But why was Lisbeth thinking about this…?

Silica considered the question until a particular image floated into the back of her mind. She spun around and looked at the lights of Ruis na Ríg again. Then she glanced at the rope hanging from Lisbeth's hands.

"…Are you suggesting we connect this spot to Ruis na Ríg with one of those…diagonal ropes you slide down with a pulley…?"

"Zip line."

"That! You want to connect a zip line?"

"Yes!"

Lisbeth held up the rope to show her. Silica stared at it. Five seconds later, she opened her mouth to correct one mistake.

"…Three miles of rope won't be enough. This spot is two hundred yards higher than Ruis na Ríg, so using the Pythagorean theorem…"

"Oh, right. Umm, if the base is three thousand and the height is two hundred, then the diagonal length is…ummm…"

"Liz, aren't you studying for college?"

"Please don't bring back traumatic memories," Lisbeth pouted. Despite that, she managed to calculate the length rather quickly. "Three thousand squared is nine million, two hundred squared is forty thousand, so combine the numbers to make nine million and forty thousand, the square root of which is…three thousand and six-point-something? It's barely any different!"

"If you factor in some slack for the rope and the length you'll need to secure them at the ends, you'd want an extra hundred yards, I suppose. Plus…the angle is barely four degrees or so, so the question remains if you can even slide down it the whole way…"

"Don't play games with a four-degree incline! That's really hard to climb on a bike without help!"

"Sure, sure," said Silica, turning to look at Ruis na Ríg one more time.

The idea sounded crazy the first time, but the image in her head wasn't going away. If anything, it seemed even more vivid and possible as time went on.

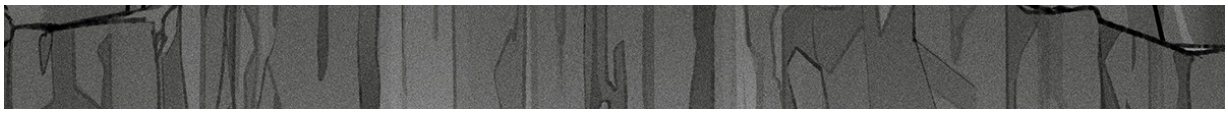
How cool would it be to have a rope connecting this spot to Ruis na Ríg, so you could slide all the way down at terrific speed? A zip line would mean they didn't need to be anywhere near the cliff face.

Even if the Genoligia had the means to attack from a distance, the rope would still be over four hundred yards from the cliff by the time you'd descended thirty yards from the top. There was no way any ranged attack would cover that kind of distance.

"Whether it's feasible or not aside, I think it's worth suggesting to the group," Silica said, watching their little town in the distance.

Lisbeth walked up next to her and said dramatically, "Believe you can, and you're halfway there…Theodore Roosevelt."





8

Just outside the second exit of Shirokanedai Station, rain was beginning to fall.

Asuna fastened the buttons of her balmacaan coat up to the neck, removed a folding umbrella from her shoulder bag, and started walking northeast on the sidewalk of Meguro Dori.

It was 10:40 AM on Sunday, October 4. There were no notable shopping destinations or tourist spots in the area, so even on a weekend, there wasn't much foot traffic.

White apartment buildings and offices lined the street. Nearly four years had passed since the last time she hurried down this particular street, and it was barely any different.

Eventually, a crossing street painted green appeared on the left side, indicating a school zone. She turned that way and walked another five minutes until she arrived at the gate of a place she had once attended as a student: Eterna Girls' Academy. However, Asuna only gave a quick glance down a side path before continuing down the hill in the direction of the Takanawa neighborhood.

She went down the gentle rightward curve until she came to a crosswalk, which she used to get to the other side of the street. The venerable old hotel looming overhead was her destination that day. Once under the entrance canopy, she shook the droplets off her umbrella, folded it back up, and went through the sets of automatic doors.

The temperature was warm and pleasant in the lobby. She crossed it diagonally to the lounge café. She told the waiter she was meeting someone, then went to the back. The text message had already informed her of which table it was, so she didn't need to waste time looking around.

The lounge's back wall was a whole glass window that offered a view of the hotel's courtyard, where the trees were in full autumnal foliage. Most of the two-seat tables along the glass were empty, but her destination was a four-seat table along the right wall. As Asuna approached, the person sitting alone sensed her coming and looked up with a friendly smile.

"Heya, A-chan."

"Hello, Argo."

She held out her hand to keep "Argo the Rat," Tomo Hosaka, from getting up. Asuna took off her coat. The round, four-seat table had two armchairs and one sofa around it. Tomo was in a chair against the wall, so Asuna put her coat and bag by the edge of the sofa and sat down next to them.

"Sorry to drag you out here so early," said Tomo. She wore a cool-weather, gray mohair sweater and salopettes. Her trademark mustard-yellow parka was folded up beneath the table.

"Oh, no worries. I got a nice, early bedtime last night."

"Ah, well, that's good to hear."

Perfectly timed with the end of their greetings, the waitress came by with water, a wet hand towel, and a menu for the table. Tomo only had a glass of water in front of her, as she'd been waiting for Asuna to show up before ordering.

"It's on me today, so order whatever ya want…as long as ya don't get anything beyond a cake combo," she said with a self-deprecating smirk.

"It's fine, you don't have to pay for me," Asuna replied. "Those combos aren't cheap, either."

"No, no, no. My professional reputation is at stake here. Can't be asking someone to make a trip *and* pay at the table."

"…If you insist, then I'm grateful for your generosity," Asuna said, opening the menu. The dishes were almost all over 3,000 yen, and even the drinks were around 2,000, which was a full digit higher than the cafeteria at the returnee school. The cake combo was 2,200 yen, which was reasonably priced…relatively speaking. But despite being in high school, Tomo was also a writer and researcher for MMO Today, the country's largest gaming media site, so she had to

be getting paid enough to reflect her expertise. And it was Tomo's idea to meet up at a hotel lounge.

Asuna examined the page of cakes carefully. "I think I'll go with the pomme verte and Darjeeling."

"And I guess I'll try…tiramisu and a cappuccino."

They signaled to the waitress and gave their orders, and Asuna leaned back against the velour sofa. The lounge was only about a third full, whether due to the weather or the time of day. The trickling of the fountain in the center of the lounge was louder than the other voices. It was a familiar sound to her.

"This ain't the first time for you here, is it, A-chan?" Tomo asked abruptly.

Asuna blinked and replied, "Y-you mean…you didn't pick this place out for that reason?"

"Nope, I had no idea. And even I don't go prying into private details like that about my friends."

"Oh…I guess that's true. Well, until four years ago, I used to be a student at the school just up the street from this hotel," Asuna revealed.

Tomo glanced to the left, in the direction of Eterna Girls' Academy, then back. She instantly understood "four years ago" meant until being trapped in *SAO*, but she didn't interrupt.

"Of course, I couldn't come into a place like this alone while in elementary school or junior high, but there were plenty of parent-teacher events and things that brought my mother to the school, and she often took me here on the way home. I think it was because *she* liked it, though, more than that it was a treat for me."

"Gotcha," Tomo commented, right as the waitress reappeared with a tray on her left arm. She set out the dishes and cups, poured the tea for Asuna, then left the receipt holder at the end of the table.

"Let's not let them get cold," Tomo suggested. Asuna lifted her cup of Darjeeling tea and breathed in the vivid fragrance of orange pekoe. When she was in primary school, she always ordered juice or soda, but since reaching junior high, she'd become obsessed with tea, and that still held true.

That was why she was surprised the previous day in the Underworld to hear the Star Queen had developed new types of cofil tea, which was identical to coffee, and called it Moonlit Evening. If the Star Queen really was the version of herself who'd remained in the Underworld, then she would have expected herself to focus on making better kinds of black tea rather than cofil.

But the Star King and Queen had lived in the Underworld for over a century, so after that much time, tastes could change. She hadn't liked straight black tea at first due to the bitterness, but over time she'd grown to love it.

She took a sip of Darjeeling, savored the mild and delicate flavor, then returned her cup to the saucer. Tomo was already working on the tiramisu, so Asuna picked up her fork and scooped up a nice chunk of the green apple mousse cake she'd ordered.

The bold freshness of green apple and gentle sweetness of white chocolate filled her mouth and melted away. The selection changed by the season, but she could vaguely remember having the same thing there once when she was still a student at Eterna.

In her memory, she'd had it with tea, so it must've been as a junior high student. But Asuna was wearing her uniform, not her own clothes…and she wasn't with her mother. It was a Monday, and after leaving school, she had come to this lounge, wary of the gazes of other students. And in all eight years—seven and a half, technically—she spent at Eterna, that was only the one time…

"Mmm, this is definitely worth the price," Tomo murmured, snapping Asuna back to reality.

"Yes, it's delicious," she replied.

"Might be a bit small for a serving, though… Figure out how to make this in *UR*, will ya?"

"What, tiramisu…? Maybe I could do it in *ALO*, but not *Unital Ring*. I don't have flour or butter or chocolate, for one thing."

"Nee-hee-hee. Good point." Tomo chuckled mischievously, and stuck the last bit of tiramisu into her cheek. She savored the flavor, then downed the last of her cappuccino. "Ahhh… It was tough to get here from Hoya, but the trip was worth it."

"Oh, right. You rent an apartment close to the school, don't you,

Argo? That must be nice."

"And you live in Miyasaka over in Setagaya, right?"

"Yeah."

"I bet it still takes time gettin' to and from school, but that's no different from the old one, huh? Let me guess: Setagaya Line to Sangenjaya, Den-en-toshi Line to Shibuya, Yamanote Line to Meguro, Mita Line to Shirokanedai… No, if you get on the Hanzomon Line at Sangenjaya, you can go directly to Nagatacho and take the Namboku Line from there… Am I right?"

"I'm astonished you can identify that complicated route without looking at a map," Asuna remarked. "The truth is, though, in elementary school they used to drive me to Senzoku Station. Once I was in junior high, I took the train and bus."

"Ahh, I see. Because you can take Senzoku straight to Shirokanedai without switching lines," Tomo noted.

"But in that case, why'd you pick this place? You could've said Kichijoji or Ogikubo or even Shinjuku…"

"Good point," Tomo said, shrugging. She picked up the small cookie that came with the cappuccino.

When Tomo suggested meeting up in real life on Sunday morning, it was in *Unital Ring* the previous day—or technically that same day, at two in the morning.

Saturday had been a truly turbulent day. Just before midnight, her father had driven her to Rath's Roppongi office, where she dived into the Underworld and performed some bizarre window palm-touch she didn't understand. Then Central Cathedral took off like a rocket, passed right by a mega-sized dragoncraft, and went into space, where they docked with a space fortress designed to look like a lotus flower.

She'd been shell-shocked by the whole thing, but really, Airy was the only one who wasn't. Actually, there was one other person—a woman named Lily Lou who managed the space fortress—but she didn't even have time to introduce herself. That was because Asuna elected to use her super-account's geographic manipulation ability to generate rock Kirito could convert to steel and crystal elements with Incarnation, which Airy could then use to regenerate the cathedral's

walls.

After creating twenty-something rocks, however, Asuna got a bit of a headache. She said she would be fine, but Kirito and Alice refused to allow her to continue using those powers, so she hastily greeted Fanatio, who had just been awakened, and an unfamiliar Integrity Knight, Eydis, before logging out. Eydis didn't know anything about the real world, however, and looked quite skeptical.

In the end, she was only in the Underworld for less than forty minutes, and didn't feel like she'd done all that much, but according to Airy, if she hadn't helped them unlock that weird symbol window, Central Cathedral wouldn't have been able to take off, and the mega-sized dragoncraft's cannon would have completely destroyed the top of the tower.

Asuna turned to Alice in her reclining chair and said, "good luck" before leaving the STL room. She didn't see Rinko or Shouzou in the hallway, but she heard voices, so she followed the sound to find them chatting in the reception room with the door open.

The open door was probably Rinko's signal that they weren't going to discuss business. Shouzou took her hint and kept the chitchat to the typical politics and financial news. On the car ride home, however, he said, "That Dr. Koujiro is one brilliant woman," so he must have been quite impressed with her management skills.

They returned home in Setagaya Ward around one fifteen. Her mother, Kyouko, was home by then, but Shouzou covered for Asuna by saying it was his idea to take her out for a drive, so there was no scolding.

Once in her room, she shook off her fatigue and dived back into *Unital Ring*, mostly to move her idle avatar to a safer location.

But to her surprise, the team had collected an astonishing amount of resources in just the two hours she was gone, and had performed a lot of repair work on the holes in the abandoned building. They could have repaired the roof, too, but according to Argo, completely repairing an abandoned building caused it to be registered as a "primary structure," which both conferred protective bonuses and summoned a legendary local beast to attack. Presumably that beast would be much tougher than the thornspike

cave bear that attacked the log house down on the first tier, so they decided to limit themselves to just repairing the walls for the time being.

Still, they'd learned from experience in Ruis na Ríg that thick stone walls were plenty strong enough to protect players from weak roaming monsters, so at two in the morning, they concluded their adventuring for the day and parted ways. She lay down on a bed of dried grass and was about to log out when Argo quietly asked her if they could meet in the morning.

Now Argo, as Tomo, was peeling the plastic away from the cookie and taking a bite. After chewing it for a bit and washing it down with water, she said, "The truth is, A-chan, I wasn't the one who picked this place out."

"Huh…? What do you mean?"

"Sorry to spring this on ya…but there's someone I want you to meet…"

"Me…?"

Asuna stared at Tomo, taken aback. Maybe it was a lack of confidence in her own communication skills that stopped her from simply saying, "That's fine, of course."

Until just a few days ago, Asuna had thought of herself as being on the more sociable side. She could talk with someone she'd never met before without difficulty, and once they got talking, they would get along.

But when Shikimi Kamura, who had just transferred to the returnee school, suggested they get lunch together the next day, Asuna accepted, but felt awkward about the whole thing. It wasn't just a trick of the mind, either, because when Shikimi was absent from school the following day, Asuna actually felt relieved. Even though the other girl, who'd gone to the same junior high, probably needed her help.

Could it be? she wondered.

Was the person Tomo wanted her to meet Shikimi Kamura? She'd transferred from Eterna Girls' Academy to the returnee school, so it would make perfect sense that she'd know about this hotel lounge.

When Asuna didn't say anything, Tomo looked suspicious. All she

had to do was ask, “Who is it?” but her mouth wouldn’t open.

Just then, she heard hard soles hitting carpet behind her. Someone was coming right toward Asuna from the entrance over her left shoulder. She could feel herself tensing up as she listened to the sound. The next few seconds felt both brief and eternal, until the footsteps stopped right next to her.

