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XIII

SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE

GUN GALE ONLINE

5th Squad Jam: Finish

SWORD ART ONLINE

ソードアート・オンライン

SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE: GUN GALE ONLINE

- VOLUME 13 -

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[YEN PRESS]

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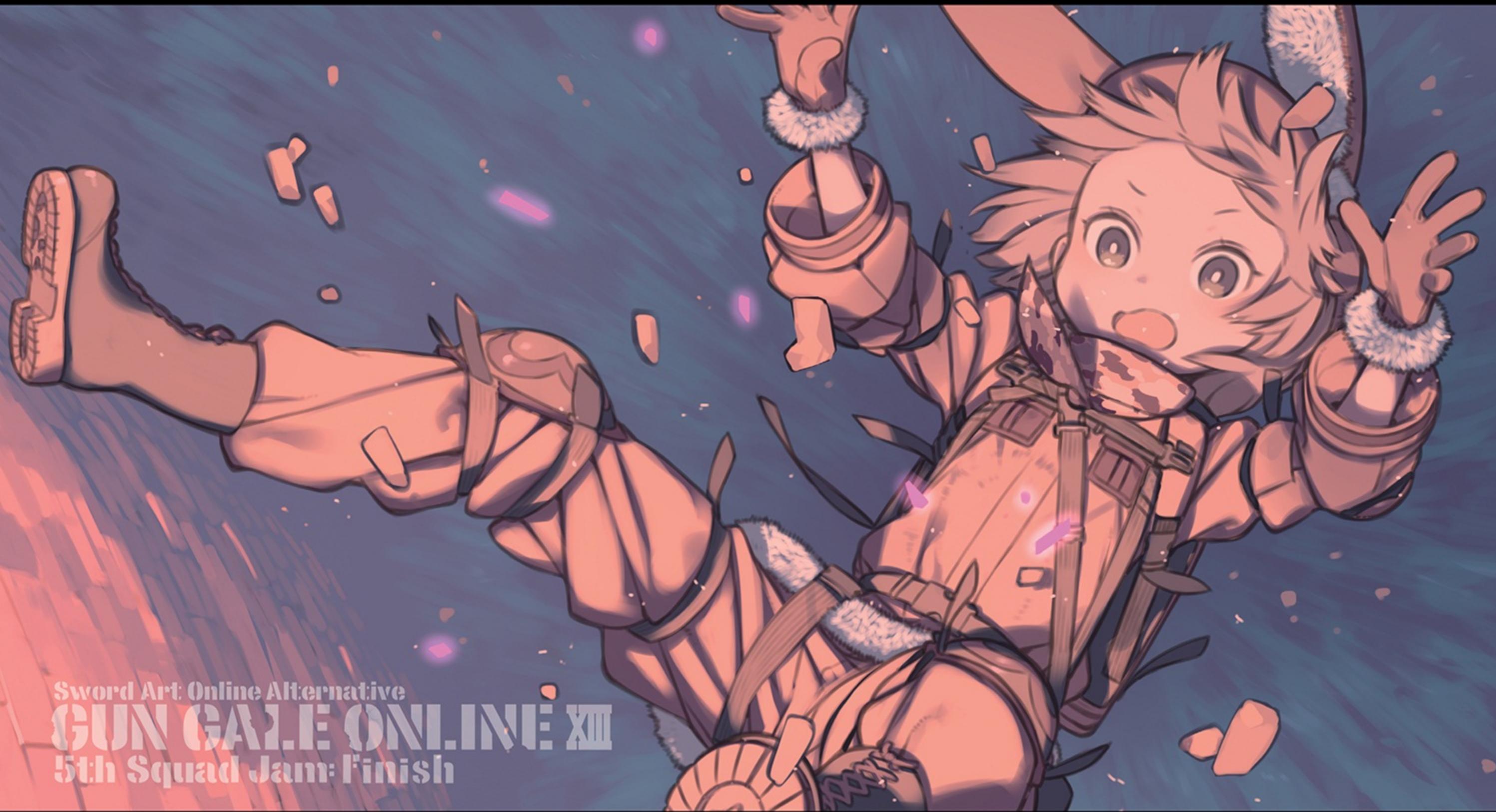
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SWORD ART ONLINE Alternative Gun Gale Online Vol. XIII

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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

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Yen On
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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: November 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Payton Campbell, Leilah Labossiere

Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

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

Title: Fifth Squad Jam: Start / 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 13

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.) | ISBN 9781975348564 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975367862 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975375232 (v. 13 : 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: 978-1-9753-7523-2 (paperback)

978-1-9753-7524-9 (ebook)

E3-20231019-JV-NF-ORI

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SYNOPSIS OF PARTS I & II

SJ5's getting hype, y'all.

Thanks to a sponsor's selfish and crappy—excuse me, *extremely unique and interesting*—rules and some genius's idea to place a hundred million credits (one million yen) on her head, our poor Llenn's been shot at and blasted by explosions from the moment this game began, but she's still alive and kicking. Llenn's a tough girl.

After a long trek through the choking mist, she had at last found her sanctuary, until Fukaziroh saw fit to blast it to pieces with plasma grenades. Still, Llenn managed to escape safely and regroup with her teammate.

But Vivi ran away. Fukaziroh was furious about it. And whose fault was that?

Llenn, Fukaziroh, and Boss formed a trio, running and hiding where necessary, but because Llenn was the one who showed up on the Satellite Scan, she got surrounded by foes chasing the bounty on her head. There was no rest for the innocent.

It was in this situation that they decided to make use of the “loadout switch” feature unique to the game this time around.

Llenn and Fukaziroh were carrying each other's alternate gear and used it to make an object that looked identical to a trash can made out of armor plating—the Pseudo-Trash-Can Two-Man Human-Powered Armored Vehicle. Plus two lightswords.

Riding in the *PM*, as they called it, Fukaziroh was the propulsion, and Llenn was the swinger. They happened across the enemy team containing Thane, the famous in-game commentator, and slaughtered the lot of them in mere moments. So long, guys.

Meanwhile...

Here and there around the map, their teammates and allies were doing their best to

survive.

Shirley used skis to zip around the snowy area in the southeast part of the map, and she enjoyed a merciless spree of manhunting in the thick fog. Until she ran into one of the exploding guys. By accident.

Clarence started in the wasteland area on the north-middle part of the map, where she met with Tanya from SHINC, and the two enjoyed a thorough round of running around like chickens with their heads cut off. When they happened across the castle in the middle of the map, they saw a very important message before anyone else did.

Pitohui chose a safe location in the woods south of the center and whiled away the time there. The slow life is always best.

M had it the hardest of them all.

He started in the city zone in the northeast and helped Anna when she was on the run from enemies. In this game, she was the designated leader of SHINC—the person whose location would be revealed.

Since she was in danger from the self-detonating team—who were trying to take out the heavyweight contenders—M found a vehicle that they used in a mad attempt to escape to safety.

But of course, they were spotted anyway and got caught in a massive blast. Not only did they get hurled all the way into the snowy area, they also wound up surrounded by foes. It was a bad scene. The only reason they survived was thanks to the help of Shirley, who was terrorizing the area.

When going their separate ways, Shirley did not shoot Anna or M, and they returned the favor. Later, in the forest area, Anna and M met up with the trio of Llenn, Fukaziroh, and Pitohui.

An hour had passed since the start of the game; the fog cleared suddenly, revealing the full scale of the SJ5 map. The game was taking place on a tabletop mountain, at an elevation of ten thousand feet.

The next thing they knew, the mountaintop began to crumble, starting from the edges. The last thing to remain would be a circular castle nearly two miles across in the center of the map, a truly stupi—excuse me, *unique and interesting* rule. The gang headed for the castle; they couldn't afford to wait around in the forest.

Unable to cross the last tiny stretch of very visible and vulnerable ground to reach the castle, Llenn's team was ultimately saved by a smoke screen caused by one of the suicide bombers.

As a matter of fact, he was allied with Shirley. His explosion was meant to get Shirley to the safety of the castle, because she was trapped at a distance just like the rest of her team.

But Shirley did not move. She was working on faith.

When Llenn's group reached the castle wall, and the dust cloud finally cleared, Shirley's righteous bullet of revenge traveled eight hundred yards to pierce Pitohui's skull.

The explosive round killed her.

Llenn was shocked to witness her brutal death.

Of course, Llenn herself had murdered Pitohui several times in Squad Jams prior to this, often in horrible ways of her own. But that was then, and this was now.

SJ5 was ready to enter its final stage.

A fierce battle inside a giant castle awaited our heroes.

After dying, Pitohui was sent back to the waiting area, where she saw a new rule on display.

You may have died, but there's still something you can do, right? Yes, you can come back and haunt people. So, everyone... would you like to be a ghost?

CHAPTER 10

The Castle Trap, or Vivi's



CHAPTER 10

THE CASTLE TRAP, OR VIVI'S

An hour and six minutes had passed since the start of SJ5. It was 2:06 PM.

"All right. We're heading into the castle!" M called out. But his teammates did not budge.

They were distracted by something else. Something their eyes couldn't help but be drawn to.

That something was the sight of Pitohui's body, facedown, resting before the massive gate of the castle in the center of the map—with a DEAD tag hovering over it.

Llenn, Fukaziroh, Boss, and Anna—every surviving member other than M—was staring at her.

And they also saw the ground begin to crumble.

There had been a minor earthquake-level rumbling for quite a while, and now its cause was coming into view. It was quite apparent, as the forest they'd just been inside only five hundred yards away was vanishing.

Although they could no longer see it, the earth beneath the trees must have simply withered and given way like an aged sponge. The massive trees the earth supported tumbled with it, causing the green of the forest canopy to grow thinner by the moment.

"Good-bye, forest..." Fukaziroh offered wistfully just as the final piece of the verdant forest tumbled out of sight. She said it in English, too, for some reason, and Llenn didn't bother to ask why, because she knew the answer would be stupid.

Lastly, the five-hundred-yard stretch of barren ground they had raced across to get there began to disappear as well.

"Good-bye, earth..."

Llenn didn't ask Fukaziroh why she said it. She just watched the process happen, marveling at the strange wonder of it all.

While the rest of them were distracted by the magnificent sight behind the group, M was the sole member who kept his wits about him.

He stared in the other direction, toward the center of the castle, with two shields propped up defensively to hide the MG5 machine gun at his side.

The ramparts were fifty yards thick, which meant that the entry gate was also that long; a pitch-black tunnel ten yards tall and twenty wide.

The exit, however, was shining brightly. For now, there was no one standing at the other end.

"Oh... the right side..."

Llenn noticed something as she watched the earth crumble nearby.

On their right, a single player was running across the wasteland. It was an unfamiliar man dressed in a dark-green jumpsuit. He was sprinting for all he was worth, legs working madly, as he raced toward them, for the castle.

Based on his position, he must have been hiding at the southwest edge of the map, then had panicked and started running for his life to stay ahead of the collapse.

There was still a space of three hundred yards between him and the castle, a cruelly unfortunate number.

"He's not going to make it," Boss noted flatly.

This mystery man was one of the many opponents between them and winning, so it was a good thing for him to die here, of course.

But then again, having just sprinted through that stretch herself, Llenn couldn't help herself. There was just one thought on her mind: *You can do it!*

"Yep, he's not making it," added Fukaziroh, equally without sentiment. "If he can't run the distance, why doesn't he just fly?"

"Because it's not *ALO*," Llenn snapped. Fukaziroh's old haunt was *ALO*, where every player was a fairy, and if you wanted to fly, you had wings right there waiting to be used.

Little tendrils of dust began to rise up from the ground near the man's feet. From overhead came the faint, dry sound of gunfire.

Someone in a position of safety was attempting to off the man who was so desperately trying to survive.

"That's harsh. But that's the way it is," Boss commented.

If not for the assistance(?) of the suicide bomber, that would have been them, too.

"Oh! Aw..."

After a few more seconds of sprinting, the man fell to the ground in silence, about two hundred yards away. There was a glowing red damage effect on him, so one of the bullets must have hit him.

There was no DEAD tag, so he was still alive, but not for long. The ground soon gave way underneath him, and he vanished from sight.

The only sensation left at the castle gate was the rumbling of the seismic collapse and an air of chilly pathos.

"Poor guy," Fukaziroh muttered. "If only he'd gotten closer... I could have hit him with a grenade instead..."

They were so occupied by the tragic fate of the nameless contestant that they never realized, off to the left, just out of their sight line, that Shirley was engaging in a desperate sprint of her own.

"Shit, crap, shit, crap! Uh-oh, uh-oh, uh-oh!" Shirley hissed, running for all she was worth. She kept the long R93 Tactical 2 rifle in front of her, running as fast as she was

physically able to move.

The people shooting at her from atop the castle struck her in a few spots. Fortunately, however, they didn't hit any bone, so she was able to maintain her momentum. There was no time to stop and wince at the pain.

She ran, and ran, and got shot, and ran, and got shot, and ran again...

Shirley's HP was down by half when she finally came within range of the gate.

But the collapse was right behind her. She could tell from the sound and didn't need to look back to see it. There was no guarantee that there would be any ground beneath her foot the next time she set it down.

"First ice... now dirt! Goddammit!" she swore, recalling the time that breaking ice nearly killed her in SJ4. She was almost at the massive gate, but the sound of the crumbling was so close that it could practically reach over and tap her on the shoulder.

"Hraaaaaah!" she bellowed, the sort of thing she would never do in real life, and leaped, putting herself airborne into the space where the gate yawned wide. It was the biggest jump of her VR life.

She soared through the opening and landed inside the gate.

Clutching the sniper rifle close to her chest, she tumbled onto the paved ground, rolled, and bonked her head hard against the side of the tunnel.

"Ow."

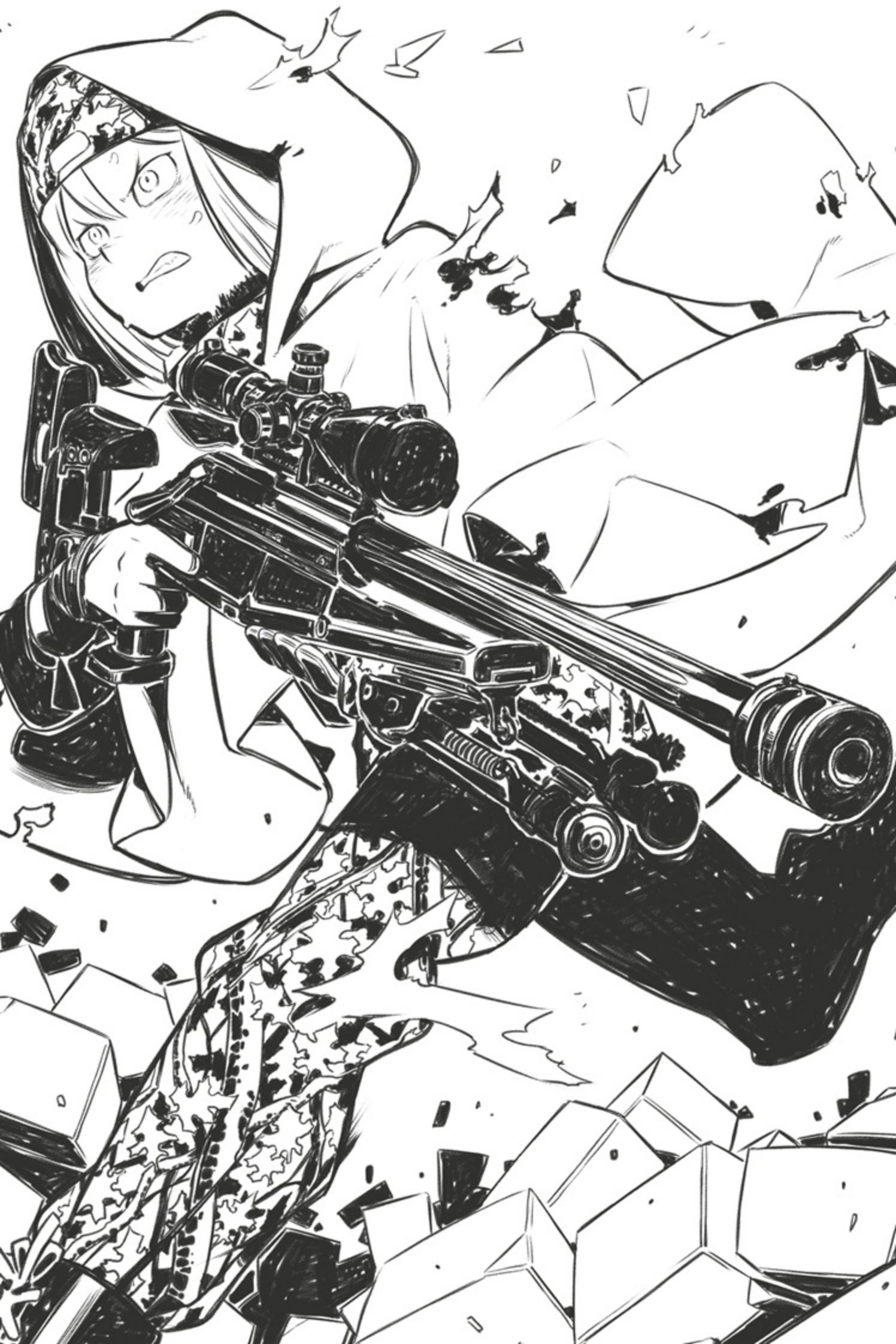
She sprang to her feet and gasped.

"Whoa!"

Her surprise was understandable. Just ten feet away, outside the castle gate she'd just leaped through, there was nothing to see. It was only sky.

Because she'd been facing the other way, Shirley hadn't realized just how close she was to the edge. The instant after her foot had pushed her into the air, that bit of ground was gone.

She'd survived the ordeal as dramatically as the final scene of an action movie.



“Hell yeah!”

Shirley turned around and began to race down the tunnel, which was as long as the rampart structure was thick. When she heard how loudly the sound of her boots echoed down the tunnel, she murmured “Oops” and slowed to a quick walk.

She also made sure to use one of her emergency med kits to start healing back some of the HP she’d lost. There were two left after this.

While Shirley’s HP began its slow regeneration, Fukaziroh was a few hundred yards away, marveling at the wonder before her.

“What a sight! What a sight!”

Barely twelve inches from the toe of her boot was a drop of ten thousand feet to the earth below.

“It’s terrifying,” Llenn admitted, backing away from the open gate.

The earth’s collapse stopped just short of the gate itself. In fact, the edge of the earth and the outer circumference of the castle wall were in perfect alignment. It was literally a sheer cliff. The two-mile-diameter castle sat atop a pillar of earth its precise size.

“See? This is what you people get for not flying all the time,” Fukaziroh said smugly.

“Another reason not to play *ALO*,” Llenn replied, straight-faced. The biggest reason she wouldn’t go back was because her avatar there was an ultra-tall and gorgeous babe.

“Once you get your first hit of winged flight and chase that dragon, you’ll never go back, sweetheart.”

“Don’t compare your game to doing drugs,” Llenn snapped.

Behind them, M, the only one actually paying attention, said, “It’s time for us to move.” His instructions were to the group—but primarily the two little ones. It was hard work keeping them in line.

"Ah, roger that," Llenn replied, turning on her heel. The change in view brought Pitohui's body into her line of sight.

Watch over me from Heaven—I mean, Hell—I mean, the waiting room. I'm gonna kick some ass, Llenn thought, squeezing her pink-dyed P90 for good luck.

"I'll kick some ass, too!"

You sure will, P-chan.

"Oops... I forgot, the suppressor's on, so I'm supposed to be quiet... *I'll kick some ass, too...*"

Tee-hee-hee. Oh, P-chan, you're so clever.

"Hey, Llenn! We're leaving you behind! What are you staring at? What's with that crazy look in your eyes?"

"Boss. Any response from the others yet?" M asked without turning back to look at her. They were carefully proceeding down the dark, fifty-yard tunnel.

The group was going down the middle because being closer to the walls made ricocheting bullets more dangerous. If a bullet struck the wall, the deflection tended to stray closer to the wall as well. In other words, the angle of reflection was smaller than the angle of incidence. So being in the middle, rather than along the wall, was ever so slightly safer. Just a little life hack to follow. Or battlefield hack, rather.

These were the bits of knowledge that *GGO* players picked up from the tendency to get shot while walking along walls. You know, things that no one in modern Japan would ever have to worry about in daily life.

The gorilla in pigtails known as Boss had her Vintorez pressed snug against her shoulder, ready to fire at anything that crossed the light at the end of the tunnel.

"Nothing yet," she murmured through heavy lips.

Boss and Anna were the two members of SHINC present. Tanya was higher up in the castle.

The others were Sophie and Rosa, the two PKM machine gunners, and Tohma the sniper.

She knew from the status readout in the corner that they weren't dead, but they weren't responding at all to her messages over the comm.

That left only one possibility.

The three of them were in a situation that left them absolutely no room to speak.

In other words, there were enemies so close by that talking would blow their cover.

In yet other words: big trouble.

Anna recognized that. She looked pensive as she took her position behind Boss. Even with her trademark sunglasses on, she could still see fine in the gloomy tunnel. The sunglasses were purely cosmetic; their vision would adjust automatically.

In the rear were Fukaziroh, holding an MGL-140 launcher in each hand, and Llenn.

Llenn was the rear guard, meaning that she was walking backward, facing the rear. All that she could see was the bright, shining exit of the castle gate, where the earth had fallen away—but that didn't mean no one could get in. They could lower a rope down from above.

Or because the surface of the rampart wall was so rocky, they could practice free climbing and make their way over using handholds and footholds.

Of course, even though it was a game and the stakes were low, nobody would bother when the price of failure was instant death. But perhaps someone out there was desperate enough to gamble on the chance to win a hundred million credits.

The last thing Llenn wanted was to get herself and her whole team slaughtered by a freak like that, so she made sure to keep her eyes on their six, as unlikely as that threat was.

Her eyes were peeled; she knew that her allies wouldn't dare do something so foolish, so anything that moved was an enemy, and she was ready to shoot.

Her weapon ammo and energy were fully replenished as of two o'clock.

P-chan and the Vor-chans were all topped off. After all the slicing and dicing she'd done, her backup twin photon swords should have had all their energy restored, too.

As the special rules suggested, Llenn and her teammates had their remaining ammo displayed as a percentage—or in dual mode along with a bullet counter. She hadn't taken a shot yet, so naturally, it said 100 percent.

From this point on, there would be no more automatic refills. Only when she got a killing shot on someone would she receive some bullets back, based on the percentage of her remaining ammo.

According to what the rules had said, if you had between 0 and 10 percent left, you would be replenished to 50 percent. In a similar fashion, under 30 would get refilled to 60. Under 50, to 70. Under 80, to 80 itself. And if you had over 80 percent ammo already, there would be no extra.

It wouldn't make sense to shoot a whole bunch and run out of ammo just to get a little back, so scoring some last hits was the plan, but she still didn't know yet if the combat she ran into would allow for that level of strategy, either.

Also, while it would be pointless to have teammates fighting over who got the last shot on a kill, it also might be arrogant to assume that they'd have the wherewithal to pull back and allow the player with the least ammo to score the bonus. Things rarely worked out that cleanly.

When M had inched his way up to the last hundred or so feet of the tunnel, he spoke into the comm. "Clarence, are you somewhere safe enough to talk?"

"*Hoh-hoh! Ahoy-hoy,*" she replied, sounding carefree. So it seemed talking wouldn't be a problem for her.

"Can you tell what's going on in the castle from up there? We're about to come through the gate from the south entrance."

"*Yeah, I can tell. What the what? Did I not tell you earlier?*"

She hadn't. And the others hadn't asked. They had needed to reach the castle before the ground gave out beneath them, so they hadn't had the presence of mind to ask.

"Please, tell me whatever you can see from there."

"Okey-dokey. Well, the castle is very round, and according to the map, the diameter is almost two miles. It's big. Almost like a whole town. Inside of the big thick outer wall, it's like a donut hundreds of yards thick, where the pathways are twisting and turning with dead ends and stuff. It's like one of those, um, whatchamacallits. A maze from a theme park. You can't tell which way to go to get to the middle. Tanya and I wandered around in it inside the fog, and then we just somehow got here. Either we were lucky, or it wasn't such a complicated maze before now," Clarence reported back. The others tried to paint a mental picture based on what she had said.

According to her, once they got through the tunnel, it would be a theme park. Yay, how fun. Was it going to cost them to get in?

Also, the maze not existing until a certain point in time was just one of those things that happened in games. You couldn't get that mad about it. That was just how things were.

"Also, in the middle of the circle is the center of the castle—the keep? Anyway, it's a big ol' thing. That's about a mile and a quarter across. And it's, um, a couple stories tall? It's like the base of a cake. The roof of the middle part is like a big open space. It's flat, but with a bunch of obstacles, so you can actually fight there. You know, like a coliseum-style training map."

The training maps were places where *GGO* newbies—or more seasoned players—could practice their shooting and other tactics. The “coliseum-style” map was the simplest kind.

The ground itself was perfectly flat and similar to concrete; the actual material, like everything in *GGO*, was a mystery. There was no physical texture to it. The color was gray.

And placed at random but appropriate locations were barricades or obstacles made of boards that you could hide behind. The barricades were cream-colored and six feet wide. They came in simple rectangular shapes and sometimes had stepped corners that allowed for better aiming. They were four inches thick, also of indeterminate material.

These barricades could receive damage, too. In other words, they could be shot and destroyed. They'd block ten or so pistol rounds, and five shots from a rifle, but anything more than that could cause spontaneous destruction of the barricade.

The trick was that they wouldn't take localized damage that chipped away at the material. No, once it crossed the damage threshold, the entire barricade would simply vanish. That was what made it scary.

After ten seconds, the barricades would reappear like normal. They needed to, or else the battlefield would quickly turn into a barren, empty arena.

The point was that you couldn't simply hide in one spot for the entire time. As the barricades went down, you had to keep moving around tactically from spot to spot.

GGO players used these training maps to get their fill of shooting practice, increase their skills, and prepare to leave the nest.

"The flat area is connected to the ramparts with these thin, long bridges. A bunch of them. But you probably shouldn't use them anymore, since you'll get shot from every direction. It's better to just give up and get through the maze. I'm up in a round tower that comes up from the edge of the foundation; it ends in a pointy spire, but there's a space like a belfry below it, only this one doesn't have a bell in it. I guess I'm about three hundred feet off the ground. I've got a really good view. Um, there are eight towers all spaced out, and I'm in the one the farthest to the north. That's all I can tell ya!"

So it was like a rounded platter with a tall rim—and a big cake in the middle with eight candles coming out of it, Llenn imagined. It looked tasty.

"All right, thanks. If it's safe, I want you to stay there. And if you can see enemies below, go ahead and shoot them," M said.

No sooner had the last word left his mouth than there was a *thwack!* sound, and Clarence shrieked, "Ah!"

Did she get shot? Llenn checked the upper left, where Clarence's previously full HP bar was rapidly dropping. It went from green straight to yellow. The speed was considerable.

It wasn't an OHKO, was it? Like Pito! Llenn thought, envisioning the worst-possible scenario. Thankfully, the bar stopped shrinking when it got to the red zone.

There was only 10 percent left. She had been shot somewhere that could nearly have been fatal.

"Ouch! I got sniped! Dammit!" Clarence grunted. Someone must have picked her off while she was leaning out of the tower.

But from where?

"Aw, no, crap! Someone climbed the next tower over! Now if I stick my head out—eek! I'll get shot!" she wailed, while the sharp sounds of bullets cracking and whizzing by sounded in the background. It was quite a deluge. Based on the speed of the shots, the enemy was clearly using an automatic sniper rifle.

If the castle keep had a diameter of 1.25 miles, then its circumference was about 3.9 miles, Llenn calculated. If you divided that by eight for the eight towers, that put the distance between each one at roughly half a mile.

Of course, it would actually be slightly shorter than that, because you were aiming on a straight line, not along the rounded circumference, which meant—ugh! It was impossible to calculate beyond this point. *Someone else do it for me! It should be around twenty-five hundred feet.*

That was a distance that a good sniper could still use. It wouldn't be an easy shot, but this one managed to hit her on the first try.

"Thanks. Stay hidden and focus on healing," M said.

Having a stream of overhead reports would be unbelievably helpful, but it would be cruel to expect that kind of assistance from Clarence and Tanya without clearing out the nearby sniper first.

And their guns, the AR-57 and Bizon, could not shoot back at that kind of distance.

The bullets could reach, of course—and you could spray them at the correct angle to land in the area—but it would not be accurate, and they'd just get picked off while they were attempting it.

Effective firing range was a cruel number. Unless other circumstances were on your side, you just couldn't beat a gun with a longer range.

"Okay, I'll do that! If anyone tries coming up the stairs to the tower, I can shoot them and drop grenades from above! As long as I keep my head down, I think I can stay put here for as long as I want, until the end of the game! So our team won't get wiped out! But it's

so lonely... So hurry and get over here, guys!"

"We'll head for the center, too, but first we want to rendezvous with the other SHINC members."

"In that case, look for my teammate Shirley, too! I wanna use the shotgun in my second loadout—I practiced with it and everything! I had to put down big bucks for that one, and I need to at least shoot one person in the face before this is over!" Clarence begged, rather selfishly.

"All right. I'll make it happen," M said, ever the gentleman. "Now, as you know, Pito got killed a short while ago."

"*Yep.*"

"It was a sniper shot. Based on the damage, it was probably Shirley who did it."

"*Whoo-hoo! You did it! You did it, Shirley! Way to go!*"

"She certainly did."

"*Damn! I wish I could've been her spotter for that!*"

She was, of course, talking rather gleefully about one of her teammates killing another one of her teammates.

That was just something that happened on this team. You got used to it.

"Didn't get the job done, huh...?"

In the tower next to Clarence and Tanya's, sheltered within an identical alcove under the steeple, was Lux, a member of MMTM.

He was dressed in his usual uniform, a Swedish military camo consisting of many shades of green in angular patterns, plus a patch on his shoulder featuring the team logo of a skull with a knife in its mouth. As always, his trademark sunglasses were on.

Behind the stone pillars that surrounded the square tower space, he had a long sniper

rifle set up on a tripod.

The gun was an F&D Defense FD338.

The AR rifles—such as the M16 or the larger-caliber AR-15—were the most famous rifles in America. Once the patent had expired, other companies were able to use its design to put out their own guns in the same style, one of which was the FD338.

One of its features was the loading handle being on the left side. It was not like the other AR-series guns, which had it higher up on the rear of the gun. There was a large muzzle brake at the end of the barrel, which directed the firing exhaust behind at an angle, reducing recoil.

As you might have guessed based on the rapid firing earlier, this was an automatic sniper rifle that could fire in semi-auto mode each time you pulled the trigger.

As the name indicated, it fired .338 Lapua Magnum bullets. That was a very powerful high-precision ammunition, the largest kind for a standard sniper rifle, boasting a maximum effective range of almost five thousand feet.

Because it was a bullet for long-range sniper rifles, it was primarily used in bolt-action rifles that boasted very high precision. So between the real world and *GGO*, there were not many rifles that could shoot them in semi-auto. Although there were conflicting accounts, this was said by some to be the first gun on the world market that could do so.

As the biggest gun freak on the team, Lux had paid through the nose for the latest model of FD338, which was very pricey within *GGO*, so he could use it in SJ5. Although he couldn't tell his teammates, he had withdrawn quite a lot of his savings in real money to convert to credits. They would be horrified if they learned how much he'd spent.

Lux was the member of MMTM who had changed his main weapon the most.

In SJ1 and SJ2, he had used a 5.56 mm H&K G36K assault rifle, like his teammate Kenta.

In SJ3, he had felt the lack of a sniper was hurting the team, and so he switched roles to take a 7.62 mm automatic sniper rifle called the H&K MSG90. In the battle on the cruise ship at the end of SJ3, it came in very handy, keeping the team leader at bay when he was on the Betrayer team. Lux, however, ended up drowning.

But in SJ4, he was in battle with LPFM at the airport and toppled from his trike at high speed. Not only did he die from a vehicle accident, his MSG90 broke when it slammed against the runway surface and had to be scrapped. What a shame. It had been expensive.

In the recent Five Ordeals, he'd had no choice but to go into his gun collection and select the SDF Type 20 rifle. It was a 5.56 mm gun and wasn't suited for long-range sniping, so he had once again selected a new gun this time around.

Lux was sitting cross-legged on the floor, with the tripod adjusted to the right height for him to aim the FD338 comfortably. He increased the zoom on the scope and examined the adjacent spire carefully.

He had been lucky from the start of this game, being placed in the snowy field close to the castle and then spotting the towering edifice very soon after the game began.

Where he was unlucky was in heading straight through the gate in one shot—because he never saw that very important warning message printed on the wall in the generic Mincho font.

He had wandered alone through the nearly empty castle and the misty town inside and eventually arrived at the center of the keep.

Inside, he had climbed the stairs to reach the arena on the roof, where he hid behind the obstacles placed there. Of course, that meant he couldn't see anything, and when no enemies came near him, he ended up spending a very boring hour in the empty fog. He was so bored that he nearly took a nap.

Then the time came at last, and the fog cleared...

Revealing several very tall spires, all quite close by. *Oh, I didn't know those were there.*

He was a sniper, so he instantly knew that he'd have a major advantage by climbing them. He sprinted over, leaped inside one, and raced up the spiral staircase.

His next burst of good luck was that members of the despicable LPFM and SHINC were in the tower right next to his.

But then he was once again struck by bad luck, as his first shot on the careless Takarazuka girl, who was leaning way out with binoculars in hand, failed to kill her in one. Apparently, the shot had not been a direct hit on Clarence. His aim had been just off enough that it hit the stone pillar next to her and struck her on the ricochet.

She had been careless before, but now she wasn't allowing any part of herself to be exposed. The other one, whose camo suggested that she was the silver-haired member of SHINC, was out of his field of view, too.

It was very frustrating that he had hit her yet failed to seal the deal, but he had to report it anyway.

He said into his comm, "Team Leader, I'm in place in the north-northwest tower of the keep. Ready to provide sniper backup. The Takarazuka from LPFM and the silver from SHINC are in the next tower over. I failed to get a kill shot. But I'm keeping their heads down."

"Good job, Lux," said David, his voice calm and soothing. Then he added, *"Listen up, all of you. We're joining forces with ZEMAL. If you see any of them, don't shoot. Provide backup. Someone really wants to finish off the pink shrimp's team themselves, so we'll help with that. If that person gets to eliminate Llenn, they've promised to share the hundred million."*

Behind his sunglasses, Lux's eyes bulged, but a smirk soon crossed his lips.

"Roger that! This is getting fun. Where you at, though, Captain?"

Fifty feet of tunnel remained to go through.

No enemies shaded the bright exit. It was so bright, in fact, that there was no way to tell what it was like past that gleaming dawn.

The time was 2:09 PM.

"M, what do you think the next scan will tell us?" Boss asked.

"I don't know," he admitted. M was the kind of honest person who would admit when he didn't know something, rather than find a way to avoid saying it.

Now that the map was nothing but the castle, would the Satellite Scan still happen the same way? Or would a different set of rules take over?

In SJ3, the Satellite Scan stopped happening once they were on the cruise ship. Instead, the scanners showed a detailed map of the ship and automatically updated with the locations of the surviving players every five minutes.

As he went, M gave directions to the teammates behind him.

“Once we get into the town, I’ll take the lead. The combination of shield and machine gun will be huge in cramped hallways. Boss and Anna, you provide support. Keep an eye above us in particular; there could be snipers on the outer walls of the keep. Fuka, bombard targets as needed. Just don’t shoot any level shots in close quarters. Llenn, continue watching the rear. If you have the chance, check your screen. There are no effective strategies from this point on. We’ll just keep moving toward the center and destroy every enemy we see. If you get any info from your teammates, Boss, let us know at once.”

The others murmured their assent.

Llenn was in the most protected position of all, but there was nothing she could do about that now.

All right. Let’s do this, she thought, right as they reached the end of the tunnel at 2:10 PM—the entrance to the town within the castle.

Six feet back, M lifted the shield on his left arm higher and held the MG5 with his right hand alone. “Let’s go. I’ll jump out first.”

The reason M bolted straight out into the light, rather than craning his neck to carefully peer outward, was to draw the gunfire of anyone who might happen to be waiting with their sights trained on the tunnel. He had the shield, which meant he was less likely to die right away than the rest of them.

Furthermore, if he had peered out with just his head, they would have fired directly into the tunnel, raising the chances of shots hitting the members farther back. That was something to be avoided.

In other words, he wanted all the heat himself.

“Hup!”

M’s large, powerful legs carried him forward into battle, just as the minute on the clock ticked upward.

At that very moment, Sophie contacted Boss for the first time:

“Boss! If you haven’t gone into the town yet, don’t go in!”

As the clock turned to 2:10 PM, M’s foot took its first barreling step out of the tunnel. At the same time, Boss shouted, “What...? M, wait! Don’t go out there!”

She was too late.

A number of things happened, all at once.

Llenn’s scan terminal vibrated, drawing her attention to the words that appeared on the screen.

Special rules for SJ5, two ten additions.

Satellite Scan will not activate within the castle.

Instead, within the town inside the ramparts, the names and distances of any players within fifty meters will become visible to you as cursors, starting from the closest. (If unwanted, cursors can be turned off by tapping them in the air.)

Around him, M could see a castle courtyard area in brownstone. The spaces between structures were as narrow as any back alley, only six to ten feet across. To either side, one-story houses were crammed together, their walls closing in on the path. There were no visible entryways, so the “houses” were really just obstacles meant to turn the place into a maze.

Beyond the brown walls, three cursors appeared in succession, from closest to

farthest. Each one popped into existence with a cute little *ping!* sound, solely inside his brain. It was very helpful and hard to miss.

[KEEs 41m]

[BOB 46m]

[YAMACHAN 49m]

“Shit!” M swore, immediately stepping back into the tunnel.

But it was too late.

Anna was watching M as he jumped out of the tunnel ahead of her. A small green cursor appeared over his back.

[M 5m]

Around three meters behind Anna, Fukaziroh saw the same cursor, only with a different number.

[M 8m]

In her case, the cursor overlapped with the wall of the tunnel. In other words, whether there was a wall or a house in between or not, the cursor, name, and distance would always be visible, telling you where the nearest players were at all times.

“M was there! I saw his cursor for a second! Did you see it, too?”

“Yeah, it was twenty-four meters to the south! If M’s here... then it’s possible that the pink shrimp actually *is* in the event, too, right?”

“Yeah! Let’s go get ‘em! Screw winning; I want the hundred million credits!”

These were the three players whose locations M had learned: Kees, Bob, and Yamachan.

"We're screwed," M spat bitterly, retreating into the tunnel.

"I'm sorry... If only I'd warned you a few seconds earlier," Boss said, feeling responsible. But it wasn't her fault. It was just the worst possible timing, that was all.

"Sophie, Rosa, Tohma, you're all good, right?" she asked her teammates. She could see their remaining hit points, so this was more about all the other circumstances.

Sophie replied, "*I'm all right, but I'm in the tunnel. Before this—things were bad!*"

"Well, at least you're okay. We're at the south gate."

"Oh! We're on the north. Basically the opposite side!"

So they were two miles away, as far as you could possibly get on the circular zone.

"The north end..." Boss murmured.

M replied, "We'll do whatever it takes to survive. Tell them to do their best."

"Got it!"

On the opposite end of the circular castle walls, inside the tunnel from the north gate, hid the three remaining members of SHINC: Sophie, Rosa, and Tohma.

Sophie: the short, wide, dwarflike one.

Rosa: the stout, freckled mom type, tall and red-haired.

And Tohma: the slender, black-haired girl with a green beanie.

Sophie and Rosa were SHINC's machine gunners, the brunt of their firepower. Both of them used the Soviet PKM.

Since SJ2, Sophie had also carried around the Degtyaryov PTRD-41 antitank rifle. While it was called an antitank rifle, they would not be shooting any tanks in Squad Jam.

It was simply a large-bore antimateriel rifle, or in other words, a super-powerful sniper rifle. Tohma, the team's best sniper, was the one who would fire it.

Even Sophie, who had a considerable carrying capacity, couldn't carry both and had given up her machine gun for a while—until the special rules of this event came into play. Now Sophie could carry around her favorite PKM like usual and actually use it.

Instead, the PTRD-41 was Sophie's second loadout, which Tohma was carrying in her inventory, along with the ammo. When the time came to use it, they would switch out to materialize the gun, which she would promptly hand back to Tohma to use.

