

SWORD ART Online Gun Gale Ring III

024

REKI

KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY abec

SWORD ART ONLINE
ソードアート・オンライン









 **Mutasina**

Leader of the Virtual Study Society, a group of players trying to conquer *Unital Ring*.

 **Argo**

A talented info dealer and former beta tester of SAO, commonly known as Argo the Rat. In the real world, she's a new transfer to the returnee school Kirito and Asuna attend.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"Kiri-boy, we gotta go!"

"What's this?
A magic circle...?"



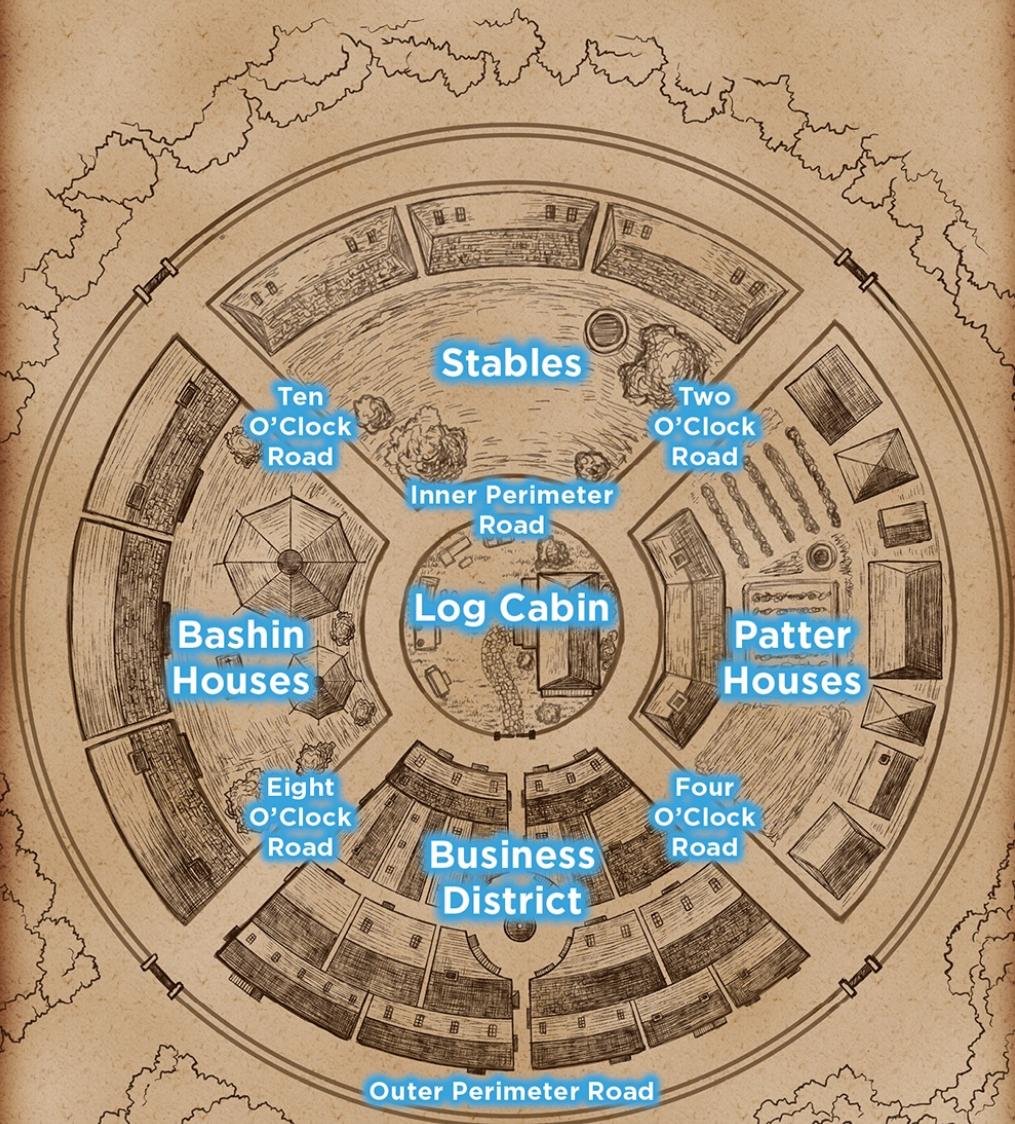
"I am E.. Pardon me.
I am Integrity Pilot
Commander Eolyne
Herlentz. It's nice to
meet you, Kirito."