“…Asuna.”

Asuna gasped when she heard the voice.

It was not at all the high-pitched, cold voice of Shikimi. It was a bit raspy, but clear, low, and strong. It was a voice she had definitely heard somewhere before…

A deep breath broke her free from the paralysis. Slowly, Asuna turned to her left.

The first thing she saw were two slender legs in brown leather boots and skinny black jeans. She wore a dark gray motorcycle jacket over a thin-hemmed shirt and held a mod coat under her left arm.

Asuna blinked, then stared at the face of the person who had just called her name.

“……!!”

She gasped. The long hair tied in a ponytail, the smooth forehead and crisp bridge of the nose, the long and slender eyes with a greenish tint—the features were more grown-up than she remembered, but she would never mistake them for anyone else’s. Before she knew it, she was on her feet, stepping forward.

“Mito…”

She took another step forward, held out her hands, and hugged the woman. Even the waft of citrus fragrance was just like the perfume she used in Aincrad.

They embraced for over five seconds before Asuna finally let go. But she did not pull away. She looked closely at the other person’s face.

“…You look good,” she murmured, her voice a bit stuffy. The other woman blinked tears out of her eyes.

“So do you, Asuna. I’m so happy to see you.”

“Yes…me too.”

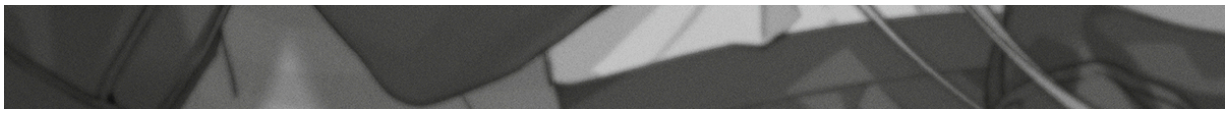
Finally, she took a step backward, then realized the waitress was waiting for them. She ushered her old friend onto the sofa, then sat down next to her.

The waitress set down another water, wet hand towel, and menu, then picked up the used plates and cups, but all Asuna could look at was the face of the cool, calm girl next to her.

Mito, or Misumi Tozawa, was an *SAO* Survivor like Asuna. But she was known by a different name in Aincrad. She was the heroic tailor known as Ashley—the first player to complete the Tailoring skill, meaning she reached the top proficiency of 1,000. She was a real legend in the game.

The Blackwyrm Coat Kirito wore when he beat the game and the red-and-white Serene Corsage that was Asuna's knight uniform were both crafted by Ashley. The Blackwyrm Coat was made with the hide and mane of a uniquely named black dragon, as the name suggested, and each stitch took ten seconds to complete, apparently. But she often complained that Asuna's uniform was harder to make. And the reason for that was…





"…This really brings me back," Misumi said, leaning back against the sofa after finishing her order.

"Huh? To what?" Asuna asked, coming out of her reverie of memories.

"The time you custom-ordered that setup in your guild colors. You said you wanted the exact same design as what you were already using, but with the highest possible specs. I didn't know what to do."

Apparently, Misumi had just been thinking of the exact same memory. Asuna giggled and said, "We were sitting side by side on a sofa like this back then, too. How did you end up re-creating the design…?"

"I put together the pattern paper for your old clothes, then auto-crafted the fabric indicated on the paper, cut it into separate parts, traced them over S-tier fabric, cut them out, then hand-sewed them all back together. I'd never done that before and never did it after."

"Wow…just hearing that explanation makes it sound annoying."

"And whose fault was that?"

"Sorry, sorry. It's just that I couldn't change the guild's uniform design. But the main thing was that I wanted you to make it, Ashl… Mito."

"It's not fair to call me that," said Misumi, giving Asuna a little side-eye. Then a faint smile played over her lips, just like it used to, before vanishing as delicately as frost in the morning sun.

"I'm sorry, Asuna," she said, dropping her eyes to her lap, "for not reaching out in two years. While I was in there, my parents turned off my phone and canceled my account. They thought it was my friends' fault I got involved in *SAO*. But it was the other way around…"

"……" Asuna paused, then shook her head. "It wasn't your fault I dived into *SAO*, Mito. My family had a NerveGear, and on the day the game came out, I wore it on a sheer whim…That was all it took."

"But I was the one who told you about *SAO*… If not for that, you wouldn't have had that whim, would you?" Misumi asked.

She couldn't deny that one. She could still vividly remember the first time she heard Misumi say the phrase *Sword Art Online*.

Asuna and Misumi were in the same year at Eterna Girls' Academy. For the six years of elementary school, they basically never talked, but Asuna recognized Misumi as the tall and striking girl at school. It wasn't until eighth grade, the second year of junior high, that they were placed in the same class together…and a bit over a month later, something unexpected happened.

It was on a Saturday, when there was no class, but a number of facilities at the school were open for students to use, so Asuna went to the library in the morning before leaving school, then stopped by Shibuya to do some shopping. On the way to the store she wanted to visit, she passed by an arcade and saw on the monitor outside that there was a fighting game tournament happening inside. At the time, Asuna had zero interest in anything related to games, so she was going to walk right past it when something in the video caught the corner of her eye, and she stopped. She noticed that on the screen was a player hunched over the joystick and buttons who looked very much like Misumi Tozawa.

Eterna strictly prohibited its students from visiting places like video game arcades, so Asuna peered through the window into the arcade assuming it was just a coincidental lookalike. The player in question wore a cap and hoodie, but that boyish profile had to belong to Misumi.

Asuna was shocked, but even more than that, she was jealous. The enthusiasm with which Misumi threw herself into the game gave off a heat she could feel even outside the arcade. It made her wonder if she had ever felt that passionate about anything in her own life.

Of course, she couldn't just walk into the arcade and talk to her, so Asuna turned to leave. But as though sensing something, Misumi turned and looked over her shoulder, right at Asuna.

She'd never asked about it, but Asuna suspected that in that moment, Misumi was torn between wanting to finish her game or going and chasing down her classmate to keep her from telling anyone. She chose the latter, rushing out of the arcade and blocking Asuna's path. After they stared at each other for a few moments, she asked Asuna to make some time for her after school on Monday.

Two days later, Misumi met up with Asuna outside school and took her to the lounge at the hotel down the street, in the place where they were sitting right now. Back then, they wore their Eterna uniforms, but the employees just assumed they were meeting their parents there and didn't ask any questions before taking them to a table by the window.

Misumi looked at the prices on the menu with desperation, then steeled herself and offered Asuna a deal: Misumi would buy her a cake if she stayed quiet about Saturday.

As an eighth grader at the time, 4,400 yen for two cake combos was a huge expenditure for Misumi. But that was the kind of value she had to expend to make it a fair deal, and Asuna realized Misumi wouldn't rest until they were even, so she forced herself to accept the deal and ordered a gâteau chantilly aux fraises—a strawberry shortcake with Darjeeling tea.

The cream was just as light as Asuna preferred, and the strawberries were fresh, but she couldn't really tell if she liked the flavor. They finished eating without sharing more than a few words, and as they left the hotel, Asuna told Misumi, "Thank you for the treat. Now we're both guilty of breaking school rules, so don't worry," and went home. At the time, she had no idea about the strange kind of friendship this would develop into.

"…You first told me about *SAO* a while after the second term started. I remember it well," Asuna said softly. She took a deep breath and repeated, "but it wasn't your fault I went into *SAO*, Mito. I think I would have put the NerveGear on that day even if we'd never met."

She reached out and put her hand over Misumi's where it rested limply on the sofa cushion.

Misumi lifted her gaze to Asuna, then shook her head again. "Even still, I need to look you in the face, in reality, and apologize… and I need to thank you, too. You beat that game of death and helped us all go free. If I really wanted to, I could've found a way to look up your information…"

"First of all, it wasn't my work alone that beat the game—not at

all. And I didn't go looking for you, either. There was one time after coming back to the real world that I tried to get in touch, but I couldn't reach you by phone or e-mail or messages. I thought maybe I could ask someone at Eterna for help…but…"

"They wouldn't have known. I didn't return to school until a year later, and I didn't tell anyone at school my new contact information," Misumi murmured.

Asuna hesitated for a while, then said, "So…you went back to Eterna."

She had to resist the urge to ask why she hadn't chosen to come to the returnee school instead. Whether it was her parents' wishes or Misumi's own decision, it was an important and private matter that shouldn't be pried into.

Misumi bobbed her head, then looked from Asuna to Tomo. "Argo…I mean, Miss Hosaka, thank you for obliging my selfish request."

Tomo hadn't said anything for a while, but her mouth curled into a grin. "Oh, please, I'm the one who should be thanking you. I was expecting to be turned down three times or so. The same way you did when I tried to make a custom order back then."

"…That makes it sound like I was very full of myself, but it was simply because I had too large a backlog of orders."

"I told you again and again to hire someone… You wouldn't even use an NPC storekeeper!"

"I wanted to keep things agile. You were always a lone wolf, after all. Or should I say lone rat?"

Listening to her two old friends' rapid chitchat made Asuna feel like she was back in the *SAO* days. She blinked rapidly. Between the wood interior, the rain dripping on the reddening leaves outside, and the burbling of the fountain, she was having trouble telling if this was the real world or virtual world.

She shook her head a little and interrupted, "Argo, Mito…um, can you explain how it is we all came to be here today…?"

They first looked at Asuna, then at each other. Tomo was the first to speak.

"Well, uh…I told ya how I was looking up info about a particular

SAO Survivor the other day, didn't I?"

"You did," she confirmed.

Rath's Seijirou Kikuoka had hired Tomo to investigate a certain VRMMO. It had been released by a company belonging to Kamura, the developers of the Augma, but based on the number of concurrent users, they were clearly losing money, but rather than trying to refurbish it or shut it down, they quietly continued to operate the game at a loss. It was a strange situation, but it wasn't completely unheard-of in MMOs, and it was a mystery why Kikuoka would go to the trouble of hiring a researcher to get to the bottom of it.

As payment for her research, Tomo requested confidential material from the Ministry of Internal Affairs's Virtual Division: private data of a particular *SAO* Survivor. She had told Asuna about that, but hadn't revealed who that survivor was, and Asuna hadn't pressed her for details.

Tomo took a deep drink of cold water to steel her resolve. Glass still in hand, she continued, "I don't know their real name, their player name, or even their gender. There are only two clues I have: locational data about where they were in Aincrad at a particular month, day, and minute, and a nickname that might not be accurate. So I had the gentleman from the Virtual Division analyze the activity logs of all the players saved on the old *SAO* server, and yesterday was when I found out the results…"

Asuna and Misumi were leaning forward without realizing it. Tomo just shrugged.

"They said no player matches those criteria."

"Huh…? Is that possible…?" Asuna asked.

Misumi added, "The activity logs can't be wrong. Was the locational data accurate?"

"Yep. I saw it for myself. I saw them talking with members of Laughing Coffin…"

"…!!"

Asuna heard the air being sucked through her own teeth. Laughing Coffin was a red guild that committed all manner of murder and atrocities in *SAO*. Even after the deadly game had been

cleared, the evil Laughing Coffin had spread continued to cast a shadow on the Seed Nexus.

Asuna was suddenly aware of the dryness of her throat, and she reached for her glass. She realized there was still tea in the pot and poured it into the empty cup. It was already cold, but lukewarm liquid was what she wanted.

After drinking down the helping of Darjeeling, Asuna asked Tomo, "Was the survivor you were looking for a member of Laughing Coffin?"

"Nah…I don't think they were official. The cursor was normal, and I didn't see the LC guild tag, either…"

"Oh, right…In *SAO*, players you had no connection to only displayed an HP bar and a guild tag," Misumi murmured.

"That's the thing," Tomo said, grimacing, "and it was the only time I ever saw that player, before or after. I was almost about to burst out of my hiding spot and try challenging them to a duel. At least then I could see their player name."

"Don't even think of it!" Asuna snapped, louder than she meant to. "Dueling PKs are their specialty. I'm not doubting you or your ability, but challenging them is suicide."

"A-chan, you're talkin' in present tense," Tomo pointed out. It took her a moment to realize what she'd done. They were in the real world, and Laughing Coffin was long gone. Asuna sat back, dumbfounded. Tomo touched her arm and said, "Thanks for your concern, though. But I'm fine, I won't get into danger… I just want to settle some work I left unfinished in Aincrad."

"…I understand how you feel," murmured Misumi. "I think just about all the survivors left some regrets behind, whether large or small. I still think about things, wishing I'd only done *that*, or if I'd only done something different…You said you're not going to do anything dangerous, Argo, but I think it's plenty dangerous trying to chase down people related to Laughing Coffin. You haven't forgotten what happened in *Gun Gale Online* at the end of last year, have you?"

"'Course not. Even if I find out who it is I'm lookin' for, I wouldn't go charging after 'em alone. I intend to submit the information to

the relevant authorities and leave it at that," she said simply. Asuna wanted to ask who the relevant authorities were in this case. But that was when Misumi's no-bake cheesecake and vervain tea arrived.

She took a sip of the lemon-scented herbal tea and let out a relaxed breath, then looked to Asuna. "You've already eaten, haven't you? Sorry I showed up late."

"No, it's fine… If I'd known you were coming, I would have waited to order with you," she replied, throwing a nasty look at Tomo, who was smugly chewing on a second biscuit. Tomo was the one who had invited Misumi and kept it a secret to surprise Asuna.

But how had Tomo gotten in touch with her? They'd met in *SAO*, and she couldn't believe they would have traded information while in there.

Tomo seemed to pick up on Asuna's suspicion, so she resumed her explanation.

"…Anyway, my last great hope in the activity log turned out to be a big swing and a miss. My gentleman client felt bad about it and said he'd pay me extra for the job, so I thought I'd take that favor and use it to be a little nosy," Tomo said, watching Misumi stuff cheesecake into her mouth. She bowed and said, "Sorry, Mi-chan. I got your contact information from the Virtual Division's database."

"I figured it was something like that." Misumi chuckled. She twirled the fork deftly in her fingertips. "This cheesecake makes us even. I once tamed Asuna with the cake combo here, too."

"Ahh, so that's why you asked for this place. It was a memorable spot for you two, huh?" Tomo remarked, nodding.

Asuna found herself filled with an indescribable emotion. They had only met again a week ago, but Tomo/Argo had probably been thinking about Asuna and Mito for much, much longer. When she learned Mito wasn't among Kirito's team of friends, she decided to pass up extra pay to bring these two old friends together.

"…Thank you, Argo," Asuna said again.