This wasn't the way the loadout-switching mechanic was intended to work, but it wasn't against the rules, either. Everything was fair play here.

The secondary loadout Sophie was carrying was a GM-94 grenade launcher, which had come into use in the previous quest, the Five Ordeals. This was a very odd weapon: a pump-action grenade launcher that could fire four times in a row.

If they conducted a gear switch, it would appear in Tohma's hands, where she would consequently hand it back to Sophie.

Up to this point, at least so far, the three of them had played SJ5 comfortably, suffering only minor damage at worst.

Sophie's starting point was the mountainous region in the northwest part of the map, while Tohma had been on the highway south of her. They had both quickly found a hiding place and waited out the first hour without being spotted by anyone.

Rosa started out near the northern edge of the snowy field that took up the southeast quadrant of the map. There were no obstacles in the snow, making it ill-suited for waiting. Instead, she walked over to the city, which was barely visible from her location.

There, she'd found a tall building and hidden inside it, hardly making a sound—and

because of that, she had almost become a victim of the massive blast caused by the suicide bomber going after Anna and M.

The blast had ripped through the building, and because the glass was already broken, it had sent everything inside flying all over the place. She herself had been tossed out of the room she was hiding in like a vigorous sweep of dust. The tumbling left her dizzy.

The silver lining was that she wasn't inside to get trapped under the building when it collapsed. Ultimately, she only suffered some minor damage.

If she'd been closer to the center of the room, she wouldn't have been tossed out and instead would have gotten crushed and died. So that was lucky.

After Anna rushed past the blast, Rosa gave up on catching up to her and headed farther west. She had evacuated to the wasteland area and found a large boulder shrouded in mist, which she had used for cover.

Just after it turned two o'clock, she'd heard the warning from Tanya.

Not everyone was safe to report back in, but they all rushed as fast as they could toward the castle.

Tohma, who was the farthest away, only made it because she'd spotted a working car on the highway just after she'd started running. It was a manual Toyota Land Cruiser 40, sitting there in the mist.

At this point in time, whether in real life or *GGO*, there were few people left who knew how to drive stick.

Nearly half of the new vehicles sold at this point were electric or hybrids. It was hard to even find a manual transmission.

Tohma blazed a path straight to the castle in the Land Cruiser. She was utterly grateful to her father for teaching her how to drive a stick back home. It had finally come in handy—in *GGO*.

Along the way, she had spotted Sophie plodding along on her own two feet and offered

her a ride. They had also found Rosa near the castle rampart, by pure coincidence. She was being followed by an opponent who wasn't going to make it and was firing like crazy at her, hell-bent on taking her down with him.

If not for Sophie's PKM in the passenger seat to help, Rosa probably would have died in that pursuit.

With the ground crumbling behind them, they had driven the Land Cruiser straight into the tunnel, racing all the way through—where they made the unfortunate mistake of driving into the town.

They regretted it immediately.

As soon as they were there and got out of the car, they saw the cursors appear, along with names and distances.

Naturally, their own locations were revealed. And coincidentally, there were two other players just on the other side of a wall who promptly started shooting.

It was bad luck, pure and simple. The trio had turned on their heels and run back into the gigantic castle rampart.

They tried to shoot back from within the fifty-yard tunnel, but once a grenade was shot in after them, they were helpless to stop it.

The blast hit them and pelted them with shrapnel, taking about half the hit points from each one. They thought about running back to the exit and circling around to a different tunnel entrance, but by then, the ground outside had totally fallen away.

There was no escape.

With grenade smoke choking the air around them, Rosa and Sophie waited for death to arrive.

But Tohma did not.

"You can't give up! There's still more we can do!" she had cried as she removed all her equipment. Suddenly, they understood what she was planning.

“They’re gone...”

A man in reddish-brown camo carrying an AC-556F and a man in American woodland camo with an M16A1 and an M203 grenade launcher attached were peering downward, right at the very edge of the rampart.

They were looking at a ten-thousand-foot sheer cliff, the likes of which they’d never seen in *GGO* before—or in any other VR game. It was such a long drop that it made no sense. It was like looking out an airplane window.

A bit earlier, they lost sight of the three cornered Amazons in the smoke but fired all the bullets they could into the tunnel. Frankly, it was overkill.

They also shot three grenades in. That was overkill, too.

Naturally, they were expecting a furious report back from the tunnel, or perhaps a suicide charge from their three opponents, but nothing happened.

And after the smoke had cleared, and they’d walked all the way down the fifty-yard tunnel, there were no people inside—and no bodies.

“They must have fallen...”

“Yep, they fell. Don’t blame us. Rest in peace,” they concluded, turning around at the edge of the cliff.

They never realized that their three targets were clinging to the wall above the gate, on the outside of the castle.

The members of SHINC were teenage girls on a school gymnastics team in real life.

Whether in virtual reality or real reality, their athletic ability was second to none.

Sophie, Rosa, and Tohma removed all their gear, even their boots and socks, leaving nothing except their camo fatigues—and then they climbed up the outer wall, using whatever tiny edges and footholds they could find.

It was a very risky decision.

They nearly fell on multiple occasions, and if their enemies had looked up even once, they would have been sitting ducks. Sophie's only plan was to drop and land on them, if it came to that.

The girls' gamble paid off, though. They got past the two men.

Once the men left, they climbed back down and silently returned to the tunnel. Then Sophie and Rosa snuck after their foes, and just at the end of the tunnel to the town, they reached out to strangle them from behind.

"Mrrgl!"

"Aaagh!"

The men squeezed their triggers, firing wildly, but all it did was cause noise and deplete their ammo faster.

Two pairs of thick arms wrapped around their necks, dragging them forcefully back toward the outer edge of the castle.

They had just seen what awaited them there, moments earlier.

Nothing.

"Hey, what—? No, don't! Please don't! Please!" the man in the reddish camo pleaded.

"Come on, don't be shy," Sophie teased, dragging him mercilessly onward.

"Huh? Stop! Look! Your giant tits are pressing on me! I can feel them!" the man in the woodland camo cried.

"What do I care? Doesn't hurt me a bit," Rosa said, unconcerned. Her ample clutches refused to let him go.

"Dammit! A lady's pressing her boobs on me, and I'm not happy about it at all!"

"Oh yeah? Sorry to hear that, kid."

"Arrrrgh!"

The men stomped and kicked their feet childishly, all the way down the fifty-yard tunnel.

“Don’t blame us. Rest in peace,” the women said, repeating their earlier words, before hurling the men over the ten-thousand-foot cliff.

“Damn youuuuuuuuuuuu!”

“Craaaaaaaaaaaaaap!”

They fell and fell, the Doppler effect causing funny things to happen to their voices.

The women watched them go, but the DEAD tag wouldn’t show up over the falling men.

“I guess that means they’re still alive until they go all the way down the ten thousand feet.”

“Hope they enjoy skydiving.”

So that was a new fact to take away from this, useful or not.

After all that, the trio had escaped their string of dangers for the moment.

Boss’s orders: “Whatever it takes to survive! Do your best!”

They equipped their gear again, stopping before the exit of the tunnel this time to examine the town carefully.

They could tell from the cursor that one unfamiliar person was a few dozen yards ahead. From this point, they could see the cursors, but once they took a single step out of the tunnel, everyone else would be able to see *them*.

And the area ahead was a very complicated, mazelike town.

In other words, they would know the direction and distance of any nearby enemies but not how to actually reach them.

"In situations like these, there's just one thing to do," said the short woman, PKM held firmly at her waist.

"Yep, only one," replied the plucky mom, identical PKM at the ready like a part of her body.

"And I've got your backs," said the woman in the beanie, leaving the Dragunov over her shoulder in the cramped environment and holding her unholstered Strizh pistol instead.

Rosa took the first step into the town and said, "We just pick directions at random and hope for the best!"

Just after 2:10 PM, David stood right before the exit to the tunnel and remarked, "Ah, so if you're within fifty meters, you can see the enemy location..."

That was because someone just so happened to be within that distance at the moment. The visible cursor came with a name he did not recognize.

He was at the rampart gate on the northwest side.

That was about four exits from Rosa's trio, but neither was aware of the other's location yet. If anything, they might have heard some distant gunfire.

Next to David was a beautiful woman with red hair, his rather unlikely partner: Vivi, goddess of machine guns.

She was in a crouch, bearing an RPD machine gun with its barrel cut short. "That just makes me even less interested in going in," she admitted.

David and Vivi were well-known players in their own right, if not quite as famous as Llenn and her hundred-million-credit bounty.

If they walked out, and their names were revealed, people would be coming after them.

"Then let's have all these troublesome folks go after the most infamous target of the day," David smirked.

"Oh, you are a most wicked fellow... Isn't that what they say in these scenes?" The woman grinned.

"First, however," David went on, "where are your survivors?"

He knew that Shinohara and Tomtom had died in battle, but he hadn't heard anything about the others.

The three other members of ZEMAL were...

Max: the muscular Black avatar with the Minimi Mk 46.

Peter: the shortest one (still tall), with trademark tape over the bridge of his nose. He used the Israeli Negev.

And Huey: the tough guy with the slicked-back brown hair, who easily whipped around a huge and heavy M240B.

All three were firepower-heavy maniacs, with backpack ammo feeders that allowed them to shoot eight hundred to a thousand bullets without stopping. You couldn't ask for better allies—especially because they would do whatever Vivi told them to do.

"Max and Peter are hanging out in the eastern tunnel. Huey's somewhere in town. He apologized and said he didn't know where. I told him just to survive for now."

"Got it. As for us," David prefaced, "Lux is atop the northwest tower, as I mentioned. It's the perfect position for sniping and monitoring. Summon is inside the western rampart, closer to us, I believe."

Summon was the largest member of the team, who used a SCAR-L assault rifle. He had started on the highway on the western edge of the map and spent fifty lazy minutes hiding in the bed of a broken-down truck he'd found nearby.

He probably had no idea that his team leader was in a switchyard quite close by. He had nearly died in the collapse, but by running for all he was worth after getting the warning, he had just barely made it.

"Fortunately, Jake and Bold have already met up. They're inside the castle wall to the east-northeast."

Skinny Jake was MMTM's only machine gunner. He liked to use an HK21.

Bold was a fashionable fellow who set his custom hairstyle in dreads. His weapon of choice was a Beretta ARX160.

Jake had started in the snowy field but quickly fled to the city, then traveled west after the titanic explosion. He had taken almost the exact same route as Rosa, but fortunately for both of them, neither spotted the other due to the thick, choking fog. If they'd encountered each other, it would have been a deadly battle. When two machine gunners ran across each other at close range, it was quite possible for both to end up dead.

Bold had started in the same city. He was lucky enough to spot his buddy Jake en route to the castle.

"Kenta's in some castle gate on the south side. Seems like he almost died in a big blast."

The quickest member of the team, Kenta had black hair and a G36K assault rifle. He started in the woods but was lucky enough to be right next to the castle when the fog finally cleared.

The special rules that split everyone up were particularly galling to the members of MMTM, who were highly disciplined and coordinated as a team. David was dying for a chance to shoot the event sponsor.

But it was also pretty sweet that all six of them were alive and nearly unharmed. Anyone would agree, they were in the best position to win it all at the moment. Of course, he couldn't tell that to the heartbroken Vivi.

"It's really sweet that you're all alive," she said to him first, instead. "So I hate to burden you, but could you ask Kenta to do some running?"

David had his STM-556 pointed to the outside, in case an enemy appeared in the tunnel mouth all of a sudden. "Oh... yes, I see!"

She had a plan. They didn't know where Llenn's team was—they could be dead, for all anyone knew—but if they were alive, the chances were highest that they were in the south.

After splitting up in the suburb, David's side had gone north, while Llenn's side had

gone south and toward the middle. If they ended the hour there and rushed straight for the castle—assuming they weren't inside already—they would be somewhere on the south side of the structure right now. Meaning Kenta was closest.

If he could at least spot Llenn's location by cursor, they could proclaim, "The hundred-million bounty is over there! You can attack her and not lose sight of her! Do you really want to fight *us* right now?" and most enemies would apply pressure to Llenn instead.

"Let's do that," he said in his typically decisive manner. He was about to speak to Kenta when Vivi cut him off.

"And... if the enemy latches on to Llenn, we should all rush straight for the middle of the castle, as fast as we can."

This idea was more confusing to David. "Wouldn't we be safer here?"

Inside the tunnel, they could see the locational cursors of the enemies in the maze, and any who might be approaching, while the enemies couldn't see them in return. It was a safe zone that almost felt like cheating.

Couldn't they just wait here in safety while the situation with Llenn's team played itself out?

"No, wait!" David exclaimed, realizing his mistake. "This part's going to collapse, too. Is that what you're saying?"

He was too busy watching for anyone who might come to attack, but he could sense that Vivi was nodding in confirmation.

"Yes."

"What makes you think that?" David asked.

"Because that's how I would design it," she replied simply.

"Seems like a really mean-spirited rule that's going to piss off the playerbase..."

"Yes, exactly."

"Huh?"

"If you're going to make up some mean rules, you can't be half-hearted about it. You need to commit to it all the way. That way, it annoys the players that you're being so mean, but by the end, it swings all the way back around into admiration, doesn't it? And that makes it harder for people to bash you by that point."

Although David couldn't see it, Vivi was grinning.

David smirked. "Guess I'm up shit creek without a paddle. Incidentally, that's the first time in my life I've ever used that saying."

"It's 2:13 PM right now. The collapse will probably happen at the half hour. Twenty would be too soon. I'm guessing there will be an announcement with more info at 2:20, and it'll start at 2:30."

"There's the paddle."

"Only one?"

"Are you... serious, Captain?" asked Kenta, standing about sixty feet from the exit to one of the rampart tunnels to the south-southwest, positioned at seven o'clock. He was flat on his stomach in almost total darkness.

"*Dead*," replied David.

His order had been to run around and spread a message designed to draw enemy attention to Llenn.

In particular, to let the ones who were more than fifty yards away from Llenn know where she was and direct them toward her. It was a siren call to look for the hundred million credits, rather than fight each other.

But Kenta himself was instructed to get to the center by two thirty PM.

Given MMTM's reputation—for better or worse—for fighting by the book, this was an almost unbelievably fresh and novel idea.

"Roger that!" Kenta happily replied. "It sounds fun!"

A little fun was the best motivation.

He held up his G36K, which had been customized to use M16 magazines so he could share with his teammates, got to his feet, and announced, “Time to get my running in!”

CHAPTER 11
Interior Battle



CHAPTER 11

INTERIOR BATTLE

Inside the castle, the various machinations and plans of the players doing battle intertwined in curious and nasty ways—without any of them realizing it, of course.

It was 2:14 PM.

“Let’s go.”

M and his companions started to move.

M, Boss, Anna, Llenn, and Fukaziroh chose to trust in their own instincts and continue forward, rather than wait at the end of the rampart tunnel.

It was easy to see where the middle of the castle was, thanks to the player’s compass visible directly above, which had returned when the fog cleared. The problem was that it was impossible to know the route to get there.

It was a maze, after all. A gigantic maze, in which the shortest possible distance to the center was still five hundred yards.

Looking at the map on the Satellite Scanner wouldn’t show you a detailed look at the maze, either, of course. They didn’t give you school test sheets with the answers on the back, after all.

But staying put and doing nothing wouldn’t help much either, since the enemies would come after M anyway, now that his location was visible to them.

Sitting here and playing defense would not lead to winning SJ5. They had to go on the offensive.

Let’s go! Llenn thought, pumping herself up.

She’d been through the wringer so far, but she was still alive. And if she was alive, she could fight. She gripped the bright-pink P90, feeling her weapon respond to the touch.

M popped out of the huge tunnel and rushed into the labyrinth, shield and machine gun in hand.

Boss, Anna, Fukaziroh, and Llenn followed him, in that order.

Just before she left the tunnel, Llenn finally got her first look at the maze ahead.

Brown walls about fifteen feet high bordered a passage about ten feet wide. They were clearly long walls of townhouses, but the buildings held no doors, meaning they were just environmental items meant to make the area into a maze. Some of the walls were just that—walls.

Ping. Ping. Ping.

Enemy cursors appeared in Llenn's vision.

KEES, BOB, and YAMACHAN. She had never seen any of these names. It was clear that they were working together, so she decided to think of them as Kees's team.

The distance to Kees's team was about twenty yards. M headed north, toward the center of the castle. The three cursors were slightly to the left, meaning they were to the northwest.

In *GGO*, a distance of twenty yards was close enough to reach out and tap someone's shoulder. In other words, very close.

But she couldn't see them.

All Llenn could see were brown walls twice as tall as she was. And they ended in a crossroads just a few yards away. It truly was a maze.

I really don't like this map, Llenn grumbled to herself. It was so difficult to fight in a place like this.

M continued quickly in silence; he was moving more or less at full speed by his standards.

Boss and Anna stayed about ten feet behind him, followed by Fukaziroh, and lastly Llenn.

Of course, she was only going at a light jog. She could run about three times faster if she wanted. She could turn and run backward and still not have to worry about falling behind.

After the party had traveled about sixty feet since leaving the tunnel, they came to a T-intersection. They would have to turn here; the left and right choices each went another ten feet.

Ordinarily, they would stop running and check for enemies down either path, but M immediately decided “right” and burst around the corner toward the east.

Boss and Anna glanced to the left just after M went around the corner, then continued their pursuit of his path.

Oh, I get it! Llenn thought, putting the picture together.

The cursors were nasty in that they gave away your location, but it also meant you could avoid an unexpected run-in with enemies. In other words, as long as the other cursor didn’t get too close, you could keep moving through the maze without slowing down.

Meaning...

“What the—? So if you can see the cursors... that means you can just run through the maze however you want,” Llenn commented, watching the distance to Kees’s team carefully; they were now seventy-five feet away.

Apparently they weren’t able to find a route that brought them closer to the group and were stuck going in circles on their own.

“What, did you just figure that out? That’s the maze game, baby!” said Fukaziroh, ten feet ahead.

“Finally. Gotta love a good game,” Llenn replied, running backward. At last, it made sense. They didn’t *have* to fight as long as they could stay on the run.

Just then, a cute little *ping!* sound happened in Llenn’s mind.

“Uh-oh, a new one. At four o’clock,” Fukaziroh said. Indeed, if M was traveling toward twelve, the new cursors appeared in the vision of the entire team in the four o’clock

direction.

There were four of them at a distance of fifty yards. Then it turned to forty-nine, then forty-eight.

But in the next moment, they stopped at forty-seven. Llenn was fairly confident she was correct. They had run into a dead end in the maze.

Of course, the other side could presumably see her LLENN cursor and her distance. They would also imagine the tantalizing one hundred million number as well.

Shirley's name was not one of the four. In fact, she didn't recognize any of their names.

If she tried to stop and memorize every name she saw, it would take too much time and mental energy, so Llenn just focused on the direction and distance.

They were still wavering between forty-seven and forty-nine, so it didn't seem they had anything to worry about at this point in time.

Up ahead, M came to another T-intersection. Ordinarily, which direction to go was a difficult decision, but he took no time at all. He went right, to put more distance between them and Kees's team, which was still closer. It put them a bit farther away—and the new group of four a bit closer.

"This could end up with the enemies just ten feet away, on the other side of a thin wall, right?" Llenn asked hesitantly.

"It's possible," M replied.

"Could they throw grenades over the wall?"

"Well, uh..." He sounded surprisingly hesitant.

"Should I blast 'em first? It's a bit close, but I could probably get a good shot on those four," crowed Fukaziroh, the grenadier. It was as casual as if she'd asked, "Want me to get some popsicles at the convenience store? It's a bit of a hike, but with my moped, it's a quick trip."

If Fukaziroh knew the distance and angle, she could indeed land an arcing grenade shot with considerable accuracy. In a maze like this, it was an almighty, one-sided

means of attack.

But Llenn had her misgivings. If it were really an advantageous tactic, M would have given her the order to do that already. So why hadn't he?

A number of possible answers occurred to Llenn.

One: to save on grenades. Even if there were refills, it wouldn't do to start wasting them on distant enemies before the final battle.

Two: to prioritize movement. Getting through the maze was more important.

Three: ummm...

"You don't need to," M stated, before Llenn could actually think of a third reason.
"Llenn, take a single shot into the air with your P90."

"Huh? All right."

She didn't know why, but she knew there was a reason. She followed the leader's instruction.

Wait, I'm the leader. Oh, whatever.

Llenn stopped briefly and aimed the P90, which had a sound suppressor on the end, at an angle into the air.

The P90ists of the world are aware of a fact of life as simple and profound as "The sun always rises in the east," but which most other, normal, healthy people have no idea about. And that's: "Even with the P90's selector in full auto mode, a light pull of the trigger can fire a single semi-auto shot." A feature known as a progressive trigger.

Llenn lightly depressed the trigger.

Shpak!

P-chan jolted in her hand, emitting a tiny 5.7 mm bullet faster than sound. An empty cartridge ejected from the bottom of the gun.

The bullet vanished in the distant reddish-blue sky—

“Oh!”

Or so you would have thought. But instead, it stopped at a height of fifteen feet, right at the top of the maze wall. The little bullet was too fast to see coming out of the gun, so it was like it had just appeared, hanging in the air.

There was also what appeared to be a ripple in the air. Then the bullet simply fell back to the ground, clattering lightly.

“It stopped! It fell back down!” Llenn said, announcing what she’d just seen.

“I figured,” M murmured.

“No surprise there,” Boss added. They’d both expected this.

“What does it mean?” Llenn asked, just to be sure. She had an idea of her own, but it would be dangerous to just make an assumption without confirming it with the others.

“You can’t attack over the top of the maze. If you shoot, the bullets will stop. It probably works the same way from above, too.”

“Like an invisible barrier?” Llenn asked.

When playing *GGO* normally, there were certain enemies out on the map, especially the “mid-boss” larger ones, who used invisible defensive shields like this. The phenomenon didn’t have an official name, so people just called it an invisible barrier.

Sometimes it was a localized effect that just covered a weak point, and sometimes it surrounded an entire foe. In the case of the latter, you needed a strategy to get past it somehow.

Up to this point in time, invisible barriers were not an item that players could acquire. It would be too big of an advantage.

“Exactly. It’s like they’ve placed an invisible barrier over the entire top of the maze,” M explained.

“I see. Makes total sense.”

“So if Fuka tried to shoot a grenade,” M continued, not bothering to stop running, “the

barrier would probably stop it before it explodes. And because it's within the safety range, they won't explode, period."

Launched grenades had a safety feature that measured distance and refused to allow them to explode until they'd traveled a certain distance from the shooter. If Llenn's memory was correct, Fukaziroh's launchers had a safety range of about sixty feet.

"But I can still shoot a plasma grenade down the path ahead of us."

Don't do that! Llenn's mental commentary snapped as soon as the words were out of Fukaziroh's mouth.

"Don't use a weapon with a sixty-foot blast diameter in this cramped area. Have you forgotten how you almost blew me up earlier?" she said aloud, glaring pointedly.

"Yes, I forgot. Do you think I can knock these annoying walls down?"

Don't do that either! Even in her mind, Llenn was fast.

M interjected, "I doubt anything we do will destroy these walls. If that were possible, it wouldn't be a maze anymore."

Exactly, Llenn thought. If that were possible, you could just create your own path straight through. Every player with grenades would be doing it.

"So I'm basically useless until we're through the maze." Fukaziroh sulked. "Fine, then. I'll put Rightony and Leftonia away and use my pistol. The Smith & Wesson will be my passport. My hard, gleaming passport. Any enemies that come flocking to us will get a bullet in the brain courtesy of this."

The Smith & Wesson M&P was Fukaziroh's sidearm. That was an abbreviation of Military & Police. It was a 9 mm automatic.

But before Fukaziroh could draw it from its holster, Llenn snapped, "Don't do that. You'll put someone's eye out."

Right around the time Llenn discovered the ceiling on the maze, or perhaps a bit earlier, Shirley had figured out the trick at the exit to the tunnel that went through the

rampart.

"I see... So that's what this is... Well, that makes sense."

There was a maze of a town ahead. As a test, she fired a 7.62 mm bullet from her R93 Tactical 2 rifle at the spires over the center of the castle—just an ordinary bullet, rather than wasting an exploding round—but it was stopped by an invisible ceiling.

Sniping up from below was impossible. And presumably, vice versa.

Whether because they heard the high-pitched sound of the gun firing or out of sheer coincidence, two cursors became visible to her, wandering around forty yards away behind the walls.

Shirley was a sniper. Her style of combat was finding enemies at long distance and shooting them. She was decent at snap shooting as she ran, too, but for that she still needed to be a decent distance away, with no obstacles in between.

If there were no cursors, and no one knew their opponent's location, then she might be able to shoot someone when they appeared around a corner in the maze. But if they knew the distance and everything, she was at a total disadvantage.

"I can't win..."

The thought of charging into the labyrinthine town and holding her own was a pipe dream.

Shirley hated to lose, but she knew her own qualities, what she was good and bad at, better than anyone else. She didn't get lost in her own fantasies.

"If only she were here..."

If Clarence were present, Shirley could hand over her second loadout, a shotgun, and have her stand in front and do all the blasting. A shotgun was the perfect gun for this environment, with a short range but wide spray, with the effect of stunning anyone hit.

But Clarence wasn't here. She had to accept reality.

So what to do?

"Should I just stay here...? No, think about these shitty rules. Who knows what might happen to this spot later... Could be that the middle is the only part that's left at the end..."

Like Vivi, Shirley was concerned about the safety of the area. Perhaps it was her wild instincts as a hunter. Perhaps it was something else.

"Should I just keep running, without even bothering with my gun...?"

If she put the long and bulky R93 back into her inventory, she could reach max speed and be much nimbler. But it would mean that the ken-nata blade was the only weapon she could use.

One method would be to pay close attention to the enemy locations via the cursors, pray that she didn't run across them, and rush through the maze as quickly as possible.

"But if they track me down, I'm done for." Once she realized that, she eliminated that option.

You didn't have to be Llenn to outrun Shirley; there were plenty of players faster than her. If they started catching up from behind, she would simply die without a means of fighting back.

While she had fulfilled one of her life goals—her Squad Jam life goals—by killing Pitohui, Shirley was not interested in resigning, committing suicide, or allowing someone to take her out.

Even if her ultimate fate was to be shot and killed, Shirley was going to do her damnedest to delay that moment as long as she possibly could.

"Then that leaves only one thing," she concluded. No matter how impossible it seemed, if that was the best option, it would have to do.

Shirley turned on her heel and began to run through the tunnel—toward the outside of the castle. As she ran, she swung her left arm, turning the long rifle into brief motes of light that soon vanished.

Then she reached the threshold of the entrance, the place she'd scrambled so hard to reach, at the top of a ten-thousand-foot cliff—and glared at the sky and the wall around her.

“.....”

“Hey! Just hear me out!”

At that shout from an adjacent passageway in the maze, a new player startled. He had a young male avatar of medium height and build, with short blond hair and blue eyes. But he wore a mask that hid his face.

He was in a black jumpsuit made of leatherlike material, one of those mysterious fabrics that was unique to *GGO*.

His gun was a Soviet SKS, recognizable by its wooden stock. It used 7.62 × 39 mm bullets, like the AK series, and could fire up to ten shots consecutively on semi-auto.

He recognized the name KENTA on the cursor ahead of him. That was one of the MMTM guys. He'd seen the man fighting (and getting killed) in a number of video clips before.

The name on his own cursor, which Kenta would be seeing right now, was MURACHI.

As for Murachi, he was panicking. “Wh-why are you talking to me?!”

He had seen Kenta approaching for the past minute or two, based on his cursor. He'd fled through the maze but found himself trapped in a dead end now. Walls surrounded him ahead and to the sides. There was nowhere to go.

The distance on Kenta's cursor grew smaller and smaller. Murachi had no escape. The man was ten feet away now. If they hadn't been in adjacent corridors, he would have been shot and killed by now.

“Hey! Guy on the other side of the wall! You can hear me, right? Your name's Murachi?”

“Wh-what the hell do you want? Huh? Y-you want me to s-surrender?!” he shouted back, although it sounded more like a shriek. He didn't know what else to say.

Murachi had just started playing *GGO*, as a matter of fact. He was a total noob.

Originally, he'd played a different full-dive VR game. It was called *Tekken Seisai Online*:

We Are the Beatdown Busters, or simply *TSO* for short. It was a fighting game that involved piloting giant robots in massive, physical melee battles.

Basically, it was like a supersize, online version of those RC robot fighting events. You had three-hundred-foot-tall steel monstrosities engaged in a destruction derby of sorts, and it was *very* impressive.

There was also a PvE city destruction mode where you smashed up buildings instead of opponents, which was awesome for stress relief.

He had played that a fair bit and gotten pretty good at it, but sadly, it must not have been that popular, because it had been shut down just three months ago. What a shame.

So Murachi was here because a real-life friend who had a long and fairly prominent history in *GGO* needed him on his team to round out their numbers. He was only temporarily present in the game.

Converting a character brought over your relative strength from the previous game, so his *GGO* character was still pretty good numerically, but he had never used a gun in a full-dive game before.

He was here in SJ5 without even really knowing how to shoot. But his friend had said, “Don’t worry! You’ll just be hanging out with the team as the holder of my alternate loadout. My teammates’ firepower is seriously crazy! We’ll all keep your ass safe! Just come along for the ride!”

Thanks to the damn rules, however, none of them were anywhere to be seen. And as had just been revealed to him earlier, his friend had already died in battle. What the hell? What kind of crappy ride was this?

That friend was one of the people who had gotten their heads chopped off by Llenn in the neighborhood to the south. Of course, Murachi had no idea what had happened, exactly.

The gun in his hand was only borrowed from that same friend: the SKS, which could fire ten shots on semi-auto, and that was it.

Frankly, it was a piece of crap. A beginner gun, cheap and feeble. The only thing it had going for it was that it was easy to use.

Thanks to its classic look because of the wooden stock, however, the people who liked the SKS *really* liked it. It was one of those “rare classics” that certain historical nerds loved to obsess over.

But if you weren’t a gun freak, why would you care? *It’s the only gun I’ve got. And it’s not even that good.*

Alone in the thick mist, plagued by fear and anxiety, he ran and ran for survival, made it to the castle, and promptly got lost in the maze. And then he found himself in the crosshairs of a powerful enemy, of whom his friend had said, ‘MMTM is tough. They’re all tough. I wouldn’t want to fight them head-on.’

He’d had enough for one day.

He just wanted to surrender and get out of this map already. The only reason he hadn’t done so up to this point was because he didn’t want his friend and all the other members of the team to whine and complain to him afterward.

Kenta called out to Murachi, “Surrender? No, I’m not talking about that. I want to send a message to you: Llenn’s in the south.”

“Huh? Who?” Murachi asked. An honest question. He was just trying to survive.

“Have you forgotten? Llenn! The little pink shrimp, a powerhouse in Squad Jam, who has a hundred-million-credit bounty on her head. They’re saying nobody saw her in the pub, but she’s here, all right. She slipped into the castle from the south. She’s probably still hanging around that area.”

“F-for real...?”

“For real, baby. If you finish her off, you get a hundred. Million. Credits.”

“Hundred... million... credits...”

The power of that number coursed through his mind. It completely banished all fear from Murachi’s being.

“Rrraaaahhh!”

Yes, people do act on wonderfully laudable, human qualities like love and bravery and

friendship and kindness. They also act on greed for money. Lots and lots of money.

Murachi's mental CPU was running at full capacity. What could he do with a hundred million credits, which was worth a million yen?

He could go all out and buy himself a phenomenal rare gun that would blow his friend away. (Not literally.)

But forget *GGO*. He should think about using that money in the real world. This was one of the rare games that actually let you trade in-game currency for real money.

A hundred million credits. One million yen. Nearly ten thousand US dollars. That would be one hundred Eiichi Shibusawas, who was on the ten-thousand-yen bill.

With a million yen, he could fulfill a lifelong dream and go on a luxury cruise. See countries and places on the other side of the world that he'd always wished to see! They would be within his grasp! Flying business class!

Or if he stretched his money, he could complete a backpacking trip around the world. He could totally take some time off from college to do something like that.

He could also stay in school, save his money, and spend it on certain businesses like that offered certain services, and maybe even fulfill a fantasy to do one day. The thought was giving him a nosebleed.

Kenta laid on the pressure even harder. "Hurry and go south! And in just this one situation, if you see folks from different teams, let them know, too! That way everyone can attack Llenn without worrying about wasted conflict elsewhere. It doesn't matter if everyone else does a bunch of damage, as long as you're the one who scores the last hit. Easy, right? It's like you've practically won the million yen already."

"Yaaaarrgh! I'll do it! Thanks for the tip!"

He was reborn.

The old Murachi, weak-willed and pliant and helpless and pathetic, had just died.

"C'mon, SKS. I'll feed you the blood of that pink shrimp..."

No one else could say whether the SKS spoke back.

"A million yen!" the man screamed, rushing off down the corridor.

"There goes another one. He was easy," Kenta commented, looking around for the closest cursor after Murachi's. "Better keep moving."

2:17, a bit more than three minutes after Llenn's team left the tunnel.

Up to this point, there had been no unfriendly contact with opposing players. In other words, no battle.

Llenn could now see ten cursors in total—the three with Kees, the four after that, then another three—but the distance between them was not closing significantly.

First it would seem like they were getting closer; then they would stop and move away. It seemed like the maze was just that twisted, because their opponents were not closing the gap.

Of course, thanks to the invisible ceiling over their heads, they couldn't get sniped from the top of the castle, nor blown up by grenades lobbed over their way.

They must have been quite visible from the center keep, the outer ramparts, and the bridges that connected the two. You would have expected a sniper to try to shoot them already, but there hadn't been a single shot so far.

The base of the cake that was the center keep was getting a little bit larger. At first it was just barely visible, when it was five hundred yards away, but now it was taller, closer, and more imposing. Due to the maze, it was impossible to measure precisely, but she guessed that they were halfway there.

As the rear guard, Llenn was the one watching behind them. In fact, she was basically walking—no, trotting—backward, so when they reached a dead end in the maze, Fukaziroh had to tell her, "Whoa, Llenn, stop!"

She turned around. Before M, the lead member of the group, the path ahead came to an end. The walls were all the same color, so unless you got fairly close, it was hard to tell if it was really a dead end, or if there were side passages at the end. The whole

thing was very nastily designed.

M came back this way, stomping past Llenn. The shield and MG5 looked very powerful in his hands. Following him went Boss, then Anna.

For the past few minutes, Boss and Anna had each been holding a spare magazine in their left hands, each belonging to the Strizh handgun that their entire team carried. Every now and then, they used a thumb to pop out one of the 9 mm Parabellum bullets and drop it alongside the wall.

If M turned down a path and saw a bullet lying on the ground ahead, he would therefore know that they'd already been this way. A very Hansel and Gretel strategy.

The rest was up to M's mental mapping ability.

M's geographic sense was unparalleled, thanks to his experience as a stalker. (As a reminder, children, do not follow his example.) He never got stuck in the same place twice and was steadily finding the most efficient route to the middle of the castle.

There were ten enemies within 150 feet. If they had to pass down the same hallway, battle would be unavoidable. If that happened, M was ready to use his machine gun in the lead to overpower them. Surely he could handle about ten people, if needed.

With each member using their wits and abilities to the fullest, the group smoothly made their way through the maze without any combat. It felt like they might actually make it.

Llenn was just allowing herself to taste the sweet, syrupy allure of that possibility, when something else dashed a bucket of cold water over her head.

Beep, beep, beep, bee-bee-beep, beep.

The rapid-fire pinging of new cursors appearing.

“Huh?”

Bee-bee-beep, beep-beep.

“What the—?”

"Hang on, what's this all about?" yelled Fukaziroh, alarmed by the sudden increase in enemy cursors within fifty yards, all closing in quickly.

Wow, even Fuka understands that this is a crazy situation, Llenn thought.

No sooner had the words entered her mind than Fukaziroh continued, "You really want to come see my adorable beauty up close, eh? Fine, the more, the merrier! Step on up to catch a glimpse of me, and I'll give you all signed grenades."

Sorry, it was Fukaziroh who was crazy.

"Tch!" Boss snapped.

"This is... not good," Anna said worriedly.

Try as she might, Llenn could not prevent these comments from raising her hackles. Maybe Fukaziroh had said what she did in an attempt to keep Llenn's nerves loose and comfortable. Oh, who was she kidding—of course that wasn't it.

She waited for what M would say.

"....."

And when he didn't say anything, then the fear set in.

"Yo! You after the hundred million credits, too?"

"That's right. So make your choice: Either we kill each other here over nothing, so the winner gets to chase after the prize alone and is beaten up, or we call a temporary truce and stay healthy, betting it all on getting that lucky kill shot."

"I don't even have to think it over. I'll take the latter. There are two things almost as important as your life. One is money, and the other one is money. I got a car loan to pay off."

"Exactly, money is everything. I've got a newborn to support. So that's our choice."

"That's our choice. Oh, and... congrats."

Here and there, other conversations were taking place, often with quite different details, but all leading to the same outcome: temporary team ups.

Let's call their team the Wannabe Millionaires. Was there an abbreviation for that? Millionaires? Who knows.

None of them were from MMTM, SHINC, or ZEMAL, of course, but they did include the armored soldiers of T-S. There was a member of NSS, the historical cosplay squad. There were even some members of RGB, the optical-only team that once served Llenn's team a bitter loss.

These were delightfully honest men who chose not their own team, nor winning SJ5, nor honor, nor glory—but the chance at a million yen in the pocket.

And now they were slinking farther and farther south around the castle.

"It's like a trade fair for the greedy!" someone in the pub yelled, either out of exasperation or admiration—or both.

The folks watching on the screens could see it all. In the big monitors mounted on the walls, or hanging from the ceiling, or floating in the air over their tables, they could see a very clear map of the castle: the final arena of SJ5.

By employing a pinch zoom out on their personal screens, the chaotic and tangled picture of the maze was made very clear. They could even see the characters' locations and names along with their cursors. It was a god's-eye view.

It made something else very clear, too.

The cursor for LLENN on the south side, grouped with her four companions, was increasingly becoming the focus of a large southward migration of players. Like ants drawn to sugar, many yellow cursors were flooding downward through the brown environment.

Of course, it was still a maze, so they went back and forth, left and right, but overall, they were making progress. Seeing the cursors closer to the center undeniably moving away from the middle made it clear how they were aiming for Llenn.

One eagle-eyed viewer spotted Kenta approaching an opponent in the southeast part of the map and making contact. Rather than disappearing, the other player turned and started moving south. When he realized what MMTM was doing, he spoke up to share his finding.

“Aha, so that’s what this is. A brutal strategy...”

“Freakin’ awesome!”

“That’s my MMTM!”

“They’re not yours.”

“Thanks for doing our usual joke.”

It was after 2:19 PM, and Llenn’s group was totally surrounded.

One person examining the zoomed-in map said excitedly, “Hey, holy shit! The pink shrimp doesn’t have a single route through to the center without crossing at least one enemy!”

At 2:19 and thirty seconds, a number of things happened all at once.

First of all, Kenta reported back to David between his various recruiting attempts around the maze.

“It’s looking good, Leader! I can tell from the cursors! We’ve got a whole bunch of people going south!”

In the rampart tunnel to the northwest, David confirmed that no one was within fifty yards of him, then spoke to his teammate in the tower. “All right, we’re going to move. Lux?”

“Ready! I’ll give it a shot, Leader!” came the response.

David hurled a smoke grenade. A burst of yellow smoke appeared in the maze town, spreading and rising.

"Confirmed!" said Lux. He was looking in that direction through binoculars from the northeast spire of the center keep. He could see the maze from above, so he was able to give directions to a certain extent.

Being as complex as it was, he couldn't give the most direct route, but he at least had a better idea if the current path was a dead end ahead, or if it was one the player had already passed through.

While it was a cheap advantage—some might call it cheating—this was simply a privilege of those teams who had members who had gotten into the castle early.

The drawback was that, by focusing on the team leader, he could not provide the same help to Summon at the west gate.

"Sorry, Summon," said David. "All I can say is: Good luck!"

"No worries, boss. Let's meet in the middle."

"Yes. In the middle," his captain replied.

"Leave the rear to me," said Vivi. The two of them rushed out of the tunnel they'd been hiding inside the entire time.

"That's weird... The enemies are all moving really far south," said Sophie, feeling suspicious at noticing the lack of cursors as she stomped along through the maze. "Ohh! Are they moving toward Llenn...? Boss! The enemy's converging on your location! I think someone's intentionally giving them directions!"

Nearby, Rosa and Tohma scowled.

