



KEIICHI SIGSAWA

ILLUSTRATION BY KOHAKU KUROBOSHI

SUPERVISED BY REKI KAWAHARA

X

SWORD ART Online ALTERNATIVE

GUN GALE ONLINE

Five Ordeals

SWORD ART ONLINE

ソードアート・オンライン

SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE: GUN GALE ONLINE

- VOLUME 10 -
Five Ordeals

-AUTHOR-
Keiichi Sigsawa
Reki Kawahara

-ILLUSTRATOR-
Kouhaku Kuroboshi

[YEN PRESS]

Sword Art Online Alternative

Gun Gale^{Heart}Online

Sword Art Online Alternative
GUN GALE
ONLINE

Keiichi Sigsawa

ILLUSTRATION BY

Kouhaku Kuroboshi

SUPERVISED BY

Reki Kawahara

Five Ordeals



CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Her Step Step

Chapter 2: Questing Together

Sword Art Online Alternative

Chapter 3: Guided by Dogs —The First Ordeal—

Chapter 4: Battle in the Woods —The Second Ordeal—

Chapter 5: Blending In with the Snow —The Third Ordeal—

Chapter 6: Hunting Dragons —The Fourth Ordeal I—

Chapter 7: Vanquishing Crabs —The Fourth Ordeal II—

Five Ordeals

Chapter 8: Reflection —The Fifth Ordeal—

Final Chapter: In Dog Heaven



Sword Art Online Alternative
GUN Gale Online



Sword Art Online Alternative
GUN GALLE
ONLINE
X
Five Ordeals

Keiichi Sigsawa

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kouhaku Kuroboshi

SUPERVISED BY
Reki Kawahara



NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT

SWORD ART ONLINE Alternative Gun Gale Online, Vol. 10
KEIICHI SIGSAWA

Translation by Stephen Paul
Cover art by Kouhaku Kuroboshi

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SWORD ART ONLINE Alternative Gun Gale Online Vol. X

©Keiichi Sigsawa / Reki Kawahara 2020

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2021 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: November 2021

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sigsawa, Keiichi, 1972– author. | Kuroboshi, Kouhaku, illustrator. | Kawahara, Reki, supervisor. | Paul, Stephen (Translator), translator.

Title: Five Ordeals / Keiichi Sigsawa ; illustration by Kouhaku Kuroboshi ; supervised by Reki Kawahara ; translation by Stephen Paul ; cover art by Kouhaku Kuroboshi.

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2018– | Series: Sword art online alternative gun gale online ; Volume 10

Identifiers: LCCN 2018009303 | ISBN 9781975327521 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975353841 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975353858 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975353865 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975353872 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975353889 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975315320 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975315979 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975315993 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975321802 (v. 10 : pbk.)

Subjects: | CYAC: Fantasy games—Fiction. | Virtual reality—Fiction. | Role playing—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S537 Sq 2018 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018009303>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-2180-2 (paperback)

978-1-9753-2181-9 (ebook)

E3-20211015-JV-NF-ORI

CONTENTS

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1: Her Step Step

Chapter 2: Questing Together

Chapter 3: Guided by Dogs —The First Ordeal—

Chapter 4: Battle in the Woods —The Second Ordeal—

Chapter 5: Blending In with the Snow —The Third Ordeal—

Chapter 6: Hunting Dragons —The Fourth Ordeal I—

Chapter 7: Vanquishing Crabs —The Fourth Ordeal II—

Chapter 8: Reflection —The Fifth Ordeal—

Final Chapter: In Dog Heaven

Afterword (I.e., Postscript. Does Not Include Story Spoilers)

Yen Newsletter

CHAPTER 1
Her Step Step



CHAPTER 1

HER STEP STEP

Saturday, August 29th, 2026.

Not long after Karen Kohiruimaki got turned down by her would-be boyfriend, Fire Nishiyamada, and ended up singing her lungs out to Elza Kanzaki numbers at a karaoke place...

“Hifh hucks...”

“You went overboard, Kohi. But I gotta say... You were awesome. I’m in love all over again. You feel better? Got it all outta your system?”

“Nwah hewy...”

“Okay, cool. You did good. C’mon, drink!”

Karen sat slumped on the sofa at the very end of the long, narrow room, her head lolling backward. Next to her was Miyu, busying herself by placing a cold, wet towel on her friend’s forehead and sticking a straw for iced tea into her mouth.

And on the other side of Miyu, in the middle of the room, sat Elza Kanzaki in a large hat and Goushi Asougi, dressed in a suit.

“M-Miss Elza! C-can we ask you a qu-question?”

“Would that be all right?” “If you don’t mind!” “You must!” “We beg of you!” “Please!”

And beyond them, at the other end of the room, was a group of teenage girls energetically jabbing their hands into the air.

They, of course, were the six members of the gymnastics team at the high school affiliated with Karen’s women’s college. They played *GGO* with big, frightening avatars to increase their bonds of friendship and were known as the menacing Team SHINC, regular finalists in the Squad Jam event.

Miyu had summoned the team to the karaoke booth here, where they learned the shocking truth: that Pitohui, *GGO*'s incarnation of destruction and slaughter—the very person who put her own life on the line in SJ2 by claiming she'd kill herself if her character died, all for a perverse thrill—was none other than one of the top singer-songwriters in Japan, their absolute idol, Elza Kanzaki.

The girls had dutifully joined in during the choruses of Karen's enthusiastic performances, but when that was done, they naturally had many questions for their favorite singer. And plenty of energy to spare, too. They were young.

Elza was in the process of putting her guitar away into her soft case, but she generously answered, "Okay, no problem! I'm sure it's fate that brought us together in the real world, too! I'll even tell you things that I'd only tell those who are very close to me! But no mentioning this on social media. This is just between us!"

She handed the case to Goushi and took a healthy swig of her favorite drink—black coffee, iced.

Goushi held the guitar case tight and said nothing. Instead, he reached out and lifted his coffee, also without cream and sugar, to his lips.

Mmph! He tensed his stomach to keep it from revolting against him.

"Of course! We'll keep your secrets close to our hearts!" chirped the starry-eyed Saki Nitobe, the girl who played as Eva in *GGO*, more commonly known as Boss. She acted as though Goushi did not even exist between her and Elza. "We'll take whatever we hear to the grave! You can have our oaths on this! If we break our word, you can kill us! It's a promise between women! Did you hear that, girls?"

"Yes!" "You bet!" "Uh-huh!" "Got it!" "No prob!"

"Very good. I appreciate that answer. Then you have my trust. Ask away."

Elza acted like a prim and proper young woman on TV, but here she talked just like Pitohui. The difference didn't bother the girls at all. It was a trifling matter to them. Inconsequential.

"Th-then... Miss Elza Kanzaki! As the humble leader of this team, I, Saki Nitobe, will ask on behalf of the group! I have a question that we—nay, the entire *world* wants to know!"

Her back went straight as she made a salute directly toward Elza—with Goushi in between them.

She was the shortest member of the gymnastics team in real life, but Elza was even smaller. However, their attitudes were completely opposite each other: A confident smile adorned Elza's beautiful face, while Saki's features were nervous between her braided hair.

The other five members gazed at Elza as solemnly as royal knights before their monarch.

"Hmm! That's a pretty intimidating lead-up! But very well, my little interviewer. Ask away, and I will tell you anything I can. Meaning that if I can't answer it, you'll get nothing."

"It's an absolute honor! Thank you! First, I'd like to ask about your wonderful name, Elza Kanzaki. Is that your real name?"

"Nope. Stage name."

It was a pseudonym.

"My real name's a secret."

"Then I won't ask your real name, of course. But might I ask the source of that beautiful stage name?"

The six awaited her answer, eyes sparkling with anticipation.

At the same time, separated by the trio of Goushi, Elza, and Karen on the opposite end of the couch, Miyu listened intently. What was this? She had no idea. But she *wanted* to know. She was very curious.

Elza beamed and answered, "Well, to tell you the truth, it's not a very meaningful reason. I liked the last name of the villain from an old movie, and for the first name, I went with something that wasn't exactly Japanese, and that was what popped into my head."

"Ooooh," Saki marveled, joined by the rest of the girls.

So that's what it was! They'd finally learned the secret to Elza Kanzaki's name!

“...”

Miyu said nothing. She glanced at Karen.

“...”

Karen had no reaction. She was still splayed out on the couch, presumably from exhaustion.

“Okay, next question! Tell us about your childhood, please! What were your early years like, Miss Elza?” Saki asked.

“Oh, you know. Normal. I grew up in a rural area of Japan, though I can't tell you where.”

“Ohhh!”

As the conversation bounced back and forth over him, Goushi mused, *I'm amazed she can come up with stories about her stage name off the cuff.*

He knew full well that she was lying. She wasn't going to reveal even the tiniest of truths.

“Okay, I won't ask where. But when you say rural, that can mean different things to different people. What kind of place was it?”

“I went to a school where every grade was just a single class. And there were only a few kids in each one.”

“Ohhh. So you didn't have any cafés or creperies or karaoke?”

“Nope. It was really on the outskirts. The only way to hang out was to run through the untamed mountains.”

That was a lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

She'd spent her childhood in Los Angeles, California.

It was in the suburbs but certainly not in the country—and it wasn't in Japan.

"Uh-huh. So you were raised amid the majesty of nature. Now, let me ask about your parents! Do you mind if I inquire about what they do?"

"Sure. We're totally in the forestry business. My dad and grandpa go into the hills and cut down trees, then use them for all kinds of things. From what I hear, our ancestors used to make charcoal back in the Edo period. My father's a master with the chain saw. He's got such fine control, he can carve a log into any shape. Basically, he loves trees."

"Cool!"

That was a lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

He didn't know what her ancestors had done in the Edo period, but her parents, at least, were classical musicians. Both were Japanese, but they were virtually unknown in their country of origin. Among classical music fans abroad, however, they were a fairly famous couple.

Her mother was a pianist. Her father was a violinist.

He obviously didn't wield a chain saw. Did he love trees? Maybe. Violins were made from wood.

They traveled around the world to perform on tours, so they were quite wealthy. And they'd never publicly announced they'd had a daughter. Apparently, that was because they worried their daughter might get kidnapped and held hostage for ransom.

So all the gossip rags found almost nothing when they tried to pry into Elza's past.

"And I'm the fourth daughter. I have three elder sisters."

"Uh-huh!"

“Basically, my home life was pretty lively. I had a raucous and exciting childhood.”

“Ooooh!”

That was a lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

She was an only child.

Her mother gave birth to her, but her parents did not raise her. Their top priority at the time was to fulfill the demands of their adoring audiences around the world.

From infancy through childhood, she bounced from babysitter to babysitter. Little Elza saw her parents only once every few months—maybe even half a year.

The memories she had of her parents' faces during her younger years were from the tablet screens when they'd video chat from the other side of the globe or from the covers of classical music magazines in foreign languages.

“So were you an active child, then?”

“Of course. I had to cross two mountains to reach my elementary school. The snow would pile up in the winter, so I got rides then, but any other time I had to rush over those mountains to get to school and back, rain or shine. And I'd catch any frogs and snakes I saw along the way! Wow, that takes me back.”

“What an amazing story!”

That was a lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

By her nature, she'd always been a very sickly, delicate girl.

She had chronic respiratory disease. Anything that took her beyond her physical comfort zone made breathing painful, as though she were drowning in air.

A huge manor encompassed the entirety of her childhood world. She almost never ventured outside because of the possibility it might worsen her condition.

Even then, Elza had experienced several attacks that nearly killed her. Though she lived on land, she was all too familiar with the agony of drowning in search of a breath. On several occasions, despite struggling from pain and lack of oxygen, she would make out a doctor saying "She will be called up to God soon enough."

After each time, the doctor would always ask her babysitter, "And you haven't been able to get ahold of her parents?"

More often than she could recall, Elza had thought, *Will I finally be at peace this time?*

Will I finally be able to die?

"So your childhood must have been really wild, then!"

"I suppose so. Looking back on it, I was a pretty rambunctious squirt; I'll admit that. But the truth is: I always just thought that was normal!"

That, at least, was not a lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

Her rich parents were never around, she never left her luxurious home, she had constant difficulties breathing, and she nearly died many times. Regardless of her personal peril, her parents were constantly globe-trotting for their career and could never be there for her.

But she *did* think that was normal. She just assumed that life was more or less the same for every other child growing up.

She had no friends her age and wasn't allowed to watch TV. The doctor and babysitter that her parents had hired rarely told her the truth about the world. In fact, they almost never did.

Perhaps that was to avoid putting too much hope for the future into the sickly girl's head, given that she was always on the brink of death. Or perhaps they just didn't care.

"How was the end of elementary school? Did your life change? What were your interests at the time? Did you listen to much music?"

“You make for a very good interviewer, Saki! Well, let’s see. I don’t think my life changed much. As for music, I listened to all kinds of things around then. I started with the pop artists my friends liked, and when I got hooked, I went through as many different singers as I could. I’d download everything on my phone, then go through every genre I could get my hands on.”

“Oh, I see! So those were your musical roots!”

That was a lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

After she’d turned ten, Elza’s condition had slowly begun to improve.

She remained careful, of course—and she came close to dying a few times—but the frequency slowly but surely lessened over time.

Even then, she spent all her time indoors. Naturally, she didn’t attend elementary school or middle school.

She was homeschooled in all subjects. If there was one thing her parents had, it was money. They hired several excellent tutors to give Elza an education.

Elza had studied many subjects intensively. Music had been the sole exception.

Her parents loved classical music with their entire souls, so they flatly refused to let her listen to anything else. No matter the medium—TV, radio, streaming—they always strictly limited her listening.

She spent every day without fear of starvation or cold, in a mansion she could not leave.

Like a bird in a cage.

And Elza had no idea that this wasn’t normal.

“Then let’s move forward and talk about memories from middle school!”

“Hmm? Like what?”

"Sorry, that was vague. When I was in middle school, I had some awkward pubescent moments like everyone does. Lots of things happened to me, which left a major impact on my psyche. Was there anything in middle school that hugely impacted your life, Elza?"

"Ah yes. Ah yes. Impact, huh?"

"And?"

"Nope. Not really. It was basically like an extension of elementary school for me."

That was a lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

In her middle school years—or the equivalent in her early teens, since Elza had never actually gone to school—there had been one thing that had majorly influenced the direction of her life.

The respiratory illness she'd struggled with since birth, a presence in her life much more constant than even her own parents, finally went away. She was cured.

It could have subsided because of the strength of her vitality, the progress of medical science, or both. Perhaps she was just lucky.

But this much was true: Elza no longer needed to assume she might die tomorrow.

And at the same time, she thought, *I guess I didn't get to die after all.*

After all that terrible pain—and all that longing to simply rest and find peace. She had prayed it would just end. She had hoped for it.

So there had been one thing that had significantly affected her life—she hadn't gotten to die.

"Ah, I see... And how about when you got to our age? We have all kinds of worries, things that don't go so well, and anxieties about college and our future! But we also have good friends and teammates—and lots of VR fun together! Tell us more about your high school years!"

“Mmm! You’re so young and fresh! Yes, I had those years, too!”

“Ooh! What kind of fresh? Like Poppin’ Fresh?”

“That’s a really weird thing to say. Anyway, my high school years? It still hasn’t been a decade, but it feels so old and nostalgic now. I dunno; I guess I’d say I enjoyed them normally.”

“Uh-huh. Meaning?”

“Meaning that I studied like a high schooler does but had a lot of fun. Going to karaoke with friends, chowing down on sweets. It was an all-girls school, so I didn’t know much about romance!”

That was a lie but also the truth. Elza had told Goushi her story.

After she’d recovered from her respiratory illness, Elza had been able to go to a normal high school like most others.

Her parents found a private boarding school in the suburbs of Los Angeles where they intended to send her. That was, of course, because they were constantly traveling around the world. If she stayed at a boarding school, they would have less to worry about around the house.

But this was where a transoceanic protest came into play.

It was Elza’s grandparents who put a stop to the arrangement from across the Pacific and the international date line. On her mother’s side.

Elza’s mother had stifled their complaints by moving to America and having that nasty disease as an excuse, but once Elza’s condition improved, the circumstances changed.

Her grandparents felt terrible that her parents weren’t giving her a proper family life, so they proposed that Elza come live with them in Japan. Despite not giving Elza the time of day, her parents balked at the idea, but Elza made up her mind at once. She decided to go live in a country she didn’t remember from her early days, with people she’d seen so infrequently that she could count on her fingers the number of times they’d met.

The kerfuffle that arose from that decision was probably intense, but Goushi hadn't been privy to the details. All he knew was that Elza had overridden the arguments and had made her choice.

Thus, Elza set foot on Japanese soil for the first time in fifteen years and began a new chapter of her life in the Tokyo suburbs with her grandparents. The elderly couple embodied gentleness in human form. Elza was their only grandchild, so they smothered her with attention.

She started attending an all-girls school near their home, where she experienced "normal" life for the first time.

Before that point, Elza had spent all her time trapped in an American home. A "normal life back in the country where she was born" might as well have been another world entirely.

"I was a fish out of water," she'd claimed.

She felt overwhelmed by culture shock—and much consternation and anxiety, but Elza enjoyed it all the same.

Soon she blended in with Japanese life and quickly learned how to get along with friends, another brand-new experience. It wasn't all that hard for her.

In Goushi's opinion, she probably hadn't adjusted to the alien world of Japanese society at all. Rather, she'd simply been talented enough at adapting to the new setting that she could enjoy it for what it was.

Around this point in her life, she heard music that wasn't classical for the very first time. She learned what popular music in Japan—and the rest of the world—sounded like. From there, she devoured all kinds of music with great enthusiasm.

Elza had felled the birdcage and was living freely and peacefully and normally—but deep in her subconscious, dark thoughts still bubbled and frothed like magma under the mantle.

Everyone dies someday.

So when will I die?

How will I die?

And what about other people?

“Is that when you decided to try being a singer?”

“Nope. It was after that. Once I graduated high school.”

“Oh my! Then I have a similar question. What was the most memorable thing about your high school years?”

“...Hmm... what was it? That’s a hard question to answer. It was chill. I had lots of fun. But out of those three years... nothing really springs to mind.”

That was a lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

Elza’s grandparents had passed away one after the other when she had been in her final year of high school. She’d mourned them consecutively.

In a sense, it should have been no surprise that elderly people would wither away very quickly once they got sick. But it must have been unbearable for her to have finally found family members to live with, only for them to pass away so rapidly.

Elza hadn’t told Goushi anything about how she’d felt at the time—but he often wondered if her fascination with death had partially developed from a hope, perhaps a desire, to see her grandparents once again.

But he couldn’t be sure.

“Tell us about when you decided to be a singer after you graduated school. What was the biggest reason why?”

“Let’s see... what can I say?”

“Is the answer a secret? If so, I’ll take back that question!”

“No, no, it’s not a secret or anything. I dunno, though.”

“You don’t know what?”

“It’s not very cool.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, basically, I wanted to make a ton of money. So the question was, what’s the most likely way I could do that? And the answer was being a singer.”

That was a lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

Money wasn’t the biggest reason she’d became a singer.

When it came down to it, it was for her grandparents.

When she was in high school, they praised her singing voice. Singing was something she’d done on her own since she was small to pass the time.

She would listen to classical music, the only thing that had been allowed, and would use the melodies to construct new songs. Sometimes, she would make up her own lyrics as she hummed along to the pieces.

Her grandparents told her, “Elza, you have the talent to be a singer.”

As a teenager, she understood their compliments as simply grandparents doting on their grandchild. Life was enjoyable enough for her at that point in time, and she had not an ounce of desire to actually be a singer.

But after they both passed away, she had to wonder: What if they were right?

So she came to a decision.

I’ll *make* them right!

“But being in it for the money is a perfectly good reason! I want to be rich in the future,

too! But how did it go once you started to pursue your dream for good? How did all this happen?"

"It was painful, it was fun, it was tough, it was sad, it was crazy... But since I'm here now, I guess it all turned out okay in the end. A lot happened before I became a pro singer, but most of it has to be kept under wraps. I can't tell you anything that would violate anyone's privacy."

That could have been either the truth or another lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

Elza's path to stardom had not been an easy one.

Initially, she was working part-time jobs as she studied various subjects. Part of that involved studying music and songwriting, of course—but she worked on business even more than that. She needed to have absolute control over her own finances in the future.

Money wasn't the main reason she became a singer, but she knew full well that you needed capital to survive in this world. All that healthcare in her childhood had been unbelievably expensive. Had it not been for her parents' financial protection, she literally wouldn't have survived.

That's why she approached her finances far more seriously and carefully than her peers.

Elza inherited her grandparents' savings, but they'd lived a humble life, so it wasn't much. She didn't ask her parents for anything, either. They'd sent her some spending money while she had been in high school, but after graduation, she changed the bank account and refused anything more.

Goushi had no idea what her parents had done in response. Elza hadn't told him anything about it.

But she did say this: "I am a *déraciné*—a flower without roots."

And that was why she'd cut loose all her previous attachments from the roots, Goushi imagined.

He had actually seen Elza in her pursuit of stardom as a singer. That was when he'd started stalking her and had wound up as her willing gofer.

So the next part was something he'd witnessed for himself, not just heard secondhand.

Elza put in a tremendous amount of work to become a singer. She balanced different jobs during the day and studied business and finance at night school.

Then one day, fortune smiled upon her.

She got hooked on the beta test of *Sword Art Online*, the world's first full-dive massively multiplayer online RPG, where you could truly inhabit an alternate fantasy world.

As luck would have it, the day the game officially launched was also the day she was scheduled to visit the first music label to take an interest in her.

Elza had a natural longing for death and destruction. When she learned that she had missed the opportunity to get trapped in a true game of death, she went mad with rage. Goushi still looked back fondly upon the pain of the rib she broke in the aftermath.

Although she'd lamented her terrible "bad luck," Goushi considered it to be one of the Three Great Strokes of Luck to happen in her life.

The music label gave her a lot of strict training, transforming her amateur talents into skills befitting a professional. Even now that she was independent, she still spoke of the label with gratitude—without them, she wouldn't have been the person she was today.

One of the other two strokes of fortune was being blessed with her grandparents. And the last was being blessed with Karen Kohiruimaki. If she hadn't met those three people, Elza's life would have turned out completely different.

So would Goushi's.

He liked to think that somewhere, several levels below that, *his* presence was also good luck for her.

And for his part, Elza's existence was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him.

“I see... And then you made your debut, and here you are now...”

“Oh, there’s one thing I forgot to mention.”

“What is it?”

“Thank you for accepting my songs into your hearts, everyone.”

“We, we, we...”

“We, we, we? No, the scale goes do, re, mi.”

“We’re not worthy! I—I mean we—want to thank you, Elza Kanzaki! Thank you for singing those songs for us!”

“You’re welcome. But I need to express my gratitude again. It’s because you support me as a singer that I get to keep doing what I do. Plus...”

“Plus?”

“Thanks to you all, I was able to buy a new sniper rifle in *GGO!*”

“Gwah! That’s true, that’s true. You’re also Pitohui... I won’t bring up anything you do as her here, but let me say this: We owe you so much for your help in that other world, too. I hope you’ll continue to teach and guide us in *GGO!*” Saki announced.

“Please, ma’am!” the other team members echoed in unison, bowing as one. Their coordination was excellent.

“Such politeness for women so young. Very well! Let’s do it! I’ll teach you! I’ll crack that whip! Hey, wanna run a quest together next time?”

“R-really? Are you sure?”

“Why not? We all love *GGO*, so let’s enjoy it together! Did you hear about that brand-new quest starting up on the fifth of next month? It begins exactly at noon for everyone, and the squadron who completes it the fastest will get a ton of experiences and loot!”

“That’s great! We’re free then, too! I was going to suggest we all take a dive that day anyway!”

“Nice! We’ll take our four, plus the Shirl-Clare combo, if we can recruit them. Plus, you six! We can tackle this with the dozen strongest players in the game!”

“Let’s do it! We’d be happy to join you!”

“Great! Then go to Karen over there and let her hear how excited you are.”

“Yes! Hey, Karen! Let’s play together again! We’d love to!”

Saki and the five others stared at her with eyes full of sincere enthusiasm.

“Huh? Oh. Yeah... okay...”

Karen, who was slumped in the corner of the room, didn’t have anything special going on that day, like a date, or a date, or maybe even a date. So Llenn had no excuse lined up to squirm her way out of this one. She was locked in, cleverly cornered by Elza.

“Hey! Me too!” blurted out Miyu, who grinned and gave them a thumbs-up.

“Umm... Boss...”

One of the six teenagers, golden-haired Milana, quietly spoke up.

“Yes?”

“May I ask Elza one thing, too?”

“Yeah.” “Sure thing!” cried Saki and Elza simultaneously.

Milana locked her blue eyes on Elza’s face.

“About the Elza Kanzaki model guitar,” she started, “I mean, your actual guitar, not the mass-produced one. You have those white cat footprints on the fret board. Do you like cats? Do you have any?”

“Yeah, I like cats. But I don’t have one. I’m actually allergic.”

That was a lie. Elza had told Goushi her story.

At her grandparents' house, they'd had three different-colored cats. The family had treasured them dearly.

The black one with the feisty personality was Spica. The big reddish-brown one was Antares. And the blindingly white one was Canopus. Her grandfather was an astronomy buff, so he'd named them all after stars.

Elza loved the three felines with all her heart. She wasn't allergic to them, either.

But after the death of her grandparents, they'd all left the house. Not of their own accord, mind you; her grandparents had delegated who would take care of the animals after their passing in their will.

Taking care of three cats took a considerable amount of work. And since the home had to be sold after their death, Elza could no longer live there. Given that she was going to be on her own, with true freedom for the first time in her life, her grandparents had kindly let her begin her new life free of burdens.

And while she'd loved the three cats with all her heart, she had no intention of adopting a new one.

When she'd told him the story, Goushi had replied, "I love cats, too. I think you should get one."

Elza replied, "But I already have you as a pet."

Goushi had been choked with emotion. She did him the favor of knocking more sense into him that night.

But let's not get sidetracked.

Elza did not have a cat at the moment.

Instead, she placed a cat sticker on the fret board of her guitar, the single most valuable item of her career. Then she stuck cute little paw prints in a trail behind it. The design was based on Canopus, the white cat closest to Elza of the three.

It represented moving forward, bit by bit, one step at a time. All in order.

Goushi was always watching her closely. Sometimes he saw her tracing the steps with

her fingers, even though she wasn't playing the frets.

"Thank you!" Milana said, bowing.

"Thank you so much!" Saki echoed. "We'll be taking our leave now! We won't ask for your contact information! Instead, we'll just ask Pitohui to get in touch for game business! This is Boss's account!"

Saki held out her smartphone toward Elza, who returned the gesture, trading their information. The younger girl clutched her phone to her chest, cradling the precious information within.

"Everything we've seen and heard today is our little secret! We'll never tell anyone, even under torture!" she swore gravely. The other team members nodded.

Elza smiled and said, "Thanks for that. I appreciate it. Yes... Karen's broken heart will be our little secret..."

"Uugh!"

Karen had been recovering from her heartache until that reminder hit her in the gut. All six feet of her body bent and coiled like a snake.

"That was merciless," Miyu commented, rubbing her friend's back.

"Don't worry. In two and a half months, your hurt feelings will have healed up, and it'll all be a fond memory," added Elza, winking. "Rumors don't last forever, y'know. That's how it's been for you, too, right Miyu?"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha." Karen chuckled, putting on a weary smile.

But without a trace of irony, Miyu replied, "Huh? No, I get over a breakup in three days. Why?"

Saki and the girls left, and the Karen Kohiruimaki Rejection Memorial Karaoke Event drew to a close.

Goushi used the company card to pay for the feast, which meant that, ultimately, it was all on Elza.

"Hey, do you really want to spend the night alone? Sure you don't want to take a bath together?" Elza insisted—which was sexual harassment, by the way—but Karen extracted herself and prepared to walk home.

"All right, just don't forget the quest next week! Let's kick some ass!" Elza called out, her features hidden behind a face mask, while Goushi carried her guitar case. They disappeared into their car, which was parked at a meter.

It wasn't the usual black luxury vehicle, but a fashionable compact in a cute color. Was that to avoid people recognizing them?

As for Miyu, who had taken a morning flight from Hokkaido just so she could spy on Karen's date, she sidled up to Karen and said, "Hey, can you let me stay the night? You can vent my ear off until morning if you want! You did that for me, after all!"

The streets were packed from Saturday nightlife, so they navigated the crowds in silence until they reached a side street with more breathing room.

"Miyu..."

"Yeah? Oops, wait until we're at your place if you want to yell at me."

"Not that. I'm not mad. Thank you."

"Right? Hey, you're welcome."

"Anyway, about what Elza said back there..."

"Huh? Oh, you wanted to spend the night with her after all?"

"No! The answers she gave to Saki's questions."

"Oh, those."

"I think she was mostly lying about those things. In fact, I don't think any of that was true."

"Yeah, probably not. I could tell, too. But those girls were so earnest and innocent that they bought every last word of it. She's got layers upon layers..."

"Also..."

"Hmm?"

"Goushi never said a word the entire time he was there at her side. I think he knows the actual truth"

"Probably."

The fashionable, adorably colored compact car sped down the expressway.

Elza held the guitar in her hands in the right-rear seat, not playing but humming, "Hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm-hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm-hmm, hmm, hmm..."

It was the Promenade section of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, which she had arranged into one of her own songs.

Goushi recalled that Llenn had also sung it on the banks of the lake back in SJ1.

When the humming in the back seat ceased, Goushi said "Boss" without turning his head. He glanced at her face in the rearview mirror instead. "That was quite a story you put together. I'm blown away that you were able to concoct it so smoothly."

"No big deal when you're Elza Kanzaki."

"But even I haven't heard about your stage name. Do you mind if I ask what the real reason for it is?"

"Huh? I never told you?" she asked, blinking. She was really, truly surprised. "Well then, I'll let you in on the secret of my pseudonym. Just for you."

"I'm honored to have your trust. I'm listening."

"The kanji for *Kan* in Kanzaki is *God*, of course. And *Saki* or *Zaki* is a promontory, a

piece of land that juts into the sea, right? The people God didn't call to be with Him must be standing on that point somewhere."

"...And Elza?"

"That one's simpler. *El* comes from *eru*, the verb meaning *to attain*. And can you tell what *za* is?"

"The kanji for *sit*... A seat, then?"

"You got it. How clever of you."

"A place to sit on the headland before God..."

"Basically, it's just a silly pun. I'm sure that when I thought of it, I felt like I was sooo deep. But the truth is that it's so embarrassing I can never publicly admit the story behind it."

"No, I think it's a wonderfully meaningful name. I'm moved."

"Really? Well, it's a secret. I'm never going to tell anyone else."

"I'll take everything you've told me in confidence tonight to my grave."

"My. Thank you. But there's one more thing. Something very, very important that I don't want you to forget."

Goushi said nothing. For a time, the only thing moving in the car were his hands on the steering wheel.

A few moments later, he spoke up. "What is that very, very important thing?"

"Everything that I've said to you in confidence could be..."

"Could be?"

"Could all be lies."

Elza slid her fingers down the fret board of the guitar.

Over the cat's paw prints, *step-step-step*.

CHAPTER 2
Questing Together



CHAPTER 2

QUESTING TOGETHER

Saturday, September 5th.

“Yo! Congrats on your one-week anniversary of getting dumped, Llenn!”

“Don’t keep track of that!”

Fukaziroh and Llenn were meeting up in Glocken, the capital city of *GGO*.

The little blond bombshell was wearing a MultiCam shirt and shorts today. Llenn had on her desert-pink fatigues; she basically never wore anything else in the game. Even her boots were pink. If they put out a statement banning pink from *GGO*, Llenn might have to quit and never look back.

But today, the two had sheathed their weapons and were adorably hidden under dark-brown robes from head to toe. They looked like tiny friars. Or perhaps electronics scavengers from a desert planet in a series of films about interstellar warfare.

One reason they were cloaking themselves was because they were so cute that they stood out. Another was that their many exploits in Squad Jam had garnered them a certain level of recognition.

It was eleven o’clock.

Despite the prenoon hour, the sky was dark red over the neon glow of Glocken’s bustling streets. Like amusements parks and tourist spots, full-dive VRMMOs were always packed on the weekends.

“Anniversaries aside, let’s go buy some stuff! I’m a girl, and I don’t have any nads. Grenads! Get it?”

“Straight into the dirty jokes, huh?”

The two diminutive figures trekked down the gleaming neon street of Glocken. Their

destination was a place that resembled a supermarket, except that the only thing on sale was weaponry and ammunition. They had to load up on as much ammo as they could before the competitive quest started at noon.

"You haven't gone back, have you, Fuka?" Llenn asked her partner as they walked. It was a short message, but Fukaziroh got the meaning.

Llenn was confirming that Fukaziroh hadn't gone back to her usual haunt, the fantasy RPG *Alfheim Online (ALO)* since the fourth Squad Jam last week. In fact, ever since she'd converted over for the special playtest on August 16th, her character had been in *GGO* the entire time.

"You bet. Converting back and forth with the same character is a snooze. Plus, I'm a tall sylph in *ALO*, so it throws off my senses each time. On top of that, you haven't been playing *GGO* with me because of some dumb reason like 'preparing for the new semester' so I've just been rampaging on my own here."

"Ah, gotcha. You should also be preparing for school, though."

"Just gonna ignore that comment. Anyway, it looks like they don't have the nads I'm lookin' for. A woman's—"

"Don't tell me you haven't gone back to Hokkaido yet!"

"Whoa, whoa, are you seriously trying to talk about real life here?"

"Just answer the question."

Llenn knew full well that it was considered taboo to talk about real-life matters in the virtual world, but she couldn't help herself.

Fukaziroh's real-life player and Karen's friend since high school, Miyu Shinohara, had flown in from Hokkaido just to spy on Karen's date. Apparently, Elza had paid for a proper first-class seat for her, which seemed exorbitantly expensive when you were used to bargain hunting.

After Fire Nishiyamada turned Karen down, everyone went to a karaoke place and sang their hearts out to blow off steam. Miyu stayed at Karen's apartment that night, then left around noon the next day, saying, "Welp, I'll head back home now. But I'll fly back to console you whenever you get dumped!"

But whatever she actually did after that point had been a mystery. Miyu liked to call Karen from her family home in Hokkaido while taking a long, luxurious bath, but there had been no such calls since that day.

She hadn't been caught hanging around Tokyo ever since, so she was probably staying at Elza Kanzaki's place, right? Karen couldn't help but worry a little—or a lot.

Fukaziroh read Llenn's mind like a book. "You think I've been staying at Miss Elza's place? No way; I wouldn't do that. I mean, I'd be curious to see what it's like, but Goushi's there, too, and I wouldn't want to intrude on their little love nest—oh, who am I kidding? I *so* wanna do that!"

"Don't. Also, don't," Llenn ordered.

"I *did* go home. I'm in bed right now. That's where I'm logged-and-in!"

"Why did you split that word up?"

"Anyway, back at our house in the village of Obihiro in the Tokachi Republic of the Great Federation of Hokkaido, the weather is cool and autumnal. 'Tis the season of delicious fall flavors."

She wasn't talking about beer, but rather the salmon that swam upstream in there during autumn.

"That's true..."

Llenn loved salmon. Her virtual stomach growled with hunger.

Simple slices of grilled salmon. Tightly packed salmon and miso hot pot. *Chanchan-yaki*, that panfried salmon dish with a tantalizing aroma of frying miso. Homemade soy-marinated salmon roe...

"You suppose it's pork bowl and curry season, too?"

"There's a season for those?"

"Yep. Over the course of the year, they're considered especially delicious in the spring and summer, as well as the fall and winter."

“So all of them.”

They were still absorbed in their conversation about the real world when they finally arrived at the gun shop.

“C’mon, let’s buy! Buy, buy, buy!”

“I’ve got to restock my ammo for P-chan and the Vor-chans, too.”

They bought tons of rounds.

Team LPFM and their partners in SHINC planned to meet about twenty minutes before the start of the quest, around 11:40.

Their rendezvous point was a place they’d been many times, a bar and restaurant that looked like the perfect location for a western movie shoot-out.

Llenn and Fukaziroh finished their shopping surprisingly quickly, so they were in a private room by 11:20. A freckled NPC waitress took their message to send their companions through to the right place.

They sat down at a huge round table that could seat a good twenty people.

“Games are so much fun, ya know? Wonder what kind of battle awaits us today.”

“I know it’s fun, but whenever we’re with Pito, it ends up being really hardcore.”

“Don’t be stupid. The game is fun *because* it feels like you’re constantly gonna die!”

“I just don’t want to feel like I’m going to die in real life.”

They chatted and sipped on their ginger ale and iced tea to kill time, until at eleven thirty, the door burst opened. A boyish, Takarazuka-esque character with short black hair stepped inside.

“Yo! Hi, you two!”

It was Clarence, dressed in an all-black outfit that complemented her nicely.

“Heya, long time no—”

“See.”

She plopped herself down next to Fukaziroh and Llenn. “Have I ever told you how small you two are? In fact, did you get even smaller?”

“Heh-heh-heh, can you tell?”

“No, Llenn, she can’t. Your avatar doesn’t shrink.”

Clarence waved her hand to open the menu and order a drink. A glass *shunked* up out of a hole in the center of the table.

“Well, let’s have a toast!”

She lifted a glass of something that was impossible to identify. It looked like the cup of water that was left behind at the end of art class.

Fukaziroh lifted her ginger ale and asked, “Okay! To what?”

“To our utter defeat in SJ4!”

“Damn, I’ll drink to that! Cheers!”

“Whoo! Cheers!”

“...”

Llenn lifted her glass but didn’t say anything. *Oh right, we lost*, she recalled.

The winners of the fourth Squad Jam were the All-Japan Machine-Gun Lovers, aka ZEMAL.

In SJ1, they were just a pack of trigger-hungry idiots who never bothered to check on one another. But with each new round of the event, they’d gotten tighter and tighter as a team.

Finally, in SJ4, they showed up with their new leader, a mysterious woman named Vivi who guided them to a stunning, tremendous victory, where they didn't lose a single member before the end.

Llenn's team wound up in fourth place.

It was the first time she hadn't been on the medal stand in Squad Jam. Not that she was obsessed with it or anything. But it left a conflicted feeling in her heart.

I guess I love GGO and Squad Jam way more than I realized...

Using a straw, she took a little sip of iced tea right as Shirley walked through the door, her hair as green as ever.

She wore her usual realistic tree-patterned hunting jacket and brown cargo pants. Her baseball cap was turned backward so the brim wouldn't bump against her rifle scope.

Incidentally, while she'd put on camouflage face paint in SJ2 and SJ3, she hadn't done so recently. Maybe someone had told her what a try-hard dork she'd looked like.

"Oh, you're here early."

They exchanged greetings, and Shirley sat down next to Clarence. "Hey, partner, how you been?"

"Good, good. A little busy, though. In real life," mentioned Clarence, with one of her typical handsome smiles.

"That's good to hear." Shirley didn't have anything more to say.

Despite Clarence's insistence that they should meet up in real life, she hadn't reached out once since SJ4, but Shirley wasn't going to bring that up today. There wasn't anything urgent enough to be worth mentioning. If she wanted to make plans, she could say so.

There's always a comfortable distance between two people, and that distance can change over time. No use in trying to force the issue.

Shirley thought back to the girl she'd rode horses with last week in the real world (where she was named Mai) and wondered what she was up to now.

"I'll have an iced coffee. Syrup, no cream," she ordered.

"Oh, you're all here early."

Pitohui entered the room at 11:35. M followed behind her.

Neither of them had gotten a makeover for the occasion. They looked the same as ever. Meaning that Pitohui wore a tight-fitting bodysuit, while M wore venomous-green camo fatigues. They were dressed light for the moment, with no gear visible on their persons.

"Hello, Pito and M."

"G'morn', Sis and Bro."

"Hey, hey."

"Hello."

Llenn, Fukaziroh, Clarence, and Shirley greeted the newcomers. Shirley couldn't help but glare when she saw Pitohui, but she was still a grown woman. She made sure to offer a modicum of courtesy.

The pair sat down in open seats and ordered their own drinks. "Let's not go over the game rules until all our teammates are here," Pitohui said, right at 11:36.

"Pardon us!"

That was when those teammates arrived—a squad of six women wearing the same camo pattern with green spots.

In the lead was a gorilla with braids, Eva—better known as Boss—followed by Tohma the black-haired sniper, Sophie the squat dwarf, Rosa the burly one, Anna the blond beauty with sunglasses, and Tanya the silver-haired fox.

That was Team SHINC, the group that had clashed with Llenn in a tremendous duel in SJ1.

"It's a pleasure to be here with you today!" Boss announced.

“Let’s have some fun!” the rest shouted in unison.

While the intimidating display blew Llenn away, Fukaziroh grinned, Shirley seemed disinterested, and Clarence whistled.

“Okay, okay, enough of the stuffy formalities. Knock it off. This is a game, so we’re forgetting all the real-world annoying junk and just having fun! I said *fun!*”

“Yes, ma’am!” Knowing her true identity was Elza Kanzaki, the group couldn’t help but straighten up. “Pardon us, then!”

They sat down in a row of seats directly opposite the table. It was like sitting across from six nervous potential recruits at a group job interview.

“Wait, what’s going on? Is this supposed to be a scary game we’re about to play?” asked Clarence, who was feeling intimidated by the strange vibe all of a sudden.

After SHINC ordered their favorite drinks, the atmosphere seemed to relax a little.

“Now then, thank you all for being here! And thank you again!” Pitohui announced, launching into a speech. She really loved to do that. “We’re going to take part in a quest designed to deepen our friendship! There will be no pointing of guns at one another today! How lovely! How sublime!”

Well, I gotta agree with her there, Llenn thought.

In SJ4, her long-awaited wish had finally come true, and she’d engaged in a one-on-one duel with Boss. She’d eked out a victory by the slimmest of margins. Now there was nothing left for her to do—not that she intended to quit *GGO*, either.

“Let’s have fun, get along, rip through this quest, and win first prize!”

“Yeah!”

Fukaziroh and SHINC gave each other daps for fun. Clarence, too, joined in after a beat.

Shirley did not, of course. With the mood in the room, she couldn’t very well announce that she would find a way to take out Pitohui while she wasn’t paying attention. She only *thought* it. That’s right, she hadn’t given up yet. One of Shirley’s strongest qualities

was her refusal to admit defeat.

"Now, coming up on this quest," Pitohui said, as though she were reading a preview for an upcoming anime episode.

"A three-parter?" asked Fukaziroh, joking.

"Close! Five-parter!"

"Huh?" She was not expecting Pitohui to give her a serious reply.

Llenn realized, *Fuka... you didn't actually read the quest synopsis that everyone had access to, did you?*

As a generally hardworking person, Karen went over the quest beforehand. It was important to do that.

"Fuka, I love the way you live your life," Pitohui said.

Please, no, Llenn thought. Don't encourage her.

"Anyway, let me just give a quick explanation of this quest," Pitohui announced.

"Huge thanks, Miss! I mean, Master!" exclaimed Fukaziroh, clapping her hands.

Llenn and SHINC understood the gist of the competition, of course, but it never hurt to have a refresher. They still had a few minutes, so they decided to let Pitohui give the class a lecture.

"Unlike Squad Jam, there won't be any player-versus-player combat in this quest. Just like with normal gameplay, we'll be attempting to clear the assignment by defeating enemies out in the field. What's most important here is that this is a competitive simultaneous quest where everyone starts exactly at noon."

It was competitive, meaning that it was a onetime event that only squadrons who had signed up ahead of time could experience, right here and now. In other words, it was going to be an enigmatic riddle of a quest, full of twists and turns that would be totally spoiled if you heard them from someone who had already beaten it.

"So when the dust settles, and we end up in first place, there's a boatload of bonus points in it for us," Fukaziroh noted.

Pitohui smirked. "You bet. And that's what we're after, of course! On top of that, there are bonuses within the team for the player with the most kills, least damage suffered, etcetera."

"Hoo, doggy! Well, that does it for the refresher! Thanks for the lesson!"

"Not so fast," snapped Llenn.

Pitohui continued, "This quest is titled... Five Ordeals." The name was an English equivalent of a Japanese term.

"Uh-huh, I see, very interesting... The Five Ordeals, eh...? I see we've got our work cut out for us... with these... *ordeals*..." commented Fukaziroh, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"You don't know what that means, do you, Fuka?" Llenn had to ask.

"It means, like, a trial, right? You spell it o-r-d-e-a-l," Fukaziroh replied, much to Llenn's surprise—and disappointment.

"That's right, Five Ordeals," acknowledged Pitohui. "In other words, we're probably looking at not just five different battlegrounds with different enemies, but five sets of custom rules, too. I can't predict what they'll all be, of course, but I'm sure certain parameters will wind up being more or less advantageous..."

"So it's testing our overall team ability," interjected the gorilla with braids, the first time she'd spoken in several minutes.

"Precisely!" Pitohui shouted, rudely pointing a finger at her.

"Hmph!" But Boss looked delighted. She couldn't hide the fact that she adored Pitohui's player. She looked like she was thinking, *I can't believe this day has finally come! Long live GGO!*

I suppose that I, in my own specific way, had that feeling once, Llenn haiku'd.