Tomo laughed self-consciously. "Aw, shucks, it was just a whim. But I'm glad to hear ya say that, because I was worrying I'd been meddling for nothing. Plus, I had a bit of a personal speculation involved, too."

"Speculation…?"

"I wanted to ask you two something." The smile vanished, and she took a deep breath. "About this *SAO* Survivor I'm lookin' for. I said the only things I knew were locational data and an unclear nickname…right?"

"You did. What was the nickname?" Asuna asked. Misumi leaned forward.

Behind her curled bangs, Tomo's eyes briefly darkened with hesitation. "Menthol. Did you ever hear of a name like that in the *SAO* days?"

"Huh…?"

Asuna stopped, looking to Misumi, then back to Tomo. "You mean, minty, cool…*that* menthol?"

"Probably."

"……Well, there was a Mint in the KoB, and I feel like I remember a Melton Wool in the DDA, but no one named Menthol…"

"Same," said Misumi, shaking her head.

"Argo, how are you so sure it's a nickname, not the player's official name?"

"Well, because I went to the Monument of Life in Blackiron Palace and went through all the player names looking for anything adjacent to 'Menthol' and following up on each of 'em. But they were all dead ends."

"…You went to those lengths?" Asuna said, aghast. "I know Laughing Coffin was the biggest impediment to beating the game, but the main brain trust was PoH, Xaxa, and Johnny Black, and the others were just loyal…no, more like brainwashed pawns. Why are you so fixated on this Menthol person…?"

"True, I thought the same thing…at the time," Tomo said, her voice tinged with a burgeoning pain. She glanced around and lowered her volume, as though worried about being overheard. "I can't be sure of this, so it's just speculation. I think all those creative ways of killing Laughing Coffin developed…the stuff outside just monster-PKing and poisoning—I'm talkin' about duel PKs, sleep PKs, hallway PKs, everything that involved clever manipulation of the game systems… I think pretty much all those ideas might've come

from Menthol.”

9

A gentle, bright melody near my eyes pulled my consciousness from the dark, dense depths up toward the surface.

With my wits half-awake and half-asleep, I wondered which of the three worlds it was… *ALO* had an automatic disconnection function, but *Unital Ring* wasn't as overprotective and would keep the avatar in place if you fell asleep while in the game. If anything attacked you, you would easily die. So there was no real reason to fall asleep in the game, and the only bedding we had at that moment was lumpy and scratchy and woven out of dried grasses.

The Underworld wouldn't automatically disconnect you, either, but the beds in Central Cathedral were unbelievably smooth and soft, even for apprentice janitors. Whatever was supporting my body was neither lumpy nor smooth, but a mattress of a polyester pad and high-resistance urethane. It was my bed in the real world.

That much was obvious, but after at least sixty seconds of remaining inert, I finally went through the laborious task of blinking my eyes open. The light coming through the curtains was pale, weakly gray. I listened hard and heard a rushing, trickling sound; there was rain outside.

Without getting up, I felt around for my phone and brought it up to my face. There was a kitten icon on a message notification on the lock screen. I wondered who it was…then saw the name said *Asuna*. That was when I realized the picture was not of a real kitten, but of the expertly made cat robot, Rath's "Yon-chan." She'd just taken the robot in for a test the previous day and had already made it her messenger icon.

I smirked and touched the screen, allowing it to see my face and unlock the phone. There was a message from Asuna in the window

that popped up, but it had no text in it, just a picture.

It was two smiling girls, standing side by side before a beautiful backdrop of red autumn trees. The one on the right in the off-white balmacaan coat was Asuna, but the girl on the left in the ash-purple riding jacket was unfamiliar to me. She was an inch or two taller than Asuna and had her long hair in a ponytail. Was it a friend from the returnee school I didn't recognize? If so, she would have written something in the text.

…But once I got a better look, the ponytailed girl with the cool features was very vaguely familiar to me. Where had I seen her before? If it wasn't school, it'd have to be Rath—but she was too young to be an employee, and it didn't explain why she would be taking a picture with Asuna.

The only other answer was the virtual world, but in *Unital Ring* and *ALO*, avatars could be completely unrelated to real-life appearance, so seeing a photo in real life that stimulated my memory didn't make sense. Liz and Silica were some exceptions, but that was because their characters were still based on their old *SAO* avatars, which were generated from your real body…

"…Oh!" I yelped, finally realizing the answer.

That was it. She wasn't a student at the returnee school, but she *was* an *SAO* Survivor. Once my mind was on that track, distant memories locked into place and came to my mind, and I exclaimed, "Ohhh…"

It was Ashley, the greatest tailor in Aincrad. I brought her materials from a named dragon, and she fashioned the Blackwyrm Coat for me. If not for her armor and Lisbeth's swords, I wouldn't have been able to keep fighting on the front line. Like Argo, her whereabouts were unknown after *SAO* was beaten, but she definitely made it back to the real world safely.

I tapped the text entry box and typed, *That's great that you got to see her. Tell Ashley I'm delighted to see her well*. Then I sent the message and put my phone on the wireless charging pad.

It was 11:50 AM, and I'd slept for nearly a full six hours, but if Asuna hadn't set off my phone, I could have slept for another two

hours.

That thought caused my stomach to gurgle and shrivel up. In truth, it wasn't the time to be so indulgent with my sleep. I needed to find a way to rescue Eolyne Herlentz after his abduction at the space force base.

He was probably—no, almost certainly—being held in the *Principia* mega-dragoncraft. As the commander of the Integrity Pilots and the son of Stellar Unification Council Chairman Orvas Herlentz, he was an ultra-valuable individual, so I didn't think they'd torture or instantly execute him, but Emperor Agumar was just as cold and cruel as Emperor Vecta, with the way he ordered his own dragoncraft crew to commit a suicide attack. If he learned Eolyne would not follow him, there was no telling what he might do.

Counterintuitive as it was, at that point my best hope was Tohkouga Istar, the one who had abducted Eolyne. Istar had pressed a knife to Eolyne's throat and damaged the skin, but for some reason, I was certain the knife would draw no more blood. They had called each other "Kouga" and "Eol," so I had a feeling there was a long relationship between the two of them. He might be unable to disobey the emperor's orders due to the seal on his right eye, but Istar would still do what he could to avoid harming Eolyne, I reassured myself, rolling out of bed.

There was a strange object resting on the floor right in front of me. It was a rectangular object, about a foot wide and a foot and a half tall, with an aluminum surface. It wasn't as heavy as it looked. Using the bolted-on carrying handle on top, I was just barely able to lift it.

On the lower part of the object were connections for power and communication, both of which had cables plugged in. On the other side was a control panel and power button. I turned it on, and a line a bit below the center split the whole thing in two. The upper half automatically pushed itself outward, revealing the interface on the inside.

Laser-etched just below the touchpad interface was a Rath logo and *STLP1.0*. It was the Soul Translator Portable, Version 1.

The previous evening, when Asuna and I left the Roppongi office,

Seijirou Kikuoka took us each home in his car. Naturally, he wasn't simply doing it out of the goodness of his heart. There was an outrageous souvenir loaded in the car for each of us.

Asuna got Yon-chan, the kitten-shaped robot. And I got the STLP.

As the name suggested, this was a downsized version of the gigantic STL in the Roppongi office, just small and light enough that a person could carry it. Its ability to read the resolution (if that's what you wanted to call it) of the soul was inferior to that of the real STL, apparently, but it allowed you to dive into the Underworld with the mnemonic visuals system and even enabled the use of Incarnation. If not for it, I would've needed to ride my motorcycle for over an hour to reach Roppongi after getting Alice's emergency request the previous night. Naturally, I couldn't have stopped the Avus-class dragoncraft from crashing into the space force base, and I didn't even want to imagine what would've happened to the people at the base like Eolyne, Ronie, and Tiese.

Had Kikuoka lent me the STLP knowing the situation unfolding in the Underworld, or was it just a lucky coincidence? Yeah, probably a coincidence.

I checked the clock again. I was definitely forgetting something. But what was it?

At that exact moment, there was a high-speed knocking on my door, which shot open a split second later. Suguha burst into the room in her tracksuit.

"How long are you going to sleep in?!" she shouted. There was a tray in her left hand, which she shoved in my face. "Now eat this!"

"W-wait, wait. First of all, I'm already awake."

"You were sleeping five minutes ago!" she pointed out, which I had to admit was true.

I took the tray from her. It held some cold green tea and cucumber sandwiches.

"Oooh, thanks," I said, sitting on the bed. I placed the tray on my side table, quenched my thirst with some green tea, and grabbed one of the sliced sandwiches.

It was a special recipe by my father, Minetaka Kirigaya, who was on work assignment in America. The sandwich itself was very

simple, featuring only cucumbers, but they had to be evenly sliced, soaked in a mixture of salt, pepper, and wine vinegar, and then dried out and placed between thinly buttered bread. It was more work than it seemed.

Suguha had probably intended for us to eat these sandwiches together. But when I didn't wake up, she just let me sleep until she couldn't wait any longer. At the very least, I needed to savor the taste of her hard work.

"You can down that thing in one bite! C'mon, hurry!" she rushed me, sitting next to me on the bed. I stuck the whole piece in my mouth. I savored the pleasant crunch of the cucumbers and their gentle, smooth flavor, and swallowed.

"That was good. You're getting better at this."

"Really?" she said, chuckling to herself. Then she got herself under control. "I mean, there's only five minutes left!"

"Why? What's happening at noon…?"

"So you *did* forget. We're going to meet with the *AD* people!"

"……Oh."

Suguha picked up another sandwich and jammed it in my open mouth.

After eating, I cleaned up and brushed my teeth at triple speed, then rushed back upstairs to my room. I expected to get another round of *hurry, hurry* when I opened the door, but Suguha was just sitting there on the bed, staring with wonder at the mysterious object on the floor. My first instinct was to freak out, but then I reconsidered the situation and realized I wasn't in trouble at all.

"Hey, Big Brother, what is this?"

"It says right on it."

"Yeah, but what's the STLP…? Huh?!"

Saying the letters out loud helped her realize what they meant. She tumbled down from the bed to get closer and stared at the front panel up close.

"Are you telling me this is some kind of mini version of the STL?! Can you use this to dive into the Underworld?!"

"Yep. Mr. Kikuoka delivered it to me yesterday," I said, recalling the events of the previous night.

The STLP had been in the trunk of the electric sedan, and even with its special carrying case, it was a bit too much for one person to move. Mom was still at work and Suguha was in *Unital Ring*, so Kikuoka agreed to help me carry it up to my room.

It was a very strange, almost surreal scene to have Seijirou Kikuoka in my bedroom, dressed in his suit. I just stood there and watched him perform the initial setup and testing of the STLP. Aside from my parents, Suguha, Yui, Asuna, and Alice during the delivery incident, I hadn't had anyone else in my room since elementary school.

When his job was done, Kikuoka looked around my room with a strange, subtle smile that was impossible to interpret, said it was a lovely room, and left. I could only wonder which part he was referring to. Supposedly, he was something of a minimalist himself, so maybe it was a serious compliment. One day, I'd have to raid his place in the Shinonome area and find out if he was being serious or just paying me lip service…

"Wait, what time last night?" Suguha asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I glanced at the clock on the wall and answered, "Around the time you were getting through the staircase dungeon, I think."

"Oh, I see… Did you at least serve him tea?"

"No, he left right away."

"He's such a busy guy…"

I nodded. Suguha brushed the outer panel of the STLP.

"Let me use this sometime."

"Sure, but…I thought you used the Terraria account to…"

"Anyway, time for *Unital Ring*!" Suguha interrupted, getting to her feet. She shoved the AmuSphere onto her head and lay down on the bed next to the wall. I would've told her to dive from her own room, but it was already past noon.

I put on my own AmuSphere and got down next to Suguha. We shouted, "Link Start!" in unison. Then I traveled through a rainbow tunnel, and as soon as my feet touched virtual ground, I shot

upright.

Instantly, I heard a voice say, "You're late!" and I hunched my neck guiltily.

Looking up, Sinon was sitting atop a thick beam with a musket resting on her shoulder. Next to her was Yui, holding a short bow. The roof over their heads was 70 percent caved in, giving a very clear look at the thin clouds in the sky overhead.

"Good morning, Papa!" Yui beamed, waving.

I lifted a hand to wave back. "Sorry I'm late! Thanks for standing watch!"

I had logged out of *Unital Ring* the previous night—er, that morning—at four o'clock. For the eight hours since, Yui had performed security for this little base all by herself, mostly. I'd said I didn't want to take advantage of her convenient AI features, so it galled me to force her to work like that, but on the other hand, ever since her birth in Aincrad, she'd been an observer, and now that she was actually a player with her own agency, who was I to tell her not to make the most of her abilities?

While Yui looked off into the distance again, soft footsteps approached from behind me. I turned to see a massive black panther coming up to butt its head against my chest. I scratched it under the chin, eliciting a happy, deep purr.

"Thanks to you too, Kuro."

"*Grau!*"

I didn't know how much the lapispine dark panther actually understood human speech, but it sat down on the spot anyway and waved its tail back and forth eagerly. Smirking, I opened my inventory and pulled out some dried meat to offer.

But where was Suguha? We should have logged in at the same time.

I looked around; I was in a fairly large building. It had been almost ready to collapse when we found it, but the group had repaired the stone walls and wooden floors with materials on hand, so it was now a solid temporary base with a decent amount of sturdiness and comfort. Unfortunately, the roof was still full of holes, but we had to leave them, because once the building was completely

repaired, it would be registered as a primary structure and might summon a local boss beast to come and attack.

This building apparently had been a guard station rather than a civilian home, so there were almost no interior walls—just one large room and two smaller storage rooms. There was a line of Crude Wood and Dried Grass Beds lined up against the wall of the big room, and the logged-out members of the group—Asuna, Argo, Silica, Holgar, Zarion, and Ceecee—were resting on them. I had been on standby on the floor instead because we just didn't have enough beds, but even *Unital Ring* wasn't going to give me a dead leg from crouching on the ground for hours at a time.

Any members who weren't resting on the beds were already logged in, but the only ones awake in the building were me, Yui, Sinon, Kuro, Pina sleeping soundly in Silica's bed, and Aga, who was curled up at Asuna's feet.

For the time being, I went outside with Kuro. The sky was cloudy, but the temperature was mild, and the breeze from the river to the south ruffled my collar pleasantly.

Aside from the guard station we were using as a base, the ruined village had a stone watchtower and a wooden stable. The watchtower faced south, so it was probably meant to monitor the path leading down to the first tier. Not that many people were likely to get past the staircase dungeon, what with the swarm of giant hornets at the entrance and the golem guarding the exit.