"Yeah, that sounds right," Boss replied through the comm. *"We're surrounded by enemies at this point. I'm sure that's cleared things up around you, though."*

"Yes, true!"

"Then head straight for the middle. Don't attempt rescue. There are too many of them."

Sophie had only one choice of reply.

“.....Roger that!”

“Mmm, I’m bored. Wanna play a word game?” suggested Clarence, lying on her back at the top of the spire, clutching her AR-57. She was completely relaxed.

“Now’s not the time...” muttered Tanya, who was also lying down to avoid being sniped. She had just learned of Boss and Llenn’s predicament through the comm. Unlike Clarence, however, she was maintaining a vigilant watch on the stairs.

There was a grenade in her hand; if anyone started coming up, she was ready to pull the pin and drop it into the hole over the steps.

Clarence was listening to the LPFM chatter through the comm as well, so she should be aware that her team was in danger, Tanya assumed.

“‘Time’...Time rhymes with... rhyme!”

She had to take that back. Clarence wasn’t aware of anything.

“Wait, that makes no sense!”

In the real world and in *GGO*, the clock struck 2:20 PM.

At that moment, Llenn followed M’s lead and stopped moving, because there were too many enemies around them.

Bzzzzzt.

Thanks to that, she promptly noticed that the Satellite Scanner in her shirt was vibrating.

“There’s something on the device!”

“Probably info. You look at it for the group and tell us what it says.”

“Got it.”

She did as he said, pulling the device out of her shirt pocket and looking at the screen. There was a message that started with *Additional Information at 2:20*, which she read aloud.

“Um, it says, ‘I intentionally forgot to say that this castle will also crumble from the outside in. At two thirty, everything will fall away, bit by bit...’ Huh? What is this crap?!”

“Just read all of it, Llenn. Remember, stay calm,” Fukaziroh admonished.

“Everything will fall away, bit by bit, until only the center remains. In other words, the final stage! Enjoy your last battle up there! Good luck!” The end!

“Gah! What the hell is that?! Screw you, asshole!” Fukaziroh exploded.

“What happened to being calm?” asked Llenn, who felt positively cool in comparison.

“What? Are you serious?”

The members of Llenn’s group weren’t the only ones who felt like panicking.

“In less than ten minutes...”

“That’s all we have...?”

“And if we don’t finish her by then...”

“We’ll all die.”



These comments came from the shallow—er, enthusiastic, income-oriented—men who were dead set on killing Llenn for the million-yen bounty on her head.

They were now faced with a simple question:

Keep chasing Llenn for a chance at earning that million-yen bounty? Or give up on it and rush for the keep as soon as possible?

“Um... What should we do?”

“They’re definitely better off heading for the middle of the castle right away,” someone in the pub said.

Their screens all contained the *Additional Information at 2:20* message, too, of course. Many of them jeered and laughed when it appeared. It was easy to sit back and enjoy the pageantry when you weren’t in the middle of it.

“Better to go for the castle... because?” asked a man who was drinking yet another virtual root beer. He’d lost track of how many it had been.

“Because,” the other person replied, “Llenn is obviously going to rush for the castle like crazy. She’s very fast and dangerous. Her chances of surviving are higher. And you’ll still have a chance to kill her in the final battle at the keep. It’s better to head for the center now, rather than risking it here.”

“Ah, I see. Yes, that does seem to be the more rational choice.”

“Assuming the folks in the maze aren’t totally blinded by money, of course.”

“On the other hand, if they’re all going for greed, that increases the chance that Llenn won’t make it out, right?”

“True, but I think that Llenn will find a way out of this mess.”

“Because?”

With a dead serious expression, the man answered, “Because she’s my Llenn.”

“She’s not yours! Hey, we just did this bit!”

"Are you serious?!" Clarence cackled happily, still lying on her back in the narrow space at the top of the spire. She was surprised, but even more than that, she was delighted. It meant her location was safe. That was the kind of person she was.

Clarence was also on her back, holding the Satellite Scanner over her face with her left hand. Yes, like a smartphone in bed. Right before you drop it directly on your face as you start drifting to sleep.

Next to her, Tanya sounded hopeful. "Does this make things easier for Boss and Llenn? People won't want to die, so they'll all come toward the middle, right?" She was still gripping a grenade in her hand.

"No," said Clarence in English.

"Why English?" Tanya asked. She shook her head. "I mean, why do you think that?" she tried again.

"Because, the whole time in SJ5 so far, we haven't had the chance to do the team battles we've been looking forward to. I'm guessing there aren't many teams with all members still alive, and nobody's been able to regroup. So in that situation, wouldn't *you* focus on getting a million yen, rather than trying for a team victory?"

"That's a good point..."

"What now?"

There was just one question on the mind of the guys who'd surrounded Llenn's position.

Do they keep chasing after her, trying to get a million yen? Or do they give up on that, prioritize survival, and rush for the middle of the castle?

"What now? It's obvious! I'm on the hunt for that bounty!" said a man who was just fifty feet away from the target. He wore black fatigues and held a Benelli M3 automatic shotgun. "If you wanna go to the center, go. I'm not gonna blast you in the back. I don't wanna waste my shells. Every one of these is for Llenn!"

The man's powerful greed—I mean, soul—struck the hearts of the others nearby, whose names and faces he hadn't known until moments ago.

“My team’s all jacked up anyway...”

“And it’s not like winning Squad Jam is going to pay out a million yen...”

“Plus, our chances of winning are super low anyway...”

They all had a different excuse, each one more pathetic than the last.

“I’m gonna shoot for that million yen after all!”

In the end, the group that had already been lured by riches were unanimous in agreeing to continue their pursuit of Llenn.

“At this point, we’ll just have to break through the enemy’s containment. Well, that’s *always* been true,” M admitted.

“Exactly,” added Boss.

“That’s what I intended to do,” Anna chimed in.

Just then, M snapped, “Enemies dead ahead!”

He slammed the bottom of the shield in his left hand against the ground.

“Llenn, Fuka, crouch down in the back! Boss left, Anna right!”

Even Llenn could tell what had happened. There were two cursors visible to her straight ahead, moving fast. The readout on the cursors on the far end of the passage beyond M had originally indicated seventeen and sixteen meters of distance, but in the next moment, they were already at fourteen and thirteen. It was a rapid approach.

There were four meters of space between Llenn and M—and a corner about seven meters ahead of M. The two enemies were surely rushing right for that spot. They would pop out right in front of the group.

"All right! Bring it!" roared Fukaziroh, getting Rightony and Leftonia ready.

"Stop!" Llenn snapped, shoving her head down on the ground and flattening herself as well.

"Fire!" M commanded.

The next moment, the air was suddenly full of the sound of shooting.

M's MG5 was in full auto, while Boss and Anna fired their Strizh pistols from the wings just behind M's large body and shield.

The sound of the gunfire echoed off the side walls, as well as the far wall ahead of them, lashing at Llenn's eardrums.

"Gah!"

It was so loud. The shooting was about as loud as you could possibly bear in the virtual world. If you were the one shooting, adrenaline would go a long way in helping to ignore the sound, but it was agony for those who were just listening. Sheer agony.

The MG5 in M's hand howled like a hound whose owner had just died. The mechanism pulled the ammo belt inward, spitting out nothing but empty cartridges and links. Bullets came out of the muzzle in a stream of fire with no end.

"Aaagh!"

"Hrrg!"

The shots punctured the legs of the two men who came darting around the corner.

In fact, what they did was less puncturing than *severing*.

A stream of consecutive bullets could easily cut off a limb. The men leaped around the maze corner and into the hallway with Llenn's team, just as anticipated. But the bullets hit their legs, cutting them off and causing them to topple forward with no means of propulsion.

And then, at almost the exact same moment—they exploded.

Ba-ba-ba-bakam!

With a blast that vastly overwhelmed the gunfire, a series of grenades went off all at once, blowing the toppled men to pieces.

In reality, this would have been a gruesome butchery, with blood, flesh, and scraps of organs splattering everywhere. But in the relatively peaceful virtual world, it was just a scattering of obviously fake polygonal chunks: body parts with wire-frame cross sections, hands and heads and legs and torsos, launching up to ten feet in the air and spraying apart. Yeah, it was still pretty gross.

“Wha—?”

Llenn had no idea what had just happened.

M stopped shooting the MG5 and explained, “They were carrying a ton of grenades. They pulled the pin and started charging us. They must’ve thought they could rush through the shots to reach you, Llenn. A suicide bomb attack.”

“Yeesh...”

Their tenacity was disturbing.

“I had a hunch about them, so I shot their legs out first to make sure they fell.”

Scratch that; M’s calm descriptions were *more* disturbing.

“Well, well, must be hard to be so popular,” grunted Fukaziroh, who was pressed flat to the ground under Llenn.

“Anyone coming next?” wondered Boss, switching from the Strizh to her Vintorez, now that she had fired all the pistol’s shots. Both she and Anna were changing from the nimbler pistols to their longer guns, the Vintorez and Dragunov.

“No, we should be fine,” M said, and Llenn could see why. No other cursors were rapidly closing distance.

“Hmph. Those two were the only ones bold enough to try us. Thank God for that. The worst thing for us would be if they’d all come at once,” Boss replied, replacing her Strizh’s magazine and sticking it in the holster.

"Hmm? Someone got ahead of themselves."

There was a group of five huddled up about a hundred feet from M. They were an impromptu team that had just come together, judging from the totally random gear across the group. They didn't have a name yet.

Based on the visible cursor movement and the sound of shooting and explosions rumbling through the maze, they could guess what the two dead players had attempted to do.

Llenn was still alive. They could see her name, right there.

The gunfire had been fast and heavy. "Either M or one of SHINC's 7.62 mm machine gunners did that. But was it a new weapon or a backup set...?"

True to their reputation as gun perver—as gun enthusiasts, *GGO* players could tell these things right away.

"They were idiots, though. Why would you attack M's group with just two guys?" one of them muttered. "Didn't they learn from the Russo-Japanese War that you can't split your strength into consecutive small bursts?"

Someone spoke up: "Listen up, people! There's no point attacking in groups of two or three in such close quarters! M has that shield. We'll be outgunned! We should get everyone together, then surround them on two sides and roll through them, before the clock reaches the half hour! This fight is all about numbers!"

"That's right, Bro. You got the right idea," someone else said. Of course, no one disagreed with him.

"How about 2:27, then? It shouldn't take more than three minutes for either them to die or us to die."

"No argument here. But what about the idea of tossing a plasma grenade at the end? I'm pretty sure—no, definitely sure—it would hit everybody."

"If you can get within throwing range, then why not? As long as we take out Llenn, who cares about the rest of them? Same for me."

“Roger that!”

“Sounds like a plan. Let’s all rush ‘em in brutal fashion, very immaturely, just to kill one target!” the first member concluded. “Of course, if we could get in contact with the guys on the opposite side of them, that would be great...”

Unfortunately, none of the members of the impromptu gathering here had teammates on the other side—or anywhere else nearby. If they had, they would’ve been in contact through the comm.

“No use lamenting the things we have no control over...”

He glanced at his watch. 2:22 PM.

“Let’s just do what we can. Watch the cursor distances and surround them.”

Out of trouble for the moment, Llenn’s team was—oh, who are we kidding? They were in trouble from start to finish.

The cursors were spreading out to surround them, while the time limit approached, threatening to collapse the very ground from under their feet.

M had fired thirty merciless bullets from his MG5’s ammunition box earlier and boldly changed it out for a fresh hundred. It was better, in his mind, to have a hundred bullets ready to go, than save a few and enter the next battle with a capacity of only seventy.

The MG5 had originally belonged to Pitohui, and there was no more ammo than this. Unless he landed a kill shot on someone to recharge his stock.

“Llenn,” he said.

“Yes?” She got to her feet, not bothering to help up Fukaziroh.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen up ahead, but in the worst-case scenario, slip out past us and rush for the center. We’ll focus on support instead.”

“Aw, man!”

It had to be a really bad situation if the usually unflappable M was speaking about disaster scenarios. It was clear to Llenn and the others that if even M couldn't come up with an optimal plan, they were in very hot water, indeed.

Boss added, "I'll be your shield at the end. Should be easy, since I'm so large."

"Hang on, wait!" Llenn panicked.

Just because she had a bounty on her head didn't mean she wanted everyone else to suffer. The fact that she could simply run off on her own and allow the others to escape weighed heavily on her conscience.

But what should I do? What can I do? Her brain cells were racing at high speed, formulating the one possible answer that would work.

"That's right! What about the PM?"

Couldn't her team-up attack of friendship with Fukaziroh work?

"Nope," M said immediately. "You'd be faster just running on your own. It has high defense, but a single plasma grenade will be the end of you."

"Argh..."

Her one suggestion had been shot down.

I guess this is it, she thought, resigned. But she couldn't say it out loud.

In the midst of battle, no matter what kind of difficulty you faced, speaking your resignation aloud was contagious. It would infect other people's mentalities. It would infect your own mentality. You mustn't give up before you're dead. You mustn't say you're giving up.

Neither Boss nor Anna spoke.

That meant nobody had an idea of how to escape their plight.

At that moment, a strange old man's voice resounded.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh. Would you youngsters mind answerin' a question o' mine?"

We're going to die soon, so I might as well let her act like a fool, Llenn thought.

Llenn stayed silent, however, so Fukaziroh got to her feet. Using the edge of the grenade launcher in her left hand to adjust the angle of her helmet, she looked upward.

"I ain't been around in *GGO* as long as y'all, but can anyone explain to me what this invisible barrier over our heads *is*, exactly?"

While Grandpa Fukaziroh was chatting with his granddaughter's teammates, the men camped in positions around them in the maze said, "Very good. The pink demon isn't moving. The enclosure's a success..."

"One million yen! But what if she gives up and disqualifies herself?"

"Gotta take her out before then..."

"What it is...?" Llenn repeated back to the mystery old man—Fukaziroh.

"Oh-hoh-hoh! I mean, gun bullets can't get through, but could a person?"

"Oh! I don't know..."

Llenn's answer was also M's and Boss's and Anna's answer.

Nobody actually knew if the invisible barriers that mid-bosses and worse put up in *GGO* could actually keep people out. Nobody had ever tried to figure it out. None of them had ever gone that close to a mid-boss, for one thing.

"This is the problem with folks who only use ranged weapons, I tells ya... You don't have wings on your back, so your minds can't take flight."

"Are you a fairy godfather?"

"From the start, I been thinkin'...if I could get up there, couldn't I just hop all over the top of the walls? Don'tcha think it's worth a try at this point...?"

"Yes, I suppose so... But how will you get up there?" Llenn asked, looking up.

The walls were fifteen feet tall, near the upstairs ceiling of a two-story house. They were totally smooth. Without anything to put your hands or feet on, it seemed impossible to climb.

Maybe it would work if you had climbing gloves with claws. But almost any *GGO* player would not bring something as heavy and bulky as those unless they were going on a spelunking mission in old ruins. And they especially wouldn't bring them into Squad Jam, where you needed all the ammo you could get.

Did Shirley have them? She was certainly abnormal. QED.

"I would say to unfold your wings and fly away," Grandpa Fuka muttered, "but..."

She shrugged. Wings did not unfurl out of her back when she did so. Instead, she peered under the rim of her helmet at the large man in the group.

"M... that's a mighty long gun you got there, eh?"

"Let's try it," he said, immediately catching on. M waved his hand to bring up the inventory screen. Boss and Anna kept an eye out while he did so.

What he pulled out was the Alligator antimateriel rifle, like a six-foot-long drying rack rod. He placed the stock on the ground and leaned it against the wall. "You two don't have to be on watch. Come and prop this up."

There were no enemies approaching at the moment.

"Okay!" announced Boss.

"Roger that!" agreed Anna.

They returned their rifles to their shoulder slings and held on to opposite sides of the Alligator to keep it steady. It might have been a six-foot barrel, but that still left at least nine feet from the muzzle at the end to the top of the wall.

Fukaziroh repeated M's gesture and opened her own inventory. Her large backpack and the twin MGL-140s went away into her item storage. Much lighter now, she approached the Alligator and said, "Go on, M, if that really is your name. Toss me from

the top."

"Got it."

Llenn could tell what Fukaziroh was thinking of doing. And she was certain her friend would do it.

Thump. M lowered his backpack to the ground, placed a foot on the magazine, and deftly climbed up. Anna and Boss did their best to keep the gun barrel steady.

Guns are big hunks of metal. They are tough by definition and won't break under a person's weight, but the smaller, more delicate parts might certainly bend or come off. This was not something to do in real life. It was certainly the wrong way to use a gun.

With surprising balance for a man his size, M climbed up the bizarre ladder and turned around when he reached the top. He placed his right foot and ankle over the large muzzle brake at the end of the Alligator's barrel, let his left foot dangle in the air, and straightened up with his back to the wall.

"Whoa!" Llenn marveled.

A large man was standing on one leg at a great height, supported by two women, with his back to the wall. What kind of religious ceremony was this?

The six-foot-long gun supported the nearly six-foot-tall man, leaving only a bit over three feet.

"Here I go. If I break my neck doing this—no hard feelings!"

She backed away from M by a few steps.

"It'll be Llenn's fault!"

She started running.

"Hey!"

Then she jumped. Llenn's futile cry only gave her an extra push on the back.

Fukaziroh's foot landed on the Alligator's magazine. Her next one landed on the

bipod—and the next one on the muzzle brake.

“Hi-yah!” She jumped even higher, reaching out.

M’s thick arms, slightly outstretched, appeared to lock firmly with Fukaziroh’s short little ones.

“Sey!”

Then he yanked upward, like pulling out a giant turnip. Llenn thought she could hear the groaning of his back.

“I can flyyy!”

The momentum lifted up her little body, hurling it into the air, her uplifted face getting closer to the invisible barrier atop the wall...

“Wooo!”

...and then she went through, soaring into the air beyond.

“Whoa!”

From the ground, Llenn saw the two women supporting the precariously balanced large man, above which was a tiny figure coasting through the air, her arms outstretched. What kind of ascension into Heaven was this?

M could do just about anything, it seemed. The angle and height of his throw were perfect. Just after the apex of her arc, Fukaziroh’s little feet plopped lightly onto the top of the maze wall.

“Amazing!”

She’d seen it for herself. Fukaziroh had flown right through where the invisible barrier was supposed to be and came out on top, fifteen feet above the ground.

“Uh-oh!” She started to lose her balance, as though she would fall backward onto M.

“Eek!” Llenn shrieked.

"Wuh-oh! Hah! Hoo!" Fukaziroh straightened out and stayed upright.

Did you just do that on purpose? Llenn thought but did not say aloud.

They had the results of the experiment. The invisible barrier that cruelly deflected all attacks did not have any effect on people, just as Fukaziroh suspected.

Llenn had a pretty decent history in *GGO* by now, but this was a totally new fact for her. Now that she thought about it, however, it seemed so logical. If the barrier's power did work on humans, then if someone fell from above, they would stop on the barrier itself.

Then you would be able to walk around on top of the barrier; basically, on the air itself. Visually, it would make no sense.

Fukaziroh looked down on Llenn, literally and figuratively, reading her mind. "This is the problem with you old-fashioned *GGOers*, bound by the earth's gravity... You are trapped by your own self-created logic. But it's not too late. Don't you wish you could be reborn as the *new humans*?"

"For this one time, we're grateful to you, mysterious old man!"

"Oh-hoh-hoh, the pleasure is all mine. You can simply wire the three hundred million yen for succeeding at this experiment to my Swiss bank account. Within three working days. Each late day will incur an additional ten percent fee."

Llenn ignored whatever it was Fukaziroh was talking about up there. M told her, "You're next," so she followed suit.

First she removed all her gear to lighten up, waited the split second for the P90 and the magazine pouch on her waist to vanish, then started running.

"Tah!"

She didn't know if it would work, but even if she failed and fell, she wouldn't die from this height. And more importantly, she was concerned about the approaching enemy cursors.

Llenn leaped onto the Alligator, using the magazine and grip as footholds and bounding up like a monkey, an acrobatic trick she could perform thanks to her

lightness and agility.

She got both of her feet on the bipod near the center of the barrel to make her last jump. She could reach the right height just from that, without needing to climb farther up to the muzzle.

“Hah!”

M’s thick arm caught Llenn’s thin one.

“Whoop!”

She thought her shoulder would be pulled out of its socket. There was a powerful g-force pressing down on her.

Her vision blurred for a moment as she was lifted up atop the wall.

“Yo!”

“Why are you still here?!”

She very nearly collided with Fukaziroh, who was absentmindedly hanging out in the spot where she had landed. Thankfully, it did not lead to disaster.

Llenn stuck the landing.

“Whoaaa!”

“Nice one!”

Her acrobatics were captured in great detail on the monitors in the pub, to the delight of the onlookers.

“I give it a ten! A perfect landing!”

“You think so? I’ve never seen anyone do it like that.”

“She looked like a boiled prawn to me.”

“No, like a motorcycle that’s been totaled after an accident.”

“Like a lazy cat lost in the midst of a daytime nap.”

“Or the frame of a pair of glasses that got stepped on.”

“It reminded me of cucumbers that you can’t sell in the store.”

“Hey! Are you trying to level up your simile game or something?! Llenn is beautiful, no matter what form she comes in!”

Finally, someone said, “Never would have guessed you could walk on top of the maze. So how will those greedy bastards respond?”

“What about the rest of you?” Llenn asked the other three down below, while she put her gear back on. M had already jumped down from the Alligator, so Boss and Anna were free from their physical labor.

“We can’t make it. You two will have to head for the center together,” M said, packing the Alligator back into his inventory.

“Aw, no!” Llenn lamented.

“Don’t cry. It’s better that way for everyone, don’tcha see?” Fukaziroh drawled behind her back.

“Oh... I guess so...”

The people with dollar and yen signs in their eyes were all going after Llenn—and Llenn alone. She needed to keep that in mind. Everyone else was suffering on account of proximity to her. She felt bad.

Llenn clenched her P90 and spun around.

Her vision was so much clearer now. The wall beneath her feet was about twenty inches wide. It was a narrow path to walk, and very scary being over fifteen feet up, but not so bad that she might cower and be unable to move.

Every *GGO* player had to cross steel beams in a factory every now and then. Not that it made you want to try the feat in real life.

Since it was a maze below, it was also a maze above, but one where you could figure out the correct answer. It seemed like they could run all the way to the center keep from here.

Llenn glanced at her wristwatch. It was 2:24 and thirty seconds. There was no time to hang around waiting.

“Got it! M, Boss, Anna, thank you! I’ll hang up for now! Meet you in the middle!”

“You bet.”

“Yeah.”

“Later!”

They smiled and waved back to her. She turned off the comm.

“Let’s go!” she called, turning to Fukaziroh. The woman had pulled out her grenade launchers again.

“You bet. I’m with ya, kid!”

CHAPTER 12

Save the Last Battle for Us



SECT.12

CHAPTER 12

SAVE THE LAST BATTLE FOR US

“Llenn’s number keeps getting lower! She’s coming this way!”

Some of the men surrounding the team, a trio who were bunched up in the maze, began to liven up with excitement. The number next to Llenn’s visible cursor, representing the distance between them, was getting smaller. Twenty meters. Fifteen meters. Ten meters.

“What? How is that possible?”

It was not the speed of someone feeling their way through a labyrinth. It was not the speed of someone rushing up to an enemy, either.

“She’s gone desperate and made a mad charge! She thinks she can get by on speed alone! She’s ours!” blurted one of the men, grinning widely.

“Huh?”

The color pink was visible. So was the cursor.

It was not in front of them, however, but above and to the side.

“Whaaaat?”

Llenn was running—on top of the wall.

The cursor position *had* seemed oddly high to them. Now they understood why.

But their minds were just a bit too slow to actually do anything about it.

Llenn glanced down at them. She saw them, noted their presence. But she did not stop running.

As she rushed past, followed by Fukaziroh, the man’s eyes lit up like gold. “That million

yen is miiiiine!" he yelled, pointing the Beretta AR70 assault rifle upward and promptly opening fire.

He did not call out to the men behind him, whom he'd only met for the first time today, to let them know he'd spotted her. He wanted to eliminate the target and collect the hundred million credits for himself.

"Huh?"

The other two noticed Llenn when he started shooting, but it was already too late.

The bullet circle in his field of view was perfectly placed over the running target. The 5.56 mm bullets he was firing at full auto would hit her, guaranteed.

They did not hit her.

"Huh?"

All the bullets stopped at a height of fifteen feet and dropped back to the ground.

"Dammit!"

He knew, of course. He had just forgotten out of a temporary, greed-induced amnesia.

One of the two stragglers started blasting wildly with his M870 Tactical Remington shotgun. *Boom, cha-chuk. Boom, cha-chuk.*

Fire, pump. Fire, pump. He had nine cartridges of double-ought buck in the gun to shoot, but Llenn just passed right over him on the side, and the shot scattered harmlessly to the ground.

"Sorry! It's an invisible barrier! Hey! Hey! C'mon, shoot at us some more! Waste your money! Hey, hey!" Fukaziroh taunted, her voice changing pitch from the Doppler effect as they passed above. "Hey, hey!"

"Give it a rest, Fuka."

"No, see, in one of my favorite classic manga, there's a middle-aged man who runs on top of a wall and says 'Hey, hey' because *hei* is the word for a wall or fence! I'm so delighted that I finally get the chance to copy him! Hey, hey! Do you mind if I talk some

more about that manga? It'll only take nineteen minutes."

"Do it later!"

"She got us! They're running on top of the walls!"

Someone elsewhere had more wits. He had instantly figured out what Llenn and Fukaziroh did by noticing the change in the distance numbers.

"Huh? You can climb these things?!"

"Dammit! Let's do it, too!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! *How?!*" someone asked.

"I've got an idea!"

One of the men coincidentally happened to have an answer. If you had a variety of people, they would come with a variety of knowledge. Too many cooks spoil the broth—errr, not that one. Two heads are better than one, or however it goes.

This man, who wore the camo style of the Marines, and used a standard-issue M16A2, took a look around and confirmed that there were eight people present.

"Three of you! Form a scrum against the wall! That's the base! Two of you form the middle row, hunching on the shoulders of the base! Two of you form a step support in front of the scrum! Cross your arms and let them step down, then lift them up on top of the middle row! Then the middle row will stand up straight! You should be able to reach, so clamber up there! Then the guy on top will use a sling to pull us up!"

In other words, a kind of human pyramid, which was an old-fashioned exercise during school athletic festivals in Japan. There were still a few schools that practiced it.

"Yeah!"

"I think it'll work!"

"Nice idea!"

They started working together, certain that a failure to act quickly would let the million yen slip away. Soon they had created a two-level human structure.

"I've got a sling! It's leather, so it should be nice and tough," said a man who used a Remington M700 VLS bolt-action hunting rifle. He held up the sling he had attached to the gun.

"Great! Climb on up!" said the man who proposed the idea in the first place. He helped push the other man upward and on top of the second level.

"Here goes! One, two, three!"

The second level, with the sling man standing on their shoulders, stood up. With the man now standing an extra ten feet tall, he was able to reach for the wall and use his arm strength to pull himself up.

"Whoa!"

"He did it!"

The men cheered with delight. By cooperating, it was possible to conquer a wall an individual could not. It was beautiful, beautiful teamwork.

"You go next!"

The man with the M16A2, who had come up with the idea, clambered up next and managed to make it to the top of the wall. Now the M700 and the M16A2 were both on top. A third man was making his way up.

"Here!"

A hand reached down to him.

It was the man with the M700. In his hand was a grenade. It was a round plasma grenade. The activation switch had been pressed, and the indicator light was blinking.

"Huh?" bleated the man who had just gotten on top of the second row.

"Sorry."

The hand dropped the plasma grenade. It clonked off the head of the man trying to get to the top.

“Ow!”

Then the man with the M700 pulled his hand back. Above the invisible barrier.

“Fire in the hole!” he warned his friend, turning around.

“You son of a biiiiiiitch!”

“Evil bastaaaard!”

“You’ll pay for this!”

“Dirty motherf—”

The furious bellows of the six men left on the ground vanished, swallowed up by the blue fireball caused by the plasma grenade.

The invisible barrier absorbed all of the explosion’s force, and the walls were designated as indestructible, so they didn’t budge. The blast simply funneled down the maze hallways instead. When it had calmed, there were only two men alive, standing atop the wall.

“You beat me to the punch,” remarked the M16A2 man with a little smirk.

There was a detonation grenade in his hand, but he hadn’t pulled the pin yet. Instead, he put it back away in the pocket where he kept his grenades.

“To think I’d be teaming up with you once again. We’ll split the cash.” He grinned.

“You never know what’ll happen in life. Half-and-half sounds good to me. There’s no point in competing over it at this point.”

So the two men knew one another.

With a grave expression, the M16A2 man said, “By the way, about that girl I ended up stealing from you? Turned out she was super high-maintenance and selfish. It was straight-up hell being with her... In the end, I got an ulcer, and she broke up with me

when she found herself another man."

"Yeah, I heard the rumors. I warned you not to do it!"

Sounded like it was a very complicated relationship.

"Dammit! It's not fair! The million yen is gonna get away!"

From down below, Llenn and Fukaziroh could hear someone lamenting their escape. Thanks to the barrier blocking any shots from down there, they could run on top of the maze.

But while they could avoid being stuck in the passageways, it was still a maze, even atop the walls. They could see the center of the castle, but they couldn't just run straight toward it.

They ran down the narrow wall, turned, ran some more, turned, continued running, turned again, and so on. Their goal was only two hundred yards away on a straight line, but it was taking ages to get there.

And that was when a bullet line reached for Llenn's back at an angle.

"Get down, Llenn," Fukaziroh warned lazily.

"Ah!"

She followed the instruction, dropping to hug the top of the wall. A 7.62 mm bullet zipped right over her back.

The man with the M700 who'd gotten on top of the wall was sniping at her. He was about 150 yards away. That was sure-kill range for a sniper rifle. If Fukaziroh hadn't noticed him and his bullet line, Llenn would be dead.

"You punk!"

Llenn spun around atop the wall and pointed her P90, but she was too late.

"Take this!"

Fukaziroh was not the target, so she stood boldly and shot several grenades from her grenade launcher, Rightony. *Pomp-pomp-pomp.*

The trio of grenades flew with unerring accuracy toward the sniper and the rifleman behind him.

“Got ‘em,” Fukaziroh said, pleased and certain.

They were standing atop a wall. The grenades didn’t even need to hit them as long as they landed nearby. The explosions would knock them clean off the narrow walls. Though they weren’t plasmas, even the regular grenades were dangerous enough in this situation.

But the men leaped out of the way.

One dropped down on one side of the wall, and the other leaped down on the other. The grenades exploded against the wall and barrier, but the invisible surface blocked the explosions and shrapnel from going down.

“Tsk!” Fukaziroh hissed, but she decided it was fine after all. “At least they fell down; that’s all that matters.”

She had just turned around when the man with the M16A2 popped his head back up and fired with one hand. It was a three-shot burst, and one of the bullets pierced Fukaziroh’s shoulder.

“Aaaah! How dare you!”

She hurled more grenades. The man’s face and arm vanished under the barrier again. The grenades exploded, but the men weren’t damaged by them, it seemed.

“What the hell?” she demanded, confused.

“They’ve got a sling draped over the wall!” Llenn announced, watching through a monocular.

She could see how the two men were hanging from the top of the wall by each holding an end of the four- or five-foot-long leather sling that went with the M700.

So that was how they could slip under the invisible barrier and find safe cover.

“Very clever...”

She pointed the P90 at them and fired full auto. You couldn’t snipe with a P90, so this was just covering fire to keep them in check. It was still better than not shooting anything. Maybe she would get lucky and a stray bullet would hit the sling and cut it in half.

The shots landed close to where the men were hiding. Based on what she could see through the monocular, the sling was just fine. The man popped up again, aiming his gun.

“Dammit! We gotta run!”

“Crap!”

Llenn and Fukaziroh started running. Their path was only twenty inches wide.

As Llenn ran the other way, the man with the M16A2 held tight to the sling with his left hand and kept his feet planted against the side of the wall, aiming with only his right arm for support.

This was quite an extreme firing position, but his targets were running rather than fighting back, which meant he had plenty of time to take aim.

He squinted, watching carefully as the bullet circle, pulsing with his heartbeat, centered over the targets, which were already small and now getting smaller. Once the two things almost perfectly overlapped, he murmured, “That million yen is mine...”

The M700 man holding on to the other end of the sling as a counterweight replied, “Remember, let’s split things evenly this time.”

“You got it.”

A high-pitched gunshot echoed across the castle interior.

“Gaaah!”

The man with the M16A2 gasped in pain, and the man with the M700 started dropping down the wall.

“Wha—?”

He fell the whole fifteen feet, totally baffled, and landed on his butt.

“Gwugh!”

He didn’t die, but he suffered a decent amount of damage.

“Whoa...”

The sling was still in his left hand. But on the other end, which his partner had been holding, was just the man’s arm. It had been torn off near the elbow but still gripped the leather tight.

The cross section of the arm was drawn in polygonal mesh and flickered red. It was clear at a glance that he’d been shot with a powerful 7 mm bullet, which tore the limb in two and dropped him down on the other side.

“But who shot him—and from where...?” he muttered to himself. No one could tell him the answer.

“You owe me for that one, Llenn.”

Flat on her stomach in front of a retaining wall atop the outer castle structure 180 yards away, Shirley pulled the bolt action of her R93 Tactical 2 and pushed it forward again to load the next bullet.

“I guess we are teammates, technically speaking.”

As for why Shirley was atop the outer rampart, she had determined that she couldn’t win in the maze and climbed up the outside wall instead. It was as simple as that.

If she slipped and fell, she would travel ten thousand feet, but Shirley climbed it

anyway, using nothing but her hands and feet. She was very, very careful, determined to avoid certain death.

Shirley was experienced with outdoor activities and had been climbing before in real life, but this was her first attempt without a lifeline.

She went very slowly, as careful as a turtle's walking pace. Even then, she lost her grip and nearly died on three different occasions.

Luckily for her, because she was so careful, the process took a long time, and when she finally reached the top of the wall, it was already past 2:20 PM.

Thanks to the announcement, by the time she was up top, nobody was still around on the top of the rampart—or the bridges connecting to the central keep. They didn't want to wait around and fall victim to the collapse when it started again in less than ten minutes.

While Shirley was climbing, the players who had been on the rampart—the ones happily shooting the helpless players who'd been running for their lives toward the castle gates—turned and fled toward the center of the castle.

They ran and ran, down massive bridges thirty yards wide and five hundred yards long. Players in the center shot back at them, and a fair number died, but some did reach the center safely.

That was the situation when Shirley finally ascended the rampart and pulled her rifle back out. She was crawling on hands and knees when she heard very clear sounds of gunfire. It was close. And some of the shots were the familiar rattle of a P90.

Is that Llenn?

She rolled over to the other side of the rampart, clutching the gun to her chest. That was faster than crawling.

Then she looked over the edge and saw, about three hundred yards away, Llenn and Fukaziroh running over the top of the maze, and two men shooting at them.

Shirley took aim and fired. It was a quick snap and took less than a second.

She'd been aiming for the arm and hit it perfectly. The man whose arm she shot off fell

down, and so did the one on the other side of the wall.

"Did they fall? I dunno what happened, but I think we're safe now! C'mon Llenn, hurry!"

"You don't have to tell *me!*"

They didn't know about Shirley's act of kindness. They couldn't have.

"Go right up there, Llenn."

"Can I trust you on that?"

"Yeah. Rightony said so."

"We're going left!"

They hurried over the top of the walls, making their way toward the keep.

"What should I do, Captain? Should I shoot Llenn?" asked Lux from the top of the spire. David was still down in the maze presumably.

He was bent over in a crouch, aiming his FD338 on a tripod, with the scope reticle trained right over Llenn. His finger was not touching the trigger, of course.

He was ready to shoot, if he should feel like it.

It was a fair distance and at a downward angle, plus Llenn was running nimbly over the tops of the maze walls, so it might not be easy to finish her in a single shot—but the FD338 was auto-capable. He could shoot many bullets, and with the power of the .338 Lapua, he only needed one bullet to dispatch his target.

This was their best chance of any Squad Jam at taking out Llenn.

The pink devil had done so many unspeakable things to Team MMTM over the last few months. And now he could kill her.

Three seconds later, Lux had his answer from David. "*Got it. I hear your orders. Say hi*

to the lady for me!"

He took the FD338 off the tripod, lowered himself flat, and hid. If any snipers climbed the other spires, he could easily get shot. He had checked them earlier, but there was no guarantee someone wasn't climbing one now.

Better to avoid getting picked off before he could regroup with the team and utilize their collective power to its fullest in search of triumph.

And because of that, Lux just barely missed seeing something as he withdrew to safety.

He missed seeing Shirley, running down the massive bridge connecting the rampart to the keep, as fast as she could go.

If he had seen her, he would have been able to shoot her. It would have been quite easy, in fact.

Llenn's good luck had rubbed off on Shirley, it seemed.

"Let's get going, too."

"Yeah!"

"Okay!"

Slightly earlier in time, as Llenn and Fukaziroh started running on top of the walls, M, Boss, and Anna began to run as well.

The enemies around them were being distracted in amusing ways by Llenn, and nobody wanted anything to do with the rest of them.

Since the two who'd covered the rear were gone, the remaining three changed formation.

M placed two panels of his shield vertically, spreading them out, and Boss and Anna each took one with both hands. They would take the lead down the corridor, with M following them. He had his heavy MG5 machine gun propped up on his shoulder like a rifle.

They moved quickly. Boss and Anna turned right at an intersection and saw three enemies. They knew they'd be there, thanks to the cursors. The distance was ten meters.

“Huh?”

“Wha—?”

“Oh, crap...”

The three were so distracted by Llenn running overhead that they totally failed to react until M opened fire on them in brutal fashion. Boss and Anna ducked down so that the storm of bullets could pass over their heads.

“Gah!”

“Guh!”

“Goh!”

The three victims sang a little tune in sequence. The men whose eyes had glinted with the color of gold were now glowing red and were quickly sent on their way to the waiting room.

After a quick look around, Boss checked her watch: 2:26 PM.

“Four minutes remaining,” she reported to M.

“We’ll make it in time. Take the next left.”

The crowd in the pub could see how the players in the maze—the donut section surrounding the middle of the castle—steadily made their way toward the center.

It was easy to tell, because they had an aerial view of the area, with cursors indicating each player’s location. There were too many to count at once, but there were probably at least forty or fifty surviving players at this point. They couldn’t tell how many were in the keep, because those cursors were not displayed.

It was 2:27 PM. Three minutes left until the collapse.

"The folks still lost in the maze are goners at this point."

"Yeah, they should just stop and write a will."

"Well, they can't use a brush. There's no time to grind up the ink."

"They'll have to use a ballpoint pen instead."

Some players were stuck wandering in the maze, almost certainly too late to find their way into the keep at this point. But others had made it through and rushed through the entrance leading to the top of the center arena.

One guy had reached a point in the maze where the corridor ran up against the side of the keep but had no entryway in, keeping him trapped outside and out of luck. The poor guy just sank to his knees on the ground. He was shouting something—probably filthy insults toward the sponsor-writer. That had to be it.

"Uh-oh, is that... the leader of MMTM... and the chick from ZEMAL?" said an eagle-eyed watcher, looking at an array of smaller monitors. David and Vivi had just reached the end of the maze and found their way to the entrance to the keep.

It was shown on the biggest screen in the house, the one hung on the wall. Out of all the many monitors in the pub, the screen on the wall was designed to show the scene attracting the most attention. It was a VR environment, so the system could keep track of exactly who was paying attention to what.

On the big screen, David had his STM-556 in hand, checking out the six-foot-tall rounded tunnel.

It was pitch-black inside, so he was confirming that there wasn't someone waiting just inside the entrance to pick them off, and that there weren't any simple wire-and-grenade booby traps ready and waiting.

Vivi's sawed-off RPD machine gun was ready at her hip, trained on the maze behind them.

"No surprises from those two. Except that they're temporary buddies."

“Yeah, very impressive. By the way, are they going out?”

“You really should fix that assumption you have that any man and woman standing in the same place are a couple.”

“I assume the same thing when it’s a man and a man. Does that make it better?”

“No.”

David and Vivi vanished into the blackness of the tunnel to the keep interior. It looked like a mouth of darkness swallowing them whole.

The screen abruptly switched to show Llenn’s position.

“Oooh!”

“Did they make it?!”

The audience buzzed with greater intensity.