"We don't know what hurdles these five battles will bring, but we can band together

and get through them! We can do this! Because we're us!" Pitohui yelled, a statement that did not justify itself.

"Yeah!" roared six burly voices belonging to little teenage girls. They were young. It was as if Pitohui was their teacher.

Whether we can beat it aside, it's so nice that we can simply enjoy a game together, without any high stakes or guns pointed at one another, Llenn thought blissfully.

Hmm, when should I make my move and do Pitohui in? Shirley thought blissfully.

Pitohui continued, "I'm assuming that someone must have designed this quest, but as usual, it's unlisted."

Of course, that was almost always the case, so they wouldn't know who was responsible for the competition. The few instances of quest-design information that had been published in the past were exceptions to the rule.

"Players get one life, and when it's gone, that's it, the end. Also, there are *no* healing items distributed to players, and you can't use your own, either."

Llenn had to admit she was surprised to learn about not having any healing. Was it going to be just that hardcore, or would there be lifesaving tools here and there? They wouldn't know until it started.

"Since Boss and her team are here, we're at the maximum group size of twelve players. Naturally, not having a full twelve puts you at a disadvantage. I can't imagine they're adjusting the difficulty to scale with the number of players on a team. But as long as just one member survives, all members will receive the experience points for the fastest completion."

"Oh-ho. So what you're saying is I could just hang out in the back and doze off, and that'd be fine," Fukaziroh smirked.

"Yeah, right. You're going to rush to the front," Llenn shot back.

Fukaziroh snorted. "Oh yeah, I forgot you were psychic."

"What, didn't I tell you?"

"All right, girls, may I continue?" Pitohui interrupted, returning to the explanation. "Anyway, that's about all we know for now. We'll have to wait for the event to start to learn more."

With her lecture over, she asked, "Has anyone changed anything on their main weapons? Let's have a look-see."

"Ooh!" the leader of SHINC said, grunting. "We brought a full stock of ammo for everything. The rules didn't mention it, but we all have pistols, too. And we've got a new weapon for Sophie—a GM-94. Show them, Sophie."

As Boss gave the explanation, Sophie produced a new toy from her inventory. She lifted it up and set it down with a thud on the table. The others stood up to get a better look.

It looked like a pump-action shotgun, with two large barrels, top and bottom—but with dimensions about three times fatter. The metallic stock was folded in, and it was longer than the P90 at about twenty-one inches. If the stock was fully extended, it would be about thirty-two.

As the one-and-two-thirds-inch-diameter barrel made clear, this wasn't your standard peashooter, but a grenade launcher like Fukaziroh's MGL-140s. It was designed to propel small grenades through the air in a ballistic arc to explode on contact.

Like SHINC's other weapons, the GM-94 was Russian-made.

"Oooh, a launcher... but can it best my Rightony and Leftonia?" Fukaziroh jeered, feeling needlessly competitive.

"Well, it can't shoot six in a row," Sophie replied, admitting defeat. Or perhaps she was mature enough—despite being in high school—to avoid bickering.

She went on, "It's pump-action, so you put three grenades into the top tube, then pump the bottom barrel to load them. It shoots up to four."

Sophie worked the action to show them. Unlike a shotgun, you pulled it forward to eject the casing, so the barrel itself moved. It was a very strange mechanism, but that's Russia for you.

Since there was no grenade loaded, it only clicked when she pulled the trigger.

"That's a nice buy," admired Pitohui, a true collector who wanted every gun in *GGO* stashed away in her locker. "This launcher should be good for indoor combat. A grenade launcher you can use in close-quarters combat—call it a Russian Concussion. You can shoot it at a target thirty feet away at the shortest... unless you don't mind splash damage, in which case anything goes. The shrapnel radius is about ten feet."

"Yes. You sure know your stuff, Miss El—Pitohui," Sophie corrected.

Incidentally, SHINC had acquired this grenade launcher after their battle against Llenn's team in SJ3. Specifically, because of the bitter experience of taking huge damage from a grenade blast in the narrow hallway of the cruise ship (although the plasma grenade that nearly destroyed the ship was Fukaziroh's mistake).

They'd always wanted one and had finally saved up the credits when one of the launchers arose on the secondhand market.

Boss explained, "I've told Sophie to blast away indoors if necessary and not to worry about friendly fire. She can also carry the PTRD-41, so we'll switch between them as needed."

Sophie had originally used a PKM machine gun, just like Rosa, but she couldn't carry one of them along with the antitank rifle, which was just as heavy. The GM-94, which packed considerable punch at a third of the weight, was a worthy compromise.

"Mmm, excellent! I'm looking forward to that!" Pitohui exclaimed. It kind of sounded like she wanted Sophie to shoot a bunch of grenades her way while they were in battle.

"Umm... as for our firepower," Llenn muttered. She started to calculate their total power in her mind. That consideration was a good example of her earnest personality.

"It's a lot!" interjected Fukaziroh haphazardly, a good example of *her* personality as well.

Llenn kindly ignored her friend and said, "First, Clarence and I have submachine guns."

Technically, the P90 and AR-57 used 5.7 × 28 mm rounds with more power than handgun bullets, so they were closer to the middle ground between an SMG and a 5.56 mm assault rifle, but that would make the explanation even longer, so she left that out. For simplicity's sake, they could just define the guns as submachine guns.

"M uses an automatic 7.62 mm sniper rifle, the M14 EBR. Shirley's bolt-action R93 Tactical 2 uses the same caliber, but she's got exploding rounds, too."

"And then there's Rightony and Leftonia! I'm packed with standard explosives, and I've got twelve plasma grenades, too!"

Llenn had been with Fukaziroh earlier when she'd bought the plasmas and was aghast at how much the powerful explosives had cost.

"Okay. And Pito? What's your loadout?"

"Same as always. The Squad Jam stuff."

That meant her custom AK assault rifle, the KTR-09, with a drum magazine for long continuous fire, the M870 Breacher shortened shotgun for a sidearm, two XDM pistols, and three photon swords.

"Got it."

"You brought the Vorpal Bunnies with you too, right, Llenn?" she asked. Llenn nodded.

Pitohui had given Llenn a pair of adorable pink pistols called the Vorpal Bunnies as a present for the "pistols only" area of SJ4. Llenn called them the Vor-chans. They came with a special backpack with spare magazines inside that allowed her to reload with one hand each.

Llenn had brought them along. Between the P90 and the extra ammunition, she was near the edge of the low weight burden she could actually carry.

But the thigh holster and pouches for the P90's magazines interfered with the pistols, so she could only equip one of them at a time. Instead, Llenn made sure to arrange her inventory so she could switch them with a single button.

To use P-chan or the Vor-chans? That was the question.

Oh, but she couldn't forget the little friend on her back, either—Kni-chan the knife.

"As for you guys," she continued, referring to SHINC, "Boss has the silenced Vintorez sniper rifle. Tanya has the Bizon submachine gun. Sophie has that grenade launcher. Rosa has the machine gun. Tohma and Anna have automatic sniper rifles. And there's

the antitank rifle, your grenades, and pistols.”

She could list all the weapons off from memory. Some of them had been a major headache for her in the past. Others had also saved her virtual bacon.

“That’s right,” Boss confirmed.

No one had any tricks up their sleeve. Nobody had any optical guns, either, which weren’t bad to use against computer enemies. But when you used a live-ammo gun for so long, it was very hard to adjust to the huge difference in weight, power, and usage with optics.

“Now, may I suggest a formation?” Pitohui ventured.

“Yes, ma’am!” Boss blurted out, as though she were about to make a formal salute.

“Enough of that. It’s fine if you’d rather decline,” Pitohui insisted awkwardly. It made Llenn just a little bit pleased to see. “Anyway, in my humble opinion, I think our point people slash attackers in the front should be Llenn and Tanya.”

No complaints there. Llenn and Tanya nodded and looked at each other. They were the fastest, so their job would always involve taking the lead to scout—or confusing and distracting the enemy. That was dangerous, of course, but it was a role that made the most of their talents.

“You’ll be in the front this time, M. Offer your support to those two and give them orders.”

“Understood,” he responded, his craggy face nodding.

Having M right behind us will be a relief, Llenn decided.

“Rosa and Anna are equipped with a machine-gun-and-sniper-rifle combination, which is very effective. You girls form a two-woman cell behind M’s position. As a core component of our firepower, you can venture right or left as the battle dictates. I’ll be behind you as *your* buddy.”

“It’s an honor!”

“We’d be happy to do that!”

"All right, all right. Anyway, Sophie and Eva and Tohma, you three will follow behind us. Again, you can change tactics as necessary at Eva's discretion. You'll be the rear guard, Boss."

The rear guard was the person at the tail end of a group formation. It was a crucial position for guarding against enemy attacks from behind, especially when you were retreating.

"Roger that!" Boss answered for the trio. The others nodded.

"Whaddabout me?" asked Fukaziroh.

Pitohui grumbled, "Fuka, you're a tough one... If we're out in the wide open, you can be farther back, or you could come up to about where M is. Indoors, you have nothing to do."

"Okay, I guess I'll just wander around within the formation or something. Let me know if you need bombardment backup at any point, people."

"With that settled, unless there are any objections, we'll use this as our basic formation," Pitohui finished. There were no quibbles from anyone whose name she'd called.

"Hey, wait a minute; what about us?"

Clarence hadn't been mentioned. She pointed at Shirley, who sat next to her in silence.

"The Shirl-Clare combo will be roamers. Form a two-person team and do whatever you want!"

"Huh?"

"Shirley, you come after me whenever you feel like it."

"What?"

Clarence seemed upset, but her partner looked positively wicked. "I'm glad you understand how this is going to work," she said forebodingly. Shirley was only an avatar, but she wore the kind of expression you wouldn't want your family members to see.

There was another woman bearing a vicious expression. It was Boss.

"Very interesting. So Shirley's still gunning for Pitohui one way or another. But this time, *we're* on your side, too. It's not going to be as easy as you think to take her out."

The members of SHINC, who were now Pitohui's personal protection squad, glared at Shirley.

"Hah. Sounds fun. I'll send you all to your final destination. Then when you come back to this pub, you can sip your tea and relax."

"I'd like to see you try."

There were already sparks flying across the table—between members of the same team.

"Oh geez..." Llenn sighed, taking a sip of iced tea.

Pitohui had just been telling them that the game wasn't likely to lower the difficulty for a smaller group. It was bold to tell Shirley and Clarence that they could do whatever they wanted.

Both exasperated and impressed, she glanced at her watch and saw that it was 11:59.

"Well, gang, shall we get out there and have some fun? Class is dismissed," Ms. Pitohui said, and the battle was on.

All twelve stood up from the round table, waved their left hands, and started working through their inventories. Light particles materialized around their bodies in various places, transforming into ammo pouches, combat vests, helmets, and the like.

Lastly, their guns appeared, settling into their hands. Metal clicked and clanked as the bits of gear loaded in and rubbed against one another.

Once they were locked and loaded, the last item was for communication.

They weren't sure how best to interface with one another, but they settled on putting all twelve members on the same channel. That meant anyone could speak to anyone, regardless of how far apart they were or how noisy the gunfire clatter was at the time.

Llenn clenched her pink P90 and whispered, "Let's have some fun, P-chan."

She pulled the loading lever, sending a bullet into the chamber.

At the stroke of noon, they vanished from the pub as one.

The glass of ginger ale Fukaziroh was desperately trying to finish hit the ground and clattered away.

CHAPTER 3
Guided by Dogs
—The First Ordeal—



CHAPTER 3

GUIDED BY DOGS

—THE FIRST ORDEAL—

Llenn closed her eyes in the moment of teleportation as light flooded around her.

“And now...”

She opened them to see...

“A city...”

It was a downtown ruin map.

This was fairly common terrain in *GGO*. It wasn’t a skyscraper downtown area, nor rows of apartment buildings, but rather a fairly prosperous commercial district.

Since *GGO* was an American-made game, the area was designed in a similarly American style. You could find something like it in any typical Hollywood flick.

The ground was flat around her; a wide, four-lane concrete road. There wasn’t a single car around. The vertical hanging traffic lights made it look *very* American.

On either side of the street, lined with parking spots, were stores. They were of solid concrete and steel girder make, so the structures were still there, but their exteriors were faded and tattered. Still, it was easy enough to identify them as electronics stores, bookstores, supermarkets, and the like.

Llenn pointed her P90 at the sky and spun around. From this, she gleaned that she was in the center of an intersection along with her teammates. They all had their guns at the ready.

Next, she looked up.

The midday sky was clear, with the sun at its zenith, but the atmosphere gave everything

a dull, reddish tinge. A number of cloud trails sat low and unmoving. The air was still.

The presence or absence of wind was a major factor in *GGO* battles. The main reason for this was its effect on bullets, of course, but the sound was also crisper downwind and vice versa. On the other hand, gales could also obscure enemy footprints—and a clear cloud of dust and smoke more quickly.

The quest was already in progress. A little clock readout in the upper left of Llenn's view said 12:00:30.

Were the enemies going to jump out at them? She looked around warily.

Behind her, MGL-140s hanging from each shoulder, Fukaziroh commented, "So what are we doin' first in this quest? Blowing up all the houses that are falling down in this city? Yep, I can do that."

She wasn't concerned in the slightest.

Then a voice said, "Hello, everyone."

All twelve squad members heard it; it did not belong to any of them. It was a boy's voice—and a young one at that.

"*Hyeep?*"

Llenn spun around, feeling a chill run down her spine. The voice had come from behind her.

Then she saw who had spoken.

It was a dog.

The other eleven turned around in surprise, too, just slightly slower than Llenn, and looked down.

A single dog stood in the midst of the twelve teammates and immediately captured everyone's attention.

“A doggy...?”

Llenn was shocked to see this black dog standing on all fours between them. Its height (measured to the shoulders) was about ten inches, just short enough to stay in the small dog category. It was entirely black, with longer hair and a pointed snout and ears—a spitz type.

“It’s so *cyute!*” squealed someone, drawing the attention of the band, before hastily composing herself. “Er! I mean... It *is* cute... right?”

It was Shirley. She hadn’t been able to stop the animal lover inside her from bursting out, so now she felt very self-conscious.

“Whoa! What’s with this little guy?!” Fukaziroh exclaimed, approaching it and going down on a knee.

“Is it a monster? Look out, Fuka!” Llenn warned.

“No, it’s fine!” reassured Pitohui. When Llenn stared back skeptically, she explained, “When has any *GGO* monster taken the appearance of a normal dog?”

“Oh. Good point,” Llenn admitted.

The animal-type monsters in *GGO* always had some kind of special tweak to their designs—usually grotesque. Not a single one looked the same way as it did in real life. These were creatures that had evolved in a future Earth setting.

“Meaning?” she asked.

Pitohui replied, “Let’s hear it straight from the dog’s mouth.”

“Once again—hello, everyone,” the canine announced. Its pointed muzzle swung up and down as it spoke in a voice like a boy’s. “I am here to lead you.”

With that, everything clicked for Llenn. *Aha, so this dog is our guide for the quest.*

The pooch was going to tell them everything, from what they should do to where they

should go next. That was why it had appeared in their midst. If it had shown up on the horizon, someone would have shouted “Monster!” and probably shot it to death.

That made their first order of business clear as day: They needed to hear him (or her) out.

But no sooner had this thought occurred to Llenn than Fukaziroh squished the dog’s face in her hands. “Awww, you’re so cute! Wubby-wubby-wubby!”

“Mmf, ah, hey, uh, mwuh...” The spitz was quite bothered.

“Hey, Fuka! How are we supposed to tell?!”

“No, it’s fine. *I* can tell.”

“Tell what?”

“This dog is a schipperke.”

“Who said anything about its breed?” Llenn commented, annoyed.

Shirley said coolly, “The schipperke is a Belgian dog. It’s a spitz type, originally for herding sheep. A fairly rare breed. You don’t see them in Japan.”

“That wasn’t a request for more detail...”

What was with these dog girls...? Not that Llenn had any problem with mutts. But clearly that wasn’t the right thing to be focusing on in this situation. Right? Or was she in the wrong?

“Who’s a good boy?!” Fukaziroh cooed, finally letting go.

“Mwah...! Excuse me,” it barked. Then it went back to the script. “I am here to lead you. I will be guiding you through the Five Ordeals. Please keep up.”

“Yeah! Thanks, pal!” raved Fukaziroh, who was even more intense than ever. “Wow, I can’t believe I’m talking to a dog! This rules!”

Such was the fate of a pooch lover. Llenn decided it was best to ignore her.

"First, please decide my name," the canine said.

Instantly utilizing her naming instincts, Llenn blurted out, "Suu-chan!"

"No, none of that! Vetoed!" Fukaziroh snapped. Llenn puffed out her cheeks.

"Then what *should* it be?"

"Fukazaburou."

"Absolutely not."

"He's Fukaziroh's little brother, Fukazaburou."

"Yeah, I get what you were going for!"

Fukaziroh picked up the little dog and hugged it to her chest. "He's my brother from a different father! We've been separated all our life! That's why his name is Saburou!"

"Uh... I guess..."

Llenn was vividly reminded of something she'd seen as Karen.

It was after she'd met Miyu in high school and had gone over to visit her house for the very first time. There'd been an old part-Shiba Inu mutt there.

That was the *real* Fukaziroh.

Ever since she was a little girl, Miyu had begged for a dog, but her parents refused every time, using the word *fuka*, for *not allowed*. But eventually, at long last, they relented and let her have a dog.

They brought it over to Miyu's room from a friend's house, back when it was still small enough to fit in a sink. She treated that pup like it was a real little brother.

Throughout her elementary and middle school years, Miyu and Fukaziroh were inseparable.

When Karen first met Miyu's pet in early high school, its hips were already weakening, so Miyu doted upon the elderly hound.

Dusk or dawn, rain or shine, and no matter how exhausted she might be after tennis club, Miyu diligently put a support harness on Fukaziroh whenever he needed to go potty outside.

In her second year of high school, Fukaziroh was bedridden, so Miyu regularly helped to turn his body over so he didn't get bedsores.

Then, in the summer of her third year of high school, Fukaziroh finally left for doggy heaven—and Miyu was so broken up that she barely ate anything for a week.

“Don’t mind me... I’m just working on a new weight loss program...,” she sniffled.

“Shut up and eat. Are you trying to mummify yourself, at your young age? Open up!”

Karen had gotten takeout curry and had practically forced it into her friend’s mouth.

The first time she heard Miyu’s avatar name in *ALO*, the corners of her eyes brimmed with tears. “Oooh...”

So Llenn just smiled and said, “All right, Fuka... I get it. The dog’s name can be—”

“Let’s combine your ideas and divide by two. Suuzaburou it is!” Pitohui butted in.

“Thank you for the name. I am Suuzaburou,” said the canine—Suuzaburou.

With a little *bing*, a tag appeared over the dog’s black head reading SUUZABUROU. It was the kind of indicator that appeared over teammates, important items, and NPCs.

If you had the “display nametags” option on, they would remain visible even when out of sight.

“Hrmm.”

“Hrmm.”

Both the little shrimps scowled at having lost the right to name the dog, but there was no changing it from here.

“And now, I will guide you to your first ordeal. The first thing you need to know is that your ammo and overheating resistance are unlimited,” explained Suuzaburou. Llenn’s

P90 glowed briefly, along with all the other guns.

“Mmm?”

She waved her left hand to check the status screen. To her surprise, the remaining ammunition for both the P90 and the Vorpal Bunnies displayed as the infinity symbol. The number per magazine was still fifty, so the readout in the corner of her view was the same as ever, but it suggested that she could reload as much as she wanted.

“So basically, if I put in fresh magazines, I can shoot as long as I want?” Llenn asked.

“Seems that way. My lightsword energy is infinite, too,” Pitohui pointed out.

Rosa, who carried the PKM machine gun, added, “Same for the barrel’s heat parameter. I can shoot hundreds of bullets like this.”

When guns were shot too much, they overheated—especially along the barrel—to the point where they got too hot to touch, then bulged and warped. Naturally, that affected their precision and caused jams and such. Heat management was especially important with sniper rifles and machine guns, but now it was a nonfactor.

“That’s so convenient!” Llenn exclaimed.

“Er... actually, no...” Boss sighed heavily.

Llenn looked around and saw that not only Boss, but all of SHINC, plus Pitohui and Fukaziroh, wore expressions that were downright funereal.

“Look, Llenn,” Fukaziroh started. She’d never seen this kind of despondency on her face. “This means you can shoot forever.”

“Exactly! It’s so convenient! Things will be so much easier!”

“It means that there’ll be so many enemies, we’ll *have* to make use of unlimited ammo.”

“Oh...”

Llenn was finally coming around to understand the point of the first ordeal.

“Exactly. There will be enemies. Good luck, everyone,” said Suuzaburou.

Now it was very clear why their starting point was a big fat intersection.

“Urgh...”

A literal swarm of enemies was appearing from the road to the east. Though they were about a thousand feet away, they were materializing out of thin air to fill the entire road.

Llenn promptly pulled out her monocular and put it to her eye. They were all small opponents, from the starting-area creatures based on pigs, crocodiles, and insects, to nonbiological monsters like robots designed to look like tin-plated toys.

These were extremely weak foes. They had no ranged weapons and low durability; a few shots from an optical gun, or one or two real bullets, would take them down. A sufficiently powerful character could even punch them to death. The real problem was their numbers.

“A ton of small enemies! East!” Llenn announced.

“No, they’re coming from everywhere,” Fukaziroh replied.

Llenn rotated on the spot and murmured, “Oh...”

It wasn’t just from the east. Similar swarms of monsters had spawned down the road in all four cardinal directions. While they weren’t yet moving, they formed a short wall that blocked the path in every direction.

Suuzaburou informed, “You may choose whichever direction you like. Once you have traveled exactly one thousand meters—one kilometer—you will leave the city. There is a distance readout that you can all see. If you break through the enemy blockade and reach the proper distance, the ordeal is over. There is no time limit, but the faster you clear this challenge, the better your advantage in the next.”

There was a *pong*, and everyone saw a readout that said 1,000 METERS in the upper-right corner of their vision.

Tanya asked the spitz, “Does that mean that once we’ve picked a direction, we *have* to

leave that way?"

"Correct. If you change directions or go off the road, it will not count as one kilometer."

"What a nasty scenario!"

"I agree."

Boss snorted and opined, "The game designer is a real creep."

"I agree. I'm quite ashamed," apologized Suuzaburou, for some reason.

"Stop it!" Fukaziroh interjected. "Don't pick on Suuzaburou!" Not that anyone was ganging up on him.

"All right, everyone, let's bust through this. But we're changing the formation," said Pitohui, smoothly transitioning into tactical mode. "We'll put Rosa in the center, so she has a clear line of fire, and have everyone else form a steady inverted V behind her. Boss, you're still the rear guard."

In other words, it would be a wedge formation, with the heaviest firepower concentrated at the front to carve the way forward. No one protested.

"Fuka, you're in the rear center."

"You got it. I'm gonna blast the hell out of 'em!"

"M! Put away your gun and shield. Reload Fuka's grenades, nothing else!"

"Got it."

M's gun and backpack promptly vanished, and he moved behind Fukaziroh. His job would be reloading Rightony or Leftonia immediately after she emptied either of them. They were copying the strategy of the Glock 18Cs in the mall battle in SJ4, which had been a major pain. Stuffed into Fukaziroh's backpack were all the grenades M could need.

"Shirley, when it gets to close combat, use my 870. I'll give you all the shells I've got."

"Don't give me orders!" Shirley retorted. Then she admitted, "This is only until we get

through here!"

After all, if they didn't survive this first ordeal, she wouldn't get a good opportunity to take out Pitohui by surprise. And there was no doubt that her single-shot bolt-action R93 Tactical 2 rifle was the weapon least suited to a swarm of enemies.

Pitohui walked closer, sending over the items directly from her inventory menu with a wave of her left hand. Shirley waved back to accept the offer, and the long rifle on her back was joined by a shoulder bag, which she hung along her left side.

It was full of twelve-gauge shotgun shells. The 8 mm lead bullets were double-aught buck, with nine pellets per shell. Though they were technically for shooting deer (*buck* being a male deer), they were useful in battle, too. And they were in infinite supply, of course. During the ordeal, this magic bag would never empty.

Pitohui pulled the shortened M870 Breacher shotgun from the holster on her left hip and handed it over. "Here. You know how to use it?"

Shirley didn't respond. The Remington M870 was the most famous pump-action shotgun in the world. She'd used it herself to go hunting before she got her rifle permit.

The woman accepted the M870 Breacher, pushed the lever in front of the trigger, and pulled the forend. Shirley already knew it was loaded, so she returned the forend and made sure the safety was off.

Then she stuck a finger into the tube magazine below the barrel, pushing against the shells to check how many were in there based on the spring tension. There were two inside.

She did all this naturally, a sure sign that she was familiar with handling a shotgun. Ignoring the knowing leer on Pitohui's face, she thought, *Great, she can tell I'm a hunter... Can't be too careful around her... How about if I gun you down in a way no huntress ever would...?*

She stuck the M870 Breacher into her belt, where her jacket was rolled up to expose it.

“Okay! Let’s go!” Pitohui roared.

“Raaah!” SHINC joined in.

“Ready!”

“Let’s do it!”

“Uh-huh,” followed Llenn, Fukaziroh, and M.

“I’m right behind ya!” chimed in Clarence. Shirley said nothing.

With her teammates locked in and ready, Pitohui asked, “So which direction are we going?”

“Pitooo, you’re supposed to decide that for us!” Llenn snapped.

“I just thought, maybe someone here likes fortune-telling.”

“In that case, I’ll go!” shouted the blond sniper in sunglasses, raising her hand.

“You’re up, Anna!”

“I checked out this morning’s online news! Today is my lucky day! And my lucky color is blue!”

“C’mon, we’re not looking for a color.”

“Not so fast, Fukaziroh. Look at the blue sign to the north!”

In the distance to the north, beyond the wall of enemies, rested a large blue store billboard. It was too far away to make out what it said.

But there wasn’t a hint of blue in any of the other cardinal directions.

“Then that’s it!” Fukaziroh roared, holding up Rightony. “Our path is decided! C’mon, let’s go, Suuzaburou!”

Llenn found it obnoxious that she addressed the dog rather than her teammates. But Fuka did not waste any time; she unloaded six grenades in a row. Her aim was true,

and the six projectiles landed behind the wall of monsters three hundred meters away, sending up glittering fragments of their remains into the air.

"That's it! Charge!" Pitohui called out with glee. The group hurried forward.

Although their enemies were ludicrous in number, if they didn't overcome them, not only would there be no victory here, but they would also fail the entire quest. It was only the first ordeal of five, after all.

Rosa led the fast-moving wedge formation. "Rrraaaahh!"

Dakka-dakka-dakka-dakka-dakka. Keeping the PKM machine gun firm against her powerful waist, she fired as she walked. The lines of light created by the tracer rounds zipped off into the distance.

Her teammates opened fire at the same time, making a tremendous clatter. Not only were all their firearms blasting away, but their subsequent gunshots echoed off the buildings on either side, overlapping into cacophony.

A thousand feet away, the enemies were shattered, blown to pieces by the squad's bullets. But as far as Llenn could tell, their numbers weren't diminishing in the slightest.

"Ugh, there are so many of them..."

After the front row went down, more and more appeared behind them. How many of these things *were* there anyway?

Their opponents neither moved nor showed signs of approaching. But to reach the distance of one kilometer, they had no choice but to bust through that blockade.

Was it even possible to break through?

"C'mon, Llenn, don't give up before we've even started!" chided Pitohui, firing her KTR-09 rhythmically nearby.

"Ugh!" Llenn shot her P90 as she walked, keeping the gun held against her shoulder. The mass of targets was way too far away, but at least some of those bullets were bound to hit their mark.

Her finger was clamped firmly on the trigger. Her firearm was at full auto. That was

fifteen shots per second. Orange fire exploded from the muzzle, and empty cartridges burst rapidly from the bottom of the gun as P-chan roared endlessly.

Computer enemies burst into shards wherever she pointed her gun, along with wherever her bullet circle landed.

Click.

When the remaining ammo hit zero, Llenn used the Quick Reload skill to switch to a fresh magazine. With blinding speed, she pulled the empty one out of the gun, then grabbed the next from her left-side pouch.

“Oh!”

Something caught her attention. Resting on both her hips were three-part pouches for her long P90 magazines. She could tell from the way the fabric buckled inward when the pouches were empty, but that wasn’t happening now. There were still magazines inside. Now they had become magic pouches that would never go empty.

So this is the power of infinite ammo... If only it were always like this, she thought. But that would make the game too easy.

“Take this!”

Fukaziroh’s next volley began. Six adorable little puffs of air followed by six devastating blasts. They landed right on the wall of enemies, tearing open a huge hole—that once again filled itself right away.

The twelve players spread out into a wide reverse V on the four-lane road.

In the center was Rosa, shooting the PKM. At her side was Tohma, helping to exchange the ammo magazines. When it seemed like she was about to run out of bullets, Tohma pulled a fresh box from Rosa’s backpack and attached it to the machine gun.

Pitohui and Llenn took up the left flank. So did Tanya and Clarence. They seemed to be enjoying their shooting.

On the right side were the other SHINC members, Sophie and Anna. And on the end, as if to say she was begrudgingly working with them for now, stood Shirley.

Every one of them was blasting at the enemies up ahead as quickly as they could.

Sophie's new GM-94 fired rapidly as she worked her off hand back and forth along the action. Unfortunately, she had to reload grenades every three shots, which was annoying.

Anna and Shirley, the snipers, weren't even looking through their scopes. They each had their long guns propped against their elbow, turning the rifles on their flat sides so they could quickly fire while maintaining aim on the wall of targets.

Following behind the group in the middle was Fukaziroh.

"Let's see what you got! You hungry for barbecue? Come and taste this smoke," she said, gloating and firing her grenades in rhythm with the haiku.

Meanwhile, M was the MGL-140 reloader.

"You're up!"

"Got it."

Fukaziroh handed him the spent weapon. He undid the lock, twisted the gun, and dumped the empty grenade cartridges out. Then he twisted the tube to recharge the spring, stuck in six more grenades from Fukaziroh's pack, and twisted it back into place. Despite his big, fat fingers, M flew through the tedious process.

Knowing that it was safest to be situated directly behind them, Suuzaburou trotted along, a little black dot. It was like the group was taking him out on a walk.

As she'd been ordered, Boss commanded the rear with her Vintorez, checking through the scope now and then to make sure the enemy wasn't changing tactics.

The wall of foes was completely still. They appeared to be about five hundred meters away, half the distance the squad needed to cross.

For now.

They shot and shot and shot, exchanging their infinite supply of magazines as they went. Over two minutes, the dozen players moved about 250 meters, creating an awful racket among the ruined city as they went. Seven hundred and fifty meters left.

At their feet, golden cartridges bounced off gray concrete, then turned into little flashes of light as they vanished. There were so many of them that the ground looked more like a starry sky. It was a beautiful phenomenon.

Between all the grenades and bullets, they tore chunks out of the wall of endless enemies. The fact that the gaps weren't filling in was a sign that no additional forces were spawning.

Llenn could see that the wall was starting to develop holes. The gray asphalt behind the monsters was clearly visible from fifty meters away.

"We can do this! We've got the firepower!" she cheered, exchanging another magazine; she'd lost count how many she'd gone through.

Hunching down, she turned her P90 sideways and sprayed lead like it was water from a hose. The maneuver put a tremendous dent into the remaining foes. It almost felt like target practice in the game tutorial.

With no worries about running out of ammo, Llenn and her teammates mercilessly carved through the enemies like ice melting over a stove.

This actually isn't as hard as I thought. Is this easy mode or something? Because it's the first one? Llenn thought optimistically.

That mood didn't last long, though. From the rear, Boss called out, "They're coming from behind now, everybody!"

"Dammit! I should've known!" Pitohui swore.

"Huh? What does this mean?" Llenn asked, turning back. Then she saw them. "Eugh!"

The enemy was giving chase a few hundred meters behind.

It looked like a flood.

They filled the wide road from end to end, advancing faster than the group was pushing forward.

"When the enemy total in any direction falls below a certain amount, the other thirty thousand will rush in at top speed. Be careful that they don't overtake you, everyone," explained Suuzaburou courteously, after they'd already figured it out.

"Daaargh! Stupid mutt! Mention that earlier next time!" fumed Clarence, putting the group's thoughts into words.

"My humblest apologies. I do not have the authority to do that."

"Don't pick on Suuzaburou!" It seemed that Fukaziroh would be the little black dog's ally no matter the situation.

"Darn... I guess there *aren't* any easy ordeals," muttered Llenn, lamenting her own optimism. She exchanged her current magazine, which still had twenty rounds, for a full one.

"So what now, Pito?" asked Fukaziroh.

She smirked and replied, "You'll have to choose from the following three options. One, we flee forward as fast as possible. Two, we do our best and flee forward. Three, we hurry and flee forward."

"Let's go with all three!"

"That settles it."

"Should we shoot behind us?"

"No, I think we should just focus on getting the hell out of here."

This was not the sort of flood that six grenades would stop.

"Yeah, I guess that's right." Fukaziroh took the latest MGL-140, freshly refilled courtesy of M, and fired it directly forward. The grenades exploded amid the enemies, but there were already so few remaining that it didn't have much of an effect. No point in

shooting anymore.

“Book it, everyone!” Pitohui commanded, and the squad charged forward to the north, where their opponents were fewest.

Llenn was the first to burst forward, quickly passing Rosa and running parallel to her machine-gun fire.

“Raaaaah!” With quick three-shot bursts, she turned three monsters into polygonal shards.

“Plasma grenades! Set timers and leave them behind you!” Boss instructed her squad, taking her own out of item storage.

She was packing both normal-size plasma grenades, which could be thrown with one hand, and a huge variety that was three times larger, like a small watermelon—the “grand grenade.”

Boss glared to the south, gauging the amount of time it would take the monsters to overtake her current position. “About sixty seconds...”

Then she quickly set the timers and rolled the explosives onto the ground at her feet.

Sophie did the same. “Boss! Hurry!” she called, trying to set down as many as possible while the others went ahead.

“That’s enough! Just go!”

“Ah...!”

If Boss gave an order, she had to obey. Sophie began to lurch north.

It would all be over if they could travel one kilometer exactly, but they still had seven hundred meters to go. Llenn and Tanya could run as fast as cars, but the slower players like M, Sophie, and Rosa couldn’t possibly cross that distance before the monsters caught up to them.

“That’s not gonna happen.”

Boss placed all the plasma grenades she could, spacing them out so they didn’t set one

another off, then turned tail and fled.

“Yaaaah!”

Llenn passed through the enemy blockade, then turned around to help finish the remaining few. With her speed, she was guaranteed to reach the finish line, so she wanted to use her power to cut down as many of the northern monsters as possible to keep the path clear for her teammates.

Every dozen feet or so, another freakish creature popped out. “Haaah! Urgh! Hi ya!” She sent them packing with quick bursts from her P90.

“Nice work, Llenn!” encouraged Pitohui as she rushed past.

She glanced to the south. M and Sophie were still plodding this way. And far behind them was Boss.

A flood of darkness pounded behind her, a tidal wave of enemies. Boss wasn’t especially slow, so why was she so far behind the others? The answer revealed itself in moments.

Blue light bloomed in the distance.

Llenn had used them before, so she knew what that effect was: plasma grenade explosions. The surges of blue shattered every enemy caught in their midst. Even this far off, the din of the blast and its accompanying vibrations battered her body and feet.

Boss’s presents were perfectly timed, detonating at the front end of the flood and directly in its midst, laying waste to hundreds of foes all at once.

“Incredible!” Llenn marveled. But when the light of the explosions faded, she grunted, “Oof...”

Behind it was another black mass that might as well have been called the second wave of the flood.

“Oh, right, it was three different directions...”

Boss had blown up the group from the south. But there were also monsters bearing down from both the eastern and western roads.

We're not going to make it in time...

M and Sophie were too slow to run all the way down the road before the monsters caught up.

Then Boss ground to a halt.

She stood in place, waving her left arm. That signified she was messing with her inventory. But Llenn had an inkling of what she was planning.

She made up her mind. Without a moment's hesitation, Llenn started sprinting toward Boss, blasting with her P90.

“Wha—?!”

Boss whipped around with shock, then understood.

Llenn's red bullet lines were shining past her side, disappearing as the bullets zipped along them. She turned back behind her and saw some of the oncoming enemies vanishing.

“Stop it, Llenn!” she cried, waving off the friend charging her way to save her. Boss was stationary, going through her inventory. An infinite supply of grenades rested on the ground at her feet.

Even without the endless supply, Boss typically carried around enough plasma grenades to snap a gigantic cruise ship in half. Now there was no limit. Her firepower was unfathomable.

But eventually they were going to catch up to her, and she would die.

“I'm the only one who needs to die here!” Boss shouted.

“I knew it!” Llenn had guessed correctly.

Boss had stopped in her tracks to focus on placing grenades, stemming the enemy tide just enough so the rest of the squad could get away, at the cost of her own life.

"Oooh! It's the sacrificial gambit of Shimazu! From the Battle of Sekigahara battle in 1600!" Clarence clamored as she ran.

"That's a weird thing to be so knowledgeable about," remarked an impressed Shirley as she riddled an enemy with buckshot from the M870. "But you repeated *battle* there."

Like Llenn, Tanya had turned back on her heel. "I won't let them kill Boss!" she shouted, racing to the south with the Bizon at her side.

Pitohui grunted "The fewer losses, the better" as she watched the silver-haired woman rush past her in the other direction.

"What now?" asked M, plodding behind her.

"What *can* we do? I don't want to lose anything more than the bare minimum of force at the very start," she replied, producing a seventy-five-round drum for the KTR-09 and exchanging it as she ran. The drum's only downside was that it was too large to fit into any pouches for easy access.

As the two teammates ran back to save their fellow squad member, she sent them a message like a teacher chaperone. "Llenn, Tanya, I appreciate your effort, but I want you to come back from helping Boss before it's too late."

"No!" Llenn protested immediately.

"Llenn," Pitohui hissed, "Boss is doing this for the sake of the team. Plus, this battle is supposed to be nasty. It's designed to force you to lose a member or two."

"But that doesn't mean I can just abandon her!"

"Oh, come on."

Pitohui stopped and turned south to where the trio were giving it their all, three hundred meters away.

Boss backed away, tossing one explosive after the other, while Llenn and Tanya fired as fast as they could. Although the monsters were disappearing bit by bit, and the blue

grenade blasts had gouged out large chunks of their forces, there were just too many. They would surely overtake the three women at some point.

"So what do we do?" Pitohui pondered, resuming her northward trek. A crocodilian monster that was still clinging to life opened its jaw as she considered her options.

"What... to... do..."

She kicked out with her left foot and sent the beast flying. That was all it took to eliminate its hit points, and it turned into tiny fragments in the air.

That was when she noticed the store with the blue sign.

At that moment, Pitohui was exactly 495 meters from the starting position. From here, the storefront was quite visible through its glass walls.

She smirked, her facial tattoos stretching. "Anna... I think this really is your lucky day. Well done."

"Huh?" Anna replied through the comm. She took out a few small machines with her Strizh pistol, then turned back to her in confusion.

"Just stick with me, people!" Pitohui called out, heading off the road toward the store.

Fukaziroh, who was protected in formation by Clarence and Shirley, shouted, "Whaddaya doing, Pito? We don't have time for shopping!"

"Shopping? No—this is more like *shoplifting*!"

"Whut?"

"I'm stealing! C'mon, keep up. This is going to be on the test."

Yet another detonation took out a swarm of enemies. After the blue surge vanished, the monsters rushed over the hole left in its wake, as though filling it up. There was no end to them.

“Dammit!”

Boss realized that this tactic wasn’t going to be enough to keep the monsters at bay. Scratch that—reminded herself, not realized. She already knew it wouldn’t have worked.

“Boss!”

“Boss!”

Two small avatars raced over to her side, screeching to a halt so rapidly that smoke could have risen from their boots. They shot from the hip.

Llenn’s P90 could manage fifty bullets, and Tanya’s Bizon could shoot fifty-three without stopping, but even that wasn’t going to get the job done here.

“Llenn, Tanya! I appreciate it, but you should go! I’ve bought enough time for everyone else to get away! Now run!”

“But—!”

“Which is better, losing one of us here or *three*?”

“...I mean... one, but—!”

“Then you know what to do. Go!”

“No! I’m staying here! We can easily run away. We’ll stay until the very last moment!”

“It’s not going to change the outcome,” mumbled Boss, who was busy setting the timers on more plasma grenades. She had utterly given up on getting through the ordeal alive.

More blue maelstroms appeared, growing into spheres that eliminated just a small percent of the overall horde descending upon them.

Empties showered out of Llenn’s P90 onto the ground. “No! Pito’s going to figure something out! I believe in her!”

"You think too highly of me. C'mon, let's go," ordered Pitohui.

"Okay!" replied M.

"You got it," answered Shirley.

"Are you sure this will work?" worried Clarence.

The glass covering the front of the store with the blue sign shattered outward.

Two vehicles emerged.

They were pickup trucks, the kind with flatbeds in the back. This was a real-world model called the Jeep Gladiator.

The Jeep brand was synonymous with four-wheel drive, and the Gladiator was their pickup model. It was very long, nearly eighteen feet from front to end, and looked quite boxy from the side. The vehicle consisted of a hood, a cabin with front and rear seats jumping upward, and a slightly recessed bed in the back.

These Gladiators had no doors. You could see the people sitting in them perfectly from the side. There weren't roofs, either. The sky was clearly visible from their pipe frames. On top of that, their windshield frames had toppled forward, so there was no glass in front. The wind just blew straight through.

One of the features of Jeep's four-wheel drive vehicles was that they could drive even when the windows and roof were off and the windshield was down. This attribute stemmed from their first models, which were military vehicles in WWII. It made for a liberating ride—if a terrifying one.

The two Jeeps were identical save for their colors—one red, one black. Like everything in *GGO*, they were faded and beaten up, but it made for a cool look here.

Perhaps more mystifying was why these vehicles, which had been abandoned since the end of Earth civilization in the distant past, would start right up and run like a charm, but none of the players were going to bother thinking about that. It was a game.

M sat in the driver's seat of the red car, his hands on the steering wheel. It was a North American vehicle, so the wheel was on the left side. In the passenger seat on the right

was Pitohui, her KTR-09 pointed forward. Fukaziroh was in the left-rear seat, holding Suuzaburou steady beside her.

Rosa had taken up the position in the center of the truck bed. She was resting her PKM on the pipe frame of the roof so she could blast wherever the vehicle was pointing. Tohma was still there, just to her right, on machine-gun-loading duty.

As for the black car, Clarence sat in the passenger seat, asking, “Are you sure about this?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it!” responded Shirley, gripping the wheel.

Sophie and Anna took up the back seat, worry lining their faces. They were probably hoping that Tohma would drive instead. That wish might’ve had something to do with the pickup grazing a light pole just seconds after leaving the building.

The pair of Gladiators roared back up the street they’d just come down.

“Yoo-hoo! You girls tired? Want a ride in a taxi?” asked a voice in the comm. Llenn spun around and saw the pickup trucks approaching.

“Thanks! I knew you’d come through, Pito! Cars are awesome! How’d you do it?” she asked, beaming.

“We went to the car dealership with the blue sign and rented them out.”

“Amazing! There are usable vehicles in this quest, too...?”

“Finders keepers. You gotta make use of the tools they give you.”

In the meantime, the red Gladiator came to a stop right in front of Llenn’s trio.

Dut-dut, dut-dut-dut-dut, dut-dut-dut-dut!

Rosa’s PKM thudded heavily from the roof, slowing the onslaught of enemies.

In the rear seat, Fukaziroh covered Suuzaburou’s ears with her hands, but she

probably didn't need to bother. It was just *GGO*.

"We're at capacity, so you'll have to take the black one."

Llenn and Boss and Tanya saw the black Gladiator rushing up from behind the other one.

"Oh! Look out!" Llenn shrieked, right as it came to a stop by smashing into the red one. Unfortunately, the driver-assistance systems were broken. It had been abandoned for many, many years, after all.

The collision pushed the red Gladiator forward so that it nearly ran over Tanya, who was standing closest.

"Ouch!"

Clarence's face slammed into the dashboard of the black Gladiator. It left a glowing mark on her forehead. She'd lost about 5 percent of her HP.

Thus, the boyish sniper was the first player to suffer damage in the quest. The cause: traffic accident.

"....."

"....."

Sophie and Anna looked pale in the back seat. Fortunately, nothing worse had happened to the pair than hitting the seats in front of them.

"What's wrong with this car? The stupid brakes don't work! Piece of junk!" Shirley fumed, smacking the steering wheel. In fact, the real problem was that her pedal work was too slow and clumsy. It was bad driving.

Tohma hopped down from the bed of the red truck. "H-here, I'll take over!" she offered, approaching the driver's side of the black one.

"How come? I'll drive more."

"Trust me, Shirley, you'll look great in the pickup bed. Just imagine, your green hair flowing in the wind, rifle held at the ready," Clarence urged, pulling her out.

"Aw, fine," she acquiesced, hopping over to the back.

Boss piled into the passenger seat of the black truck, while Tanya and Llenn were small enough that they could go in the bed of the red truck, behind Rosa.

In the meantime, the swarm of monsters was now a flood that covered the road, bearing down on the two pickups.