Eolyne

Leader of the Integrity
Pilots, the pinnacle of the
Underworld's military. His mask
is apparently meant to protect
his skin from the light of Solus,
but is that true...?

".....Eu....."

RUIS NA RÍG



A small town created by Kirito and his friends to serve as their adventuring base in the world of *Unital Ring*. Known by the nickname of Krito Town. Kirito and Asuna's log cabin is at the center, with a circular wall about sixty yards in diameter around it and four quadrants surrounding the cabin to the north, south, east, and west.



Illustration: Reki Kawahara



VOLUME 24

Reki Kawahara

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bee-pee



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REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Stephen Paul
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**"THIS MIGHT BE A GAME,
BUT IT'S NOT SOMETHING
YOU PLAY."**

—Akihiko Kayaba, *Sword Art Online* programmer



Reki Kawahara

abec

bee-pee



1

"I believe you already know me quite well. At last we meet, Chrysheight."

Argo the Rat put on a cocky smile, leaving both me and Seijirou Kikuoka with our mouths hanging open.

Chrysheight was the name of the character Kikuoka used when he played *ALfheim Online*. *Chrys* came from *chrysanthemum*, the English name of the flower *kiku* in his name, while *height* was meant to conjure the *hill* meaning of the other kanji, *oka*.

His fairy race was undine, and his player class was mage. His memorization of the many Spellwords of the game was extremely helpful during boss fights, but he very rarely logged in, so few ALO players even knew his name.

What connection would Chrysheight have with Argo, who didn't even play ALO? And before that, how did Argo know the two men were one and the same? Plus, how did she sniff out that the person I was meeting at this fancy Ginza café was Kikuoka...?

As I was buffeted with wave upon wave of questions, I could only look to the two of them, searching for answers.

"...I see, so it was *you* that one time..." Kikuoka muttered to himself once he had recovered from the shock.

What time is that?! I screamed on the inside. Argo and Kikuoka seemed to be undergoing some kind of battle of wills, and neither wanted to explain the situation to me.

Fine, then. I'll just eat my cake. I sulked, flipping through the menu and deciding on what I wanted to order within ten seconds or so.

As if by telepathy, the waiter showed up at our table and asked, “Have you decided on what you’d like?”

“I’ll have a cheesecake with chestnut sauce and a piping hot cappuccino,” I ordered without tripping over my tongue—the cake was 1,900 yen and the coffee was 1,200, both eye-popping prices—and sent the menu over to Argo. “This friendly gentleman is paying, so order whatever you like.”

“Aw, really? You’re not gonna foot the bill for me, Kiri-boy?” she teased, then proceeded to flip through the menu. She did not seem intimidated by the prices. “I’ll have this month’s special cake and a royal milk tea, hot,” she said. The waiter bowed and left.

I grabbed the menu and, despite knowing it was improper, mentally added up the cost of Argo’s order, then combined it with mine. The cake and tea were 3,500 yen, which made our orders 6,600 yen in total. She might have followed me on her own, but it was my fault she was here. I was resigning myself to whatever horrible task Kikuoka might ask of me in return, knowing I couldn’t say no.

But then Kikuoka said, “Well...I needed to get in contact with you again anyway, Argo, so...”

He scooped a piece of the pear parfait in front of him with its long, thin spoon and lifted it to his mouth. At last, my patience was gone, and I had to ask:

“So how do you two know each other?”

“We’re client and investigator,” answered Argo.

“Which one’s which?” I asked.

“Do you even hafta ask? This fella’s the client.”

I looked over the table at Kikuoka. “What did you ask her to do...?”

“You know a public servant isn’t supposed to talk about their official duties,” he obfuscated.

“But you’re a fake government agent.”

“Well, that’s just rude...but to tell you the truth, it’s not worth hiding from you anyway, Kirito,” he admitted, then lowered his voice to a whisper. “You know the company Kamura, right?”

“Kamura...the developer of the Augma?”

"Yes. We've got info that they're doing something fishy with a VRMMO world, which is why I hired her."

"Fishy...? I hope it's not something like the *Ordinal Scale* incident all over again," I said, scowling.