At last, Llenn and Fukaziroh had reached the center of the castle.

Llenn and Fukaziroh were running atop the walls.

They’d been shot at numerous times on this trip from below. But with no damage suffered, of course.

After a while, the unwanted sight of enemy cursors popping into existence simply stopped bothering them. They no longer needed to worry about them. And soon, they reached the edge of the massive wall standing 150 feet high.

There was a large black hole just below Llenn, since she was perched up on the maze wall. It was the entrance to the keep.

It was too dark to know what was in there, but there was definitely *something*. All she could do was pray that it wasn’t painted with the world’s darkest black paint, so that

she ran face-first into it.

They did have a real problem, however. “Um, Fuka... how are we gonna get down? It’s fifteen feet up...”

Only now did Llenn consider the problem of how they’d get back to the ground. A drop of three or four yards was still short enough that you could absorb the impact, but the extra yard made it much scarier.

The hallway was narrow, too, so she wouldn’t really have room to tumble and absorb the shock. Maybe she could try it diagonally?

Fukaziroh’s matter-of-fact answer was, “Well, I guess we just gotta count on some damage going down. We can’t fly, after all.”

“I guess it’s our only option... Please don’t do too much damage,” Llenn prayed reluctantly.

“Hang on, Llenn,” Fukaziroh suddenly chirped. “Don’t be too hasty. Our cushion has arrived!”

“Huh?”

She looked in the direction her partner’s grenade launcher was pointing. Two men were running down the hallway below, toward the dark tunnel mouth.

Both were tall and large, wearing matching French army camo. Llenn didn’t recognize these players.

Both were equipped with an iconic French gun: the FA-MAS bullpup assault rifle. Naturally, they could see Llenn and Fukaziroh, too. But they knew they couldn’t shoot them, so they relied on a different kind of attack.

“Hey, you! Particularly the devil’s million yen!”

It was a rather cruel insult. As well as being grammatically out of order.

“We’re gonna kill the hell outta you later!”

“Yeah, that’s right! So wash your face and prepare for the ax to fall!” they sneered as

they rushed closer.

The numbers next to their names weren't necessary to indicate distance anymore. They were thirty feet away from being directly below Llenn and Fukaziroh.

"Let's do it," Fukaziroh said, waving her hand to call up the inventory.

"I guess we have no choice..."

Llenn swiveled the P90's sling around to her back. Fukaziroh's MGL-140s disappeared from her hands.

"Here we go, Kni-chan!" she said, drawing the black combat knife from behind her back.

"Ready for combat!" the knife called back.

The men were sprinting closer, down below.

"Bombs away!"

"Hah!"

Fukaziroh and Llenn leaped.

The players in the pub got to see it happen on the big screen.

Two little bodies plunged toward two large men and slammed feet-first onto them.

The force of their drop landed on one torso each, knocking the men off their feet. The women's knees bent and slammed into the solar plexuses of their targets next, cushioning the blow of their fall.

Although there was no sound to the video, the audience could see the faces of the men contorting in unspeakable agony—and some kind of liquid flying out of their mouths.

Immediately after that, Llenn stuck her combat knife in the eye of the man and, perhaps assuming she wasn't going to get an instant kill from that, promptly stabbed

his other eye for good measure.

Fukaziroh kept her knees on the other man's solar plexus, stuck her M&P pistol into his gaping mouth, and held down the trigger.

Golden cartridges flew out of the gun. She fired fifteen bullets, the entire magazine. The pistol's slide did not return into place.

He was dead, of course. From the upper jaw on up, it was nothing but red shapes. He was suddenly significantly shorter.

In the now-quiet pub, someone muttered, "Fukaziroh's really bad at aiming pistols, but that's one way to be accurate."

"Whew... Finally, you're actually listening to what I tell you... You've become mine at last. Guess I've got to give you a name," Fukaziroh purred, placing the reloaded M&P back in her thigh holster as she stood over the dead man. "It's an M&P, so it should be... um... empee..."



"You can figure that out later," Llenn said coolly, sliding her knife back into its sheath. She grabbed the P90 from behind her back and glanced around.

Someone was very close, only thirty feet away, but they were on the other side of the wall and not coming any closer.

Her clock said it was 2:28 and thirty seconds. Only ninety seconds left until the crumbling resumed.

"Let's go inside, Llenn!" Fukaziroh said, MGL-140s in hand again.

"What about M and the others...?" Llenn wondered, glancing back at the maze. There were no cursors reading M nor EVA nor ANNA yet. That meant they were all more than fifty meters away.

There had been intermittent gunfire in the distance for a while, but Llenn had no means of telling if it belonged to them. The walls of the labyrinth deadened the sound, so it was impossible to tell the distance and precise type of gun.

In just over eighty seconds, the collapse would begin. It was highly unlikely that such a wide area would fall away all at once, but either way, it wasn't enough time to travel at least fifty meters within a twisting maze.

Llenn considered connecting the comm again, but her partner said, "Don't worry. They'll be fine. No proof of that, but... we should focus on our own survival."

"Yeah..."

Llenn turned around, held the P90 at shoulder level, and approached the hole in the wall.

"They'll be fine," Fukaziroh had said about M, Boss, and Anna.

"Urrgh..."

They definitely were not fine.

In fact, they weren't anywhere close to fine.

"There's no time left!" Boss shouted, leaning halfway around the corner and spraying fire with the Vintorez. Since it was silenced, there was almost no sound. The clatter of its bolt and the rattling of the cartridges ejecting onto the ground were louder than the shooting itself.

"You jackasses!" cried Anna, the filthiest word she could think of. She was watching the rear with her Strizh in hand.

They were stuck in place at an intersection within the maze.

Around the corner on the left was a very long hallway by the standards of this maze, at nearly a hundred feet. M suspected it was the answer, the proper route to leaving the maze.

At the other end of that corridor was another intersection, this one a T with branches leading left and right. There were five players camped out at the far end.

They were sticking their guns out around both corners and firing incessantly toward the trio. One person would unload an entire assault rifle magazine on full auto, and when they were out, a different person would pick up the slack.

They weren't aiming, just firing randomly, but when the width of your passage was only ten feet, that was enough to be a lethal threat.

They could have gone ahead to get closer to the castle keep, but instead they were staying here and holding M's group back, possibly out of vengeance for helping Llenn escape. What happened to trying to get that million yen?

Even with M's shield, a hundred feet was not a distance they could cross in these circumstances. They would be shot at the entire time. And even if they could close the gap, a single grenade could easily take out all three at once.

"One minute left!" Anna wailed.

M waited for their magazine change, then stuck the MG5 around the corner and added one last burst of shots. The other side pulled their guns and hands back, but now the MG5 was out of ammo.

The machine gun had been salvaged from Pitohui's body. M put it away in his inventory so that it didn't get repurposed by anyone else—or perhaps destroyed.

Then he turned his stony face to the two women and said gravely, “Listen close. I have a plan.”

At 2:29 and fifty seconds, Llenn’s watch warned her of the time. She was right outside the tunnel entrance.

Ten seconds until the collapse. It didn’t seem likely that this spot closest to the center would go right from the start, but in any case, there was very little time left.

From what she could tell, there were no traps or enemies inside the entrance. Or maybe there were, but it was too dark for her to see them. Either way, she couldn’t spend any more time out here.

She made up her mind.

“All right, I’m goin’ in!”

Llenn hopped through the darkened entrance with both feet and immediately felt a strange sense of weightlessness.

“Oh, I’m being teleported!” she realized at once, saying as much to Fukaziroh behind her.

It wasn’t an uncommon sensation in a game to be forcibly sent to a different location, i.e. teleported. It was like the simulated Earth gravity got weaker, and her body was suddenly floating. Or perhaps like a rapid descent in an elevator.

“Guess I’ll go in, too,” said Fukaziroh, following suit.

“Huh? Wait—” Llenn panicked.

In her mind, she was thinking that her warning meant: *I don’t know where I’ll get teleported. So I’ll get sent there first and report back on the comm. If it’s safe, or if I need you, I’ll want you to come right after me. But if not, I’d rather you stayed there as long as possible to preserve your own safety.*

Instead, Fukaziroh had come running in right after her.

Oh, she did that on purpose, Llenn realized.

Fukaziroh was a hardcore gamer, and she would have understood the meaning of the warning right after Llenn said it—in fact, a whole three years *before* she said it.

But she thought it would be more fun to tag along.

She had misjudged Fukaziroh's willfulness. Then again, Miyu had always been like this. It was her own fault for forgetting that.

Something more than just regret dimmed Llenn's vision. Her eyes were open but saw nothing. Closing them would surely do the same.

In the next instant, she was going to be somewhere else. There might be an enemy right in front of her. Such mean-spirited teleportation did not usually happen in the game, but you never knew with Squad Jam.

Her finger was poised at the ready, just short of touching the P90's trigger.

And then...

...the floating sensation stopped, and her feet touched a hard surface. Light began to coalesce and return into vision.

“Hey! You’re here!”

And there was Clarence’s smiling face. It was always such a dashing smile.

Llenn was standing, while Clarence was crouched in front of her, handsome and boyish Takarazuka face tilted slightly upward. It wasn’t a hard angle, because Llenn was so short.

It was such a shock that she nearly started shooting on impulse. Thankfully, she was able to hold back her finger.

“Hey! We’re here!” said Fukaziroh, appearing behind Llenn.

She turned around and saw Fukaziroh being her best self.

Where are we? She turned around to get a better view.

She was inside a square space about three tatami mats in size. Meaning: a bit over seven feet to a side. Under her feet was a flat stone floor. In one corner of the floor was a hole big enough for a person to fit through, followed by a very steep staircase.

Around the edge of the space was a stone wall less than two feet tall, and in each of the corners was a thick, round, stone pillar with a diameter of about sixteen inches. She looked up and saw that the pillars were supporting a stone roof overhead.

“Oh!”

Llenn figured it out. Actually, she should have figured it out when she saw Clarence.

“We’re at the top of a spire!”

“Bingo, correct! But get down, get down,” Clarence warned, in the same tone of voice as someone saying *Sit down, have a beer*.

“Ah!” Llenn did exactly as she said. She had just remembered how Clarence had been shot earlier. This was a place where you could get sniped.

Fukaziroh had already hit the deck, so to speak. She was good at this sort of thing. Those hardcore gamer instincts.

“Gosh, it’s been so long since I saw you two, though. What’s it been, three years?” Clarence asked, now that their faces were looking at each other, pressed to the ground.

“No, not since college graduation, so it’s been *five* years. Everything going well with you?” Fukaziroh joked back. Llenn didn’t need to say a word.

Clarence seemed satisfied with that comeback and asked quite seriously, “You’re both alive, right? You’re not ghosts?” She was more serious than earlier, at least.

“Yes, we’re alive, somehow. It wasn’t easy!” Llenn answered.

From behind Clarence, Tanya’s silver head popped up. She was flat on the ground too, of course.

“What about Boss, Llenn?”

“.....”

She wasn't sure how to respond.

That was when Boss popped into the space just to her left. That giant bulk, hanging pigtails, and gorilla face couldn't belong to anyone else.

She was followed by golden-haired Anna, shades and all.

Llenn was startled in the extreme by their sudden, ghostlike materialization and realized that she must have appeared in the same fashion. She found herself oddly impressed by how Clarence had taken her presence in stride, with a healthy smile.

"Oh? Ohh...! You guys!"

Boss was startled at first but grinned when she recognized Tanya, although it was not as delighted as you might have thought. Behind her sunglasses, Anna's expression was clouded, too.

They understood where they were and crouched down at once.

Six people on the floor in the same three-tatami-mat space was very cramped. Even with the diminutive size of Llenn and Fukaziroh, they were fairly squished, jammed in like hikers in a mountain cabin in the busy season. The guns were getting in the way. (Don't bring your guns to a mountain cabin, by the way.)

Unperturbed by the lack of space, Clarence marveled, "I knew it! The teleportation mode automatically places the teams back together again!"

That made sense to Llenn.

The mean-spirited rule that forced them to fight apart was finally over. It had been such a bother that she was not in any kind of mood generous enough to think *Thank you for letting us regroup!*

Most likely, she guessed, it was set up to teleport you to the first teammate to enter the keep after the announcement at 2:20. For Llenn's team, it was Clarence, and for SHINC, it was Tanya.

"What about M?" she asked Boss, but she realized she already knew the answer.

She forced her attention into the upper-left corner of her vision, where she could see

the status of her various teammates, arranged neatly out of her regular line of sight.

Right as she saw the truth, Boss said, "M's dead. He did it to get us here."

Like Pitohui's, M's spot was red, and there was an X above his name.

"....."

Boss felt that she had an obligation to explain what had happened.

"The enemy had us pinned at the end of a long hallway. In order to break through the stalemate, M took my large plasma grenade and his shield and charged at them. Then he blew himself up and opened the way for us. We were just able to make it in time."

The world shook a little bit just then.

"Well, if he's dead, he's dead. Seems like the castle is starting to crumble," Fukaziroh said, distinctly lacking in solemnity. Meanwhile, Llenn could see the distant ramparts crumbling.

It was the second collapse of the day.

The ramparts were the farthest part of the castle. They went first, disappearing over the edge, and then, as though dragged down with them, the huge stone bridges that connected to the central keep fell, one after the other. If you happened to be stuck beneath them, you'd be crushed to death.

But even if you weren't flattened by the bridges, you would lose the ground beneath your feet in moments. Right after the ramparts and bridges, the maze town was next.

The central area was lifted 150 feet above the town, and the spires rose another 150 from there, so the group had a three-hundred-foot vantage point over the destruction. It was very easy to tell what was happening.

"What a sight," Fukaziroh murmured, popping her head over the edge to see. That was the moment that a bullet twanged off her helmet and deflected into the sky.

"*Gmburgl!*" she squawked. The helmet saved her life, but she still felt like someone had punched her in the head, and the shock traveled to her neck as well, causing the weird gurgling cry she made. She rolled around on the ground in agony; the shot had cost

her 5 percent of her hit points.

"Sniper! Southwest!" Llenn called out, cursing their lack of caution in watching the collapse below. She fell to the floor as a red bullet line extended over Fukaziroh, only to be erased by its bullet. A nasty hiss buzzed in her ears.

"Yikes..." she murmured, having seen it out of the corner of her eye. She asked Clarence, "Is that sniper in the next tower?"

"Yep, that's my stalker. That creep's still around? He's pretty good, right?"

"I'll admit it."

"Why did he shoot just now? We were pretty chill before this. I really thought that there was a loving truce between the two of us."

"Ow, my head... Must be because he's found himself another woman," Fukaziroh chimed in.

"I don't think it's anything as sweet as that," Boss pointed out. She had sunk back against the stone wall, with binoculars pointed around the side of the pillar. Only the right lens was extended around the edge, because both would be too much of a target.

She reported back on what she saw. "MMTM's in the next tower to the southwest! It's the sniper in the sunglasses who shot at us: Lux. But there's no one else in the tower... I think."

"Ha-ha, so he's the only one left, eh?" Fukaziroh snorted. However, while the chances of that being true were not zero, they were definitely very, very low.

Brrr! Llenn felt a sudden shiver down her spine. She had a very bad feeling.

"That's not it! The others are there, too! They met up with the teleport, and they know we're here... so they're coming toward our tower so they can climb up!"

"That's it!" Boss agreed, right as a sniper's bullet cracked just past her head. Another three inches, and it would have pierced both the lens of the binoculars and her right eye.

No matter how many times she heard it, that sound like insect wings magnified

hundreds of times in volume was a horrible sensation. The only good thing about it is that if you heard it, it meant you didn't get hit by it.

Boss hunched down and said, "Dammit! Everyone, hurry down the tower! If they block us in, we'll never get out! That's what MMTM wants!"

Brrrr! Llenn's back shivered again. Her dark premonition was exactly correct.

In other words, this was the situation.

David's Team MMTM was reunited via the teleporter and realized the situation in this tower: M and Pitohui were not there. Then they leaped into prompt action to eliminate Llenn.

First, they left Lux to be a sniper atop the tower and prevent Llenn's group from looking down or getting any closer. In the meantime, the other members rushed down their tower and were making their way toward Llenn's tower now.

Then they could surround it at a safe distance and keep the group trapped inside. If they had plasma grenades, they could try knocking over the tower. Or they could steadily attack from below until they picked off everyone.

And if they didn't want to risk the danger, they could just tell everyone else "The million yen's up in that tower!" and let the opportunists do the rest.

The end result would be the same: Llenn's group would be stuck in the tower, surrounded by enemies and unable to gain an advantage over anyone.

It was exactly the kind of plan MMTM would execute, given their overall team skill and David's sharp, uncompromising tactical leadership. They were a formidable foe.

But this wasn't the time to be paying compliments.

"If we don't get down, we're screwed..."

"That's right! Let's go!" Boss urged—right as she got trampled on. "*Mrglh!*"

Sophie and Rosa and Tohma had just jumped into the entrance from the crumbling castle and were promptly teleported on top of Boss as a group.

It wasn't anyone's fault. There just wasn't any room.

"Oh! Sorry, Boss!" remarked Sophie, realizing that she was stepping firmly on her squad leader's head.

"Just get down!"

"Huh?"

She was just a fraction of a second too late.

A bullet line flashed for a moment on Sophie's wide face, and the .338 Lapua was upon her.

It struck true, passing through her head.

Sophie only had the time to murmur, "Alas..."

It was a headshot insta-kill; Sophie died on her feet.

And in that instant, Sophie's second loadout in Tohma's inventory—the PTRD-41 antitank rifle, which Tohma was actually supposed to use—would no longer appear in SJ5.

When they saw Sophie get hit, Rosa and Tohma stepped off of Boss and dropped down—Rosa landing on Clarence, and Tohma on Fukaziroh.

"Urgh."

"Oof!"

The two got squished, but it couldn't be avoided. There just wasn't any room.

"Hrrrg!" Boss roared furiously. She was incensed.

Llenn glanced over to see what she'd do and was so startled that she actually said, "My word!"

Boss was lifting up the freshly dead corpse of Sophie. She carried it over to the stone pillar where she'd just been using her binoculars, then set it down hugging the stone and propped it up from behind.

The pillar was only sixteen inches across, not adequate to hide behind, but now it was significantly bolstered by Sophie's wide body.

In Squad Jam, a corpse was an indestructible object. It would serve as a shield that would block any and all attacks for the ten minutes until it vanished.

SHINC hadn't used Sophie's body as a shield since at least SJ2. That time was an intentional tactic, but this time around, her death was incidental and unplanned.

"Anna! Tohma!"

"Roger that!"

"Yah!"

The two SHINC snipers, Dragunovs in hand, set up next to the body. They hadn't had them materialized, probably because they were sprinting to get to the keep, so they had to retrieve them from their inventories and load them.

With the dead body acting as a shield, they allowed only the muzzles and scopes to protrude, minimizing the amount of space that could be hit. If he still got them after this, you just had to give him props.

They fired.

High-pitched Dragunov semi-auto filled the partially enclosed tower; on top of that, it was doubled. Empty cartridges flew out and over the edge into the open air.

At a distance of 2,500 feet, the Dragunov's precision left a little something to be desired. With Lux crouching out of sight, their chances of hitting him were low, but if they could just keep his head down and prevent him from sniping, that was a big win.

They kept shooting, while Boss held the body in place.

"Girls!" she shouted. "Go down now, while you've got the chance! Tanya, you take lead! Leave the tower if you can!"

"Roger!" said silver-haired Tanya, rolling over to the hole in the floor with her Bizon in hand. Llenn watched her drop out of sight.

She was going to descend the stairs and attack MMTM, who were very likely to be outside. She'd be surrounded and die, of course, but it would buy more time.

"No!" Llenn fumed, outraged that this was costing SHINC more members.

But Boss said, "M's last words to me were, 'You have to survive and protect Llenn.' He kept us alive, so I'm going to keep my promise to him alive, too."

"....."

A storm of emotions passed through Llenn's mind, robbing her of the ability to argue back.

So Fukaziroh took it upon herself to join the conversation. "Well, well, look who's a real samurai. C'mon, Llenn, let's go. Our battle is only just beginning! Have no fear. I'll be the one to accompany you and keep you safe to the bitter end!"

"Fuka..."

Her friend's touching attempt to cheer her up brought a little moisture to Llenn's eyes.

"After all, it's the only way I'll be able to shoot you in the back and get that million yen for myself at the end."

Llenn was forced to consider the idea of making sure *she* shot Fukaziroh first before the end of the game.

After losing Pitohui and then M, Team LPFM was suffering a major decrease in power.

Regardless, Squad Jam would continue until either you died or the game was over, so simply giving up wasn't an option.

No matter how bad things got, she would never give up—the only option was to fight as hard as she could.

That was simply the courtesy she owed all the players she'd killed up to this point.

That was what Llenn—er, Karen Kohiruimaki—had learned in *GGO*.

Huh?

But I started GGO so I could be a different person, so... Huh?

Wait, no, this still fits... I think?

Inside her own thoughts, Llenn had gotten herself totally confused, but she realized that this was not something she should bother herself with at the moment.

What should I do right now? I should do what I can!

Once again, after so many times today, Llenn steeled herself for action.

“We’ll secure the area below! You come after us later, Boss!” she said, crawling on hands and knees toward the hole in the corner.

“Huh? Where am I?” said Shirley, teleporting into existence. She landed with both feet directly on top of Llenn.

“*Gaaah!* You’re too heavy!”

The staircase inside the tower was dark and spiraling and endless.

Llenn had been teleported atop the tower, so she hadn’t been here yet.

The spire was only six feet wide, with a round and delicate pillar placed in the center and narrow steps descending in a spiral. The steps were quite steep and had wide gaps between them. A child could easily fall through. If this were an ordinary home, it would be condemned for code violations.

There were no windows and no artificial lights at all, but somehow there was enough light inside to see where you were stepping. It was a game, so you were allowed to do things like that.

Llenn sped down the stairs, trying to catch up to Tanya. Whatever the reason for Shirley's last-second teleportation, if she hadn't totally stomped on Llenn, she could have left the spire opening at least thirteen seconds sooner.

It was a 150-foot spire, which would make it at least ten stories ordinarily. That took some time to descend. Llenn rushed as fast as she could go, battling centrifugal force.

"We're all hooked back up," Clarence announced lackadaisically into her ear. That meant that the four remaining members of LPFM had active comms once again.

"Thanks!" Llenn said, too busy rushing down the stairs to have taken that step for herself.

"Yo, Llenn. Sorry for killing Pitohui," said Shirley, who had just been teleported on top of Llenn moments ago.

Shirley did not sound sorry or guilty at all. In fact, she sounded proud of having bagged a particularly desirable prey. Their feud had been going on for ages, so Llenn couldn't blame her. She must have been very happy to snipe her archenemy.

In any case, what's done was done. There were more important matters now.

"I don't care about that—just help us! We wanna be the last two teams with SHINC!"

"Got it. Now that we've reached this point, I promise to do anything I can for the team. Although the money would be nice, too."

"Thanks!"

They had a crack sniper back on the team. A very good sign.

Clarence took it as a sign that the conversation was over. She chimed in, "Anyway, Shirley! Get out my backup gear! I went to all the trouble of getting it and practicing with it—I was afraid I wouldn't get a chance to shoot it once!"

"Okay. I'll give it to you now."

"Yesss!"

Llenn continued to rush down the steps, leaving them to their business. She had to

hurry, or things were gonna get bad. Real bad. If she didn't reach the exit at the foot of the spire before MMTM had it surrounded, she'd never be able to get out.

She couldn't see Tanya ahead of her, but she felt like she could hear her footsteps ahead. And sure enough, being faster than Tanya, Llenn soon saw the flash of white hair ahead of her.

They were almost at the doorway. Just past the final step of the spiral stairs was the lowest floor of the spire, with a hole just large enough for a person to fit through, facing south toward the center of the castle. There was no door to shut.

Beyond that was the foundation of the keep.

She hadn't been able to look down earlier, but according to what Clarence had said while they were back in the forest, it was a round, flat space a mile and a quarter across, arranged with a bunch of breakable barricades like a coliseum-style practice arena.

The maze had collapsed by now, so this was the only place in SJ5 that you could move around in. Originally, it had been a map six miles to a side.

But this was good news to Llenn.

An area with solid footing and reasonably placed obstacles was a godsend for players like Llenn and Tanya who had maxed out their agility. The final battle of SJ1 took place in a wasteland that was just like this.

She could use her innate speed to hit and run (or hit and gun) and kill as many foes as possible while staying on the move.

"Wait, Tanya! I'll go out with you! Two is better than one!" she called out.

"Got it! But I'm under orders to protect you. So don't make it too difficult!" she replied, stopping to wait a few seconds at the door for Llenn to reach her.

There was no telling who might be waiting for them in the bright sunlight outside, but with their speed, it would be difficult to hit them.

Tanya gave Llenn a brief look, silenced Bizon raised at her shoulder. Llenn nodded back.

Her combat boots hit the mysteriously smooth but non-slippery surface outside. A beat later, Llenn followed her—and immediately gasped.

“Huh?”

The instant Tanya had jumped out into the light, she turned back around, hard expression on her face. The muzzle of the Bizon was pointed straight at Llenn.

Helpless to react, Llenn could only watch as Tanya jabbed her with the suppressor end of the Bizon, right in the chest. She put her weight into it, a very clean hit. Light as she was, Llenn was thrown right back into the tower she’d just exited.

“Wha—?!”

Llenn landed on her butt and stared up through the open entranceway, where Tanya was lit up in the sunlight. The silver-haired woman grinned at her, clearly satisfied with what she’d just accomplished.

“Get down!” she yelled, right as the bullets came flying.

Llenn twisted and dropped flat to the floor at the very same moment that the bullets riddled Tanya’s body.

All she could do was watch helplessly at a distance of ten feet as they shot through Tanya, one after the other. She was pockmarked with red damage bits all over her body.

“Hrya!” Despite her shock, Llenn leaped instinctually into action.

She scuttled across the floor like a certain black, shiny, oily insect that shall not be named—and clambered up the stairs.

An instant later, bullets tore in through the tower entrance, either passing through Tanya’s body or because she had fallen. They hit the stone of the tower interior, some chipping away at the surface and others twanging and deflecting farther.



Somehow, Llenn managed to evacuate up the steps and out of danger. Either because she was tiny, or lucky, or some combination of the two, not a single bullet struck her.

But still the hail of bullets continued.

“Hyaaa!”

Red bullet lines filled the narrow entryway, and orange tracers added their own touch of color.

She didn’t know if this was actually MMTM, or some other group. But it was highly likely to be the former.

In either case, there was one thing she knew for certain.

There was no longer any escape from this tower.

“Dammit!”

Boss had just learned of Tanya’s death. She saw it on the team’s status screen and then with her own eyes.

With Sophie’s body propped up before her, she was able to crane her neck as far as it could go and get a glimpse of the ground below.

Fifty yards down and a few dozen yards away, a man stuck his gun out from behind a barricade and fired. Tanya leaped out of the entrance, noticed the enemy, and turned around to push Llenn back, just before she was shot and dropped like a pile of rags. There was a DEAD tag floating over her body.

“Tanya’s dead,” she announced heavily, right as Lux shot back. The bullet grazed Boss’s cheek. “Dammit!”

Lux continued to snipe from his tower perch, all alone.

He made full use of the FD338 he’d paid so much to acquire. In other words, he fired

and fired and kept firing.

It was too dangerous to keep using the tripod, because it placed the gun in too vulnerable a place, so he sat behind the pillar and pressed the barrel against its side to steady his weapon.

From there, he fired at a target nearly half a mile away, as small as a sesame seed by the naked eye, but so large through his magnified scope that they appeared to be right next to him.

His bullet circle was pulsing powerfully, so that it was larger than the circle of the scope itself, but right as it shrank to its smallest width, he pulled the trigger. This pattern he continued, again and again.

His mission was to ensure that the people at the top of the spire could not look out from their shelter. That much was just as Llenn's group suspected.

All the members of MMTM reunited around Lux when they used the teleport tunnel. Since there wasn't enough room, several of them got stepped on.

In an instant, David came up with a plan to trap Llenn's group inside their tower, and they promptly began to execute on it.

If the snipers in that tower were able to get a bead on targets below, it would be relatively easy for them to pick off the other MMTM members making their way over. Lux continued to fire, keeping that possibility at bay, even if it resulted in his death.

The FD338's ten-shot magazine was empty, and the bolt stopped. Lux promptly picked up a spare magazine—he'd materialized a bunch from his inventory earlier and scattered them across the floor for easy access.

He exchanged the magazines and smacked the bolt catch on the left side of the gun with his palm. The large bolt grabbed a .338 Lapua round and slid forward, sending it into the chamber at the rear end of the barrel.

In that brief span of time, the snipers in the other spire poked their heads out and fired their Dragunovs with merciless speed. Their barrels flashed from the side of the dead body they were using as a shield.

But despite the bullet lines flickering all across his location like mosquitos, Lux did not

attempt to flee the area. If a red bullet line entered the scope through which he was watching them, *then* he would avoid it. That would mean it was on course to shoot through his eye to the brain.

But anything short of that, he stayed firm and shot back.

If they hit his body, the only thing that mattered was that he kept his vital zones protected and out of danger. Anything to eliminate a one-hit kill. As long as he stayed behind the pillar and wall, the chances of that were extremely low.

And anywhere outside of those spots, he could stand a few shots.

For example, if his right arm got shot, because it was jutting outside of the pillar by necessity to keep his gun aimed, that was not going to be instantly fatal. As long as he could withstand the numbing pain, he could still shoot back.

But if there was a deflection, or a line he failed to see, or some other prank by the God of *Gun Gale* that caused him to get hit, he would just have to curse his own body and pay his respects to a worthy foe.

So Lux kept shooting. Right into SHINC's attack.

Bullets zipped back and forth between the two towers, fifty yards above the ground, keeping things very busy.

Although he didn't know why, he felt very lucky that SHINC's ultimate weapon, that PTRD-41, hadn't fired at him yet. It was powerful enough that it would destroy the entire stone wall he was hiding behind and take him with it.

The trade-off for that monstrous power was the incredible length of the gun, so he would notice right away if they tried to point it at him. For now, though, there was no sign of that. Of course, he did not yet know that one of his earlier shots had killed the owner of the antitank rifle.

But there was something Lux could not hear over the sound of his own gun.

It was David and the other members of his team, deployed at barricades surrounding Llenn's tower, opening fire all at once and riddling Tanya full of bullets.

"We've surrounded the tower and eliminated SHINC's attacker. Llenn probably snuck

back inside. That's fine, though!" David reported over the comm.

The strategy was a success. Lux had completed his mission. Not only that, he received praise from his team leader:

"This is all thanks to you, Lux. Good work!"

The squad loved David because when he scolded you, he did it in private, but when he praised you, he did it in front of the group.

If only my boss at work were like this. When he gets mad at you, he screams at you in front of everyone, and when he praises you... In fact, has he ever paid me a compliment? No, he just takes the credit for himself. Listen to me, complaining about work in my head.

"Time to enjoy a little overtime, then!" Lux smiled, loaded his next shot, and peered through the scope.

The snipers from SHINC, who had been shooting back so furiously just moments ago, gave nary a glimpse of a bullet line.

He didn't know why.

Had they figured out they were surrounded and given up their futile resistance, or were they plotting something new?

Lux didn't know the answer, but he was going to keep firing anyway.

Until a single bullet hit the flesh of his upper right arm.

"Not done yet!" he crowed through the pain. He squeezed the trigger finger of his right hand.

The order came from his brain, sending a virtual signal to his finger.

But no bullet came out of his gun.

"Huh?"

The long and heavy FD338 succumbed to gravity, toppling to Lux's right. It struck the stone wall and fell to the floor, clattering twice.

"Huh? Why?"

His eyes dropped to the right, where he found his answer.

On the ground with his gun was his own arm.

The arm was covered in familiar camo, its cross section just a polygonal wire frame shrouded in red light. It had a firm hold on the grip of the FD338.

"What?"

He looked farther to the right and up a bit, at his right shoulder. There was nothing coming off of it.

"Are you kidding me...?"

A shot had hit him on the arm without a bullet line.

And it wasn't from the antitank rifle.

But it completely severed his arm.

"Aaah! It's her! The exploding-bullet sniper chick with the pink shrimp!" Lux surmised correctly. He twisted and reached for the gun with his left hand.

Because the other hand was still holding the grip, he had to pry it loose with his left and toss the offending arm over his side.

Tossing your own arm over your shoulder was an experience that was hard to replicate outside of virtual reality. It was not something you wanted to do, ever.

Lux lifted the long gun with his left arm alone, rested the front atop the short stone wall, and pressed the stock against his left shoulder.

"I'm not done yet!"

He resumed firing with his other arm. It wasn't possible to aim closely; he just had to

wait for the bullet circle to contract as far as the naked eye told him and place it over the other tower.

"I'm not done! I'm not done! I'm not done!" he shouted with each shot, just as loud as the gun's report.

Finally, he had emptied the magazine, and the bolt was locked in the rear.

"Not yet!"

The moment he dropped the empty magazine one-handed was the moment that Shirley's next bullet put a hole in his trademark sunglasses.

A split second later, the bullet exploded in Lux's eye socket.

The woman who took the shot said, "Whew... He was tough..."

She pulled the bolt handle on the R93 Tactical 2 back. An empty cartridge popped out on the right side and started the long fall 150 feet to the ground.

"Did you get him, Shirley?" Clarence asked.

"Yeah."

"Can I let go now, then?"

"Of course not!" Shirley snapped at her. She wanted to believe that Clarence was joking, but this was the kind of thing she *would* do. "Just pull me up already."

She was hanging on a rope over the edge of the spire.

Shirley had tied her own rope around her torso and thighs as a harness, then dangled down on the north side of the tower, out of sight from Lux and the rest of MMTM. Once she was hanging down there, she planted her feet on the wall of the tower and pressed her rifle against the side to stabilize it for shooting.

This idea had come from one of the snipers working for Fire during the SJ4 battle in the shopping mall. The man with the XP-100 had climbed up the pillars with a rope

and tormented Shirley.

Her acrobatic feat ended with two successful shots on target, but she was now dangling six feet from the edge of the open space under the spire, meaning that she couldn't easily get back up with her rifle in her hands.

"All right, fine," Clarence said. "Heave-ho!"

With the help of the SHINC trio, she pulled Shirley back up inside the tower.

Tohma took a look at her and noticed, "You got shot!"

There was a wide red damage effect on Shirley's side.

"Oh, you're right," she murmured. She'd been so focused on shooting that she never noticed she'd been hit. Her hit points were cut in half.

"Gwaaah! Are you gonna die, Shirley?" Clarence asked.

"Why do you sound so excited about that?" Shirley demanded.

She replied, "We don't need to get into that. Just use your med kit."

David learned about Lux's spectacular death through the change in his status bar.

"Lux is down," he announced to his squadmates, who had their guns pointed at the entrance to the tower.

David, Kenta, Jake, Bold, and Summon were hiding behind barricades, each one spread out at least thirty feet from any other.

They were a few dozen yards away from the tower itself.

If they were any farther back, other barricades would block their line of sight (and fire) and prevent them from aiming at the entrance. But if they got too close, the height of the barricades would no longer help, and they'd be susceptible to gunfire and grenades from over the top.

Only speedy Kenta kept on the move between barricades, ensuring he had visibility and could check on their rear. His G36K was ready to fire if anyone came up on them.

The other four kept their guns trained on the entryway to Llenn's tower. Jake had his HK21 machine gun on a bipod, ready to attack at any moment. If there was any hint of movement, he would open with continual fire. The bullets that killed Tanya earlier were his. That was the power of a machine gun.

"Watch out up above. Don't poke your head out if you can help it," David instructed. Without Lux up there, the enemy had nothing stopping them from attacking from above.

Jake hunkered down lower and lowered his HK21, too.

"I'll stay posted on it," Bold said, Beretta ARX160 in hand, taking over the watch on the entrance.

David had an STM-556 with a grenade launcher attached to the underside of the barrel. He was ready to shoot a grenade at anyone who tried to leave.

"Switch to Incoming Channel Two," he said, a preprogrammed voice instruction. It caused the comm to switch to a different channel. "Can you hear me?"

"I hear you," said a lady's voice.

"We've got Llenn's group trapped in a tower. The northernmost one. Can you make it here?" he asked Vivi.

"Of course," she replied. "I'll 'convince' the others around here and be on my way as soon as possible."

Her voice was the very model of refined grace, smooth and patient.

"We'll be on our way to eliminate the pink demon's companions soon."

CHAPTER 13
Tower Defense Battle



CHAPTER 13

TOWER DEFENSE BATTLE

The audience in the pub observed it all on the screens, enrapt.

“This is brutal...”

They were watching the ultimate team, ZEMAL, absolutely annihilating their opponents.

“They’ve seriously improved so much...”

“They’re like different people—I mean, a different team entirely. Even though their names and faces and weapons are exactly the same.”

“Well, they always had firepower... I guess it’s what they say about nature versus nurture. They just needed the right circumstances.”

“Who is that Vivi anyway?”

The castle keep was now the only environment left in SJ5. In the southeast, three of ZEMAL’s surviving members were leaving an unstoppable wake of destruction on the orders of their goddess.

Huey the macho man, with a rooster haircut and an M240B machine gun, stood at the head of their A-shaped formation.

Thanks to the bullet circle feature, he didn’t even need to hold the gun up to his shoulder so he could peer through the scope. Like a badass movie star, he held his weapon at his waist and was able to shoot accurately anyway. Thanks to the backpack belt feeder system, he could shoot somewhere between eight hundred and a thousand bullets without needing to stop and reload.

He strolled around the side of a barricade, where he spotted a team in reddish-brown camo about a hundred feet ahead and unleashed a torrent of 7.62 × 51 mm NATO bullets.

One of them was unable to run and was shot through the head and killed instantly. Two others panicked and hid behind a barricade. The wall blocked a few of his subsequent shots before vanishing entirely, leaving them exposed and helpless. They followed their teammate off the map a second later.

At that moment, about forty yards to Huey's left, a member of T-S bravely leaped out from behind cover. He charged with a Steyr AUG assault rifle tucked under his arm, willing to take a few shots first. The Steyr model had been customized to be what they called an HBAR, with a longer barrel and a bipod attachment.

The heavily armored man with the long rifle charged like some medieval knight. This kind of bold advance could only be attempted by someone with enough defense to believe that 5.56 mm bullets would not stop him.

"Ohhh!"

"Will he make it?"

The men in the bar stirred with anticipation. One of them rose a little from his seat, fists clenched.

"Awww..."

He didn't make it.

The man on the left leg of the A formation, Max—who played a Black avatar with a fairly common Minimi Mk 46—promptly cut the man down with a hail of bullets.

On top of that, Vivi, who took the center bar of the formation, began to shoot a short-barreled RPD light machine gun.

The Steyr AUG slipped out of the T-S member's hand and got blasted away. It would need repairing to work again. Pretty, colorful sparks began to shoot from all parts of his body.

The bullets that hit him weren't penetrating the armor, but he was still getting smacked with their full kinetic force. He quickly lost his balance and toppled to the left.

Even still, he tried to fight back and get to his feet, but the hailstorm did not stop.

He was being showered like a flower receiving water. Too much water. Enough to drown the delicate flower.

Max and Vivi must have had plenty of extra ammo, because they simply did not stop.

"They wanna beat him to death."

"Nah, I think they just enjoy holding down the trigger."

Perhaps that was right.

Their victim was getting shot continuously, all over his body, and couldn't get back to his feet due to the impacts and pain, even if he wanted to. It was difficult to watch.

"I swear I've seen this scene before in *RoboCop*. The original one, from 1987."

"There you go, bringing up classic movies again..."

"I bet that T-S guy is thinking *Kill me, just kill me* right about now."

"You never know. He could be a woman."

"Absolutely no chance. But it would be sweet... I would totally nurture that T-S member back to health, brokenhearted and scarred after being unable to fight back..."

"No, I'll do it! Me first!"

"I'd like to hear less from the virgins in the crowd."

The audience members carried on, their imaginations getting the better of them. But in the meanwhile, the T-S member decided that giving up would be preferable to taking more of a beating.

In other words, he chose to quit the game.

He waved his left arm and then fell lifelessly to the ground. A tag saying RESIGNED appeared over his body. The machine guns stopped, and the world was quiet.

Then the camera centered on Vivi, who began to walk slowly out of the middle of their formation.

On Vivi's right side was the smallest member of ZEMAL, Peter, who was identifiable by the bandage he stuck over his nose. His weapon was an Israeli Negev 5.56 mm machine gun. He moved right and left along with Vivi, ensuring that he was always within the space ten feet in front of her.