"We're all in!" Boss called out.

"Then let's get going. Hey, driver!" Pitohui shouted to M. "It'll be a pain to turn around, so just move us straight forward. Watch out for the holes from the plasma grenades. Tohma, keep up behind us."

"G-got it..." muttered Tohma, her hands trembling on the wheel as she realized what Pitohui was suggesting.

"Then let's go." M jammed his foot on the accelerator, and the Gladiator's 3.6 liter V6 engine roared. The automobile shuddered and began to zoom forward.

"Urgh!" Llenn wasn't holding on to anything in the back, so she rolled backward.

They were heading south. Naturally, it was the direction where the massive swarms of enemies were.

"We're going to blaze through 'em! Hold on!" Pitohui cackled as the truck began to smash through the smaller enemies like a snowplow.

They were puny, weak opponents. Some of them got smushed right under the big fat tires, while others bounced off the bumper. The front grill even sent one of them flying into the air.

"Hah—?"

Just as it was about to land right on top of Llenn in the bed, the damage it had sustained caused it to burst into polygons. It was like fireworks.

M turned the wheel left and right in an easy rhythm, just barely avoiding the large holes in the road created by the plasma grenades. With each sway of the truck, Llenn clutched the pipe frame to avoid being thrown off.

“Aaaah!”

In the car behind them, Tohma murmured, “This is crazy...”



She was keeping up with the path M carved out.

"What's wrong, Black Hair? Run some of them over! You don't need to practice safe driving in a game!" howled Shirley from the back seat, but Tohma was keen to ignore her attempt at advice.

Llenn had her P90 ready and pointed below the bed, but she didn't need to fire it. The two Gladiators were blazing a trail through the monsters who choked the road, splitting the swarm in two. Soon they reached the intersection where they'd started the game.

"We're through!" Llenn beamed, the group completely clearing the enemy horde. Nothing but empty road lay ahead.

Now they just had to drive. It was the easiest racing game ever.

The Gladiators sped up, faster and faster, and crossed the remaining kilometer in an unceremonious fashion. It only took about thirty seconds.

Not a single enemy could catch up.

The moment they made it out of the town, Suuzaburou announced, "Congratulations, everyone. You have completed the first ordeal."

The clock said that it was exactly twelve fifteen.

CHAPTER 4
Battle in the Woods
—The Second Ordeal—



CHAPTER 4

BATTLE IN THE WOODS

—THE SECOND ORDEAL—

“Now I will guide you to the next ordeal,” said Suuzaburou.

At that moment, a number of things happened in succession.

First, the infinite ammo indicator returned to the number of bullets they’d actually brought with them. The guns flashed as their resistance to overheating wore off, too.

Next, the racing Gladiator engines suddenly sputtered to a stop, so that only their tires kept moving on momentum, until that slowed down, too. They could no longer be used for travel.

Clarence’s hit points recovered slightly. She was now at 97.5 percent, so she’d recovered half of the damage she’d suffered in the previous engagement.

Then a bright light surrounded everyone, its blinding power forcing them to shut their eyes. “Eep!” Llenn yelped.

“Mwuh?”

When she opened her eyes next, she saw a different map.

The first ordeal had taken place in a downtown area, but now...

“It’s a forest.”

Surrounding them was a massive, wooded area, packed with conifer trees that stood rigidly straight.

The earth beneath their feet was damp and covered with ferns that grew to about Llenn's knees. Overhead, tree branches lined with copious needles blocked out much of the sky. It was just like the location where Llenn had first spawned in SJ1.

In fact, this place seemed to have been recycled from that exact map environment. There were a few variations on the patterns of markings on the tree bark and branch placements, but otherwise they were all the same trees.

Llenn struggled to read the wind in the woods. She didn't hear rustling, so if there was any zephyr, it wasn't strong at all.

Across the fern-covered ground lay gentle dips and hollows about thirty to a hundred feet apart. The dips were deep enough that you could lie down to avoid detection. But that also limited your line of sight, so it was better to hide in the undergrowth.

Due to the network of overlapping tree trunks, visibility was fairly short, which hindered snipers. But it was a good map for Llenn, who could move quickly and nimbly. The trees were thick enough that they would stop any bullet if she hid behind them.

Llenn turned back and saw the rest of her team there. Nobody had been left behind.

The players who'd been sitting in the Gladiators were still there after teleportation, so the group made for a comical sight in the midst of the forest. They slowly got to their feet.

Of course, the little black guide dog remained there as well.

"This is the second ordeal," Suuzaburou announced.

"Awww, you stayed with us!" Fukaziroh cooed, rubbing his cheeks with her hands.

"Mrg, guh, hng, bebegh, mlam, yarl."

"Just let the dog talk," Llenn scolded, pulling on Fukaziroh's backpack.

Freed from her torment, the canine was able to give his explanation.

"First of all, I will be setting all of your hit points to infinite."

Whut?

Llenn's tiny body glowed as she reacted to this news. The hit point gauge in her upper-left corner, along with the eleven smaller ones below it for her squadmates, turned from green to gold. They were invincible now.

"You and your weapons may take as much damage as you'd like. In this ordeal, you cannot die, and your armaments and items cannot break," Suuzaburou said. The group gasped at the announcement, and Llenn's eyes bulged.

"What does this mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like, Llenn," noted Fukaziroh. "It won't matter how much the enemy attack us. No sweat."

Llenn turned toward her friend. "Yeah, I know. But that's such an advantage! What I'm asking is: Won't that make the game way too easy?"

"Of course. That just means there's going to be some kind of time limit, ya know? Also..."

"Also?"

"It's probably not going to change the fact that you'll get a nasty sting from taking a bullet, right? I mean, if you can't die, doesn't that mean you *can* get endlessly hurt?" Fukaziroh added, her tone heavy.

That made sense to Llenn. From what she'd heard, *GGO*'s pain system that activated when you got hit was harsher than the feedback systems in other games. Their absorber function was much lower.

If your limb got blasted, it would go numb, so you wouldn't be able to hold objects. Take a cap to the torso, and a nasty shock would pulse your body. A round to the head would hurt more than getting slapped in real life.

If you couldn't die but were susceptible to a constant stream of that pain... well, that was torture, in a way.

"What the hell...? That's so messed up..."

"That's what I said, didn't I?"

"Huh? When?"

Boss snorted and repeated what she'd said in the first ordeal. "The game designer's a real creep."

"I concur. I'm very ashamed," apologized Suuzaburou, for some reason.

"Stop it!" Fukaziroh interjected. "Don't pick on Suuzaburou!" Not that anyone was doing that.

The dog resumed his speech.

"This area is a circular forest map with a diameter of two kilometers. Within its boundaries, thirty foes lie in wait. Please eliminate all of them. Your time limit is twenty minutes, plus a time bonus of five minutes for the previous ordeal. An early finish will have no effect on the next ordeal. When you complete the task, all the ammunition you used will be restored. And now, I wish you good luck."

I see.

That cleared up the premise to Llenn and the others. The number 30 appeared in the upper-right corner of their vision, along with a timer that started at twenty-five minutes, which promptly turned to 24:59.

Before the timer ran out, they would have to reduce those thirty foes to zero.

They'd finished the first ordeal in fifteen minutes, which gave them a bonus of five minutes. If they had taken over twenty minutes back then, it probably would have subtracted from the time limit here. Good thing they'd found those cars.

The fact that their ammunition was being replenished at the end suggested that they would need it in the following ordeals. That was going to help out quite a bit.

"Aw, that doesn't sound too hard, does it? We'll just split up and take 'em out. We won't suffer any damage, and we'll get our ammo back, so... let's give 'em a gun gale!" Clarence cheered, patting her AR-57 and smiling in her trademark lackadaisical manner.

"Better than a gun fail..."

"Shut up, Fuka," urged Llenn, with the kind of love only a best friend could have.

On the other hand, Shirley looked peeved. That's because she *was* peeved. If the players couldn't suffer any damage, that meant she couldn't assassinate Pitohui in this battle. She was quite annoyed, indeed.

"Heya, M?" Pitohui stated, giving him the floor. He put his tactical ideas into words for the rest of the group to hear.

"A circle with a two-kilometer diameter is actually quite large. That's over a mile. If we have to find and eliminate thirty foes, I could certainly see us at risk of running out of time."

That made sense to Llenn. Within the forest, the farthest you could hope to see ahead was a hundred meters, one-tenth of a kilometer. Without a map or a satellite scan, you'd have to find those enemies the old-fashioned way. Twenty-five minutes could pass in a blink.

"How about this?" Boss suggested, keeping her back to the group so she could watch for hostiles in the vicinity. "Llenn and Tanya will run in predetermined directions. If any enemies attack them, we'll know where they are, and all members will move toward that spot. The two of them will just have to sit there and take a beating, though."

I see; that's not a bad plan, thought Llenn, although she certainly wanted to avoid as much conflict as possible.

But Pitohui cut down that idea at once. "Our opponents aren't guaranteed to attack us once we're in their sights. And we won't necessarily be able to chase them down, either"

"Oh... yeah... Good point... And we still don't know *what* kind of foes they are," Boss realized, withdrawing her support.

Some monsters in *GGO* were programmed to always run away if a player spotted them. If a player failed to ambush them, they would have to give chase at top speed or flush them toward a friend who could finish the job.

But I'm good at that sort of hunt, thought Shirley, who practiced hunting fleeing monsters with her squadron, Kita no Kuni Hunter's Club. However, she kept that to herself.

M responded, "I can't imagine they're all enemies who will run away, because then the

nullification of damage doesn't make sense. I assume they'll attack. But it might be more or less the same thing if they only strike when we find them hiding and fire at them first."

Everyone aside from Shirley nodded.

"Ooh! Ooh! What about this?" Clarence blurted out, raising her hand. "We'll put the slower people in the middle and the faster people on the outside, dividing one kilometer by twelve people, so that we're in a line about eighty meters apart each! And then we'll rotate around like a compass!"

Hmmm... maybe that will work, Llenn thought, until Shirley opened her mouth.

"Not a chance. If the game—er, the monsters are adept at sensing us coming, they'll just run the other way, behind our line. They could end up following us on the opposite side of the circle perpetually, no matter how many times we rotate around."

Shirley had experience tracking game on the vast plains of Hokkaido, so she realized the flaw at once.

She had never once caught a Yezo sika deer without a solid plan to track them. You had to think about the terrain and set up a scenario where you could assume they would *want* to flee in your direction. Even then, you might guess wrong.

When she saw that virtually the entire group was taking in this advice with wonder, she felt just a little bit proud. But when she saw Pitohui wearing a shit-eating grin on her face while chuckling "I knew you'd realize that," Shirley wanted to shoot her in the face.

But Clarence was persistent. "Then what if we split into two groups of six and made two lines...?"

"And trap them from both sides? I get what you're saying, but with a hundred and sixty meters between each person, it would still be easy for them to slip through."

"Grr... Stop picking on me, Shirley!"

"I'm just telling the truth."

Then what should we do? Llenn wondered, at a loss. Time was ticking every second

they stood here. It was down to twenty-three minutes now.

When in need, ask a friend.

"Hey, Suuzaburou! Give us a hint!"

Without an ounce of shame, Fukaziroh turned right to the spitz for help. Everyone else rolled their eyes. If there was anyone in the group who would do that, it was her.

Suuzaburou's doggy expression did not change. "All I can say is: Kick back and relax."

"What's that supposed to mean?! Hey guys, you wanna sit down and have some tea?" Fukaziroh asked.

"Let's do that," announced Pitohui, drawing everyone's eyes on her.

Is this really a good idea...?

Llenn sat on the root of a six-foot-wide tree, leaning back against its trunk. The timer in the upper-right corner ticked from fifteen minutes to 14:59. Then 14:58. Then 14:57. The other number was still at thirty.

Pitohui always found ways to surprise her; this instance was no different.

About seven minutes ago, Pitohui had offered a rather shocking suggestion.

"Let's all just sit down. Though, I don't have any tea."

"Umm... what? Are you serious, Pito?"

"Serious as a heart attack. Let's just sit down and wait. And then the enemies will wake up and come to us... I hope."

"You hope...?"

"Llenn, do you know a song called 'Waiting in Vain'?"

Without waiting for her response, Pitohui began to sing.

"Waiting in vain / waiting in vain

I went to the field / to work one day

Out came a rabbit / from the brush

It tripped and fell / on the tree root"

It was the first verse of the famous nursery rhyme by Hakushū Kitahara, delivered in perfect a cappella.

“Oooooooh!”

Boss and the rest of SHINC applauded furiously, on the verge of tears.

It's Elza Kanzaki!

In her avatar!

Singing a nursery rhyme!

In a cappella!

They were so overwhelmed that their AmuSpheres could have shut themselves down.

“What's up with them?” asked Shirley.

“Dunno... She's good at singing, but did it warrant *that* reaction?” wondered Clarence. She couldn't be blamed for her lack of enthusiasm; after all, she didn't know the truth.

Llenn applauded politely and said, “Of course I know it. But that's a song about a person who keeps waiting so long for the next rabbit to come that they end up becoming worthless.”

“Oh... wait, really? I only know the first verse.”

“Well, yeah, then it sounds like a really *lucky* song!” Llenn snapped.

"In that case, we'll sing the other verses!" Boss shouted.

All right, Boss, cool your jets. All of you, chill. Fukaziroh held up a hand to stop the rest of SHINC from launching into song. Her other hand was ceaselessly petting Suuzaburou, who was resting on the ground next to her.

"Anyway, my point is: Let's not waste our energy scrambling around to find the monsters. Instead, let's sit here and wait for them. No use rushing. Take a break," said Pitohui lackadaisically, plopping down on the soft earth. M followed her lead, as did the younger girls, who would do anything their hero commanded.

"*Sigh...*"

Llenn didn't feel up to arguing, so she walked over to the large tree and plopped herself down on top of its roots.

A very relaxing period of time followed—until the countdown hit ten minutes and then 09:59 a second later.

"Are we done yet...?" murmured Llenn, who couldn't help but express the smallest bit of frustration.

Three feet away, Shirley hissed "Don't speak" and lifted the muzzle of the R93 Tactical 2.

She was resting against the same tree with her legs pointed straight outward. Her elbows fell close to her knees, where she had her long rifle steadied.

There was a blast.

The R93 Tactical 2 had a piece on its tip called a muzzle brake, or a compensator. It was a little bulge with some holes that allowed the gas from the gun firing to escape to the sides, keeping recoil to a minimum.

"Gah!"

The gas shot sideways, which was rather unpleasant for Llenn, who was sitting very

close to Shirley. It felt like she was getting slapped in the face with air.

The bullet that burst from the gun zipped through the trees at Mach speed—and though Llenn couldn't see around the thick trees, she could tell that the shot had landed true, because the number in the corner went down from 30 to 29.

"Nice one!" Pitohui bolted upright from her position resting faceup on the grass.

"Hrmf." M got heavily to his feet.

"Here they come!" SHINC also jumped up; they had been sitting in a circle facing outward. Their backs were to a tree so that they were protected on one side and watching their perimeter.

"What was that? Shirley did it? Wild!" shouted Clarence from a seated position.

"More fighting. What must humankind do to move past the cycle of violence...?" murmured Fukaziroh with love in her eyes. She was using both hands to rub Suuzaburou all over, off in her own world.

KTR-09 against her shoulder, Pitohui warily asked Shirley, "What was it like?"

The enemy had taken a single shot and had gone down without any attack in response. There was no movement. The forest was as silent as could be.

Shirley finished cycling the bolt to load her next bullet, fighting the urge to shoot the person who asked her the question. She peered through the scope, looking for the next foe, and murmured, "It definitely had a humanoid shape. A robot soldier."

It was a humanoid robot standing at about five feet seven, with a thin, dull-silver body, joints that shone with a bluish light, and a single red lens in the center of its face.

There weren't any human-shaped enemies in *GGO* aside from this kind. You often saw them in abandoned factories and subterranean dungeons.

"Then it's not that tough of an enemy."

While not as weak as the tiny creatures from the first ordeal, the machine soldiers were not very hardy on their own. Blasting their limbs off with a rifle was easy, and a head shot was a sure kill.

But you had to be careful around them. Since they had two arms, they could use a variety of weapons, just like humans. They mainly wielded cheap optical guns, but sometimes they carried rare live-ammo guns or threw grenades from a great distance. Their attack power could not be overlooked.

Of course, in this battle, the only threat they posed was a little pain.

“What weapon did it have?”

“Dunno. I only caught a glimpse. It was definitely an automatic rifle, but I can’t tell what kind.”

“Come on, that’s important! How many years have you been playing *GGO*?” pouted Clarence. Shirley ignored her. She wasn’t a gun fanatic and didn’t know much about the types of assault rifles, so she wouldn’t be able to identify one at a glance.

M stood up, pressed the left side of the M14 EBR against the tree trunk, and looked through its scope. He gazed carefully in the direction Shirley fired.

“I don’t see it,” he reported. “How far away was it?”

“About two hundred meters. I just saw a bit between the trees and fired,” Shirley replied nonchalantly. But in a situation where everyone else was losing focus, she had stayed vigilant, noticed it first among the group, took aim, and fired immediately to strike the target through the trees. That took a tremendous amount of skill.

“You’re so good at that!”

“.....”

It was simply in Shirley’s nature to be pissed off when Pitohui complimented her.

“Very skillful,” M added. It was also in Shirley’s nature to begrudgingly accept the compliment from him instead.

In real-life hunting, catching a tiny glimpse of your quarry between the trees was a frequent event. In those circumstances, a hunter absolutely would not fire unless they were certain that it was not a human being they had seen.

There had once been a tragic shooting accident in which someone mistook a towel

tied around the neck of a person in the woods for the white rump of a Yezo sika deer. Mistakes were intolerable in Japan if you were being given the right to use an actual rifle.

That spoke to how much experience Shirley had with taking care to identify what she was shooting. Hence why she took out her target with great skill in one attempt here.

So how would their opponents react...?

Llenn and the others waited, their senses prickling, as the moments passed in silence.

The enemies were out there, and one had come to them in time. But after felling the first, the others weren't attacking. Why not? Would they have to venture forth after all?

The squad kept their eyes and ears open in all directions, waiting with equal parts nerves and skepticism.

That was when the sound started.

It was a pouring rustle, like a downpour of rain. The sky was still clear, of course.

The sound came not from any one direction, but from all around them.

And it was getting closer.

"Above!" Pitohui barked, swinging the KTR-09 toward the sky and firing.

From outside the world they had all been watching, hopping around high in the conifer trees like monkeys—a robot fell, shooting sparks where Pitohui had shot it.

It smashed to the ground about fifty yards away, breaking to pieces. The green gun it had been holding bounced and vanished into the ferns.

Pitohui's "Waiting in Vain" plan was a resounding success.

"Everyone, shoot! Don't let them get closer!" Boss ordered, and SHINC burst into simultaneous gunfire.

"Haaah!" Llenn yelped, pointing her P90 at the sky, too.

However, she could see nothing but branches and needles. With all the din of gunfire around, there was no way to hear the robots jumping from tree to tree.

“Wh-where are they?”

“Doesn’t matter! Just shoot around!” Clarence shouted. She was blasting her AR-57, a gun that used the same ammo and magazines as the P90. The high-pitched cracks rattled like a high-speed snare as empty cartridges simply poured out of the bottom.

Either Clarence’s shooting was impressive or her luck stat was great. Maybe even both. Whatever the case, a robot fell from the trees about 120 feet away, its arm shattered from a bullet.

Hail after hail of rounds issued forth from the group. The forest that had been so quiet was now a cacophony, with multiple firearms blaring at any instant.

“Raaaaah!”

Blam-blam-blam-blam-blam-blam-blam.

Rosa clutched the PKM tight to her side as she fired, blasting branches and needles loose, littering the forest floor with greenery—and the occasional robot.

“Yah!”

Llenn emptied an entire fifty-round magazine at random like spraying a hose, but it seemed that luck wasn’t on her side today. If she wasn’t going to hit anything, she decided, better not to shoot at all. After popping in a new magazine, she watched and waited for enemies on the ground, but nothing was coming.

As for Fukaziroh, she asked, “Hey, what kind of dog food do you prefer, lamb or chicken?”

“.....”

Suuzaburou did not say anything that he didn’t need to say.

“I’d probably go with lamb. I tried a little bite of that stuff once, and it’s got a pretty good fragrance...”

She was off in her own world. Her grenade launchers didn't do very much good shooting upward, so sitting around chatting was actually the correct course of action in this case.

"This is weird..." Twenty seconds into the racket, M was the first to notice that something was wrong. "Everyone! Something's wrong!"

The gunshots started to die down.

"Oh, you're right. Hey, what do you all see for your remaining enemies?" Pitohui asked. Llenn had been watching along the ground, so she glanced up and to the right.

The countdown read 08:05. The number of remaining enemies: 29.

"They haven't gone down! It's still twenty-nine!" Llenn shouted.

"Samesies for me," Clarence added lackadaisically.

"Me too!" Boss chimed in. "This doesn't make sense!"

"We're not beating them...?" muttered Shirley, her brow furrowed.

She had seen at least four of the robots fall from the sky. They'd smashed against the ground and burst into polygonal shards. It didn't make sense that the enemy counter wasn't decreasing.

Then a hand grenade came hurtling over in her direction.

"Urgh!"

"Eek!"

Shirley was practically in the center of the blast, and Llenn was nearby. They were flung to the left and right.

The shock wave-type grenade threw them both about fifteen feet. Despite being farther away from the blast, Llenn flew the same distance because of her light weight.

"Owwwww!" howled Shirley, writhing on the dirt.

"That hurt!" Llenn yelled. She was writhing, too, but twice as fast.

As Fukaziroh had said, her body was numbed in an intensely painful way. The fact that her hit points *weren't* affected made it even more unpleasant. The visual damage effect was still active, however. Llenn's body was glowing red all over.

If getting struck at a distance from the explosion was that painful, then how bad was it for Shirley, who was nearly hit dead-on?

From what Llenn could gather, her right side looked like it had taken a shower with red paint. Under normal circumstances, she would have died instantly, before all that pain could have registered.

"God-frickin'-dammit!" Shirley swore, the only thing she could do to withstand the agony. You couldn't blame her.

"Found one!"

Pitohui had rushed over after hearing Llenn's scream and immediately spotted the enemy. A robot was lying on the ground just thirty feet away, its red lens visible through the ferns. She fired once with the KTR-09, splitting its silver head. The shards burst everywhere.

"They're down below, too!" she called out.

"Why...?"

"How come?"

Shirley was still reeling from pain, while Llenn had shaken off the numbness. If they were that close to the ground, it didn't make sense that they weren't visible through the trees. And even while crawling, they were large enough to be conspicuous. Were the robots springing up out of the earth?

"Gahk!"

"Eek!"

Those screams belonged to Tanya and Tohma.

Llenn spun around and saw the two members of SHINC, who had been guarding their rear from thirty feet away, squirming on the ground in a glowing mess as well.

“Dammit! They’re over here, too! Down below!”

A grenade had incapacitated Boss’s teammates; she valiantly led the charge for vengeance. Switching her silent sniper rifle to automatic mode, she rushed forward, shooting at the silver head.

“Die!”

From a distance of barely ten feet, she put ten bullets into the head of the metallic soldier, which was trying to lift its gun. It was overkill. Against another player, that would have been very bad form. Not the sort of behavior to emulate in Squad Jam.

The machine’s head blew apart, and its body fractured into pieces and vanished. Certain of her victory, Boss checked the number in the corner.

“What the hell?!”

It was still 29.

“This doesn’t make sense! I just watched it die!”

The next moment, several bullet lines appeared on a diagonal above, followed by submachine-gun rounds that pelted Boss’s large body, riddling her with damage effects.

“Aiee! Owww, that hurts!”

“This is so strange...”

Pitohui watched and waited under a large tree, keeping an eye out for enemies.

The automatons were certainly advancing upon them, and the group was returning fire and destroying them. But the remaining enemy counter wasn’t dropping at all. Although they were knocking down the foes from above, others were coming up from

the ground, too.

"Oh, that's it," she remarked, right at the moment that a rifle bullet burst through her head from right cheek to left. Her smile turned bright red from the damage.

"Hey, Clarence," she called out casually, as though she wasn't feeling anything at all.

"What?" asked Clarence, flat on her stomach behind a big tree out of fear of being shot.

"Go and check out the one I just blasted."

"No! I'll die."

"You won't die. Just go—you'll be happy you did."

"How come?"

"Because then I won't shoot that cute little ass of yours."

Clarence looked up and found the red bullet line from Pitohui's KTR-09 traveling right to her own rear end.

"Okay, fine... but back me up, okay?"

"You got it. Now go!"

Pitohui began to shoot around the area as Clarence got to her feet and crossed the thirty-foot distance in a half crouch. Eventually, she reached the spot where Pitohui had fired at the robot moments earlier.

"Huh?"

She was staring directly into the eye of the fallen robot soldier. Two guns pointed at each other, mere feet apart.

"Aaaagh!"

Clarence's brutal scream resounded in everyone's ears.

"Ouch, ouch, holy shit, dammit! My ass would have hurt less! But I got you, you son of a bitch!"

Llenn and Pitohui saw Clarence rolling on the ground in agony, her chest and back glowing bright red. Apparently, the shot had ripped right through her body.

She was wearing a combat vest with pouches for those long AR-57 magazines—and bulletproof armor over her chest and back. And still, the bullet had torn through all of it.

The robot must have been equipped with a very powerful rifle, at least an 8 mm caliber. Under ordinary circumstances, that would be an insta-kill shot, of course.

But that wasn't the problem.

"Huh? Why? Who got you?"

In mystery novel terms, Llenn was less interested in the "howdunit" than the whodunit.

"It was the one-eyed robot! Dammit, Pitohui! He wasn't dead at all! He just pointed his gun right at me! So I shot him through the head and finished him off! It was a mutual kill! Ahhh, this hurts!"

Pitohui nodded in understanding.

"Ah, I had a feeling!"

"You had a feeling?" asked Clarence and Llenn together. Pitohui ignored their suspicion.

"M! Plasma grenade where Clarence is now!"

"Okay."

"Huh? H-hold on, stop!"

M did not stop. Instead, he did as he was told, chucking a plasma grenade toward her with great accuracy.

"Hyaaaaa!" Clarence shrieked, fighting through the pain to get up and run right as a blue orb appeared, obliterating the ground and ferns within its diameter. The explosion

buffeted her back.

"Blegh!" She fell face-first into the earth, getting a good taste of virtual grass and soil.
"Gross!"

The number in the upper right of their displays went down to 28.

"Oooh? What's this?" wondered Fukaziroh, who was kicking back and relaxing in the middle of the group.

"Everyone, listen up," announced Pitohui, answering the mystery. "It's not the robots we're supposed to destroy."

What? Llenn's mouth fell open, as did everyone else's.

"It's the *guns* they're carrying. Those are the enemies to beat. The robots will keep respawning, over and over, unless we destroy their firearms," Pitohui informed.

"That is correct," announced Suuzaburou.

"Ohhh! I get it now!"

Boss wore an angry smile, like a child who was about to burst into tears. Pigtails swaying, she charged toward a machine soldier who was staggering to its feet a few yards away.

The automaton held a large green assault rifle in a model she'd never seen before. It pointed it at her and fired several shots. More red damage effects bloomed on her chest.

"Screw this!" she roared, ignoring the pain and smashing its neck with a brilliant move that used a lariat. It toppled onto its back, leaving its face exposed.

"Eat it!"

She pulled the Strizh pistol from her right hip and fired quickly. After five shots, the

machine fell apart and disappeared. Only its weapon was left behind.

"Stupid gun... I'll blow you up!"

Boss pressed the activation switch on the plasma grenade and affixed it to the top of the gun.

"Actually, bring it here," Pitohui instructed.

"You got it!" Boss replied, incapable of refusing her request. It would be annoying to undo the counter on the plasma grenade, which was going to explode in ten seconds anyway, so she just chucked it out of the way.

Rushing back toward Pitohui, her body framed by the blue explosion in the background, she set down the mysterious firearm on the ground.

Pitohui, M, and Llenn stared down at it.

"What is this?" asked M.

"If you don't know what it is, there's no way *I* would," replied Llenn.

Although she didn't know all the guns in *GGO*, of course, Llenn had heard Pitohui brag about her gun collection plenty of times. She felt like she'd absorbed a whole lot of information about guns that way, but this weapon was new to her.

The gun featured a very blocky design. Its stock rested on your shoulder and pressed against your cheek while you held the pistol grip. In other words, it was an assault rifle of some kind but with an angular body that could have belonged to a tin-plate robot. A bipod was folded in across its front end.

The trigger wasn't just in front of the pistol grip, however. There was another one in front, too.

But the strangest thing of all was that resting on the top of the firearm was a classic hand grenade, pineapple shape and all.

There were weapons that launched grenades from the muzzle, or from below your body, but Llenn had never seen one on *top* of a gun. How were you supposed to use the sights with it there? Well, there was the bullet circle, so maybe you didn't need

them.

Between the amateurish design, the blocky frame, the inexplicable extra trigger, and the unfathomable grenade placement, Llenn got the feeling that she was looking at some kind of child's toy.

"Oh my godddd! No way! I've never seen this one here! I can't believe it's in *GGO*!" Pitohui exclaimed with delight.

"You recognize it, Pito?" Llenn asked, dumfounded. Pitohui really seemed to know *everything*. Even M's eyes were wide.

"Yes, I know what it is," Pitohui replied. But before she could continue, an explosion drowned her out, and everyone stumbled from the force of the blast as the ground shook. That was from a grand grenade.

"What was that?" Llenn wondered, tearing her eyes from Pitohui. In the distance, the grand grenade explosion was toppling several trees.

"It's Boss! She's blowin' herself up!" Tanya replied.

Since she couldn't take any damage, Boss had rushed close to the enemy and detonated the biggest bomb in her arsenal to take them out. It was a suicide attack.

"Ugh. That's gotta hurt..."

If she couldn't die, then the surge of her explosive was just going to chew her up and spit her out. That seemed like it would hurt terribly. Llenn did *not* want to try it out for herself.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is nothing compared to messing up on the floor and hitting the ground! No snickering spectators here!" Boss chuckled. Falling on a high-speed gymnastics floor routine sounded pretty painful.

"She's so hardy," Llenn muttered to herself. Meanwhile, the number of enemies had decreased to twenty-two. The other five players in the group were busy firing away, so for the time being, SHINC seemed to have a handle on things.

Llenn got back to the topic at hand, pointing at the robot's bizarre gun. "What is it, Pito?"

Pitohui smiled, her facial tattoos stretching. She held up the mystery gun and explained, "This is a Johnny Seven OMA. That stands for One Man Army."

"That's a pretty fancy name for something that looks like a kid's toy."

"That's because it is. A kid's toy, I mean."

"Huh?"

"It's a child's toy gun from early 1960s America. The little turds back in the day would run around their immaculate lawns with these things. It's got a rifle, submachine gun, antitank rocket, even a physical grenade launcher. Seven different features, as the name implies. If you remove the pistol grip part, it becomes its own handgun."

Slapping all those things together into a single weapon certainly sounded like a toy concept. But for some reason, M mused, "Sounds just like an XM29."

In the 1990s, the American military had developed a gun with a similar idea in mind.

That was the XM29. It was a firearm that combined the features of a 5.56 mm assault rifle and a 20 mm semiautomatic grenade launcher. The problem was that it was too large and, more importantly, too heavy.

Ultimately, they decided that it would be easier to just keep the functions separate and ended development. The South Korean military tested a similar design in actual combat, but it simply wasn't up to snuff. Constant breakdowns eventually caused them to scrap the weapon.

The examples above illustrated why trying to give a single tool many functions could be a bad idea.

"Ah, I see... So it actually *is* a toy... But why do you know that, Pito?"

"I learned about it during PE in elementary school."

"That *has* to be a lie."

"Regardless, what a rare gun! What a bizarre shooter! What a freak piece! I'm taking this one! Into my inventory, then my collection! It's not for you, Llenn!"



"I... never said I wanted it. Besides, isn't that the enemy? The number won't go down unless we blow it up, right? So..."

Llenn's fears promptly materialized.

An automaton soldier began to form, clinging to the Johnny Seven right in Pitohui's hands like a ghost coming back from the grave.

"I knew it!" Llenn shouted, swinging her P90.

But before she could do anything, Pitohui screamed "Hah!" and tossed the toy gun, then severed it in two with her pale blade. The slice was instantaneous. She clutched the optical sword Muramasa F9 in her right hand, the first time it had seen action today.

The robot soldier burst into tiny pieces, and a moment later, the vertically split Johnny Seven vanished along with it.

"Arrgh! I really wanted that one!" Pitohui wailed as the readout of remaining enemies went from 15 down to 14.

"When you run up on them, they're actually pretty easy," remarked Boss, who'd been fighting like a demon possessed as she destroyed yet another robot—er, Johnny Seven.

She'd figured out that the machine soldiers in this battle weren't really that powerful once you got up close. Not only was their agility no better than an ordinary human's, but their rate of fire was also low.

Boss had ceased using her plasma grenades. Instead, she was walking boldly up within a few yards of her foes and using the Vintorez's automatic mode to dispatch them.

After ten Russian-made 9 × 39 mm bullets sprayed from her silenced sniper rifle, the Johnny Seven sparked and burst into pieces. The robot soldier holding it looked briefly mournful, then vanished just like its weapon.

Thirteen left.

Rosa's machine gun knocked a robot to the ground, where Tohma's rapid fire caught

it. The Dragunov's automatic mode was at its best here. Five bullets to the robot's Johnny Seven sent it packing.

Twelve left.

“Raaah!”

With a cute little *pomp*, Sophie shot the GM-94 horizontally. The grenade attack at just fifty feet blew up both the robot and the Johnny Seven in its hands.

Eleven left.

“That hurt earlier!”

Shirley sprinted through the forest as fast as she could, spotted an enemy about a hundred feet away, and shot one of her insta-kill exploding rounds at it.

It was her specialty, the running snapshot. As with her very first blast, it hit the Johnny Seven smack in the middle, rending it in two.

Ten left.

“We can do this!” Llenn cheered, and the time remaining hit 03:58. Then a voice entered her head.

“Be careful, everyone. When the number of enemies goes under ten, their attacks will get fiercer.”

It was Suuzaburou's voice.

“Hey, everyone, Suuzaburou just said, like, we have to watch out and stuff. Did you catch that?” asked Fukaziroh, who had been doing nothing this whole time. Llenn was too preoccupied to reply.

A red projectile rocketed toward her and exploded.

“Aaaaaahh!”

Llenn flew into the air, the Doppler effect kicking in and making her voice shift in pitch.

A grenade flew and exploded against her, hurling her tiny frame three times farther, until her back slammed into a thick tree trunk.

“Bwoogh!”

She fell ten feet down from that spot.

“Bwagh!”

Her face and torso embedded a few inches into the dirt.

“Ouch...”

Once again, she tasted pain that she wouldn’t have felt if she could actually die.

Llenn slowly sat upright, pulled the P90 sling closer, and ran her hand around P-chan’s grip.

“Gahk!”

Something beamed her in the head. It was a powerful sniper rifle shot, the same kind that went through Clarence. Must have been one of the magical effects of the mythical Johnny Seven. A huge red spot glowed on her forehead.

“Aaaah...”

She tried to lurch upward, feeling as groggy as if she were drunk, then fell flat on her butt.

This... has to be bad for my mental health... literally...

She couldn’t move the way she wanted to. It was like she had a concussion, although her thoughts were sharp.

Just as she’d anticipated, getting continually shot without dying in *GGO* was a trying experience. If the game had been this brutal when she’d first started, Karen would never have kept up with it.

The difficulty increasing once they were down to ten enemies was understandable, but this shift was extreme.

“Waaaah! Owwww! Don’t shoot me there! Perv! Freak!” Clarence yelped. In all likelihood, another one of the Johnny Seven’s weapons, its submachine gun, had nailed her in the butt or similarly sensitive area.

“Dammit! They’re moving faster!” Rosa shouted. While she’d disappeared from Llenn’s view, she got the impression that Rosa was struggling with a machine that had suddenly gotten quite limber.

She looked up and saw both Shirley and another automaton weaving rapidly through the trees before her. The robot was faster than before, but Shirley had the skills to match. She spun and darted from tree to tree in a white-knuckle game of tag.

Shirley had placed the R93 Tactical 2 on her back. Simultaneously, she held Pitohui’s M870 Breacher, chasing after the machine as she rushed left and right around the trees.

“Raaah!”

The moment her foe hid behind a trunk, she fired not in the other direction, where it was most likely to emerge, but toward the very spot where it had disappeared.

Her prediction was dead-on. The metal soldier merely feinted and spun back toward its original position, where it collided with a shotgun shell. It had been planning to point the Johnny Seven back at Shirley, but that just made it an easy target for the shotgun, splitting apart.

Got it! Llenn exulted, but the automaton simply pulled the pistol grip out of the Frankenstein firearm. Although most of its body was destroyed, the pistol part was fine, so it aimed and shot at Shirley.

“Guagh!”

They were fifty feet apart, but a simple one-handed shot with the pistol caught Shirley right in the forehead, and she faltered. Since she’d been rushing forward, she ultimately toppled to the ground face-first.

The machine that scored the head shot on Shirley with its pistol-only Johnny Seven

turned and vanished into the woods.

There were still ten enemies left. Two minutes and fifty-nine seconds to go.

"This is pretty bad," observed Pitohui. Though her tone was as flippant as ever, her statement was unvarnished fact.

She and M came up beside Llenn, who had finally shaken off her numbness and gotten to her feet. M had his trademark shields up in both hands, protecting Pitohui.

Time remaining: 02:45.

"Say, Llenn. You mind doing something painful?"

"I do! I've had enough! And... what is it?"

"Attagirl! Can you go running around looking for where the remaining robots are? If you find them, chase after them as fast as you can. You stick out, so I'm sure we'll be able to spot you even with all the cover around."

"Uh-huh..."

That would help Pitohui and the others identify where the machines were. It seemed that they had been biding their time in the area and simply circling around the players at a bit of a distance.

"But I don't think P-chan and I can finish them off," Llenn admitted. She doubted the P90 could pierce the backs of the robots and destroy the Johnny Sevens they wielded.

"Yes, which is why—" Pitohui started to say.

"Gaaah!" Tanya's high-pitched shriek cut her off. One of the mechanical soldiers was doing something mean to her, clearly. *Take care, Tanya.*

"Which is why Fuka's going to shoot at you. With her plasma grenades, which are guaranteed to destroy the target."

"Whuh? Meaning...?" Llenn asked, although she already knew the answer.

"Kaboom! Both you and the bad guy," Pitohui replied.

A plasma grenade, with its sixty-foot blast diameter, would certainly obliterate the robots and their weapons. But at a terrible price.

“I’ll be engulfed in agony!”

“Yeah, but you won’t die.”

“But it’ll *hurt!*”

“Yes. So I can’t force you to do this... but we have no other effective options... and less than three minutes until our shot at this quest ends miserably in the second stage... I know everyone would have really loved to keep playing longer... What a shame it would be to let them down.”

“Urrrrgh...”

“Hey, gang. I know it’s sad, but maybe we should wave the white flag. I’m sure there’s a FORFEIT QUEST button in here somewhere—”

“Arrgh! I’ll do it!”

“There’s the Llenn I know and love! C’mon, gang! Round of applause!”

All the members of SHINC stood ramrod straight and clapped their hands for her.

Oh, Llenn, you have so much to learn, thought Fukaziroh as she stroked Suuzaburou’s fur.

In the two minutes that followed, Llenn felt something she’d never experienced before in *GGO*.

If those sensations had a real-life parallel, she thought they would be a combination of an incredibly hot sauna and the minus-twenty degrees she’d felt in the Hokkaido winter.

Pitohui’s wildly unorthodox plan actually worked quite well. Llenn would use her legs to evade the robot soldiers’ gunfire and chase them around. Then Pitohui would give

an order.

"Fuka, right over there."

"You got it."

Right at the moment Llenn was about to overtake the robot, Fukaziroh's bombardment would arrive. Plasma grenades, naturally. Even if her aim was off a bit, the blast radius made up for it.

"Now the other way. I saw a pink rabbit."

"Sure thing, Boss."

Amid the strange explosions around her, Llenn confirmed via the decreasing enemy counter that the machine soldiers' Johnny Sevens were being evaporated. At the exact same moment, however, she succumbed to an intense sensation.

She couldn't tell if it was hot or cold. After a while, she couldn't even distinguish if it was painful. It enveloped her entire body from head to toe. The effect lasted for three seconds. After the first detonation, she never wanted to feel it again.

But Boss withstood this!

That fact alone kept Llenn rooted in place. If she couldn't put up with this, she'd be admitting she was inferior to Boss. Right in front of her. She didn't want to lose. Not to her.

Clearly, Pitohui had put her up to this, knowing she'd feel that way. Crafty bitch.

Tanya offered to do the same after a while, but she was overruled because that would be too many targets for Fukaziroh to focus on at once. Besides, she only had twelve plasma grenades at a time.

Battling the pain, Llenn chased after yet another robot and fell prey to the explosion that ensued.

"There you go! You got this!" cheered the woman who came up with the plan, though there wasn't much heart in it.

“You can do it, Llenn!”

“Be strong!”

“Hang in there!” roared the SHINC members, who *were* putting their heart into it. That alone helped Llenn persevere.

“There you aaaaare!” she roared, chasing after the last automaton with a demonic countenance. The finishing eruption happened just thirty seconds before the end of the battle.

“Phew, that was some good work I just put in.” Fukaziroh, who was the only player who had avoided getting shot even once and who’d escaped perfectly unscathed, sighed.

“Llenn!” cried Boss, rushing over to the collapsed girl, her big hands outstretched. “You did great!”

She felt close to fainting, but she grasped the hand firmly. “Heh-heh-heh. I wasn’t going to let you beat me, Boss.”

The second ordeal was over.

CHAPTER 5
Blending In with the Snow
—The Third Ordeal—



CHAPTER 5

BLENDING IN WITH THE SNOW

—THE THIRD ORDEAL—

It was 12:40.

Llenn and company had no time to rest and relax after the furious bout to the very end of the time limit.

“It’s so bright!”

Once again, they found themselves teleported through a blinding light.

“Whew... Where to this time...?”

Llenn opened her eyes.

“It’s so bright!”

It was a world of white—a snowy field.

The sky was blue with a hint of red, and the sun shone high overhead. Snow was packed across every inch of the land, reflecting light that stabbed at Llenn’s eyes.

You weren’t going to go blind from snow glare in a VR game, but it was dazzling enough that she wanted sunglasses. There was supposed to be automatic brightness adjustment in the game, but the developers had probably configured it not to work as well in this particular instance.

Llenn’s pink boots sank into snow up to the ankle. It felt like hard ice was resting just a few inches underneath. She spun around and, with the exception of her teammates, saw nothing but flat, snowy ground. That, and buildings.

They were placed at seemingly random intervals of a few dozen yards each. Their exteriors were falling apart, and the majority of their windows were broken. Each

structure was tall and square, about 130 feet to a side, all perfectly vertical. Not a single one was leaning in any way.

The buildings varied between three and seven stories in height. They all lacked a visible foundation or entrance, which meant they were buried in deep, deep snow.

A field blanketed in snow, save for countless buildings popping their heads up above the mass of white. *GGO* had plenty of bizarre locales that made you want to do research into the life of the designer who came up with them, but this one was a real doozy, even by this game's standards. It was surreal.

"Whoa! The buildings are growing out of the snow!" shouted Clarence, calling it like she saw it.

Fukaziroh petted Suuzaburou and commented, "The building seeds we planted in the fall have taken root. By next summer, those big structures will be bearing plump fruit."

"Wow, cool!"

"Clarence... have you actually had your compulsory education?" asked Shirley.

Right on cue, as always, Clarence replied, "Not to my knowledge."

The next moment, the ground shook.

Their ankles wobbled, slowly at first but more violently as time went on.

It was obviously an earthquake—and a fairly intense one at that. Clearly unable to withstand this, the buildings creaked and trembled, and the occasional window shattered.

Zaboom! Another building sprung up out of the snow.

About five hundred feet to the south of the group, there had been a building about thirty feet tall and wide peeking out of the snow. It was much smaller than the others in its vicinity.

But now it was shaking away the snow around it as it soared up much higher. Up and up and up it went, absolutely rigid.

“Whoaaaa...”

They admired the spectacle with jaws agape.

“That’s too much fertilizer, right? Nutrients are like allowance: You shouldn’t give them out too much,” Clarence commented.

“Oh, I know all about that. It’ll grow into bamboo. If you cut them when they’re freshly grown shoots, they taste good. We’re a little too late for this one, though,” lamented Fukaziroh.

“Bamboo can represent a countless multitude of something!” said Milana the Russian, who was playing Tohma. She must have just learned about *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* in school. Either that, or Elza must have slipped her some bit of language trivia while they were at the karaoke place.

The structure’s growth was so dramatic that it caused the wind to howl, and it came to a halt right as the rumbling did. Now it was a good three hundred feet tall—or thirty stories. It loomed high over all the other edifices, jutting into the sky. With how thin it was, it resembled a stick rising from the ground.

“It looks like, um, a bar graph.” Sophie gulped.

“I would have preferred a circle graph,” opined Rosa. She must have been thinking of homework.