Kikuoka raised his hands in supplication. "No, I wouldn't ask Argo to handle something as dangerous as that. Besides, I hired her before *Ordinal Scale*. It's just about a game that obviously has no profitability—in fact, it's *certainly* losing them tons of money—and is getting almost no publicity, either."

"Hmm..."

"Based on Argo's reports, I haven't seen any evidence that might link to criminal activity. She's just as good at her job as the stories say...but I didn't expect her to track me down in real life like this, too."

"Why? Did you skip out on your payment?"

"Not at all. I paid her exactly what she invoiced me for. I just haven't yet been able to provide her with an extra line item she asked for as a bonus," he said, gesturing awkwardly.

Argo grumbled, "For me, what you call a 'bonus' was the main prize. That's why I came to you in person, to try to jolt ya into action so I could collect."

"I'm sorry about that. But how did you figure out that Chrysheight was me? I only met you once in ALO half a year ago."

Half a year ago would have been late March 2026. Kamura put out the Augma in April, so it was just before that. What could this VR game, surreptitiously operated by a company that specialized in AR devices, be? I had to resist the urge to interrupt and ask.

Argo unfolded her hands and spread them over the table. "I didn't pin down yer real name or anything like that. I just did some research in ALO and found out real quick that Chrysheight was a friend of Kirito's. Today, Kiri-boy said he was ditching class because he got summoned by some creepy old guy, and that's how I knew."

I sighed and said, "Oh, come on, Argo, nobody's intuition is *that* good."

Kikuoka, too, seemed disgruntled by her insinuation. "'Creepy old guy' is rather rude. I happen to consider myself a very diligent man in

the prime of his life.”

Argo glanced at me first and joked, “I survived through SAO on good intuition alone, remember?” Then she looked at Kikuoka and stated, “You’ve never struck me as anything other than a creepy old guy.”

The first comment was too modest by half, while the latter comment was undeniable, I thought. But before I could deliver that incisive feedback, our pieces of cake arrived at the table.

The baked cheesecake had a nice golden color to it, and the light-brown chestnut sauce drizzled over the top shone in the light. I didn’t even have that big of a sweet tooth, but I had to pause the conversation and pick up my fork. The first bite was smooth on my tongue and rich in flavor, and a splash of bitter cappuccino washed it away to reset my palate.

Argo’s cake, the monthly special, was an apple mille-feuille, which also looked quite good, I noticed. Once we had both finished half our dishes, her plate slid over toward me.

“Let’s trade now, Kiri-boy.”

“...I see no reason to refuse,” I said, despite a brief hesitation, and pushed my cheesecake to the left. The only reason for my hesitation was the smirk Kikuoka was giving us. I’d have to reassure him at some point hence that Argo was nothing more than an old battle companion, I thought as I tasted the mille-feuille. Between the light, crispy layers of fragrant piecrust, there was plenty of fruity apple preserve and a mildly sweet custard cream. It, too, was very good. Including the drinks, it all really was worth 6,600 yen...if you had that kind of money to spend.





Kikuoka finished his parfait right as we two starving teenagers emptied our plates.

"I must say, the sweets at this place really are highly satisfying. I could only dream of this place while I was out there on the Pacific," he said, referring to the *Ocean Turtle* while it'd been out at sea off the Izu Islands. They may not have had deluxe desserts there, but Asuna had claimed that the mess hall on board was actually quite good. Sadly, I'd been unconscious the entire time, so I'd never gotten the chance to try it.

Regardless of my own reflections on the matter, Kikuoka pressed ahead and said, "Strangely enough, in my dreams, I was always with you, Kirito. Even though we'd only been to this place together twice in reality."

"...I have no idea how to respond to that," I stated.

Kikuoka replied cryptically, "That response is enough," and drained the rest of his coffee. Then he glanced at the diver's watch on his wrist, assuming a serious look. "So. Before I get to the real reason you're here...may I assume that you're going to be a member of Kirito's army, too, Argo?"

"H-hey...I don't recall ever starting an army!"

"Then call it Team Kirito, or Kirito and His Band of Merry Companions. My question is, will she be fighting on your side if there's any trouble?"

"...Well?" I wondered, passing the baton to the young woman at my side.

Argo's shoulders bobbed. "Mmm, well, I guess I'd say my plan is to join the Kiri-boy army in *Unital Ring*. Outside of that, I'm considerin' my options in other VR worlds..."