At a glance, it seemed like he was extremely agitated.

"Is that guy holdin' it in or something?" someone suggested crudely, eliciting a wave of laughter.

"No, he's changing position based on the barricades nearby to act as a shield for their team leader," someone else said casually, drawing their attention.

"Wow... Do you have combat experience or something?" someone asked.

He smiled back. "Yeah. In *GGO*."

On the screen, Vivi was shouting something. She was using a megaphone, which was very similar to those handheld devices you saw people talking into at school festival days, but this one was sci-fi looking, all angles, and rather small.

The men in the pub were just learning for the first time that such an item existed in the game. But they had no idea why she would have brought that with her.

Vivi was shouting into the megaphone. They couldn't hear her.

"What's she doing...?"

"Probably sending a message to the players around her..."

"Oh, I got it!" said one man, drawing everyone's attention. "She must be recruiting others to go after the pink shrimp!"

"We are on our way to defeat the team that contains Llenn, the player with the hundred-million-credit bounty. They are currently trapped inside the north tower. But the target I really want to dispatch is the grenadier known as Fukaziroh. I don't need the bounty. If you want to join us, speak up. Let's go and beat Llenn together. You just might win that bounty. Or would you rather get into a firefight with us?"

She repeated her message over and over.

Her voice carried well, echoing behind all the barricades.

One man who heard it, wearing desert camo and holding an M16A1, a standard-issue American assault rifle, stood up and made a show of himself.

“Don’t shoot! I’m in!”

Once one person had volunteered, the rest felt less shame at the idea.

“Me too!”

“I’d love to join in!”

In small groups, surviving players—and sometimes teams—offered to take part in Vivi’s invitation.

Huey, Peter, and Max kept their machine guns aimed and ready, watching carefully, as the other players approached without their guns in hand. Soon all the gunfire in the area had died out.

As they came closer, Vivi said, “Very well. The place is the northernmost tower. Our partners in Memento Mori have it surrounded, so we’ll make plenty of noise as we approach. If you try to sneak up in silence, they *will* shoot you, so be careful.”

She beamed most fetchingly.

“Llenn, I’ve taken out that annoying sniper,” Shirley stated.

“Thanks for that. But I can’t get out...”

Llenn was in quite the predicament right at the entrance of the tower. Or exit, depending on which direction you faced.

Earlier, she had removed a magazine from her pouch that was low on bullets and very

casually tossed it through the entrance to the outside.

The next instant, it was neatly shot through the middle. The magazine had taken more damage than the item could withstand and turned into little fragments of light that soon disappeared.

That was a sniper shot from David's scoped assault rifle, but from the inside, Llenn couldn't tell who had done it.

All she knew was one simple fact: "If I go out in any way, I'll get shot!" The message was extremely clear.

But there was one other thing: "They're not aggressively coming in here, either."

If they had intended to do that, they would have done it while they had sniper support. If that had been the case, Llenn would have rushed up the stairs and shot back at them with P-chan. *Heh. You suckers saved your own lives there.*

"Llenn. Boss says she wants to communicate with our team. Is that cool?" Fukaziroh asked.

"Of course! Hook everyone up!" she replied at once. Two seconds later, Boss was speaking into her ear.

"Llenn. I wanted to get out of the tower ASAP, but now we don't really have that option. We're switching to a plan to shoot back from the top. If it's just MMTM, I think we can hold them off. We'll just have to pray that some other team comes by to pick them off while we're in a stare down."

It was a rather passive plan, but Llenn couldn't see a better option. Besides, being camped in a higher elevation was an advantage in battle.

While the barricades might block their attacks from above, they could be destroyed with enough shots. Eventually they would return, but it would help push hiding foes out into the open.

On the other hand, as had occurred to her earlier, they might be surrounded by *more* enemies in the meantime, and if they came with weapons powerful enough to destroy the tower, everyone was screwed.

The scariest possibility of all was what Shirley did in the Five Ordeals: a suicide attacking using plasma grenades that would kill the target by toppling the building on top of her.

But it was Boss coming up with the plans now, instead of M. All Llenn could do was follow her lead.

"All right. I'll stay down below. If anyone tries to come in, I can shoot them from higher on the stairs."

"Great. Do that."

"I will!" she announced confidently.

Not knowing, of course, that ZEMAL was recruiting companions who were making their way toward MMTM.

Just so Vivi could take out Fukaziroh.

There were about fifteen men who had either been convinced or hoodwinked by Vivi into approaching the tower that was currently surrounded by MMTM.

They moved in small groups together. Some were from the same team, while other groups were simply a product of happenstance. They didn't want to get shot along the way by others who were unaware of the situation, so they made sure to have the same pitch ready that had worked on them: *We've got a chance to seize that bounty; are you in?*

Although none of them were aware of it, there were only about forty players still left in SJ5. That was all that remained of thirty teams totaling just under 180 players.

Not a single team was unblemished, either; nobody had their full lineup still alive.

It was still most of a mile to reach the tower, so they were all sprinting, but because it was a virtual world, nobody was short of breath.

"You don't got your thang on you?" the man with the desert camo and M16A4 asked the fellow running next to him.

"Thang?" he replied, blank-faced. There was nothing in his hands.

He wore a green T-shirt and camo pants, just like your average person walking around Glocken. Just an average white avatar, average height, average build, with no real distinguishing features.

"I mean your main weapon. Come on, man, it's not that hard to figure out," the first man said, looking suspicious.

"Oh, my main gun. Sorry! I had it, but it got blown out of my hands in an explosion in the city area. I couldn't find it, and I've been on the run ever since. I didn't catch any of my squadmates, either."

The suspicion turned into understanding. "Ah. That was the crazy suicide bomb team that messed things up last time, wasn't it? I guess they were here again. We're going to take out the pink demon, though. Are you gonna be able to do anything?" he asked.

The empty-handed man waved one of those hands as he ran. "Oh, no, no. There's absolutely no way I could ever win the bounty. But since I've come this far, I'd like to see the outcome of the hundred million credits for myself. I'm the only survivor from my team, so I really appreciate ZEMAL's proposal."

"Uh-huh. Well, good luck. What's your team name, by the way?" the desert camo asked.

The featureless man in light gear smiled back.

"We're called BOKR. It's our first time. Nice to meet you!"

"Aren't you going to use any grenades, Captain?" Kenta asked David while he was carefully patrolling the area behind the rest of the squad. They spoke through the comm. Their comms were only tuned to be within the squad for now.

Under the barrel of David's STM-556 was an add-on grenade launcher. Distance and skill-wise, David was capable of placing a grenade squarely into the entrance to the tower.

He smiled viciously, without turning back to show it—vigilance was more important. *"If I blew up the pink shrimp, and she died, just like that, it would cause problems. We"*

need those folks looking for her bounty to come here."

"*Got it,*" Kenta replied. "*Makes sense.*"

"Vivi's target is just one person, whom she bears a very deep connection to going back to ALO and whom she blames for killing Shinohara: Fukaziroh. She really respects that grenadier, apparently. So until then, we let them do what they want. If they're going to send people our way, we'll take anyone we can get to help cut down on Llenn's remaining strength and ammo stock."

"*And after that?*" Kenta asked, patrolling farther away from David now. It was his job to stay on the move.

"We'll use everything we've got to defeat ZEMAL and be Squad Jam champions. I don't care how."

Although he wasn't saying it out loud, his implication was that they were willing to play dirty. For example, if members of ZEMAL were tired out from dealing with Llenn's group, MMTM might just shoot them in the back.

So in a sense, he *didn't* want to tire out the folks in the tower too much just yet.

"I thought you'd say that!" Kenta chirped, delighted.

"They're going to be thinking the exact same thing, that's why."

"Of course. Oops, I think our guests are arriving," Kenta said, spotting a group of men approaching with their guns raised high. *"Got an incoming party of grist for the mill, ready to be seated."*

It was 2:35 PM.

The men in the pub watched events unfold over multiple screens. Although there was no explanation being written up for context, a sampling of the various monitors told the story well enough.

These were folks who had put up with an entire hour of looking at nothing but milky-white fog. They were made of sterner stuff.

“So Llenn’s team isn’t leaving the tower. Or they can’t.”

The seven survivors of the combined squads of the pink demon and the Amazons were holed up in the tower directly to the north, where they were not attacking the others around them.

“They must be holding back their fire to conserve bullets. That makes sense.”

“I guess they’re staying put and hoping that the other teams will take each other out.”

The five members of MMTM had the tower loosely surrounded from a distance but were not actively attacking, either. They were just keeping it encircled.

“There must be some agreement between David and Vivi.”

ZEMAL was currently moving straight through the center of the small map, convincing other players to head toward Llenn’s location. The audience couldn’t hear what they were saying, but it was clear on sight that the people they spoke to were turning on their heels and rushing straight toward Llenn.

The occasional burst of short machine-gun fire was simply the outcome of those who would not go along with the plan.

As a concession from the devs, there was a map on one screen that displayed the location of each surviving player as a moving dot.

Now you *show this to us*?! the audience all thought, but no one said aloud.

“All the survivors are gathering in the north,” they noted.

The lit dots aside from Llenn’s group and MMTM were all making their way north, like ants converging on a sugar cube.

“If I were down there, I’d sneak away to the south and just hide the whole time...”

“I can see it now. When the toughest team is the last left alive, they’ll track you down and corner you, and you’ll gnash your teeth and cry ‘Dammit! Better this than letting them kill me!’ before you jump over the edge.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you were a prophet.”

It was fun to be in the audience here, because you could eat and drink to your heart's content and say whatever the hell you wanted to say while you watched other people fight to the death for your amusement.

"So this is setting up a thing where all the bounty-hungry scum come together to beat Llenn's group, then get slaughtered by ZEMAL and MMTM, so they can face off for the championship, right?"

"Yeah, probably... I'm sure those last two teams are plotting to betray each other."

"Once you know the outcome, it really drains all the tension out of it... It would be nice to have a new surprise or shocker right about now."

"Those words mean the same thing."

"Why don't you run down there and join the fight, then, smart guy?"

"Oh, sure! Whatever you say! I'll just dive right into the screen! Is that what you want?!"

"Yeah. Thanks for the mental image."

"You're welcome. May I sit here?"

"Be my guest. I kept it warm for you, my lord."

"Ah, very good, very good... Wait a second, this is *my* seat!"

"Aaaand scene. Thanks for your assistance, my friend."

The two of them had taken it upon themselves to accompany the show with some entertainment of their own.

"Can you guys get a room and stop being annoying here?" said a coolheaded watcher of the action. "Isn't it weird that this much time has passed, but none of the dead participants have come back out to watch with us? That doesn't make sense! Right?! Why isn't anyone talking about this?! Tell me!!"

It turned out that he was not that coolheaded after all.

"Our goal is to win, so we're going to let someone else get the hundred million credits. Tackling the tower is up to all of you. Go crazy on it," David explained gently to the arriving men, who were all blinded by the promise of riches.

There was a heavy implication in his statement that "You guys will never come close to sniffing the victory," but he made sure to stoke their greed by mentioning the hundred million credits.

"The current survivors in the tower are SHINC's leader, one of their gunners, and two snipers. LPFM has their sniper, the tomboy, the little grenadier, and the bounty. Seven in total," he offered helpfully.

He didn't know the exact number, but there were close to twenty people in the group, it seemed, and no one was in direct command over them.

They passed by David, giving him sidelong glances. A man in desert camo with an M16A4 said, "I choose to be grateful for your generosity," fixing him with a rather intense stare.

It was the look of someone who understood full well that David and Vivi were using them as pawns, or disposable tools to wear down their enemies.

And even knowing that, he was on his way to defeat Llenn.

His team had been split up from the start, and none of his squadmates had survived. Winning Squad Jam now was an impossible dream. If there was one way he could actually get back at SJ5 and its horrible special rules, it was this.

"I'll pray for your good fortune and courage," said David, who understood the other man's plight. It was exquisitely sarcastic.

He moved out from behind the barricade he'd been using as cover and began to withdraw, carefully looking out for anyone who might sneak up on him. He didn't want to get sniped from the top of the tower at this moment, so he had a teammate stay on watch.

It seemed that Boss and her girls were not looking out at all, however. They were probably staying put and keeping their heads down, hoping all the other teams would wipe each other out.

"But it's not going to be that easy," he muttered, a message to the unseen Boss.

"Damn. Blast it," Boss muttered darkly, peering through the binoculars briefly as she stuck her head over the edge a tiny bit.

"Blasted, huh? What is?" asked Fukaziroh, sitting on the spiral stairs.

The population density in the tiny bell-less belfry at the top of the spire was too high, so they were sitting a little bit lower down.

"Your head, probably. From playing too many games," Clarence said snarkily, her dark clothes a natural camouflage in the gloom, three steps down from Fukaziroh. She was rude as a general rule, but that was just how things worked with Clarence.

"We're being surrounded by the teams that are left," Boss announced.

The remaining members of SHINC—Rosa, Anna, Tohma—stayed low and silent atop the tower, the mood gloomy.

"I had a feeling," admitted Shirley, who was recovering her hit points. "The others have called a temporary truce in order to hunt down Llenn. Someone must have rounded them all up and talked them into it." She was sitting on the top step of the stairs.

"You had a feeling, and you didn't tell us?! You should share that kind of information!" Clarence pouted, although she still *sounded* like she was having fun. She was always having fun; that was just how things worked with Clarence.

"It was only one of a number of possibilities I foresaw. And if Boss is our leader, I'm not going to tell her what to do," Shirley explained.

On the inside, Boss grumbled. Shirley was probably a grown adult in the real world, unlike the teenage high schoolers in SHINC. It wasn't a bad thing to have a hierarchy within the game, but surely she could have said *something* if it was on her mind. Of course, Boss wouldn't say a word of this. She couldn't.

Instead, she gave a silent apology to M, for making the wrong choice as group leader.

Shirley, meanwhile, told the downcast Boss, "Give me a little space," as she climbed up

the steps to the belfry where the four members of SHINC were all squished together. She popped her head out into the open. “I’ve got an idea for how to get us out of this predicament. May I?” she asked.

She asked because she wanted to give the leader the opportunity to make a decision, but she didn’t offer details because of the lack of time.

“Do it,” Boss said immediately, without asking.

“Good,” Shirley replied, satisfied. Into the comm, she demanded, “Llenn! Hurry back up the stairs!”

“*Huh? You want me back?*” asked Llenn in surprise, 140 feet below.

“That’s right. And get your second loadout from Fukaziroh. Might as well fight like Pitohui’s team would.”

“*Huh...? Oh! I get it!*” she cried.

“Hoh-hoh-hoh. Ah, I see, I see. So that’s what you’re after. Then I suppose I’ll oil up these old joints and get ready. Upsy-daisy!” Grandpa Fukaziroh added.

“Hmm?” Boss did not get it yet.

“Nice one, Shirley! It’s a brilliant plan!” said Clarence, pretending she understood.

While Llenn sped right back up the spiral staircase of the tower, Vivi and David were reuniting about a thousand feet away.

“Thanks for proselytizing and getting it all set up.”

“You’re welcome. Thanks for guiding them here.”

“You’re welcome.”

They faced one another at a distance of about five yards, locking eyes. Naturally, there were ZEMAL and MMTM teammates nearby, keeping an eye on the area. Surely there were no rogue players left to be their enemy at this point, but you couldn’t be too

careful.

"Give me a bit of time. I need to back up the twenty who heard me out," Vivi said, to David's surprise.

"Meaning... you're going to keep hitting the top of the tower with long-distance machine-gun fire, to keep them from peeking out?"

"Correct. Very sharp of you," Vivi marveled.

That would certainly help. It would allow the twenty men to charge into the tower without worrying about being attacked from above.

"Honestly, I'm surprised. I figured you would leave all that up to them," David admitted.

"That wouldn't do," she said. And even more surprisingly, she added, "It would leave more survivors that way."

They started scattered across the map and alone, shrouded in thick fog, cowering in fear of unseen enemies and occasionally fighting them, then running from crumbling earth, struggling through an enormous maze, nearly plunging off the edge in another collapse, until finally reaching the last stage of SJ5...

These men had no team power left to count on. The kind of men who were described with various cruel and dismissive terms as *stragglers*, *remnants*, and *dregs*.

In the end, twenty of these men found themselves drawn to the allure of the bounty. Even they would admit they were just a random rabble, but they were passing from barricade to barricade on the way to Llenn's tower all the same.

A hundred million credits were waiting for them inside.

Of course, only one person would get that—or if you were incredibly lucky and somehow got a simultaneous kill, two or three.

Naturally, these twenty had no team strategy in mind. Their comms weren't connected, so they had no special coordination. If there was anything that gave them an edge, it was their sheer numbers.

Even if they managed to defeat Llenn and her cohorts and survive, it was obvious that they would be crushed under the total team power of ZEMAL and MMTM.

Still, they had no option but to attack the tower.

Pathos hung thick in the air around the men as they inched closer and closer to their destination.

There were a hundred yards left to go.

The approach was a subject of great interest in the pub.

“So what’s gonna happen? What are your bets?”

“I’d like to hear that. I’ll buy a drink for whoever’s right.”

“Very generous. But what if there are multiple correct guesses?”

“Well, then it’s obvious—”

“You’re buying a round for everyone?”

“—I’m going to buy one drink anyway, and you can all take sips and share, obviously.”

“Cheapskate!”

“How is that the obvious choice?! ”

Soon they had set up their own action on the outcome.

“You came up with the idea, so you go first.”

“All right. I think... the attacking team is gonna come out ahead.”

“Uh-huh. Why?”

“Because they’re... By the way, let’s just call them Team Greedo...”

“I get that you’re calling them greedy, but don’t say it like ‘commando.’”

“Why, is it weird?”

“No, actually, it’s my favorite.”

“Can you guys get on with it already?”

“Anyway, having the high ground is advantageous, but since there are no windows, the only place to shoot down from the tower is the belfry at the very top.”

“Right, so wouldn’t you be invincible if you shot down from there? They got three snipers, a machine gunner, and the grenade launcher, from what I can tell. That’s a ton of power. I mean, they’re super tough.”

“That’s true, but to shoot at an enemy below at an extreme angle requires sticking way out over the stone lip, right? As long as they keep focusing their shots on the belfry from a distance, it’ll be too dangerous to lean out. So as long there’s plenty of covering fire, they should be able to sneak up closer.”

“Oh, I hear ya. It really helps to have the numbers in a situation like this, huh?”

“Of course, the folks in the tower don’t want to die yet, so they’re gonna fight their hardest, but they have fewer people, so each casualty is a major loss. They’ll be extra cautious for that reason and rarely stick their heads out. In the end, I think they’ll get whittled down to nothing. Once the attackers get into the tower, their numbers will win out. That’s why I think Team Greedo wins.”

“I see. A very convincing argument. Any other guesses?”

“I’m with him.”

“Me too.”

“Same.”

“I agree.”

“I’ve wanted to say that since yesterday, actually.”

"You guys really wanna share a single beer that bad?"

The pub was briefly full of pleasant chuckles.

"You guys suck! Have you not been watching every single Squad Jam as they happen?!" protested one man bravely, his voice high-pitched. Naturally, he was greeted with some very frosty glares.

"So what's your prediction, then?" someone asked, naturally.

"You'll see it happen soon enough. Clean out your eyes and watch for yourself."

"Did you mean, 'clean out your ears'? Don't touch your eyes."

"And did you notice that he didn't actually say what his guess was? He's just gonna go 'See? I was right,' no matter what happens."

"Oh, no, busted! Is that what you want me to say? Well, too bad. My prediction is that the team creeping up on the tower will get wiped out. My reasoning is..."

"Let's get started, then," Vivi said, kicking off the first good battle in a while.

It was 2:43 PM.

"With pleasure!" Huey exclaimed, opening fire. His machine gun was propped up on a tripod to keep it steady. He was located about four hundred yards south of the tower.

The sturdy tripod cut down on the recoil significantly, making his concentrated firepower that much stronger. It also increased his accuracy at range. They had incorporated the use of the tripod in SJ4 to get the most out of their machine-gun power.

Huey had the machine gun placed low with the barrel pointed upward, so he could fire short, repeated bursts at the belfry space at the top of the tower four hundred yards away.

The bullets passed just over the top of the closest barricade, only a few yards from the muzzle of the gun. Since he was on the ground, it would be basically impossible for

anyone in the tower to hit him at that angle.

Although not all of the gently curving bullets landed on target, most of them certainly did. They gouged out chunks of the stone and created little dust clouds where they struck. There was also an occasional burst of orange light.

One of every four rounds was a tracer that carved out a brilliant orange arc, and when they struck a surface, it was easy to see the random directions their deflections took.

In these circumstances, leaning out of the top of the tower was suicide. No intelligent player would attempt to shoot back now. The ricochets were dangerous enough even without exposing yourself to the open.

This was their big chance to storm the tower.

“All right, let’s go!”

Twenty men situated a hundred yards away came charging out from behind their barricades. From this point on, it was a mad dash to the entryway into the tower.

After that, it would be every person for themselves. If you were lucky, you’d be the one who landed the kill shot on the pink shrimp.

“Best of luck,” said the man who’d lost his weapon, watching the guy in desert camo with the M16A4 run off. The others all left in search of riches, leaving him behind, until he was all alone.

“So,” he said, waving his left arm to bring up the inventory.

An enormous backpack appeared in front of him. Next, a number of protectors stuck to his body, like parts on a tin robot toy.

The last member of Team DOOM, now known as Team BOKR, finally had his thang on him again.

“They’re coming. Shooting at us like crazy. Can’t look out,” Boss reported to the others.

She had evacuated to the stairs.

There was no longer anyone in the belfry area that had been so cramped earlier. Sophie's body was placed at the exit to the stairs to block it off. If Boss had stayed up there, even flat on the floor, she would have been vulnerable to deflections off the ceiling or pillars.

"Long-distance covering fire from machine guns. We had to deal with that when getting off the train in SJ4. It's bad news," Shirley commented. Her matter-of-fact speaking tone was very reminiscent of M's.

She, too, was on the spiral stairs. In fact, all the survivors were. They were scattered throughout the tower.

"It's just like Shirley said! Nice one!" Clarence exclaimed.

"People don't just change the way they fight out of the blue. It's like your special attack. If you're really serious about winning, examine the videos from past Squad Jams. Bring those memories back," Shirley said coolly. "Same for how *we* fight. Is everyone ready? If anyone out there's forgotten, it's time to educate them."

The nineteen men approaching the tower marveled at the never-ending stream of bullets flying over their heads toward their destination.

"Holy shit!"

"This is amazing... Thank God for ZEMAL."

"Once this thing is over... I think I'm gonna ask Vivi out..."

"You'll get riddled with bullets before that ever happens."

"Once I get riddled with bullets... I think I'm gonna ask Vivi out..."

"All right. Good luck with that."

They were seventy yards away now, and still there was no response from the tower. They knew for a fact that the people stuck inside had not managed to flee.

There was only one exit to the structure, and there were no barricades nearby, so there was no place to hide. The only side of the tower they couldn't see was up against a ten-thousand-foot sheer cliff.

"This is gonna work! I'm gonna rush in there and get a hundred million credits!"

"No, I will!"

"Over my dead body!"

A footrace started up. The earlier you were to get inside the tower, the more chances to take out Llenn. Of course, it also meant more chances of getting shot, but that was just a risk you had to take. Even if you blew yourself up with a grenade, as long as it managed to take out Llenn with it, you'd get that hundred million.

"I'm on death duty today!" cried the fastest man, hoping to be the first to reach the tower. Yes, he was a history nerd.

"Death duty" was a Shinsengumi term from the mid-1800s, referring to the man who walked first when they patrolled the city, charging into residences where their official business took them. Naturally, it was the man most likely to be cut down. The Shinsengumi would rotate who was on death duty each day.

This fellow had an MP5 SD6 silenced submachine gun at the ready near his waist. He had only fifty yards to go.

There was no doubt that he would be the first to get inside.

Would he be the lucky man this year? He couldn't help but think so.

"That's far enough. Let's do it," Shirley said.

"I'll start," replied Llenn.

The man running in the lead with a blissful smile suddenly erupted into hit marks all over his head. He flopped forward and tumbled, with a DEAD sign appearing overhead

very soon after.

“Huh?” the audience in the pub wondered aloud. “He get shot from behind?”

“Someone tryin’ to stop the first guy from getting in?”

Their first guess was to assume it was some ugly infighting.

“What the—?”

The man running right behind him knew that none of them had shot the man. For one thing, the damage was on the front of his head, so it was clear right away that he’d been shot from the tower.

“But where?”

There was no bullet line or muzzle flash visible in the entranceway. If they had seen it, they would have dodged out of the way.

He had no idea where the enemy was.

“*Gaaagh!*”

And then, like the other man, he too was shot in the head.

“Fire, fire, fire!”

On Boss’s orders, everyone except for Shirley and Fukaziroh began to shoot.

“Don’t be cheap, P-chan! Let it all out!” Llenn cried.

“Got it! I’m ready for this, Llenn! Finally, the time when I can bark all I want! Even if I have this muzzle protector on! Guess I can’t do anything about that!” said the boyish voice of the P90 with suppressor attached.

"Raaah!" Rosa roared, her PKM thumping powerfully. "This is for Sophie!"

"And this is for Tanya!" Anna and Tohma added, the snipers with their Dragunovs.

"This is for Shirleeeey!" Clarence belted out, holding her AR-57.

"I'm not dead yet!" Shirley snapped through the comm.

They let loose at the approaching enemies.

"They're shooting from the tower, Captain!"

Summon was stationed the closest to the tower of anyone in MMTM, at a distance of about 150 yards.

Instead of his usual SCAR-L, he was holding a monocular and poking his head out over the top of a barricade. It was possible for him because he was the tallest on the team.

Summon reported back with what he was seeing. "The invasion team is getting shot one after the other. They're sitting ducks. The machine gun is flushing out the ones behind barricades and leaving them to snipers."

"Roger that. It'll do—tell me if anything else major happens," David replied to Summon.

He recalled what Vivi had said earlier: "*It would leave more survivors that way.*"

Not helping out and forcing some of the invaders to hang back and provide covering fire would "leave more survivors."

In other words, by having ZEMAL cover for them, it made the twenty men feel emboldened to charge into the tower, ensuring that they would all die sooner.

That makes sense to me... I can't believe I forgot... it happened to me! David haiku'd in his head.

He couldn't help but remember now—that Team LPFM had *twice* already used a strategy that involved shooting through holes created by lightswords.

"My prediction is that the team creeping up on the tower will get wiped out. My reasoning is," said the man in the pub, a few minutes earlier, "they can poke holes in the tower using their photon swords, stick the barrels out, and shoot in total safety. They've done that before a couple times, remember?"

He was now watching with great satisfaction, while the others looked on in shocked disbelief.

It was a very sorry slaughter—a total massacre unfolding on-screen.

The men rushing toward the tower found themselves under attack from spots along the sides of the tower, from anywhere between ten and fifty feet up. They were firing from tiny holes in the wall, eliminating their targets.

"I see... So that was still an option..."

"Let me buy you a round, man. What's your drink?"

The stone walls of the tower were thick enough that an ordinary assault rifle couldn't shoot through them. But no matter how thick the stone was, those cool sci-fi lightswords were guaranteed to burn a hole right through it. Whether you wanted to or not.

Llenn's backup gear was a pair of lightswords.

She got them from Fukaziroh, then went up and down the stairs, fashioning a bunch of holes in every surface aside from the north wall. The Muramasa F9 had a dial on the handle that would adjust the length of the blade.

After checking out the thickness of the walls at the entryway, she just had to extend the blade that same length and poke it into the wall, and it would be nearly impossible for the enemy to notice that she was making holes with it.

It had been a huge rush, but she managed to create a plethora of holes for shooting through. They were called loopholes, or eyelets.

The team had their gun barrels poking through, and they used separate, smaller holes above them for seeing through, so they could spot their bullet circles and aim. It was a very unnatural position to shoot from, but it wasn't that hard. Llenn found it quite easy, in fact, because her gun was so short.

Poke a hole in a tough, defensive surface, and let it defend you while you shot. It was a trick—or technique, or tactic—they used in the log cabin of SJ2 and the train car in the switchyard of SJ3.

The man who guessed it correctly glanced sidelong at the man offering to buy him a drink and said suavely, "I'll take... a hot milk."

"Dammit! We can't win against this!" swore another man as he was sent to Heaven. Or back to his squadmates, whichever you preferred.

He had been desperate to earn that hundred million credits, until the PKM shredded the barricade he hid behind, and one of the Dragunovs picked him off after he lunged for a new safe spot.

It was still seventy yards to the tower. You'd have to be incompetent to miss at this distance. They could see the bullet lines coming from the tower, of course, but that wasn't going to help them when they were this close.

Of course, they weren't all going to die hiding and running. Some of them bravely shot back. They realized they were being shot at through holes in the tower and decided they would shoot back through the holes.

"You won't get me this way! I won't let it be that easy!" one shouted, rather stereotypically, and started shooting at the muzzle flashes he was seeing. In no time, his magazine was empty.

"Blebhgh!"

Llenn's merciless P90 shots pierced him through the head and body. GG, my man.

Clarence's AR-57, which used the same magazines as the P90, exhibited the full extent of its power: a spray of fifty rounds at full auto.

Though they were small and didn't pack as much punch, all it took was a few of those bullets to make a barricade disappear.

"Oh, crap!" exclaimed a man huddled on the ground behind one, now fully exposed for all to see. The other forty-plus bullets took care of him, though it was certainly overkill.

Even as he was shot through like a pincushion, he allowed his mournful parting words to mingle with the air of *Gun Gale Online*.

"Aw, man... I wanted that million yen... so I could take my mom on a hot springs vaca—"

While the group was getting shot, one player got quite close to the tower entrance: the man with the desert camo and M16A4.

He was calm, cool, and collected.

As soon as the shooting started, he dropped to the ground, watched the bullet lines coming from the tower very carefully, and moved from barricade to barricade while other targets were getting hit. He managed to approach without taking a single bullet, until he was only twenty yards away.

He was now huddled behind the final barricade. There was nothing but flat ground between here and the entrance to the structure.

Using a handheld mirror, he peered around the side of the barricade at the tower. Tanya's body was facedown next to the entrance. The tower itself loomed very tall over everything, and beyond that was empty sky.

The man checked the pocket next to his magazines, where he had his hand grenade stock. They were M67s, just your garden variety shrapnel grenades. Not the powerful and significantly more expensive plasma grenades that swallowed up all matter within their midst in a blue sphere of destruction.

"Should've just splurged on the plasmas," he muttered, but it was too late now.

If he had plasma grenades, plural, then he could have possibly knocked down the tower just by throwing them at his current distance. Or if the whole group of twenty temporary teammates had actually compared notes on their weaponry and come up with a plan, they might have learned that someone had plasma grenades, so they could

keep him in the back while the rest opened the way forward...

But there was no point lamenting what could have been.

Even if they had succeeded, they would have broken down and fought over who would get the hundred million credits. Split it nice and clean down the middle? No. That would never happen.

If working with others only got him five million credits, or fifty thousand yen, he would have tried for the full million yen instead.

In that sense, the prize amount of a million yen was perfectly balanced.

It was realistic enough that you could imagine someone actually paying it, but also hefty enough to have a magical allure that made people do reckless things for it.

“Money’s a scary thing,” he murmured, trying to make an obvious statement sound profound.

Then again, “I’m still alive; gotta see how far I can get with this one...”

He placed his gun over his shoulder, grabbed a grenade, and pulled back behind the barricade. The plan was to throw it into the entrance, and when it exploded, rush in for himself. Assuming he didn’t get shot in that last twenty yards, of course.

He pulled the pin, cocked his arm back, and tossed the grenade.

“Take that!”

But his estimate was off, and it was just a tiny bit short. It landed six feet early and came to a stop when it hit Tanya’s body. The grenade did explode, but the dead body was invulnerable to any kind of damage and sat as still as stone with roots in the ground.

If not for Tanya, it might have rolled onward through the entrance. But like this, not a piece of shrapnel even flew in from the blast.

Even in death, she protected the tower.

“Ahhh, dammit!” he howled. The barricade he was hiding behind came into Rosa’s

sight as she shifted positions, and her machine gun made quick work of it.

“So much for that.”

He hunched up in anticipation, just before Tohma’s shot passed through his skull.

Of course, as you might expect, some of the group saw the inevitable and decided to cut their losses and run first.

“Let’s get outta here!”

When they saw the men in front of them falling like sacks of potatoes, the ones bringing up the rear of the group—the slowest of the bunch—promptly turned tail and ran.

If they were any faster, they’d already be dead. Sometimes being slow will actually save your life.

One of them said to a fellow escapee from a different squad, “We got screwed over! That Vivi chick knew this would happen! She knew they’d shoot at us from holes in the tower! I’m outta here, man!”

“But what are you gonna *do* after running?” asked the other man, who was doing the exact same thing.

“I’ll find a place to hide! And once ZEMAL comes to tackle the tower, I’ll shoot ‘em from behind!”

“Sounds good! I’m in! Let’s buddy up!”

“Yeah! Our fight is just beginning!”

As if to say *Not so fast*, the bullets started flying at them.

They were coming from the friendly fellows they’d passed earlier, with the shoulder patches of a skull with a knife in its teeth: MMTM. After the men had passed by the barricades where they waited, the squad started shooting them in the back.

There was no chance to return fire. The men were hit in the back and the head, dying as they fell forward. The ones who came after them, and the ones who ran in different directions, suffered the same fate.

All was quiet around the tower.

There was distant machine-gun fire, but even still, everything was much, much calmer than before.

"How many are gone? Asking you, Summon," David asked, reloading his STM-556.

Summon had been monitoring the tower area. "I see twelve," he said, counting the DEAD tags in the air.

Kenta and Bold, who had been down on the ground, reported in with their results.

"I beat two."

"Three for me."

David had dispatched two of them. "So that's nineteen confirmed. That sounds about right."

In his mind, they'd killed all of them. So he switched the channel on his comm and reported as much to Vivi.

"That's enough. Cease covering fire," she commanded curtly.

"With pleasure!"

Huey stopped shooting, and the world was quiet again. There were two used barrels resting next to his machine gun.

Vivi had known that all of these things would happen.

"Listen up, everyone. The last battle of SJ5 is about to begin. Our battle to avenge Shinohara and Tomtom," she told her teammates. "There are only two orders I have for you. Strike down the foe who delivered an unjust death to our comrades. And take

those machine guns you love so much and shoot them to your heart's content. Can you do that for me?"

Three hearty bellows arose from different spots around the area. They were earthshaking roars. If the comm didn't have automatic volume adjustment, Vivi's eardrums would have been in trouble.

"Very good. Then shall we prepare the weapon that is the embodiment of our souls?"

It was just after two forty-five PM.

"Seems like we've made it through," Shirley said. Everything was quiet outside the tower.

She wasn't shooting, in fact. Her position was at the second highest of the holes they made in the tower exterior, about forty yards high. And Boss was another five yards up.

They were using binoculars to monitor the movement of the enemy and give directions to their teammates.

Since the shooters had only tiny holes to look through, having someone who could spot things quickly and give accurate instructions was extremely helpful.

"That was a brilliant plan, Shirley," said Boss. "So—"

"Hang on, that's the end of my leadership role. I'm not meant to be a leader," Shirley said, cutting her off before she could continue.

"Grr..."

Fukaziroh, who, like Shirley, had not fired a single shot, added, "Hey, remember? You're the leader, Boss. You inherited M's will."

Fukaziroh was ordered not to take a single shot, for two reasons.

First, the grenade launcher's barrel was nearly three inches across and would require a rather large hole to stick out, which would likely draw the attention of their foes.

"Aw, c'mon, let me shoot! I got twelve whole plasma grenades waiting to get fired!"

And second, because an unlucky bullet that went through that hole and hit a plasma grenade would set off a chain reaction that would destroy the entire tower.

With that aside, Boss murmured "Fuka" with deep emotion. The person inside her avatar was the captain of the gymnastics team, so being accepted as the leader was something that made her very happy.

The team had gone through a lot before they were as tight-knit as they were today. And they still had some problems, considering that there were no new members this year.

"So go ahead and give that order! Tell me to go out there and raise hell!"

"I can't do that. We're conserving our firepower until we hit the two big teams."

"Well, what if I get taken out before my moment to shine arrives?! I want to help everyone out!"

"Fuka..." murmured Llenn, feeling a warmth in her chest at her friend's touching sentiment.

"At least let me shoot Llenn before that happens!"

"Hang on."

That warmth was for nothing.

Speaking of Llenn, she had blazed through plenty of barricades with full auto fire, constantly exchanging magazines as they dispatched their foes.

Her remaining ammo was still at 80 percent, meaning that she had a thousand bullets left. Getting those kill shots in helped replenish quite a lot. It was very helpful to her.

"Shirley! Switch loadouts!" Clarence yelled from much farther below.

"All right, fine. I'll head down," Shirley grumbled. Everyone could hear her.

"Yay! Shirley, I love you!"

Clarence had switched to her second loadout earlier, but on Shirley's orders, she had been put back on AR-57 duty. This was because her secondary weapon was not suited for fighting back against invaders inside a tower.

"Hang on," Boss said, confused. "If we're going to fight off ZEMAL and MMTM here, wouldn't it be better *not* to switch now?"

That had occurred to Llenn, too, but a much more frightening idea was now running through her mind.

"Shirley, you're not gonna..."

"What is it, Llenn? Speak your mind."

"You're not gonna give up... are you?" Llenn asked, hoping against hope that she was wrong.

"That's exactly it. You got it," Shirley admitted.

"Ugh. But why?"

"ZEMAL and MMTM are gonna make their move on us next, right? The same trick isn't going to work on them. Plus, I don't know what their second loadouts are, but they probably have something tremendous up their sleeves. If we can't escape, then we won't be able to muster a good counter, and they'll probably just knock the tower over with all of us inside it."

"Wha—?!"

Don't jinx us! Llenn wanted to protest... but she couldn't.

"You might be right..."

"Then we'll blaze a new path for us! The rest of you escape while you have the chance! Make use of your speed to circle around behind them so we can do a pincer attack!" Boss raved, full of purpose.

"That won't work; the arena's too small," Shirley said, cutting that idea down. "If we could get distance by running all the way to the other end, I might have considered it. But if that were possible, we wouldn't be taking refuge in here in the first place."

Boss groaned, and Llenn had no comment to add; she knew it was true. They had made it through so far, but the crisis was ongoing.

"Well, we've enjoyed our SJ5 for this long. If we're gonna die anyway, why don't we each go out our own way, doing what we want?" suggested Shirley.

"Nice, Shirley! Let's buddy up and wild out until we're dead!" Clarence promptly added.

Of course she'd feel that way, since she got that monkey off her chest by killing Pito, Llenn thought. For her part, she was going to do right by the departed Pito and M and try to figure out a way to survive and win as a team. She had to think very fast, because there wasn't much time.

If they stayed put, they probably wouldn't withstand the attack.

But if they rushed outside and fought head-on—meaning, got into a typical barricade fight, with Llenn using her speed to rush and attack—they still wouldn't be able to beat ZEMAL and MMTM together in either numbers or power. Which meant...

Out of ammo.

She had nothing left.

"I don't think there's anything we can do," she lamented.

"Llenn, my lass, it's too early to give up," said Fukaziroh, eager to speak up. "Look. I have a good idea."

Her ideas were generally trash, but at this point, Llenn was willing to give her a chance. You never knew, she might have another solution that was completely outside of the box, in a way that no native *GGO* player would consider.

"And that is?"

"Shirley has a long and sturdy rope."

"Yes, I know."

"We'll use it to tie you up."

“Huh? And?”

“We’ll write, ‘Here’s the hundred million credits’ on a piece of paper, and Boss will use her monster strength to roll you out the doorway. You keep rolling the way you like to do, real fast. And no one will be able to read your trajectory, because you keep hitting the barricades. It’ll be a game of human pinball. The enemies will be distracted and go after you. And in the meanwhile—”

“Do I have to listen to the whole thing?”

It was a mistake to count on her for help, Llenn thought.

But in that moment, she had an epiphany.

If she had not been listening to Fukaziroh’s stupid idea, lightning would not have struck her brain.

“Shirley! Get out the rope! All of it! Now!”

“Oh, are we going with it? Was my flash of insight brilliant after all?”

“No! Not at all! But thanks!”

“Shall we put on the finishing touches?”

Vivi and the rest of ZEMAL made their appearance near David.