“I bet the view up at the top is really good,” Boss said.

“Yes, exactly,” added Suuzaburou, much to everyone’s surprise. “I will now explain the third ordeal.”

“Huh? You mean we have to climb it?” Llenn asked, getting to her feet.

“Yes,” the dog confirmed. “I would like you to listen carefully to what I say next. On the rooftop of the tallest building on this map is a door. If you pass through it, you will find yourself in the next ordeal.”

“It’s the Anywhere Door!” shouted Fukaziroh, mimicking the voice of the blue robot protagonist of undoubtedly the most famous children’s cartoon in Japan. Nobody laughed.

They didn't chuckle because her impression was *too* good. It was so uncannily similar to the real thing that it just wasn't that funny.

Suuzaburou also did not laugh. He continued, "As long as one person passes through the door, the ordeal will be over for the entire group. You have eighteen minutes to complete it, starting right now."

Once again, in the upper-right corner, they saw eighteen minutes, which then ticked down to 17:59. Llenn checked her wristwatch and saw that it was 12:42 in real time. That meant they had until exactly one o'clock.

"This one's really gonna work our legs," said Clarence with a fierce grin. "Unless there are elevators in that building, Mr. Doggy?" she asked the spitz at her feet.

"There are no elevators," answered the canine.

"So just one person has to go up to the roof there? Sounds easy, right...?" Anna sighed doubtfully. Llenn was skeptical, too.

If all it took was running up the stairs there, she could do it in a few minutes. This wasn't real life; taking all those flights wouldn't even tire her out.

"I haven't finished explaining. Please pay attention," the dog scolded the group, who was busy commenting from the peanut gallery.

"Hey, people! Don't disrespect Suuzaburou!" Fukaziroh fumed, despite the fact that she was the one who had been mimicking the famous blue robot cat.

"In this ordeal, you cannot use your weapons or armor. I will be confiscating them."

Whut? Llenn thought. Then her trusty gun, P-chan, vanished from her grasp in an instant. The pouches on both hips disappeared, too, along with their contents. She reached around her back; even the knife was gone.

No way! You're going to give them back, right...? She couldn't help but worry, even if it was unfounded.

Upon turning around, she saw that everyone was similarly empty-handed.

Those who had bulletproof plating in their vests had lost them. Pitohui's headgear had

disappeared, and Fukaziroh's helmet and knife were gone. Without the shield inside it, M's backpack was completely flat.

SHINC was only outfitted in combat fatigues, too. They all looked like they had at the bar, hanging out without any of their equipment on.

"Good grief," muttered Fukaziroh, who used her knife as a hairpin. Now she had to collect her long, loose hair and tie it together in a bundle.

Suspecting she already knew what lay in store, Llenn waved her hand and brought up her inventory window. The two Vorpal Bunnies and the backpack with the magazines inside had big Xs over their icons. No pulling them out.

Nothing that was left had any real connection to combat. Thermoses for a bit of civilized tea out in the wasteland—three of them, in fact—cookies for a snack, headphones for listening to Elza Kanzaki songs.

She always had them in her inventory, so she'd forgotten she was even carrying them around. If she'd taken them out of storage, she might have been able to bring a bunch more ammo.

Better not tell anyone I have this stuff in here, Llenn decided.

And of course, as was only fair, she had much more carrying capacity after subtracting P-chan and Vor-chan from the total. In other words, the invisible "bag" she was carrying around with her was much lighter for the time being.

"Don't need weapons to do some stairwell jogging, eh?" mused Boss.

"As long as there aren't any enemies," added Sophie.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha. There's no way you could call that an ordeal!" Pitohui, who was excited for some reason, laughed. "Isn't that right, you blackhearted—er, black-headed doggy?"

"That is correct. There are monsters on the other side of the building that just had a growth spurt. They will attack you as they attempt to get through the door first."

"What? Are we supposed to beat them in a fistfight? I don't wanna pummel monsters with my hands!" lamented Clarence.

“You may if you’d like, but there are weapons and ammunition that you are allowed to use scattered throughout this map. Find them if you are so inclined and use whatever you like. The conditions are the same for the enemy. You may also defeat the enemies and loot their weapons.”

Wow! The team was shocked.

This sort of scenario was common in other games, but there had never been a time in *GGO* where you could scrounge up weapons from the environment or steal them from enemies.

“Here, your hit points will decrease if you take damage, as usual. If you lose all your HP...”

You’ll die? You’ll get booted out of the quest? Llenn worried. But she was wrong.

“You will be put on standby in a state of temporary death. If someone completes the ordeal, you will be resurrected on the next map, with all of your hit points returned.”

That explained it. The arrangement here was that either everyone went on to the next stage, or no one did. That was the only way it could work.

“That concludes my guidance. Best of luck.”

“Okay, Llenn! Run! Don’t worry; I’ll walk Suuzaburou!” Fukaziroh shouted. Her hands were free without the MGL-140s, so she picked up the little black dog.

Her suggestion aside, Llenn *did* start running.

“I’ve got this!”

A competition of speed was her forte.

If she could zip across this field of snow before the enemy arrived and climb up that sticklike building, the ordeal would be over before they knew it. Easy-peasy.

After saving the team in the last trial, she was set to be the hero again. She needed to think of what to say for her triumphant postgame interview.

Newly invigorated, she left little footprints in the snow as she hurried, until—*zhunk!*—

she sank up to her chest on the fourth step.

She was immediately immobilized.

"Wha—? Hey! What! What's going on with the ground?"

"This is what's going on..."

Llenn looked up at M, whose voice she had just heard. He was in the snow to his thighs, working his powerful legs back and forth, leaving a snowplow trail as he came closer.

Well, goodness. Everything just a few yards from their starting location had been soft, freshly fallen powder. Llenn struggled but was completely unable to move.

Shit! She cursed her own tininess. It was the first time she'd ever done that in *GGO*. Now there was no way for her to get into the building first. There was no way for her to be the hero.

"Ugh, it's hard to walk," grunted Boss as her team waded over laboriously. "We'll head for the structure over there on the left! There should be weapons inside! After me!"

"Raahh!"

They headed for the closest building, a four-story structure about twenty yards ahead to the left—or perhaps southeast.

"Any enemies?" Llenn asked.

Fwoomp! M pulled her right out of the snow.

"It's like harvesting carrots," commented Clarence, still standing in the starting area.

"Of course there are. Behind the tall building, about three hundred yards off. Weird-shaped creatures, about a dozen. They're approaching a building on our right as a group, squirming and bulging and being creepy," spat Pitohui, peering through binoculars.

The strap of the binoculars ran around Shirley's neck. Meaning that she had pulled them out of her inventory, but Pitohui had grabbed them to use. Shirley looked ready to bite her neck at a moment's notice.

"At any rate, we'll need some weapons!" shouted Boss, leading SHINC in a line toward the nearby structure. "I'll be turning off the comm for the moment. Just call for me if anything happens."

They were going to temporarily separate communications. That made it easier when you were acting in different groups, since you didn't have to hear everyone's interactions all at once.

Pitohui responded lackadaisically and brushed her ear. Then she called out to LPFM, "Shall we hurry, then?"

There was a bit more than sixteen minutes left. No time at all for sitting back and relaxing.

"Grab on!" M shouted, lifting Llenn up with his arm alone before moving her back behind his head. Her legs went around his neck, so that she was riding on his shoulders.

How many years had it been since she'd ridden piggyback...?

Then M said, "Get in the bag. You can cover your head if you want."

"Huh? Ohhh..."

Llenn hesitated for a moment until she grasped his intentions. She slid her feet down into M's big backpack, which was now empty without its armor inside. As she did this, she had to hold on to his large head so she could fit her legs inside one at a time.

If she crouched down inside the bag, it was a perfect fit: not too tight, not too loose. It was like the bag had been crafted specifically for carrying Llenns.

"Here we go."

M started to slouch forward with her on his back. He resumed his snowplow path toward a different structure from SHINC's, about forty yards away on the right.

Having a tall vantage point gives you a really nice view. Well, duh, she thought.

In the real world, Karen looked down on virtually everyone, but in *GGO*, she could only see things from very close to the ground. That was a considerable disadvantage when it came to spotting the enemy as soon as possible, she realized.

"Do you see those enemies, Llenn? On the left."

M was correct. About a thousand feet leftward, half buried in the snow, monsters were on the move. They were eerie and unidentifiable, albeit hastily pushing through the terrain.

Like her own squad, the monsters were making for a building on the western side. Their tracks were practically parallel. It was frustrating to be able to see their foes without having any means of attacking them, but that was true for the other side, too.



Llenn looked behind her and saw Pitohui and the rest of the team following.

"Marchin' thru the snow, steppin' on the ice! Where is the river, we lost the road twice!"
Clarence sang happily.

"How do you know that song?" Shirley asked behind her.

"The Snow March" was an eccentric military song without much glory to it; the lyrics depicted the grousing of soldiers being forced to march through freezing conditions. Shirley knew the song because she sang it often while trekking through the winter landscapes with her hunting companions. They would usually scold her for singing when it might scare away their game.

"The horses are down, and— Uh, I learned it from a manga. Or maybe it was an anime."

"Uh-huh."

Llenn looked behind them. There was a path in the snow they'd pushed aside, and in the back, after most of the work had been done, Fukaziroh tenderly cradled the little black dog.

"There, there. You don't want to get your widdle toesies to get cold."

Was that really necessary?

Once they were inside the office building, Llenn jumped out of M's backpack. The interior was spacious, with sturdy three-foot pillars supporting the ceiling. There were large metal desks and simple steel-frame chairs abandoned here and there. Some of them were in normal positions, others were flipped over. The walls and floor were a wreck, but there was no snow on the inside.

The structure was devoid of lighting save for the sunlight bleeding through the windows, which was still bright enough to illuminate even the back of the room.

"No traps in here," Llenn announced, checking carefully around knee and waist level.

"It would be really nasty if there was one," commented Clarence.

The rest of the group clambered through the broken window to get inside. "Split up and scan the area for weapons quickly, then meet back up here," M ordered, shifting a desk. It was about the size of a single bed and looked very heavy. It made a nasty scraping sound on the floor.

"Me too?" asked Fukaziroh.

"Of course!" snapped Llenn.

"Aw, darn," she grumbled, gently setting the dog on the floor. Suuzaburou plopped down onto his furry bum at once. She rubbed his head and said, "There you go, good boy. Stay here and *occhanko*. Don't go too far from this spot."

Occhanko was a local Hokkaido word for sitting with one's bottom on the floor. Only Llenn and Shirley would have understood her.

"Let's go!"

No longer limited in her mobility, Llenn sped through the empty building. Near the center of the floor was a staircase, the kind that went back and forth with landings. The lower part was buried in snow, but she could still go upstairs.

Nearby, blocking the gloomy hallway, was a gun. It was a rail-thin, long bolt-action rifle with a wooden stock. That was all Llenn could tell, but she was obviously going to take it back with her.

Beside it rested a green shoulder pouch. It gave a metallic sound as she lifted it—the pouch was very heavy. That had to be ammunition.

Llenn tossed the bag over her shoulder, held the long rifle vertically with both hands, and rushed back to where they'd started.

She'd been the first to discover treasure. No one else was around. It was just Suuzaburou, sitting on the floor in an empty office building.

The snow outside was so dazzling that it formed a white background. For a moment, she got the impression that the black dog's dark eyes were completely without expression, so she startled. But upon closer inspection, he was as cute and attentive as ever.

"There, there," she consoled, resting the rifle on the floor to pet the dog's head.

"Don't touch Suuzaburou! Oh, it's just Llenn... I thought you were a pink monster" Fukaziroh shouted rudely as she returned. The other four were close behind. They all were carrying spoils.

The enemy side had still not launched an assault. With the depth of the powder outside, they couldn't have reached the goal edifice this soon if they were heading straight there. Now the squad's top priority was to arm themselves.

They laid out all the guns on the floor. Some were big, some were small, and—

"Oh my," exclaimed Pitohui. "The Mosin-Nagant M1891/30..."

The rifle Llenn brought back had been constructed by the Soviets for WWII. It was about four feet long. Like Tohma's Dragunov, it fired 7.62 mm rifle bullets.

"Two Uzis..."

Those were Israeli submachine guns. Despite being crafted back in 1952, they were considered masterpieces to this day. Their metal bodies were shaped like a capital T and attached to a wooden stock. The firearms fired 9 mm Parabellums, pistol bullets.

"A Beretta M12S..."

That was another 9 mm submachine gun, this one of Italian make. Built in 1959.

"A Thompson M1A1..."

An American submachine that took .45-caliber pistol rounds. This one had a wooden stock and grip and was fairly long. A WWII-era gun.

"And a PPSH-41, huh?"

That was a Soviet Tokarev 7.62 mm submachine gun. It had a long wooden rifle stock and a seventy-one-round drum magazine shaped like a cookie tin. Another gun from WWII.

In other words...

“What is this, an antiques show?!”

They were all very old guns. Historical pieces. Collectors might enjoy them for the nostalgia, but in an actual battle, you would obviously want something more contemporary.

“And they’re all SMGs,” grumbled M.

Aside from the Mosin-Nagant, they were all submachine guns that used pistol bullets. At the very best, their effective range wasn’t going to pass two hundred yards. If the enemy side found actual assault rifles, their own team wouldn’t stand a chance.

“Just gotta fight with what we have! Those are the rules!” Shirley said, accepting the reality and grabbing the Mosin-Nagant, lifting the bolt, and pulling it back so she could insert its long rifle rounds from the top. This category of rifle always worked more or less the same way, so she didn’t have to give it much thought.

Once Shirley had loaded five bullets and pushed the bolt forward again, M said, “Keep a lookout for us.” She nodded and left the office area.

Shirley was a reliable sniper, so she’d do well with that gun even if it wasn’t her usual, Llenn trusted. But as for herself?

“Um, which one should I...?”

She couldn’t choose. The rest were submachine guns, but she was clueless about the benefits and applications of each. Early on in *GGO*, when she’d chosen the Skorpion for PKing, she’d done a little research on gun capabilities, but what little knowledge she’d gained had been long forgotten.

“You take this one, Llenn. Fuka, here.”

M did the hard work for them. Fukaziroh and Clarence had no complaints, and Llenn certainly didn’t. They accepted their weapons like they were receiving holiday presents.

But what to do with it?

Llenn had a black submachine gun in her hands. How many years had it been since she’d used a black firearm?

In addition to the normal grip behind the trigger, there was a similar one in front of the long, narrow magazine. That made it easy to hold the gun with two hands.

It was sixteen inches long. The stock was like a metal rod, folded up on the right side. It would be even longer if extended, but Llenn figured it was fine the way it was now.

The good news was that it wasn't so heavy that she couldn't hold and fire it at the same time. The bad news was that she didn't know how to use it.

"Llenn, there's a manual in the game window," said Fukaziroh.

"Really?" She waved her hand and opened a pop-up window with the firearm's name on it. According to that, Llenn was holding a Beretta M12S. There was another pop-up with a simple guide to the weapon.

A SUBMACHINE GUN MADE BY BERETTA. FIRES 9 MM PARABELLUM BULLETS. FIRES FROM AN OPEN BOLT AND HAS A SELECTOR BETWEEN SEMIAUTO AND FULLY AUTOMATIC. HOLDS THIRTY BULLETS AT A TIME. KNOWN FOR ITS GRIP SAFETY, SO THAT THE GUN CANNOT FIRE UNLESS IT IS FIRMLY HELD.

"Uh-huh..."

Llenn touched the floating description, bringing up a graphic with operating instructions. She quickly and carefully checked out how to disengage the magazine, how to use the safety, how to switch the selector, and how to fold the stock.

Just as she finished and felt like she had the gist of it, a high-pitched gunshot echoed throughout the building interior.

"Looks like the other side's ready to rumble!" called out Shirley through the comm. She had been watching the structure where the enemy had gone and was shooting at them as they emerged.

"They ducked back inside. Everyone, hurry!"

It was a great luxury to have a good sniper at a time like this.

As for Shirley, she'd rushed through the dark hallway and had made it to the office on the far side of the edifice about a minute earlier, where she could see the enemy. The office was practically identical on the other side. Only the view was different. On the left stood the tall, thin goal—so close, yet so far.

Shirley took position behind a thick pillar and pulled out her binoculars. Through the broken window, she examined the wide building the team of monsters had presumably entered.

Just seconds after putting the binoculars to her eyes, the enemies emerged from the structure. They were about a thousand feet away. With the magnification on the binoculars, she could clearly make out their shapes.

The monsters resembled eerie octopuses with rainbow stripes. She had never seen anything like them in the game before. They were freaky.

Based on the ratio of their bodies to the guns, she could tell that they were the size of humans. She didn't know what they were wielding, though.

Switching the binoculars for the Mosin-Nagant, she pressed the side of the gun against the pillar to steady it, then took aim at the head of the octopus monster leading the group. The rifle didn't have a scope, so she was relying on only the metal sights.

It was a primitive method of aiming, aligning the rear sight that was closer to her eye with the front sight at the end of the barrel. The rear sight could be adjusted up and down, but she didn't have time to tinker with it first.

Adjusting the firearm carefully, she lifted it upward until her aim matched the target and then fired without hesitation. It was a pure snipe with no bullet line to speak of—no system assistance, but no warning to the target, either.

Since it wasn't her gun, her aim was slightly off. The bullet passed just to the side of the cephalopod's head, and he (?) pulled back.

Shit! Should have gone for the body.

Shirley had given in to old hunting habits, where the vital spots like the neck and head were sure kills but harder to hit. She cursed that tendency in the moment.

"Looks like the other side's ready to fight! They ducked back inside. Get a move on,

everyone!" she called out to her companions—for the time being, at least.

Instantly, a number of red bullet lines lit up the building—and the office interior.

"Tsk!" she ducked back and hid behind the pillar.

A hail of bullets followed, erasing the red lines and striking the surfaces of the room, causing a racket. It was a counterattack, of course, not just random suppressive fire. The sounds of damage around her were light, which told her that their guns were mostly SMGs, too.

If they were firing normal machine-gun rounds in the 6 to 8 mm size, the effect would have been more severe. They would be tearing chunks out of the pillar around her.

Once the pinging of bullets ceased, Shirley glanced back toward the enemy area and reported to her team, "They shot at me with SMGs. They haven't left their shelter."

"Wow, thanks; that's great to know!" replied the one person who pissed her off the most. Pitohui came into the office carrying an Uzi, her center of gravity low. Llenn and the others followed her in.

Llenn had the M12S, M had the PPSh-41, Clarence had the Thompson, and Fukaziroh had the other Uzi. They all looked very strange without their usual weapons. Especially Llenn, with her black gun.

Each of them took position behind a pillar or toppled desk or the like, facing forward. They all knew that getting too close to the window would leave them completely vulnerable. The scary thing about *GGO* was that after you'd played long enough, you unconsciously identified real-life locations in game terms. "Oh, I'll get shot here." "This spot is safe."

Karen had once sat at a café with a view of an intersection below and felt strangely sick. She realized she was anxiously thinking *What if I get shot from the building across the street?*

Llenn stared out the south end of the structure. Beyond the white plane of snow, the stick—er, edifice—that was their goal was clearly visible, but there was nothing in between. No obstacles, no cover. And the deep snow would stymie them from moving quickly across it.

"So if we just trot out there, we're gonna get shot, huh?" Clarence mused.

"Yeah. *I'll* shoot you," barked Shirley.

"It's a stalemate," fumed Llenn. They had thirteen minutes left on the timer. There was no room for error.

"Hello, Evacchi? How's it going?" asked Pitohui, switching her connection to the other team back on. Llenn waited for their response, hoping they'd managed to find some powerful weapons. But she was disappointed.

"I was just about to let you know! Nothing over here! We searched and searched, but the only things we found were grenades!"

"Goodness. What kinds?"

"About fifteen normal types and plasma grenades. And tons of grand grenades, more than I can count! Dammit! Nothing we can actually shoot!"

"Aw, darn. We got one rifle here, but everything else is submachine guns. Though, it seems like the enemies found about the same."

"So we're in a stalemate."

Exactly, thought Llenn.

"Can you make it over here? I'd like some grenades," Pitohui asked Boss.

"Probably, if we crawl on our hands and knees through the snow. More importantly, could we get to the building we're heading for by keeping it between the enemy and you, so they can't see us?"

"That would be risky since it's so narrow... I'll leave the decision to you. What do you think?"

"...Let's meet up first."

"Okay, make it quick."

So SHINC was going to come and join them. If the monsters climbed to the top of their

building, they might shoot down on a diagonal at the squad, but Boss did not argue in the slightest.

“You got it!”

Please be safe, Llenn prayed. Twelve minutes left.

“Got any ideas, M?” Shirley asked, hoping for a breakthrough. She was still clutching the Mosin-Nagant. Clarence was using the binoculars to watch the other building.

“Mmmm,” he grunted.

“Oh! What about a sled?” Llenn suggested, deep in thought. It was true Hokkaido inspiration. “A sled can run right over soft snow! We could use those whiteboards!”

They were in an office, after all—grimy whiteboards were scattered about here and there.

“I see. But they won’t move on their own, will they? What’s going to power the sleds?” Clarence asked.

“How about farts?” suggested Fukaziroh. The group went silent.

Llenn ignored her friend and mulled it over. She answered, “What if we pointed guns backward and shot? Would that provide enough recoil to move us?”

“Maybe in the vacuum of space,” quipped Shirley sardonically. It was asking a lot of an SMG’s recoil power to push someone five hundred feet.

“But if we can just get Llenn there, we could clear the ordeal in a snap,” Pitohui grumbled.

In the meantime, bullet lines appeared from the building across the way, followed by a number of shots. Everyone ducked down, so they remained unharmed, but they couldn’t leave at this rate. Time was passing without a lick of progress on their end.

“We’ll be there soon,” Boss reassured, but Llenn’s team was still no closer to finding a solution. The countdown continued its cruel march, descending from ten minutes to 09:59.

"The enemy's moving!" exclaimed Clarence, who was acting as Shirley's spotter with the binoculars. Llenn took out her own monocular and pressed it to her right eye, peering over the top of the sideways desk.

"Ugh!"

From the building a thousand feet away, she saw desks marching in their direction.

They were sturdy office desks, like the ones the players were hiding behind. The monsters held them in a formation, three desks across and two tall, slowly but surely sliding over the landscape. They were heading for the tallest building, of course.

"They're using the desks as shields!" Clarence cried. Now and then, they caught a flicker of some strange color that looked like one of the octopuses between the tables. Behind the shield, nearly ten monsters were working together to support the six desks, propping them up and pushing them along.

"Screw this."

Shirley aimed at the tables and fired her rifle.

The bullet zipped forward and deflected off the surface of a shield, shooting out into the sky somewhere. Although the desks wobbled from the impact, the bundle of six tables continued its forward progress undeterred.

"What?!" fumed the sniper.

As a test, Llenn rapped the desk in front of her with her knuckles. It made a dull, heavy sound.

"Didn't know they were so tough..."

Tough enough to deflect a rifle round from this distance? That was a shock. It was comparable to M's shield, which was constructed from spaceship plates. This future office wasn't playing around.

"This is one of those 'you win once, you figure it out' games. Can you copy them, M?"

"I'll try."

On Pitohui's orders, he picked up the desk to imitate the monsters. True to form, the monstrously strong man could lift it. That meant he could probably hold it up and proceed forward in safety—provided he could also deal with the deep snow.

"I'll try it, too, then!"

Fukaziroh copied him and easily lifted the heavy desk, a sign of just how much time she'd spent buffing up her character.

"I can't do iiit!" wailed Clarence. Though she could just barely lift it up, the weight penalty made it impossible for her to walk with it.

"Neither can I," admitted Shirley, without bothering to try. Llenn knew she didn't stand a chance, either.

"Pito, can you cut them smaller?"

"With the photon sword? Sure thing, I'll cut them down to size as soon as you pull my sword out of your magic hat."

"Huh? Oh... I forgot..."

Their weapons had been confiscated—*all* of them.

"Th-then should we wait for Boss to get here and copy the idea?" Llenn asked.

"Hell with that! I'd rather blast 'em to smithereens first!" Clarence growled, holding the Thompson at her waist. She proceeded to the window and began firing.

The pistol bullets couldn't cover a thousand feet, but when combined with the effect of the bullet circle in her line of sight, she could create a rain of lead. The point was simply to cause the enemy to falter, however minutely.

Ping.

"Gyah!"

A bullet promptly returned their way, penetrating Clarence's left arm and spinning her backward. Incidentally, of the ten or so pistol rounds she fired, maybe *one* of them had hit their target and given it a little knock.

"Sniper! One of them on the other side has a sniper rifle!" Shirley snapped, quickly firing the Mosin-Nagant at the spot where the bullet line had briefly shone, then moved just as quickly to avoid reprisal fire.

"Did you... did you get 'em?" Clarence asked, wincing and holding her shining left arm as she scrambled back. She'd lost about 30 percent of her hit points.

"No, I didn't get any feedback," Shirley said, expelling the empty.

It was strange to talk about "feedback" in a gunfight where you couldn't feel your shots hitting, but veteran players of *GGO* tended to use terms like this. And the weird thing was: They were often correct.

While this was happening, the countdown timer ticked every second faithfully away, so that it now read 08:40. The shield of desks was also slowly approaching the center building. They probably had about four hundred feet to go.

"Once they get inside, they'll reach the top in two or three minutes," M stated, a hint of panic in his voice.

Wh-wh-wh-wh-what-what should I do, what should I do, what can I do, whaddle I whaddle I whaddle I do-do-do-do? On the other hand, Llenn's mental commentary was nothing *but* panic.

"Now, now. Slow and something wins the idea, as the saying goes," Fukaziroh offered lazily.

As for the tiny blond, she'd been absorbed with something on the floor for a little while. She was forcefully prying the boards from the seats and the backs of the metal pipe chairs. Llenn was certain that she was trying to build a doghouse.

"Sorry we're late!"

Just then, the six members of SHINC stomped through the building. They were early.

"Once we saw what they were doing, we just started running normally."

Well, that would explain it. They were plastered with snow from their earlier crawl, but it was evaporating and clearing away quickly.

Pitohui asked, "Still no guns?"

"No... unfortunately. If we'd gone into a different building, maybe..."

"Hey, no sweat. We're coming up with plans since we can't break through their wall."

Boss looked through her binoculars at the wall of desks that was steadily pushing its way across the snow. They had 350 feet to go. "Grrr, now there's an idea. Let's do that, too!"

She picked up one of the desks in the room.

"It's too late to catch up by doing the same thing. Take out all the grand grenades you picked up instead and put them behind us."

"A-all right."

Boss did as she was told and materialized all the extra-large plasma grenades she'd found, placing them on the floor. There were twenty in total.

Of course, they didn't forget to use the overturned desks as shields. If any one of the grand grenades went off, the ensuing blast would kill everyone and probably demolish the building along with them.

Fukaziroh observed the scene as though inspecting a pumpkin crop. "Just so ya know, ya shouldn't eat 'em right away. Pumpkins gotta ripen up. Got that?"

"You're still talking about that?" Llenn snapped. Yes, it was true that a properly ripened pumpkin was delicious, but that had nothing to do with the crisis at hand. Llenn's favorite pumpkin dish was pumpkin *dango* dumplings. Shortly followed by pumpkin stew.

"You have a plan for this?" Boss asked Pitohui. She was clearly hoping that the answer was yes. Behind her, the other members of SHINC gazed at their tattooed hero with admiration and expectation.

Those tattoos crinkled into a smirk.

"A plan? You could say that."

“Ohhh!”

“But we’ll need to convince a certain someone to do it,” Pitohui sneered, sending a devious sidelong glance at the back of the player looking for the enemy sniper with her Mosin-Nagant at the ready: Shirley.

She must have felt the virtual glances of SHINC and Llenn, because she turned back with a scowl and asked, “Did you call me?”

“The enemy party is cooking away, folks! Whatever we do, it’s gonna be soon!” called out Clarence, who was keeping tabs.

“I’ll make it brief,” said Pitohui. “First of all, Tohma will take the rifle to the roof of the building.”

“Okay, so we aim from above!” Boss raved.

“I’m not done,” Pitohui scolded her.

“Oh! Sorry!”

Shirley snapped, “Just get on with it.”

“Right, right. Tohma, you focus on finding and eliminating the enemy sniper. Don’t worry about shooting the team on the move. You won’t be able to shoot through the desks if they angle them your way anyway. They can all go inside the building, for all we care.”

“Have you forgotten the rules? We’ll lose,” pointed out Shirley, who was correct. Llenn wondered if Pitohui had given up on winning the competition.

“Now, now. Anyway, they’re going to climb up the building. It’ll take at least two minutes at the very fastest to reach the top. So we’ve got at least that much time.”

Assuming the edifice was twenty-five floors, climbing one set of stairs would have to be under five seconds to hit a two-minute total. That was extremely fast, but Llenn could manage it.

“And?”

“In the meantime, Shirley’s going to zoom off on her skis.”

“Glllp!” Shirley made a sound like she had food caught in her throat. She *did* have skis. They were a cross-country variety that had material at the back to keep from sliding. She’d used them to zip up a snowy slope in SJ2, and they weren’t that heavy, so she always kept them in her inventory.

“I’ll ask you later how you knew I had them. For now, yes, I could probably rush to that building within a minute. But—”

“Just sixty yards to go!” reported Clarence on the monsters’ progress.

Shirley continued, “But what will happen if I get there? I can’t handle the enemy all on my own.”

“No. But you *can* handle the building on your own.”

“Huh?”

“You’ll take M’s backpack, filled with as many grand grenades as it will hold. When you reach the structure, you blow yourself up.”

“Huhhh?”

Oh! I see...

Llenn could picture it now. She’d seen Pitohui’s vision.

There was a high-pitched noise nearby. M was firing the PPSh-41 on automatic in an attempt to slow down the opposing side. His gun’s top ejection spat out golden cartridges like a fountain. They looked like they would hurt if they hit your face.

Now that the desks were much closer, quite a few of the bullets struck their target, but that was all that could be said of it.

After about ten shots, M quickly spun out of the way, and the sniper shot from the enemy monsters passed through the space where he’d just been standing. The countless rapid-fire bullet lines he sent up were like a lighthouse beam illuminating his location.

“Fifty-five yards to go!”

“And what is blowing myself up going to accomplish?” fumed Shirley.

“It’ll fall down!” Llenn explained. “A chain explosion of large plasma grenades will chew up most of that skinny building! It’ll collapse, the same way the ship in SJ3 broke in half!”

The rest of the group murmured in surprise, except for Clarence, who reported, “Fifty yards!”

“Okay, fine! Goddammit!”

Shirley swung her left hand, and soon a pair of skis with sealskin backing appeared, along with two poles.

“Go, M.”

“Got it.”

M lowered his empty backpack and began to shovel grand grenades into it. After five of them, there was still room, but he instead made sure he could shut the zipper before adjusting the straps to fit Shirley.

“Here,” Boss said, handing her an ordinary-size plasma grenade. The timer was set to zero seconds. That meant an instant explosion as soon as the switch was pressed. Perfect for booby traps... or self-immolation.

“Thanks. Got any cups for a last toast?”

She didn’t understand what Shirley was getting at, so Pitohui answered, “After the game, maybe.”

“Urk!” Shirley glared at her, then hauled the backpack up and moved to the pillar closest to the window so she could equip her skis. Only the toes of her boots were fixed in place.

“Go ahead, Tohma.”

“Yaaah!”

Tohma took the Mosin-Nagant and its ammo, rushing along with her spotter, Anna, through the office on Boss's orders.

"Thirty yards to go!"

Shirley squeezed the ski poles and attached the detonation grenade behind her back. "But just so you know, there's no guarantee all the monsters are going to climb up once they're inside the edifice. If they stay on this side and wait at the window, they'll just shoot me, and that's it."

"True, but I have a feeling they're all going up."

"I assume you have a reason for that?"

"Bet your ass. It feels safer that way. If only one goes up, all progress stops if they fall on the way or run into obstacles. Having the entire group go as far as they can is a much more reassuring tactic."

"Ugh! Reassuring? What are you, an octopus psychologist?"

"Twenty yards to go!"

"Oh? What, you haven't figured it out yet?"

"...Figured what out?"

"Fifteen yards! They're going to pass behind the building!"

"We'll talk later. Dammit, you better be right about this!" Shirley snarled, crouching in preparation to jump through the window.

Time left: five minutes.

"They went in!" Clarence shouted as soon as she could no longer see them through the binoculars.

"Goddammit!" Shirley swore, then launched.

Though the skis did sink into the snow, she forcefully worked her arms and legs back and forth, which kept her sliding forward.

"She's so fast! I want those!" Llenn marveled, clutching the M12S.

"You shouldn't envy other people's toys," noted Fukaziroh. The girl who'd been doing nothing but building a doghouse had just reproached her.

Shirley left two parallel tracks on the snow behind her as she went. After ten yards, she hadn't been shot at. After twenty yards, she was still in the clear.

M started blasting the PPSh-41 again from the window in order to draw the sniper's attention toward himself. He fired wildly at the building a thousand feet away.

Shirley covered thirty yards.

The enemy did not fall for M's diversion. They avoided him and fired at Shirley. Llenn could see the bullet line heading for the other woman—but before she could shout out a warning, Shirley fell onto her side. Sudden turns were tough in skis, so that was the best way to dodge an attack.

The gunshot rang out across the field, but the snow absorbed most of the sound; the merest of echoes came from the building. Shirley's hit points weren't changing. She had dodged the shot.

"Yesss!" Llenn cheered, right as something roared overhead.

That had to be Tohma. It was an instant counterattack as soon as she'd spotted their location. Another shot. Then another. That was to keep the sniper from popping back up.

In one swift motion, Shirley shook loose the snow covering her and used the poles and her sheer arm strength to get back on her feet.

Amazing!

You really had to know your way around snow to exhibit that kind of body control. As a Hokkaido native, Llenn understood this. Where did Shirley live in real life?

The sniper pushed off again with cheers at her back.

"You got this, partner!" screamed Clarence.

"Goooo!" yelled Llenn.

Pitohui, thankfully, said nothing that might upset her.

After Tohma's fourth shot, her spotter, Anna, announced to the group, "Hit! I saw a flash of red effects!"

"Yes!" Llenn cheered.

But Pitohui commented "Earlier, I said they'd all climb up the stairs, but now I think some of them might come back" with all the nonchalance of someone realizing it was nearly time for lunch.

"Goddammit!" Shirley screamed. She had about eighty yards to go. She was pushing along even harder, the spitting image of a cross-country skier in the last leg of the race before the goal.

You can do it, Shirley! You can do it, Shirley! You can do it, Shirley! You can do it, Shirley!
You can do it, Shirley!

Llenn felt as though she were cheering on an athlete at the Olympics. And her devotion must have worked because Shirley safely cleared the remaining distance.

And when she reached her objective, the sticklike building that was their final destination, a blue explosion followed.

The blast diameter of a grand grenade was sixty-something feet at maximum. That was easily large enough to envelop an entire side of the narrow edifice, before even taking into account that Shirley had five of those explosives. They went off in a chain reaction, the blue orb bulging larger and larger as it tore away the exterior wall, reaching up to the third floor.

The force of the eruption shot flurries of snow outward, obscuring Llenn's view of the structure. Several seconds later, while the detonation was still rumbling along, the snow suddenly cleared. She could make out a crater on the building.

It was still standing, but the bottom three stories looked like ice cream that had been scooped out by a spoon. At its thinnest, the building had maybe 20 percent of its width left—just six feet.

But... it's still not falling? Llenn worried—and immediately received her answer as the remainder crumbled.

The tall, tall tower lost its perfect straightness, then tilted, slowly picking up momentum as it fell toward their group.

“Yeep?” She backed away, trying to run.

“Have no fear. It’s not tall enough,” said Fukaziroh.

“Oh, right.”

Llenn stopped and watched the tremendous collapse play out instead. They were 150 yards away from the edifice, which had only ninety yards left of its height. But even though they knew it wouldn’t reach them, they were terrified seeing it implode in their direction.

“Eeesh...”

“Wa-hyo-yooo!” gurgled Clarence cryptically.

“This is scary,” admitted Sophie.

The structure plummeted sideways toward everyone—except for Shirley. When it struck the ground, it blasted the deep snow clean in another brief storm. The flakes and particles even flew into the office building where the team waited.

“Bwaaah!”

It blanketed their front halves in white. Despite the cushion of the snow, the sound and vibration of the crash were intense. The heavy desks rattled and jumped around.

After ten seconds or so, it was calm again. “Pff!” Llenn spat snow out of her mouth and beheld a perfectly toppled building.

The graphical cost of calculating and displaying the complete destruction of such a tall

building had to be overkill, so it was still totally intact, just lying on its side, embedded in the snow. That would be inconceivable in real life, but this was a game. About 80 percent of the thirty-foot-wide rooftop was visible above the powder, about two hundred feet away.

It was impossible to tell from here what might have happened to the monsters that had been rushing up the stairs—but they probably weren’t okay.

“Now we only have to rush over there!” Llenn exclaimed. There was still 3:50 left, so they could even take their time getting to the building.

But Pitohui crushed that hope of hers.

“No, the goal’s moved.”

“Huh?”

“That’s not the tallest building anymore.”

“What? Whaaaaat?” Llenn gasped, looking up at her. *Is that even possible?*

“Correct. I’m grateful that you listened carefully to my explanation,” spoke Suuzaburou for the first time in several minutes.

“So the *next* tallest building, which is now the tallest, is the goal. Meaning that one!” Pitohui boldly exclaimed, pointing at a building two hundred yards to the southwest. It looked ten floors high, or approximately 130 feet tall.

“We’re going there, then? But...”

Time remaining: three and a half minutes.

“We won’t... make it?”

Six hundred feet through the snow and over a hundred feet of stairs.

The climb would be doable with fifty seconds to spare. If she had solid ground to run on, Llenn could have sprinted six hundred feet in less than thirty seconds.

But with the snow going up to her chest, there was absolutely no way she could cover

that much ground in two and a half minutes. Even if M carried her piggyback. It just wasn't happening.

"Oh no, it's all overrr..." she wailed as SHINC let out heavy sighs of frustration.

"It's only over when you give up," noted Fukaziroh sagely, patting Llenn on the back.

She spun around, thinking about what kind of comeback to throw out, when Fukaziroh handed her something. "Here's your toy."

It was a collection of parts that she'd used her incredible strength to pry loose from the pipe-frame chairs. She'd bent the metal into elongated circles, stuck the seats in the middle, and then tied ropes over the top to hold things in place.

In other words, they were a pair of DIY snowshoes. Just the device she needed to walk over the snow.

Llenn had never used snowshoes—but Karen had. They'd gone walking over the snow in them on outdoor events several times back home.

"Fuka, I love you!"

"I know."

CHAPTER 6
Hunting Dragons
—The Fourth Ordeal I—



CHAPTER 6

HUNTING DRAGONS

—THE FOURTH ORDEAL I—

“Congratulations, everyone. You have completed the third ordeal,” Suuzaburou announced, 130 feet below Llenn.

She’d raced across the snow with her new snowshoes, then blazed up the stairs with inhuman speed onto the roof, where there was simply a door standing in the empty air, like the Anywhere Door from that famous cartoon. She walked through the frame, and that was that.

It was now 12:58:42.

They were warped from the blinding snowfield to a dark, nondescript place. It looked like the standby area from Squad Jam, right before the event started and after you died.

Light began to take shape before Llenn’s eyes, and her eleven teammates steadily appeared around her. They were all there.

Yeah, Llenn, way to go, you’re the best, you did awesome, our hero.

Through the praises and compliments, she walked over to Shirley, who’d been temporarily dead for the last few minutes. “Thanks. You helped us win,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” Shirley even seemed to smile a little bit. “I couldn’t move from that spot, but I watched you go. You’re from a snowy area, aren’t you?”

“Hey, we’re not supposed to talk about real life... but yes.”

“I was impressed.”

“Same thing for your skiing.”

“No biggie.”

For a brief moment, there was a glimmer of friendship between the two.

"All right, enough flirting," interjected Pitohui, who always knew how to ruin a moment. You couldn't blame Shirley for being annoyed at that one. "Doggy wants to say something."

Llenn turned toward Suuzaburou, who was in Fukaziroh's arms at the moment.

"The fourth ordeal is approaching, everyone. It will begin in five minutes."

Llenn checked her wristwatch. It was exactly one o'clock.

"Your equipment has all been returned to you, so make use of this time to prepare for battle again. Your hit points have been restored as well."

"It's true! Yahoo!" cheered Clarence, who'd been severely injured earlier.

The whole group waved their left hands to get into their menus, including Llenn. When she saw the window that appeared, she heaved a sigh of relief internally. *There they are! Whew!*

P-chan, the Vor-chans, and Kni-chan were all there in her inventory, including the magazine pouches for her ammo. She selected EQUIP ALL, as always, and then she was properly outfitted for battle again. Grabbing the P90 out of the air where it waited, she cradled it to her chest. "There, there... I've missed you so much, P-chan..."

She stroked the curve of the grip tenderly. Llenn was the only one fondling her gun like this.

Freshly retrieved from storage, the firearms were not loaded. Each member prepared their weapons with their respective ammo, creating a symphony of metallic clicking and sliding that filled the dark space.

Once it died down, the group had regained its fangs and was ready to do combat again. They had a hungry look in their eyes—but the timer had over four minutes remaining.

"Should we sit take a breather?" asked Tanya.

"Yeah," replied Anna.

Twelve people and one dog sat right on the ground. Time to relax.

"Hey, Pitohui?" asked Shirley, pointing her legs straight out and sticking the butt of the R93 Tactical 2 between her thighs.

"What is it?"

"Since we have time, I've got to ask you now. What did you mean when you said I hadn't 'figured it out' about the twelve monsters earlier?"

That was right—they'd been talking about that before Shirley's suicide attack. What was the answer? Llenn listened in, curious.

"What? Are you being serious, Shirley?" asked Clarence, of all people.

"Huh?" Her mouth fell open. "What...? You figured it out?"

Clarence's handsome face wore a skeptical expression, as though the answer should have been obvious.

"All those monsters were players, right?"

"Whut?" "Huh?"

Shirley and Llenn gasped in unison.

"Wha—?" "Hmm?"

As for SHINC, they were split between two identical reactions, three apiece. Everyone was stunned.

"What?! Hang on; are you saying nobody else figured it out...?"

And no one was more stunned than Clarence.

"Very sharp, Clare. How'd you figure it out?" asked Pitohui, confirming that she was correct. Shirley decided to listen to her partner's answer, as did Llenn and SHINC.

As for Fukaziroh, she'd fixed up her hair with the knife hairpin and was rubbing Suuzaburou again. "There you go, awww, who's a sweetie, who's a cutie pie?"

"How? I dunno, there were lots of weird things, weren't there? If we were supposed to be dealing with regular enemy monsters, they could have simply interfered with us getting through the door in a couple ways. So why would they be on the other side, rushing for the same goal? And searching for weapons like us? Why would they set up such a weirdly specific system?"

Those are some very good questions, Llenn agreed.

"Also," Clarence continued, "they didn't fight like monsters at all. The enemy was moving through the snow like us, hiding in buildings, watching our movements. They used that shield movement plan when there were exactly ten minutes left and kept one person back as a sniper. It all smelled really *human* to me. Well, it didn't smell, exactly."

"Hmmm, I see. Yes, yes. So that was what tipped you off. Uh-huh."

"Well... damn," said Shirley, metaphorically doffing her cap.

"Oooh, that's interesting," murmured Llenn.

"In other words, they were another group of players on the quest, just like us. The developers were having us compete directly against another team. They just tampered with the visual information so that we each looked like monsters to the other side."

It was a video game, after all; it would be easy to manipulate a player's graphical view. The other team would surely have seen Llenn and her companions as unsettling creatures, too.

"And that's why they made sure the starting time was so uniform," Boss realized, as did the rest of SHINC.

Except for Sophie, who wondered, "What were they going to do if there was an odd number of teams?"

Rosa answered, "I think one of the instances would've had three teams instead of two."

"Ohhh, I see."

"Honestly, I'm just baffled that you didn't figure it out, Llenn," noted Pitohui, to her great surprise.

"Huh? How come?"

Now it was Pitohui's turn to be surprised. "How come...? Oh! Oh, I get it!"

"Yes?"

"Llenn, when you won SJ1, you didn't actually *read* the signed books written by the sponsor of the event, did you?" Pitohui said.

Llenn was completely taken aback by the sudden new direction of the conversation.
"Uh... yeah? I didn't..."

"Honesty is good. Well, that makes sense, then."

"Why?"

The sponsor for SJ1, SJ3, and SJ4 was a clinically gun-obsessed writer in his fifties. He'd sent a full signed set of his books to the winner of the events as a prize. Zaskar had delivered a large box to Karen's house because she'd had to include her address in her account registration.

She did not read the books. But it seemed rude to sell signed copies to a used bookshop, so instead, she left them to rot in a cabinet somewhere. She knew she'd have to get rid of them eventually.

Still, it was humiliating that Pitohui could correctly assume her behavior in this regard. Llenn asked, "What do those novels have to do with this quest...?"

"The situation is identical."

"Meaning?"