Or, seen another way, the people who built this monitoring station were *that* concerned about an invasion from the lower level. You would think they could just fill in and seal off the dungeon leading up entirely, but maybe they had some need to get down from up there, too.

Between the very artificial three-tiered concentric circles and the perfectly circular basins around the first tier, what the hell *was* this place meant to be anyway? The scout party from *Apocalyptic Date* had encountered dark elves in the western forests of the second tier. Why had those elves called themselves Lyusula…?

I was standing outside the station pondering this question when I heard Lisbeth say, "Hey, Kirito, over here!"

Over on the west side of the ruins, some of our friends had gathered. There was Leafa, too, who should've appeared when I did. I trotted over and found they were facing someone else. I popped my head around Klein on the left end and immediately blurted out, "What the—?"

Standing a short distance away was a bipedal foxperson with slender limbs and brilliant dark-red fur. It was one of the four therians from *AD* who had kidnapped Yui the previous day, Azuki.

"Why are you here, Azuki?" I asked. "Weren't we supposed to meet at the western bridge?"

Azuki thrust forth her pointed snout and demanded, "What in the world are you talking about?! I had to come here to find you because you didn't show up on time!"

"Oh yeah. Sorry about that," I said, scratching my head. The previous day, I'd told them I would be at the bridge to the west of the ruins by noon today, but the digital time readout in the lower right corner of my vision said it was already 12:10. "Wait…did you come here from that bridge in just ten minutes, Azuki?"

She puffed out her chest proudly. "Maybe next time you'll respect my speed. Out of the two hundred therians who are on the second tier, I'm either the fifth or the sixth fastest," she boasted.

Then why did you leave it up to Masaru the monkey-man to capture Yui? I wondered, but I guessed asking her that would only make her angrier. Azuki probably didn't have the strength to pull it off.

"So is the fastest one a cheetah therian?" Leafa asked curiously.

"Yeah," Azuki admitted. "But cheetahs don't have staying power. Neither do I, though. For overall speed, I think it'd be one of the antelopes, like a springbok… Hey, stop trying to trick me into giving you information. That'll cost you!"

She gave us all a nasty look, ending with an especially cold stare at me.

"All right, Kirito, let's hear your answer! Are you going to fight alongside us or not?!"

"We will."

"And let me warn you, after stringing us along this far, you can't

just stonewall us and give us nothing in… Wait, what? Did you just say you will?"

"We will."

"……"

Azuki's hostility was immediately deflated. Her long lashes beat several times as she processed my answer.

"…O-oh. Well, thanks. Umm…in that case, you should meet with our leader. And you also need to friend me for contact purposes."

"Got it."

I opened my window and quickly added Azuki as a friend. In moments, Leafa and Lisbeth were crowding in, too.

"Hey, me too!" "Yeah, don't forget about me!"

"……Fine, if you want," Azuki acquiesced.

Just then, the previously silent Klein shot his right hand straight up into the air and shouted, "I—I also request your friendship!"

In the moment, I couldn't tell if everyone else's silence was out of admiration, shock, or just simple secondhand embarrassment.

The leader of the forty-person *AD* scout party was a feline named Cathpalug who usually went by the nickname Casper.

Azuki befriended Leafa, Lisbeth, and Klein, then sent a message to Casper, got a message back at once, and told them, "The meeting place will be the midpoint between here and our camp. It'll be at nine o'clock tonight. Got that?"

"W-wait…how far apart are we talking here?"

"Umm, about a hundred and eighty miles."

"A hundred and…"

I was speechless. I knew it would be far, but when you said it out loud, the distance was almost unimaginable. In the real world, that was a trip you'd take the Shinkansen for.

"…So you're saying you traveled over three hundred and fifty miles to kidnap Yui? How many hours…how many *tens* of hours did that take…?"

"Ummmmmmmm…"

Azuki hemmed and hawed for a bit, then decided she might as

well go ahead with it.

"There's an item that triples your speed and stamina…a secret elixir. With that, even Rascal the Raccoon could run sixty miles an hour. So overall, it was a little under seven hours…"

"Sixty miles an hour?! Then why didn't Masaru use that when he was running away with Yui?"

"We didn't expect you would ride pets to chase us," Azuki admitted, glancing at Kuro. The panther was sitting next to me. "The elixir only works on therians and beasts. So you'd have to give it to your pets, then ride on them. Do you have any other rideable pets aside from that one and your lizard?"

"Umm…"

I still wasn't sure if it was going to be possible to get Misha there. Instead, Friscoll the negotiator stepped in to say, "We've got a huge bear, but it's not as fast as the panther here, and it can't get through the staircase dungeon."

"Oh…yeah, it seems like the dungeon serves as a pet-sized gate," said Azuki, her fine whiskers twitching. "And if you try to tame a monster around here right now, you're not going to have the level or affinity to make the trip in time…which means only you and one other person are going to be able to reach the meeting place."

"Wouldn't that automatically make the other person Yui? She's the only one with the capability to talk to dark elves…"

"At her size, she could ride on Otto's back. Assuming she's fine with that."

"…We'd have to ask her," I suggested.

From the guard station over twenty yards away, Yui shouted as loud as she could, "I'll be fine! I'm excited to get a ride on a tiger!"

Azuki responded by waving to Yui, then said to me, "Sheesh, did she hear the conversation we're having from that distance? She's got better ears than me."

"I suppose so," I said with a grimace. Yui was capable of picking up and deciphering very faint sound signals a biological brain wouldn't even identify as words, which some people might consider a kind of cheating. But like her skill with the bow, this was simply a tool she possessed that enabled her to protect herself and her

friends in this world she was cast into without a choice. Besides, even if I told Azuki and her friends Yui was an AI, they wouldn't believe me.

Meanwhile, Azuki glanced at Yui and Sinon again, then curled up her fluffy tail. "She's such a sweet girl. I feel bad that we scared her so badly…"

"You should be. You could've just come up and asked for a negotiation," remarked Klein. Azuki threw him a nasty glare.

"You can only say that because you didn't end up fighting for your life on both sides. Us *AD* folks got attacked by *SoulSoil* on the left and *BluePara* on the right. We lost a third of our players in the first three days."

"Oh…man, that sounds rough…," said Klein, immediately sympathetic.

SoulSoil was short for *Soulless Soil*, a VRMMO with a very hard-core audience and outlook, set in a dark and heavy setting, where one simple mistake could lead to instant death.

Meanwhile, *BluePara* was short for *Blue Parallelism*, a VRMMO with rare cel-shaded anime rendering and a stylish and clean aesthetic that was popular with younger gamers. Both were among the highest-ranking on the Seed Nexus's concurrent user charts. Stuck between the two of them, I thought it was no surprise they'd lose a third of their players.

"Yeah, but, Azu-Azu, I thought *AD* barely had any kind of infighting since the start of this game. Why wasn't there a battle for leadership?" Friscoll asked.

"Who are you calling Azu-Azu?" she snapped. "Anyway, we didn't need to fight over it because we already have the greatest leader we could ever want!"

"Is that the Cathpalug you were talking about?"

"No. Casper's a really great leader, too, but there's someone else above that. They're the first one in *AD* to reincarnate as a high mytherian, a legendary character type that's super hard to achieve and has a stupidly long questline…*and* it's an elder dragonewt, the hardest of all…"

Azuki stopped herself there and jabbed a finger at Friscoll's face,

exposing her adorable little finger beans.

"I told you not to try extracting information from me! Ugh, we're done here! I'm going back!"

"N-no, wait!" I shouted, quickly stopping her before she could hurry away. "When will we get that elixir? Also, aren't you going to show us the way to the meeting place?"

"Oh, right. Umm…," Azuki called up her ring menu again, looked at the communications tab, then said, "We need to arrange some things, so let's meet at four o'clock at the same collapsed bridge again."

"Got it. Just two more things… Are there any downsides to this elixir? Like, it lowers your maximum HP or has a small chance of killing you, or…?"

"Why would we drink something like that?" Azuki said, annoyed. She cleared her throat. "There is a downside, though, of course. It accelerates the loss of TP and SP. That's it. So as long as you bring plenty of food and water, you'll be fine."

"Okay. And the other thing is…does the elixir work on birds, too?"

"It does. In *Apocalyptic Date*, avithians are considered therians. You're not thinking of, like…taming any old bird and holding its leg while it flies, are you? Just so you know, the elixir only boosts speed and stamina, not physical strength!"

"I know, I know," I reassured her, but Azuki's triangular ears continued to twitch suspiciously.

Eventually she murmured, "Well, good," and leaped backward, lifting her hand in salute. "See you at four. And don't be late this time!"

With that warning, she turned and ran off. When she said fifth or sixth fastest, she meant it. The slender silhouette rapidly distanced herself until she rounded a gentle hill and was out of sight.

A few seconds later, Leafa and Lisbeth said in unison, "So… *cuuuuuuute!!*"

"Did you see that, Lis?! Her ears! Her whiskers! They were moving just like a real fox's!"

"I did! And that gorgeous, fluffy, silky pelt… Oh, I should have asked if I could fluff it with my fingers!"

"We'll make sure to ask next time we meet her!"

"I'll fluff it, even if she says no!"

Despite their excitement, all I could remember was the time I splattered a Rotten Shot against that fox girl's face—not that I was going to bring it up. Instead, I stepped aside and spoke to Klein and Friscoll.

"Listen…I think it's going to end up as me and Asuna and Yui going to meet with their leader, but a hundred and eighty miles one way means we probably won't be back the same day, and depending on the negotiations, we might end up traveling to the *AD* camp instead. In that case, we might not return for about three days."

"That makes sense. I wanna go, too… I bet Casper the cat is a real cutie…," said Klein, getting a far-off look in his eyes.

I ignored him and continued, "The thing is, I checked on Ruis na Ríg before coming here, and it was looking pretty chaotic…Agil says he suspects the *ALO* players who have moved in are going to start demanding the NPC living spaces for themselves…"

"Ah, yeah… I looked into that myself, and it turns out the news about Ruis na Ríg offering level-3 protection has spread pretty widely at the Stiss Ruins…"

Protection was the name for special effects granted to the log cabin that was the primary structure of Ruis na Ríg. At level 3, it offered a maximum of 100,000 extra durability to all secondary structures within 150 feet of the primary structure. The wood or stone huts people could build on their own at this point had a durability of maybe 3,000 or 4,000, and a lean-to made of branches and twigs might have 1,000 if you were lucky. Therefore, a bonus of 100,000 was a truly massive difference.

Klein returned from his world of dreams to scratch his stubbled beard and mutter, "And the protection area's completely filled at this point. They're selling a single hut for about eight hundred to a thousand els."

"Eight hund…?! I don't even have *one* hundred."

"Oh yeah, you weren't there for the gilnaris hornet fight, Kiri, my man. That nest was absolutely packed with riches." Klein grinned. I gnashed my teeth. If a hut outside the walls was going for 1,000

mels, then how much would Ruis na Ríg itself fetch as a whole? It was a pointless exercise to wonder; I snorted and got back to the topic at hand.

"…So I want to fix the situation before we get to people actually making those demands. I've got two radical solutions. We could either build another structure at least five hundred yards from the log cabin and raise that one up to level 3 next, or level-up our log cabin even further. I'd like to knock out one of the two before Asuna and I have to leave in three hours…"

"Hmmm. Three hours," Friscoll murmured thoughtfully. "It's an hour-long round trip between here and Ruis na Ríg, so you'd have two hours down there. Either one would be real tough, but I think the level-up might be the better bet. You heard about the group of migrants who built a house by the river that got smashed by a boar boss monster, right? It was insanely powerful, they said."

"I'd kind of like to try fighting it, but not to beat it. I want to be thoroughly prepared and find a way to tame it. So I guess leveling-up the log cabin it is… The problem is, how much building and adding do we need to do to level it up…?"

"That's information we don't have yet. I mean, there's no way any player home in *UR* is at level 4 yet. There's not enough material near the starting point, and the boss monsters are crazy strong if you leave that area…The *Asuka* and *Apocalyptic Date* folks are at the second tier only because they gave up on building a mid-base on the first tier and just put together supply porter squads of, like, a hundred players at a time to stay supplied."

"Whoaaa…," I murmured, using two-thirds of my mind to mull over what Friscoll was telling me, while the remaining third delved into memories.

It was January of the previous year that I'd met this thin-faced salamander in a huge cavern in Alfheim called the Lugru Corridor. Leafa and I were heading for the World Tree when we were waylaid by a huge regiment of salamanders, one of whom was Friscoll. He was the only survivor, and he easily accepted the deal I offered him. As we parted ways, I thought I'd never see him again, but one year and nine months later, we ran into each other at random in a

different world altogether and were now companions. You never know where life will take you…

But now wasn't the time to be lost in remembrance. It was twelve thirty, and if I was going back to Ruis na Ríg, I needed to be out of there by one o'clock, but I also needed to have all my info straight.

"When you say porters…you're talking about a group with a bare minimum of gear that's designed solely for carrying supplies, right? And they're having them run laps from the starting point to the second tier and back…? I would assume they've got a safe route figured out, but it sounds dangerous to me."

"I mean, obviously it's dangerous," said Klein, glancing to the southern sky. "I wanted to build a safe round between Ruis na Ríg and the Maruba River, so I put up fences and surrounded it with walls, but the more you try to reinforce it, the stronger the mobs that come around, it feels like. I don't know what the *AD* and *Asuka* folks are doing to ensure safety, but it's not the kind of game that allows for big groups of weakly armed people to go traipsing back and forth endlessly without disaster."

"Agreed."

"Same."

The three of us crossed our arms and thought. *Asuka* was a rival, plain and simple, and *AD* would ultimately be one, too, but we were at a stage where there might be some teamwork in the cards, and I didn't want to suffer any major losses at that point. When we had our meeting, I needed to remember to ask how they were ensuring the safety of their supply line. Not that they were likely to tell me…

"About that, Kirito."

I turned around to face the speaker. Newly logged in, with Pina on her head, Silica stood there accompanied by Leafa and Lisbeth.

"Hey, Silica… About what?"

"The supply line. We need a way to carry food and materials from Ruis na Ríg to this base, right?"

"That's right…and there's this wood-louse-looking boss on the cliff face, right? We can't fight it on a vertical battlefield, so I assume we'll just have to trudge our way up and down the staircase dungeon…"

Just that morning, Silica and Lisbeth had come back from their scouting at the cliff to give us their hard-fought intelligence report, as I recalled. They looked at each other and grinned.

"We might not need to go climbing up and down," Silica announced. Even Klein and Friscoll were confused by this.

Lisbeth held up a foot-and-a-half length of rope in her hands and tugged it straight.