She chose not to call it “the final battle” to make it painfully obvious that they were ready to fight MMTM, too. It was practically a challenge.

The team had regrouped behind a barricade about three yards south of the tower. Only Bold was nearby to serve as David’s defense.

The other MMTM members were spread out laterally, watching the tower. They were on their feet and vigilant, so that they could move instantly if their barricades disappeared.

“Let’s go,” David told Bold. Then he mentioned to Vivi, “That reminds me, I didn’t get

to hear about your ‘special attack.’”

In a display of etiquette, he started to trade second loadouts with Bold—in order to show his off first.

Bold’s ARX160 disappeared. It was replaced by a large weapon that resembled a three-foot-long narrow tube with a cone shape stuck to the end.

“We brought this,” David said, taking it from Bold and resting it on his shoulder.

“An RPG-7. That’s an antitank rocket. It must have been expensive,” Vivi said, identifying it at a glance.

The RPG-7 was one of the most powerful weapons in *GGO*, in particular for its rocket range and power. The projectile was an antitank rocket meant to blow holes in the thick armor plating of military vehicles. There were different kinds of grenades that could be fired from it, such as the classic exploding shrapnel heads, and they could be switched out as needed for tactical purposes.

Naturally, with all that incredible power came an equally hefty price tag. In response to her concern over his budget, David chuckled and said, “I really want to win one of these things.”

The RPG-7’s existence in *GGO* was confirmed in the playtest the previous month, and there was a team in SJ4 that was completely equipped with a set of them—the ammo refilling had helped them go crazy blasting people. The price was indeed laughable.

The launcher was expensive to begin with, and so were the rockets. Each one was equal in price to a cheaper SMG or pistol. It was like firing disposable weapons.

Vivi did not ask what happened with MMTM or how they were able to afford such a thing. Instead, she said, “I don’t want to make an enemy out of you. I suppose it’s our turn to show off.”

She turned to the three machine gunners behind her and said, “Summon the Big Mama, boys.”

The surviving members of ZEMAL traded loadouts, and the three aside from Vivi materialized their alternate gear.

Four separate things, roughly speaking, appeared.

A mammoth gun receiver—a hunk of metal well over a foot long, with two vertical grips coming off the rear. That was Huey's alternate weapon.

A mammoth gun barrel—a thick and sturdy metal pipe with a grip along the middle, ready to bludgeon someone to death. And not just one, but a collection of ten of them. This was Peter's alternate.

A mammoth tripod—big and low enough that it could probably support an elephant's front legs.

And several large, metal ammunition boxes, the size of rice bins. The tripod and ammo were Max's alternate gear.

“.....I'll be damned...”

David recognized what they were putting together. He could only watch in amazement.

Max handily spread out the tripod while Huey affixed the base of the receiver to the tripod. Lastly, Peter stuck a barrel into the receiver and jammed it into place by pushing on the muzzle end. The gun was complete.

“An M2...” David gasped, offering his shock as a return gift for earlier. And he *was*, in fact, shocked. Completely bowled over. “And it's the M2HB-QCB model for easier barrel replacement!”

The M2 was a Browning machine gun made for the American military, starting all the way back in 1933. It used 50-caliber (12.7 mm) rounds, which is why it was called a heavy machine gun.

Despite its long history, it was a perennial bestselling heavy machine gun, excellent in both form and function and used all over the world. The Western powers, including Japan, liked to put these on their military vehicles.

The M2HB-QCB that David mentioned was the Quick Change Barrel model, which was the most popular model that everyone was switching to now.

The barrel exchange, which had taken too long due to the ancient modeling, was much

easier with this model. It was Belgium's FN Herstal that had produced the QCB—the same company that made Llenn's P90.

Vivi pulled a—you guessed it, mammoth—ammo belt out of the ammo box and declared, "Correct."

She was holding 12.7 mm rounds for machine guns known as .50 BMGs. That was the same ammo that Pitohui's M107 antimateriel rifle from SJ2 used. Or to be more accurate, antimateriel rifles took the huge bullets designed for the M2 and put them in a high-powered, long-range gun that a single person could carry and operate.

The power of each shot was out of this world and could easily shoot through objects that an ordinary assault rifle could not penetrate. Its effective range was devastating as well, at well over a thousand yards. Two thousand, if your visibility was good. And if you didn't care about accuracy, it could go even farther.

Thanks to the sturdy and heavy receiver and barrel, the M2 could shoot ten times a second. This was surely one of the most powerful guns found in *GGO*, alongside the M134 Minigun from SJ4 and the 7.62 mm Gatling gun.

There were downsides, too, of course. When you included the tripod, it was tremendously heavy; a single person could not carry all the parts together.

You had to dismantle it and split up the parts among different people, then assemble it when you were going to use it and carry the assembled gun with several people at once. It was very difficult to use when completing routine *GGO* quests.

But David broke into a grin. "It's perfect!"

It was indeed the ideal gun for shooting at a group of people staying hidden inside a tower.

But he had to wonder something: "Did you see this situation coming?"

They had prepped their RPG-7 because there were many usable vehicles in Squad Jam, and they wanted a weapon against that. After watching the video for SJ4, they saw that another team had used them to devastating effect on the diesel train as M was driving it.

RPG-7s were not especially heavy and could be carried as you moved, so the negative

effects they had on the team's strategic options was negligible.

At the same time, MMTM did not select the option of preparing a different set of guns as their second loadout. They were used to the weapons they had now, and they liked it that way.

So where had ZEMAL come up with the decision to have the entire team carry an M2 as their alternate? Certainly there would be some level of the usual *We love machine guns! We wanna have the biggest one there is!* but that alone would not be enough for Vivi the tactician to choose it.

She gave him a little grin and said, “Oh, you know. It’s that sponsor’s—”

“That damned excuse for a writer! It’s from one of his crappy books!”

“Yes. If there’s one thing I have, it’s time. So I read all of them that I could find. There’s one where a high schooler barricades himself in a tower and starts shooting a gun wildly and making all these absurd demands, like *Bring me twelve beautiful girls to be my little sisters* and *Force NHK to re-air all of my favorite anime and shows*, and in the end, the SDF sends a tank that shoots the tower with a cannon and blows him up. It’s called *Totally Toppled Tower: My Seven-Hour War*. ”

“And this is... a comedy?”

“No, it’s dead serious. Actually, there’s a whole explanation about the reason he turned to violence, and his hidden true identity subplot really gets paid off in the end. I thought it was pretty tragic.”

“Well, setting that aside... So that’s how you got the idea. And since everyone’s got the parts, you couldn’t afford to lose a single one of them. Though I know your love for them extends beyond this strategy,” David added hastily. He wanted to make it clear that he knew she wasn’t just mad about Shinohara and Tomtom dying because of the tactical deficit of losing their alternate gear. She was very team-oriented.

“Shinohara had ammo, and his partner Tomtom was in charge of spare barrels, so the silver lining is that they didn’t leave the gun unusable,” Vivi said sadly. It was a coincidence that the two of the six members who died just happened to be carrying spare equipment, but that didn’t make it a happy one.

“I see... Well, shall we go? Time to go beat the people we were allied with an hour ago.”

“Let’s do it.”

“An M2 heavy machine gun! No way! They have one?!”

The excitement of the audience over the appearance of the big guns for the finale of SJ5 was reaching a fever pitch. Because they were gun freaks. Emphasis on *freaks*.

“I’ve seen one of those attached to an enemy robot’s arm. Can’t believe they’re playable now.”

“I heard they showed up at an underground shop a few days back, but they sold out in minutes. For astronomical prices, of course...”

“ZEMAL made a bunch of cash for winning the last one... I bet all that prize stuff they got would make a nice pile of change if you sold it all.”

“The point is: This isn’t an item you can just *decide to buy* like that!”

“I hear you can see Vivi in Glocken at all hours of the day. Of course, you’re bound to notice. Because she’s hot.”

“I bet she’s diving all day long. Must be raking in the credits. Or else she hemorrhages real money...”

“It’s like, who the hell is she...?”

On the screen, the ZEMAL men lifted up the M2, tripod and all, and with covering help from Jake and Bold of MMTM, they started making their way toward the tower.

David had his RPG-7, and Kenta was watching the rear. Summon continued to monitor the tower closely. Though they were two separate squads without their comms hooked up, their distribution of roles was perfect. This was a benefit of having good leadership.

“So they’re gonna attack the tower with RPG-7s and an M2. Either that or—”

“No, they’re gonna blow it up, along with the people inside.”

“Brutal...”

“But the ideal option, right?”

“So? What next?” Shirley asked, having gotten out her rope near the bottom of the spiral stairs.

“We do this!” Llenn said, activating her photon swords—having traded with Fukaziroh yet again—and illuminating the gloom.

CHAPTER 14
Ghosts of Squad Jam



CHAPTER 14

GHOSTS OF SQUAD JAM

At 2:53 PM, there were eighteen survivors left in SJ5.

They were as follows:

From LPFM: Llenn, Fuka, Clarence, Shirley.

From SHINC: Boss, Anna, Tohma, Rosa.

From ZEMAL: Vivi, Huey, Peter, Max.

From MMTM: David, Jake, Kenta, Bold, Summon.

And one member of BOKR. Wherever he was.

“Let’s go,” Vivi said casually.

“With pleasure!”

Huey began to fire the M2 at full power.

After they assembled the gun, they carried it to a spot about two hundred yards from the tower. For the M2, that was practically *too* close of a range.

He sat behind the gun, firmly planted on its tripod, with his legs splayed out in front of him. The vertical grips were in both hands, where his thumbs could press on the plate-style trigger between them.

Dud-dud-dud-dud-dud-dud-dud-dud.

It vibrated the ground beneath their feet.

A bullet of this size shook the air when it passed through, especially at that speed. The pressure of the gas escaping the muzzle was phenomenal. The amount of air it punched was enough to make your head hurt, not just your eardrums.

And it was happening ten times a second, which turned it into a continual explosion instead.

How did it feel to shoot a gun like that?

“Hya-haaaaaa!”

Huey’s delighted smile told you all you needed to know.

The thick barrel extended from the side of a barricade and fired at the tower. Extra ammo and barrels were within reach to the side. For now, he just kept repeating full auto, ten bullets a second.

The massive bullets began to gouge chunks out of the tower.

The sheer kinetic force of the projectiles was over five times that of 7.62 × 51 mm NATO rounds, by rough calculation. The amount of dust it created when striking stone was phenomenal.

Each bullet tore about half of the wall’s thickness out, so a second one would punch a hole through it. Eventually the stone would lose enough of its durability as an item that it would vanish in a puff of light. That started happening here and there all over the tower.

Huey adjusted the vertical angle of the M2, sweeping his bullets all over the tower from top to bottom. The tripod had a fixture that would hold the gun’s height, with a dial for fine-tuning the angle, but they weren’t bothering with that. This wasn’t long-distance sniping, so the gun worked fine for their purposes without it.

His bullets riddled the tower from about fifteen feet up, all the way to the top at 150. Dust kicked up from the stone all over, holes opened up, and eventually entire chunks of stone started to disappear.

Summon from MMTM had his gun ready to shoot into the tower if he spotted any

counterattack, but for now, there was no sign of that.

Jake had his HK21 machine gun pointed at the entrance, but there was no one coming out there, either. If they had, he would've pumped them full of lead.

The non-Vivi members of ZEMAL had switched out their regular weapons for the M2 parts and ammo, so the only things they still had left to shoot with were M17 pistols using 9 mm Parabellum bullets.

Max took on the job of refreshing the ammo box, while Peter's role was to exchange the barrel once it overheated and no longer functioned as well.

Exchange ammo boxes, reload, exchange overheated barrel, and shoot, shoot, shoot some more. After about a hundred seconds, the M2's roar briefly stopped, and the dust cloud surrounding the structure cleared.

The tower was still standing.

About half of the stone on the south side had vanished. It was now a lousy, bug-eaten tower instead. At times there were huge holes nearly three feet to a side in the wall, revealing the spiral stairs on the inside.

When Kenta saw that it refused to fall yet, he commented, "It's like a really long, expert game of Jenga."

Vivi used the comm to speak to David. "*That's enough from us. I'm sorry, it's just—the ammo.*"

She did not clarify whether she meant "the ammo is gone" or "the ammo needs to be saved for later," and David didn't press for details. This was an adult conversation.

Instead, he offered a guess. "No refill, huh? I guess that means nobody inside died. They're tough."

It seemed that no one inside the tower had died yet. He could only assume that they had fled to a part that wasn't shot up yet.

"Can I ask you to take over for us?"

"Even if I end up killing Fukaziroh?"

"I would be delighted to see it."

"Very well." David grunted and rested the RPG-7 on his shoulder. It was his role on the team to fire their ultimate weapon.

Not because he was the leader and demanded to have the spotlight. It was because they had done a shooting competition, and he proved himself to be the best with it. David assumed that Huey was shooting the M2 for a similar reason. But as a matter of fact, it wasn't that—Huey had simply won the rock-paper-scissors tournament they had held before SJ5. But that was neither here nor there.

"It'll be a bit of a letdown to have you die this easily, but we don't want you surviving, either," he muttered to his distant targets, cocking the RPG-7's hammer with his thumb.

By peering through the simple optical sights and putting his finger against the trigger, he created a huge bullet circle in his field of view. There was no wind, and the distance was close, so as the circle contracted with his pulse, its edges did not go over the side of the tower. He was close enough that there was no way to miss the target.

He took aim at the middle of the tower, height-wise, and was just about to pull the trigger.

"Captain! Get down!" Kenta snapped. David promptly fell to the ground and rolled, disengaging from the gun, of course.

"Enemy at the top!" he continued, right as the shooting started.

A PKM machine gun's low thudding sounded, and bullets hurtled down at the barricades from above.

From over the corner of his barricade, David could see SHINC's machine gunner leaning out from the top of the spire, spraying bullets all around the area.

MMTM promptly started firing back, so Rosa withdrew and hid behind the low stone wall around the belfry. Once the shooting stopped, she popped up and started shooting again.

Fortunately, she wasn't shooting in David's direction.

"I'll get her first!" David snarled, leaning around the barricade, taking aim, and firing.

The RPG-7 was a cannon.

By pulling the trigger, the powder ignited, propelling the heavy rocket inside the tube forward. In order to cancel out the powerful recoil, the launcher had to expel a ton of gas out of the rear—a recoilless launcher.

Once shot forward, the projectile's rocket lit up at about thirty feet and rapidly accelerated. In other words, a tandem charge.

The exhaust of the rocket enveloped David. It was like having a very heavy, hot blanket tossed onto you. The rocket shot forward at nearly the speed of sound, expelling combustion gas, zeroing in on the bell-less belfry at the top of the tower.

It struck the underside of the roof and exploded.

Even without coming into contact with the fire of the explosion, the sheer shock wave of the blast itself was incredible, slamming the inside of the belfry.

The person inside was pushed outward, back-first, into open air.

"Nwaaaaaaa!"

Rosa wailed and flew, along with the PKM resting on her shoulder.

She was hurled southward, fell 150 feet, and landed on her head. She was dead, of course. One less SHINC member.

Right at that moment, a countdown started.

The number 240 against a black background.

The next second, it said 239.

"Why did she just start shooting?" David wondered aloud. He jumped over to the next

barricade.

An RPG-7 expelled a ton of exhaust smoke to the rear after each shot, so it would tell you exactly where it was fired from. That made it easy to get counterattacked after every use.

As he rushed, he kept his hands busy, reloading the launcher. From his storage he pulled out a grenade head attached to a long, narrow tube and jammed it onto the launcher. Then he pulled the safety pin from the head, so that it was ready to fire.

It took only a few seconds, because he'd practiced the process to perfection.

Once it was ready, he slid on his knees behind another barricade and warned, "Second shot! Watch out behind!" in case any of his squadmates were nearby. Then he leaned out around the barricade and took aim at the middle of the tower this time.

The second rocket shot into one of the holes created by the machine gun where it struck the spiral stairs, activating the fuse and exploding. A bunch more stone blocks were blasted out of existence, including some on the far side of the tower.

At last, the climax of their Jenga game arrived.

"It's gonna fall!" Summon warned the others. The tower slowly tilted over from the middle, its top falling southward.

Then, from a few yards below that, the collapse began.

Not *topple*, but *collapse*.

When it started to lean over, the part of the tower significantly weakened by all the gunshots was unable to support the additional weight, lost its item durability and crumbled, or in some cases, just vanished altogether.

A chain reaction of destruction and gravity took over. The tower began to collapse straight downward.

An unpleasant sound of stone scraping stone filled the air, the earth below them shook—and then dust enveloped the area, hiding everything from sight.

Once the sound of destruction died down, David continued to wait for the dust to stop

blowing past the barricade.

"Did that do it...?"

Bold promptly ran up to him and began to switch their gear. He was not going to need the rocket launcher up ahead as much as the assault rifle. David picked up his familiar weapon again and loaded it, bullet and grenade.

The members of ZEMAL were trading their gear back, too, so that they had their regular machine guns now. The three aside from Vivi had their backpack ammo-loading systems equipped. The end of their ammo belts went into the guns.

They took formation, the three of them surrounding Vivi, and approached the tower.

Although there was no wind, the system ensured that the dust cleared after a certain amount of time. In real life, it would still be dropping thick and heavy for a while, but this was a game. Like mist, it would steadily clear at a comfortable rate.

ZEMAL approached the tower from the southeast, and MMTM from the southwest. Facing the tower, ZEMAL was on the right wing, while MMTM was on the left.

As usual, they moved carefully, guns up, covering for each other, winding from barricade to barricade. By the time they were seventy-five yards away, the dust had totally cleared, and the nine of them could see clearly what was left of the tower.

The lowest fifteen feet or so of the structure was still remaining, but all the rest of it had fallen to pieces. The base was buried in the stones that had fallen from above, and the stairs were completely covered up. No one could still be alive under there.

Around the base were hundreds of stones that still had some item durability left, piled into a mountain about thirty feet tall and across.

Aside from the chipped ones that had been shot, all the other stones were still in their pristine shape, which made the scene appropriately video-gamey. It was like a pile of toy blocks.

The tower was now a mountain of stone, but there were no red DEAD tags in sight.

"Vivi, can you see any tags from over there?" David asked through the comm.

"Not a single one," she replied.

"That's so strange... Are they buried underneath?" he wondered aloud.

It seemed physically possible that the dead bodies could be under the stone—if they were originally at the bottom of the tower, for example—and simply far enough down that even the tags weren't visible.

Even still, there were seven of them after Rosa, so you would think at least *one* more would be in sight.

"We'll shoot. Watch out for deflections," Vivi said.

"Roger that. Give me a moment."

David sent some hand signs to the rest of MMTM, who pulled back behind barricades. At seventy yards away, it wasn't unthinkable for machine guns firing from their right to deflect off of surfaces and hit them.

"All right, you're clear," he said. Huey and Max started shooting.

Twin trails of machine-gun fire lashed at the hill of collapsed stone, tearing up the blocks. A number of the stones that had already been low on durability simply vanished. Bit by bit, the mountain of stone got lower and lower.

They paused after five seconds of continual firing. A faint cloud of dust was rising, and the pile was getting smaller, but there were still no tags to be seen.

"Did they fall off the opposite side...?"

"It's quite possible. But if they fell, we wouldn't be able to see them."

The two squad leaders weren't sure what to do yet.

If all of Llenn's group had fallen to their deaths ten thousand feet below, the only thing left to do was kill each other.

But they had totally lost the right timing to decide on that. It was like a sumo match in which neither side had won, and they were just standing around awkwardly.

Either they needed a foe nearby to turn all their firepower against, or they needed to stop and reset.

David and Vivi faltered for just a few seconds, uncertain of what to do next.

“Fuka! Do it!”

“Aye, aye!”

That was when Fukaziroh started blasting with her grenade launchers.

The audience in the pub witnessed Fukaziroh point her pair of MGL-140s into the air and begin launching.

The massive rotating canister *chunked* and changed angles with each shot, loading the next grenade of the bunch directly into the barrel. Then that one, too, would be launched into the air.

“That’s the spirit! Fight back!”

“Hit ‘em hard!”

Displayed in close-up on the big screen in the pub, Fukaziroh was hanging from a rope. It was tied around her waist and thighs, with her feet planted firmly against a vertical wall to keep herself steady.

In fact, it was almost exactly the same as how Shirley was hanging when she shot off the tower.

The difference here was that Fukaziroh’s boots were not pressed against the side of the tower, but against the sheer cliff that was the outside of what remained of the castle itself.

There was nothing but ten thousand feet of empty air behind her now.

Or should that be more like 9,990 feet? She was actually a bit lower than the flat, level

area where Vivi and everyone else were standing now.

Just to the right of her, Llenn was dangling in the same fashion. On her left were Clarence, Shirley, Boss, Anna, and Tohma.

The ropes the seven were dangling from were tied around the base of the tower. Llenn had created two holes with her photon swords that they then tied ropes through. Since the base was still intact, the ropes would not come undone, even if it was covered by rubble.

This was the one means of survival Llenn had come up with, based on Fukaziroh's nonsensical rambling.

Even splitting up the duties among them, it had taken time to prepare the trick, and so they were still inside the tower when the M2 started shooting at them. The only reason none of them got hit was that Huey had kept the angle reasonably high to avoid shooting the ground.

They escaped down the side of the cliff on ropes when the RPG-7 had started shooting. While they were hanging, they had to face the anxiety that the tower would surely be destroyed and possibly fall off the cliff with them attached, or that big chunks of rock would land on their heads. It was all a gamble.

But Llenn's lucky streak was once again going strong.

“Grenade!”

David heard the soft, silly *pomp-pomp* sound of grenades, followed, contrastingly, by the horrifying recognition of their imminent destructive power.

Then he saw the extremely high arc of bullet lines bending down toward them.

“They were behind it!”

From that location, Fukaziroh was firing in an almost totally vertical position, with just the tiniest angle toward them. The grenades soared high, high into the air and would soon give up and let gravity pull them down—toward his team.

And what if they were the same plasma grenades that utterly demolished his hideout from about an hour ago?

“Don’t run! Shoot them down!” he barked to his teammates, but ZEMAL was already firing.

Vivi’s order to her men was “*Sweep the sky clean.*”

Four machine guns unleashed their full power on the bullet line above them.

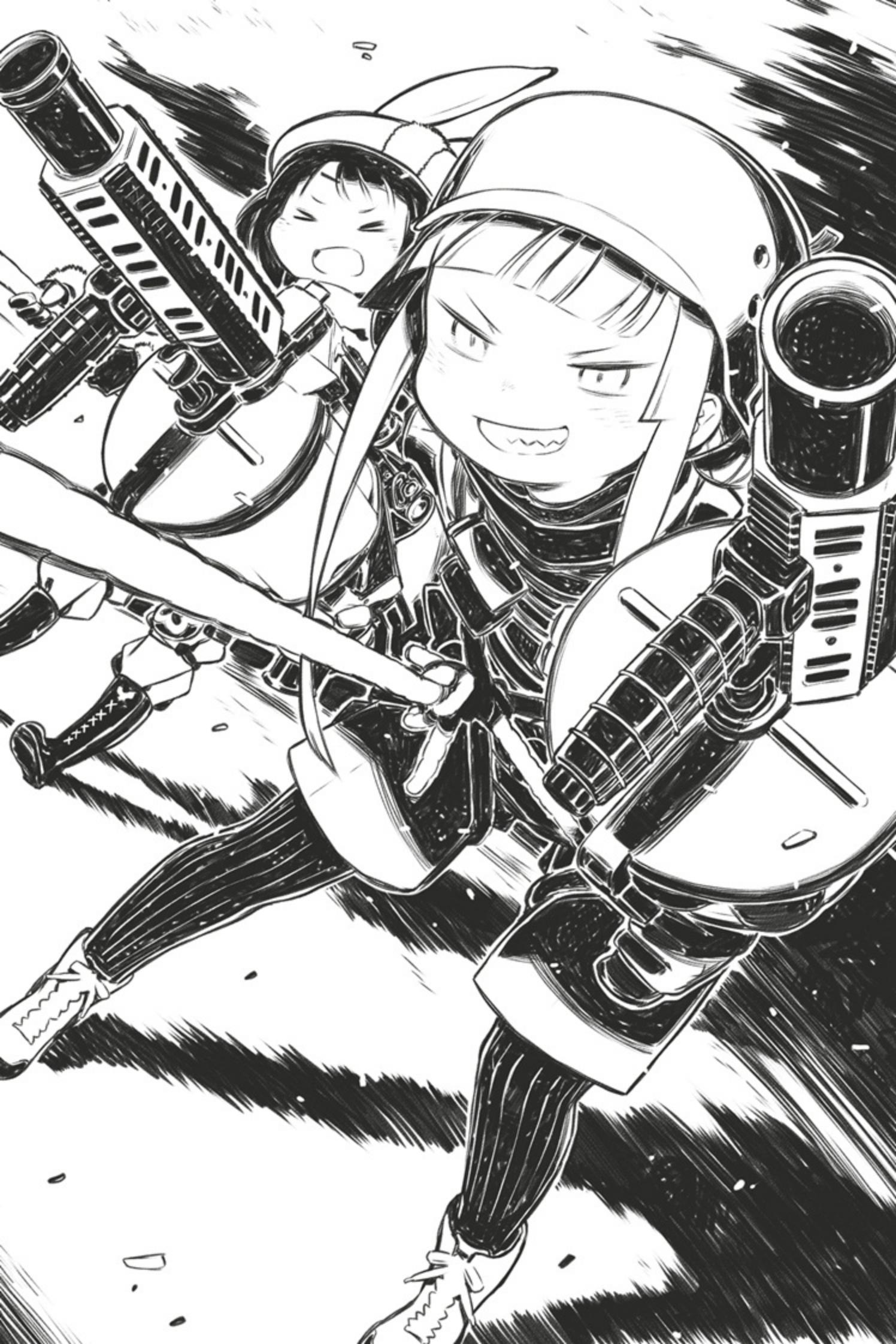
MMTM followed suit a beat later.

The projectiles were traveling in a very high, soaring arc and hadn’t yet hit their peak. You could see on the bullet line that they still had over half of the distance left to cover.

Nine machine guns and assault rifles began to spray bullets into the sky.

“Knock ’em down, knock ’em down!” David raved at his men. His gun was going at full auto, too, of course.

“*Don’t worry, as long as you keep shooting, one of them will hit it,*” said Vivi, very calmly and gently in comparison.



It was a shower of bullets, falling upward from the ground instead of the other way around.

A large blue sphere appeared high in the air. In the sky over ZEMAL, a blue firework exploded, stretching to a diameter of sixty feet. Another firework went off at the edge of it—a chain reaction of the grenade that followed it.

Over MMTM, similarly, more fireworks went off: one, two, three.

The blue orbs hovering in the sky actually became the shield that protected David and his squad, ironically. The plasma surge would not dissipate right away. So when another grenade followed the same path, it would hit the explosion and go off, too, expanding the overall blast zone.

The explosions went off in overlapping circles, like star mine fireworks.

The reddish *GGO* sky regained some measure of blue color, illuminating the faces of the players below.

The big screen in the pub blazed blue.

A dozen plasma grenades were fired off in succession, each one setting off the next in a chain reaction. There went another. And another.

“It’s a chain!”

“What is this, a falling block game?”

“Fireworks go boom!”

“Kabooooom!”

“See, kids, there used to be this old video game called *Missile Command...*”

The audience was in an uproar over the latest burst of excitement.

A moment later, the camera pulled back to show the full extent of the scene. There was blue, blue, blue covering the sky in a span of dozens of yards and stretching sixty yards

tall.

"If they're gonna do a fireworks show, I'd appreciate a bit more color variety."

"Don't complain about a free show."

There was another explosion, another blue flower blooming, then another...

"You know, it looks like they're getting lower."

The height of the blue surges was getting closer to the ground.

"Shit! Gotta make it in time!" David shouted, glaring frantically into the sky.

He wasn't shooting anymore. He'd run through his entire magazine.

The air overhead was glowing blue, and there was a red bullet line coming through it, meaning that any new grenades that could hurt them would be caught in the blast, too.

But it was clear at a glance that they were coming lower and lower.

That only made sense, of course; as the grenades exploded and spread, they were on a downward vector, so the sphere of destruction would drop as well.

They were a full twenty yards across, so if they exploded low enough, and the orb touched the ground before it dissipated, it would obliterate MMTM with it.

"Make it in time!" David shouted, right as the wind blast of the initial explosion, and those that were set off in chain reaction behind it, slammed into the ground.

The pressure was tremendous. It was like five typhoons, all hitting them at once.

"Aaah!" David grunted.

"Eek!" Vivi shrieked.

It hit the other seven as well, not only bowling them over backward, but powerfully

beating them down as well.

“They got shot...”

Llenn noticed the light show in the sky above while she pulled herself back up the rope.

It was their shot in the dark, their ace up the sleeve, the one secret weapon she thought might actually get them the win: a full twelve-grenade sweep from Fukaziroh’s plasmas. She unloaded everything she had on hand. A total going-out-of-business sale.

But they got shot in the air.

Llenn understood that this was possible.

At the start of SJ3, Fukaziroh had launched one straight upward and M shot it with his M14 EBR in order to send a signal to Llenn.

Since *GGO* had the concept of bullet lines, a large, slowly flying target could certainly be shot down by certain folks confident in their accuracy. The freaks.

And once a single one was shot, the rest would fall prey to the chain reaction after it.

“Whoo-hoo! These are the only fireworks I need to see this year!” marveled Clarence, who was climbing up the wall using the rope and her feet on the surface, just like Llenn. She had a shotgun over her back on a sling: her secondary loadout.

It was an Italian-made weapon, the Beretta 1301 Tactical. This was a semiautomatic shotgun that could keep firing if you held down the trigger.

It was about three feet long, with a tube magazine that could load seven shells into the gun. There was also a shell holder on the left side of the body for more ammo storage.

The stock and fore-end had Magpul custom accessories. To the left of the muzzle was a powerful flashlight, and to the right was a laser sight. They weren’t necessary in *GGO*, but she put them on because they looked cool.

This was what Clarence had happily purchased for herself after M offered her some

advice upon seeing her combat style.

She had materialized it once earlier, but it hadn't been helpful for defending the tower. She used double-o buck that fired nine pellets at once, so its range was short. But it would be perfect for the upcoming fight.

The three SHINC members climbed as fast as they could. Even with a rope and one's feet planted on the side, it was very difficult to make a vertical ascent. It required a *lot* of arm strength, and extra weight and guns made it even harder. If you lost your grip on the rope, you were also in danger of falling back to where you started.

If it wound up tangling around your neck, you would essentially hang yourself. If it grabbed a limb, you'd be stuck dangling, perhaps upside down. And you were unlikely to recover on your own.

But at this point, it was their only hope for survival.

It was Rosa, no longer with them, who had taken on a crucial role that made the whole strategy possible.

Her job was to lean out of the top of the tower and make a big show of attacking, both to slow down or delay the enemy's attack on the tower, and to make them think that everyone else was still inside.

And she was absolutely certain to die.

Rosa popped her head out at the best possible time, fired her gun like crazy, and got David to fire his first RPG-7 rocket at her.

If not for that, he would have destroyed the tower sooner and likely killed the whole squad with it. In that extra window of opportunity, the others finished prepping and were able to hang from their ropes.

“Don’t let Rosa—!” Boss shouted, thick hands pulling her up the rope, bit by bit, lifting her weight.

“Have died—!” followed Anna.

“In vain!” finished Tohma.

Their final chance—the true last opportunity of all—hinged on climbing back up as quickly as possible and attacking before the other teams could regroup.

Llenn took advantage of her small size and weight. She was very nearly up at the surface when she shrieked.

“Hya!”

A gust of blast wind hit her, blowing her tiny body backward.

The result of Fukaziroh’s dozen plasma grenade barrage was that they all exploded in the air, in a chain. It was a very impressive and attention-grabbing fireworks show that did not succeed in eliminating a single enemy player.

The reason for this was Fukaziroh’s excellent skill. She had shot them *too* accurately.

With a rope around her waist and thighs. Hanging with her feet planted on the side of a sheer wall. Aiming at targets above her on a slight forward angle.

If Miyu Shinohara weren’t a total unhinged gamer—pardon me, an aficionado and lover of all things video games—who had practiced shooting for hours on end until she had mastered the multi-shot grenade launcher, and she weren’t the most Fukaziroh Fukaziroh that had ever Fukaziroh’d, the shots would have spread out a bit more.

Or if she had thought ahead and intentionally spread out her projectiles better, they might still have gotten shot out of the sky, but they wouldn’t have all automatically exploded against each other after that.

If one or two had slipped between the aerial explosions and hit the ground, they might not have eliminated *all* the enemies, but it could have at least taken out a member or two of ZEMAL and MMTM.

“Is everyone all right...?”

It was one of those *GGO* things that people often asked out loud, despite the fact that

a simple look at the team status in the corner would tell them the answer.

David was slammed to the ground by the blast, then knocked backward, and slid about sixty feet along the ground, but it wasn't enough to be ruled as damage. It was a sign of his skill and experience that he didn't lose his grip on the gun.

All the MMTM members had survived.

Kenta had lost a solid chunk of HP, about 30 percent, because he'd slammed his head against a barricade. But as long as they were alive, things would work out. He used an emergency med kit and got the slow healing process started.

"On your feet, boys. We've still got some fun left. You're going to shoot those machine guns of yours," Vivi instructed. She always gave her orders with good cheer.

"Yeah!"

"Hell yeah!"

"Open bolts!"

Her teammates were healthy and motivated.

They'd been knocked around by the explosions, and some had lost HP, but so what?

As long as they blazed their targets with their beloved machine guns, those hit points would come right back. Well, no, they wouldn't. But it felt like they would.

From a distance of about sixty yards, the four members of ZEMAL readied their machine guns and began to march, issuing brief bursts of gunfire, on their goddess's peculiar order.

"Shoot, enjoy yourselves, and move forward!"

"They're fine, too! Don't let the machine gunners beat us!" David yelled, lashing his squad into shape. "Advance, but don't get too close. Always watch out for grenades."

He steadied the assault rifle against his shoulder.

"Yo, Llenn. Welcome back."

"Ugh..."

Llenn was dangling next to Shirley. Upside down.

She knew exactly why.

She'd been climbing up the rope as fast as she could and reached the top before anyone else, but the wind from the blast hit her just before she reached flat ground and knocked her back.

It tossed her back outside of the castle keep area, but since the rope was still tied, she did not fall ten thousand feet to her death. She only fell twelve.

But now she was upside down. The force of her fall caused the rope to dig into her waist and thighs somewhat painfully.

"After I did all the work to climb up," she grumbled, staring down at the sky overhead.

"You went up a bit too early."

"Grrr..."

Shirley had not climbed up at all. She'd figured that even though it was a straight-pull reload that was generally quick to execute, having only a bolt-action rifle to fight with would make it impossible for her to get up safely.

So she had told them that she had no intention of climbing up. She was just going to relax and hide here. If they found her, they found her. But she didn't want to just sit there and get shot, and she didn't want her gun to get broken, so she'd cut her rope with the ken-nata and enjoy ten thousand feet of skydiving instead.

"Aw! Shirley, remember all the snap shooting you did while running around in SJ3?!" Clarence protested, referring to their rather extreme encounter there.

"That was because I started in a very advantageous position that time. Plus, I'm just tired," Shirley said. She was no fun.

And yet, she did lift Llenn's head and body until she was able to get her footing against the wall. "Here, start with your left foot."

"Thanks! I'll go back up there!"

"You do that."

Llenn attempted her second climb of the wall.

She looked up and saw that the others were nearly to the mountain of rubble at the top. She had to get up there with them and beat ZEMAL and MMTM while they were at least somewhat damaged.

Her gloved hands grasped the rope. Quickly, she began shimmying back up, her eyes skyward.

Which is how she saw the many bullet lines extending over their heads above.

"Look out, Boss!"

Boss had been the first member of SHINC to the top. She turned and reached for Anna, which is why she did not see the lines at first.

"Huh? Gah!"

A bullet passed through her shoulder.

She dropped to the ground, ensuring that she didn't get hit by any others, but Anna was unable to get all the way up. Which was for the better, actually. The bullets flew directly over the rubble, deflecting off of stone.

"Awww..." Llenn sighed heavily. She couldn't see over the lip, but she could guess what was happening.

The survivors of ZEMAL and MMTM—probably many of them—were closing in on them, shooting heavily.

At this point, they wouldn't be able to look over, much less fight back. She could envision an imminent future in which their enemies would climb over the rubble with guns pointed, shooting their helpless targets.

"It's over..."

She stopped climbing.

Above and to her left, Fukaziroh had her grenade launchers hanging from her shoulders on slings. She smiled and said briskly, "Well, we did what we could."

Her partner's smile lured Llenn into a smile as well. They *had* done all they could. If they died here, even Pito would understand.

Not that there was any *need* for her to understand. She was her own person!

"Yeah, I guess," Llenn murmured. "We did well. I did well, and you guys did well."

Maybe it *was* okay to just let it end here.

"Now, I'd like that million yen more than anyone else, so I'm thinking of putting you down now. Would you be a dear and climb up level with me, so I can hit you with my pistol?"

"Screw you!"

Llenn changed her mind.

Dammit! I can't let it end here! she decided.

"We're not dead yet! Fuka, hurry up and reload your grenades, then focus on the enemy and *git!*"

"Well, how about that?" Fukaziroh grinned. "You said 'git!' Is that the Hokkaido in you talking?"

Llenn ignored her friend and snapped, "Clarence! Climb up and shoot for all you're worth!" She was already near the top anyway, in a different spot than Boss and the SHINC girls.

"Um, so you want me to get shot?" she replied.

"Just buy Fuka time to reload! I'll find your bones and bury them later!"

"Ha-ha-ha! This Llenn is abusive!" Clarence exclaimed with delight. She pulled herself up the rope.

"And Boss! You guys just shoot back! We're not dead yet! So don't act like it!"

"You got it!" Boss replied, crawling on her stomach in the rubble with a glowing shoulder wound. She helped Anna and Tohma reach the top, too.

And between the enemy's bursts of shooting—not that there really were any pauses—she tried to toss a grenade. She only had ordinary grenades on her belt, to prevent a catastrophe if they got hit, and she gave some to Tohma and Anna, too.

Hidden by the rubble, they pulled the pins on the three grenades, kept the levers depressed, swung their arms behind, and started a count of "*Un, deux, trois!*"

It didn't matter if the grenades didn't reach their targets, as long as they bought some time. But they did not actually let go.

Right at that moment, ZEMAL's machine gun spray reached their area, destroying the stone right at the top of the heap ahead and passing through to pierce all three of their throwing arms.

"Argh!"

"Gah!"

"Ow!"

They suffered just enough damage that it didn't sever the limbs. The grenades they failed to throw dropped from their hands. The safety levers flew off, and the grenades fell backward, hit more stone, deflected—and began to fall ten thousand feet.

"Huh? Eeeep!" Llenn shrieked, and she saw a trio of grenades pass just on her left as she was climbing up her rope.

And in their path was another teammate.

"Huh?"

Shirley looked up and saw three grenades, falling directly toward her.

"Oh, come on, *this* is the punch line?" she squawked—her final words.

The grenades exploded in short order right beneath her feet, enveloping her in shrapnel and explosive force.

There was no player who could survive something like that.

"Aw..."

Llenn saw the DEAD tag appear on Shirley's body.

Visually, it was a grisly amount of damage, but it promptly returned to its original state. It was a video game, after all.

Shirley's body was now an indestructible object, hanging from its rope. It was immobilized horizontally, perfectly perpendicular with the vertical cliff. Based on the placement of the rope, it shouldn't have gone horizontal, but that was video games for you.

Fukaziroh observed the surreal image and said, "She's glitchin' out."

"S-sorry! Sorry about that!" Boss said frantically.

"No worries! Happens all the time in *GGO!*" Llenn reassured her. She didn't have time to worry about it.

If the grenades hadn't exploded *under* Shirley, incidentally, the shrapnel could very likely have hit Llenn, too.

"Rrrraaaahhhh! Vengeance for Shirleyyyyyy!" Clarence growled, getting to her feet with the 1301 Tactical. Since Shirley was dead, she couldn't tell her off for being stupid.

She pulled the trigger.

Nine pellets shot from the barrel at once, and a single shell fell out of the right side of the receiver.

"That feels *good!*" she marveled.

The next moment, all members of MMTM trained their bullet lines on her.

"Let me shoot at least one more!" Clarence begged—her final words.

But she did not go out quietly.