"The battles that crappy writer depicted in his books are extremely similar to what we've experienced in this quest so far. The first ordeal with unlimited ammo? It's basically exactly like his short story about people trapped in a gun store on a big intersection, where they have to escape from a swarm of zombified cats and dogs. That one's called 'Our Crossroads Strategy: Clean Up the Petting Horde.'"

“Oh...”

I never would have known that, since I didn't read the books. Also, what's up with that title? Llenn thought.

“The next ordeal is exactly the same setup as his masochistic novel about soldiers who turn immortal and participate in excruciating engagements against a robot army from the future. That one's called *The Ultimate Agony! Aaahhh!* There wasn't a Johnny Seven in the novel, but I recall that, in the afterword, he mentions that he won one in an online auction, except that they told him 'We cannot ship to Japan,' so he had to give up on it.”

“Oh...”

I never would have known that, since I didn't read the books. And what an awful title, Llenn thought.

“And the ordeal we just overcame was the same as a short story he wrote that people hated for being a rip-off of a famous battle-royale game. It's about prospective employees who have to engage in a survival game for the chance to earn a job in the future. That one's called 'Death Motive: A War That Tests Your Mettle.' In that story, it turns out the enemy robot soldiers are actually other rivals for the job. Once you beat everyone else, the survivor gets the position.”

“Oh...”

I never would have known that, since I didn't read the books. This guy really has no idea how to name his stuff, Llenn thought.

“Anyway, Pito, if you realized all these things, you should have mentioned it earlier.”

“She mentioned it right now,” interrupted Anna, the blond sniper. Pitohui's knowledge seemed to have impressed her. At least from what you could discern with those sunglasses cloaking her eyes.

“It's pretty clear that the author wrote the scenario for this quest,” said M.

“Probably,” agreed Pitohui. “I bet he's watching us tackling his battle ideas and grinning like an idiot right now.”

From the back, Boss asked, “Can you predict the next ordeal, then?”

“Nope, no way. That hack has *so many* short stories. I think he just likes writing about weird situations he comes up with. But maybe I’ll recognize it once the trial starts.”

“Still, we can use that to our advantage.”

“Maybe.”

“But, Pito,” Llenn asked, “they’re getting tougher and tougher, so it’ll probably be real hard, right...?”

“Exactly. What do you think, Llenn? Be honest.”

“Sounds fun! I’m ready to kick ass!”

“That’s my Llenn!”

“Heh-heh-heh! Wait, no, I’m not yours!” she protested, right as the teleportation happened.

It was 1:05.

Llenn opened her eyes and saw a wasteland.

Hard-packed brown earth stretched to the horizon, peppered with a random assortment of boulders in various sizes. It looked like they were reusing the terrain data from the final battle of SJ1.

“It’s so nostalgic,” Llenn murmured.

“Yeah,” agreed Boss. This was the place where their friendship had begun.

Suuzaburou announced, “I will now explain the premise of the fourth ordeal. Defeat that.”

“Defeat what?” Llenn wondered.

"That!" yelled Sophie. Her burly arm was pointing skyward. The spot was beneath the sun, so that made it south, about a thousand feet off. Something was materializing against the clear red horizon.

Particles of bluish-green light were appearing, floating gently up, then rapidly coalescing into a single point, where they formed a shape...

"Huh?"

Several seconds later, it was still forming.

Llenn and the other eleven watched as the particles gathered, and gathered, and gathered, and gathered, gathered, gathered some more.

"Is it still going?!" she shouted. The amalgamation of light seemed to hear her complaint and turned a dull red.

Now its shape was clear.

It was a dragon.

Long neck, large head, and a huge mouth. A trunk with four short legs and bat-like wings that weren't very large. A long, snakelike tail. It was none other than a classic European dragon.

And it was a machine.

The body was metallic, with smooth sides that shone a faded red. Armor-like sliding plates protected movable parts like its neck, and its limb joints were exposed.

An outline of the beast had formed, but it was still growing. More and more motes of light accumulated as it expanded outward, slowly rotating sideways and showing off its full size.

Gigantic monsters existed in *GGO* in the form of dungeon and quest bosses, but this creature was new. Its design had an unfinished quality. Was it a rejected model, like what had appeared in the most recent Squad Jam?

"What's that thing? A mecha-dragon?" Clarence muttered.

"It has no particular moniker," Suuzaburou answered faithfully.

That was actually a rather important point. Whether they were big bosses or random wimps, monsters had names, and having them displayed when you recognized that a creature was an enemy was a staple of the RPG experience.

Their names should have a hit point bar below it, too, so players could learn how much longer it would take to beat it and gauge the effectiveness of their attacks—or alternately, determine when they needed to give up and make a break for it.

This creature's lack of a name made it seem lazily slapped together, but maybe there was a reason for that. What if it didn't have a hit point bar, either? That would make the fight really rough...

Sensing the group's worry, Suuzaburou explained, "Once you've attacked it, the remaining hit points will appear."

Oh, that's good, Llenn thought, relieved.

"So there's no name? Let's just call it Mecha-Dragon, then!" Clarence decided. To the twelve players present, at least, it was officially Mecha-Dragon. Nobody complained because it was pretty easy to say.

It's so huge, though! Llenn gaped as the mechanical monster grew even larger.

"My God. How big is it...?" Boss asked.

Tohma peered through her Dragunov's scope. "Can you tell how far away it is?"

Llenn pulled out her monocular, aimed it at Mecha-Dragon, and pressed the button. The digital distance readout delivered a number.

"One thousand and fifty feet to the torso!" she reported.

"*Khorosho!*" replied Tohma, using the distance sights on her scope lens. She thought for three seconds, then answered, "By my rough estimation... the torso length is thirty-three feet!"

That meant the tail was about the same. The neck and head seemed around fifty feet. Which meant...

"A hundred and fifteen feet!" Llenn gasped.

It could sit end to end in a school pool, and its tail would still spill out. The width of the monster's torso was a good fifteen feet at the widest.

"That's huge. So where's the weak spot? The eyes? Or the scales?" Clarence asked the dog.

Suuzaburou quickly responded, "I have not been given that information."

"That's what they *told* you to say, right?"

"I'll leave that up to your imagination," the dog insisted.

"Hey! Stop picking on Suuzaburou!" cried Fukaziroh. They weren't picking on him.

The pooch continued, "If all of your health is depleted, you will be permanently removed from the quest and returned to Glocken. Be careful."

That meant death was an actual threat now. Vigilance was the name of the game.

"Your time limit is twenty-one minutes. The ordeal ends at one thirty. You cannot proceed to the next trial without beating it. Best of luck."

The timer appeared in the upper-right corner again and displayed twenty-one minutes. It ticked down to 20:59.

The mecha-dragon summoning had finally finished. There was no more light gathering around it, it had stopped rotating, and its pale eyes opened.

Still floating, it slowly reared its head, opened its large mouth, and shrieked, "*Graaah!*" The screech took a second to reach them.

The enormous red monster glided down toward the ground until it went out of sight behind the boulders. The huge cloud of dust and the shaking of the earth that followed told them it had landed. Again, it took a second for the *whump* to reach them.

"So we have to beat that... but how?"

"Don't ask other people to do your job for you, Llenn. You've got to use your twin

weapons of ‘pink’ and ‘speed’ to go give that beastie a polite greeting. I’ll back you up,” said her friend warmly, holding grenade launchers in both hands.

“Fuka,” Llenn murmured, touched.

“Then make sure it targets you and run like hell. While it’s squashing you like a bug, the rest of us will take it out. Your noble sacrifice will never be forgotten. The days will be long without you, my friend...”

“So you coming with me?” asked Llenn, wishing she could punish herself for feeling emotional for even a second.

“Here it comes!” Boss shouted. Llenn abandoned her little comedy routine with Fukaziroh and stared in the direction of Mecha-Dragon.

The rumbling and booming were getting closer. It was obviously charging in their direction with great force.

“Split up!” M commanded. The group bolted out of the way.

There was no way to know where to go when something so huge was coming for you. But if all twelve of them were grouped together in one clump, it would be one strike, you’re out. They needed to fan out as wide as possible to minimize potential damages.

Don’t come this way! Please don’t come this way! Llenn prayed, knowing it would mean one of the others getting chased instead.

With her extreme agility, she quickly made her way left to the north, outpacing the others. She was used to sprinting around this environment. As long as she kept her eye on the nearest rock in the direction she was heading and got out of its way early, she could keep moving at nearly full speed.

Then a small black shape slipped past her.

The dog! It’s so fast!

Suuzaburou’s ears were folded down, the wind pressure buffeting his fur back as he passed her. She did her best to give chase; if she stayed with the mutt, she should be safe. The guide wasn’t going to die when there was another ordeal after this.

The rumbling grew fiercer. Llenn glanced to her right and saw Mecha-Dragon's massive body crush a boulder to dust as it pursued the others. It had turned a bit to the left, so Llenn knew that her direction was safe for the time being.

"Oh no! Sophie, look out!"

Sophie and Rosa, the slowest members of SHINC, were in its path.

They're not going to make it...!

She was certain they were going to die. She stopped to gape at the giant creature.

Then Mecha-Dragon bore down on the two women...

"Huh?"

And jumped over them.

The sound of its heavy feet hitting the earth stopped, replaced by the howling of its massive form displacing air.

Its tiny wings, however, were just for show. The creature jumped twenty or so feet in the air, launching past Sophie and Rosa, then landed sixty feet from them. The rocking of the earth was tremendous.

They're alive, Llenn thought, relieved.

"Oh no! Everyone, after it! Full power!" Pitohui shouted into the comm. Adding that nugget of information to what she was watching, Llenn understood.

Mecha-Dragon was running away for all it was worth. It was making an escape. That long, thick tail was getting smaller and smaller as it waved back and forth.

Clarence yelled, "It's a runaway boss!"

"Is that even a thing?" asked Shirley.

"It is now!"

"Okay..."

So they had to chase the boss. They couldn't beat it if they didn't chase it, and they couldn't complete the quest if they didn't beat it. Twenty minutes and four seconds to go.

Llenn began to bolt after the waving tail, shouting, "Don't run away! *I'm* your target!"

She fired with the P90. The tiny bullets flew toward the huge beast a hundred yards away. Since it was so large, they probably hit their mark. She thought she saw sparks on its red tail.

Then, above the upper-right portion of the dragon's body, a little green 100 popped up. That was probably its health percentage. Hadn't gone down at all. Not in the slightest. Not a smidge.

"Llenn and Tanya, you latch on to it! Don't lose sight of that thing!" Pitohui commanded.

"Roger!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Whether anyone else could catch up or not, Llenn knew what she had to do. She dashed for all she was worth after the gigantic beast. Since it smashed through the rock towers as it went, the ground was covered with fresh rubble, but that was easy enough to avoid or jump over. All she had to do was focus on not tripping.

Behind her, Tanya followed. Llenn's top speed was slightly higher, so it was only inevitable that she would steadily increase the gap ahead of Tanya.

The others were trying to keep up as best they could, but Clarence complained, "What do we do? How are we supposed to chase that thing?" She had a point.

"Hey, Pitohui! You remember the story yet?!" bellowed Shirley. For a moment, she pointed the R93 Tactical 2 and its exploding bullet at Mecha-Dragon but decided to hold off on firing. It would be a waste of good ammo.

"Which one would it be...? There are just so many... But I don't really remember anything specific..." Pitohui grumbled.

"Oh! I think I know it!" called Anna, the blond in sunglasses. She sounded more like her real-life counterpart because she was remembering something from the real

world. “I like reading, too, and when you were describing the stories earlier, it reminded me! This situation is a lot like that author’s newest novel! It’s called *Lord of the Wheels!*”

“Really? Then I guess it wasn’t in the prize set. No wonder I don’t know it,” Pitohui admitted.

“That title sounds like it’s ripe for a lawsuit,” opined M. Clarence murmured in agreement.

“What kind of story is it, Anna?” Boss asked, picking up the slack.

In the meantime, the dragon was rapidly thudding away. The rest of the group wasn’t ever going to catch up to it at this rate. They just had to pray that Llenn and Tanya could overtake it and slow it down, but the pair certainly didn’t have the firepower to stop that thing. If things continued as expected, it was going to end up being a school relay race. They desperately needed a hint.

As she sprinted, Anna described the book.

“Basically, the tunnels underneath New York connect to an alternate world where mechanical monsters roam the wastelands. The American government secretly sends in vehicles, gas, and guns to bring back all kinds of chemicals you can’t obtain on Earth, so they get superrich. At the same time, two car thieves named Josh and Mary hide from the cops in their stolen car, which ends up getting shipped to the other world. But they’re not feeling sorry for themselves. They use their driving and shooting skills to beat a bunch of monsters, and it gets really exciting when—”

“Okay, thanks, Anna! That’s all I needed!” Pitohui shouted, cutting her off. “Everyone, stop! Stop! But not you, Llenn and Tanya! Everyone *else*, stop!”

Nine other players skidded to a halt, and Pitohui gave them their orders.

“There’s got to be vehicles hidden somewhere around here! Check the bigger rocks, every single one you can find!”

Time remaining: eighteen minutes.

Llenn spent two minutes at a dead sprint through the wasteland, keeping her eyes glued on Mecha-Dragon and listening to her teammates communicate.

“Found one!”

“Over here, too!”

“Oh yeah! What a haul!”

“Can you ride it?”

“No worries!”

That was Pitohui, Fukaziroh, Boss, Clarence, and Shirley, in that order.

It was clear to Llenn that her teammates had found some treasure in the form of vehicles, but there was no way to tell *what kind* of vehicles they were. And more importantly, something else was demanding her attention: Mecha-Dragon’s course.

After it appeared, it initially ran directly north toward them, but once they gave chase, it stopped going in a straight line. It was weaving erratically right and left, and she didn’t know if the others would be able to figure out which direction to pursue it from. The beast might have been large, but it was probably out of sight for them by this point.

The rough earth beneath them left no footprints. Maybe they could track the smashed boulders? Based on the dragon’s speed, the majority of the group had to be well over a mile apart by now.

“We’re all set! Where are you, Llenn?” asked Pitohui.

“How am I supposed to know?!?” she wailed. Up at the very top of her vision was a compass. “I’m running northwest right now! And before that... I was doing serpentines!”

“Uh-oh. And we can’t see your tracks...”

Llenn was afraid they were out of luck, but then she recalled the beginning of SJ3. She’d gotten lost without knowing how to get back and required the assistance of Fukaziroh and the others.

“How about if Fuka lobs a plasma grenade up, and you shoot it?”

An explosion that size would act like lighthouse. If Llenn told them the direction she saw it, they just had to add (or subtract) 180 degrees to know which way to head.

“Nope, no can do. We can’t waste a single grenade we might need against that monster,” Pitohui countered promptly.

“So what should I do, then?”

“We’ll handle the street signs!” crowed Boss. “Don’t miss any of them, Tanya!”

“Roger that!” acknowledged Tanya, who was following just behind Llenn.

Don’t miss what? Llenn wondered, slowing down so she could look over her shoulder as she ran. A ray of light hung low in the sky; it resembled a shooting star, except that it curved like a parabola, and it was a vivid orange. That was a bullet, a tracer round that fizzed with light in the rear.

“A little bit to the right!” called Tanya.

Then there was another light. But this one was a bullet line.

“Oh!” Despite her panic, Llenn worked it out. The game was designed so that bullet lines were always clearly visible, regardless of distance. The line passed directly overhead in a low arc.

“That’s the angle! You got it! At this rate, you might as well aim for Mecha-Dragon! From a good, healthy distance!” Tanya called out. The line stretched out farther, made contact with the bounding beast, then extended past it.

“Now!”

A moment later, an orange tracer round shot forth, erasing the red trail.

It seemed like it was going to hit Mecha-Dragon, but instead it struck the ground to the side of it, kicking up dust.

“That was so close!” Tanya lamented.

"Okay! Well, we got the direction at least!" shouted Boss.

That told Llenn that the shot she saw was from SHINC's Anti-M Ultimate Weapon, aka the M-Gun. Or more officially, the PTRD-41 antitank rifle.

It was a 14.5 mm-caliber monster. A bullet that large could fly over three miles if you didn't care about direction. So they'd aimed it like a flaming arrow, then used the bullet line to calibrate the monster's direction. Only an ultra-long-range sniper rifle could display its bullet line like that.

"That was amazing," Llenn murmured, putting her feet back into top gear.

"You think so? We just copied you guys in SJ2," replied Tanya.

Sixteen and a half minutes left.

Fortunately, Mecha-Dragon's speed was just a bit slower than Llenn's, so she was able to keep it in view. She was pacing it well, staying in range, when she heard a high-pitched engine noise.

"Hey, good effort. Nice job tracking it."

A vehicle came roaring over with a plume of dust. It slowed down and parked to the left of Llenn.

"M! Pito!"

M was driving, and Pitohui sat in the passenger's seat.

It was a small but *tall* vehicle. The full length was a bit over ten feet, with a width of around five and a half feet. Its tiny chassis left room for only two seats side by side. There were no windows and no roof, just little doors and a metal pipe frame called a roll cage.

Additionally, the automobile had a height of six feet three inches, which was considerable. That was because the suspension connecting to the tires was extraordinarily long. Beneath the body was a good foot or so of space. It looked like a

turtle raised up on its tiptoes.

The color was faded here and there to match *GGO*'s aesthetic, but it had originally been a green-black combination. This wasn't your typical vehicle that got a license plate, but rather a small buggy designed for high-speed off-roading. Based on the seating arrangement, it could be classified as a side-by-side vehicle.

"There's a bed in the back. Can you jump on?"

"I'll try... Yaaa!"

Llenn leaped as hard as she could while sprinting. She landed in the flat, shallow space in the rear of the buggy. Naturally, you would never want to ride this thing with a person sitting there in real life.

"Nice job. Hold on tight!"

Llenn grabbed the frame and M jammed harder on the gas. The buggy began to lurch and hop, going faster and faster. Now it was moving at over fifty miles per hour.

Although the ground was rough, with the occasional rock strewn along the path, with such tall suspension and the buggy's good handling, the ride was quite steady despite the way the car seemed to wobble. Llenn wasn't scared of being thrown off at all.

While it moved at a significant pace, it was still easier to handle than the trikes from the last Squad Jam. Those had been truly terrifying.

"You found a really wild ride!" Llenn shouted, fighting to keep her face straight into the wind.

Pitohui replied, "A couple of these boulders are dummies, just balloons. They pop if you break them. And it's got a full tank!"

"This is the Kawasaki KRX 1000. It's the perfect car for a place like this," said M.

"Who cares about the name? Ugh! Men."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha. What about the others?"

"Turn around and see."

Doing as Pitohui said, she saw a number of other vehicles driving to the sides, trying to avoid the dust plume of the buggy.

One of them was a motorcycle. She couldn't tell the make, but she knew it was a large off-road bike with four headlights jutting from its front. Shirley was driving it, with Clarence riding behind her.

"A motorcycle! Cool!"

Llenn could neither ride motorcycles in real life nor in *GGO*, so she admired the way Shirley could handle it so gallantly. Even if she was terrible with a four-wheeler.

"That's a Yamaha Ténéré 700. A pretty simple, large off-roader. I'm noticing... lots of Japanese vehicles here."

"Who cares about the name and other trivia? Ugh! Men."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha."

The motorcycle had a higher speed than the buggy, so it easily passed them by.

"Later!"

A further glance revealed Fukaziroh, riding the exact same buggy. There was no one in the passenger seat with her.

"Yoo-hoo, Llenn. I caught up," she said, beaming. She had a driver's license in the real world and also played lots of racing games, so her handling was impressive.

"Yoo-hoo, Fuka. Can I join you?" Llenn asked, preparing to leap over.

"Sorry, babe! On a date with my boyfriend. Some other time?"

As she drove up, Llenn noticed that there was, in fact, a little black dog sitting in the other seat.

"Oh... okay..."

Another one of the buggies came along next, with Sophie at the wheel and Boss as the passenger. Anna sat in the rear with her feet sticking out, and Tanya had hopped on to

stand next to her, clutching the frame. Since there wasn't much room in there to begin with, it seemed quite cramped.

Sophie looked uncomfortable driving the car, but she was doing her best.

Where are Rosa and Tohma?

Llenn looked around and spied them riding a vehicle other than a buggy. They were all the way in the back of the formation, in a sidecar motorcycle. That meant it was a motorcycle with an extra attachment on its right side that could seat another person in an asymmetrical fashion. It was painted a faded rouge.

Tohma was commanding the bike, with its round front light, classic style, and wide handlebars, while Rosa sat in the hack, or the sidecar portion. She'd propped the PKM against the frame so she could shoot ahead or to the right as they rode.

"A sidecar! Amazing!"

Llenn couldn't drive, so she only knew sidecars for their reputation of being difficult to maneuver. It was certainly in the spirit of *GGO* to not give the player any assistance maneuvering the machine, yet Tohma was admirably keeping it under control.

"That's a Russian sidecar, the Ural. They started copying German sidecars in the war but kept updating it over the years. You can still buy them new. Plus, it has two-wheel drive on the sidecar side, which means you can drive one with a normal auto license in Japan."

"Who cares about the name and history and drive type and licensing specifications? Ugh! Men," Pitohui ranted, completing the trifecta. "Anyway, no wonder Tohma's got it down. The Crushin' Russian."

That reminded Llenn that Milana was playing as Tohma. She'd lived in Japan a long time and spoke fluent Japanese, but she was still a beautiful Russian blond, no doubt about that.

Her car-loving father had also taught her how to drive back home. She was the only woman in SHINC who could handle a manual transmission. In all likelihood, her father had raised her to operate the vehicle, insisting that if you couldn't drive a Russian sidecar motorcycle, you weren't fit to be Russian, or something like that. That had to be it. Okay, maybe it wasn't, but she sure looked cool right now.

"All right! Then let's chase down this scaredy-cat boss!" Llenn cheered triumphantly, as the countdown hit fifteen minutes.

"We don't have much time, so once we reach it, we just gotta blitz it. And pay close attention to where your hit lands and how much damage you do! There's got to be a weakness somewhere!" Pitohui commanded. The rest of the group chimed in.

"You can do it, Shirley! Let's land the first harpoon!"

"Like I need you to tell me!"

Despite having the two riders, the vehicle in the lead was the motorcycle with the best combination of weight and skill behind it. They approached the rear-left leg of Mecha-Dragon, which was bounding along, and began to pace behind it at a distance of just thirty feet.

The digital speedometer revealed that they were going thirty-fives miles per hour. So that was the monster's top running speed.

Each flick of the tail, which hovered aboveground, swept dangerously close to the motorcycle.

"Hey, Shirley! We're too close! The tail's scaring me!"

"Shut up! Be willing to die! Now shoot!"

"This is partner abuse," Clarence grumbled, sticking out the AR-57 with her right hand and holding on to the bike with her left for dear life. She fired the gun on automatic, its high-pitched rattle clattering off the dusty wasteland.

At this range, she couldn't miss. Sparks flew from the dragon's tail here and there.

"We hit the tail! No good! No damage at all!"

Like Llenn's first shot, it had done no damage. The meter was still at 100, of course.

"Can you hit its legs?" Pitohui asked.

"I'll try!"

Clarence gave it another shot, this time on the rear-left leg.

Despite its joint being exposed, neither a well-placed shot nor a series of blasts could scratch the creature's hit points by even a single percent.

"Nothing doing! I'm out of ammo!" Clarence barked; she'd drained fifty shots. Consequently, Shirley had to drift farther away from Mecha-Dragon to safely slow down, so her partner could use both hands on the reload.

"We're up next!"

"Raaah!"

That was Rosa and Tohma, raring to go. Tohma pulled the motorcycle sidecar up behind Mecha-Dragon, and Rosa blasted the PKM through the dust that had been kicked up.

With the support of the hack holding it steady, the machine gun maintained a high precision position. Every one of its shots struck the beast's tail, body, and rear legs, producing a shower of sparks that burst like fireworks in an impressive display.

"Even that's no good?!"

After nearly a hundred powerful 7.62×54 mm R rounds, they had done no actual damage. The number still read 100.

"Okay, we're up next!"

The buggy with four SHINC members, including Boss, rushed over in a hurry.

"Sophie, get us in ahead of it!"

"You got it!"

The eyes of SHINC's driver were bloodshot from the sheer nerves required to maneuver the automobile, but she jammed on the gas and swerved out of the way of rocks as the buggy overtook Mecha-Dragon on the left side. They'd gotten around it in front of its vicious face.

"We're gonna drop grand grenades! Look out in the rear!" Boss warned, producing the

large plasma grenades from her inventory and handing some to Anna and Tanya. The three bombs were set to a four-second timer.

“Ready! Ready! Ready! And... now!”

The gymnastics team lived up to their reputation. Their timing on the throws was perfectly coordinated.

Three watermelons hit the ground and rolled away into the distance, and Mecha-Dragon ran directly over them. Perfectly timed at four seconds, right as the grand grenades were about to pass under the huge red body—*Ba-ching!*

The monster flashed. Its body blazed as though it were a lightbulb burning itself out.

“Huh...?”

It stepped on the grand grenades and kept running, *stomp-stomp-stomp*.

“Uh... what...?” Boss muttered.

“Hey, what’s wrong? They didn’t explode. Did you get the timer wrong?” wondered Pitohui.

“I think... it must have deactivated them,” Boss muttered, as she couldn’t think of any other explanation.

“An electromagnetic pulse,” mused M, who had witnessed the flash. “It fried the plasma grenades’ electric fuses with an EM pulse. The flash was just there to sell the effect to us.”

“Kahhh! Damn, that’s a mecha for you! They do things no ordinary Japanese dragon can!” complained Pitohui. The fact was, however, that there were no dragons in Japan, ordinary or otherwise.

“Dammiiiit!” screamed Boss, who’d been certain this would work. Her face was so screwed up with rage that it would send small children to tears if they saw it. The good part, however, was that the EMP hadn’t knocked out the buggy’s electronics. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to drive.

“Is this supposed to mean... we can’t use plasma grenades on it at all?” Llenn asked.

"So it seems," M was forced to conclude.

"Aaaargh! What the hell, man? Screw this!" raged Fukaziroh. "That messes up my years-long plan to hit that sucker with Rightony and Leftonia, splatter its guts into the dust, then serve Suuzaburou the finest sirloin steak I can cut off of it!"

That was the first Llenn had ever heard of this plan. It was utterly inessential information.

The remaining time was 13:05.

Tanya said, "Anna mentioned this was a scenario from the author's story, right? Were there any hints in there on how to beat the meownster?"

She dropped into cat speak every now and then, but she could get away with it because it was cute.

Yeah! That'd be purrfect! Llenn thought. The rest of the group waited with bated breath for the answer.

"The truth is: I couldn't tell you more back then," Anna admitted, disappointing them all, "because the book isn't out yet!"

Huh?

They were stunned.

"I'm sorry, Pitohui. I should have interrupted to tell you this before. The novel's been delayed month after month. The only reason I'd known what I'd mentioned earlier is because it was on the sales blurb!"

No way! Llenn was shocked and disappointed they wouldn't unearth a good hint out of it.

"Ahhh, I get it! So that's what's going on! Damn that writer!" roared Pitohui, who seemed to have understood his plan.

"What does it mean?" Llenn asked.

She spelled it out to the group. "If it's been delayed, it's because he hasn't finished

writing it! He's out of ideas! So he's going to use this fight to give him inspiration to finish the thing!"

"Ohhh..."

That explained it. And the source of Pitohui's anger.

M deftly steered the buggy around a large boulder. "It's like using a tabletop RPG as the groundwork for your novel. You're certainly going to get a wider range of ideas than if they all popped out of one person's head."

"Yep! He's going to use all our ingenuity for his own personal benefit. He figures whatever team survives this long is going to be good enough that he can pit them against an impossible foe, and they'll find just the trick to defeat it!"

"That's simply ghastly, Pito," added Llenn, though she was smiling as she said it. "So let's take this thing out in such a ridiculously over-the-top way that either his readers think he's full of it, or his editor turns him down for not being realistic enough!"

She'd managed to pump up the team's morale with that speech, but at the same time, she couldn't help but wonder, *And how exactly are we going to do that?* Fortunately, she was shrewd enough not to ask that out loud.

How *do* you beat a mechanical dragon anyway?

Remaining time: eleven and a half minutes.

Buggies, motorcycles, and sidecars kept pace alongside the bounding beast as their drivers brainstormed a way to take it down.

Clarence was the first to propose an idea.

"Hey, Shirley! You have that long rope, right? Let's tie up its legs and bring it down! They did that to this big elephantry robot in an old sci-fi movie once!"

"If we're thinking of the same movie... they were flying planes, right? On a motorcycle, it's just going to drag us behind it. But hey, it's bad form to give up on something before

trying it, so it's all you. Go ahead and take the bike, though I hate to give it up. Good luck."

"No way."

That was that.

"Could we try hitting it with a normal grenade? If we can at least make it stop, that might give us an opening," Rosa suggested.

"Ooh! And try it we shall!" Boss announced boldly, like a samurai. She prepared for another round of explosive attacks.

"Watch out in the rear! Yaaah!"

The same members tossed some Russian RGD-5 antipersonnel grenades overboard.

Llenn saw the trio of explosions near the enormous creature's legs. Black smoke erupted, followed by a *ba-ba-boom*.

"No good..."

It hadn't amounted to anything. A hand grenade could blow up a person, but it was totally inadequate for stopping a monster of this size.

Mecha-Dragon continued its inexorable charge, shaking the ground around it. Where was it heading?

"Could we use a grand grenade to create a huge hole in front of it?" Sophie wondered.

Interesting. That way it should blow up without the EM pulse interfering, right? Llenn thought.

"If there's a hole, it'll probably just jump over it or run around it," M countered. That made sense.

"Does someone want to try hopping onto it?" Boss asked.

"Hmmm, I don't know if that's going to work," speculated Pitohui. As the resident madwoman with the lightswords, she seemed like the best candidate. Leaping onto a

wildly moving object was inherently risky. If she misjudged her jump at this speed, then falling to the hard ground below would be enough to kill her. "It's not that I fear for my life, okay?" she added. "I would easily give up one or two lives for all of you."

Oh, so she's afraid of dying, Llenn realized.

"What's the weak point of a machine?" asked Tohma, driving the sidecar motorcycle.

"Like... moisture? A computer breaks if you dump water on it, right?" noted Rosa, who was seated in the sidecar.

"That might not be bad," responded Pitohui, actually optimistic for once. "But does anyone have any liquid?"

There was an awkward silence for several seconds.

Then Llenn raised her hand.

"Uh, me."

CHAPTER 7
Vanquishing Crabs
—The Fourth Ordeal II—



CHAPTER 7

VANQUISHING CRABS

—THE FOURTH ORDEAL II—

“Well, I’m shocked and kind of annoyed, but nice job today!”

“Hey, thanks!”

“Now let’s go— *Raaaaah!*”

Ten minutes remained. The moment the wristwatch displayed 1:20, with M driving the buggy, Pitohui hurled the cylindrical object with inhuman strength.

It was the thermos full of Llenn’s tea.

Then she pulled the M870 Breacher shotgun from her left side and blasted it. The buckshot punched a number of holes in the thermos in midair, spilling tea as it fell toward Mecha-Dragon’s head.

Brown liquid splashed onto its reddish cranium—and the beast screeched.

“Graaah!”

It was only a tiny splash on a small portion of Mecha-Dragon, but it swung its long neck back and forth in apparent agony, lost its balance, and fell over to the left.

“Yesss!”

Then the sideways body of the creature began to roll.

“Huh? M...! Look out!”

It barreled toward their buggy, clearly on purpose.

“Ah!”

M yanked left on the wheel. The automobile's center of gravity shifted hard to the right, and it eventually made a successful turn, rear wheels skidding, just as the long tail of the rolling creature bore down on them.

Nothing but red tail was visible overhead.

Uh, we might be dead.

Llenn was preparing for the worst when it whizzed past just above their heads. There had been barely inches to spare.

"Wowzers, that was a close one," commented Fukaziroh, who'd seen it all from behind. She braked gently to adjust; you had to be careful when there was a dog in the car.

Mecha-Dragon had stopped rolling and was now upturned on its back; off to its side, she noticed a new number.

Remaining hit point percentage... 50.

Various cheers and shouts of triumph rang out from the group.

Mecha-Dragon was stuck on its back, fat legs kicking helplessly in the air. Its stomach glowed red and dull.

"Eat this!"

The motorcycle sidecar was closest to its head, so they opened attack with the PKM. Sparks erupted from all over the target, but its hit points weren't dropping.

Yet when the bullets made contact with its head, there was movement. The 50 on the gauge pinged down to 49 after about ten shots.

"The head! It's working! We can grind it down!" Rosa reported.

Pitohui relayed her instructions to the group. "You heard that, everybody?! Aim for the head! Attack with the sun at your back!"

SHINC members were already advancing into proper formation to avoid a cross-fire situation, in which people attacking the same target from opposite sides accidentally shot one another past it.

Sophie stopped her car fifty yards to the south of the downed beast, and the team let loose. Boss fired the Vintorez from the passenger seat, and Anna and Tanya shot from the rear bed with their Dragunov and Bizon. Lastly, Sophie herself let go of the wheel and used the GM-94 to blast grenades.

A deluge of bullets struck the machine's red cranium, which turned orange with sparks. Grenades exploded on its surface. When they finished their magazines, they exchanged them for new ones, then shot, shot, and shot again.

"Grind it! Grind it down! We can do this!" encouraged Boss. The number was indeed dropping. It went to 45, then 43, then 40...

"Once you figure it out, it's kind of anticlimactic," mumbled Shirley, who stopped her motorcycle behind SHINC's buggy. She was going to pull her sniper rifle out of storage but decided it wasn't necessary.

"Do you really think it's just going to end like this, Shirley?" asked Clarence, holding her around the midriff from behind.

"Huh?"

"Big foes like this never get serious until they're under thirty percent."

"Clare's right. You might want to back up a bit, Boss," warned Pitohui, whose buggy was even farther away.

"No worries! We'll take it down ourselves!" replied Boss. She and her teammates continued blasting.

The overturned mecha-dragon craned its long neck and struggled, but the head was so large that it wasn't hard to keep wailing on it regardless. Its stamina number dropped under 35.

Is this really going to be the end of the ordeal? Are we getting through this? Llenn wondered. There was just over eight minutes left, plenty of time for them to finish it off at the current pace.

“Ah! It’s getting up!”

Nope, it wasn’t going to be that easy. The creature rolled over and promptly began to struggle to its feet right before SHINC. The number was 31.

“See, what did I say?”

“Get back!”

Sophie put the buggy in reverse, and Tohma did the same for the sidecar. The teammates stopped shooting, zooming away in their vehicles.

In the back, the duo on the regular motorcycle commented on this development.

“Ooh! That sidecar model can go in reverse!”

“Shirley, why are you getting distracted by that?”

Is Mecha-Dragon finally going to square off with us? How will it attack? Is there anything I can do with P-chan? Llenn wondered, clutching the buggy’s frame with her free hand while keeping the P90 aimed at its rising form...

“Huh? What? Whaaaat?”

The dragon ran off again.

There the beast went, thudding away across the wasteland.

“Are you kidding me?! All it’s going to do is turn tail?!” Llenn roared.

“I know; it’s disappointing. Especially for someone like you, who lives to shed the blood of everything that breathes on the battlefield.”

“I resent that remark!” she snapped back at Pitohui, not exactly denying her claims. If anything, it was a tacit agreement.

“I can’t believe this thing!” Boss seethed as well. No matter what they did to it, the creature just fled. Shifting from reverse to drive again, they resumed their pursuit of Mecha-Dragon, who was now down to 30 percent.

"Good grief." Shirley sighed, putting her hog into gear.

"Good grief." Fukaziroh sighed, taking her foot off the brake pedal.

The monster was actually faster now, closing in on fifty miles per hour. Their vehicles would have to hit highway speeds in order to close the gap.

About twenty seconds after starting the pursuit again, the rocks that had dotted the landscape all but disappeared. The same was true for the divots in the earth.

It was as if they were traveling across a brown sea. Before them lay nothing but hard earth underfoot that continued all the way to the horizon, absent a single feature.

"What basic-ass graphics! Did they skimp out on map space?!" Pitohui raged.

"Hey, it makes it easier to drive," M admitted. They might as well have been on asphalt. He could close his eyes and still go perfectly straight.

Llenn watched over the top of the buggy at SHINC's automobile and the sidecar motorcycle, fervently pursuing the giant beast two hundred yards ahead on a diagonal. They were like a swarm of orcas taking down a much larger whale.

Occasionally, a flash of light and sound would occur as they fired on its bobbing head. Bit by bit, the number on the side of Mecha-Dragon dropped by one or two points at a time.

Six minutes to go.

"Huh? Is it just going to end like this?" wondered Clarence, who was usually the last to pick up on things.

"Hang on, I see something. Up ahead on the horizon," murmured Fukaziroh lazily. She was driving on the right edge of their formation, the farthest in the back, to avoid all the dust plumes from the other vehicles.

Hmm? Letting the P90 drop on her sling, Llenn brought the monocular up to her eye. She scanned above the horizon.

"Euuuugh!" she exclaimed once she recognized the object in full detail.

"What?" demanded Pitohui from the front seat.

Llenn had no other option than to tell the plain truth.

"Another... mecha-dragon... A blue one! Coming *this* way!"

"I *knew* this thing wouldn't be that simple," frothed Clarence with excitement.

"Are you kidding me? What do we do now?" asked Boss, whose team was still busy attacking.

"We'll have to split apart for the moment," Pitohui ordered. SHINC obeyed. The buggy and sidecar drifted off to the left.

M turned to the right, and Shirley and Fukaziroh followed his lead.

Through the monocular, Llenn watched the red mecha-dragon race onward, directly toward its blue counterpart, which was close enough to make out with the naked eye and looked exactly the same, color aside.

More dust clouds kicked up behind the blue beast. Before Llenn could even home in on them with her monocular, Anna's scope did the job.

She reported, "More vehicles! Behind the blue one! The same buggies... five of them!"

"Huh? What does that mean?!" Llenn exclaimed.

But Pitohui seemed to have grasped the situation. "It's fairly obvious—"

Before she could say it, Suuzaburou interrupted.

"The victory conditions for this ordeal have been updated."

"The fourth ordeal has entered its second stage. The countdown clock will be reset."

In the upper right of her view, the countdown had stopped at 05:14. That was a welcome change, of course.

"Your requirements will remain the same. Please defeat the target you have labeled Mecha-Dragon."

"And what about the other one?" Llenn asked.

"There is no need to destroy anything other than the target. That is all from me. Good luck."

"All right. But what's that other one coming from the distance? And who's behind it?" Llenn asked, her mind swimming with questions.

Now Pitohui had the chance to say what she was mentioning earlier.

"Another team working on this quest, trying to defeat a different mecha-dragon. We've linked up with another group again."

"Ah, that makes sense..."

Two mechanical monsters, red and blue, rapidly converged.

The other one was going at the same speed, but because they were traveling toward each other, it created an optical illusion that made them look much faster.

They zoomed toward each other, seemingly about to collide, and just when it seemed unavoidable—they *did* collide.

The shock waves from the impact of the red and blue dragons felt like a heavyweight sumo bout. Their chests smashed and lifted upward with momentum, thrusting each of them dozens of feet into the air.

Once they hit the peak of their height, they flashed.

"Ah, that's bright!"

Everyone shut their eyes against the light.

When they could open their lids again, Llenn and the others beheld something new.

The mecha-dragons had fused in the sky.

"Huh? A crab...?"

Their tails intertwined so that the monsters had attached back to back. Then they combined into a single body, blue on the right and red on the left.

The rear legs had fused and were no longer visible. Their heads stretched luridly away from each other, flanking the body and opening their jaws wide, so that the entire form looked like a crab with two outstretched claws.

What had been their front legs jutted out to the left and right, so that they instead resembled the limbs of a crab. Just with two fewer on either side.

"If we have to call it something, I'd say it's a crab," Fukaziroh agreed.

"If we have to decide now, it's a crab," Pitohui agreed.

"Yep, it's a crab," M agreed.

"So what now? Do we stop saying Mecha-Dragon and switch to Mecha-Crab instead? It's harder to say," whined Clarence.

"Forget that! What about the other team?" Boss demanded, trying to get them off the topic of crustaceans. A rival team was taking part in the ordeal on five buggies. They were heading straight for Llenn and company.

"We'll pass by them for now. Don't slow down, or they might shoot us," Pitohui advised.

Boss asked, "Should we blast them?"

"Only if they fire first."

"Got it!" Boss complied.

After connecting together and becoming a crab, the Mecha-Dragons had landed back on the ground, allowing the group to race around the sides. The oncoming team was directly in view.

If they shoot, shoot back...

Llenn gripped the P90 harder but kept her finger off the trigger. Simply displaying a bullet line in *GGO* was a clear sign to your opponents that you intended to fight.

After a few tense seconds, another buggy of the same type passed by M's at high speed. The members of the opposing team did not shoot.

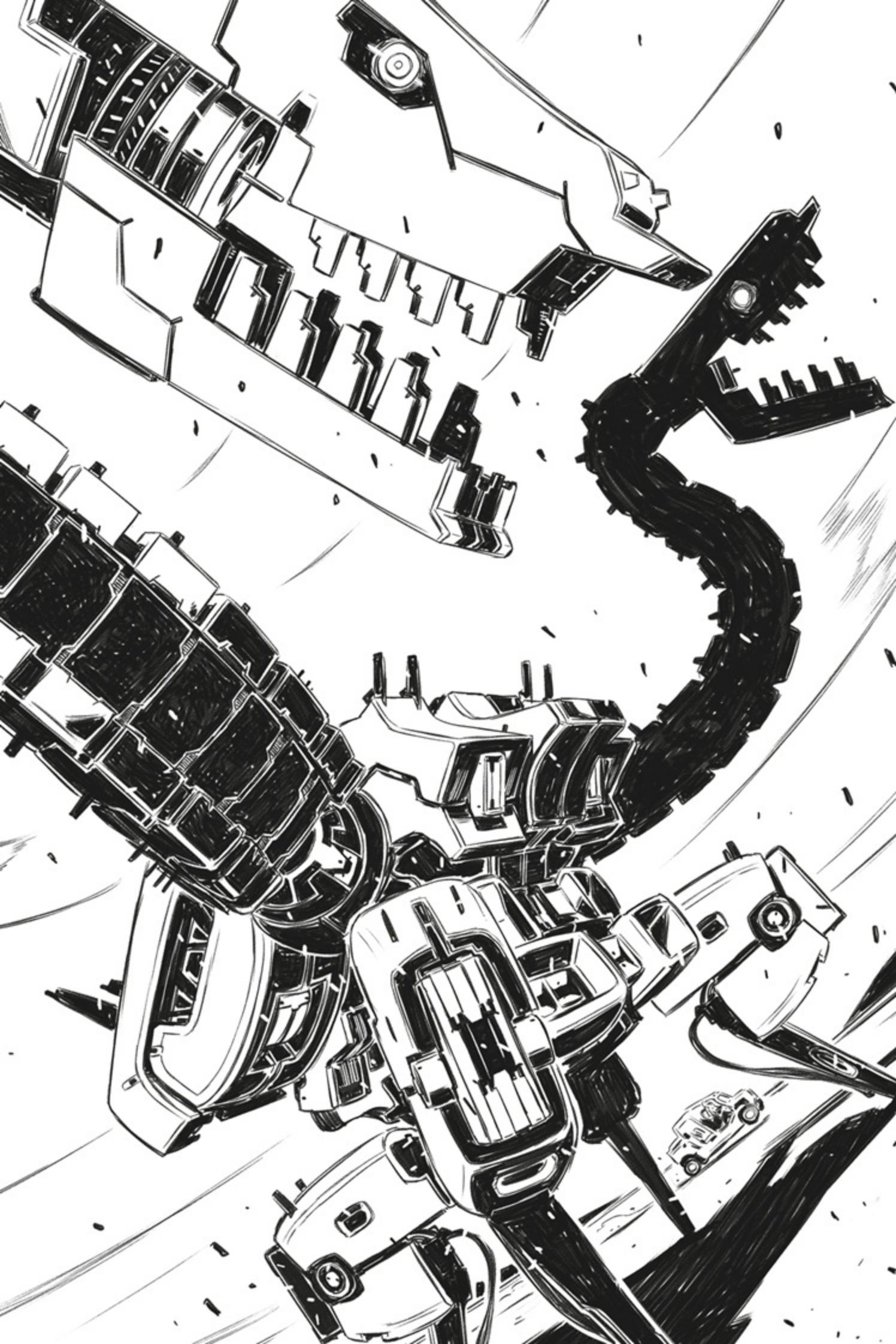
"Oh!"

The instant she could make out the players on the other side, Llenn recognized a familiar face.

"Hah! I knew it!"

Sitting in the passenger seat of the buggy that passed by Llenn was a man wearing a Swedish military camo suit composed of different shades of green in a blocky pattern. He smiled menacingly. His upper-left arm bore a logo of a skull with a knife in its teeth.

The man leaned back, holding a 5.56 mm Steyr STM-556 assault rifle with grenade launcher, and spoke through his comm, "Did you all see that?" He sounded excited. *Very* excited. "That was Pitohui's group!"



An elated woman's voice rang in response. "I saw them, too. They're teamed up with the Amazons."

"Aha, just as we thought! So what now, Leader?"