"This is a prototype rope woven with half hemp fibers and half Needy thread. We're going to test it out."

"Test out…what?" I asked.

Silica and Lisbeth spoke as one.

"A zip line!"

10

"Go ahead, Alice, dear."

She received the offered cup with both hands.

"Thank you, Lady Eydis," she replied, and despite knowing it was pointless, added, "Please, just call me Alice. I'm new to the knights. It hasn't even been a decade yet."

"Oh, I don't decide what I call people based on their number. I mean, I call Fanatio Fanatio."

"Then why…?"

"Because you're cute, of course," Eydis said without a hint of shame. She gave Alice a seat on the sofa and sat down next to her. In a very smooth and natural way, she reached out to caress Alice's head.

"Plus you did such, such good work last night, dear. As your senior, I need to make sure you get all the praise you deserve."

Selka sometimes looks bothered when I try to spoil her. Now I see how she feels, Alice thought, ready to give up. She waited until Eydis had her fill of contact.

They were in the middle of a significantly long room. The all-black furnishing was simple, but between the black marble walls and ceiling, the plush rugs made of wool from the black sheep of the southern empire, and the sofa made of leather from the same sheep, not a single square cen of the entire room looked cheap in the slightest.

There was a total of four sofas, each able to seat three, lined up in a row, while the wall they faced was all a glass window. Beyond it was a quietly glittering canopy of stars. But they couldn't open this window. They were sitting in the viewing lounge at the base of the *Black Lotus 02* space fortress hovering 30,000 mels above Centoria.

Eydis caressed Alice's head for a good ten seconds before she finally lowered her hand and leaned back against the soft back of the sofa, exhaling.

Like Alice, she had removed her armor and was wearing a black sleeveless uniform, leggings, and a narrow sword belt. The clothes had been made for her three hundred years ago, but the shine of the material made it look perfectly new, and the design didn't feel old in the slightest. It felt as though the overall craftsmanship of it was quite similar to the knight's uniform Kirito loved to wear.

Her noble features made her look a bit older than Alice, but not so much that Alice deserved to be treated like a little sister. To an Integrity Knight whose life had been frozen in place anyway, age might as well not even exist. Three hundred years ago would be Stellar…that is, Human Era 280 or so. The Integrity Knights were founded another century before that; Deusolbert liked to say the old Integrity Knighthood was much, much stricter when it came to behavior and protocol, so Eydis was sure to be strict on things when it mattered. Alice decided she would prefer to avoid doing anything impolite, if possible.

As she rested deep in the sofa, Eydis reached toward the low table and used Incarnation to lift the cup she'd placed there. With practiced ease, she slid it toward her and grabbed it, then brought it to her lips. But instead of taking a sip, she just savored the steamy aroma.

"Ahh, what a fragrance… The cofil tea of the past always had a bit of a roughness to the scent, no matter how carefully you prepared it…"

Alice was taken aback. She shook her head to recover and said, "It is a variety called Moonlit Evening that Asuna cultivated."

"Ohhh… And that sweetie Asuna and Kirito were the human realm… I mean, the Underworld's king and queen, was it? She's not at all like Administrator if she digs around in the dirt," Eydis whispered, taking a sip of cofil. "It's delicious," she added, turning her gaze to the stars outside.

Alice hadn't moved the cup from her hands, but now she tasted it. She had insisted again and again she would make this cofil tea,

but Eydis had insisted and ordered her to sit, so she had no choice but to obey. Her first sip was on the rich side, but very smooth and without any impurities to distract from the flavor. It was most certainly a grade or two above Alice's ability to brew it.

"It is delicious."

"Isn't it?" said Eydis, beaming. She tapped the armrest of the sofa with a finger on her other hand, bringing up a translucent window. This was tech that didn't exist in the past, but the holo-window itself functioned as a Stacia Window, so Eydis got used to it at once. She tapped a few menus to get the window before them to switch to a remote feed.

It was displaying the middle of Centoria. The very place where Central Cathedral had stood just half a day before.

The footage was an overhead view from the southeast of the vast grounds. Naturally, there was no giant white tower, just a yawning square hole fifty mels to a side. It was 12:40 in the afternoon, so Solus was almost directly overhead, but the entire grounds seemed to be swallowed up in shadow and unreached by sunlight.

The massive vertical shaft was completely surrounded by metal isolation barriers that jutted up from the ground. Yellow ropes were hung all around it, and guards in gray uniforms and caps stood watch at intervals around the shaft. It wasn't clear what orders they had, but the occasional glances upward suggested it wasn't a duty they were following, but a means of fighting off anxiety.

Eydis performed another operation on the window, causing the image to zoom out quickly and display all of Centoria instead. Only by looking from this angle was it clear what was casting a shadow on the cathedral grounds.

An artificial, wedge-shaped ship measuring three hundred mels wide. The mega-sized dragoncraft carrying the so-called emperor Agumar Wesdarath VI—the *Principia*.

It had hovered two kilors in the sky the previous night, but now it had descended to just five hundred mels. It was no coincidence that they had chosen the height the top floor of Central Cathedral was supposed to occupy.

The people of Centoria, and in particular the guards standing

watch over the grounds, were probably terrified that the dragoncraft was going to fall and crash into them. Even in broad daylight, the *Principia* could not be seen blowing any heat-element engine exhaust.

Eydis, who had been thinking along the same lines, said, "That dragoncraft thing that flew into the cathedral last night was blowing flame from heat elements behind it…but how is that huge one floating like that?"

"I have no idea. Airy's leading the research team, so I'm sure we'll have a theory before long…"

"I see…"

Eydis took another sip of cofil and adjusted the image yet again. She zoomed in and brought the focus downward. Eventually, the red sandstone buildings of South Centoria filled the window screen. It wasn't even a single kilor away from North Centoria, but the clothing of the people walking the streets and the variety of trees standing over them were completely different.

The video zoomed closer to what you might call an open café in the real world, an establishment serving light food in an outdoor setting. It was just around lunch, so the seats were mostly full, but there were no smiles on the faces. They huddled together, occasionally glancing up at the dark shadow filling the sky, and whispered to one another. There was no way to hear their voices, but the nature of the words was clear. They were discussing whether to evacuate the city or to stay put.

Emperor Agumar had used a projection of himself to announce he was the rightful ruler of the entire human realm, but all he'd done since then was lower the *Principia* to its current height, with no further messages. Most likely, Central Cathedral's flight and docking with the space fortress were far outside the emperor's expectations. He had flown the *Principia* two kilors above the cathedral the previous night to declare victory, but that cathedral now hovered thirty kilors over his head, and he clearly wasn't sure if it was accurate to declare victory again.

Of course, this side was pretty much stuck, too. The *Black Lotus 02* was loaded with a ton of weapons of all sizes, but if the *Principia*

crashed, the damage to Centoria would be immense, far beyond that of a simple Avus-class dragoncraft. If all the thousands of heat elements on board were released at once, it could literally transform all four sides of Centoria into a sea of flame.

So as the commander of the current Integrity Knighthood—which had only five waking members—Fanatio chose to wait and see how the emperor acted next. It was passive, to be sure, but Alice would have done the same if she were commander. At the very least, all the frozen knights the emperor was so determined to wipe out were safe and sound, so there was a sense of security that allowed them to wait to see what the enemy did.

Once Fanatio made that decision, Kirito and Asuna logged out before dawn. The others took turns bathing, while the *Black Lotus*'s caretaker, Lily Lou, kept an eye on the *Principia*. After that, they got some sleep in the two-person bedrooms on the ninety-second floor of the cathedral.

They split up the rooms between Tiese and Ronie, Fanatio and Eydis, Alice and Selka, and Airy and Natsu. Alice was excited about the chance to finally have a nice, long conversation with Selka, but as soon as she sat on the bed, exhaustion took her.

What was supposed to be a nap turned into six full hours of sleep, and when Selka finally woke her up, it was after ten o'clock. The enemy ship still had not moved, so the whole group ate breakfast together on the ninety-fourth floor and were essentially on free time until they received word of any updates.

Alice would need to log out soon, before she *really* started imposing on Dr. Koujiro, and she was concerned about the situation in *Unital Ring*, too. But if she left Selka now and found something terrible had happened by the time she returned, and they ended up separated again… It was impossible not to think about the worst. She sat around fretting until Selka, who had resumed making her thawing solution, told her she was being a distraction and should find somewhere else to go.

Dejected, Alice had plodded down the great stairs until Eydis caught up to her and suggested they go to the viewing lounge at the base of the *Black Lotus 02* so they could look down directly on

Cardina. Alice had no reason to say no, so they used the levitating platform on the eightieth floor to go all the way down to the first floor and went through the front door of the cathedral into the fortress. After a few twists and turns, they had reached the viewing platform, and there they were now.

If Alice wasn't going to log out, there was plenty to get done. Familiarizing herself with new sacred arts that had been developed in the two hundred years she was gone, studying the history of the Stellar Era and its geography, or even just cleaning the cathedral. But the more she rested on the sofa that seemed to cling to her body, and sipped on her cofil tea, the less she wanted to actually get up…

"Three centuries," Eydis murmured. Alice's eyelids snapped back open.

To her left, the black-ribbon-wearing knight's eyes seemed to be flickering as she gazed at the image of South Centoria's streets.

"…I knew the world would change in many ways after so much time…but not that the Axiom Church and Integrity Knighthood would no longer exist, and that horseless carriages would zoom down the streets, and that tourists from the Dark Territory would be visiting."

Indeed, there were goblins and orcs here and there in the image. Alice hesitated at first, then commented, "Lady Eydis, those demi-humans are not tourists, but rather immigrants, or perhaps their descendants."

"O…ohhhh. Really…"

She seemed stunned by this, but there was no hatred in her expression. She exhaled softly and resumed in a whisper.

"But the biggest shock…is learning that Lord Bercouli and Administrator are no longer with us."

"……Yes."

It was all Alice could manage to say. Eydis's hand moved to pat Alice's where it rested on the sofa cushion.

"I'm not blaming you for fighting Her Excellency, Alice, dear. Yes, I was startled to find out…but I had a feeling such a time might come eventually…"

"…Why did you?" Alice asked.

Eydis's gaze traveled to the ceiling of the room. "Administrator was too great…and had too much strength. And because of that, she was unable to trust in anyone but herself, in the truest sense. So if a peril were to arise that Her Excellency was unable to handle on her own…"

She did not continue that statement, but Alice felt she understood Eydis's implication.

The Otherworld War, also known as the final stress test, was that very peril. The pontifex chose not to strengthen the Integrity Knights and the armies of the four empires to fight off the armies of darkness marching on the Eastern Gate, but instead launched a mad project to transform half the humans in the realm into Sword Golems. Kirito, Eugeo, Alice, Cardinal, and her familiar Charlotte fought Administrator to prevent that plan from going into motion.

…But on that very topic, the Integrity Knighthood itself was a product of Administrator's paranoia. She wanted the ultimate protection for herself, but feared being betrayed, and thus developed the Synthesis Ritual to enforce eternal, unwavering loyalty. Those who became her knights lost their most precious memories, and in their place received programming called a Piety Module that went into their foreheads. That ritual changed their fluctlights and caused them to believe they had been summoned from the celestial realm to be Administrator's faithful servants.

That module remained in Alice's fluctlight. It was possible to remove it, but if the stolen memories were not put back in its place, her fluctlight would cease to function properly…meaning she would lose chunks of her memory and potentially even fall comatose. And even if she got her memory fragment back, her persona as the Alice Synthesis Thirty of today would probably be lost. On the other hand, the fragment of lost memories had been lost in the battle with the pontifex, so there was no way to remove the module anyway.

Like her, Eydis had lost memories of someone she loved and had a Piety Module inserted in their place. Fanatio probably hadn't explained the truth of the Synthesis Ritual to her. One day, Eydis, too, would learn the feelings she held toward the pontifex had been largely forced upon her.

Without thinking about it, Alice curled her fingers and squeezed Eydis's hand. When she realized what she was doing, it was too late. The senior knight smiled in wonderment.

"Lady Eydis," Alice said, searching for the right words, "I don't know if it's right for me to say this, as I turned my sword against the pontifex, but in her own way, she did love the Underworld. And I believe…her love also fell upon us, her knights."

"……"

Eydis was silent for a long time. Eventually she turned her hand over so she could squeeze back, palm to palm.

"…You're right. We may have been dolls that would eventually fall apart and be cast aside…but Her Excellency always treasured us. I don't regret the years I spent as an Integrity Knight."

"……Indeed," said Alice, leaning to the left to rest on Eydis's shoulder. The two Integrity Knights remained there for a time, watching the beautiful city displayed on the monitor.





11

It was one thirty PM on October 4.

I stopped at the foot of an especially large spiral pine, and for the first time in ages—actually just eighteen hours—I took in the sight of Ruis na Ríg and was speechless.

I'd been startled by the changes I saw when I'd logged in the previous night, too, but in less than a day it had expanded even more than before.

The town of Ruis na Ríg was surrounded by walls with a radius of thirty yards, but the Protection of the Ancient Oak effect from the log cabin in the center extended for fifty yards, so even twenty yards out from the walls, quickly built little huts were crammed in cheek to jowl, creating a dividing line between the city center and the "suburbs." That was last night.

Now the suburban area extended another twenty yards beyond the protection line. Nearly all the structures bristling along the edge were Crude Wooden Huts made of unprocessed narrow logs—in other words, branches. Naturally, since they weren't within the area of protection, they had less than 1,000 durability. Even a low-level player could easily destroy one with a stone ax.

It wasn't a very reliable place for storing items you couldn't carry or for offering safety so you could log out, but the extreme density of the living quarters gave you some kind of security through mutual supervision. Perhaps the peace was maintained by the fact that if you were trying to destroy a house while the owner was away or logged out, chances were someone else would be around to catch you doing it. Still, it wasn't likely to last long. They were all just staking their claims that they were "in line," waiting for the protective effect to expand or hoping for a chance to be given choice

territory inside the walls.

"Hmm. Better hurry up with this," I murmured. Asuna looked at the town around the other side of the tree and said, "Yeah. At this rate, there's going to be major trouble before the day is over."

"Plus, there are folks still streamin' in, lookin' for shelter. Folks around the Stiss Ruins already know we made it to the second tier," Argo explained from the back.

Next to her, Silica said, "Oh, really? It hasn't even been a day, so I wonder where the info is coming from…"

"With online games, rumors can spread from one corner of the map to the other in a day. But this one seems a little *too* quick to me. And I haven't caught sight of anyone braggin' about it on social media…"

"Really, Argo? You check everyone's online presence?" Asuna said, surprised. The informant grinned; her painted whiskers were back and stretched over her cheeks.