Before the bullets tore her apart, Clarence pulled the trigger twice and succeeded at pounding the side of Bold's body with pellets. They hit the receiver of his ARX160 (also a Beretta) and knocked it out of his hands.

And so Clarence left SJ5, having taken a third of Bold's hit points and damaging his gun.

"Shit!" Llenn swore, seeing the DEAD tag on Clarence's body as she climbed up her rope. Once she was at the top, she leaped toward the freshly dead body and hid behind it.

"Vengeance for Clarence!"

Using the teammate she'd just driven to her death as a shield, she stuck the muzzle of the P90 over the top and held down the trigger.

It was a wild spray, sight unseen—blind fire. Pitohui had warned her long ago never to do that, but she didn't have a better option now. She just had to buy a little time.

She had just emptied an entire fifty-round magazine and pulled the barrel back a tad to load up a new one when a perfectly aimed and timed bullet hit the base of the P90's muzzle, showering her with sparks.

"Aaagh!"

The force ripped the gun out of her hand and inflicted a bit of damage on her, too, calculating that her fingers would have been broken.

The fingers were one thing, but the bad part was that the gun, sling and all, got yanked

free of her tiny body altogether.

“Aaah!”

She lunged with her right hand, but it was already too late.

P-chan, the pink P90, cried, “Good-bye, Llenn! Until we meet agaaaain!”

It crashed atop the stone, bounced twice, and fell over the edge of the arena map.

“Aaaaah!”

She scrambled over the stone and stuck her head over the abyss.

“Ah!”

The sight of the little pink object falling to the ground ten thousand feet below burned itself into her retinas.

“Goooood-bye, bye, bye, bye...”

P-chan’s voice got fainter and fainter.

“Bye...”

And then it was gone.

“Awww...”

She slumped with her face over the edge, feeling weepy.

“What’s wrong, P-chan dumped you?” asked Fukaziroh, who was reloading her MGL-140s. Even though she had use of both hands, you needed to keep your feet firmly planted to avoid losing balance, so it took quite a long time to reload. But from what Llenn could tell, she’d just finished with Rightony, the launcher in her right hand.

“Fuka... shoot me with that... You wanna split the bounty with SHINC?”

“Llenn,” Fukaziroh replied, an uncommonly serious look on her face. She stopped reloading. “You should have mentioned that earlier. If I’d known you were up for it, I

would have blasted you to bits with a plasma the moment we reunited.”

“You’re right. I should have said it earlier...” Llenn said.

But she trailed off, because she had just realized that when they were reunited, she *had* nearly been evaporated by a plasma grenade.

“No, never mind! I still have the Vor-chans!”

Without getting up, she reached around her back and pulled out her combat knife, using it to slice through the rope around her waist and thighs. The action apparently nicked her skin, too, because she suffered a bit of damage, but she didn’t care.

“What, is that all you need from me?” asked the knife as she tucked it back into its holster. She ignored it and waved her arm to switch out her gear.

A backpack with ammo magazines appeared on her back, and the magazine pouches on her thighs were replaced by holsters carrying her Vorpal Bunnies, the .45-caliber pistols.

Llenn drew them from the holsters, then dragged the rear sight against the corner of a nearby stone to pull back the slide, first on the right one, then the left.

“Wait a second, what are you doing?”

“Once you’ve reloaded, go and help SHINC, Fukaziroh!”

“Wait! My million yen!”

Llenn turned away from Fukaziroh and glanced at the SHINC trio about five yards to her left, prone before the mountain of rubble. Their arms had regained feeling, apparently, because they were busy taking off the ropes.

With bullets flying overhead, Llenn shouted, “Boss! Two requests! One, pull Fuka up after she reloads! Anna and Tohma, protect Boss as she does that!”

“What’s the other one?” Boss asked.

“Bring out the grand grenade for me, *just one*. Along with a hook to hang it from my belt,” Llenn said.

"Hrrg," Boss grunted. She understood right away what Llenn meant to do.

The grand grenade was the colloquial term for a large plasma grenade, which was the size of a small watermelon. It had about the same power as one of Fukaziroh's plasma grenade rounds. In other words, a blast diameter of sixty feet. It was scary, because it meant you had to throw it at least thirty feet to avoid getting killed by it.

It was also heavy as hell, to hold all that power. So while Llenn could carry it around, she couldn't actually throw it.

Boss hadn't thrown it at the enemy for two reasons: If there wasn't enough distance to throw it, they would die, and if it got shot in the air before it reached its target, they would die.

And she wanted it along with a hook for her belt. Which meant...

"You're going out there... to die..."

Boss couldn't see any other answer, because there was only one.

Llenn was going to hang it from her belt, then dangle that around her chest or stomach, and rush out there with her Vorpal Bunnies blazing.

With her ultra speed, she might not get hit. Or if she had the armor plates in the backpack and Vorpal Bunnies in her hands, she might be able to run and point her back to incoming fire at the same time, long enough to get into the midst of one of the two remaining teams before she died.

Once she was close enough, the grand grenade would blow up if she got shot. And if that didn't happen, she could press the switch with a zero timer on it and detonate it before she died.

If all went well, it might succeed at eliminating one of the two enemy squads entirely. As long as they didn't mind losing Llenn.

"If I get half of them, you and Fuka's launchers will have to try taking out the rest! Good luck!" Llenn smiled at Boss, bullet lines and bullets whizzing over their heads.

"I suppose there's no point trying to stop you," Boss said, opening her inventory. She didn't want her own hesitation to hold them back until the plan would no longer work.

The enemy was being cautious for now, but she could tell that the source of the intermittent shooting was getting closer and closer. Whether thirty yards or forty, they were very close. If they got any closer, Llenn's suicide bomb would harm her allies as well.

Boss grabbed the large sphere that popped into existence before her and crawled over to Llenn to deliver it.

"Thanks, Boss," Llenn said, hooking the heavy ball to the belt that ran diagonally over her chest.

All you had to do with the little hook was bring it close to the belt, and it would attach. It didn't look big or sturdy enough to support such a heavy object, but once it was on, it was locked. Just another one of those *GGO* things.

A round object nearly as wide as Llenn's torso, stuck to her chest and stomach; it was unmistakable. Llenn quickly fiddled with the timer switch and set it to zero. If she firmly pressed the large switch at chest height, it would immediately explode.

"....."

Anna's sunglasses pointed at her.

"....."

Tohma's eyes did the same. Neither could muster a word.

"Well, here goes!" Llenn smiled.

She took off on a journey to the land of death.

And immediately got shot.

About two moments after hopping up to her feet, a bullet pierced her left shoulder.

"Eep?"

Shoved backward, Llenn found herself tumbling to her right, and she cracked her head

on the corner of a stone.

"Owww!" she yelled, louder than when she got shot.

She was now sprawled out on top of the pile of rubble.

"Oh, crap!"

Llenn rolled over and, using the backpack as a sled, tumbled down the pile. As she did so, a second sniper shot passed right through the spot where she'd been resting.

It very well could have hit the grand grenade on her stomach.

"Brilliant work," David murmured with admiration.

He was peering through the scope of his STM-556 at a distance of fifty yards when he saw the instant the pink shrimp popped up, but another bullet came flying in from the right before he could even react.

It hit Llenn on the left shoulder and sent her sprawling. The second shot missed on account of her slippery speediness, but he certainly caught sight of the grand grenade she had affixed to her front.

"Llenn's got the grand grenade. Don't let her leave that spot!" he warned his squadmates.

The target of his admiration, Vivi, muttered, "I was *trying* to hit her in the face."

Vivi was crouched beside a barricade with her secondary loadout, having failed to eliminate Llenn. The long rifle she had steadied against the side of the structure was an English L86A2 LSW.

This was an updated version of the bullpup-style 5.56 mm assault rifle known as the L85. A 4× scope was equipped by default.

LSW stood for Light Support Weapon, a designation that was often called Squad

Support Weapon. In other words, a light machine gun designed to provide support for a squad of troops.

They extended the L85's barrel, made it thicker to increase precision and durability, then placed a bipod under it and added a left-hand grip so you could lie down behind it and fire with both hands and called it the L86. A2 meant that it was the second improved model.

It was a machine gun, but it used assault rifle thirty-round magazines, so it could only load and fire a few bullets at a time. But the US Marines used a similar gun, with the logic being that precision shooting would be more effective and desirable than a gun with a larger magazine wasting its bullets.

Then again, back in England, they had already phased out this gun by 2019.

Because the L86A2 had the benefit of high precision, it was often used for simple sniping, amusingly enough. It underwent a class change into a marksman rifle: a gun that snipers did not need, but that a skilled foot soldier could use for aimed shooting.

ZEMAL were the Machine-Gun Lovers, so they had an ironclad rule that nothing aside from machine guns could be used as main weapons. Actually, it wasn't a written rule, just a general vibe. An ironclad vibe.

So Vivi's choice was the light L86A2, because it could actually provide some sniping support for the team.

Just another brilliant Vivi decision that everyone could admire. They called that a brill-Vi for short.

"An L86A2. What a rare gun," David said admiringly, watching her from afar.

Before the L85 series was refined in the 86A2 model by H&K, it was infamous for its poor performance. But after it was improved, it still got treated like a joke gun or a novelty; even in gun-crazy *GGO*, there were few people who would choose it, the poor thing.

"And she's good with it..."

He was confident in his own shooting skills, but he'd been late to notice the target and missed out on the chance to shoot. She was very good. Very, very good indeed. Or at least, highly leveled up.

You would never imagine that from her red hair and adorable profile.

And it caused David to slip into a bad habit.

"Vivi, I'd like to talk to you in Glocken sometime. Maybe over a cup of tea."

Fortunately, his comm wasn't tuned to *all* the members of ZEMAL.

"Are you asking me out?"

"I just want to know the secret of your strength," he lied.

"Like I told you earlier, I have a lot of time to dive; that's all. I have more time than anyone else here, so I spend it all in GGO."

"So would you happen to know a restaurant with a nice ambience and good food? I would appreciate your experience in this regard. It would be on me, of course."

"Why, you charmer."

As they listened to David speak in a more pretentious air than usual, the other members of MMTM thought, *Captain. Hey, Captain. You sure you wanna do this? You're gonna get stiffed.*

Plus, searching for a girlfriend in the virtual world was inadvisable. After all, you never knew what they'd be like in real life.

But they didn't say anything.

They were good teammates and helped their captain look good. By thoroughly enjoying his escapades at a distance. If he got dumped, they'd be there to help him recover. Anything to have a party.

"Maybe once this massacre is over."

"Good idea."

That's right. The pink shrimp is still alive. This is no time to be picking up chicks.

"Aw, dammit!"

And yet, Llenn was, in fact, half dead and in a pretty hopeless situation.

Getting shot through the shoulder had inflicted damage on her lungs, a critical organ. She had lost 40 percent of her hit points all at once. Llenn could not take many shots.

On her back, with the heavy pack acting as a table on the side of the stone slope, Llenn popped a med kit. Would she still be alive by the end of the minute and a half it would take to heal her its full amount?

"Crap..."

She'd jumped up expecting to die and didn't make it a single step before being shot and incapacitated.

The only remaining shred of luck on her side was that the bullet hadn't hit the grand grenade resting against her stomach. If it had, all her friends would have been wiped out. Except maybe Fukaziroh, because she was hanging down below? But no, it would have disintegrated the rope, too.

The enemy's sporadic shooting was still ongoing. Could ZEMAL be intending to keep shooting in place until it had destroyed all the stone blocks? Given their ammo stock and trigger-happy nature, they might just try.

Llenn stared at the sky and thought, *Pito, M, I think I might really be a goner this time.*

It was a thought she'd had several times today, but this time felt more serious.

This was definitely the Squad Jam whose special rules messed with me the most, she thought. Even in SJ3, which had the betrayers system, it wasn't the rules that messed with me, but Pito.

The thick fog, the split-up squad, the collapsing map, the teleportation...

If she was going to be jerked around by the rules throughout the game, they could at

least save her butt once. But that didn't seem likely.

Her eyes brimmed with desperation. The image of Pitohui's face floated into her vision.

The usual tattooed face, which was hard to read at first glance but ultimately proved to be just that: hard to read.

Next to it, she saw M's craggy face as well, bounded by the reddish-blue sky above.

It almost seemed like his expression was saying *You fought well*. Almost. It was just her imagination.

Have their ghosts come to greet me? she wondered. It was the crisp clarity of their faces that made her wonder.

They started out faint, then steadily got deeper and darker, coming into focus.

"Look, Pito's come to take me to Heaven," Llenn murmured to herself.

"What?! You see her, too?" Boss yelped.

"Huh?"

Llenn sat up and looked around.

A few yards to her left, Boss and Anna and Tohma were hiding on the downslope of the rubble, staring at the sky, too.

About four yards away from them in the direction they were staring floated the faces of Sophie and Tanya, two of their members who had died in combat. In fact, it wasn't just their faces, but their bodies as well, hazy but waving happily.

"Aieeeee!"

Llenn felt a thrill of horror zip up her back. Her agility was so high, even the chills seemed to move quickly.

"Oh?" Fukaziroh had finished loading her grenade launchers and looked up from her rope harness. "What's this? Hang on, I can see Pito's and M's ghosts in the air to the

right of Llenn. Is it Obon already? I thought the day of the dead was later in the year.”

“Can you see them, too, Fuka?”

“Yeah. I’d recognize the contour of Pito’s ass anywhere. When you’re an assficionado like me, you can even tell a person’s life experience and personality from their ass contour—”

“Wha... wha... wha...?” Llenn ignored whatever Fukaziroh was saying, rolled over, and stared at their inverted faces this time. “What is happening?!”

Pitohui’s face and body were becoming crystal clear now, except for her legs. Most of the translucency of the finer parts of her figure were gone, and Llenn couldn’t see the sky through her anymore.

Between the bodysuit, the KTR-09 in her hand, and the other gear, she was clearly outfitted in whatever she had at the start of the game.

“Huh?”

Pitohui jabbed M in the side with her elbow.

M reached out to Llenn as far as he could with his shield, which was now visible.

“Huh? What?”

Llenn was completely bewildered by what was happening. All she knew was that the shield was being pointed at her, so she squinted at it.

There was a message written all across the surface of the shield, probably in whiteboard marker.

It was in Japanese, so she could understand it.

It said: *We set the stage for support. The rest is up to you; keep fighting until you die.*

“Huh?” Llenn gaped.

And then, somewhere in *GGO*, a countdown timer reached zero.

The Pitohui, M, Sophie, and Tanya that they could see now had fully visible legs and feet. They slid through the air without a sound until they were standing right at the lip of the arena.

Pitohui and M were about twelve feet to Llenn's right.

Sophie and Tanya were about twelve feet to Boss's left.

It was like they had come back to life, but upon a closer examination, their bodies, clothes, and guns were just the tiniest bit fuzzy. It was like they weren't quite in camera focus. And floating over each of their heads was a conspicuous orange letter *G*.

"Wh-wh-wh-what is happening here?!" Llenn wailed, practically screamed—when the Satellite Scanner buzzed with the answer to her question.

Text appeared on the screens in the pub, and on the Satellite Scanners of each surviving player. It began with the message that appeared in the waiting area at exactly one o'clock.

About the special rules of SJ5: Here are some more! It's very important! Read carefully! Don't give up just because you're dead!

Only those who have died in SJ5 get to read this. We have a very special opportunity for all of you!

You may have died, but there's still something you can do, right? Yes, you can come back and haunt people.

So... would you like to be a ghost?

GHOST, as you know, stands for:

G ranulated

Homogeneous

Object of

Spiritual

Transcription!

Granulated Homogeneous Object of Spiritual Transcription or, in easy-to-remember Japanese, *Konpaku-tensha-ryuuujou-kinshitsu-buttai!*

Thanks to nanomachine producers run amok, the souls of the dead have fused and taken temporary form again in this blasted hellscape of Earth!

They possess the wills of the dead and have full free movement!"

It was a bombastic message.

And what the hell did they mean, "as you know"? Nobody knew that nonsense about ghosts. It was entirely invented for SJ5.

The following text was much more straightforward and descriptive.

So with that said, in SJ5, even players who have died in battle will be able to return to the field as ghosts.

Super-duper important! Special ghost rules that *will* be on the test tomorrow!

1. Those who wish to return to SJ5 as ghosts must choose to go to the Graveyard after spending ten minutes in the waiting area. If you do not go, you will be returned to the pub like usual. The Graveyard is set up to be just like the pub, so you can eat and drink and enjoy the live feed as you wait. Dead souls can converse with one another. If you change your mind, you can also return to the regular pub from there, or log out.

2. Once there are seventeen or fewer players remaining, a 240-second countdown

will begin. If the timer reaches zero while there are still surviving players active, all players in the Graveyard will be returned to the battlefield as ghosts to fight again.

3. To the living, ghosts will appear hazy and faded, and the letter G will appear over your head to distinguish you. To ghosts, both the living and other ghosts will be clearly visible, and the letter L will be displayed over the bodies of the living.

4. Ghosts are an amalgamation of nanomachines and have physical form. Their feet touch the ground, and they move the same way the living do. Ghosts cannot pass through physical objects in the battlefield or other ghosts.

5. Ghosts can use both their main weapon and special alternate loadout freely. They can be switched between in the inventory without needing a partner. Ammo and energy stocks will match what was brought into the event and will not be refilled. Communications items are not usable.

6. Ghosts can only do damage to other ghosts and cannot attack the living or physical objects. Attacks from the living will not hit any ghost; bullet lines and projectiles will pass through harmlessly. Sound cannot pass between ghosts and the living. Vocal communication is not possible.

7. Any ghost hit by an attack will lose hit points, but its damage will be only a tenth of the same attack on the living. (You may think of it as having ten times the hit points instead.) No recovery items can be used. When all hit points are gone, you will “ascend to Heaven” and be sent back to the waiting area, never to return as a ghost.

8. Ghosts cannot touch the living. Approaching within twelve feet of the living will generate an optical defense field that slows and impedes the ghost’s movement. Within nine feet, recoil will occur, and the ghost will be flung away.

9. Experience the other features of being a ghost for yourself. It’s annoying to list them all out here. If there are bugs, the sponsor and developers take no responsibility for any undesired effects.

10. Lastly, ghosts can claim “hidden spots” throughout the arena to gain experience points. When within six feet, the spot will emit a faint glow. Place

your hand over the hidden spot to claim it. A random value between zero and ten will be granted, which can be converted into experience points or GGO credits after SJ5 has concluded. It is a treasure hunt, so explore the map to your heart's content.

“They’ve got a system to come back as a ghost!”

“More unique rules...”

“No wonder nobody was showing up here.”

“You get to return to the game *and* you get experience and credits? Mighty generous.”

“Who wouldn’t take part in that?”

“The mysteries have all been solved!”

“Dammit! I wish I’d been in SJ5... and hadn’t lost in the prelims...”

The men in the pub chatted among themselves after reading and absorbing the rules displayed on-screen.

“Keh. Like any of you cared,” grumbled one man who had noticed quite early on that no one was returning to the bar. “Another round over here, Pops!”

“Yo. What’s the plan?”

“What do you mean, ‘What’s the plan?’”

Shirley and Clarence were in the darkened waiting area, where the elder girl pressed the younger for her opinion.

“Are you going back as a ghost?”

They sat on the black floor in a daze, legs splayed out in front of them, guns at their sides.

"I dunno, we have to wait eight minutes before we can come back to spook people. It'll all be over before then," Clarence complained.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Shirley shrugged. She opened her player window to put the gun and gear into her inventory. But then she noticed something. "Huh? There's a food menu here, just like in the pub. Is this a ghost thing?"

"Really? Do they have French fries? With lots of ketchup and mustard! Order a ton of them!"

"Fine, fine."

"Do they have chips? Hash browns? Ooh, I'd like some croquettes!"

"Do you eat anything *other* than potatoes?"

"Well, I was in Hokkaido in real life recently. It helped turn me on to the taste of potatoes! Man, I wish I could go again."

"Uh-huh. And you're aware that I live in Hokkaido. I guess I could tell you a little something about myself. Just for you."

"Ooh, I wanna hear!"

"Oh my word," Llenn remarked, having sped through the text on her device.

"C'mon, why don'tcha give us an explanation? And make it simple!" ranted Fukaziroh, who had to pull herself up from the brink using her own power, since everyone else was too busy looking at their devices.

She crouched next to the pile of rubble and waddled over to Llenn.

"Ghosts!" Llenn exclaimed, breaking into a smile.

"That doesn't tell me anything!" Fukaziroh shot back.

"Oh, sorry. The people who died can come back into the game as ghosts! But they can't attack us, and we can't attack them. They just earn points."

“Ah, I see.”

“But it’s a chance for us! I’m sure Pito’s got some ideas! We can still fight! Thank you, shitty rules!” Llenn said excitedly, waving around the Vorpal Bunnies.

“Fine, fine, I get it. Just put that pregnant belly away. You almost pressed the switch on it.”

“Eep!”

Llenn hastily activated the safety on the grand grenade.

“So what now?” smirked her helmeted partner.

Llenn said, “First of all, shoot off Rightony and Leftonia! And then—”

She didn’t even get the rest of the sentence out before Fukaziroh started shooting.

In fact, the shooting started around the words *First of all*, which made Llenn want to believe that Fukaziroh was actually psychic.

“Grenades!”

Distracted by the ghost of Lux appearing twelve feet to the side and the abundance of text on the Satellite Scanner, David and the rest of MMTM *did* have the presence of mind still to react when they heard the firing sound and saw the descending bullet line.

It was one of Fukaziroh’s high-arching grenade attacks. What if it was another plasma grenade?

David was about to order his men to shoot into the air again, but then he remembered something Llenn had said an hour earlier.

“They’re all normal grenades!”

Yes, just before blowing off the roof of the brick mansion in the neighborhood, Llenn had said that Fukaziroh had a stock of twelve plasma grenades. That was crucial

information.

Knowing her personality, she had shot them all off earlier. And they had exploded in the air. If no one died, then there was no chance they'd been refilled.

"Roger!" his squad replied, taking action to avoid the bullet line with minimal movement. An ordinary grenade round was lethal to a radius of about five yards. As long as they moved farther than that and hit the ground, they'd be safe.

David glanced to his right at the girl he wanted to ask out for tea—at Vivi—and her teammates, who were busy doing the same thing.

A ghostly Tomtom and Shinohara were nearby, but not within ten feet. They only hovered around the edges of the scene.

They were doing something to the ground, trying to communicate with Vivi. She looked confused; whatever message they were sending, she didn't seem to get it.

"What should we do, Captain?" Kenta asked, speaking for the rest of the squad.

"It's our chance!" David said, making a lightning call. He put his left hand to his ear and switched off the channel to Vivi. "Finish off Llenn's group now! Flank them from the left."

In his head, David was thinking they'd finish off that team, leaving only Fukaziroh alive, perhaps, then chasing her over toward ZEMAL.

It might be a tricky strategy to pull off, but he believed that, with their level of expertise and coordination, they could do it.

And if they did, Vivi would be grateful to him. His stock would rise in her eyes.

She would find him more appealing.

The perfect plan.

"Roger that!" his squadmates said, completely aware of his motivations.

They knew what he was doing, and they wanted to assist his quest for love. They were okay with it, because if it worked out, it would be funny, and if it didn't, that would be

funny, too.

Ghost Lux was panicking, his expression worried behind those sunglasses, but David didn't see it.

"David, pull back. Regroup."

Shinohara and Tomtom lined up the ammo from their magazines to spell out a message for Vivi, finally getting their intent across.

"Attacking right now would be a bad idea... David?"

Vivi was trying to send him a friendly warning, but David could not hear her by now.

The five surviving members of MMTM swung around to the left as fast as they could, moving toward the mountain of rubble. The six grenades that came flying toward them exploded in vacant space and did no damage.

They backed each other up, covering blind spots and sight lines, executing to perfection their brand of methodical advance. The men slid from barricade to barricade, with one person on the move while the others always stayed vigilant, a smooth and practiced formation.

If Llenn's group popped out from the barricades, they were ready to shoot back at any time, but there were no shots forthcoming. They passed the final barricade, with only the sixty-foot open space beyond.

Jake silently crouched, held his HK21 in position for covering fire, and the rest of them prepared to rush in.

"Let's goooo!" Pitohui commanded.

"Huh?"

Kenta, the lead in MMTM's formation, was about to cover the last sixty feet when he saw a woman in black charging at him with a glowing photon sword in either hand. He was stunned.

"Son of a—!"

He slowed down a bit and fired his G36K. All the bullets passed through Pitohui's smirking face.

Next to him, Summon saw a large man in green with an M14 EBR pointed in his direction.

"Gah!"

He fired, too. The bullet from his SCAR-L passed through M as well.

"Uh..."

"Crap."

That was when they both realized that they'd just been turned into ghosts.

"Fire!"

Boss, Anna, and Tohma had climbed to the top of the rubble heap and started shooting for all they were worth with their Vintorez and Dragunovs.

Their targets were the two members of MMTM who had just gotten distracted. They were charging toward Llenn, so their flank was wide open. Very easy targets.

"Damn!"

Bold saw his teammates getting shot ahead of him and continued his rush. If he stopped moving and turned now, that would only make him an easier target to hit.

He had a Beretta APX 9 mm pistol in his hand. His usual assault rifle, an ARX160, had

been broken by Clarence.

He'd seen through the enemy's strategy. There would be no more teammates turning into ghosts. This location was easy for SHINC to attack, so he was going to rush straight for the rubble for cover, then attack Llenn behind it.

Pitohui and M were just ten yards ahead. He rushed straight for them, like he was going to execute a body tackle. When he was within four yards, they slowed down unnaturally, and at three yards, they were thrown backward.



It was a fantastic effect, as though the air around him had become a giant ball of rubber that repelled them. Pitohui and M soared a good five yards away. M was pushed to the left and very nearly flew right off of the castle edge.

“These ghosts ain’t sh—”

He wasn’t able to finish that sentence. Right behind the ghosts was what looked like a large trash can placed upside down. In the slim crack near the bottom, two spots flashed with light.

Then he couldn’t see *anything*.

It was only later that Summon learned he was looking at the Pseudo-Trash-Can Two-Man Human-Powered Armored Vehicle, also known as the *PM*; that Llenn had shot her two Vorpal Bunnies from the slightly ajar lid; and that her 45-caliber pistol rounds had hit both of his eyes.

“Screw this!”

Jake’s HK21 roared in anger at the defeat of his teammates. True to its German precision, the gun slammed the trash can with powerful 7.62 × 51 mm NATO rounds. And every shot that hit the can simply bounced off.

“What?! Is that the same as M’s shield?!” he realized promptly, although it didn’t cause him to stop shooting. As long as he was firing, they couldn’t pop out of the crack to hit him back.

But that only left him vulnerable from another direction.

Boss descended the mountain of stone, opening herself up to attack from David or ZEMAL, swung around to the right of Jake, and put a clean, well-aimed shot from her Vintorez into his head. There was no sound.

ZEMAL was not shooting at them.

The moment his mates started dying, David stilled and clutched the STM-556’s magazine. In front of it was the trigger to the grenade launcher stuck underneath the gun barrel.

However tough the armor on that suspicious box was, a direct hit from a grenade

would flip it over. And once it was overturned, he could just shoot whoever was there.

But the next moment, David's vision went dark.

"Huh?"

Actually, the world went dark.

Coming up behind him on a diagonal in his blind spot was a gang of about fifty ghosts, circling around in front of him, on the sides, and behind, completely surrounding him from a distance of just over four yards.

On top of the scrum of men surrounding him, more men climbed up, followed by even more. The pyramid structure began to topple toward David.

Ordinarily, this meant they would simply fall on their faces near him, but the special ghost rules prevented that from happening.

"Approaching within twelve feet of the living will generate an optical defense field that slows and impedes the ghost's movement."

The ghosts at the top of the pyramid covered the dome of space around David and came to a stop in the air.

As a matter of fact, they were falling—but very slowly, and the closer they got, the slower it went. So it looked like they were simply freezing in midair as they covered him.

Physically, this arrangement was simply impossible, but because of the ghost rules, this was the only way it could play out.

"But so what?!" David roared, surrounded by ghosts. That was the extent of what they could do to him. They had temporarily blocked his view. They couldn't even inflict any damage on him.

However, if he couldn't see past them, he couldn't shoot his grenades.

"Move it!"

He rushed forward. The instant he was within nine feet, the base of the scrum and the

ones standing on their shoulders were yeeted clean out of the way.

In the moment that the world became bright again, there was a small watermelon rolling on the ground before him.

Well, it was similar in size and shape to a melon, but it wasn't one. It was a large plasma grenade.

"But how...?"

He looked up and was surprised to find that the rubble heap and the trash can were a hundred feet away. Was there anyone left alive with the strength to throw such a heavy item that far?

The grand grenade rolled to within six feet of David's right side and exploded about twelve feet behind him.

As the blue plasma obliterated him, all of the many ghosts choking the area suffered nothing more than a bright light in their eyes.

After the grand grenade blast died down, Llenn quietly peeked out of the *PM* and saw five whole DEAD tags around her.

"Wow! We completely wiped out MMTM!"

Because the grenade explosion removed the barricades, too, there was nothing but a wide area of flat, empty ground, decorated by five fresh bodies and the tags hovering over them.

"You okay, Boss?" she asked. Boss had rushed in from the left on her own.

"I'm okay! Looks like ZEMAL pulled back. I'll stay on the lookout!" she replied thankfully.

This made it seem like ZEMAL had escaped from them, but Llenn did not think they could have beaten the machine gunners in a direct fight, so this was a welcome outcome. Now they had a chance to regroup and reset.

Then she yelled, “Fuka! Nice kick! That was brilliant!”

It was the answer to David’s mystery: how that huge, heavy grand grenade moved a hundred feet to land right next to him.

With her powerful legs, Fukaziroh kicked the timer-activated grand grenade from the edge of the *PM*. Throwing it might be impossible, but kicking was different. The legs are three to five times more powerful than the arms.

The grenade rolled over the flat surface, a long pass to David. Although it wasn’t perfectly on target, it was close enough. Thanks to the ghosts blocking David’s sight line, he didn’t see it until just before it went off.

Fukaziroh replied, “No big deal. I played some full-dive soccer games on an alt account.”

“How many games do you play?!”

“Listen, sports are great.”

“Spoken like a former tennis team member!”

“Don’t you wanna try, Llenn? People are really into this one game where all the avatars are giant bugs.”

“What happened to sports?”

“At any rate, long live the ghosts.”

“Agreed.”

Llenn popped her face out of the *PM* and gave the fifty ghosts milling around the area an adorable little bow of her head.

They returned a collection of smiles that indicated some very conflicted feelings.

A few dozen minutes earlier, in the Graveyard where the ghosts waited to return, Pitohui shouted, “Hey, everybody, listen up! Attention please!”

The space was built to the exact same specifications as the familiar pub in Glocken.

In other words, it was reused assets. It was easy to forget which of the two you were in if you weren't paying attention. On the familiar monitors, Llenn and her teammates were wandering aimlessly through the maze.

Pitohui was a well-known face around Squad Jam, so more or less all the men turned to look at her. Some of them had gone through agony in past Squad Jams because of her, or torment, or fire and brimstone. But all of that was in the past. There was no point feeling hatred toward her now. Just play it cool.

Anyway, you couldn't attack anyone else in the pub, and even if you could, there was no guarantee you'd actually win.

"Listen up, people! You died! Too bad!"

"Yeaah!" some celebrated.

"So did you!" others jeered.

Who among them would have guessed that Pitohui, of all people, would be dead, too, at this point?

"Yeah, yeah! It happens to me, too!" She smirked, facial tattoos dimpling. "But more importantly, too bad about those hundred million credits! Or the million yen!"

It was like she'd shot them all with an arrow.

"Shuddup!"

"Do you *really* feel sorry about that?!" they yelled back.

"So I've got a deal to discuss with you. All you guys whose teams are wiped out or aren't likely to last to the final seventeen! Aren't you angry? Doesn't it frustrate you to know that someone *else* is gonna make off with that prize?"

Their eyes glinted savagely. It was an unmistakable answer: *Of course we're angry!*

"In that case, once we're ghosts, why don't you ignore these cheap little points competitions and offer your full support to Llenn instead? You want some other

jabroni to make off with those hundred million credits? Well, if you help Llenn survive and win the event, then no one's going to end up with that bounty money!"

The men gulped loudly.

"Not that I'm gonna force ya!" she said, completing the sabotage.

"Pito's ideas scare me," Llenn said with equal parts admiration and exasperation. Even after death, Pitohui was still Pitohui. "If she hadn't died earlier... then I would've lost back there."

In the distance, Llenn could see Lux's ghost suffering unspeakable things. Pitohui's and M's ghosts, along with all the other ghosts who'd gone along with Pitohui's plan, were ganging up on him.

She couldn't see the bullet lines the ghosts were producing, but she could faintly see the tracers from their shots. M's MG5 emitted a beam of light that struck Lux's long sniper rifle and destroyed it.

She didn't know what would happen to a ghost's weapon if they lost it, but she could only pray that the item wasn't gone forever. That was an expensive rifle.

"God damn youuuuu!" Lux howled with rage, his voice resounding across the arena.

Of course, only the ghosts nearby could hear him, so only those ghosts bothered to respond.

"Don't blame us!"

"It's nothing personal, man."

"It is for me. He beat me up in SJ2."

"And he sliced me up with a knife in SJ3."

"Okay, mess him up, then."

The ghosts around Lux were switching off taking potshots at him. It was really rather cruel.

They were all Greedos. Greedy folks who didn't want anyone else to claim the hundred-million-credit bounty. They couldn't stand the idea.

So they attacked anyone who was an enemy of Llenn's team.

MMTM was wiped out, so they really didn't have any reason to beat up on Lux, but their thought process was very pure and simple: Make everyone who served as any kind of impediment to Llenn disappear.

Despite getting shot by Pitohui and M, and beaten up by Team Greedo, Lux was still alive. Well, ghost-alive.

Since his hit points were ten times as high as usual, he just wouldn't die. He couldn't die.

When he got shot, it still hurt as much as it did when he was alive, somehow. But because he had too many HPs and couldn't die, he was helpless to do anything but suffer.

“Agh!”

A rifle round went through Lux's head. Ordinarily, this would be an insta-kill shot, but his hit points only went down 10 percent.

His FD338 sniper rifle had already been shot and broken, and while he could repair it, it was unusable for now. He pulled his Beretta APX from the holster and shot at the ghosts surrounding him, but there were so many, and all with ten times the health, that of course he didn't stand a chance of killing any of them.

The ghosts swarmed him, all shooting. Some of them got hit with deflected bullets, but they didn't care.

“I hate that stupid sponsor! I'll come back to haunt *you* as a ghost, you hack!” Lux bellowed. Despite the fact that he was already dead.

At long last, with over fifty players chasing and shooting him, his times-ten HP was gone, and Lux moved on to the afterlife in a most ignoble way.

“Damn youuuuuuu!”

“Thanks. You two are free to do as you will,” Vivi said to Tomtom and Shinohara. They couldn’t hear her, but the two ghosts grinned and dispersed all the same.

Knowing them, they’d probably shoot the other ghosts until they ran out of ammo. It would take ten times the bullets to finish off their targets now, which sounded like a whole lot more fun.

The remaining members of ZEMAL survived because the other two ghosts had warned them that it was dangerous over there. They had heard Pitohui’s plan and promptly used their ammo to spell out a message to Vivi.

Run away.

She saw it, understood, and immediately made the decision to move south.

She also warned David, but their team did not survive. She didn’t know why.

She had no idea that David had been trying to act cool out of a growing infatuation with her—and that he and his team had happily thrown themselves into an unwinnable situation as a result.

After beating MMTM, Llenn’s group finally had the chance to rest.

It was just turning three o’clock. They’d been fighting without a break for nearly ten minutes.

At the two-hour point, people started getting full-dive fatigue that steadily dulled their abilities and decisions. If it got bad enough, the AmuSphere’s safety functions could kick in and auto-shutdown the unit. Fortunately for Llenn, she’d gotten used to it in past Squad Jams. At the very least, she was fine while she was playing. Afterward, she might get a headache.

From her seat atop the *PM*, Llenn switched Fukaziroh’s second loadout. The *PM* promptly vanished, and the MGL-140s returned to Fukaziroh’s hands.

Llenn returned her Vorpal Bunnies to their holsters and materialized the backpack that held her magazines for easy reloading.

She couldn't wear it inside the *PM* because it was too big. It was even hard to shoot the P90 in there. That was the biggest drawback of their defensive vehicle: It limited Llenn's firepower.

"Fuka. Did you get your plasma grenades back?" Llenn asked.

It had been on her mind. If she could have gotten back up to 80 percent of her ammo in plasma grenades for having kicked the grand grenade over to David, that would have been nice.

"Nah," Fukaziroh said, however. "I never went below eighty percent in the first place."

"Ohhh..."

Well, that settled that. Fukaziroh had too much strength and brought too many grenades to actually run out of them and earn a refill.

"You stay here," Boss said to them. "We're gonna focus on ZEMAL and—well, not 'eliminate' them, but at least lower their numbers!"

She, Anna, and Tohma were about to take off, with the other two ghosts in tow.

Immediately, Llenn cried, "Noooo! Stay and fight with us!"

Boss had been marching off in a cool, manly way, but that made her stop.

She'd sent Rosa to her death to protect LPFM, which was more than enough to repay what had happened with M.

"Hmph... I guess we could do that. Until we're the only two teams left."

"That's right! We'll beat ZEMAL together! Without losing anyone! And then we'll have a real true duel again!"

"That sounds perfect. But how do we attack them? We don't know how many of them are left, but whatever the number, they'll have the advantage in firepower," Boss said.

She was correct. They didn't know who aside from Shinohara might be dead. Certainly not Vivi.

How to beat those firepower-obsessed knuckleheads? Was it possible?

Llenn could run around alone at max speed to draw their attention, but if more than one of them started shooting at her with machine guns, she probably wouldn't be able to evade them for long.

Also, no one else was fast enough to pair up with Llenn anymore. And most important of all, she didn't have her P90 either.

Fortunately, they did have a firepower-obsessed knucklehead of a different sort in Fukaziroh. She would be a good linchpin for their attack strategy.

Could Llenn be a decoy and help the sniping support from SHINC put pressure on the enemy? That seemed difficult...

Llenn's mind was racing a mile a minute. Suddenly, fifteen feet ahead of her, Llenn saw an unfamiliar ghost waving at her. It seemed to want her attention.

More people were gathering, joining the group that had already shown up. The numbers had swelled to probably eighty or more by now.

Meaning that nearly half the ghosts had been suckered—er, inspired—by Pitohui's passionate speech and were coming to her aid. There were so many Gs over their heads that the wavering effect was slightly nauseating.

Their support was appreciated, of course, but she had to ignore them, because they didn't have time for that now. She focused on coming up with a strategy.

The SHINC members didn't have their backup gear anymore. Or more accurately, they didn't have their partners to trade with, so they couldn't change weapons. They had to use what they had on them now. Fortunately, Boss had another five or so grand grenades...

The ghosts were flocking to Llenn, waving and smiling. They were extremely distracting.

“Shut uuup!”

She started sprinting at them.

By plunging into the pack of twenty or so ghosts, she went within the danger zone of nine feet, which hurtled them all far away.

The ghosts who got hurled away stood back up where they fell, with big smiles, and flocked back to her, as though to say *That was fun! Again, again!* She decided to ignore them. She wasn't in the mood to play fetch with dogs.

"Hey, Llenn, wouldn't that work?" Fukaziroh muttered.

"What would?" she replied.

While the two girls were holding a strategy meeting, ZEMAL's two ghosts were having a strategy meeting of their own—if you could really call it that.

"Save us! Save our goddess!"

Having left Vivi's side, Tomtom and Shinohara were now firing their machine guns into the sky and rounding up more ghosts to speak to them.

It really wasn't any way to ask people for help, but the other ghosts decided they would rather hear out their story than fight them and die. They had gathered over seventy players, easily, from across the southern half of the arena. More were coming up every moment.

Maybe some of them were hoping to get a closer glimpse of the pair's beautiful teammate, Vivi, but that was neither here nor there.

"Our goddess and our squadmates, as of this moment..."

Shinohara began to deliver a speech to the gathering of ghosts. So he had a means of speaking with others aside from bullets, after all.

"...are about to defeat the pink shrimp and her alliance! What do all of you ghosts want to do with your time? You're back in the game. Do you want to go searching for cheap trinkets or get into shoot-outs with other ghosts, fighting over them? Would that really be fun for you? Yes—yes it would! You get to shoot like hell, and it takes forever to die

now!"