"That's a good question. First, I'd like to have a nice leisurely chat with Pitohui. There's a lot of information I could glean from her."

"Got it. Don't shoot them until they shoot us, got it? If they fire, you fire like hell."

Boss's voice reached the ears of the rest of the team.

"I just saw them as we passed! It's them! The All-Japan Machine-Gun Lovers!"

"We saw them, too! It's MMTM! They were on three vehicles, two people each! So they're working together..." replied Llenn to the shock of the rest of the group.

I can't believe it. The top overall team, MMTM, working with ZEMAL...

They were undoubtedly both powerhouses. MMTM had been a thorn in Llenn's side too many times to count in Squad Jam. And she'd given plenty of grief back to them, too.

As for ZEMAL, they were tops in firepower and had gotten stronger with each iteration of Squad Jam. They won SJ4 by a landslide.

A mystery woman named Vivi who had shown up and taken the reins had been behind their rise to power. She knew Fukaziroh from *ALO* and was a serious gaming addict; there was no doubting her skill. After all, she'd turned ZEMAL into champions. ZEMAL!

"Oh! Did you see Vivi?" asked Fukaziroh, growling.

"Yep!" answered Rosa, who knew about Fuka's grudge.

"Veevee? Who's that?" asked Clarence; she couldn't be blamed for that. She'd blown up spectacularly before the group came face-to-face with her in SJ4. But Shirley *had* been there, and she began to explain what had happened in SJ4 after that point.

"No change in the crab yet? They'd probably like to share information, I'm guessing. Can you all be patient? No shooting yet. Keep your distance from the crustacean. We

don't know how crabby it is."

"Got it. You handle the negotiation. We'll keep an eye on the seafood."

So you're just going to call it the crab, Llenn thought, disappointed. She did, however, approve of Pitohui's plan to convene with the leader of the other team. The only question was which person was playing the role.

Eventually, a single buggy approached M's vehicle where it sat on the dirt. It, too, was a Kawasaki KRX 1000. Both automobiles had identical paint jobs and forms, so it was difficult to tell them apart.

They could have numbered them, Llenn thought. She watched the other side approach, keeping the P90 hanging on its sling to show that she had no intention of being aggressive. Of course, it was still close enough to her person that she could grab it and fire with incredible speed if necessary.

The vehicle closed in on the left slowly, with the bandanna-wearing member of ZEMAL, Tom-Tom, in the driver's seat. He wore their group uniform and a green fleece jacket bearing an infinity symbol logo made out of ammo belts on the right breast. Below the waist he'd opted for black combat pants.

His machine gun was an FN MAG; he typically used the "cheat code" backpack ammo-loading system that allowed it to fire a thousand rounds consecutively, although it was in his inventory right now because it would only get in the way while driving.

What was different was that Tom-Tom's sunglasses had clear lenses now. They were a type of smart glasses you could acquire in *GGO*.

These special lenses could display in-depth information that supplemented the readout available to all players, and they offered better night vision in dark places. Of course, the smart glasses available in the real world weren't nearly this effective (publicly, at least), so the ones on offer here were more befitting the futuristic setting.

In the rear of the car was another ZEMAL member, Max. He had a powerful Black avatar—the kind you were more likely to see in an American-made game like this—with a fade cut on the sides. He, too, wore smart glasses.

A rope was tied through his belt buckles, connected to the frame of the roll cage. The arrangement ensured he wouldn't fall over when the buggy shook. A nylon resin pistol

holster was attached to his right side. Resting inside of it was the American military version of SIG Sauer's P320, an M17 9 mm automatic pistol.

There were tons of them in *GGO* since it was a common model of military gun. You found them in the wild quite often, so they were cheap but fairly solid—a firearm that wouldn't let you down. The entire team must have gotten a set for the pistols-only area in SJ4.

Max carried his favorite machine gun, too, of course, but it was slightly different than before. Though Llenn, who wasn't that much of a gun expert, had absolutely no idea what that difference was.

"Hrmm..."

"Oooh."

M and Pitohui, however, identified it right away.

The 5.56 mm Minimi light machine gun he wielded had been subtly updated. The Mk2 basic model had been swapped out for a customized Mk 46 model used by special forces. There were actually multiple variation of Mk 46; this was the original "Mod 0" type.

What made it distinct from the Mk2 was a shortened barrel, a lack of the carrying handle, and a standardized railing around the front end of the gun body for attaching accessories.

Presumably for mobility purposes, he wasn't using ZEMAL's favorite backpack ammo-loading system; instead, he'd attached a hundred-round box magazine to the bottom of the gun. By contrast, when ZEMAL's ammo system was attached, a metal rail connected the feeding slot to the backpack, which limited the directions he could turn.

A laser sight was fastened on the left side of the Mk 46's railing. It projected both visible and invisible (infrared) light to a target distance of several hundred yards away for the purpose of aiming. Real armies commonly employed them, especially wealthy ones like the Americans, but you hardly ever saw people use them in *GGO*.

That was because the bullet circle rendered them obsolete. So there had to have been a reason for him to attach it.

Last was the person in the passenger seat of the approaching buggy: the mystery woman named Vivi.

"Hello, everyone. Enjoying yourselves?"

She had the beauty of an avatar who looked around twenty years old, with pale skin, gray eyes, and wine-red hair. Perhaps she had swapped out some of the colors for a better look. Her slimmed-down smart glasses were stunning. They gave her that intelligent lady look.

Clutched to her chest was a cut barrel RPD, a Soviet machine gun with a drum magazine like a candy tin. Another M17 pistol clung to her hip.

Vivi turned toward Pitohui. "May I speak with the leader of your team?"

So she's their leader? Llenn was shocked that it wasn't MMTM's David calling the shots for the other allied team. But she didn't voice this.

"Hi, Vivi!" smirked Pitohui toward the other buggy.

What's she going to say first...? wondered Llenn, M, and Boss nervously, listening through the comm.

"And to the rest of ZEMAL, congratulations on winning SJ4!"

Oh my. Actual sportsmanship. Llenn was surprised. Impressed, in fact. If Pito wanted to be magnanimous, she could.

"We collected up all the most powerful survivors into that mall, did our damnedest to finish them off, and died in the process, so you'd better be grateful!"

Ah, classic Pito. I take it back, Llenn thought.

"All of that aside, how many of yours are alive? Still everyone?" Pitohui asked, fortunately bringing the topic back to today.

"Of course. You too?" Vivi asked.

"Obviously. I have to say, I didn't expect to see you folks teaming up with MMTM."

"When you want to finish the quest faster than everyone else, you join forces with the best team."

"Ooh, ouch! Guess you picked wrong then, honey. *We're* the best team."

"It's good to have lots of confidence. But even better when you've got the skill to back it up."

This development was not particularly surprising. The women were sparring with insults. But the scary part was how they kept it so classy. Still, this wasn't the time for bickering.

Llenn interjected, "Hey, you two! The crab! We're supposed to be beating the crab!"

"That's right. You're calling it the crab? Fine, crab it is. Did you hear that, boys? Now that the 'draggys' have fused together, we're just calling them the crab," Vivi told her teammates. So they had called their target Draggy, then.

As for the crustacean, it was slowly but crabily crawling sideways on its four forelegs on the sides of its body. That was taking it away from the group, but it was also moving much slower than ever before, so there wasn't much worry about it fleeing from the group's range.

Circling around the gigantic form, Boss's and MMTM's buggies enclosed it from a distance of a hundred yards.

As for Shirley and Clarence, they had come up on their motorcycle behind the LPFM buggy on the right side in a position to protect Pitohui, but Llenn knew better. If anything happened, and they started a furious firefight with MMTM and ZEMAL, Shirley was set to assassinate Pitohui before anyone else. She was keeping the R93 Tactical 2 on a sling in front of her chest for that very reason.

They just had to pray that the entirety of ZEMAL didn't glance at her and think, *Is that sniper on guard to shoot us? Please, don't worry, her target is our team leader. I know that doesn't make much sense. It's our problem, not yours.*

"What was the remaining HP on the blue one? Ours was 27," Pitohui informed. It was only proper that she revealed her information before asking for theirs.

"16. I thought we were going to pulverize it."

Impressive, Llenn thought. ZEMAL and MMTM had been chasing the fleeing mecha-dragon just like Llenn and company and had managed to get it that much farther down. That must have been thanks to the firepower of the Machine-Gun Lovers.

“Did you know you can’t use plasma grenades against them?” Pitohui asked.

Vivi nodded. “We tried that. Didn’t work.”

“What did you use for liquid? We used tea,” Pitohui said.

That was a good question. Llenn wondered if someone else had brought their tea into battle like she did, but Vivi’s response ruled that out.

“Coolant from the buggies we didn’t use. We collected it from a couple of them, then threw it in an ammo case.”

“Ah, I see. So you had that idea in mind. Very sharp!”

Llenn saw why Pitohui had no choice but to praise the other team’s ingenuity. At the point that the dragon started fleeing, both teams had concluded that there would have to be a way to catch up to the target. That meant the other group had immediately decided they might need the coolant from the extra vehicles to use as a weapon. You had to have some serious predictive skill to make that call on the spot.

“Aw, man! Their plan was way flashier than ours! We’re losing! They’re the ones who’ll get written into the novel!” fumed Clarence loudly from the back seat of the motorcycle.

“Hmm? What do you mean?” Vivi asked. They didn’t seem to be aware of the writer, then.

Pitohui glanced briefly at the mechanical crustacean, then went through a brief explanation of the story behind this particular ordeal.

“Ah, I see... Thanks. We had no idea about that. So that’s the backstory behind this quest,” said Vivi, who seemed to be either genuinely interested or genuinely annoyed. That impressed Llenn even more—they’d done this well without cluing in to what was going on?

At this point, Fukaziroh’s vehicle stopped circling around and rolled closer. She lined up right next to ZEMAL’s automobile, trapping it between hers and Llenn’s.

"Hey, Vivi," she called out with a dark look in her eyes. "I don't see your guide doggy in any of your buggies. What's up with that?"

Really? That's what you're worried about? Llenn thought. The leader's buggy was indeed dogless. Fukaziroh must have been driving around to inspect all the other vehicles.

"Oh, we left the pooch back at the starting position."

"You! What?!"

"Hey, don't freak out. It was for safety. Although it's basically immortal—there's no way to kill it."

"How do you know that? *Did you try?!*"

"I told you: Don't freak out. On the previous map, one of the enemy bullets hit it by accident. So when this ordeal started, we told it to wait there. You'll hear its messages wherever you are anyway. Besides, isn't it weirder to take it into battle as though you're going on a walk?"

That's a pretty good point, Llenn supposed.

"Hah! It seems we're fated to never see eye to eye..."

Fuka, stop acting like some weird old guy.

"All right, everyone, let's get along," Pitohui insisted. "We need to defeat our respective parts of that crab. But it's not that simple anymore. I trust we all know why?"

Llenn certainly did. When you had this many players concentrating on attacking the same target, your "allies" were going to get in your way. Both sides had a vested interest in avoiding cross fire and stray bullets.

They also had to watch out for overcrowding from all the vehicles. Nobody wanted to crash their buggies into one another.

Plus, the targets were mixed. If you attacked sloppily and hit the wrong one, you were only helping out the rival team.

"That's right. So I have a suggestion—" Vivi proposed.

"Got it. We'll go with that," interrupted Pitohui.

Uh, Pito? She didn't say it yet, Llenn snapped—but only in her mind.

Yet somehow Vivi understood. "I'm glad you agree. So who goes first?"

"Whoever loses this," responded Pitohui, holding out her fist.

"Got it. Here goes... Rock, paper..."

Scissors, shoot! And sure enough, Vivi played rock. Pitohui threw paper.

"Yeaah!" Pitohui celebrated as though she were a child.

Huh? Wouldn't you want to attack first? Llenn wondered.

"Sorry, everyone. We're going to have to make the first strike. Be on your guard for a counterattack from the crab," Vivi announced. That explained it; with the enemy in a new form, no one knew how it might react. Thus, the first side to attack would be at a disadvantage.

"Don't worry about it, Leader. We'll grind out those last sixteen points in no time," reassured Tom-Tom.

ZEMAL had been a very merry band the last time around, but they seemed to have toned down some of their cultish zeal from SJ4, where they'd referred to Vivi as Goddess. They were still deferential to her, however.

"...Okay, got it. Pitohui, David has a message for you," informed Vivi, having just heard him in her ear.

"Oh? What is it?"

"Have fun sitting back and watching. We'll see you around later."

"Ha-haaa! Send this one back to him! 'Eek, you're so cool! Open parenthesis, heart emoji, close parenthesis. Good luck! Daveeeeeed!"

Vivi repeated the message into her comm and quickly grimaced. You could only imagine how he would react to that one.

After that, the rival leader's gaze sharpened behind her smart glasses. She was switching from water cooler chat mode into battle mode.

"Everyone, on high alert! We're going with our machine-gun-centric style again! Use grenades only when you're certain you can land the hit! You handle the aim, Max!"

"Roger that, Leader!"

Tom-Tom started driving the buggy off, while Max pressed his body against the roll cage to keep the Mk 46's aim steady. It was pointed at the distant crab, but he hadn't fired yet.

Instead, he switched on the laser sight. A red beam appeared from the accessory and illuminated the side of the monster's blue head.

M started driving and pulled the buggy away from Tom-Tom's. He murmured, "Knew it. They really thought this through."

Llenn asked, "Thought what through?"

"Their new tactics. On Vivi's orders, Max will point out the target with the sighting laser. In the light, he uses the optical beam, while in the darkness, he can switch to the infrared laser, which their smart glasses will pick up on night-vision mode."

"And... what else?"

"The other members of ZEMAL aim their bullet circles at that guide to blast away. That ensures an extremely focused assault, which also doesn't require verbal communication that could be misunderstood. Concentrated fire from a group of 7 mm machine guns is going to pin down your target, even if they're not all hitting. Plus, it cuts down on wasted shots."

"Meanwhile, Daveed's group is better on mobility, so they can charge in and take advantage of its reaction, lobbing grenades, watching the vicinity, and providing support. Very shrewd, an excellent division of duty between teams," Pitohui noted.

"Ohhhh!" Llenn exclaimed. She was impressed by both their observation skills and

Vivi's leadership.

She guessed that, in the first and second ordeals, they must have used this arrangement to effectively defeat their targets. The third ordeal, where the players' weapons had been taken away, was more of a mystery to her, but she assumed that they probably hadn't gone down to the wire like LPFM and SHINC did.

"The only question is why proud Daveed agreed to follow Vivi's lead... But for now, let's just see what they do."

Once he was a healthy distance away from the crab, M stopped the buggy at an arbitrary location on the pondlike surface of the rock. From this point on, they would be observing. Llenn watched their rivals brawl with the beast through the monocular.

Inside the scope, she saw five buggies begin their assault on the crab. From this vantage point, it was easy to grasp the scale of the 150-foot-wide crab monster. It was like they were driving toward a building.

In front of Vivi's buggy was another vehicle with machine guns bristling from the passenger seat and bed in the back. They approached the crustacean at an angle, circling to strike it from behind, but the creature sensed them and turned so that they ended up directly in front of it. The automobile came to a halt about 150 yards away.

MMTM's vehicles spread out to the sides of ZEMAL's to offer support. Just as M said, Max's red laser sight lit up the blue head on the right half of the crab.

Their attack began.

The muzzles of the machine guns lit up, and a second later, their automatic fire reached Llenn's ears. The blazing line of shots from the two buggies, including tracer rounds, struck the only part of the mechanical monstrosity that could be damaged: its head.

The sparks were so numerous that she couldn't see its face nor its head anymore. Overwhelmed by the deluge of bullets, the crab swung its right pincer—or head. It was desperate and seemed to be in pain.

But streams of bullets continued to pummel the target. The machine guns were packing considerable power. Although many of the opposing team's shots missed because the head was whipping around rapidly, they had enough output to make up for that.

The crab scrambled backward, but the machine guns continued to fire. Llenn couldn't see the hit points of the blue one, but it had to be taking serious damage.

"Is it just me... or are they likely to finish it off soon...?" she wondered, peering through the monocular.

"Uh-oh, are they gonna get it done first?" Pitohui asked, too.

Boss brought her buggy around behind them. "What happens in that case...? If one half of it dies, what about the other half...?"

"Dunno. Let's just hope our half dies with—"

"Wait!" Anna shouted, cutting off Pitohui.

She'd been peering through some large binoculars, so she could see it better than anyone else. The left side of the crab—the red pincer that Llenn's team had been chasing—was reaching over toward ZEMAL, its jaw opening.

"Red mouth! Here comes something!"

And that was when the counterattack began.

"Here it comes! Look out!" yelled David.

Everyone in ZEMAL heard him since their comms were linked. Tom-Tom and Peter, the two drivers, jammed on the gas. They were already in reverse gear, so their buggies zoomed backward.

Shinohara and Huey had been standing in the rear of the cars to shoot. The sudden reversal shook them up quite a bit. Huey, in particular, nearly lost his balance and fell off, but he recovered and stayed in his vehicle through sheer strength.

"Gaaaah!"

Something blue erupted out of the red maw and struck the ground where the buggy had been just half a second before.

A laser? Llenn and everyone else thought.

That was because the blue light shot forth with phenomenal speed and stabbed into the ground faster than they could see.

“Huh...?”

But once the dust cleared, the blue object was still stuck in the ground.

It was several inches in diameter and about ten feet long.

“Ice...?”

A long, thin pillar of ice.

A beautiful, pale icicle, stabbed at an angle into the earth.

“Yeeep! That one! Was bad!” screamed Peter.

If he'd been a split second slower to step on the gas, the frozen spike would have speared the buggy. He was the smallest member of ZEMAL, whose trademark detail was the tape over his nose. As the car backed away as fast as it could, he called to his teammates, “Sorry for driving so erratically! You okay?”

Black-haired Shinohara with the M60E3 in the passenger seat replied, “More or less!”

He was clutching his chest with his left hand. When the buggy slammed into reverse, he'd smashed into the handle near the dashboard. He'd even lost a few hit points.

“Yeah! I'm alive!” managed Huey, the macho man with his brown hair slicked back, from the rear bed. He'd flipped completely off his feet, and they were both sticking up into the air. But he never let go of his M240B machine gun, which was attached by a rail to his backpack.

The red mouth opened again, pointed at the two retreating vehicles—but it did not emit a pillar of ice this time.

It was hail. An absolute deluge of frozen orbs.

The rounded chunks of ice, about four inches across, shot out all at once like shotgun pellets. It must've been the same kind of ice as the pillar, only crunched up inside the dragon's mouth.

"Wha—?"

Peter saw the hundreds of ice pellets spreading out in an array before him but realized it was too wide for him to be able to avoid through steering.

"Sheeit!"

He yanked the wheel to the right in the midst of a full-speed reverse.

A shotgun blast typically struck all at once. This hail was the same; hundreds of spots on the brown earth over a range of a few hundred feet spat up dust simultaneously. The ice shattered on the hard surface, glittering in the sun.

Llenn watched everything happen.

"Aaaah!"

Tom-Tom's buggy was outside the attack range, but Peter's was obscured with dust—right in the midst of the offensive spray.

"They're down!" Llenn wailed, as though it were her own companions who'd been hit.

Within three seconds, the brown mist had cleared, giving her a view through her monocular.

"Huh? Oh! Wow! They're alive!"

Beside the overturned buggy, all three members of ZEMAL were running. Scratch that, they were sprinting. Fleeing for their lives.

A fair amount of damage glowed on their bodies, but none were dead. They were bolting away for all they were worth, lugging along their heavy machine guns with one hand.

The overturned vehicle wasn't so fortunate—both of its right tires had blown off, and

its body was heavily damaged. The fact that it hadn't vanished was a sign that it could be fixed and used again, but that wasn't going to happen in a matter of seconds.

"Were they just lucky...?" she wondered.

"No," M replied. "The driver flipped the buggy on purpose. He pulled into an extreme turn in a very risky way. Since it flipped over, the ice hit the underside of the vehicle—and unlike bullets, ice isn't that hard. All the pieces shattered, so none of them went through the metal."

"Ohhh!"

Llenn was impressed by the split-second decision-making that saved the lives of the driver and his companions, but it also meant one of the buggies was now wrecked. Considering using vehicles was the entire point of this engagement, that was a considerable loss in attack power.

ZEMAL's remaining buggy and MMTM's three all stopped firing and took their distance. The three on their own booked it with their backs to the crab, as fast as they could. Fortunately, there was no extra attack coming.

The crustacean, meanwhile, thudded slowly sideways while looming over the earth, impossible to read. Next to the red head was the same number as before: twenty-seven.

The bout had ended in the span of less than a minute.

"Mmm-hmm. That was very instructive. Thank you for the lesson," Pitohui murmured happily. Llenn couldn't see it from the rear of the buggy, but she was sure that Pitohui had the most wicked smirk on her face.

"If you attack, the other head delivers a fierce counterattack..." stated Boss. That seemed correct. If so, it left them with only one option.

"Okay, Llenn. Get off," M ordered. She did as he instructed and jumped off the bed. The car's total elevation was much higher than her actual height, but she'd jumped inside in the first place, so it wasn't a problem for her.

M got out of the driver's seat and materialized the backpack he had in his inventory. He quickly retrieved the shield from inside. The eight plates were spread into a fan

shape, but he pulled them apart. Each one was a piece of spaceship armor, roughly twenty by twelve inches in size. He began to attach them to the pipe frame around the driver's seat.

"Here you go!"

Pitohui used the best friend of all Americans, her trusty roll of duct tape, to wrap the shields to the frame.

The automobile now had plating around the driver's seat. There were two plates each on the left and right, two over the front, and two overhead. The effect was a very rough, homemade armored car. At the very least, it should protect M from ice pellets in the front and above. The gap between two consecutive plates barely measured two inches, just enough to stick a gun barrel between.

"Nice! So this is for attacking, huh?" Llenn said, excited.

"Yes. I want the person with the highest attack power to sit in here, though."

"Meaning?"

Llenn was thinking he meant Rosa, who had her PKM machine gun.

"No. Someone from ZEMAL."

"Excuse me, Shirl? Would you call Vivi over here?"

Shirley fumed at the nickname and the errand request but did as she was asked. Approaching Tom-Tom's buggy, which had returned from the battleground, she sent the request message to Vivi in the passenger seat.

Eventually, her own vehicle made its way over toward Pitohui's, where she muttered bitterly, "First I lost the game of rock-paper-scissors, then I nearly lost my teammates."

"Sounds like you've had some bad luck," smirked Pitohui.

I'm guessing she's not faking that smile. She's just happy that things turned out exactly the way she anticipated, Llenn thought.

"I already know what you're going to say, so can it. You're not going to bother attacking just on your own, are you? It seems clear to me. We'll have to bring it down with our forces combined," Vivi said. Pitohui gave her a very satisfied smile.

I'm glad she didn't say something like "It's your turn now! Go out there and die!" thought Llenn, relieved.

Pitohui gestured toward the armor plating on their buggy and announced, "Ta-daa! This will easily help us withstand the ice shotgun. Now it can get in close, absorb all the damage, and still attack. So with that in mind, can we borrow one of your gunners?"

Her request came in the same tone that one would use to go next door and borrow a bottle of soy sauce.

"....."

Vivi hesitated. In a sense, she was also asking to borrow one of their own soldiers for a decoy plan that was highly likely to end in death. But she hadn't come up with a better alternative on her own.

"Tom-Tom, can you do that?"

"I'd love to, Leader!" he shouted, as though he were her employee, hopping out of the driver's seat. He waved his left hand and materialized his FN MAG 7.62 mm machine gun and its backpack ammo-loading system.

MMTM's three cars came up alongside Pitohui's. They were riding two to each vehicle, just as they did with the hovercraft in SJ1.

The driver of the first car was the short, black-haired Kenta, with the G36K. In the passenger seat was the large Summon, with the SCAR-L assault rifle. Both of them, of course, were wearing smart glasses.

In another buggy sat Lux, who always wore sunglasses. In his case, the smart glasses' functions had probably been installed on his usual pair. He'd lost his MSG90 automatic sniper rifle due to a high-speed traffic accident in the most recent Squad Jam. That had been Fukaziroh's fault.

Hence why he was using a 5.56 mm assault rifle this time. It was a Type 20, a domestic

rifle that the Self-Defense Force started using in 2020, a rare drop. He was the biggest gun nut on the team, so he'd undoubtedly brought it from his collection. A short scope was attached to the weapon; like David, he could work as a close-range sharpshooter.

MMTM's leader, David, took up the passenger seat of that car. "So it's come to this anyway. Well, I'm not surprised," he admitted.

Behind the wheel of the final vehicle was Bold, the dreadlocked wielder of a Beretta ARX160 assault rifle. Jake was standing in its bed, holding a 7.62 mm machine gun, the HK21.

Additionally, all six members of MMTM were outfitted with their pistols from the last Squad Jam, Beretta APX 9 mm handguns attached to their belts. David was the outlier, with a Steyr M9-A1, plus a lightsword.

"Hi there. We had quite a double kill last time, huh?" Pitohui smiled. She and the MMTM leader had a furious rivalry. "But I looked at the video and measured very closely. I died about point-five seconds later than you, so technically, I won that fight."

"....."

Pito's really got a talent for making him angry, Llenn thought, wisely choosing not to say that out loud.

Careful not to set off David, whose temple veins were pulsing, M interjected, "I'll drive and put us right up front. I plan to escape as quickly as possible, but I expect that whatever machine gunner is with me could possibly get wiped out."

"Yeah, I know that," said Tom-Tom. "I'm not gonna let you guys have all the glory."

The members of MMTM whistled and cheered.

Vivi asked the obvious question: "But which one should the rest of us attack?"

Naturally, each group's completion was on the line, so they wanted to blitz their own target. They were all itching to move on to the next ordeal with a head start over the competition.

M answered, "Whichever one you want. Striking your own color will lower its hit points but make the attacks from the other color worse. You could choose to fire at the

other one to prevent that or try to take out both heads together at the right opportunity. As long as we're not hitting each other, we should be free to adapt to the fight as needed."

"Interesting. That sounds fine," acknowledged Vivi, watching the scampering crab in the distance. "I'd like to have a strategy meeting. Can you give me two minutes?"

"All right."

They had agreed upon a cooperative battle plan.

M shut off his comm and climbed into the buggy with Tom-Tom. Each man left his team behind. Since Llenn and Pitohui had lost their vehicle, she went over to Fukaziroh's buggy and begged, "Fuka, give me a ride! I already asked you once."

"Damn, I guess I have no choice, huh? But only this once," Fukaziroh reluctantly agreed. Suuzaburou got onto her lap. Even now, it seemed that the option of dropping him off in a safe location never occurred to her.

M and Tom-Tom were on their own now, no longer surrounded by any other cars or people.

The machine gunner rested his backpack ammo-loading system on the bed and brought the rail up in front of him. The barrel of the FN MAG stuck out between the armor plates. He was ready to shoot for all he was worth in the passenger seat.

"Let's do this, M. Drive with all you've got!"

"Yeah. Same with your shooting."

"Don't worry! By the way, you're still not selling your MG42, are you?"

"Nope. Even though I haven't shot it in forever."

"The god of machine guns longs for you to give it to us."

"Sorry, but I've got my own goddess, and every now and then she demands to use it. I can't let go of that gun."

"Well, that sounds pretty final. But if she ever gets tired of it, sell it to me."

Two buggies, one sidecar, and one motorcycle huddled for an eleven-person strategy meeting.

"As you heard, M's going to draw all the damage toward himself. Of course, that's no guarantee that we won't be attacked at all. But in the meantime, we're going to focus our firepower to get those hit points ticking down. Ideally more than the other side does, but they've got a big lead, so that might be impossible. We should pay attention to when the blue head hits zero," Pitohui announced. "And when that happens, be careful not to let any stray bullets hit the other team. That's a warning. Okay? Just a warning. I can check the warning off the list now."

Llenn and the others got the gist. *If a bullet does go their way and hits them, that would be a real shame. Sometimes, stuff happens.*

On that topic, Llenn turned her thoughts to Shirley. *She's probably thinking that if a bullet does go Pito's way and hits her, it would be a real shame. But sometimes stuff happens, you know?*

That was Shirley's reason for participating in these quests in the first place, so it was fine. In all honesty, Llenn just didn't want any of these stray rounds hitting *her* during the shenanigans to come.

Boss asked, "We've got two cars, a sidecar motorcycle, and a regular motorcycle. Each one has different characteristics and different types of mobility. Can we make use of that somehow?"

It wasn't a surprise to hear that question coming from Boss, who was quite cognizant about how bodies moved in real life. That was the sort of thing Llenn would never think to ask about.

"Good point. Motorcycles are advantageous because of their high speed and small size, so it would help if we could have them rush around and keep the enemy at bay."

"Absolutely not. If we get hit with anything at all, we'll spin out. And I'm a sniper. I shoot the target in the head from a distance. That's what I do," harrumphed Shirley. It

made sense to Llenn.

"I'll stay in the back, too," added Tohma, SHINC's sniper.

Sophie got down from the driver's seat and materialized the PTRD-41 antitank rifle she kept with her. She was responsible for holding the firearm, along with using her shoulder as a base so Tohma could fire it.

Naturally, that meant losing a person to drive the sidecar motorcycle, so Rosa had to get into the back of Boss's buggy and rest the PKM atop the cage.

"What do we do about the Ural?" Boss asked.

"No problem. I'll do my best to drive it. I've never done it before, but it'll work out, I bet. And Llenn can ride in the sidecar."

No way, thought Llenn, before realizing she couldn't turn the suggestion down. So instead, she asked, "What are we supposed to be doing, then?"

"Riding all around the crab, of course..."

"And attacking as much as we can while M's drawing its damage on himself?"

It would be best if Llenn could drive the sidecar motorcycle so Pitohui could concentrate on shooting, but she knew that wasn't going to happen. She hoped people weren't expecting too much from her P90 against that gigantic monster, but she was part of the team, so she had to do *something* to help.

Summoning her courage, she asked about that arrangement, but Pitohui replied, "Huh? No way. Riding around helps us avoid trouble. Surviving this battle is our strategy."

"Whaaaat?" Llenn gasped.

"All right, everyone, listen closely. Teacher's going to explain something *very* important right now. I want you to only think about survival from here on out. Leave the main offense to M and the other team. But if we're too obvious about staying out of trouble, our opponents will freak out, so put on a show for them. The snipers will be perfect for that. Just pop off some shots from a distance. You don't even need to land them. Just demonstrate how enthusiastic we are about the battle," Pitohui explained

shamelessly.

Boss nodded. "Noted. No point in jockeying with them right now. We've still have another ordeal left after this. Everyone got that? Our strategy is all-out preservation!"

"Okay!" agreed SHINC in unison.

"That was *my* plan all along," muttered Fukaziroh, who was back to driving around with her dog again.

As long as they don't find out what we're up to, thought Llenn.

But Pitohui jerked her out of her reverie by shouting, "Come on, Llenn! Get in! You're in the sidecar for our date!" And so she clambered into another strange vehicle.

About a minute before this, Vivi and David were conferring, watching LPFM in the distance.

"What do you think Pitohui's team is going to do, David?"

"Easy. I guarantee you they won't really strike the target. They're going to do the minimum to avoid getting yelled at and let us do the dirty work."

"Yes. My thoughts exactly."

Pitohui's plan was completely busted. Or maybe *scheme* was more appropriate.

"But the real key will be M and Tom-Tom, who'll bear the brunt of the monster's damage. We'll take it down while they're occupied and get moving to the next ordeal."

"Agreed. And when the time comes, we'll do like always."

Once their strategy meetings had ended, Pitohui patched in to M, and Vivi contacted Tom-Tom.

"All right, M. As the representative male of the group, it's your duty to die and look good doing it."

"Tom-Tom, this might sound cruel, but we're counting on you to carry us through."

Both messages had essentially the same sentiment, but the amount of kindness put into each one couldn't have been more disparate.

"Got it."

"Gladly."

Yet the two men were full of the exact same determination.

They shared a brief glance and some words of encouragement.

"If we're gonna go out, we might as well do it like kings. I'm banking on that gun of yours."

"No complaints here. Relying on that driving!"

M looked forward and slammed on the gas.

Good luck, M! And... be safe somehow!

Saying "Don't push yourself too hard!" to someone making a huge sacrifice was pretty insulting, so Llenn kept her words of encouragement to herself.

Humanity's last stand against the crustacean menace commenced.

Shuffling across the ocean of earth was a titanic crab over sixty-five feet tall, a freakish monstrosity birthed from the fusion of the red and blue mecha-dragons.

An armored buggy sped straight toward the beast.

The rest of Llenn's team wanted to attack the red head on its left flank, so their two buggies, their sidecar, and their motorcycle fanned out on that side for the approach.

On the other side was Vivi's group. They had four buggies spreading right and left in a wing formation. Three of those buggies carried two members of MMTM each; on their rear beds sat Shinohara, Huey, and Peter, each equipped with their machine guns and backpack ammo-loading systems.

Vivi commanded the final buggy. Max stood in the bed as her spotter.

"First we're going to weave through their legs!" M shouted, once they were going over sixty miles per hour. Given the extra load it was carrying, that had to be the automobile's top speed.

Although they could see forward through the crack between the plates, with the massive size of the crab, it wasn't much of an issue.

"Here we go!"

When they were about a hundred yards away, Tom-Tom opened fire. The barrel of the FN MAG sticking through the gap roared as several of its shots homed in on the blue cranium.

"Don't worry, I got you, too!"

Tom-Tom fed the red one a couple shots as well. He seemed to be the dutiful type.

Both heads looked down in fury and opened their mouths wide.

"Too slow!" M drove the vehicle through the crustacean's legs and beyond. There was enough clearance to pass under, but it would be terrifying for anyone who happened to be standing up in the back.

The spray of ice that burst from both mouths smashed nothing but empty earth, but it was very pretty.

The crab had no real front or back, so the necks simply swiveled backward in the direction M had driven.

"Fire!" ordered Vivi.

"Here we go!" ordered Pitohui at the same time.

A hail of bullets converged on the heads from the buggies slowly circling to the sides, along with the snipers hanging back.

Llenn observed ZEMAL's offensive from the sidecar. Ferocious lines of gunfire extended toward the heads, pelting them with rounds. Their firepower was tremendous.

It was a miracle that she'd survived this onslaught at the start of SJ1. What would have happened, if not for the trees she'd hid behind? Even now, she still reeled from that encounter.

But her teammates were no slouches, either.

"Raaah!"

Despite being reassured they wouldn't need to get in close, SHINC's overloaded four-person buggy was closing in at a high speed. Anna was firing from the passenger seat, while Rosa and Tanya blasted from the bed.

A tail of glittering gold from all the empties trailed behind the buggy. It looked like a comet.

"Oh, c'mon. I just said you could take it easy." Pitohui sighed. She twisted the sidecar's accelerator. "Go on then, Llenn. Blast away."

"You bet!"

Llenn aimed the P90 from her seated position and opened fire at the back of the red head. It was far enough away that she didn't think she was making much contact, but it was better than doing nothing.

"Whoo-hoo-hoo. They're getting into gear. Shirley?"

"Yeah, gotcha."

The motorcycle was propped on its kickstand. Shirley was in a partial crouch with her R93 Tactical 2 resting on the seat. The pose was terrible for your back, but hunters and snipers had to be skilled at shooting from all positions.

The target was about 650 feet away.

"Eat that!" Shirley cried, pulling the trigger.

Clarence used binoculars to watch the bullet explode over the head. "Brilliant!"

Its hit point number dropped immediately from 24 to 21.

"Shirley must have struck the target... Well, I don't want to be the one who missed..." grunted Tohma, calibrating her aim at the target over nine hundred feet away through the scope of the PTRD-41.

The barrel was as long as a flagpole, resting atop Sophie's left shoulder where she sat cross-legged on the ground. She was still alive this time around, of course.

The antitank rifle barked at the distant target of the crab's head; because it was so large, aiming wasn't particularly difficult. As the massive bullet erupted from the barrel at twice the speed of sound and struck the back of the red cranium, the gun roared so deafeningly that dust rose from all around them.

All at once, 21 reduced to 16.

"M! It's down to sixteen now!" Llenn reported.

M turned to his riding partner and yelled, "We're at sixteen. How about you?"

A moment later, Tom-Tom replied, "I just saw it! Eleven!"

"Okay, let's do that again!"

"Okay!"

M hit the brakes and pulled the buggy into a sharp U-turn. The idea was to charge beneath the crab again, pulling its attention so that it would attack them. When they completed the 180-degree turn, the crustacean loomed before them again. This time the sides were reversed—red on the right, blue on the left.

Off to the creature's sides, the other vehicles were busy making distance. He waited about five seconds for them to fan out before stomping on the gas pedal, starting the drag race up again.

"Here we go!"

That was the very moment that Huey, firing his machine gun from the bed of the retreating buggy, beamed the blue head—and dropped its HP number down to 10.

Pgyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

The crab's pincerlike head let out an earthshaking shriek.

Now with its HP at 10 percent, the blue head roared at the sky. A moment later, the red one mimicked it.

"Oooh!"

M and Tom-Tom winced as their car approached the beast; the cry was like nails on a chalkboard. But the decoy charge did not falter.

"Rahhh!"

Tom-Tom attacked the blue head again, now on the left side, in an attempt to draw its attention toward them—but it didn't take the bait.

"What?!"

The huge cranium, stretching toward the sky, turned and opened its mouth at his companions far off to the left.

"Oh no! Everyone, look out!" Tom-Tom screamed, right as the ice spray emitted from its jaw.

If the previous attack was an ice shotgun, this one was an ice machine gun.

And if the previous attack was a net, this one was a whip.

Hail pieces less than four inches wide rocketed out of the blue mouth at a ferocious rate; at least twenty chunks per second. It fired at the vehicles driving below it.

The small pieces were coming so fast that they appeared to be connected, painting a single blue line. It was like watering the lawn with a showerhead.

When the blue maw moved, the line moved with it, whipping up a string of dust disturbed by its icy assault. The four buggies started turning when they heard Tom-

Tom's warning. The line of frozen bullets followed them.

"Gah!"

It struck the left flank of Shinohara, who had his M60E3 ready to fire from the buggy bed, knocking him clean off the vehicle. His teammates could see his HP gauge drop significantly, down to 70 percent, and his stomach glowed red with injury.

Neither ZEMAL nor MMTM could scoop him up off the ground. They didn't even have the wherewithal to worry about him. The frozen lash coming from above clogged the space around them with ice and dust.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Bold yelled, nearly flipping the buggy to the left in an attempt to avoid the attack. Between the g-force of the tilted buggy and the menacing ice attack, Jake and Peter both went queasy in the passenger seats and the back of the car, respectively.

Dozens of hail chunks ripped through the area just three feet from the right side of the vehicle. It was like a wall of dust had instantly been erected beside them.

"We need distance!" Vivi instructed. The four buggies scattered to the wind.

"Son of a bitch!" David swore as the whip of ice descended upon his car at an angle. They weren't moving fast enough to avoid it. "Rrrgh!"

Anticipating huge damage, he gritted his teeth and shut his eyes, but luck was on his side.

The first hail projectile struck the buggy's pipe frame and sprayed David's face with ice shards. The second projectile broke against the hood of the car and dented it, while the third dented the radiator, and the fourth grazed a tire.

After the buggies scattered, Shinohara was left all on his own.

"Ryaaaaaa!"

He got to his feet, held the M60E3 to his waist, and began blasting at the crab's head right in front of him.

"What's wrong with you? I'm right here!"

The ice-spitting head noticed the small target shooting at its chin, just below it. For a brief moment, it stopped spitting and looked downward.

Then its mouth opened again and paused, seemingly gathering power, and shot out a huge chunk of ice.

When he saw the giant iceberg heading his way, Shinohara grunted “Don’t worry—I’ll keep you safe” before tossing his M60E3 as far as he could to the left.

The pillar of ice many inches wide and ten feet long pierced his body and his backpack ammo-loading system, obliterating both into polygonal pieces.

The only thing that survived was the machine gun, which fell clattering to the featureless earth.

“Hng!” Vivi grimaced as she watched her teammate die. She and the other three drivers pulled farther away from the crab.

Its blue head rose, watching them go imperiously, but did not attack further. Shinohara had acted as a sacrifice and allowed the others to survive.

“Dammit!” yelled Tom-Tom as the armored vehicle passed beneath the crab without taking any attacks.

“Hyaaa! Looks like they’re having trouble over there!” exclaimed Pitohui with inappropriate excitement, turning the sidecar motorcycle’s handlebars left to pull them farther away from the monster.

“No, you were totally expecting that to happen,” Llenn snapped. She had watched the entire thing play out, the ice spraying from the blue head like water from a hose.

Even from a distance, it was clear to see that one of ZEMAL’s members had fallen from a buggy and stayed put, attacking the crab to focus its attention and allow his teammates to get away, while an icicle skewered him.

“Nweh-heh-heh.”

Llenn didn’t need to read Pitohui’s mind to know what she was gloating about. *Vivi was trying to finish this quest without losing a single member, and that’s been ruined*

now. Bwa-ha-ha!

"Poor, sweet Vivi. Her plan's gone up in smoke."

I knew it.

"We won't be able to get closer!" rang Boss's voice in Llenn's ear. Since they couldn't afford to get pulverized by the same attack on this side, she had to keep the automobile she was riding in with her three companions farther away.

Reasonably safe at a distance, Tohma announced, "I can shoot the next one. Should I?"

Pitohui promptly replied, "Er, no. Same to you, Shirley. I think it's set to attack more fiercely after its HP number gets to ten. Take a break, sniper team. Have some tea."

"I mean, that just makes sense. Do you *have* tea?" asked Clarence, who was watching through binoculars next to Shirley's motorcycle. The remaining number on their target still read 16.

Shirley stopped looking through the scope and snorted. "Hmph."

Llenn asked, "How are we supposed to avoid those attacks...?"

A machine-gun rattle of ice was lashing down from above like a whip. There was no cover, nothing at all to hide behind.

She tried to think of a solution on her own but came up with nothing. At best, she figured that if she ran around fast enough, it would be harder for the beam to connect with her.

"Let's see..." Pitohui murmured, starting to think.

But before she could say anything further, M spoke up.

"I'll knock it out."

"I'll knock it out."

Vivi and every other player fighting against the giant crab heard that declaration. He'd

asked Tom-Tom to link up his comm item so all the teammates on the other side could hear him, too.

On the other hand, neither M nor any of his teammates could hear the voices of MMTM and ZEMAL.

H-how? Llenn wanted to ask, but she resisted the urge. She assumed M was going to give everyone a piece of his mind. It didn't take long for her prediction to come true.

"This is M. I have a message for everyone here. I'm going to approach the underside of the crab on my own. Once I'm at its feet, I'll have Tom-Tom fire at it from behind. We'll cause a vehicle explosion."

Ohhh, Llenn marveled. I get it.

Shooting the buggy would produce one of *GGO*'s famous vehicle explosions, which might succeed in toppling the enormous but unsteady-looking crab creature.

Even if he didn't knock it *out*, he would most likely knock it *over*. That would bring the heads down low, which would remove their altitude advantage, plus make aiming at them easier.

It was a brilliant gambit, something bold and dynamic in the midst of a bad situation. Classic M.

The downside was that M would die. No question about it. He'd go out in a blaze of glory. Without a driver in the seat, there was simply no way to pilot the buggy to the right spot at the exact moment.

It was clear to everyone what would need to happen. Pitohui answered with two short words.

"Do it."

"And that marks the end of our exciting drive together."

M parked the buggy about two hundred yards away from the front side of the

crustacean. When it wasn't assaulting them, it essentially just stood in place. It seemed to be jeering, *Come at me, if you dare.*

M looked over at Tom-Tom and said, "The timing is key. I'm counting on you."

"Don't worry; I've got this."

Then the pair parted ways, one inside the vehicle and one outside.

Tom-Tom stood on the hard, solid earth and effortlessly hauled his heavy machine gun up to his shoulder.

M jammed on the gas pedal, jolting the armored automobile forward.

Using his sets, which was something he rarely did, Tom-Tom aimed carefully for the rear of the buggy.

The crustacean noticed the vehicle, lifting its blue head easily. The frozen shotgun erupted from its maw.

Hundreds of hail pellets sprayed out in a net that captured M's buggy. It vanished into the storm of dust and ice—and burst out the other end before the cloud of debris cleared.

Although the body was dented all over, it had retained its shape and protected M from the frigid blast. Not all the duct tape had survived the onslaught, however, because in short order one sheet of armor fell loose from the car, then another.

"Yaaaaah!"

M's mettle and speed did not waver.

"You should join our squadron. We're always looking for people who really kick ass," muttered Tom-Tom. He opened fire with his FN MAG.

The buggy was about to collide with the crab's right legs when the bullets caught its rear bumper and struck true.

A fireball worthy of an action movie shook the world—and the crustacean.

The explosion threw two blue legs on the right side loose like they'd been swept; then the monster's giant form wobbled and tilted before collapsing backward.

While it was still falling, Vivi yelled "Go!" and Pitohui snarled "All right, get 'im!" and their vehicles came roaring forth from both sides.

As the sidecar rumbled with rapid acceleration, Llenn saw M's HP bar plummet to 0 in the upper left of her readout.

Prayers up!