"That's just 101, baby. I even follow all the accounts of the *Insectsite* folks," she bragged. "Only problem is the *AD* folks from yesterday—I haven't gotten them yet. It's possible the news is filtering out through them."

"Or some other *ALO* players are keeping tabs on us," I said, not mentioning the possibility that someone from the team was leaking information about our progress to the outside. "If we *are* being watched, there's a high likelihood it's someone connected to Mutasina. We destroyed the staff that casts the Noose, but she's not going to give up just from that. She'll make another move against us eventually."

"I agree," said Asuna, who watched the bustling exterior of Ruis na Ríg with concern. "It might be hard for her to put together a huge army like she did before without the Noose, but there's plenty she can still do if she sets her mind to it. She could whip up all the people who've moved here into starting a riot, or kite a huge monster like the Life Harvester all the way over here…or she might just try to assassinate you, Kirito."

"Well, I don't really think that's…"

I started to laugh it off, then realized that she wasn't

exaggerating at all. They all sounded like tactics employed by the infamous red guild of *SAO*, Laughing Coffin, but in a world like *Unital Ring* without a crime-prevention code, it would actually be even easier to pull off unrest or assassination like that.

"…Okay, fair point. I'll be careful to watch out for myself. You do the same, Asuna," I suggested. Asuna grinned briefly and said, "I will."

Behind us, Silica cleared her throat and said, "Anyway, I was wondering, do you think Mutasina's goal is to collect all the *ALO* players and be their leader?"

"Yeah…I think so. Azuki already told us the *AD* folks have their own dragon therian as their leader, and the *Asuka* players probably have something like that, too…"

"Rumor says they've got a freakin' powerful commander and a really sharp strategist," Argo added. I shot her an appreciative glance, then turned back to Silica.

"So if Mutasina's gunning for a position like that, then we're an impediment to her… So I think she wants to bend us to her will and absorb Ruis na Ríg into her own army," I replied.

Pina's position shifted forward on Silica's head as she tilted it to think. "In that case, why didn't she just try to be the best possible leader in a more orthodox manner? If she can use massive magic spells like that, then her inherited skill and gear must have been really powerful. Why threaten people with suffocation magic when you can build up trust normally? She could have been good enough to find herself as the leader of the *ALO* faction anyway…"

Her suggestion reminded me of the conversation I heard at the Stiss Ruins.

The most effective path is to threaten your fellow players with this sadistic magic? There are other members of your Virtual Study Society here, aren't there?

That had been Tsuburo, a wielder of a two-handed sword and leader of the Announcer Fan Club. Mutasina took his criticism with a cool, cruel smile.

The reason you chose to meet in this place was because of a temporary alignment of goals, wasn't it? Let me be clear: You might

cooperate now, but the closer the goal becomes, the more our teams will compete with one another. In the end, even the players within a team will fight and kill one another. But as long as my magic is active upon you, we can avoid that situation. Do you see…? This is the best and most effective means of getting to the finish line, isn't it?

I shook my head to get the witch's voice out of my ears and told Silica, "Mutasina said even the most tight-knit group would ultimately turn on one another as they grew closer to the goal, and the suffocation magic would prevent it from happening. It's true there's no guarantee that won't happen to us, but there's no way the best option is to threaten your companions and force them to do your bidding. And I feel like Mutasina realizes that, too…"

"Then…why would she…?" Silica asked.

Again, I shook my head back and forth. Every player would reveal a little something of their nature when you spoke to them face-to-face, but even in the moment I unveiled a sword skill in her presence, the witch didn't give me anything to work with. I might not have felt something like that since Emperor Vecta, aka Gabriel Miller… Then again, during my fight, I could sense that within him there was only endless nothingness. But Mutasina's eyes, by contrast, were mirrors that reflected back everything they saw…

"Kirito…?" Silica prompted.

I looked up. "Oh! Sorry. I can't even imagine the purpose that drives Mutasina's actions. All I can tell you is she's definitely going to try something else next."

"Then we have to be greater than whatever she's expecting us to be!" she said with a smile, and gazed at Ruis na Ríg. "First, we have to do something about the chaos going on here! Then we can start the zip line experiment!"

"*Kyuru!*" cried Pina from her head.

She was right that it was pointless to stand around talking. I had to be back at our temporary base on the second tier by three forty-five, or I wouldn't be on time for our meeting at four o'clock. That meant I had just an hour and forty minutes I could spend here in Ruis na Ríg. And the log cabin had to be leveled-up in that time.

While I went into my inventory, Argo took a step back and said, "Welp, I'm gonna get goin'."

"Huh? Where?" I asked.

Argo glanced at Asuna and explained, "Gonna go down to the Stiss Ruins. I'll be back at Ruis na Ríg later in the day, but if you and A-chan are goin' to the *AD* camp, then I prolly won't see ya until a while later."

"Ah, yeah…Take care, then."

"You too!" Argo said, and, with ninja-like nimbleness, she darted off through the trees and vanished.

I went back to my inventory and pulled out a Crude Linen Cloak to wear. Asuna and Silica put the same thing on from head to below the knee.

Silica also had a large cloth backpack that she placed Pina in and slung over her back. Now she wouldn't be an obvious giveaway to anyone who might recognize her. The thought that we, the people who built this village, should have to return in disguise seemed silly, but I wanted to avoid any unnecessary trouble. Fortunately, given the difficulty in drying hair and clothes in *Unital Ring*, there were many players who wore hooded cloaks to avoid the rain, and the three of us didn't stand out dressed like that.

We left the large tree and approached the suburban area of Ruis na Ríg. The majority of the buildings were simple huts, but the narrow path also had many carts selling unspecified skewers, stews, and dumplings. The aroma was quite arresting, actually.

"We're not buying any," Asuna said quietly. I protested that I hadn't even said anything.

We continued down the footpath, which wasn't even six feet across. It looked just like a slum, but the mood was surprisingly cheery, and in the few little openings that existed, players who'd been out hunting on their own during the morning sat around eating skewers and drinking from bisque cups, chatting genially.

After about twenty yards, the quality of the huts jumped significantly. We had entered the Protection of the Ancient Oak zone. Whether built of branches, planks, or stone, these structures got a major durability boost, but when you thought of them as permanent

homes rather than as placeholders for waiting in line, it made sense that you would want to build something nicer.

Another twenty yards in, we passed through the northwest gate of Ruis na Ríg. The path known as the Ten O'Clock Road was even busier than usual, thanks to it being a Sunday. On the right side were the Bashin quarters, packed with tents. Hidden in one of them was a tunnel, the only way in and out of the log cabin's enclosure, with its high walls.

We tried to take the wooden gate around the midpoint of Ten O'Clock Road into the Bashin quarters, but a great roar arose from the left side up ahead, drawing our attention. On the left side of the path were the stables, where in addition to our four pets, other people could keep their own tamed animals. Kuro and Aga were up on the second tier, so it was only Misha, Namari, and a handful of other people's pets…or so I thought.

I pulled away from the gate and trotted toward the voices. There was a large crowd in the spacious yard of the stables, I found, and from beyond them came the sharp sound of metal on metal. Upon squeezing through the audience, I was not expecting what I eventually found.

In the center of the fan-shaped yard was a large circle, inside which two players were facing off. The man on the left was using a longsword and a round shield, while the one on the right used a two-handed sword. They had set up an impromptu fighting competition. But the HP bars on the spindle cursors over their heads showed 80 percent left for the greatsword, and a bit under 70 for the longsword. That seemed like too much damage to suffer for a simple exhibition.

There was a man in leather armor cheering them on in the front row. I sidled up next to him, and without lifting the hood of my cloak, asked, "What are they doing here?"

"This? It's the final!"

"Final of what?"

"Quit botherin' me, this is the good part. Can't you read?" he snapped, pointing to the right of the ring. Under the shade, which was why I didn't notice it, was a handmade sign with a tournament

bracket on it. There were eight contestants, meaning there had been four quarterfinals and two semifinals before this, and we had walked into the championship bout.

I watched the swordsmen sidling carefully around one another, then stared at the bracket again.

At the top of the bracket, above the line that indicated the eventual winner, were the letters *vs*, though they were difficult to make out. So the winner would then be scheduled to fight someone else. There was another line going up from the vs, and above even that there was more writing, but it was terrible handwriting, and the shade from the branches was waving back and forth, making it very hard to actually read.

One of the combatants shouted, "Shaaa!"

The one with the longsword raised his shield and closed the gap. His plan was probably to get the greatsword-wielder to attack, which he could deflect with the shield, or use it for a body blow if the other fighter dodged to either side. The round shield was made of metal and fairly thick, so it would hold up against a blow from a big two-handed sword. The orthodox tactic against a big opponent was to close the gap and use their size against them.

But the two-handed-sword fighter, if he had experience fighting against other players, would be used to opponents trying to get close. So how would he react to this? I leaned forward a bit in anticipation.

"Rahhh!" howled the greatsword-user, and did something I did not expect at all.

He cast his sword aside, stepped forward, and grabbed the rim of the round shield with both hands. Thanks to his larger size, he was able to bend backward and absorb the charge of his opponent. Then he shouted, "Oraaa!" and spun the shield to the left. The longsword-wielder tried to resist, but the difference of strength between two hands and one was insurmountable, and he lurched to the side.

From my *SAO* days until now, I had almost never used a shield in a VRMMO. But I was aware that among shield-using players, there had been an endless debate over whether a shield fixed to your arm

or more free-swinging was better.

Almost all shields had a leather strap on the backside that held your forearm against the shield, and then a handle to grip. This was the orthodox method, and in *SAO*, when you dropped a shield on your equipment mannequin, that was how it would materialize on your person. If the belt was over your arm, you could let go with your hand and still keep the shield on, so there was some freedom of movement there, and you could better defend against shield-snatching skills.

On the other hand, it wasn't easy to loosen the belt in battle, so if you ever wanted to let go of your shield—say, a giant monster had its mouth over it, or the shield got covered in poison or oil—you couldn't immediately disengage your arm from it. I'd heard of stories in *SAO* about running from a monster and having the edge of the shield catch on the wall of a narrow passage, or players trying to loosen the belt, only for it not to work, thus leading to disaster. Since that point, many players specifically used the Quick Change mod to remove their shields rather than switch between weapons.

It seemed the player using the shield here preferred to fasten it with the belt, and thus he lost his balance at once. But in an impressive feat of agility, he managed to stutter-step his way to staying on his feet.

At this point, the greatsword-user wasn't necessarily at an advantage. He had thrown away his sword to grab the shield. Now it was just a question of whether he would pick up his sword or the longsword-user would regain his balance first.

But instead, the greatsword-user quickly kicked his leg up. The sword on the ground floated up into the air, where he caught it by the handle. Apparently, he had only pretended to throw it away, but kept the toe of his boot under the flat of the blade.

This bit of acrobatics made the crowd roar. It was a flashy trick, but even more than that, it was extremely difficult. You had to know by muscle memory where the center of gravity of the sword was, and kick it accurately, or else it would come up at an angle, not straight.

The player added his left hand to the hilt and held it even. The

unadorned but sturdy-looking blade glowed red: the sword skill Cyclone. His opponent was still stumbling. This one was going to land—I was certain.

"That's enough!!" bellowed a deep voice, and the greatsword-user intentionally fumbled his Cyclone to prevent it from activating. The longsword-user straightened up and screamed, "Dammit!"

There was an even greater cheer and rapturous applause as another player stepped forward from near the sign. He was a heavyset man with scale armor and a scimitar on his left side. He seemed familiar to me, but before I could pinpoint where, Silica whispered, "Oh, that's Dikkos."

"Ah…you're right."

The man with the scimitar was indeed Dikkos, leader of the Weed Eaters. I'd heard he took part in the battle against the gilnaris hornets the previous day. What was he doing here…?

Promptly, Dikkos raised his hand toward the combatant and shouted, "The winner is…Tsuburo!!"

Another cheer arose. My mouth hung open. His gear had changed completely, so I didn't realize it was him, but now I recognized that extremely thick set of eyebrows and that square jaw. That was obviously Tsuburo, leader of the Announcer Fan Club.

Dikkos, Tsuburo, and Holgar from the Absolute Survivor Squad had once announced a major friendly alliance party at the Stiss Ruins, hoping to promote unity among the *ALO* players. But that had been the site of Mutasina's Noose of the Accursed magic, turning the party from a celebration into a house of horrors.

Following that, the trio of teams were re-formed as Mutasina's army and led an attack on Ruis na Ríg. We fought back against the army along the banks of the Maruba River, and at the end of a terrible battle, I smashed Mutasina's staff. Once freed from the Noose, Dikkos and Holgar stayed in Ruis na Ríg, while Tsuburo returned to the Stiss Ruins—I had assumed.

So why was he here, taking part in a fighting tournament, and what was the deal with the tournament anyway? I glanced at the bracket again. At that very moment, some thin clouds blocked the sun, evening out the dappling effect of the shade on the board.

The name of the person at the very top of the bracket, whom the winner was scheduled to face, was…*Kirito the Black Swordsman.*

"Oh, it's Kirito."

"Looks like it's Kirito," Asuna and Silica both whispered.

I turned back awkwardly and asked, "Hey…was I scheduled to appear in something like this?"

"Not as far as I'm aware…"

"Exactly…"

"Oh, Dikkos is going to say something," Silica said, so I turned around toward the ring again.

Having acknowledged Tsuburo as the winner, Dikkos took a step forward and shouted, "As the winner, Tsuburo will receive the prize of one hundred weed dumplings and the right to challenge Kirito to a fight! However, Kirito is currently tackling the second tier, and the timing of his next return to Ruis na Ríg is unknown! Therefore, when we have a date and time for the bout, it will be displayed here!"

Boos cascaded down upon him from unhappy watchers who thought the fight was going to happen here and now. Meanwhile, I steadily backed away. But I didn't get more than two feet before someone grabbed my shoulders from behind.

"Kirito, why not just fight him now and get it over with?"

"What…?"

Over my shoulder, Asuna had a cheeky grin on her face.

"I think Dikkos has some kind of plan in mind. If we travel to the *Apocalyptic Date* base, who knows when we'll be back here? Don't you want to clear up this matter now, while you can?"

"Well, I mean…sure, but…"

My mind was racing. True, it was hard to believe Dikkos would put on such an entertainment-focused event without consulting me, when he was using my name to promote it. There had to be some connection to the current state of Ruis na Ríg, I suspected. It wouldn't feel good to leave on my journey with that question hanging overhead. Plus, if they wanted me to appear in a duel, that was way easier than doing negotiations or giving a speech.