Tomtom jabbed Shinohara with an elbow to stop him from digressing even further. He took over the speech.

"But why not choose a more satisfying battle to take part in? I want you to follow us, then throw yourselves at that pink shrimp! There are ghosts on the other side who have been misled by the devil woman Pitohui! You can't beat the living, but you can beat other ghosts, block the enemy's line of sight, and help support our goddess!"

This one was much more effective and persuasive.

"All right, then! I'm in! I'm not coming back as a ghost to go scraping together chump change or sit around on my ass!"

"Exactly! I don't care about the hundred million credits anymore. I want to have a fight with meaning behind it, man!"

With two players loudly coming forward to voice their support, a number of other men in the crowd reluctantly offered their support, too. This sentiment spread until the entire crowd was more or less committed to the cause.

What the rest of them didn't know was that the first two to speak up had been bought off by Tomtom back in the pub. The reward he promised them was the location of a hunting ground that ZEMAL favored because of its high rate of machine gun drops.

Of course, he didn't tell them it would be easy to get those guns.

"I am a ghost! A ne'er-do-well rascal of a ghost! When I make threats, the storm winds blow to make good on them!"

Among this group was Thane, the live-commentator player, who was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Can one bloom after death? I will show you what is possible! Prepare for commentary from the perspective of an apparition from beyond the grave! I have not a shred of anger toward Llenn for cutting off my head, but my allegiance and utmost efforts will belong to *this* side!"

It sounded like he was holding a grudge.

At 3:04 PM, both teams had come up with their tactics, their plan, or to be as broad as possible, their strategy.

“Oooh, there they go!”

The screens showed a pack of ghosts charging forth.

The final battlefield remaining of SJ5 was a round arena a mile and a quarter across.

A grouping of players on the north side started running toward a different group on the south side.

“There we go! Run, run, run!”

Standing at the lead of the eighty-ish ghosts on Llenn’s side was, of course, Pitohui.

With a KTR-09 in her left hand and a photon sword with blade extended in her right, she cut a bold figure at the head of the pack.

The striking nature of her pose was reminiscent of that classical painting of a charging woman leading her people into a glorious revolution. But not with her chest bared, of course.

The swarm of men outfitted in various gear rushed after her, eager not to be left behind.

Pitohui bellowed into the sky, “Come one, come all! If ye be distant, hear the sound! If ye be close, see the sight! For we are the No One Gets the Million Yen Friends! Or in abbreviated form, the Pitohui Army!”

No one there was going to make fun of the fact that there was no way that title abbreviated that way.

“Yaaaah!”

“Let’s goooo!”

“If I don’t get to be rich, no one gets to be rich!”

“That’s right! If we’re *all* miserable, we have nothing to fear!”

They were all too busy yelling and joining the charge to care. These people were in it for a good time, not for grammar and logic.

M was not present in the Pitohui Army.

So where was he? He had climbed up the tower where Lux was hiding earlier and readied his monstrous six-foot gun, the Alligator antimateriel rifle. Its effective range was over the full length of the arena, so he could hit anyone across the map from there.

“Pito, proceed south. There’s about ninety of them. Three hundred yards to go,” he said through the comm, which ghosts could use as well.

“You got it!”

The Pitohui Army started a ferocious charge, slowing down only to weave around any barricades in their way. Like an arrowhead, some of the members naturally wound up ahead of all the others, and they tore right into the enemy.

“Enemy troops incoming! Stay put and shoot back!” Tomtom instructed his companions.

From the gaps between barricades, they could see the enemy ghost army on their way. They took positions shoulder to shoulder, ready to fight. They would stay here and shoot as much as they could, rather than turning to run, leaving their backs exposed.

“This is where we hold the line!” Shinohara called out.

“If you want our machine guns, you’ll have to come over here and take them from us!” Tomtom added bravely. No one had actually said they wanted the guns.

The group of ninety or so ghosts spread out laterally. They were lying down, crouching, or standing as needed, ready to fire. They were shoulder to shoulder, ready to deliver

the maximum firepower to the enemy.

"The battle is set to begin!" Thane said, filming unsteadily as he walked in front of the lineup. "It's just like the setup to fight off the famed Takeda cavalry at the Battle of Nagashino! The alliance of Oda Nobunaga and Tokugawa Ieyasu! Ie-yes-u, I say! Our victory is guaranteed! Look at how tight-knit our group is!"

One of the ghosts looked at the capering Thane and asked, "Can I shoot him?"

But the person next to him warned him not to.

At the very ends of the line were Tomtom and Shinohara, whose 7.62 mm machine guns could shoot over eight hundred bullets each.

The formation was complete.

"Here we go; it's a full-on battle!"

Naturally, the audience in the pub was thrilled.

Whether Japanese warlords from the Sengoku era or cavalry battles from medieval Europe, this kind of large-scale, two-sided group battle simply wasn't something you ever saw in *GGO*.

The overhead camera caught the two lines of players, rapidly coming into range. There were only two hundred yards of space between them.

"Who's got the advantage, you think?" someone wondered.

"Ordinarily, the side that's spread out and waiting has the edge," said the orthodox mind.

When one force was charging fast, only those at the head of the movement, or the ones on the wings of the formation, could shoot. Conversely, everyone on the defensive side had a clear shot.

But there were special rules this time.

"If you have ten times the hit points, even a bunch of shots won't kill you yet, right? Or uh... send you to Heaven, I guess?"

"True. So as long as the charging side puts up with the pain of getting shot, they can punch a hole right through the defense, huh?"

A hundred and fifty yards left.

Because of the rows of overlapping barricades in between, neither side had fired a single shot yet.

"What happens if the charging side breaks through the center? They'll be where Vivi's team is, yeah?"

The image on-screen made it clear. Located around ten yards behind the center of the Vivi Army's lineup were the four members of ZEMAL. They were spread out at intervals of about twenty feet, with two watching left and right in the fore—and two watching left and right in the rear. In other words, full-perimeter defense.

"Nothing'll happen. Ghosts can't attack the living, remember?"

"Aha, gotcha. And that's what Vivi's aiming for."

"What do you mean?"

A hundred yards left.

"The offensive side can break through the defense, but what happens when there's four living behind them?"

"Oh! I know! They get tossed backward!"

"Exactly. It's a two-tiered defensive line, both ghosts and living. Once the attackers are rebuffed by the living, the defense's ghosts will finish the job."

"Ah, I see..."

Fifty yards left.

The defensive side fired first.

“Yaaaaah!”

“Doryaaaaaa!”

Tomtom and Shinohara uttered sweaty man-roars over the thudding of their machine guns. They created a pincer effect of heavy fire from the edges of the formation against the group rushing for the center of their line.

That was the cue for ninety ghosts to start shooting.

Instantly, the world was full of clamor. There was so much shooting happening that it was impossible to hear it stopping and starting. It was just a constant, raging roar.

“It’s and __y...! I think getting !”

Thane was shouting something from behind the line, where he had retreated, but no one else could make out the words.

Hundreds of bullets raced toward the long, vertical spear of charging enemies in a cloud of death. Naturally, as the head of the spear, Pitohui took a ton of hits.

“Bwaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Damn, that hurts!” she crowed. Her body was covered in damage effects.

But it was still far from the ten-times damage needed to kill her, so she kept running. In the meantime, the KTR-09 in her left hand fired wildly.

The men who followed behind her did the same. They ran as fast as they could and unloaded the maximum possible firepower at their disposal. Because the Pitohui Army was plunging straight toward the center of the defense, they got blistered by shots from either side of them. But they still weren’t dropping dead, and as long as they didn’t, they ran.

And most importantly, the ghosts farther on the inside of the spear formation were not easily hit by those bullets.

“Switch!”

“Oh, fine.”

That was one of Pitohui’s strategies, too. By having the inside and outside of the formation periodically switch places, they could alternate who was doing the guarding against enemy shots.

Some shots hit the barricades around the area, but shots from ghosts had no effect on the obstacles. The only thing that happened was the bullets being deflected.

The attackers fired as they ran, sending many of their bullets to hit the men who stood in place, shooting back. But the defenders were holding their ground, too. There was a long way to go before they started getting summoned back to Heaven.

This bizarre situation, which did not feel like it represented a shoot-out, led to the Pitohui Army drawing very close to the Vivi Army’s defensive line. Thirty yards left.

“Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Pitohui cackled as she ran.

“I’m gonna kill her!” said one man, who set aside his gun and started to throw a plasma grenade instead.

He would have preferred to keep shooting, and he didn’t want to throw the plasma grenade out of fear that it would hurt himself, but there wasn’t a better option.

He pulled the dull-gray sphere out of his pouch and was about to press the activation switch—when his upper and lower halves separated and fell to the ground, three feet apart.

“Wh-what happened...?”

He had no idea that, from four hundred yards away, M had sniped him without a bullet line. A direct hit from an antimateriel rifle to the stomach would easily split the torso in two. Ordinarily, that would mean instant death, but now they were ghosts.

“Whuh?”

The upper and lower halves began to move on their own, as though drawn by magnets, until the wire-frame cross sections fused, and the avatar’s skin and clothes returned to normal.

He'd lost enough hit points for three lives over. The plasma grenade that had been in his hands was gone.

"Hya-haaa!"

As the point of the spear, Pitohui was the first to reach the defense, twirling the lightsword in her left hand and roaring.

"Damn youuuuu!" bellowed a man with an M4A1 assault rifle, who shot back without faltering a step.

"Move it."

"Guh!"

She kicked him out of the way. Once in the midst of the enemy, there was just one thing for Pitohui to do:

She hurled the KTR-09, which had emptied out its drum magazine, into the waiting face of some stupid sap, spun around and drew another photon sword with her right hand, then began a dual-blade reign of madness in the enemy's midst.

All she was doing was running around and flailing her arms, but because the all-cutting power of the photon swords was so great, she left a trail of players behind her whose hands had been cut off, dropping their guns and falling victim to the Pitohui Army's gunners, or losing their legs and rolling on the ground, and... Well, you get the point.

"Hya-haa!" Pitohui howled, literally hooting and hollering, until she finally inflicted ten lives' worth of damage to someone, turning him into dwindling motes of light.

"One ticket to Heaven!"

Of course, there were many, many men trying to shoot Pitohui, but M took it upon himself to pick off the targets who posed the highest threat, so she was still doing fine for now.

"Wa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The sheer force of the lunatic woman was enough to put the gun-toting men on their back feet. And they found themselves getting shot by the rest of the Pitohui Army coming up behind her.

“What a joyful scrum! In any era, the only true law is chaos! A dual-bladed menace on the loose! We are witnessing the birth of a new school of swordfighting!” jabbered Thane animatedly.

“You wanna go next?!”

“Nooo!”

Pitohui cut him into four pieces or so. Then she moved on to her next prey.

That hadn’t been enough to send Thane to the afterlife. When his body reconnected, he said, “Being resurrected as a ghost is a truly, indescribably strange experience. But it’s also rather fun. In fact, I daresay that if implemented as a play mode in *GGO*, many players might find it enjoyable! This has been Thane, reporting to you live from the battlefield.”

“Damn youuuu!” howled Tomtom.

He pointed his gun in the direction of where Pitohui was chopping up his comrades to pieces and sprayed full auto fire with his FN MAG.

A number of the bullets struck Pitohui, who made a show of pain. “Oh! Ow! Ow, crap!”

But that was only a minority of the shots.

“Hey! It’s us, you idiot!”

“Is your *brain* a machine gun?!”

“Owwwww!”

Most of them smacked into his own side, interfering with their ability to fight and concentrate. In the meantime, the highly motivated men who’d been at the lead of the attacking group with Pitohui tore into the defenders.

“Doryaaaaa!”

“Kill ‘em aaaall!”

They split off to the sides and engaged in close quarters combat. Some used combat knives, while others charged with bayonets, if they had them. Some switched to pistols and enjoyed the experience of up-close fighting.

“God dammit!”

“Don’t fall back! Give ‘em hell!”

There were also bloodthirsty—scratch that, *passionate GGO* players on the defensive side as well. They rushed into the midst of the fray, leaving their positions to do so.

The scene was now a mess.

Since shooting rarely actually killed anyone, it was a constant rattle of endless gunfire. It was hard to distinguish friend from foe, so some people were just randomly attacking without really knowing what they were doing.

And then the main force—or at least, the thickest part—of the Pitohui Army pressed into the line and broke through the defensive quarantine.

“We’re through! Let’s go!”

The triumphant chargers continued to rush, slowing for nothing—

“Vivi! Your life is ours!”

—straight for the ZEMAL leader.

The men in the pub watched as the group pushed straight through the defensive line and swarmed around the surviving ZEMAL members.

They were aghast.

“What’s that supposed to...?”

“What are they going to do now?”

Soon, the thing everyone expected to happen, happened.

Invisible barriers rose around the four survivors. Not because they had a special item or ability, but simply because that was how the special rules were programmed.

“Ah, geez.”

Once the attackers got within ten feet, they suddenly slammed on the brakes. But there were more and more ghosts rushing in behind them, pushing them closer, until they made contact with the defensive barrier around the living and were promptly ejected out of the way.

More and more came running up, got knocked back, and flew through the air.

“What the...?”

Pitohui was enjoying the sensation of being tossed through air, and despite the looping, spinning vision, she was able to observe not just the dark mass of their group charging at ZEMAL and getting knocked away—but also who was rushing up at the end of the pack.

“Why would they do this...?”

Vivi hadn’t even fired her gun yet.

She and her three companions—front, front left, and left—were under a completely meaningless assault by hostile ghosts. It was an onslaught. And their assailants got deflected, tossed into the air, and pushed away.

Some of them were bounced up by one player, soared into the air, then came down on another, only to slow down briefly and get tossed up again, like on a large and very strange trampoline. It seemed fun.

Vivi’s vision was full of the ghosts, faded and indistinct figures with the letter *G* over

their heads. For each one who was knocked away through the air, another was already behind it.

It was like being behind a windshield in a snowstorm. Vivi wasn't getting touched by any of it.

Whatever this was, it was totally pointless.

It would be one thing if they just wanted to play a game of rag doll, but if these ghosts were trying to defeat the enemy ghost team to benefit Llenn, they shouldn't be wasting their time with Vivi.

They'd already broken through the line, so the smart course of action would be to take out the individual members of the Vivi Army one by one.

Instead, they were playing this silly game, which was allowing the Vivi Army to regroup and shoot them from behind instead.

Tomtom and Shinohara were blazing away without a care, taking out ghosts from the Pitohui Army bit by bit.

Even still, the advance on the living did not stop.

"What's the purpose...?"

"Grab on tight! Here we go!" roared Fukaziroh, who was driving.

The Pitohui Army pack had been rushing ZEMAL, getting tossed around, and rushing back, for over ten seconds, and it was starting to lose steam—when Vivi saw it.

"!"

Beyond the Pitohui Army, there was a ghost flying through the air.

She could tell it was the man who'd tagged along with them from the rare SG550 assault rifle he was holding.

And then everything clicked.

"Everyone shoot!"

But her order was too rushed—and too simple.

Keeping orders simple was crucial, but in this case, it backfired, because the other members of ZEMAL just watched in mute bafflement.

“Here’s the first one!”

“Awright!”

Fukaziroh’s *PM* was racing forward, barreling the Vivi Army’s ghosts out of the way.

The *PM* had tires. And on a perfectly flat and smooth surface like this, Fukaziroh’s propulsion efficiency—which came entirely from herself—was at an optimal level.

Peter’s cause of death was faltering at Vivi’s orders, and turning back to glance at her.

The *PM* zipped past the man with the tape on his nose, as quick as the breeze, and in that time, Llenn’s extended arm extended its photon sword arm, too, neatly cutting off his head.

“They’ve gone in,” said M.

Pitohui, who only had a few percentage points left of her expanded hit points, made a triumphant pose with her lightsword.

“Hell, yeah!”

Fukaziroh and Llenn’s plan had been conveyed to Pitohui via messages carved into stone with Llenn’s photon sword.

Ghosts

Charge

We come

Behind

The plan was to use the ghosts to distract and blind ZEMAL to the approach of the *PM* behind them, and it had worked like gangbusters.

“Wa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Pitohui brandished her lightswords high as the remnants of the Vivi Army swarmed her and riddled her with bullets. “I regret nothing!”

She had a joyous smile as she moved on to the afterlife.

“Vivi, forty-five degrees right!” Llenn instructed.

“Don’t worry, I see her!” Fukaziroh said, already steering the ship in that direction before Llenn had even closed the lid again.

The *PM* had been improved onsite. They had prioritized visibility over defensive capability.

They fashioned a single, two-inch hole near Fukaziroh’s right eye with the photon sword, so that she could see as she piloted. Despite the excellent defense of the shield, pressing the sword against it at full power output would eventually burn a hole into it. If not for this hole, they would not have been able to speed around barricades and keep up behind the ghost charge.

Their first attack just happened to be on Peter, who was the closest at hand, but their true target was Vivi.

The *PM* ignored Huey and Max, who were stunned to see a garbage can running by, and rushed straight for Vivi.

“Ah!”

Vivi’s RPD barked at them, but all the bullets were deflected, and none were lucky enough to pass through the sight hole.

“Take thiiiis!” Fukaziroh bellowed, the sound muffled by the cramped interior. Her powerful glutes bulged as she pushed.

Although the shots did slow down the *PM* slightly, it still continued its push toward Vivi—who, recognizing the futility of shooting, tried to jump to the side to avoid it.

That prevented the vehicle from delivering a body blow on her, but it did produce the dull thud of metal on metal. The RPD was jolted out of her hands. It was hanging on a sling, so it dangled on her body rather than being thrown free.

The next moment, a blade emerging from the open lid of the *PM* swiped at Vivi.

“Ah!”

With brilliant reflexes, she dodged this as well.

The blade had been meant for her neck, but it only grazed her shoulder and chest instead. There was barely any HP loss, most likely. But Llenn’s determined attack succeeded at severing the gun sling, dropping the RPD to the ground.

“Damn, I missed! Nice dodge!”

“What did I tell ya? She’s real tough. Close combat is her forte,” Fukaziroh said of her bitter rival. The momentum of their surge took the *PM* well past Vivi’s position.

“Then let’s attack again!”

“Anytime, anywhere, anyhow!”

Fukaziroh’s boots jammed against the ground hard enough to burn the surface, jolting the *PM* into a rapid brake, followed by a screaming one-eighty turn.

“Augh!”

Llenn smacked her head against the inside of the vehicle up above.

The turn was finished, and the *PM* began to close the gap with Vivi again. It was a distance of about twelve feet.

“Goddess!”

“Take this!”

Huey and Max started shooting, but the expensive plating on the *PM* repelled all their bullets. There was no power like wallet power.

They stopped shooting just as quickly. They were afraid that they'd hit Vivi, either directly or on a deflection.

“Doryaaaa!”

Fukaziroh made another furious charge. Vivi easily stepped aside, like a matador avoiding a charging bull.

But Fukaziroh had read her all the way. “You always dodge to the left!”

With her entire body thrown into the steering, Fukaziroh jolted the *PM*'s helm to the left.

“Augh!”

Llenn smacked her shoulder against the inside of the vehicle up above.

There was also an ugly thud as the *PM* slammed into Vivi's body. She was thrown up into the air and landed directly on top of the vehicle.

“Goddess!”

“Get back here!”

Huey and Max could only watch as their leader was taken away on top of the fishy upside-down garbage can.

“Hmm? Why is the car heavier?”

“She's on top of it!” Llenn noticed. She tried to push the lid on top open with her lightsword hand. “It's too heavy to open!”

“Trying to mooch a free ride? You'll pay for that!”

Suddenly, the interior of the *PM* was bright.

“Huh?”

Llenn looked up in surprise and saw that, despite doing nothing on her own, the lid was open by about four inches—and there was a pistol pointed right at her through the crack.

Vivi had slid down off her stomach and clung to the edge of the *PM*, ripped the lid open with her right hand, and jammed the M17 pistol she drew from her waist into the opening.

She fired.

“Aiee!”

Llenn dodged. If her agility hadn’t been buffed to its current level, she would have gotten a 9 mm Parabellum bullet through her head.

Instead, however, the bullet struck the helmet of Fukaziroh, the driver, bounced off, deflected against the inside of the *PM* again, then lodged itself into Fukaziroh’s side.

“Gaagh! First you try to ride for free, then you hijack me, Vivi?!”

The bullet ignited her fury. She’d lost 20 percent of her health.

“Tah!” Llenn output a short bit of blade from the photon sword and thrust it at the gun. But Vivi was quicker to withdraw her hand, and the sword singed nothing but empty air.

Then the lid was slammed back shut.

“Yeow!”

Right on top of Llenn’s head.

Vivi clung to the outside of the racing *PM*. Over her shoulder, she called out, “Shoot them! Shoot me!”

“But...”

“We can’t...”

Huey and Max hesitated momentarily, watching the *PM* carry their leader away.

“Your goddess commands you!” she yelled.

“Open bolts!”

“Yes, sir!”

They immediately jumped into action, pointing their machine guns at the trash can rushing away at a distance of fifty yards.

“Wha—?!”

But a huge swarm of Pitohui Army ghosts rushed in to block their visibility.

“Move it!”

“Damn youuu!”

They started blasting at whatever they could see through the crowd.

The bullets roaring toward the back of the *PM* did not hit it.

Fukaziroh did a left turn to take them around a barricade, causing the bullets to shoot harmlessly past them. If not for the ghosts’ interference, she would not have made it in time.

“Llenn! Cut down our fare dodger! Cut through our baby if you have to!”

“Got it!”

Llenn pointed the end of the photon sword at the roof of the *PM* and adjusted the output to maximum. The blade extended upward and penetrated the lid, which was not as thick as the armor on the sides.

"Did that do it?" asked Fukaziroh, who was staring through her forward hole.

"I didn't feel anything!" Llenn replied, right as the hole went dark.

When Vivi had slammed the lid down, she trapped her left hand under the edge.

In real life, that would have broken all the bones in her fingers, and she *did* lose some hit points, but it wasn't worth worrying about.

She clutched the front of the speeding *PM*, found the little hole in the exterior, and stuck the end of her pistol against it.

"*Gyaaaaaa!*"

Llenn was stunned to hear Fukaziroh screaming in a way she'd never heard before. She checked the status area and saw that her teammate's hit points were all the way into the red zone.

"She shot me in the eye... Damn, I can't see a thing!"

Even still, Fukaziroh did not stop running. She craned her head out of the way to avoid getting shot a second time.

"Take thiiis!"

Llenn shoved the lid upward with her head and swiped sideways with her photon sword.

Clink. The hilt of her sword smacked against Vivi's M17.

The sound of metal striking metal was dull and hard.

While the driver continued to run, sight unseen, Llenn and Vivi stared each other down atop the speeding *PM*.

"I did say we'd be enemies the next time we met, right?" said the pretty redhead,

smiling.

"Yeah, I know..." Llenn muttered reluctantly.

She's scary—for the opposite reason as Pito, Llenn thought, but she didn't have the time to say it.

She wanted to push her lightsword through and finish the swing, but Vivi's brute strength, which even Fukaziroh admitted was impressive, kept her hand in check with that pistol. Vivi's other hand was gripping the pipe edge of the *PM* and couldn't let go. If she did, her entire body would get sliced in two.



But because Vivi had the butt of the pistol pressed against the hilt, she couldn't point the gun at Llenn, either. They were both using the side of the *PM* to prop themselves up and couldn't let go.

The word *logjam* came to mind, an impasse of a situation.

Then for some reason, it morphed into *gunjam* in her head.

She had thought that neither of them could move, but Vivi's arm strength gradually showed Llenn that she was wrong.

They weren't in a stalemate; Vivi was pushing Llenn down. The butt of her pistol slowly moved the hilt of the photon sword lower and lower.

Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap. This is bad. Like, bad-bad.

Sirens were blaring in Llenn's mind. If she got pushed any lower, the photon sword would cut through the *PM* and Fukaziroh alike. But if she switched it off to remove the blade, Vivi would instantly be able to point the gun and shoot Llenn with it. She wasn't likely to dodge at this distance.

What should I do?

There was nothing she could do.

And that was when she saw something preposterous over Vivi's side.

Something preposterous—a tower.

A structure with the exact same appearance as the one where she'd gone through so much hassle, just ahead and on the right. And that meant one thing...

“Fuka! We’re going to fall up ahead!”

Somehow, they had come to the edge of the central keep arena. There were no barricades to block them up ahead.

Llenn tilted her head, and Vivi craned her neck to see the direction they were heading.

In another sixty feet, the vehicle was going to plunge ten thousand feet downward.

"Fuka! Stop, stop, stop! The cliff's ahead! Danger, watch out!" Llenn shrieked.

"I will triuuuuuumph! Now is the time to avenge yeaaaaars of hatred!" Fukaziroh bellowed back.

Realizing what she was about to do, Llenn screamed, "No, dummy, doooooooon't!"

But the car was not stopping. Sixty feet to go.

The next moment, a hand shot up from below.

It was Fukaziroh's little hand, clenching Vivi's wrist.

"Urgh!"

She fixed it in place with an iron grip. Llenn could withdraw her hand and not get shot.

Thirty feet to the cliff.

Now Llenn understood what Fukaziroh *really* wanted to do.

"Thank you, Fuka..."

She retracted the glowing blade and jumped. Her feet launched up off the pipe frame inside the vehicle, hurtling her upward. The lid on top came off and flew with her into the air. Llenn was clear of danger.

From her position above it all, Llenn could look down to see the topless *PM* accelerating even more, rushing ahead with Vivi held captive on the side.

There was a cliff just ahead, which the vehicle charged toward.

All the way to the end, Vivi tried to keep her pistol pointed at Llenn. But Fukaziroh's firm hand kept its grip steady.

The *PM*'s wheels hit air at the same time that Llenn's feet hit ground.

The soles of her boots landed ten feet from the edge of the cliff.

"!"

Then she did a somersault, on purpose. Llenn ended up on her stomach, clinging to the ground with every inch of her that she could, using her entire body as a brake.

"Stoppppp!" she willed, with every ounce of her being, praying to the god of *Gun Gale*.

The prayer was heard, and she came to a stop. Her face was over the edge of the cliff, giving her a perfect view of the plummeting *PM* below.

"Fukaaaa!" she cried, mourning the loss of her partner.

"Hey, what the—? Llenn! No! What?! You jumped off? Why did you do that?! C'mon! This was my chance to kill you and Vivi at the same time! My hundred million crediiits!" Fukaziroh wailed a cry from the soul, reaching Llenn's ears through the comm.

"Huh? Oh, uh, happy travels! Glad you could beat Vivi at last," Llenn replied. It was the only thing she could say.

As the *PM* got smaller and smaller, she spotted some bright flashes of light.

The sound of faint gunshots rose upward, and through the comm, Fukaziroh shouted, "*You biiitch!*"

As they fell, Fukaziroh and Vivi were engaged in a pistol shoot-out.

"Oh geez..."

There was nothing more to say. Llenn kept her head poked over the edge so she could watch. Even after the vehicle was completely out of sight, she could hear Fukaziroh in her ear shouting "*I'll beat you! I swear to God I'll beat you! This day has been a hundred years in the making!*"

Llenn recalled a Japanese class lecture in which she'd learned that the previous stereotypical saying, often used when confronting a nemesis, used "a hundred years" as a metaphor for the human life span. In other words, "This is to be your dying day."

On the left edge of her vision, Fukaziroh's hit points emptied out and were accompanied by a little X, exactly sixty seconds after she plunged over the cliff.

Llenn sighed, pulled herself up to a sitting position, and turned around.

“Yo.”

“Hey.”

“Yeep!” she shrieked. A hundred feet away stood the two survivors from ZEMAL.

Huey and Max had their black imposing machine guns readied at waist height. Bullet lines extended from their muzzles, and the other ends were pointed right at Llenn.

They did not shoot her right away, however.

Mohawked Huey said somewhat sadly, “I’d demand revenge for our goddess and shoot you right here and now, Pink Devil... but you actually saved our leader’s life near the start of the game, didn’t you?”

“Huh? Oh yeah. Just kind of happened that way.”

“While you may be our foe, we will repay your good deed. This is an obligation that every machine gunner must fulfill in order to be beloved by the machine gun. You understand that, of course.”

She did not.

“I sure do,” she said.

“So we will not shoot until you have gotten to your feet, brandished your weapon, and taken a fighting pose.”

“That’s it?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“Well, I’m grateful that you didn’t just shoot me right on the spot. But I mean...”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I still have teammates left. You know that, right?”

Two Dragunovs fired in unison, high-pitched and crisp.

Their bullets pierced the heads of the two men standing across from her.

At the edge of the map, beside a tower, and facing the bodies of the last two members of ZEMAL, Llenn slumped to the ground.

“Ugh... I’m exhausted...”

Even the photon sword that slipped from her fingers muttered, “Yesss! Berry, berry tired!”

“Thanks for your help, Pho-chan.”

Llenn was nothing if not consistent in her naming standards.

Three women came strolling up on the right, bold and proud, in the open.

“Well done! A brilliant plan!” said the gorilla in pigtails, favoring her with a smile that would make little children burst into tears. The sniper pair of Anna and Tohma beamed at her, too.

It had been Llenn’s plan to keep these three out of direct combat, to hold in reserve as backup power if needed.

So she’d had her comm hooked up to them the entire time, and each had heard everything the other said.

“So what now? The ghosts seem to be enjoying themselves, but they’ve really got nothing to do with us,” Boss said, walking up to Llenn.

“Good point. I say, let’s settle this with a normal duel—but with one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t care how we do it, but it should be a one-on-one with you and me. And if I win,

I want either Anna or Tohma to shoot me.”

“That’s not—”

“I don’t know who placed the hundred-million-credit bounty on me, but I want to make sure they’re out a lot of money! Your whole team can split the prize!”

“Hrmmm,” grunted the pigtailed gorilla.

“And I won’t go easy on you, of course!” The pink demon grinned.

“Um... Do you think I could join in, too?” said the man.

He stepped right out of the tower.

The tower he’d been hiding in the entire time.

The man’s whole body was covered in protective armor, looking like a tin robot toy.

Over his shoulders was a gigantic backpack.

And he was holding a string that went into the pack...

“Nwaaah!” Boss roared, launching into a forward kick.

“Glurgh!” It slammed into Llenn’s stomach.

Her little body hurtled backward. The impact was strong enough to inflict damage equivalent to about 30 percent of her health.

“Aaaaahhh!”

Llenn flew over the edge of the cliff and began to plummet the ten thousand feet to the surface below.

The pull of freefall gravity tugged her downward, bottom toward the ground and feet pointed at the cliff. Right beyond her feet, the cliff climbed upward, going thirty-two feet faster every second.

Of course, she was the one who was falling, but in terms of how it looked to her, the

surface beside her was shooting upward, faster and faster.

There was a bright-orange light on top of the cliff.

Llenn understood what it was, of course. It was an explosion from the self-detonating team. The one member who had survived was hiding inside the tower the whole time, then popped out just so he could blow himself up.

Boss had recognized who he was and kicked Llenn to knock her off the arena. To ensure she wouldn't die.

"Boss... you saved me again... Thank you..." she murmured, gazing at the orange light in the sky.

And then, just as loud and flashy, accompanied by a musical fanfare, a message appeared in front of all of that:

Congratulations!! Winner: LPFM!

The orange light promptly went out. There was no blast wind, no sound. The center of the castle just kept shooting upward, faster every second.

"Oh, right..."

With the last survivor of the suicide bomb team, there had been five players left, including Llenn. Four of them had just died in that blast, so Llenn was the last person alive. The winning team was LPFM.

SJ5 was over, and no one had successfully claimed the hundred-million-credit bounty.

As she dropped, Llenn had only one question on her mind.

How long am I going to keep falling?

CHAPTER 15

The Battle Is Over, the Day Is Done



SECT.15

CHAPTER 15

THE BATTLE IS OVER, THE DAY IS DONE

September 20, 2026 (Sun)

“Hullo! Hi, Llenn! Good job yesterday!”

Pitohui greeted her with yet another energetic, obnoxious welcome and went in for a big hug, but Llenn dodged out of the way. She was faster than anyone.

They were in a private room at a pub in Glocken, at one fifteen in the afternoon.

About twenty-four hours had passed since the start of the battle to the death known as SJ5. Yes, it was the next day.

“Am I the last one here? Sorry for making everyone wait.”

Everyone else who’d been called here was already present in the rectangular room, aside from Llenn. The group included the five members of LPFM and the six members of SHINC. They could easily fit another ten people around the long table.

After the end of yesterday’s Squad Jam, Llenn had fallen and fallen until she finally hit the ground and died after roughly seventy-five seconds. She suffered quite the impact.

In fact, Llenn had been lulled into a kind of stupor and was so startled by the sudden jolt that the AmuSphere’s safety measures kicked in and shut down the game. She was returned to reality.

As a result, all the aftereffects of her long, protracted battle immediately hit Karen in the form of a headache. So she sent a message to everyone explaining that she wouldn’t be logging back in—and thanked Boss in particular for saving her.

They decided to schedule the LPFM celebration party for the next day, instead, starting at one thirty.

That was pretty prompt scheduling, but since she was the first to return to the real

world, she certainly couldn't ditch this one. Thankfully, she didn't have any other plans, aside from doing her classwork.

Llenn thought she was showing up early, but she was the last one there.

"You're not late!" said Clarence, looking dashing and handsome, as always. She had a French fry in her fingers.

"Pito gave you a time thirty minutes later than everyone else's," Fukaziroh informed her. She had her helmet off, letting down her smooth golden hair. It really changed her look quite dramatically.

"Oh, dang," Llenn blurted out. That would explain it, then. "But why?"

"Because we can't keep the guest of honor waiting, of course. And you did show up pretty early," Shirley said, eating a potato next to Clarence. "Fuka just got here."

"Hey, I thought we agreed not to mention that!"

"I didn't agree to anything."

"I thought we agreed not to mention that either!"

"Which I did not."

Llenn ignored them and went over to Boss. She was still huge, even sitting down.

With a little bob of her head, Llenn said, "Thank you for saving me."

"You already thanked me yesterday. But you're welcome."

Llenn continued to thank each and every member of SHINC, then sat down at the end of the table.

"All right! The guest of honor has seated herself, so the party may begin!"

Of course, they'd already been eating and drinking quite a lot, but that was fine.

"Here," said M, setting down an iced tea in front of her.

"Thank you, M. Good job yesterday."

"It was a fantastic battle."

"In that case, I'll take the lead!" Pitohui cried energetically. "Before we can toast, I'm going to give a really long, stupid, boring speech that'll last until all the beer is lukewarm! GG, everybody! Cheers!"

It was one of the shortest speeches in world history.

Llenn had just enough time to take a sip of her iced tea through a straw.

"Okay, party's over! Time for the SJ5 postmortem!"

One of the shortest parties in world history came to an end, transitioning into a chance for reflection and betterment.

There wasn't all that much to do, however; they just recollected the battle from the day before, and talked it through with the occasional diversion—in this case, the diversions took up the bulk of the time.

Whether party or postmortem, they were doing basically the same thing, so Llenn didn't mind. It was more fun doing this than battling, and it was always wonderful to spend quality time with her friends.

So she made an offer. "Maybe we should order some pizza for once. If you eat too much here, it can be dangerous, because it ruins your appetite in the real world... But I could stand to eat a little less for one day."

"Yeah!" Clarence roared, having just finished off a huge plate of potatoes. How much was she planning to eat?

Pitohui said, "I'm down! What better food for a party than pizza? Let's get extra-larges! I'm talkin' the size of a manhole!"

What happened to the postmortem? Llenn wondered but did not say.

"Take it away, M," Pitohui said, dumping the responsibility on him. "Anchovies, anchovies! And one with pineapple! Let's get a thin crust! But also one deep-dish! Also, we can get Buffalo wings, right? I'll take it medium-hot! Also..."

Her love for Kenji Miyazawa was apparent. This was indeed a Restaurant of Many Orders.

"So no one ended up winning that bounty prize," Llenn mentioned, bringing up the topic she was most curious about. "Who do you think put that out...?"

"Oh, that came up first when we met today, so we got the answer before you showed," Fukaziroh said, to Llenn's surprise.

"Really?"

After SJ5 yesterday, Karen had mulled over that question quite a lot. If there was an answer, she very much wanted to know it.

"Yeah. We came up with our own answer."

"And that is?"

"Anyone."

"Huh?"

"It can be anyone. Ultimately, we don't know the answer in the current situation, so there's no point fretting over it."

"....."

This was a very unsatisfying answer, but if they weren't going to learn the exact person, then this was clearly the best.

"All right, we'll go with that."

Llenn reached out for a piece of the massive pizza that was now resting on the table, piled high with anchovies.

The End

SPECIAL AFTERWORD PIECE

EXP

Amid the red sand of *GGO*'s desert wastes, two small players lounged on their backs.

"Hey, Llenn."

"What, Fuka?"

"I'm bored."

"Me too."

"That's the thirty-fourth time you've responded that way."

"Because it's the same number of times you said what you did."

"Close. I said mine thirty-five times. One time, you didn't say anything. What happened? Were you thinking about daikon pulling?"

"Why would I? Also, Fuka, I found out that daikon pulling is totally just a local Hokkaido thing. None of the kids down here have even heard of that game before."

"Yeah, I know. I was talking with a foreign exchange student from Honshu, and she was totally baffled when I mentioned it."

"She's not a foreign exchange student if she came from Japan. Hokkaido hasn't declared independence."

"So were you thinking about daikon pulling?"

"No! All I was thinking was that it's very boring to be waiting around like this."

"Hey, Llenn. Is there really a special enemy who drops super-rare items around here? You didn't get tricked by another no-good man, did you? I'm worried about you, daughter!"

“You’re not my mom. This info came from Pito, so I’m pretty sure it’s solid. Pretty sure...”

“Fine, then.”

“That satisfies you?”

“I will believe anything Lady Elza says, unconditionally. It is my path to salvation.”

“Don’t go starting a cult.”

“Wicked heretic! Disbeliever in Our Lady Elza! Begone from this place!”

“Knock it off, I said. We can’t be relying on M and everyone else all the time.”

“Yeah, that’s true. We gotta be able to earn enough money for ourselves...”

“Yes, exactly.”

“...and once we’re independently wealthy, *then* we can milk the rich for their money.”

“Not so fast.”

“No, I’m going to speak my mind. In real-world terms, how much money do you think we’ve sunk into our goddess Lady Elza?”

“Huh? Um... a lot...”

“Right? So we’ve earned a little return on our investment.”

“What do you mean, ‘earned’?”

“Anyway, let’s just focus on killing any enemies who show up.”

“That’s the problem: There aren’t any...”

“Still, you’ve changed, Llenn.”

“Huh? Have I gotten smaller?”

"Nope. I take that back. Llenn hasn't changed; Kohi has. Karen Kohiruimaki has changed."

"Well? Have I gotten smaller?"

"Nope. Forget about your height; that's a lost cause. No—what I mean is, in all ways, you've gotten so, so, so much more proactive than you used to be. Your personality's brighter. You just don't seem to have noticed."

"R-really...?"

"The old Kohi was like shyness itself, dressed up in clothes. You never ever reached out to interact with anyone before, did you? That's *Gun Gale Online* for you. The ol' Geeg..."

"Hmm. You really think I've changed that much? Really...?"

"Yes, you've obviously changed! You're a different person! Who the hell are you?! Give back the nice, reserved old Kohi! Give her back right now!"

"Huh? No! I won't!"

"Damn you, impostor! Prepare for eternal judgment!"

"Oh? You're gonna draw your pistol on me...? That you can't hit anything with?"

"We got a fifty-fifty chance at this distance. Bring it on! I'll destroy you and feed you to my weapon for EXP!"

"Heh, I was just getting exhausted waiting for enemies to show up... P-chan's been dying for EXP, too... Execution Points!"

"You really have changed... Show me, then! Let's have a true women's duel!"

"Hey, M, do you think that's Llenn and Fuka going crazy over there?"

"That seems to be the case. Couldn't begin to guess why, though."

“Did they have a falling out?”

“It seems like they’re enjoying themselves, though.”

“Did they start a fight to the death out of boredom? I want to let them know that no enemies are going to spawn in that spot anymore, but I’d hate to interrupt their fun. Let’s leave them be for now.”

The End

I've always drawn my black-and-white interior illustrations without grays or screentones, so when it's time to draw camo patterns, it's a whole lot of extra work.



At the end of the battle, everyone looks like this, so I wanted to draw a much cuter Saki.



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