"Yeah, but pretty much all of them have been absorbed into *UR*, haven't they?"

"There are still VR worlds that don't belong to The Seed Nexus, kiddo," she said with a smirk. Then she turned to Kikuoka. "So tell me, Chrysheight. Did you call up Kiri-boy to talk about a world that isn't hooked up to the Nexus?"

"Huh...? *Did* you?" I asked, looking at Kikuoka. Up to this moment, I'd just assumed his business was related to the ongoing

UR incident. But—no. Upon reflection, I recalled that Alice sent me his message (*The twenty-ninth, at fifteen o'clock. The expensive cake shop.*) before New Aincrad came crashing to the ground. So this whole thing hadn't blown up yet when Kikuoka had first tried to make contact with me.

Argo and I stared holes in Kikuoka's face. He pushed up the bridge of his black-framed glasses and murmured, "Yes, that is true. What I want to speak to you about today—what I want to ask you to do—has no direct relation to this *Unital Ring* business. I'll be up front with you, because we don't have all day: Kirito, will you dive into the Underworld again?"

"....."

All I could do was stare. The winter sunlight coming through the south-facing window reflected off his glasses, so I couldn't make out his expression. I could feel my palms getting hotter.

"That sounds...great," I said, my voice hoarse. "But why would you say that to me in person? Surely you could just tell Dr. Koujiro to pass the message along."

"Actually, Dr. Koujiro was against getting you involved again. She told me that if I wanted to rope you in, I was welcome to go and explain it to you myself."

"Ah..."

That did make sense. For the last month, every time I mentioned wanting to visit the Underworld again, Dr. Rinko Koujiro would say nothing more than, "We're assessing the situation." She wasn't being mean, of course, just keeping my personal well-being in mind. However, diving from The Soul Translator in Rath's Roppongi branch office wouldn't cause my physical body any harm, and inside the Underworld...Well, it was an arrogant way to describe it, but there was nothing there that could threaten me anymore.

"...I see. So what is it that you want me to dive in and do?"

Kikuoka glanced around us. It was afternoon on a weekday, so there wasn't much of a crowd at all. Every adjacent table was empty. There couldn't be anyone listening in, but he lowered his voice even more until it was barely audible.

"Someone has broken into the Underworld somehow."

"...!" My eyes went wide. I whispered back, "Broken in...? What do you mean?! Who did?! When?!"

"Hold on, hold on," he replied, lifting his hands. He glanced at Argo. "How much do you know about the Underworld, by the way...?"

"It pains me to admit, as an info dealer, but I don't know any more than what the mainstream media reports on it."

"So you know the Underworld is contained on the *Ocean Turtle*, and the *Ocean Turtle* is on lockdown at sea near Hachijojima."

"Yeah, but I don't really know whatcha mean by 'on lockdown,' specifically."

"Exactly what it sounds like. There's a guard ship from the Maritime SDF and a patrol ship from the coast guard keeping watch twenty-four hours a day so that no one gets close. Remember how the media boat tried to push past the blockade, and the patrol ship had to fire warning shots to scare them off?"

"Yeah, I remember that piece of news. Welp, it's about what I expected," Argo admitted.

Kikuoka looked back to me. "When I said that someone broke in, I'm not talking about someone physically sneaking onto the *Ocean Turtle*, of course. A week ago, we found traces of someone diving into the Underworld who wasn't from Rath."

"Diving..." I murmured.

The Underworld was built on a special kind of data structure called Mnemonic Visuals, which meant it couldn't be accessed except with The Soul Translators on the *Ocean Turtle* or in Rath's Roppongi office. At least, that was my assumption when I started working with them. But it wasn't that simple.

In fact, the Underworld's mnemonic visuals, which were just as realistic as images in the real world, existed in parallel with a more traditional polygonal-model style, using the Seed program. You had to use an STL to get the high-fidelity experience, but you could still access the Underworld with an AmuSphere, if you wanted an experience that was on par with SAO and ALO. At the climax of the Otherworld War, thousands of VRMMO players from Japan, America, Korea, and China dived into the Underworld for a ferocious

battle. Meaning that, strictly speaking, you needed only an AmuSphere to enter the Underworld.