"Well…guess I'll go and do this," I told the two girls, then strode confidently into the open.

"Who's that?"

"Is he tryin' to stake his claim?"

The crowd tried to figure out what was going on, but I just walked right up to Dikkos. The scimitar-wielder looked suspicious for a second, then noticed my face under the hood, and his jaw dropped. He quickly recovered, however, and leaned in to say, "I can explain this, Kirito. But first, will you promise to fight Tsuburo now and ask questions later?"

"Sure, but what happens if I lose?"

"Things get very annoying and messy, so please win if you can. I need you on this one…but I still have to be an impartial judge," Dikkos whispered. He was sure asking a lot.

He stepped forward and addressed the crowd.

"Ladies and low-down mangy dogs!"

Outside the ring, Tsuburo was drinking a potion. He spun around. The crowd that had begun to disperse quickly returned to fill the space again.

"Today is your lucky day! As it turns out, we've got that extra fight for you, right now!"

"Huh…? Who's that?" demanded Tsuburo, his big eyebrows raised. He looked over my head, but the suspicion did not leave him.

In *Unital Ring*, player cursors generally did not appear for anyone who wasn't a party member or raid member. The only exceptions were hostile players and those who had changed their cursor display settings in the system menu. In the fight between Tsuburo and his swordsman opponent, they had changed their settings to display only the HP bar to everyone so Dikkos the judge and the audience could gauge the remaining HP for themselves. I opened my ring menu and altered the cursor settings to match.

Dikkos held out his left hand toward Tsuburo, who looked baffled, and shouted, "In the blue corner…leader of the Announcer Fan Club, the Voice Actor Otaku of Truth…Tsuburoooooooo!"

At a loss for what else to do, Tsuburo raised his fist to the crowd, who lustily cheered for him. Once that died down, Dikkos held out his right hand toward me.

"In the red corner…master of Ruis na Ríg, the Black Swordsman…

Kiritooooooo!”

Wondering how I’d gotten myself wrapped up in this, I grabbed my cloak and ripped it loose.

The cheers hushed briefly, building up momentum…and then exploded. I glanced around and saw more people were streaming in from the Ten and Two O’Clock Roads, as well as from the Inner Perimeter Road behind us.

Through the deafening roar, Tsuburo stomped toward me. His greatsword was in the sheath on his back, and he held out open palms to show he was holding nothing.

“You came back, Kirito?” he asked, smiling confidently. I held out my hands in the same way.

“Yep. Just now.”

“I’m guessing you’re not sure how it came to this, then. I hate to force you to fight while in that state, but you walked out in the open, so we can’t help it now,” he said at a normal volume, then jabbed a finger in my face and growled, loudly enough for all to hear, “Kirito, I got nothing in my heart but gratitude for the way you saved us from Mutasina’s bullshit magic…but this town’s had enough now! If I win, you better hand over control of the town to me!”

Whaaaat?!

Through some miracle of willpower, I kept my reaction under wraps. I had a feeling the dueling tournament had something to do with the overcrowding situation, but I wasn’t expecting control of the town to be the wager. In other words, if I accepted this match and lost, ownership of the log cabin, the primary structure of the Ruis na Ríg settlement, would belong to Tsuburo.

I glanced to my right at Asuna, who stood at the front of the crowd. She hadn’t anticipated this outcome; her mouth was slightly agape in the shadow of her hood.

I thought she might leap into the ring and shout, “No, you can’t do this!” But she just closed her mouth and shrugged, as if to say, “As long as you win, there’s no problem.”

To be honest, this wasn’t the kind of faith I necessarily wanted placed in me. I had to fight back a grimace and opened my menu to equip my Fine Steel Longsword. A familiar, trustworthy weight pulled

on my left hip.

Tsuburo saw this action as an acceptance of the terms and grinned. “That’s more like it.” He stepped back until he crossed the starting line drawn on the east side of the ring, then turned around. I went back and toed the starting line on the west side in turn.

Dikkos left the ring and held up a small pot and a ladle.

“There are no time limitations! First clean hit wins, leaving the ring is an automatic loss, and TKO rules apply! Competitors, draw your weapons!”

Tsuburo pulled the greatsword off his back, and I grabbed the longsword from my sheath. We took traditional stances. It was the same combination of weapons as the last bout, except for the fact that I didn’t use a shield.

Tsuburo kept his eyes glued to my hands. Was it because he had a plan in mind and didn’t want me to intuit it based on the movement of his eyes? I had no plan going in, just one bit of determination—*not* to use my Incarnation.

After five seconds of milking the moment, Dikkos struck the bottom of the pot with the ladle. It made a goofy *kaponk* sound, and Tsuburo charged.

It went against all proper theory for a greatsword fighter to close the gap himself. He probably wanted to catch me off guard and ram me—in kendo, this was called *buchikamashi*—until I lost my balance and fell out of the ring. I could wait him out and then dodge to either side, but I had a feeling Tsuburo would be expecting that.

A split second had me launch off the ground—not left or right, but forward.

In the center of the ring, our swords collided with an ear-ringing clash. My weapon was smaller than his, but thanks to the Rebound ability, which increased the chances of inflicting a knockback on the enemy, both Tsuburo and I were pushed backward with equal force.

Despite the unsteadiness of his feet, Tsuburo lifted his greatsword a bit, but quickly drew it back. He was probably trying to execute a sword skill the instant his balance recovered, but he thought better of it when he realized he wouldn’t have enough distance.

In duels, you wanted to avoid just “firing off” sword skills—using

single-hit attacks that were all-or-nothing prayers. Instead, it was best to knock the opponent off-balance with regular attacks and only use sword skills when they couldn't be avoided, even if the opponent could defend against them. When a sword skill missed, it would lead to a lengthy recovery delay that would essentially end the duel. Tsuburo made the right decision.

But this system had a depth to it that *ALO* players who first came to know sword skills there would not understand yet.

While my upper half was still upright, I moved my sword over my right shoulder. All sword skills were initiated by placing the weapon in a certain position and at an angle, and would activate after the appropriate charge time, unleashing an attack with boosted speed and power that finished with a preset delay time.

Most players believed the time needed, from the startup to the end of the delay, was set in stone on the system end. But in fact, the only values set in stone in the whole sequence were the charge and delay times. Everything else could be shortened with player technique. For example, if your weapon's position and angle relative to the body's median plane were precise enough, you could launch a sword skill while in a knockback or a jump.

Having finished the motion input before I recovered my balance, I focused on the slight vibration coming through my palms from the hilt that was now held behind my head. A flash of chromatic light and high-pitched noise typically accompanied the charging of a sword skill, so in the past, you used to be able to sense when it was complete based on visual and audio cues, but they continued after the skill engaged, so unless you used a stopwatch, there was always an element of guesswork. But while the vibration started up at the initiation of the charging time, it grew stronger in the middle of that period and vanished at the end of it. The fluctuation was very slight, but if you were able to sense that secondary function, you could anticipate the exact moment the charging time ended with considerable precision.

The soles of my boots gripped the ground, and my trunk shifted from leaning backward to forward, so I made a conscious effort to tense my left leg. If you pushed off the ground even a tenth of a

second sooner than the charge time ended, the sword skill would fumble. So I waited for the vibration in my right hand to wane, dwindle…and stop.

"…!!"

With a silent cry, I pushed off my left foot at full power. The blue glow infusing my sword flashed powerfully—activation successful.

Before me, Tsuburo was potentially just about to recover from his stumble, and his greatsword was held at a halfway position. Below those fuzzy brows, his eyes were open wide with alarm. Making full use of the sword skill's assistance, all the muscles in my body were boosted, and my sword swept through at a nearly vertical angle.

Zwash! I felt a crisp response in my wrist. I adjusted my distance so only the tip would strike home, so the force of the hit would only be two-thirds as strong, but it was certainly enough damage to count for a first-strike duel.

I waited for the post-skill delay to wear off, then stood. Tsuburo stood there with a bright red damage mark on his chest. His head was tilted back, and his eyes pointed to the upper left—at his own HP bar indicator.

I glanced at the spindle cursor above Tsuburo's head, too. The curved HP bar was silently dropping. After going down 20 percent, then 30, then 40, I started to get nervous, but it stopped just before it dipped below 50 percent, and I could exhale at last.

"…Sorry, that was a bit more than I meant to take," I said. That was the cue for Dikkos to snap back to reality and lift his pot and ladle for a clamorous medley. His voice nearly broke as he screeched, "It's over! It's over! And the winner is…Kirito!!"

After a brief silence, the clearing outside the stables filled with a tremendous roar of excitement.

"What kind of speed was that?! Was that even two seconds between his stance and the follow-through?!"

"But the range! It was just a Vertical, but he jumped as far as a Sonic Leap!"

"No, the power! He barely scratched the other guy, but look how much damage it did!"

The gallery had plenty of commentary on what they'd just seen.

Meanwhile, I sheathed my sword and walked up to pat the dazed Tsuburo on the chest.

"Nice job. That initial *buchikamashi* was a good one."

"……But I didn't actually go through with it…," Tsuburo said weakly, shaking his head. He tried to snap himself out of the disappointment by forcefully sheathing his weapon and said, "You won that duel handily, but it doesn't change the fact that this town's got problems. I mean, the whole reason we were having this fighting tournament in the first place is…"

"I think I've got the gist of it," I said, moving to the center of the ring. I surveyed the still-buzzing audience, took a deep breath, and shouted, "I'm sorry for leaving this place unsupervised for so long!"

The crowd of over a hundred abruptly went silent.

"I'm aware of what's happening with Ruis na Ríg! My plan is to level-up the protective effect today, but I don't know if that will expand the range of the durability bonus effect!"

There were individual complaints from the crowd, begging me to open up more space inside the town. I waited for the heckles to die down before continuing.

"But there is another solution! At the entrance to the second tier, a new base is coming together as we speak! We've got a location already, and once we're ready for the boss monster that will come for us, we'll be putting the finishing touches on the primary structure!"

This time, the murmuring from the crowd was anticipatory, not disappointed. I shot a glance at Asuna and Silica, who were still in the front row, then finished my speech.

"The next base will be the front line for our quest to clear the game! From that point on, we have no idea what kind of terrain or monsters we'll encounter! It'll be much more dangerous than Ruis na Ríg, but if you're up for the challenge, anyone is welcome to move there! If you want to join us on the second tier, let me hear you make some noise!!"

After the echoes of my voice died out, there were a few seconds of silence.

Then the entirety of Ruis na Ríg shook with a massive roar.

Raaaaaahhhh!!

And in response, Misha the thornspike cave bear poked its head out of the middle stable and joined in. "Grrraaaahhh!"

12

Integrity Pilot Commander Eolyne Herlentz did not know his own parents' faces, nor their names.

It wasn't until his third year at North Centoria Primary Juvenile School that Eolyne learned he was only the foster son of Orvas Herlentz, chairman of the Stellar Unification Council—though at the time, he was the commander of the ground force. He got into a fight with his one-year-older brother, Ruglan, about something stupid, and it reached the point that Ruglan furiously told him he was just adopted.

Apparently, Orvas had told the older two of his three children—Ruglan and the sister, who was two years older—that they were strictly forbidden from saying Eolyne was a foster child.

That meant that in that moment, on impulse or not, Ruglan had broken an order from a higher authority. He collapsed to the ground, holding his bloodshot red eye, and ended up in bed for three days with a terrible fever.

Eolyne's parents, Orvas and Jill, asked him what happened, so he was honest. They talked among themselves in a hushed tone, then sat Eolyne down on the middle of the sofa and flanked him, squeezing him tight, as they admitted the truth to him.

Just as Ruglan said, Eolyne was not their real son. His true parents were no longer alive. And even if they weren't related by blood, they still considered themselves his father and mother and loved him deeply.

He was very happy to hear that, but he also felt a bit apologetic—because when he first learned he was a foster child of the Herlentz family, Eolyne did not feel shock or sadness, but acceptance. Life in this family had involved the occasional strange feeling of wrongness,

of being different, and finally he had an explanation of why.

Now that he was twenty, he also understood the reason why his brother Ruglan had always been so antagonistic.

The Herlentz family was a proud house founded by the first commander of the Integrity Knights, Bercouli Herlentz, a legendary warrior in his own right. The swordfighting talent that belonged to Bercouli and his heir, Berche Herlentz, hero of the Black Emperor War, carried over to the sixth patriarch of the family, Eolyne's foster grandfather, and the seventh, his foster father Orvas. But of the three biological children Orvas had, that talent was most keenly embodied not by Ruglan or the youngest, Idris, but by his oldest, Feurphice, the only daughter.

She was currently stationed in Obsidia as the vice commander of the Obsidian Army, one of the three armed forces in the Underworld. The Obsidian Army was the modern-day form of the dark forces that fought against the human army in the Otherworld War. After peace had been forged between the two sides, the hostility stubbornly remained between the residents of the human realm and the demi-humans and humans of the Dark Territory's army. But through the tireless efforts of first commander of Dark Territory headquarters Iskahn, his wife Integrity Knight Sheyta Synthesis Twelve, and their daughter Leazetta Zarre, the second commander of the group, the Dark Territory army and the human realm forces stationed in the Dark Territory merged into the Obsidian Army in the early 400s.

Since then, tradition held that the commander of the Obsidian Army was a dark-worlder, while the vice commander came from the human realm. Last year, in the spring of 581 SE, Feurphice Herlentz, captain of the ground force's Third Front Regiment, was named to the position of vice commander.

She was just twenty-one years old at the time. At sixteen, she'd joined the ground force, and in just three years had been promoted to regiment captain in charge of a thousand soldiers. This promotion came just two years after that. And yet there were almost zero cries of nepotism over the Stellar Unification Council's chairman's daughter being chosen. This was because of her record of unimpeachable excellence, starting with her victory at the Stellar

Unification Tournament at the age of fifteen. But her record of being the youngest-ever champion did not last long, because it was broken just a few years later by the genius swordswomen Stica Schtrinen and Laurannei Arabel.

Regardless, Feurphice had displayed great skill and scholastic aptitude from a young age, and it seemed the eighth head of the Herlentz family was all but decided. The firstborn son had always inherited command through Orvas's generation, so Ruglan's feelings of pressure and inferiority had to be severe. The only person he could take his darkest thoughts and feelings out on was the brother who was not related by blood.

Eolyne figured this out in his mid-teens, but even before he had been called "adopted," he'd always sensed his brother's darkness, even at a very young age, and had subconsciously avoided standing out because of it. He had basically no friends, returned straight home after school, and chose to spend the rest of his day swinging his wooden sword beneath the massive dark cedar tree in the backyard of the Herlentz home.