M had told her that he would pray for her if she died, so Llenn imagined placing her hands together to send an invocation for him in turn. Her actual hands were too busy clutching the P90 and the frame of the sidebar.

Just as they'd expected, the crab hit the earth with a heavy boom and did not rise. Its legs merely flailed helplessly back and forth. Since the necks supporting the heads were sideways, they couldn't really lift the craniums much higher off the ground—ten feet at most.

As Bold drove the buggy slowly in for better aim, Jake landed the first shot from the passenger seat. Pointing his HK21 to the right, he slammed down the trigger to avenge Shinohara.

The rounds smacked the head resting on the ground, taking its HP down to 9.

The other buggies crowded behind that one, and soon more lines of fire joined the fray. Every member who wasn't driving was unloading with everything they had. The din from the scene was unfathomable.

LPFM approached on their automobiles and sidecar motorcycle from the other side, coming to a total stop at a distance of forty yards so the drivers could shoot, too.

As everyone capable of shooting joined in, the true cacophony really began.

"Vengeance for M!"

"Rahhh!"

SHINC pointed all the myriad firearms in their arsenal at the same target, muzzles

flashing.

"Hya-haaa!" Pitohui screeched joyously, emptying out the KTR-09's drum magazine. Llenn stood up on the edge of the sidecar, then pressed down the P90's trigger all the way. Empties flooded out of the bottom of the gun, pinging pleasantly off the body of the sidecar.

Fukaziroh showed up late, observing the crowd around the gigantic form. "Whoa, you guys are really going for it," she remarked. "Like a bunch of starving beggars crowded around an all-you-can-eat crab buffet."

"Fuka! Are there any other analogies you could have chosen?" Llenn asked when she had a moment to switch magazines.

"Nope."

"Oh."

The next moment, the fallen half of the crustacean—the blue side—burst into tiny shards and slowly began to disappear.

Even without an explanation from the game, it was clear that the ZEMAL/MMTM alliance had slain their target. Llenn could see the men pumping their fists on the buggy nearby, while Vivi waved her hand from the driver's seat.

The blue shards slowly climbed up into the sky. After many seconds, half the crab vanished, and all the members of that team simply blinked out of existence like ghosts. They had finished the fourth ordeal first.

"Five left!" Boss announced, switching her magazine.

In the distance, two hundred yards farther away, Shirley muttered, "No need to shoot the crab anymore..."

Resting atop the seat of the motorcycle, the muzzle of her R93 Tactical 2 swiveled smoothly. The crosshairs in the scope homed in on the back of a woman with a ponytail standing in front of the sidecar motorcycle.

Oh? You gonna do it? implied Clarence with only a sneering expression.

I'll do it right before we finish, Shirley replied, using just a smirk.

"Down to three! Almost there!" Boss rallied, counting down. "Now, two!"

Shirley's finger approached the trigger.

She didn't need a bullet circle. Since she had her gun zeroed in on a distance of four hundred yards; at two hundred yards there would be less drop on the bullet. As long as she aimed slightly downward, the round was guaranteed to hit Pitohui somewhere.

And her explosive bullet would ensure that the results would be lethal, no matter where it landed.

"Down to one! Shoot, shoot, shoot!"

Shirley silently reached for the trigger.

"Ah!"

A bright-red line landed on the motorcycle right in front of her.

That was a bullet line, of course, coming from over her left shoulder, and it was far bolder than usual. Only one person had a weapon capable of producing that.

"Fine. I lose."

Shirley lifted her gun off the seat.

Tohma saw that action through the scope of the antitank rifle, just as Boss roared, "That's zero!"

She took her finger off the trigger.

As pieces of the crustacean tore apart and rose up to the heavens, Suuzaburou's voice echoed in Llenn's ears.

"Congratulations, everyone. You have completed the fourth ordeal."

She lowered her heated P90 and checked the watch on the inside of her left wrist. It was just after 1:42.

"I will escort you to the fifth ordeal now."

The final ordeal at last... I wonder what it's like...

White light engulfed her.

CHAPTER 8
Reflection
—The Fifth Ordeal—



CHAPTER 8

REFLECTION

—THE FIFTH ORDEAL—

When Llenn opened her eyes, Llenn was standing before her.

“Hyeep?”

They bulged with shock, as did the eyes of the Llenn right in front of her.

“Ohhh... It’s just a mirror...” she muttered, realizing that she was merely looking at an enormous reflective surface.

That was her up ahead, dressed in desert pink, sporting a desert-pink hat with a white line along its length and carrying a desert-pink P90.

Except that she was holding the P90 in her left hand, and the line on her hat was on the left side, too. Her mirror image, in other words.

Yes, yes. Very tiny and cute. And the pink looked great as well. Even that gun was adorable. Llenn beamed at herself.

Then she turned to the right, and there was Llenn.

“Hmm?”

She turned to the left, and there was Llenn.

“Uh?”

She turned all the way around, and there was Llenn. And when her eyes shifted to the side, she saw many Llenns.

“Oh... It’s a fun house...”

One of those things at amusement parks that had floor-to-ceiling mirrors placed like walls at strange angles. It was the first time Llenn had been inside one—and Karen, too.

She looked down at the ground and found it perfectly dark. The floor was hard and reflected no light at all.

Then she checked up, and the ceiling was the same way. Black boards hung about ten feet overhead—higher than the average home and absent of mirrors.

There were no light fixtures, either, not on the walls nor the floor nor hanging from the ceiling.

Yet despite the lack of any light sources, she could perfectly make out her reflection in the mirrors. Long live the virtual world.

She walked closer to one of them. When she outstretched her left hand, the reflected Llenn held out her right, and she felt something hard on her fingertips.

Since the placement and angles of the mirrors were so varied, if she tilted her head a little, she could see many versions of herself at different angles all at once. At some points, the reflective surfaces also faced one another, creating an endless corridor effect.

She tried pushing on the mirror as hard as she could. It didn't budge. Then she took a few steps and tried again in a different spot. This one was like a rotating door, and it easily spun in place. Beyond it was a space filled with more mirrors. It seemed this was meant to be a maze.

"I think I'm going to get lost... What am I supposed to do here?" she grumbled to herself, before having a very belated realization.

Where are my teammates?

"Everybody! Where are you?" she shouted, assuming that her comm had been deactivated. The mirrors on either side echoed slightly. She received no response.

Hrm...

Llenn decided to inspect her situation.

The upper left of her vision still displayed a list of her teammates, but their hit point bars were hidden. M only had an X mark for a bar because he was already dead.

Her weapons: P-chan, Vor-chan, Kni-chan—all present.

Ammo: fully replenished.

Status effects: none.

Communications: As suspected, there was an X over her comm icon, which showed that it was unusable.

RESIGN button: eligible to use.

“So I’m supposed to fight on my own...?”

Llenn squeezed her P90, felt for the safety selector to ensure it was set to full auto, and then heard the disembodied voice of Suuzaburou announce, “Welcome to the fifth ordeal, everyone.”

Realizing that everyone else was getting this at the same time, she listened carefully. Suuzaburou’s voice ringing in the absence of his presence made her feel like she was listening to the voice of God.

“Each of you is in an isolated location. You do not know the state of any other player. You cannot communicate or meet up.”

Just as I thought.

“You are trapped where you are. You cannot escape unless you finish the trial, die, or resign. Victory hinges on fighting and defeating a single opponent. If your hit points deplete completely, you will fail the ordeal. In the event that you slay your foe, you will be taken to the meetup point. Your team will have cleared the fifth ordeal when all survivors are together.”

Essentially, she had to defeat just one enemy here in this house of mirrors, then meet up with the rest of the surviving team members to beat the quest.

In that case, time was of the essence.

If she couldn't beat her opponent or was taking too long, she could choose to resign as a strategic option and hope that her teammates had already finished. But the risk was that if she withdrew without anyone else beating their foes, she was just taking herself out of contention. And she had no way to know which was the right call.

"The present time is 1:44. You have six minutes. Prepare for battle."

In the upper-right corner, a countdown appeared reading six minutes. It ticked down to 05:59.

That was a severely restrictive time limit, even for just one enemy. She couldn't take her time—she needed to locate and finish off her opponent immediately.

That was when Llenn heard a cute, boyish voice in her mind.

"Llenn! I don't care who our enemies or allies are! Never let me go! My incredible rate of fire will slaughter them all!"

That's right, P-chan. I need your help. Oh, but don't shoot any allies. That part is bad, she thought.

But then came another voice, a relaxed one.

"Ah, how long it has been. Do you not think such a place behooves you to employ me?"

Ooh! Kni-chan's got a point!

In a close-combat situation, the combat knife she kept behind her back at all times might be the better choice.

Then two additional, identical voices rang out.

"Hey! Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Hey! I think you're forgetting something!"

Oh, right...

For a brief moment, Llenn debated her alternatives, then made up her mind and swung her hand through the air.

“Yeah!”

When the window appeared, she selected SWITCH EQUIPMENT.

“Awww, no faaaair!” squealed her adorable P90 as it vanished from her hand, along with the ammo pouches on either hip. They were replaced by two black holsters on her thighs. Inside were two pink pistols. A rectangular black backpack with pink-and-white lines had appeared on her shoulders.

They were Llenn’s personal handguns, which Pitohui had arranged for her as a gift in the pistols-only area in SJ4. This *GGO*-original design was called the AM.45 because it was a subcompact .45-caliber pistol. Since they had a custom-color job to match Llenn, they were called the AM.45 Version Llenn, aka the Vorpal Bunnies.

Llenn pulled the Vorpal Bunnies out of their holsters.

“Let’s do this!”

“Let’s kill ‘em!” they roared lustily.

She rested the protruding rear sights on the guns against her belt, then pushed her arms downward. That pulled the slides back, and the power of their springs pushed them into place, loading the squat, acorn-like .45-caliber ACP rounds into their chambers.

Her guns were loaded.

Each one could shoot six times. There were spare magazines in her backpack, but until she went for them, she could fire a maximum of twelve rounds.

As soon as she had her fangs in hand, Suuzaburou announced that the ordeal had commenced.

“And now, best of luck.”

So... where’s the enemy?

And... what are they like?

Keeping the Vorpal Bunnies steady at shoulder height, Llenn moved forward slowly.

Since her opponent might grab her weapons, she refrained from extending her arms. Instead, she held them close to her body, keeping them reasonably tense so she could swivel and point rapidly.

There was no guarantee that the enemy would approach her if she stayed in place. In fact, based on the previous ordeals, they probably wouldn't.

So Llenn stayed on the move.

The fun house projected many Llenns, stirring and shimmering as she moved. The Vorpal Bunnies in both hands slid silently past the mirrors.

She kept her index fingers outside the trigger guards for now to avoid accidentally touching them and creating a bullet line—and more importantly to avoid accidentally firing if she fell over.

Thirty quiet but tense seconds passed. Remaining time: 05:10.

Llenn strained her ears even harder than before. Perhaps her hearing would help her detect the enemy first in a place like this. However, the material underfoot was a mystery—it made no sound at all, even if she stomped her feet. That told Llenn that she didn't need to worry about her foes overhearing her footsteps, but by the same token, it also removed her ability to hear the same.

That meant she'd have to narrow in on smaller sounds, like her opponent's body moving through the air.

Where...?

Time passed in silence that was so absolute it was terrifying.

What is it...?

Remaining time: 04:58.

She had seen herself so many times and was getting so sick of the sight that she almost

failed to notice the enemy right before her eyes.

When Llenn passed one wall of mirrors and turned the corner, she saw her standing there, ten feet ahead.

The space was nearly black because of its low mirror density, save for a single mirror reflecting her straight ahead.

A mirror image, staring back at her. A reflection with the white line in her hat on the right side.

But Llenn's sharp gaze did not miss what was off.

She pointed straight at the reflected Llenn with the Vor-chan in her right hand.

The Llenn of the mirror ten feet away also had her left Vor-chan trained at her.

But at the moment, Llenn's gun was tilted a bit, aimed slightly to the inside.

By contrast, the Llenn ten feet away was essentially holding her weapon at a vertical angle.

As soon as Llenn squinted at the image with confusion, that was how she could tell.

The Llenn ten feet away remained as expressionless as a mannequin.

Oh... that's it.

She let her right index finger touch the Vorpal Bunny's trigger and pulled.

The two fired almost simultaneously.

“Gahk!”

I knew it! Llenn shrieked to herself, triumphant that she had been correct, before a dull pain in her right shoulder knocked her back. It glowed red with bullet damage, and her hit points went down to 80 percent.

The mystery was solved.

She knew who the enemy was.

It was *her*. The one who'd taken Llenn's shot to the left shoulder blade and had flipped backward the same way.

Llenn quickly got up, pointing the muzzle of the left Vorpal Bunny—but her foe was already gone.

“Gah!”

Instead, the enemy's remaining health had now appeared in her upper-right field of view in a bar of its own. It looked about 80 percent. The same as Llenn.

My opponent is a copy of myself!

The version of herself she saw a moment earlier hadn't been a reflection. It had been the enemy.

It was a model of herself, dressed exactly as she was, only mirrored from left to right.

And when she fired, the enemy had deduced that she'd been found out and so attacked her back a split second later. Both of them had taken a .45-caliber bullet to the shoulder as a result.

The fifth ordeal's opponent was a copy of herself.

“Argh! What poor taste!” Llenn shouted. But she was also fired up. “That's my opponent! And she's going down!” Another cute little girl in pink, just like her. “I'll beat her! I'll destroy her!”

She smiled viciously and sprinted in the direction her foe had probably gone.

Then she spotted the enemy against the black space and, giving in to her battle instincts, pointed the right Vorpal Bunny. The other girl pointed her left Vorpal Bunny in a complete mirror image.

Wait, no!

She realized her mistake too late.

The Vorpal Bunny whose trigger she pulled smirked, “*You can’t call take-backsies. I’m a machine.*”

Its hammer fell, striking the firing pin inside the gun and causing the pin to hit the primer. In other words, the gun activated and propelled its loaded bullet forward and into the mirror she was pointing at, just as she’d intended to do when pulling the trigger.

From elsewhere in the black space, a different bullet sped toward Llenn, who had accidentally shot at her reflection. She managed to twist herself so that the new round passed just inches from her side.

“Dammit!”

Rolling and rolling, she fired two shots with each hand in the direction she heard the bullet come from.

It didn’t seem to do any good.

She curled up on the floor instantly before four return shots flew at her. They each struck her backpack, pushing her four times. “Gug-gah-gah-gah!”

Fortunately, the bulletproof plates from M’s shield had prevented the rounds from penetrating. She’d lost no hit points.

Llenn twisted and jumped to her feet, hopping quickly from side to side as she retreated. As she did, she liberally switched out the magazines that still had good bullets in them, dropping the loaded ones and sticking the grips of the pistols into the bottom of her backpack so she could click in new ones. When the slides were back in place, she had a total of fourteen new bullets between the two guns.

After retreating a bit, Llenn stopped and hid behind a mirror.

04:14.



She glanced at the remaining time and stood there in quiet contemplation.

Can't just blast away as soon as I see the enemy. Could be me in the mirror.

And if I fire, my opponent is guaranteed to shoot the same number of rounds back. So first I have to make sure it's not a reflection, then shoot as many bullets as possible to ensure it won't return fire...

She started sprinting.

As her feet pattered soundlessly on the black flooring, she rushed through the darkness in search of the flashes of pink. In other words, a place with more mirrors. Eventually, she passed a number of other Llenns on her left and right.

When she saw herself straight ahead, she couldn't tell if it was a mirror or a foe. Assuming it was a mirror, she fired a round from her right gun anyway. As long as she could keep moving, any counterattacks would most likely pass her by.

This way, I can search for her location!

This one was a mirror, its image distorting from the bullet. She heard a sharp whistle from the left.

By the time her spine tingled, it was already too late.

A tiny pink shadow came barreling toward her from over her left shoulder, jamming one of her pistols at Llenn from just six feet and unloading. She tried to dodge, but it was just too close. The bullet passed through her side as she contorted.

“Urk!”

She fell, backpack and all, eventually smashing into a mirror and shattering it to pieces. When she twisted around, she found that the enemy hadn't stopped moving for a second after shooting.

Covered in glass shards, she lay prone as her hit points instantly decreased by 30 percent, the gauge turning from green to yellow.

She's fast! She's quick! She's tough!

Llenn had nothing but praise for her foe.

She'd approached with inhuman speed, nimbly launched her assault, and disengaged. It was a brilliant use of the hit-and-run strategy. For the first time in her life, Llenn truly appreciated how unpleasant it could be to duel a small, quick opponent.

I have to wonder, has everyone who's fought me... found me annoying? she pondered, a quick haiku.

Now she got why people called her by that horrible nickname, the Pink Maiden of Manslaughter. She understood it firmly. She understood it thoroughly. She understood it violently.

For Llenn, who'd only ever tangled with opponents who were bigger and slower than she was, this was the first foe in *GGO* she wasn't sure how to defeat.

This is really tough...

The countdown was at 03:59.

But she couldn't just lay there on the floor. Llenn sprang to her feet, scattering shards of mirror.

Her hit points were at 50 percent. The enemy was at 80 percent.

Thanks to her build, she couldn't sustain too much punishment. A single shot from a .45-caliber ACP round to one of her extremities had stolen 30 percent of her health. A bullet to the head or heart would spell instant death.

But that meant her opponent had the same constitution. She was an exact copy with the same features and capabilities. It wouldn't be fair otherwise.

If she could just nail her foe with a single head shot, Llenn stood a chance of snatching victory from defeat.

Slowly marching forward, Llenn realized that she should stay away from areas with high mobility. Places like this, where mirror density was low, gave the enemy more opportunities to move quickly.

Her doppelgänger wouldn't attack first, even if she was right over her shoulder. Instead,

she was relying on a battle style where she would wait for Llenn to take the initiative before counterattacking.

That was because of the time limit, she deduced. There was no need to rush things when your opponent could lose just by taking too long.

That meant the key to victory was for her to spot the enemy first, then blast her until she was undeniably dead.

Llenn crept forward, six rounds in her right Vorpal Bunny, seven rounds in her left.

Eventually, she found herself in a room with many mirrors on the walls, though she couldn't tell if she had looped back to the start or if it was another location entirely.

03:25.

Here we go; this should work, Llenn mused, gazing upon a sea of herself. *Now... time to do this...*

She prayed that this was going to play out the way she'd envisioned.

Let's go, Vor-chan.

Without aiming anywhere in particular, she reached out and fired her left Vorpal Bunny.

The instant she pulled the trigger, Llenn dropped to the floor and listened for the reprisal round flying back over her head.

I knew it. She was right.

Her foe would only fire as many rounds as she'd fired herself. It attacked like a mirror, reflecting the player's actions.

Llenn was flat on the ground; she was an easy target, but her adversary wasn't firing. Clearly, the game designer had intentionally set up the mirror enemy this way.

Once the bullet had whizzed past, she got back up and examined her surroundings.

There was nothing but Llenn after Llenn as far as the eye could see. So many Llenنس. She spun around for a full view. A whole bunch of Llenنس. Here, there, and everywhere. All Llenنس.

Mirror-image Llenنس.

And... regular Llenنس.

There was a Llenn with the line on the left side of her cap, right there. Their eyes met.

“Found you!”

Llenn rushed straight for that “mirror” and launched herself into a ferocious slide. She clenched her guns hard to make sure they wouldn’t fly loose. When her feet hit a mirror, she pointed her firearms in that direction.

If there was a reflection of Llenn standing there, it would look proper when viewed in the mirror. And Llenn would be able to look her in the eyes.

She conjectured, then charged; sure enough, she’d found her doppelgänger.

About thirteen feet away from the spot where she came sliding to a halt.

With her two pistols pointed back at Llenn.

It doesn’t matter how much she shoots me as long as I shoot her.

The difference in their postures—the sizes of the strike zones each one offered—possibly gave the real Llenn the edge.

It was a desperate ploy to secure a chance at survival, a gamble in the midst of near-certain death.

“Taaa!” Llenn shouted, squeezing the triggers of both Vorpal Bunnies.

They released no bullets.

Huh?

Despite the force she was applying with her fingers, the triggers seemed firmly fixed in place.

Huhhh?

She caught sight of the rear of her Vorpal Bunnies.

Ohhhhh! What have I done?! she screamed.

It was obvious why she hadn't been able to shoot them.

She'd lifted the safety selector on each pistol with her thumbs as she'd gripped them—almost certainly a byproduct of squeezing them so hard while sliding. By simply gripping her weapons harder than she'd needed to and accidentally turning on the safety, she'd ruined herself.

I really screwed up! I'm so sorry, everyone; I couldn't make it, she apologized—yet another haiku—waiting to be riddled with bullets.

Time passed in silence.

Llenn had failed to fire, but her opponent didn't even shoot.

“Huh?”

Right in front of her, merely thirteen feet away, the enemy held a pair of mirror-image Vorpal Bunnies without firing.

“Why...?” she asked thoughtlessly. Her doppelgänger said nothing.

She was just standing there. The same as when Llenn had first found her.

“Ohhh!”

An electrical signal shot through her brain like lightning as understanding dawned on her.

The enemy won't attack unless it is attacked. And it won't strike if I can't.

Those were the underlying principles of her foe's actions.

Even though she was training her pistols on the other Llenn with her fingers on the triggers, the system was aware that her safety mechanisms were on. It knew those guns were not going to release any bullets.

No human player would have ever given her this benefit of the doubt. Loaded or not, a pointed gun signaled an intent to attack, so you would typically shoot and kill. Besides, it was basically impossible to determine the status of the safety from the front of a gun.

“.....”

Slowly, Llenn tilted her firearms. She kept the safeties on.

“Excuse me, Llenn? Aren’t you going to shoot?”

“*Why not take the safeties off and let us loose?*” complained her Vor-chans, who didn’t comprehend the situation.

“Mlp!”

“Mrf!”

She stuck them back in their holsters.

As expressionless as ever, her opponent slowly moved her hands and put the mirror-image Vorpal Bunnies back in their holsters.

Llenn steadily walked toward her opponent.

If I attack, she’ll attack, she reckoned. So I just have to prevent her from striking back...

She got closer.

The opponent is a reflection of me... reversed left to right...

She came right up to her foe. Save for her empty expression, it was just like looking in a mirror. Then again, Llenn didn’t know what face she was currently making; maybe it was just as blank as the enemy’s.

I’ll only have one chance! I just have to hope this works!

Llenn stuck out her left hand.

“Shake!”

“.....”

The enemy said nothing. It wasn’t clear whether she identified that as an attack, but she also stuck out her left hand regardless.

And once Llenn saw that it was the left hand, not the right, she realized, *I can win this!*

She reached and touched her doppelgänger’s left hand with her own, then grabbed it. It was the first time she’d ever shaken hands with herself.

She squeezed harder. “Feeling good?”

“.....”

The enemy said nothing. It wasn’t clear whether she identified that as an attack, but she also squeezed back regardless.

“Die.”

Llenn reached behind her back and grabbed the handle of Kni-chan, who announced, “*Yes, my time has come.*”

Her foe reacted immediately to Llenn’s intention to strike. She used her empty right hand to reach behind her back—and grasped nothing but empty air.

A mirror image isn’t going to find the handle there, is it?

Llenn pulled her dagger out backhand with her right and swung it at maximum speed. The blade passed through the middle of her opponent’s neck at the moment its right arm passed in front of Llenn’s neck, too.

Even as her doppelgänger’s body toppled backward, glowing with damage on her neck, Llenn refused to release her grip. The enemy’s hit points dropped further and further.

Yanking with all her might, she spun the lifeless body of her opponent so that its back struck her chest. Now she was firmly gripping a body exactly like her own from

behind.

"You were... so strong..." she whispered lovingly. "So just in case..."

It wouldn't be nice if all of this wasn't enough to kill, so she plunged the knife right into her body double's chest.

The HP gauge went down as far as it could go, and the enemy body she clutched to her chest burst into pieces. The countdown clock stopped at 02:23.

"Very well done," announced God—er, Suuzaburou. Then she was standing in a field.

It had been an instantaneous teleportation, with no flash of light. In the blink of an eye, she'd been transported to another location entirely.

Spread out before her was a breathtaking sight.

Tall green grass rippled and waved in the gentle breeze. A multitude of low, rolling hills continued all the way to the horizon. Cirrocumulus clouds dotted the sky in the distance. But overhead, it was beautifully clear. It was a reddish-blue hue (this was still *GGO*, after all) but it seemed clearer and more brilliant than usual. The midday sun blazed down from on high.

GGO was set in a world where civilization had collapsed following a world war that had been devastating enough to affect the atmosphere. Apparently, however, some beauty still remained. Or perhaps this landscape was a reward for finishing the quest.

Llenn returned the knife to its sheath behind her back.

"Hey, took you a while," came a voice from over her shoulder.

She didn't need to look to tell who it was. It was Shirley. But she checked anyway, and it was still Shirley.

"*Sigh...*" Llenn exhaled.

There was also a large house ahead. It was a country-style dwelling like you'd expect to see in an American TV drama, a log cabin with a chimney in the middle and a beautiful gabled roof. It was also huge—about a hundred feet wide and thirty feet long.

Log cabins like this were a frequent sight in *GGO*, and their interiors and furniture placement would always be identical. While the exteriors might have been run-down and ancient, the insides were always well-preserved. The glass windows were still intact, and the roof hadn't fallen through anywhere.

The house was nestled between hills on three sides, right, left, and rear; east, west, and north. A fence wrapped around the house with plenty of yard space. The grass on half the yard had been trimmed to serve as a lawn, while the other half housed rows of plants.

Just one tree stood in the yard, and a child's swing hung from one of its large, thick branches. Barrels for capturing rainwater had also been set up, and a small doghouse sat under the eaves of the tree.

In the corner of the yard was a gray-brick well, its black mouth yawning toward the sky. Its bucket had been pulled up and was overflowing with sparkling liquid.

It was a place people could call home.

The pastoral sight made you wonder, was this the house of a family who had lived off the land for generations and generations after that foolish war wiped out nearly all of humanity?

Shirley sat down on the cushion of a small, rusty tractor in front of the yard, its tires sunken into the grass. She clutched her freakish rifle in front of her.

The red tractor was a Porsche, the German automaker famous for their sports cars. As far as tractors went, it was pretty cool-looking and also pointed in the front. The female sniper sitting in it looked equally cool.

"Congrats! You beat your copy, too!" Llenn cheered, approaching through the waist-high grass.

"Yeah. It was creepy, though."

"How long did it take you?" she asked. Shirley had undoubtedly been faster than Llenn, but she was curious.

"Thirty seconds from the start. I've been bored out of my skull this whole time. I didn't think anyone else was showing up."

"That's so fast! How did you do it?"

"Hmm? I wandered around the fun house, then noticed one of my reflections looked different. That's when I realized it was the enemy, not a reflection."

That had been the same as Llenn.

"But I was too close, so I didn't use my rifle. I drew my ken-nata and attacked her with that. She did the exact same thing back, so that's when I realized even my attacks would be a copy..."

Llenn's experience had also been identical. She'd just figured it out much quicker. But how did she manage to do better than a stalemate?

"I held back my swing at the last second and stuck out my thigh to take my foe's blade. Did you know that really developed muscles, like your thighs, can lock so tightly around a deep stab that the blade won't be able to slide back out?"

"Urgh?"

Llenn did not know that. How the heck were you supposed to find out about something that gruesome?

"While she was busy trying to pull it out, I just grabbed her around the neck with both hands and choked her out. Didn't take that long, actually."

"Urgh..."

Llenn really hadn't needed to hear that.

"Nobody else is showing up," murmured Llenn, leaning against the rusty tractor and taking in the beautiful scenery.

She'd assumed that she would at least see Shirley's HP bar show up again after finishing the ordeal, especially since the sniper was sitting right there, but that didn't happen. Llenn had also thought the area would act like a victory screen and prevent her from shooting, but her guns hadn't been disabled, either.

"Whether they show up or not, we've still finished the quest," noted Shirley

nonchalantly.

"True," acknowledged Llenn, who didn't really have any other explanation to offer.

"Might be too late for us to win the fastest finish. It's quite likely the other guys beat us to the punch."

She was referring to ZEMAL and MMTM's alliance. They had gone into the fun house before LPFM and SHINC, after all.

"Probably."

"Do you think Pitohui died, too? The stronger you are, the tougher it should be to beat your doppelgänger. I won pretty easily by not using my rifle. If we'd gotten into a shoot-out, it would have been a draw."

"Hmmm..."

Pitohui was perfectly capable in every kind of engagement, it seemed. Would she really fall in battle to a mirror image? Maybe they ran each other through with their photon swords.

Shirley watched the wind rustle through the grass in the field and murmured, "It's beautiful. I can't believe there's somewhere in *GGO* like this."

"No kidding."

"I don't want to have to fight somewhere so peaceful."

"Neither do I. But I don't think it'll be necessary. I have a feeling this is a reward for beating the quest."

"I hope so."

Shirley and Llenn fell silent, basking in the moment.

"Fwuh? Where am I?"

Suddenly, the splendor of nature was shattered by the introduction of a new figure carrying a pair of grenade launchers: Fukaziroh. Since nothing had telegraphed her

instantaneous arrival, it was startling.

Before Llenn could even get a word out, Boss appeared, too. "Hnn?"

And Tohma. "Ah!"

The three of them were in a line facing away toward the fields.

"Yoo-hoo! Guys! Over here!" Llenn called.

Fukaziroh turned around, beaming. "Yo, Llenn! Did you murder Llenn?"

"You bet. Did you gut that teensy blond, Fuka?"

"Yeah, she was tough... And let me tell you, it was hard to kill someone so beauteous and fair... Wish I could have taken her captive to show to you all."

"Nah, one is more than enough," Llenn said, laughing. She welcomed the trio, figuring she would hear how Fukaziroh won the fight later.

"Is this it? No Pitohui?" asked Boss. Llenn shook her head.

Tohma said, "I had barely any time left..."

Did Pito die, then? Was fighting against herself just too tough...? Llenn wondered.

"Keh! How dare she die before I could kill her!" Shirley swore, right at the moment her rival materialized.

Her sudden arrival was a surprise, but so was her appearance.

Pitohui was dressed in her underwear.

She wasn't equipped with any of her gear, not even her usual navy-blue bodysuit. Her lithe, strong, tanned body was covered with only a black sports bra and boxer shorts, the minimum possible equipment in *GO*. Even her feet were bare.

Presumably, she'd unequipped all her gear at once, clothing included.

"Why?" Llenn asked. It was the only word that came to mind.

"Eeeek! You look so sexy, Pito!" shrieked Fukaziroh.

Pitohui spun around, her ponytail swinging. "Hello, everyone! There you are! All together!"

"Pito! You're almost late! But you made it in time! That's good!"

"Thank you, Llenn. I have to admit: It was a close one! That should be all of us, I assume. Who's not here? Clare, Rosa, Sophie, Tanya, and Anna?"

Llenn glanced at her wristwatch. It was 1:49:58. No time left.

And then there was Clarence.

"Huh? I made it?" she murmured, turning around. "Yahoo! Is this Heaven?"

"No, but congratulations all the same!"

"Whoa, all my hit points are back! Yesss! I'm so glad! Whew, I thought I was a gonerrrr!" Clarence wailed. She must have had *some* battle with herself.

Llenn was very curious to hear about everyone else's experiences, but she wanted to know what had happened to Pitohui, who was calling up the menu to put her gear back on, most of all. Why would she be in her underwear?

"Pito, why did you strip?"

"Oh, that?" Pitohui replied, transforming back into her full getup like some kind of magical girl. "I was so jazzed about getting to fight myself that I went for a fistfight, rather than a gunfight."

"Huh?"

"So both of us stripped down to our skivvies and had fun with our hands!"

"Oh..."

"Anyway, I managed to feint and pin her down, but it seemed like such a waste to kill her right away!"

"Oh..."

"So after I duct-taped her hands and feet, I had a moment to experience something truly precious: the chance to torture myself! But I went too easy on myself and nearly ran out of time. Whoopsie!"

That's not a "whoopsie"...What's wrong with these people? They're all crazy, thought Llenn, who'd achieved victory by slashing her own throat.

"Well done, everyone. You have cleared the fifth ordeal," said Suuzaburou, popping out of the grass to greet Llenn, Fukaziroh, Pitohui, Shirley, Clarence, Boss, and Tohma.

Every one of them felt either relieved at the victory or bittersweet at the thought of those they'd lost along the way.

But Fukaziroh just crouched down and screamed, "Oh, Suuzaburouuuuu! You're aliiiiive!"

"Were we the first to beat it?" asked Boss.

"I still don't know that yet," replied the dog, which took the group off guard. "But one task I would like you to complete still remains. Once you finish it, this trial is truly over. The quest will be complete."

"What? Six?! I thought you said it was the five ordeals, not six!" joked Clarence.

"It is not so taxing that I would call it an ordeal. It will be over very quickly," noted Suuzaburou in his typically calm manner.

"I want you to kill me."

FINAL CHAPTER
In Dog Heaven



FINAL CHAPTER IN DOG HEAVEN

“I want you to kill me.”

“Okay! I’ll do it real quick! One shot, totally painless!” shouted Pitohui, reaching for her XDM pistol.

“Not so faaaaaaaast!” Fukaziroh’s heavy grenade launcher pushed her hand aside.

“What’s this? You want to do it yourself, Fuka?” Pitohui asked, looking down from on high.

Fukaziroh glared back at up her, eyes just visible beneath the brim of her large helmet. “No, I don’t! What are you talking about, ‘real quick’?! Don’t you dare kill Suuzaburou! And why do we have to do that in the first place? Hey, Suuzaburou, why did you say that?”

“Unfortunately, I have not been told the reason why.”

“Grrr! Then go ask that awful writer! Right now! Go, boy, go!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can! Go on, ask! I won’t give you your favorite treat until then!”

“Stop picking on him!” Llenn cried, defending the canine.

“Weren’t you supposed to be invulnerable?” asked Boss.

“That status has been removed,” replied Suuzaburou.

Clarence remarked, “So is this something where the event rounds itself out by having the messenger killed at the end? That’s a fairly common convention, isn’t it?”

“I don’t care! I’m not letting anyone kill him!” Fukaziroh raged, darting in front of the

little dog and boldly guarding it, both MGL-140s at the ready. “If anyone points their gun at Suuzaburou, I’ll blast them!”

“So I just have to use my photon sword, then?”

“Same thing! I’ll shoot you! And let me warn you: I’ve got plasma grenades as the first shot in both Rightony and Leftonia!”

“Then everyone will die, *including* the doggy.”

“Grrr...”

Llenn stepped in front of her. “Fuka... you didn’t think this through, did you? You’re always like this...”

The little pink thing stood side by side with her counterpart, who was nearly as tiny.

“I agree with Fukaziroh!” she announced. “I’d rather not kill the doggy!”

“Llenn... You’re the best friend a girl could ask for...”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Suuzaburou! Did you hear that? Llenn’s letting herself be slaughtered like a lamb for your sake! You’d better call that completing the quest!”

“Hey, wait.”

“Don’t worry, Llenn. Let me do the talking.”

“No, no, no.”

“C’mon, it’s just a silly joke! Anyway, nyah-nyah-nyah! Hey, all you bad guys trying to kill Suuzaburou! You gotta take on the both of us!”

“Wait, wait, wait a second!” shouted Boss, rushing over with her pigtails bouncing to interject. “What will happen to the quest if we don’t kill you? Tell us, Suuzaburou.”

“It will not end. For you to depart, you would have to shut down the AmuSphere, perform an emergency log-out without saving, or resign from the quest event.”

"I would assume that wouldn't count as finishing the quest? No experience points?"

"That is correct."

"Well, that's no good." Boss sighed. "Um, Mi..."

She clamped her lips shut the moment before she revealed Miyu's and Karen's real names. Shirley and Clarence didn't know their real-life identities.

"Fukaziroh, Llenn... I know the pooch is cute, but killing him is part of this quest. And while I hate to put it this way, he *is* just a character in a game."

"You think I don't know that?!" Fukaziroh ranted. "I've played VR games for years! How many virtual beings do you think I've killed with my own two hands?! But you know what? I'll be damned if I watch a dog die before my eyes again!"

"....."

Boss was taken aback, unsure how to proceed. Instead, a woman with a wicked expression (Pitohui) added, "When everyone's working together to achieve something, you sometimes have to suck it up, Fuka and Llenn."

"Then why don't *you*?!"

"Oh. That's a good point. But I don't want to. I'm not known for my patience."

"In that case..."

"Yes?"

"I'll run away! I'm taking Suuzaburou and escaping! I'll rush to the very ends of the earth! I'll cross the ocean and find the new world! And all who try to chase me will have to deal with the pink demon and my grenade launchers!"

"Hey, don't leave me behind," whined Llenn.

"All right!" exclaimed Pitohui. "Then I respond to your heartfelt sentiment with heart and fists of my own!"

She put the XDM back in its holster and lifted the KTR-09 at her shoulder.

Well, I could have seen this coming, Llenn thought, giving up.

This was *GGO*, after all. A swarm of people who chose to let bullets do the talking—herself included.

“Very well. Very well. Let’s rumble, and the winner gets to make the call,” said Fukaziroh, grinning maliciously. She was enjoying this.

“That sounds fun!” someone shouted. It was Shirley, and her expression matched her words. Hopping down from the tractor with R93 Tactical 2 on her shoulder, she marched up to stand next to Llenn. “I’ll be on *this* side. I don’t suppose I have to explain why, do I?”

Llenn knew it was because she wanted to shoot Pitohui, but she didn’t bother voicing it.

Fukaziroh replied, “Of course I know why! Because you’re a dog person!”

“.....Well, I won’t deny that.”

When it came to animals, Mai loved cats and dogs and foxes and rats and just about anything else. At the same time, of course, she was a hunter who’d ended the lives of many wild creatures.

“My goodness! So it’s one against three. Even *I* might have trouble with this,” drawled Pitohui, who was very much putting on an act. Yes, she was hamming it up, indeed.

“Many against one? Methinks this is less than honorable,” muttered Boss theatrically, something she must have heard from a samurai story, before standing right beside Pitohui.

But Llenn could tell the truth: Boss just wanted to join forces with Pitohui—or more specifically, with Elza Kanzaki.

“Let’s consider this an equal fight, young ladies,” added Tohma, standing with Boss. Now it was three on three.

But Llenn could tell the truth: Tohma just wanted to join forces with Elza Kanzaki, and so on, and so on.

"Eva, Tohma! Oh, girls! I love you!" cheered Pitohui. The two simpered like goons.

At this point, it was Llenn the submachine gunner, Fukaziroh the twin grenadier, and Shirley the deadly sniper versus the heavily armed gunner Pitohui, the silent sniper and assault riflewoman Boss, and the automatic sniper Tohma.

There was a kind of tactical balance between both sides, although that wasn't entirely clear to Llenn.

Lastly, one more person got up and announced, "Good grief. Listen to you ladies..."

It was handsome Clarence, shrugging and attracting the attention of all six.

"Don't look at me that way. I'm not joining either side. I can't ruin the even matchup, and I'm a little tuckered out after my suicide bombing earlier. Plus..."

Plus? They waited for her theatrical conclusion.

"If you all wipe one another out, who's going to finish this quest? We seem to have given up on being the first to finish the event, but aside from that, there's no point letting all that hard work go to waste, right? It would be unfair to those who died before us."

That was a good point, they all agreed—except for Fukaziroh.

"Now, just a moment! Are you saying that if we all kill one another, and you're left on your own, you're going to shoot Suuzaburou?"

"Basically, yeah."

"Then you're actually on the other side! I should blast you right now," she spat, lifting the MGL-140s.

But Llenn stopped her. "Fuka, it's simple. Just win and ensure we're not mutually wiping one another out. We should be happy she's not joining the other side. If she wants to give us that handicap, let's take it," she explained, the voice of reason.

"Grrr...," Fukaziroh grumbled, but she reluctantly agreed.

Llenn turned to Clarence and said, "But if we win, and we're half dead when we

survive, I want you to promise you'll resign from the quest with us, rather than finishing us off."

"That only makes sense. Okay, I promise. You guys go ahead and kill one another over the fate of that little fluffy black creature. I'll be... Well, I'll be sitting back on the hill to the north, watching. You come with me, Suuzaburou, it's dangerous over here," Clarence stated, beckoning.

But the dog did not budge. Fukaziroh crouched down next to the little black spitz and stroked him with a very kind, loving look. "This place is going to turn into a battlefield. You go with that tomboy. Don't worry, I'll come back for you..."

The canine replied, "Um, I don't think this is supposed to happen..."

"Don't worry about it. Also, I'll give you some delicious dog food."

"No, this *really* isn't supposed to happen..."

"Okay. Well, it's not really safe, but I'll give you some people food, too. I'll make sure to wash it first, since the flavor will be too strong."

"That's not what I meant," Suuzaburou protested, but Clarence picked him up and walked away.

"....."

Fukaziroh watched them go. Clarence walked about a hundred feet to the northwest, next to the house, then turned around and called out, "Okay, you can go now! Sixth ordeal! Kill one another! Ready, fight!"

Hang on; not like that! Llenn snapped.

"We're just supposed to start shooting, right here? We can't do that! Not unless you *actually* want us to all wind up dead in a draw!" vented Shirley.

"That's right!" Boss added. "We should face off and make it a proper duel!"

"We'll need to reconfigure our comms," noted Tohma, a crucial detail to keep in mind. Otherwise, both groups would hear each other.

"But how will we..." Llenn wondered aloud.

Around them were nothing but open fields. Nowhere to hide, nothing for cover. The snipers would have the run of the place.

"All right, here's a proposal," said Pitohui lackadaisically. "See that log cabin there? We'll split up on either side, backs against the walls, where we can't see the other team. No going inside before the engagement starts. Let's say we're allowed to run into the hills to the east and west. But no shooting until the duel starts. You stay on the north hill to watch for cheaters, Clare."

"And?"

"How about sixty seconds until the all clear? We'll have Clare shoot her gun to start the battle. Then we can make it an interior battle right away or rush into the distance for sniping and grenades."

This was all just Pitohui's suggestion, but the others didn't have any better ideas.

"I'm fine with that," said Llenn.

"Very well. Let's do it," added Shirley.

"Sounds good. I'll be there with bell song!" chirped Fukaziroh.

"Fuka... did you mean 'bells on'?"

"Is that the saying? Yeah."

"Okey dokey, folkey, when you're on the wall of the building, wave to me for a signal. Then I'll start the countdown," rang Clarence's voice through the comms of both groups of three.

"Win or lose, no hard feelings!" added Pitohui, waving.

"Heh! There's no 'or' there; we're gonna win!" Fukaziroh shouted, glaring as the groups proceeded through the yard to the cabin.

Although they hadn't decided on it, based on where they'd been standing, Fukaziroh's team naturally wound up on the east side. Pitohui's team was on the west.

Both were taking their sweet time. This was to give themselves as much leeway as possible to discuss tactics before the sixty-second countdown began.

"It's the filibuster tactic, Llenn!"

"Is that what you call it...?"

"Anyway, Llenn, do you have a strategy in mind?" asked Shirley quietly as she walked at the slowest pace in history.

"Is there a reason you're not asking me?" demanded Fukaziroh, mildly outraged.

"Well, let's see... First, we should go over the opponents. Pito's just supremely tough all around. And Boss is no pushover, either. She's quite fast for her size. Both of them can take a lot of punishment. Tohma's sniping is excellent, and her Dragunov is an automatic," Llenn remarked, thinking out loud.

The house was getting larger on her left. "I'm assuming the interior layout is the same as the cabins we've seen on the world map. It'll have a big living room with a loft in the center and bedrooms on either side. The hallways on the north side. Walls are logs, so they don't allow any bullets through. But Pito's photon swords can pierce them. And a pistol can fire through the interior doors. The floorboards in the hallways always creak when you step on them."

"Hmm, sounds about right. Continue."

"The yard around the house is very open. No cover aside from the well, tractor, and tree. Hills to the left and right. Grass is tall enough to hide people, but you'll probably get spotted if you move. It's close enough that a sniper has a sure kill shot..."

How to win a three-on-three fight in this setting?

"Llenn, remember that I still have twelve plasma grenades," Fukaziroh reminded her, lifting Rightony and Leftonia. They represented a tremendous amount of firepower, but if a bullet hit even one of them, the results would be disastrous. A chain reaction of twelve plasmas could blow the entire cabin to smithereens. And they couldn't afford a draw.

"Ah... so how about this?" added Shirley, offering her most grisly idea. "I'll sprint for sixty seconds and hide atop a hill. You two go inside and stick together. Once you've seen Pitohui and Eva go inside, detonate yourselves immediately. Send the whole building to smithereens. And I'll take out Tohma after that."

Fukaziroh responded, "Brilliant idea—not! I'm going to pick up Suuzaburou and live with him here, in this cabin! You saw that doghouse in the yard!"

"Don't be stupid, Fuka," scolded Llenn. She turned to Shirley. "I'm afraid that plan is off the table. What if they don't go inside, or only one of them does? You're going to end up fighting one on three, or one on two."

"Hrm..."

"Plus..."

"Plus?"

"Didn't you want to kill Pito yourself, Shirley?" Llenn asked with a nasty grin.

"I'm impressed," Shirley replied, metaphorically doffing her hat. They had finally reached the side of the cabin.

We're out of time. No time. Need to think.

Think of a way to beat them.

A way, a way... There must be a way... Any way at all...