“But...how did they get in? The only way to dive into the Underworld now is through that server in Iceland whose IP address got sent to me...I mean, to Alice. Right?”

“Yes, the satellite connection Rath used has been blocked on the government’s orders. Presumably, that means the infiltrator must be using the same route...”

“.....”

I stared at the plate dotted with flecks of mille-feuille and thought very hard about this.

My suspicion was that the IP address to reach the Underworld came to us from a kind of digital ghost of Akihiko Kayaba. He’d been lurking within Niemon, a humanoid robotic body, watching Project Alicization play out, until he’d ultimately charged into the containment chamber of the nuclear reactor to save the *Ocean Turtle* from a water vapor explosion. Nothing more than an oil slick was ever found of Niemon after that, however. If Kayaba had set up some kind of communication device on the *Ocean Turtle* as Niemon’s last act, then perhaps the infiltrator had also gotten the server address from Kayaba—if it wasn’t just Kayaba himself.

“...Mr. Kikuoka, how did you learn that someone outside of Rath had reached the Underworld? Real-time monitoring from Roppongi isn’t possible, is it?” I asked.

He frowned, nodding. “That’s correct. Fortunately, I’m able to at least see an access log from the gateway server on the *Ocean Turtle*, thanks to that special exterior server. The log saves all access from the outside.”

“From the outside...?”

“The Seed Nexus’s Japan node. Meaning that someone converted their own character into the Underworld.”

Thirty minutes later, Kikuoka finished paying the bill, over 10,000 yen with tax included—in cash, for some reason—then told me he would contact me again tonight, and vanished into the bustle of Ginza.

After his suit was out of view, I stayed there on the sidewalk, thinking. There was so much to consider that I felt like just tilting my head would cause excess information to spill from my ear.

The *UR* incident was still ongoing.

A week ago, there was an unexpected access to the Underworld.

And the suspicious activities at Kamura, which is how Kikuoka and Argo came to work together...

I looked over at Argo, who had her hands stuck into the pockets of her jacket and was currently cracking her neck.

"That pastry was real good, but places like that make my shoulders stiff, I tell ya."

"...No arguments here," I murmured, taking a step closer to her. "But what were you doing here in the first place? You didn't even talk about your payment or whatever it was."

"It's not the kind of thing he can just produce with the snap of his fingers. I'm not in a rush about it, either."

"...What did you ask him for?"

"Mmm...well, I guess I can tell ya for free. It's real-world details about an SAO survivor."

"A survivor...? Y-you mean, when you took the job...you knew Kikuoka—I mean, Chrysheight—was in the line of work that could tell you?"

"He introduced himself as being part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications' Virtual Division."

"Oh, that would explain it...So...would that be someone I know...?" I asked, not sure if I should.

A frail smirk tugged at one of Argo's cheeks. "Can't tell ya *that* much. It's just...personal info."

"Ahhh..."

Of course, Argo had been through her own experiences during those two years. I wasn't going to pry into her past. I exhaled, trying to switch gears, and looked at the sky. At some point, dark-gray clouds had covered half the sky, an ominous echo of my state of mind.

Argo followed my gaze and said helpfully, "Chance of rain downtown after six o'clock was seventy percent."

"Whoa, really...? What about Kawagoe?" I asked without thinking.

"You can look that up yerself," she said with exasperation. "But since I'm so nice...I'll look it up for ya."

She pulled her smartphone out of her pocket and tapped at it a few times, then grinned.

"Well, here we go. Kawagoe at six o'clock...eighty percent chance."

"...Thanks."

I had a small folding umbrella in the side pocket of my messenger bag, but I couldn't use that while riding my bike, so if the rain was really coming down by the time I got back to Kawagoe, I'd have to walk the last mile home on foot. If I had full rain gear, I could just blaze my way through it on the bike, but I was warned about the dangers of riding at night in the rain by my mom...and Suguha, and Asuna, and Yui. They'd worried about me doing that on many occasions, so I had to hear them out this time.

If I got onto the subway right now, I might get back to Honkawagoe Station before the rain started, but I had one other important mission left. Mentally preparing myself for that mile-long walk in the rain, I started to say my good-byes but changed my mind.

"Ummm...Argo, there's something else I'd like to know..."

Her smirk turned into a comically exaggerated frown. "I'm gonna start chargin' ya now."

"Go right ahead."