But a few months after that incident, the very day he advanced to the fourth grade at school, his sister Feurphice actually appeared in the yard for once and watched Eolyne swing for a while. Then she dragged him to the training grounds. From that day on, his older sister gave Eolyne personal lessons when she had the time. Her instruction was exceedingly strict, and even their father Orvas, a great warrior in his own right, complained she was going too far. But Eolyne was overjoyed. No matter how hard she hit him with a wooden sword, he never once complained. He absorbed and devoured the techniques of the Herlentz family, which had been passed down directly from their sire, Bercouli.

Eventually the instructions encompassed sacred arts and Incarnation. The fierce but satisfying lessons continued until Feurphice's promotion to regiment captain at age nineteen. Eolyne was sixteen then, and had become the first seat elite disciple at North Centoria Imperial Swordcraft Academy.

That year, Eolyne won the Stellar Unification Tournament, one year older than his sister when she did, and was given a special

exception to graduate immediately and join the space force. So if not everything Eolyne had was thanks to his sister Feurphice, then at least 90 percent of it was.

But how could he have guessed he would be named by the previous commander of the Integrity Pilothood as next in the position, thus placing him in command over his sister, the vice commander of the Obsidian Army?

And that it would be the cause of such discord with his brother Ruglan, now a first-class soldier in the ground force, and their father, Orvas…

Kshunk.

The sound of melting ice shifting echoed off the walls, causing Eolyne's eyes to flicker open behind his mask.

The interior of the room was plain, but it was about as big as his private room on the space force base. It was furnished with a bed, table, sofa, writing desk and chair, and wardrobe. All were made with light metal and bolted firmly to the floor. That made sense, because this was inside a dragoncraft that flew in the sky.

On the table was a lunch tray a soldier had brought by some time ago. The meal was so decadent, he assumed it had been taken to the wrong cabin. The main dish was a venison roast with a rich fruit sauce. But a prisoner couldn't just go devouring such a fanciful meal; a Norkian squash sandwich would do. So instead, he ate the bread, soup, and ice water, and left the rest.

But I bet if Kirito were in this situation, he would finish off every last bite, Eolyne thought, chuckling to himself as he envisioned it, and leaned back on the sofa.

Over six hours had passed since he'd fallen unconscious in the office of the space force base. The clock on the wall said it was two o'clock in the afternoon, but nothing else suggested a date, so there was no guarantee it was December 8, the day after the attack. All the soldiers told him was that this was the *Principia*, the mega-sized dragoncraft of Emperor Agumar Wesdarath VI, and that Eolyne was their prisoner.

There were no windows in the room, so the situation outside and the craft's location were unknown to him. Most likely, they were hovering over Centoria, he guessed. He worried about the state of Central Cathedral and the base, but the cathedral had Alice Synthesis Thirty guarding it, and the base had Kirito. Those two had power Eolyne himself could only dream about, and they would keep both of those places safe.

It was that certainty that made his own weakness, falling unconscious in battle and being taken prisoner, so galling.

Eolyne became aware of his issues with fatigue about five years ago, when he entered Swordcraft Academy. It was around that time that the skin around his eyes became weak to Solus's light, forcing him to wear a mask during the day, but the fatigue was an even bigger problem. When he pushed himself too hard, his entire body felt strangely frail, regardless of how much or how little numerical life he had lost. It was a very strange feeling, as though his very existence was becoming rarified and sparse.

He had supposedly slept almost eight hours between passing out in the office and waking up here, but he could still feel that exhaustion to a small degree. But he couldn't sit around complaining about it. The longer he was held prisoner, the more likely Kirito would come from afar to rescue him. Eolyne wanted to get out of there on his own, before Kirito used his monstrous Incarnation to rip the *Principia* in half.

There was only one door, and two soldiers stood watch outside it. If he could just open that door, then he could use Hollow Incarnation to hide his presence from the minds of others. But the soldiers would soon realize Eolyne wasn't in his room, so the alarms would start immediately. The only question was if he could reach a door to the outside air.

Performing Hollow Incarnation tired Eolyne out even more than fighting did. He still had difficulty believing he'd used it for so long on that secret base on Admina.

He had been hand in hand with Kirito to ensure its concealment affected him, too. Despite how delicate Kirito looked, his palm was powerful and warm, and seemed to be feeding some kind of power

into him. Eolyne kept the Hollow Incarnation going for over twice as long as he expected, and he still had some strength left with which to fight Tohkouga Istar. If that really was thanks to Kirito, then discovering the cause of that phenomenon might lead him to the answer to his issues with exhaustion.

"…What a truly mysterious man," he murmured dryly.

Eolyne realized he was smiling once again. Just remembering the warmth of Kirito's hand seemed to bring back some small measure of power to himself.

He still couldn't be sure if that was truly the same person as Kirito the Star King.

The Star King was a real person who had ruled the Underworld until a hundred years ago. Eolyne's foster grandfather, Dylian Herlentz, had heard stories from his father and grandfather, who had served Kirito as knights. Yet, in a sense, the mystery of his existence was even greater than Bercouli's. In recent years, many children thought of him as a character in a fairy tale, according to Stica and Laurannei.

It was hard to accept at face value that the legendary ruler had suddenly returned to the Underworld and had no memory of his time as the Star King. When Eolyne talked to Kirito, he just seemed like a normal boy of the same age…but that tremendous Incarnation and his triple-digit authority level were remarkable and inexplicable.

Eolyne wanted to take Kirito to his favorite place in the whole world—the forest hideout near the space force base—and have a long, friendly chat over wine and cheese. He wanted to know more about Kirito, and to talk about himself. He wanted to reveal all his innermost secrets, including things he had never told anyone, such as his anxiety over not knowing who he truly was…

He actually shivered at the power of this sudden impulse. But at that very moment, a uniformed soldier opened the door and walked inside.

Eolyne expected him to take away the meal tray, but instead, the soldier stood at the door, saluted, and said formally, "Please come with me, Integrity Pilot Commander."

"…Very well."

A part of him was curious as to what would happen if he refused, but he didn’t even have a knife, much less a sword, and there was a large electroblade on the soldier’s belt. He obediently rose from the couch.

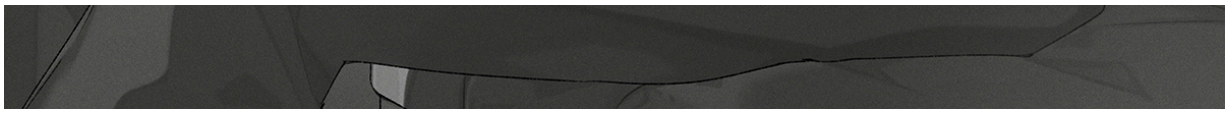
It gave him a moment of lightheadedness, but Eolyne pressed onward, determined not to let it show. The soldier saluted him again at the door, then headed out.

The hallway outside the room was abnormally long, speaking to just how large the dragoncraft was. Two sets of footsteps clanged on the metal floor for about a hundred mels to the end of the hall. Then they turned right and went up a set of stairs. After another few dozen mels, they finally reached their destination.

The grand double doors had glass windows and silver trim, and looked nothing like anything you would expect to see on a dragoncraft. The right door featured a sigil of a shield and dragon, while the left featured an octagram consisting of eight sharp, jutting spindles. The sigil on the right was the long-dead Wesdarath Empire’s insignia, but he had never seen the left one before. Soldiers bearing actual swords, rather than electroblades, flanked the doors.

The soldier who escorted Eolyne saluted. The soldier on the left returned it and pressed a button on the wall. The faint hiss of a wind-element canister sounded, and both doors opened on their own.





"Right inside, if you please," said the soldier, stepping back. Eolyne nodded to him and stepped through the doorway.

The room was quite lengthy. It was carpeted in black with silver lines, and the side walls appeared to have windows on them, but all were closed with armored blast shutters. Only the light-element lanterns on the ceiling offered any illumination.

Eolyne held his head high and walked down the center of the carpet. Ahead of him, on the other side of the room, the floor rose in steps. Four armed soldiers stood before them.

Two steps higher, there was a chair with an extremely high back, upon which sat a man. He wore a white shirt with a pleated collar and black pants. His face was sharply featured, as though carved, and he sported a thin mustache. His eyes were a gray as cold as ice.

On the right behind the chair was a young man wearing a dark gray coat. Eolyne recognized him even without seeing his brilliant, flowing black hair and shockingly good looks. This was the very person he'd known since his days at Swordcraft Academy: Tohkouga Istar.

Eolyne's gaze headed straight forward again, just as the man said, "I will not demand you kneel, but the least courtesy you do is remove that tasteless mask…Eolyne Herlentz."

"Forgive me, but I will need to keep the mask on to protect my fragile skin, Lord Agumar Wesdarath VI," he replied, eliciting a snort from Emperor Agumar.

"Very well. I trust I need not introduce Istar to you?"

"No, Your Excellency," Eolyne said, glancing again at Istar. The other man's face was a blank mask.

Agumar nodded and tilted his head to the left this time. "Then I shall only introduce her to you."

…Her?

Eolyne peered to the left of the throne. Then he sucked in an alarmed breath.





Somehow, there was another figure, standing in the same flanking position as Istar on the other side. But there was no door at the back of this room, and there had been no footsteps. It was as though she had been there the whole time, and he had simply failed to notice her presence…

It was a woman. She wore a pure white robe and cape, like the sacred articians of old. On her chest was a silver medallion with that pointed octagram. It was exactly the same as the symbol on the door.

Her long hair was deep purple, and her small, delicate face had an inhuman beauty to it, just like Istar's. The eyes that looked down upon Eolyne were purple, too, but seemed like mirrors that only reflected, and gave away none of her inner thoughts.

There was a little smile playing across her thin lips. "I can introduce myself, Your Excellency," she said, her voice as melodious and cold as a bell made of ice.

"Very well," Agumar said, motioning to her. She stepped forward and gave a swishy bow. When she raised her head, those deep violet eyes fixed upon Eolyne.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Eolyne Herlentz. I am a descendent of the Norlangarth imperial family…Mutasina Muicilli."

(To be continued)

AFTERWORD

Thank you for your boundless patience in the long, long wait before *Sword Art Online 28: Unital Ring VII*.

It's been one year and eight months since the last new volume, which I believe sets a new record for the longest wait for a new *SAO* book… Records are meant to be broken, but this is one I really didn't want to break! I'll make a mental oath to get the next one in promptly!

(This next part will contain spoilers for this book.)

Here's a little bit about the story. This one was mainly about the events in the Underworld. During his appearance in the last volume, Emperor Agumar really gave off the aura of a weekly villain who ends up saying, "But you won't get the best of me *next time!*" at the end of the episode, but he turned out to be tougher than he looked! I think he's going to continue to play the villainous role in the next book, too.

Also, in this volume we have two characters who achieved an unprecedented feat of joining the story after being introduced in a different medium.

The first is Integrity Knight Eydis Synthesis Ten, who was a game-original heroine from the mobile games *Alicization Blading*, or *Unleash Blading*. In the previous volume, I wrote that the "tenth Integrity Knight" was frozen in Central Cathedral, so I knew I would eventually be introducing Synthesis Ten. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to invent a totally new knight or to reverse-import Eydis Synthesis Ten from *Blading*, but I figured more than a few readers

probably had some attachment to the name Eydis Synthesis Ten, so I put her into the story here. However, a number of details are different from the game, which I'll go over later.

The second character was Mito (Misumi Tozawa), who appeared in the animated feature films, *Sword Art Online Progressive: Aria of a Starless Night* and *Scherzo of Deep Night*. She's had quite a complicated creation process, actually. In interviews and other places, I've said I created her on request to fill the position of Asuna's real-life friend for the purposes of the movies. But the truth is that she didn't simply come out of nowhere.

The story "The Safe Haven Incident" from Volume 8 contains a mention of a brilliant tailor by the name of Ashley. Even back in *SAO*'s days as a web novel on my website, I always envisioned her as someone who was friends with Asuna in real life, and who helped support Asuna in the difficult period after her partnership with Kirito ended. I wanted to write more about Asuna and Ashley for forever, but wasn't able to make it work. When they asked for a new character for the *Progressive* movie, however, Ashley was the first image that popped into my head. So I created Ashley's story from scratch and added more details until I was left with Mito.

I kept that connection quiet because I wanted the reveal that Mito was Ashley to come from the story itself, not from some interview or online post. However—and I touched on this a bit in the story reading at the tenth-anniversary "Fulldive" event—the two movies weren't going to get this far into the story, and I wasn't confident putting her into the *Unital Ring* arc would feel like a natural and unforced story development, so I didn't think I was going to get the chance for a while. But as I was writing Volume 28, I suddenly had a burst of intuition that the moment might be right, and so I got the chance to reunite her with Asuna.

All that said, however, it's difficult to make the background of the Mito from the *Progressive* films match the story here. So, like Eydis, there are some differences between the character in the movie and in this book. In short, here are the distinctions.

[Eydis]

- Frozen 300 years ago (100 years before the Alicization arc) and has no knowledge of anything after that, particularly the Otherworld War. Has never met Alice before.

[Mito]

- Didn't encounter Asuna at the start of *SAO*, and naturally did not abandon her in the Nepenthes Forest.
- Didn't take part in the battle against the first-and fifth-floor bosses.

The stuff that happens in the Nepenthes Forest is a core element of Mito the movie character, so it didn't feel right to completely ignore that, but it's such a heavy thing that hangs over her head that I didn't want Mito in the books to suffer from the same kind of guilt, so I removed that burden from her. On the other hand, it's not like she didn't suffer any painful events in Aincrad, so Mito is actually technically the *second* Ashley, and inherited the name Ashley from the original owner. I think that story will find its way into the main books at some point. It's not important, but just for the record, Mito hasn't played any VRMMOs since being freed from *SAO*, and passed off the Ashley name to a third person.

I expected this to be a short afterword, but I've gone on for quite a bit. The main point is that I hope you will cheer for the Eydis and Mito that appear in the novels as you've already done in the games and movies.

This is also the first book to feature a part from Eolyne's perspective. It's given him the chance to speak a little bit about the backbone of his mysterious story. And the intruder Kikuoka was so worried about has finally appeared (again?), so I'll let your imagination fill in the blanks of how the two worlds might continue to intertwine in the future.

I thought I had plenty of extra time on the schedule this time around, but as usual I went right down to the wire, so I must apologize to my editors Miki and Adachi, my illustrator abec, and all the people who help make this book a reality. And to you readers, thank you for following along, and I hope to see you in the next one!

Reki Kawahara—April 2024

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