And after a ferocious loop through her mind, something burst.

"Oh. I have a good idea."

"Let's hear it," requested Shirley.

"It's a little crazy," added Llenn hesitantly. "Are you sure?"

"The crazier, the better."

Much like Llenn's team, Pitohui's side was tiptoeing along as slowly as possible.

"Let's see, how should we beat them? Oooh, I can't believe I get to fight Llenn again! This is so exciting!" she exclaimed. The atmosphere was like a picnic. She was jabbering so loudly that she didn't care if they overheard.

"Did you have a plan in mind, ma'am?" asked Boss under her breath.

"Yeah," Pitohui replied, just as quietly. "Eva, what's the biggest thing to watch out for in a three on three?"

"Whichever group loses at least one member first will lose due to a numerical disadvantage. Never break the three-person cell."

"Correct. You get a gold star," answered Pitohui, reaching out and rubbing Boss on the head.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh..." Boss grinned, pleased as punch that Elza Kanzaki('s avatar) was rubbing her (avatar's) head. Meanwhile, Tohma looked jealous.

"So leaving a sniper up on the hill is actually quite risky. But what's the point of having two or three of us on a hill? Especially when Fuka's got her plasma grenades left, and Shirley has those awful explosive rounds."

"I've got plenty of grand grenades, too. I could go inside and blow myself up if I see at least two of them! I bet it would level the entire building. After all, even a draw is a win for us."

"That's true. I considered that, too. If I only cared about winning, that might be the most solid course of action, sending you in there alone to blow up... and while I'm acting as decoy, Tohma shoots Shirley."

"Is there a problem with it...?" Boss asked hesitantly.

"Against ordinary enemies, no. But we're dealing with Llenn here. She knows she can't get into a draw. When her back is against the wall, that's when she comes up with the real bonkers ideas. So with that in mind..."

"With that in mind?" Boss and Tohma asked simultaneously.

Pitohui finished, “It’s pointless to come up with a solid plan! Let’s just play it by ear! Real close to the line! Only thing is...”

After taking their sweet, delectably sweet time, both teams reached the sides of the log cabin.

“Wow, you finally made it, huh? Thought the sun was going to go down. All right, I’m starting the sixty-second countdown!” announced Clarence, standing on the breezy hilltop to the north. Suuzaburou was cradled in her left arm.

They had configured their comms so that Clarence was the only person everyone could hear.

On either side of the house, Llenn and Pitohui waved back. Clarence called up a window to start the countdown. A display emerged in the upper-right corner of her vision.

58, 57, 56...

The countdown proceeded in silence.

43, 42, 41...

Bored, Clarence watched the two teams prepare from the hill. When she saw them motioning and murmuring among themselves and recognized what they were doing, she thought, *Ohhh! So that's your plan!* She had to make sure not to say anything out loud, because the other team would hear.

21, 20, 19...

Once it started, this one was going to be over quickly, she thought, pulling the Five-Seven pistol loose with her free hand.

11, 10, 9, 8...

Clarence pointed it straight up in the air, just like the starter at a track meet.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1...

She fired.

As soon as Pitohui heard the gun salute from Clarence, a rather silly-sounding succession of *pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop!* followed it.

“Inside!” she barked to her teammates, leaping into motion.

There were back doors on both sides of the cabin. She kicked theirs in and went through.

She was immediately inside a bedroom. Pitohui passed by the large bed and reached the interior door, which she also kicked open into the hallway.

“Get down!” she ordered the other two. Boss and Tohma obeyed like faithful hounds.

That’s when the explosions and shock waves started.

Boss turned around, crouched, and saw a plasma grenade detonating on the west side of the house. The blue surge created a wicked sphere that obliterated the yard.

The well, the crops, the tree, the swing—all these things a civilized life required melted into slag. The gust of wind rattled the door they’d entered through and smashed all the glass windows.

Crouching and tensing against the explosion, the force even shook her. If she’d been on her feet, she wouldn’t have been on them much longer.

The detonations continued in an extended sequence that refused let up.

“Thanks a lot, Fuka!”

“Did she shoot them *all*!?” Tohma shouted. She and Boss knew what had happened.

Just after the duel started, Fukaziroh had fired all twelve plasma grenades in succession from the other side of the building—in an extremely tall arc.

The slight effect of the wind on their trajectories then scattered them across the lawn,

which resulted in a sequence of twelve blue spheres. They had to be excavating a ton of earth.

"That was scary," murmured Tohma. If she'd hesitated at all to go inside, the blasts would have slammed her backside.

As the explosions continued, Boss asked, "Are they all inside?"

"Possibly. But if not, remember: no suicide bombing," Pitohui replied. She'd already given up her KTR-09 and equipped the best weapon for close-quarters combat, her lightsword. She kept its point toward the ground, just in case Llenn tried to charge them during the diversion.

Boss kept her Vintorez in hand, but she did remove the scope, which was meaningless inside. Her selector was on full auto. She didn't bring out her grand grenades, either. One unlucky shot could wipe out their entire team.

"I'll do anything to help!" said Tohma. "Even if it means being a shield!"

She was no longer clutching her Dragunov sniper rifle. Instead, she had equipped the M870 Breacher shortened shotgun. It was Pitohui's, of course.

She'd borrowed a gun from her personal hero. Tohma's mission in this house was to rush through, blasting buckshot, and flush out the enemy from their hiding spots, even if it ended in her death.

As the eleventh explosion settled down, and the twelfth began, the trio stood up and prepared to rush. Their destination was the spacious living room just through the interior door. Once they had secured it, they could perform a sweep. If Llenn's squad was in there, it would be time to fight.

In the lead was Tohma, who was ready to go down shooting. If this were the Shinsengumi, she would be on "death duty," the member to enter a deadly situation first.

Next was Pitohui, with photon swords in both hands. She would run through both Tohma and the enemy if that was what it took.

Taking up the rear to watch for an opponent who might circle through the hallway—or from behind—was Boss, whose large size would help protect Pitohui.

If they spotted their foes as they leaped through the door, the fighting would start, and it could all end in under ten seconds.

As the final explosion settled down, and the force of the shock wave ebbed, Pitohui gave the word.

“Go!”

“Yahhh!”

Tohma got to her feet.

At the same time, on the exact opposite side of the symmetrical log cabin, a tiny girl dressed in pink battle fatigues listened for the twelfth explosion and called out, “Last one!”

“Ready whenever you are!” replied a shrimp wearing a MultiCam shirt, having doffed her green bulletproof vest.

No matter the exterior, the furniture in the log cabins’ living rooms were always arranged the same way.

The living room was about sixty-five feet wide and twenty-three feet long. One of its sides—the south side in this case—featured a huge glass window in a thick wooden frame that ran all the way to the ceiling. The sunlight beamed through it.

On the opposite side—the north side in this case—the wall housed a log surface with a large fireplace in the center.

The fireplace had a splendid brick hearth over three feet wide, plus a spacious grate. There were no logs or ashes there anymore. From the back of the fireplace, also made of brick of course, rose a fat chimney. There was independent loft space on either side.

Across from the fireplace was a large coffee table, surrounded by sofas. Stretching alone the back wall was a formidable table with eight chairs to match.

Wham!

Uninhabited until just a moment ago, the space now played host to people bursting through the doors on both ends.

People armed to the teeth and intent on killing one another.

“Aaaaah!” bellowed Tohma, charging through the door first. And because she was in the lead, she was also the first to notice the little girl in a MultiCam pattern and a helmet kicking her way through the door sixty-five feet away.

She pointed the M870 Breacher as she ran closer, but the shrimp in the helmet quickly ducked to the side, hiding behind the dining table and chairs. Promptly taking her place in the doorway was another shrimp the same size, dressed in pink and holding a P90 of an identical hue.

Da-koom! She fired the shotgun.

But it was just a moment too late. Both of them were already out of blast range by the time she pulled the trigger. The pink girl dove to the left to get out of her sight line. Instead, the nine pellets flew toward the open doorway.

Tohma hoped that the third person would walk through and take the hit, but it didn’t work out that conveniently. The shotgun pellets bounced off the top of the heavy dining table, embedded into the log wall, or passed harmlessly through the empty doorway.

“Fuka, right; Llenn, left!” Tohma announced, pumping the action to expel the empty shell and load the next shot.

“Good!” called Pitohui, who rushed past her.

Which one are you going after? Tohma wanted to ask, but the black limbs rushing like the wind to the left were all the answer she needed.

Pitohui was intent on eliminating Llenn.

“Boss, right!”

“Got it!”

Boss brought up the rear, pointing her Vintorez to the right.

Three seconds had passed since the battle had begun.

Llenn's eyes told her the story the instant she jumped through the doorway.

Tohma, straight ahead! And she's got Pito's shotgun.

Behind that, a shadow with the dark, foul aura of Pitohui!

Hard to tell past her horrible air, but that's probably Boss behind her!

She thanked Lady Luck that her guess was more or less correct.

“Do it, Fuka!” she commanded.

“You got it!”

“Oh, Llennnnn!” called Pitohui, leaping over the dining table and landing atop a sofa. Little pink shrimp poking her face and weapon out from under the other table ahead.

Vwom!

She pressed the switch on both photon swords, extending them to their maximum length. Their pale, three-foot blades reflected off a metal trophy of some kind on display over the fireplace.

She could see the muzzle of the P90, and the bullet lines reaching toward her, but Pitohui did not stop running.

She was going to skewer Llenn, even if she took ten rounds in the process.

The bullet lines passed to the left of her body. An angle that would not strike their target.

“I've got youuuu!” exulted Pitohui, certain of her victory, as she narrowed in on Llenn's

cap, right above where she'd pressed the P90 to her cheek.

She leaped off the sofa and over the dining table, hurtling down at an angle to skewer her prey with both swords...

"!"

And then she saw Llenn's face.

Smiling despite her imminent skewering.

No—that wasn't Llenn.

"Rrrahhh!"

Fukaziroh rolled backward and kicked out hard with both feet. They slammed against the dining table just above her head. With muscles that were actually as strong as M's, she launched the heavy piece of furniture up into the air as effortlessly as if it were a trash can.

The table rose into the air toward the descending Pitohui.

One second before, at the exact instant Pitohui jumped, Boss pointed the Vintorez at Fukaziroh, who had fled to the right.

The dining table was at the end of the room. A green helmet popped out from under it.

Boss pulled the trigger faster than she'd ever done before.

Sh-kunk! It quietly fired a single round that crossed the room at just under the speed of sound, striking and penetrating the helmet.

Got her! Boss thought, certain of an automatic head-shot kill.

Then she saw the helmet—and only the helmet—fly backward.

That was when she noticed that it was not Fukaziroh's head underneath.

What jutted upward was a pistol. Painted pink.

Five seconds had passed since the battle had begun.

"Ha!"

Pitohui swung her arms, trying to use the lightswords to block against the dining table soaring up to meet her.

But all that accomplished was stabbing through the thick wood, instead of stopping the furniture itself from smashing into her.

"Gahk!"

Her dark form collided with the dining table in midair and lost all momentum.

Llenn fired at the same moment.

It was a shot with just one Vorpal Bunny, on the left side.

One .45-caliber bullet fired at Boss, while Llenn was dressed in a MultiCam shirt and pants—in other words, Fukaziroh's battle outfit.

The bullet passed through the room at slightly less than the speed of sound, breaking through the Russian camo that SHINC wore as a uniform and into the body of the person wearing it.

"Rgh!"

Tohma! Boss thought, calling out the name of the teammate who had stepped in to take the shot for her.

First her long black hair swept past to take Boss's visibility away—then it took the bullet away, too.

“Yaaaa!”

Pitohui kicked the table she collided with in the air.

The bulky object fell to the floor, and she jumped backward—and spun.

She did a backflip, staring hard at Fukaziroh, who was wearing Llenn’s outfit.

The blond started firing the P90 wildly. It was fifteen bullets a second, shot from a fallen position with no intention of hitting her target. The bullets tore at the ceiling.

The dining table rammed into Fukaziroh’s stomach.

“*Gwafooh!*” she grunted. But she did not release the trigger.

Llenn sprinted, listening to her wardrobe-swapped companion firing P-chan.

She’d used their trick to blast Boss—she’d had her dead to rights, but Tohma jumped in from the side to stop the bullet. Luckily enough, the bullet hit her square in the middle of the face, so she was certainly dead now.

Llenn shot the glass in front of her with the right-hand Vorpal Bunny twice, then slammed into the cracked pane to burst through, exiting the room in a dynamic fashion.

“Not so fast!” Boss snarled, pulling her gun to the right and firing at the diminutive target in MultiCam leaping out into the yard—her eternal rival, Llenn.

A number of bullets embedded into the window frame; some hit the glass and shifted trajectory, while the rest passed behind the speeding girl and vanished into the yard.



Once she had fired all thirty, Llenn came rushing back her way on the other side of the window.

“!”

Boss tossed aside the empty Vintorez and pulled out her Strizh pistol. She pointed it at Llenn on the other side of the opening, who was approaching with her hands stuck out.

Boss fired. Llenn fired.

The slide on the Strizh pumped back and forth, ejecting a 9 mm Parabellum cartridge.

“Rahhh!”

Boss stood still on the inside half of the window, turning as she fired at Llenn rushing past outside.

“Taaa!”

In the yard, Llenn zoomed past the window, firing her Vorpal Bunnies.

Ten seconds had passed since the battle had begun.

“Rrrgh!” Boss grunted. She felt pain in her right thigh and left shoulder.

The wounds were from .45-caliber bullets that Llenn had shot as she'd darted past. Two rounds fired at high speed through a window. There was no way to know if she'd aimed them that way or had simply gotten lucky.

“But this won't be the end of me!” Boss roared, dropping the empty Strizh magazine so she could fight back.

“How about this, then?” came a different voice as a sharp pain ran through her back.

“.....”

The spare magazine she was lifting up to the gun fell from her fingers.

"Damn... I was... sloppy..."

Boss expired quietly, stabbed through the side with Shirley's ken-nata.

The P90 was no longer firing wildly at the ceiling, and the area was suddenly quiet.

The heavy thump of a large body slumping to the floor was deafening amid the silence.

Twelve seconds had passed since the battle had begun.

"Dammit... They really did a number on me...", snarled Pitohui, right in front of the fireplace.

Exhaling her tension, she brandished her extended photon swords. Pitohui stared past Boss's body to find Shirley twisting her ken-nata loose. She squared off against an opponent with double her number of blades, at three times the length, from a distance of thirteen feet.

After Tohma's body, Boss's was the next to turn into polygonal shards and vanish. The light from that process illuminated Shirley's face from below as she marveled, "It was a ridiculous plan, but it really did work."

This was Llenn's strategy.

First, Fukaziroh began a plasma grenade bombardment to unnerve their opponents.

Anticipating that Pitohui would be relentless in her pursuit of Llenn, they switched outfits. It was a total gamble that all three of their opponents would come inside the building.

Fukaziroh was tough, but she sucked at shooting pistols. Llenn was weak, but her speed gave her great offensive power. If the opponent mixed them up, they would be utterly confused.

And in the midst of this chaos, Shirley snuck around the outside of the house, rather than down the creaking hallway, and slipped in behind the firefight to catch the enemy unawares.

She'd borrowed Fukaziroh's M&P pistol, too, just in case, but she hadn't needed to use it. Boss was so dialed in to her battle with Llenn that she never even noticed she was about to be run through.

"Yesss! We win!" shouted Fukaziroh, dressed in Llenn's clothes in the corner of the room, from beneath the dining table Pitohui had kicked back her way. Her cap had fallen off, and her tied-up blond hair made it quite apparent that she was a different person.

She exchanged the magazine in the P90 and announced, "I give you a warrior's mercy! Surrender!"

Meanwhile, Llenn reentered through the western door in Fukaziroh's outfit. She had reloaded both Vorpal Bunnies.

"Not so fast, Fukaziroh. I want to end her!" shouted Shirley.

"I understand how you feel, but your blade can't stop that woman. Don't get any closer, or you'll put yourself in her range. And don't get your rifle out to shoot her, either. That's tacky. It's just an execution," stated Fukaziroh. She held out the P90 but kept her finger away from the trigger guard.

"Then I'll use what I borrowed." Shirley sheathed the ken-nata and pulled the M&P out of her jacket pocket, where she'd stuck it to stay out of the way. She held it in a two-handed grip. She didn't look very comfortable with it, but a gun was a gun.

"After all this time, I don't want to execute her, either. Pistols are fine. Duel me, Pitohui!"

"Hmmm. I have just one question, though. Do you mind? All three of you."

"What is it?" Shirley asked.

"Speak your mind," said Fukaziroh.

Llenn was the only one who acted otherwise. She pointed the Vorpal Bunnies at Pitohui and fired.

But she was half a step too late.

Pitohui fell straight backward so Llenn's bullets passed just in front of her face.

“Did you think you could—?”

Run away? Shirley with her pistol, plus Fukaziroh with the P90 at waist height, rushed over and examined the floor in front of the fireplace.

“Huh?” “Huh?”

There was no one there.

“She went into the chimney!” Llenn cried.

“Bastard!” Knocking chairs out of the way and leaping over the sofa, Shirley crouched to get into the fireplace, then thrust her gun through to shoot inside.

“No!” Llenn warned, but it was a split second too late.

When Shirley stuck her arm under the chimney, a falling photon sword stabbed it.

“Gah!” she howled, dropping the M&P while using her other hand to pull the lightsword out.

“What, thought you’d won?”

Pitohui’s upside-down visage emerged from the chimney, posing the question she hadn’t been able to pose earlier.

Her other photon blade swung from low to high, slicing the fireplace grate, then Shirley’s head in two vertical pieces, then the brick chimney itself, before vanishing back inside the darkness.

“You evil, evil, *evil* Santaaaa!” Fukaziroh fired the P90 from the hip.

Evil Santa? Like... Satan? Hmm, maybe not, thought Llenn pointlessly. All the 5.7 mm bullets chipped harmlessly off the fireplace and chimney right in front of her.

“Yikes!” she yelped as deflected bullets bounced back her way. She had to duck so fast it left an afterimage just to avoid being hit. “Stop it, Fuka! She’s already gone up!”

“Should we shoot up from the inside?”

Llenn glanced at the fireplace, where Shirley's corpse had already vanished. The M&P was on the ground, as well as two other pistols—Pitohui's XDMs, which she kept in her thigh holsters.

She got what was going on. The chimney narrowed as it climbed, so Pitohui had doffed them for a smaller profile. She was squirming her way farther upward like a caterpillar.

"Oh! We can't let her get outside!"

Pitohui didn't have her KTR-09 assault rifle. Either she'd left it outside or in her inventory; either way, if she passed through the chimney out to freedom, she would be able to use the rifle again, so they wouldn't stand a chance.

Despite the Vorpel Bunny she was clutching, Llenn used her left hand to open the game window, then rushed over to Fukaziroh and tapped her left shoulder. Instantly, their clothes swapped back to normal.

On her back was the pack with all the magazines for the Vorpel Bunnies, which she promptly used to load fresh ammo.

Fukaziroh was reunited with her MGL-140s, along with her backpack and bulletproof vest. The vest had held backup magazines for the Vorpel Bunnies, but they returned to Fukaziroh now.

No one was holding the P90, so it inevitably clattered to the floor.

"Whaaaat? You're leaving me behiiind?!" squealed P-chan.

Sorry! All Llenn could do was apologize. There was no time to pick it up and switch out the other weapons.

As she transformed back to her original look, Llenn rushed in the direction Pitohui had come from, pointing the Vorpel Bunnies ahead of her as she passed through the door, the hallway, and then outside.

"There! Yes!"

She spotted the KTR-09 with its drum magazine and kicked it.

“Get outta heeeeere!”

It was a perfect strike for all she was worth. The gun floated a bit and fell into the yard, then down one of the massive holes the grenades had left behind.

Trying to ignore the pain in her foot, Llenn shouted, “I kicked her rifle away! Now the only weapons she has are the photon swords and the knives in her boots... I think!”

“That’s huge! We can win!” Fukaziroh replied.

Llenn rushed farther out into the yard—but felt a horrible tingle of dread in her spine.

What people actually “sensed” in VR games was a matter of long, unresolved debate—but at this moment, Llenn most certainly sensed something.

How is Pitohui going to attack without a ranged weapon? she wondered. But her body moved on its own.

She leaped, spinning in the air. It was the fastest method she knew to avoid a shot—a maneuver she’d employed in the duel with Boss in SJ4. But it could only halve the target she presented.

As she spun,.45-caliber bullets passed in front of her and behind—right before her flat chest and just under her bulging backpack. Through the rotation, Llenn caught a glimpse of Pitohui looking down at her from the roof of the cabin fifteen feet above, pistols in both hands.

And the pistols were familiar.

Llenn spun and fell into one of the holes Fukaziroh had created, just like the KTR-09 she’d punted. She wasn’t trying to do that; it was just where she was going to land once she leaped.

She slid on her butt facing backward down the hole, which was a good thirty feet deep.

“Fuka!” she called out. “Pito’s already got two guns! They were an ace up her sleeve!”

“No way! What kind?”

"Same as mine! Two black ones! And the exact backpack! So don't get too close! Her back's protected, too!"

"We can't complain about that! Suuzaburou's life hangs in the balance here!"

"What about mine?"

"I don't care if you go down, too! Just win! You have to win, Llenn!"

"You're too honest for your own good, Fuka," Llenn chided archly. But on the inside, she told herself that she wasn't going to stuff curry into her friend's mouth like she did last time.

"Ooh-hoo! They're still going! That's wild!" exclaimed Clarence on the hill to the north.

Only thirty seconds had passed since she'd fired the Five-Seven to signal the start of combat.

In that time, Clarence had witnessed Fukaziroh, wearing Llenn's getup, shoot a bunch of plasma grenades that left giant holes all over the west side of the yard.

Then Pitohui's team and Llenn and Fukaziroh's team—the two were impossible to tell apart from this distance now—rushed into the building, while Shirley trotted around the north exterior of the cabin. Raucous shooting resounded from inside the building.

Once things quieted down, she thought the battle must have finished, but then a photon sword sliced through the chimney on top of the roof, and Pitohui emerged from inside it. New guns in hand, she fired at Llenn as the tiny girl rushed out of the building. But her shots had missed.

"Wow, what a show."

Llenn slid and slid and slid on her rear down to the bottom of the hole, but she got right back to her feet and tried to scramble up the side.

She might have gotten hit along the way, but in the pit of a hole, it didn't really matter

where the shooter was outside it—you were dead meat. She had to at least be able to pop her head out before Pitohui came into the yard.

But I can do this with speed like mine.

She took one step on the slope, and *sliiiiip*—

There was no traction.

“Huh?”

Fukaziroh had created the huge mortar-shaped hole—more like a crater—with a plasma grenade, and the outer portion was made of soft, loose earth.

“What?”

Taking another step would only cause more dirt to come loose. She nearly lost her balance and fell forward, which would have jammed the muzzles of the Vorpal Bunnies into the dirt. Incidentally, both in real life and in *GGO*, there were people who argued you would blow up the barrel of your weapon if you tried to shoot through a dirt blockage—and people who argued it would blast through just fine.

“Whaaaaat?!”

“What’s up, Llenn? Did you get her?”

“I... I can’t get out! I fell in the hole, and I’m stuck!”

“What? I’m on my way!”

“No! Don’t come here!” Llenn shouted, but there was already someone at the lip of the hole.

Fukaziroh hadn’t arrived already. It was Pitohui, of course.

“Hiii!”

She was too fast. She must have leaped all the way down from the rooftop, despite knowing it would cause major leg damage.

The lip of the hole was about fifty feet away. Llenn was staring up against the sun, so she could only make out a silhouette, but the lithe body, long ponytail, and inward-tilted pair of black pistols were clear enough.

“Aaaah!”

Llenn pointed the Vorpal Bunnies right back at her.

Pitohui’s black AM.45s and Llenn’s pink AM.45s faced off—and fired together.

“Gahk!”

“Rrgh!”

Llenn and Pitohui grunted at the same time.

Llenn’s rounds hit Pitohui’s shoulders. Pitohui’s rounds hit Llenn’s shoulders.

The pink demon’s body was thrown backward, Vorpal Bunnies flying out of her numbed fingers.

“Aaaah.”

“*Farewell,*” mourned the guns as they thumped into the dirt about ten feet away.

Llenn toppled backward, and her momentum stopped as the backpack stuck on the earth. There was a metallic sound behind her waist. Her hit points were down to 40 percent.

Pitohui also fell back from getting hit, but she was up on her feet within three seconds, where Llenn could see her again.

And the AM.45s were still in her hands.

Argh! She’s so tough!

They’d both taken .45-caliber bullets in the same spot, but Pitohui hadn’t let go of her guns. Whether that was the difference in their numerical strength or simply their willpower was unclear.

But in any case, Llenn knew one thing: *I can't beat her.*

She no longer had any weapons on hand.

"Only a fool would give in!" Kni-chan cheered.

Sorry, a correction: She no longer had any ranged weapons on hand.

"Lleeeeeenn, my deaaaar!"

Her eyes had grown accustomed to the glare of the sun in the background, so she could make out Pitohui's expression now.

She wore a smirk of delight—great, unbridled, wicked delight.

Her arms were outstretched in that inward tilted way again. The bullet lines from her guns fixed on Llenn's forehead.

"Prepaaaare... toooooo... Boofp!"

And suddenly, for some reason, Pitohui was flying.

She was soaring from the edge of the ditch, then over the pit itself.

And that was when Llenn heard the faint sound of an explosion.

It's Fuka!

It made sense to her now. Fukaziroh had shot a grenade from behind Pitohui. It had struck her backpack and erupted against its armor plating.

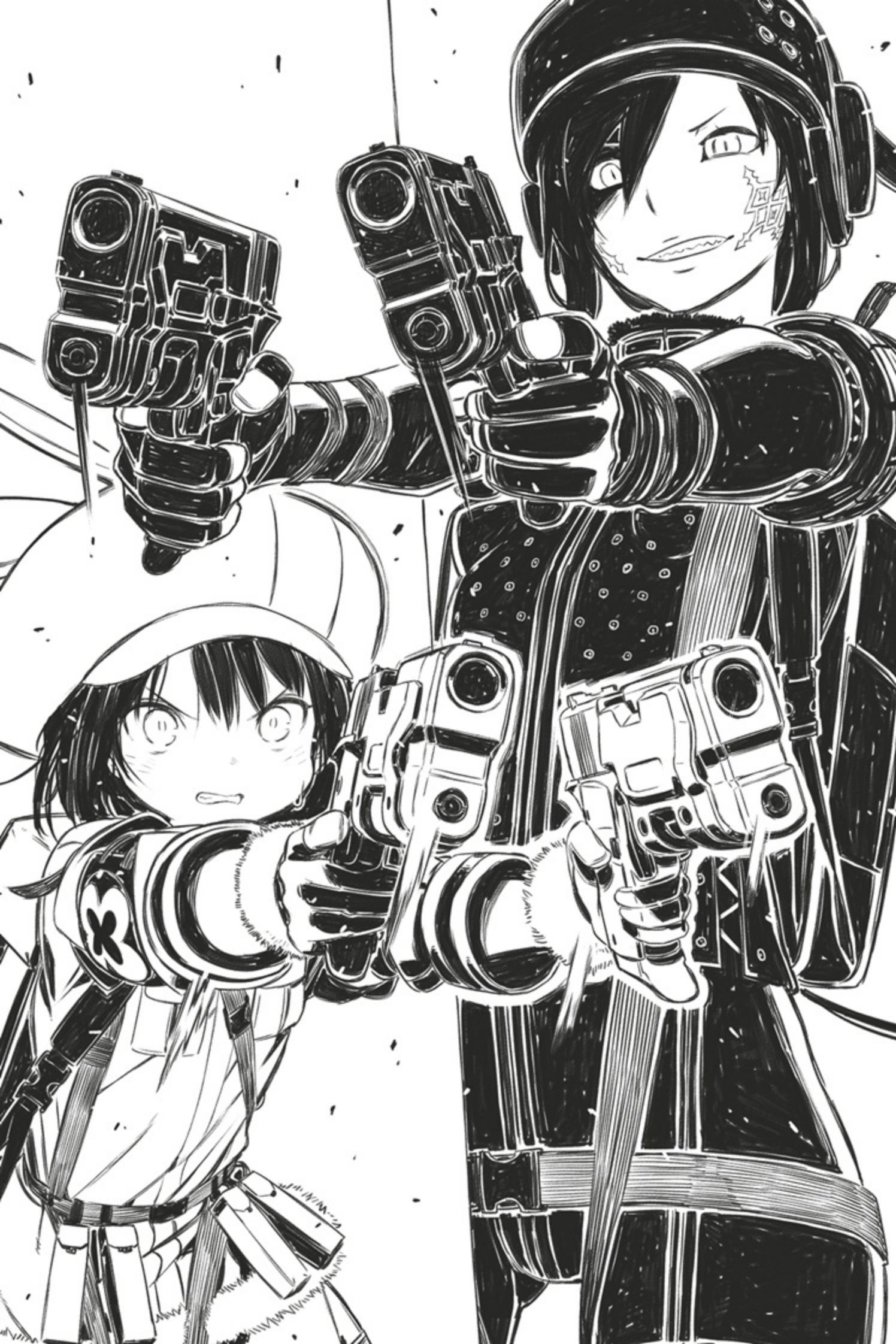
Its detonation power might not have pierced the pack to reach her body, but the explosive force had been properly transferred. It threw Pitohui's body a good sixty feet.

"Damn youuuuuu!" she swore in midair, her AM.45 still aimed.

Onward she fell.

Come right down here! Llenn prayed, but it quickly became clear that her wish would

go unheard. Pitohui's momentum was too strong; she was going to fly over Llenn.



Bullet lines moved toward her back from overhead. Pitohui was going to blast her while she was still flying through the air.

I can't. I have no way of attacking her..., Llenn thought, capitulating again.

"Do not relinquish hope, I tell you!" Kni-chan scolded her. That was when something felt off to Llenn.

When she'd fallen into the hole earlier, she'd landed on her backpack, and there was a sharp, metallic sound.

Why?

There was armor plating in the backpack, but the exterior was nylon. And the dirt was soft.

Why did it make that sound...?

"Grab it! Reach out and take it!" Kni-chan urged again, revealing the answer.

Llenn stood up and spun around.

She grabbed the object that had been behind her waist, the object that the handle of her combat knife struck when she fell and lifted it with all of her strength.

"Pito! Eat thiiiiiiiiiiiiis!"

She fired the KTR-09 on full auto.

Before Pitohui could pull the triggers, the wild spray of 7.62 mm bullets passed over her figure, and by coincidence—true, miraculous coincidence—one struck her directly in the chest.

"Gahk!"

The force of the round smashing into her armored breastplate slammed Pitohui backward in a vertical backflip, unable to fire the AM.45s. She slammed back-first into the slope on the opposite side of the hole from Llenn.

“Aagh!”

The impact caused her to bounce, knocking the pistols from her hands. Her backpack acted like a sled, so she slid down the slope, her body glowing with damage effects. She only came to a stop at the bottom of the hole, just ten feet from Llenn.

She's so tough...

Pitohui wasn't dead yet. That was her in a nutshell.

But her remaining hit points had to be minuscule.

“Whew...”

Llenn slowly lifted the heavy KTR-09 to inspect it. She pulled the bolt on the side back a bit to examine the inside of the chamber. She was checking for any loading problems, to see if it was still operable. It was, of course, none other than Pitohui who had taught her how to shoot the AK series, which was what the KTR-09 was based on.

There was nothing wrong with it. The GUN EQUIPPED icon in her lower-right corner displayed the KTR-09 with a healthy seventy rounds to go.

The reason for her diligence, of course, was that she hadn't forgotten the ending to SJ2. But this KTR-09, which she would now call K-chan, was on Llenn's side.

“*Yes, that's right, sweetie. Honestly, as long as I can be useful, I don't care who wields me,*” stated K-chan. She sounded like an adult.

Llenn pointed the KTR-09 at Pitohui, who was still faceup on her back, and placed her finger against the trigger. The bullet circle appeared over Pitohui's stomach. Their eyes met.

“Hah! You gonna do it?”

“I'm not,” Llenn replied at once.

“You all right down there?” called out Fukaziroh from overhead. She came to the lip of the ditch, pointing one of her MGL-140s down at the bottom. “Llenn! You need a finisher?”

“You gonna blow me up, too?! The fight’s over!”

“You sure about that?” smirked Pitohui, a moment before an explosion went off.

It came from above, and the moment Llenn recognized it was a grand grenade, Fukaziroh had already been blasted over the edge of the hole.

“Hyaaaaa!”

Like Pitohui, she soared over the pit, and like Pitohui, she landed on the opposite side on her back.

“*Goofh!*”

Like Pitohui, she slid on her back down the dirt slope.

“.....”

Llenn could only watch in dumbfounded shock as Fukaziroh came to rest three feet away from their opponent.

“Hrrgh...”

Fukaziroh was dazed; her hit points were down to 6 percent. Her body was glowing red all over, so she must have taken the brunt of the plasma grenade’s damage.

Pitohui had set it up, of course.

When Llenn had shot her with the Vorpal Bunnies at the edge of the hole, and she’d briefly fallen backward out of sight, she must have activated the grand grenade on a timer and had hidden it in the log cabin somewhere.

What a devious schemer.

“Arrrgh! Fine! I’m going to blast you, then!”

Llenn aimed the KTR-09 at her target again.

“Huh...?”

That was when she saw what was in the hands of the other woman lying in the dirt.

She must have reached back and pulled it out of the backpack during the confusion of the eruption. It was a dull-gray orb about the size of a small watermelon.

A... grand grenade...

The tension in Llenn's trigger finger loosened. If she shot that grenade, it would cause an eruption double the size of the crater, killing everyone.

“Damn... We lose...”

And that would mean losing sight of their goal.

“What’s wrong, Llenn? Shoot h—!” Fukaziroh shouted when she saw Pitohui, before cutting off midsentence.

“Go ahead. Shoot me,” jeered Pitohui, smiling from her upside-down position. She looked like a demon or a sorcerer—or both.

“We lost. We’ve lost this one. Fuka... I’m sorry...”

“.....Dammit... dammit... At least shoot me dead first...”

Llenn swore to herself that she was going to stuff many spoonfuls of curry into her friend’s mouth. She put the safety on the KTR-09 and tossed it onto the dirt.

“*Oh, you’re not going to shoot me? Maybe next time,*” bemoaned K-chan, who fell silent from there.

“In that case,” Pitohui said, spinning around and getting to her feet with the grand grenade held out in front of her, “I win this round.”

Llenn sat down in the dirt. “We lost... When you shoot Suuzaburou, at least do it somewhere far away, where we can’t see it...” She hung her head in defeat.

But she raised it again when Pitohui said, “Hmm? Oh, I’m not killing the doggy.”

“Whaaat?”

Baffled and back in their basic combat fatigues, Llenn and Fukaziroh climbed up the rope Clarence tossed down once they'd called her over.

"You guys are a lot of trouble, you know that?"

"Don't fall in, Clare. If you do, none of us can get back out."

"Yeah, yeah. Would have been nice if you'd left some of the footing around here in better shape. The house is totally trashed, you know. Can you imagine what the owner's going to think when they get back?"

Clarence had to tie one end of the rope around the axle of the rusted Porsche tractor. Then she hauled up the other three one at a time, with more strength than you'd expect from her looks.

They were back at ground level, surrounded by the splendor of nature again—plus the half-destroyed cabin.

"Have you reached your answer?" asked Suuzaburou. The little black dog was sitting nearby.

"We have!" said Pitohui. "As a team, we're not going to kill you. So we'll just resign from the quest."

"Is that your final decision...?"

"Yep. We all agreed a moment ago."

And to the shock of Llenn, Fukaziroh, and Clarence—who hadn't heard the final decision until this point—Suuzaburou replied, "Congratulations. You have completed the quest. You are the fastest to finish it." Then he added, "And now, good-bye."

He stood up and spun around, showing his fluffy little tail and butt.

"....."

Then he turned back around and returned to the group—specifically, to Fukaziroh.

“Fukaziroh. You cared for me more than anyone else.”

“Suuzaburou...” She knelt down and cradled the little black spitz.

“Thank you. I will tell tales of you in Dog Heaven,” he said, popping out his tiny doggy tongue to lick Fukaziroh just once on the mouth.

Then he sprang away, as if to escape, and did not turn back.

The little dog disappeared into the tall grass and was never seen again.

A large CONGRATULATIONS! sign and windows announcing a very generous amount of experience points displayed before the team who was the quickest to complete the quest.

“But... how...?” Llenn asked Pitohui.

Fukaziroh faced the fields where Suuzaburou had vanished, as still as a statue, salty liquid pouring down her cheeks. She wasn’t going to be of any use for a while.

“Hmm? How *what*? ”

“How did you know we’d finish the quest if we didn’t kill the dog? Or did you just change your mind on the spot...?”

“Yeah!” Clarence pouted. “I wanna know that, too! And what was that pooch anyway? An AI? Just a character? I don’t get it!”

“Ah. Anyway, you didn’t read that crappy writer’s books, right?”

“Huh? Yeah, that’s right. I mentioned that in the fourth ordeal.”

“You see, that hack is a real dog lover. There are always a bunch of dogs in his books. Talking ones, too.”

“Uh... huh...”

Why should I care? Llenn thought.

"Incidentally, I'm a cat person."

"Yeah, I know. Make with the explanation."

"Now, would you expect a story he wrote to have the faithful canine, who's helped out the whole time, reveal himself as the final kill target and go *Yay, you beat the quest* after that?"

"Well... uh... I guess not..."

Fukaziroh loved dogs and refused to let that happen. Mutt lovers loathed scenes where the dog dies.

There was even an English website where you could search movies to find out if there was a scene where a dog (or other animal) died. That way you could safely view a movie while being certain that no dog lovers would be traumatized.

"Right? So I'm guessing that everyone else made that mistake. It's a quest, after all, so they probably just shot the dog without thinking twice. And that's how we're the first group to finish the quest, even though we took so long!"

"Ohhhhhh! I get it! I guess I was right about that sixth ordeal thing!" marveled Clarence, who was very impressed.

Hmm? Wait a second...

Llenn wasn't fooled.

"Pito... Does this mean... you knew about this... from the very start...?"

"Yeah, I guess. When you're a Pitohui like me, you just cotton on to these things, ya know?"

"Which would mean... you knew the right answer... and you still claimed that we should kill the dog to finish the quest?"

"Oh my goodness. Is that right? Whatever could have gotten into me?"

And then, just to be sure, Llenn snarled, “Bitch, did you do this just to fight us?”

“Geez, you’re scaring me. Don’t glare at me like that, Llenn. And you, Fuka, how long are you going to cry? You’ll die of dehydration,” insisted Pitohui, materializing in the spacious private room at the pub.

“Mmm!” grunted M. He and the other team members (and non-team members) reacted to their sudden appearance.

“I won’t stand for this!” Llenn shouted.

“There, there. All’s well that ends well, as they say. It was the best possible ending to the quest, wasn’t it?” consoled Clarence soothingly.

“.....”

Fukaziroh returned in silence, tears streaming down her face like a waterfall.

The next moment, all of those who died in the event offered their congratulations to the survivors. They were all trying to speak at once, so the girls had to wait for the noise to die down.

“All right, all right! Good job, everyone! Do you know the result already?”

“We do! We came in first! They announced it over here, too, and we got tons of experience and credits! In fact, no other squadrons have finished the quest! Our names are going down in *GGO* history!” crowed Boss. She was supremely proud.

“We have no idea what happened in there, though. Only as far as what Shirley saw,” added M, curious.

That made sense. Unlike Squad Jam, this wasn’t being streamed anywhere. The rest of the participants had just been waiting around for the others to finish—and asking each member for an update as they died.

“Huh?”

That was when Llenn noticed that there were too many people in the room.

In addition to the twelve members of their team, there was another group including a woman in tiger-stripe camo and a third group with a scowling man.

Seated around the table were twenty-four people in the “private” room. The furniture and the room had therefore automatically expanded to accommodate the greater number of guests.

“Hi, guys! Ahhh, I see, I see, very interesting! Mm-hmm-hmm-hmm.”

“Stop chuckling, Pitohui! Goddammit!” swore David, the representative of MMTM. His expression was the very picture of disgruntlement.

“I assume you’re going to fill things in for us. That’s why we waited around,” added Vivi in a rather harsh tone by her standards. The other members of ZEMAL were waiting obediently at her side.

“Oh, you bet! I’ll tell you *everything!* So listen up, folks! First, take a seat!”

Pitohui looked happier now than Llenn had ever seen her.

“Good grief...”

She ordered an iced tea, and it promptly popped up out of the table. Then she sat down next to her friend, who sobbed, “Suuzaburou... You’re on... your own now...”

“It’s not curry, but you need to drink this,” Llenn consoled, sticking the straw in Fukaziroh’s mouth.

The End

AFTERWORD (I.E., POSTSCRIPT. DOES NOT INCLUDE STORY SPOILERS)

Rrrrrr.

“This is the Dengeki Bunko editorial office.”

“Excuse me for bothering you. I’m the writer Keiichi Sigsawa. Is the editor XXXXX available right now? If not, that’s totally fine, I’m just going to hang up now so we don’t waste electricity, good-bye—”

“This is XXXXX. You knew it was me, didn’t you?”

“Huh? That’s weird, I didn’t recognize you at all... Did your voice change?”

“That’s right. I’m glad you noticed. So why are you calling? I’m willing to help as long as it doesn’t involve you being unable to finish your afterword on time.”

“I can’t finish my afterword on time.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve.”

“Yay! It’s been so long since I’ve gotten a compliment. The more I get, the better I do!”

“That wasn’t a compliment. You’re way past your deadline, so I’ll give you three seconds to write and submit it.”

“I can’t do that, even through e-mail. You know it takes several seconds, up to a dozen, to send an e-mail, right? Even to a person sitting right next to you. It would be way faster to just link the two computers together. I find myself thinking about those topics on fine spring days such as this. How are you all spending your season?”

“Don’t try to weasel your way out of this by acting like you’re giving a seasonal greeting. Why’s it taking you so long to write this afterword anyway? Aren’t you widely

acknowledged as being an afterword author, first and foremost?"

"That was my reputation in the old era. It's Reiwa now."

"But Reiwa started last year. It's already been a whole year."

"Whole new year, no book here."

"That's not funny. Anyway, this is Volume X of *GGO*, so shouldn't you have a lot to say?"

"Like what?"

"Are you taking notes?"

"Why would you suggest that? I'm going to record the call, of course. Now, what was it you were saying I should write in the afterword? Go on! The tape is rolling!"

"...Like, for example, in the afterword of Volume IX, you said you were planning to make Volume X a short story collection, but you ended up writing an entire novel instead."

"Oh, that's a good idea. Approved! Well, the reason is that this seemed like it would be more fun! I can still write a set of short stories whenever I want, so I figure I'll just say that I'm waiting for the right opportunity."

"Also, shouldn't you write about how ReoNa, the singer for Elza Kanzaki in the 2019 *GGO* anime, put out a new single called 'Prologue' as 'Elza Kanzaki Starring ReoNa'? And also about how the short story you wrote for the single is also included in this book?"

"Approved! That single was really great! ReoNa's singing is fantastic, of course, but the song and lyrics themselves really embody Elza Kanzaki's worldview! I want to go around the world with a megaphone shouting that everyone who hasn't heard it yet should give it a listen."

"I wouldn't do that; you'll probably get arrested."

"Well, I've got a lot to write about now. I should probably talk about how I'm going to buy a new hunting rifle this year, too, huh?"

"Huh?"

“Oh, did I not tell you about that?”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Anyway, I’m still in the application process. They haven’t approved me for the permit yet, but I’m constantly waiting by the mailbox. Every day is an eternity! Honestly, it’s like the circle of life that I use my royalties from *Gun Gale Online* to buy guns. I’ve found the natural way to live.”

“We might need to debate the definition of the word *natural*.”

“But we don’t have time for that, do we? Anyway, what else should I include?”

“Grrr! Why don’t you just start by expressing your gratitude to the original series creator, Reki Kawahara, and illustrator, abec, for allowing you to use the world of *Sword Art Online*? Plus, Kouhaku Kuroboshi, for providing all the wonderful *GGO* illustrations.”

“Oh yeah, that’s really important! Those two made it possible for me to reach Volume X, and I’m so grateful to Mr. Kuroboshi for depicting Llenn and all the others as so cute and cool. I would like to express my gratitude to all three in song!”

“Before you start, you’ll have to make it clear that your editor told you not to do it.”

“Got it. I’ll throw in some dance moves, too.”

“And before you strut your stuff, you’ll have to make it clear that your editor insisted otherwise *several times*.”

“You bet, pal. Well, I think I’ve got everything for this afterword. Now I’ll just write this up and we can act like we never had this conversation. This is where my reputation as an afterword author really shines.”

“I’m eagerly awaiting the results. Employees of this company are sworn to secrecy, so I will do my best to take this conversation to my grave. See you in three seconds.”

“I’ll do my best, too.”

Keiichi Sigsawa—April 2020



If there's a "writer
who only writes
books about guns,"
then couldn't
there also be
an "illustrator
who only
draws half-
naked girls"?

Kouhaku
Kuroboshi

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink



PtF by: traitorATZEN