"...All right. What is it?"

"For example...let's say Asuna's birthday is coming up. What would *you* give her?"

Her mouth fell open. A moment later, a long, long sigh escaped it.

".....Listen, Kiri-boy, that ain't an example. A-chan's birthday is tomorrow. You don't have a present for her yet?"

"Wait...you know Asuna's birthday is September 30th?"

"I've known her a long time, too, ya know. Today was just the first time we met in real life."

"Yeah...that's true, I guess..."

Asuna and I had gotten married in Aincrad, but even then, we'd hardly ever traded any real-world information. It wasn't until the

floating castle crumbled into ruin that we ever admitted our real names and ages to each other. But Argo, true to her inquisitive nature, had somehow learned Asuna's birthday when I hadn't yet.

"...Okay, so it's not an example. Straight up: What do you think Asuna would like?" I asked again. Argo prodded my upper arm.

"Kiri-boy, the fact that you make the effort ta pick it out is part of the present. Besides, you oughtta know more about A-chan than I do."

"Yeah, I know. Yui said that, too...And I get it, but..."

I exhaled, looking up at the encroaching clouds. They seemed ready to open up at any moment.

"Lately, I find myself thinking...What if everything I know about Asuna is from the virtual Asuna, and in fact, I hardly know a thing about the real Asuna? And...not just Asuna. I'm talking about Liz and Silica and Sinon and Agil and Klein...Maybe I'm not even seeing eye to eye with my sister, Leafa, except through the virtual world...", I said, finishing in a mumble. Then I smiled awkwardly. "I know, you didn't come here after two years just to hear me complain about things. I'll come up with a present for Asuna. Sorry to keep you here...You going back to Kanagawa now?"

"Nah, I can't commute from the southwest part of Kanagawa all the way to West Tokyo every day. I got an apartment close to the school." Argo cleared her throat. "Well, I ain't really in any position to give advice to other people about their relationships...but as thanks for that expensive cake, I'll give ya one piece of advice."

"...For free?"

"For free. Listen, Kiri-boy, yer thinkin' too hard. Real, virtual—it's still the same person on the inside. There's no point to treating 'em like separate things."

"....."

"What's with that look?"

"I was just thinking...you really *are* older and wiser than me..."

"I've always called myself Big Sis for a reason!" she scolded, jabbing me on the shoulder again. Then she hopped back a step. "And here's another one for free. A-chan's not gonna be happy if you go in over your head and buy some fancy brand item here in Ginza."

She waved her hand and said, "Welp, see ya tonight!" and with a swish of her khaki jacket, Argo vanished into the crowd, too.

I leaned back against the side of the building and exhaled, rethinking my previous plan to, as she called it, "go in over my head buying a fancy brand item in Ginza." I closed my eyes, shut out the roar of the city from my mind, and envisioned Asuna, as I'd known her, from the first day we'd met until today.

Asuna in the first-floor labyrinth tower, running herself ragged but dispatching monsters repeatedly with a sword skill as pure and speedy as a shooting star. Asuna as the vice commander of the Knights of the Blood, leading the group against a floor boss. Asuna dozing off in the rocking chair in our forest cottage on the twenty-second floor. Asuna at my bedside in the hospital in Tokorozawa, cradling the NerveGear she'd just taken off me, waiting.

Asuna dueling with Yuuki the Absolute Sword in New Aincrad after it was added to ALO. Asuna fighting at the forefront of the human army with a super-account in the Underworld. And Asuna leaning against my shoulder in the secret garden at returnee school...

In the nearly four years since I'd met her, Asuna had always been there for me, supporting me. There was no doubt that I'd received so much more from Asuna than I'd really given her. And after all that, how many times had I ever really put into words the gratitude I felt toward her...?

"Ah, geez..."

I sighed again, feeling inadequate once more. Whatever I gave her for a present, the one thing I needed to do for sure was put my feelings into words for her, I knew.

With that oath in mind, I headed for the subway station.

2

I finished my shopping in Ikebukuro, then got on the Tobu-Tojo Line express for thirty-two minutes. The street at the west entrance rotary at Kawagoe Station was still dry. According to the weather app, I had about ten minutes before it started raining. In a hurry, I ran to the public bicycle lot and pulled out my ride.

The quickest route from the station to my house was through the Little Edo old town area. There was always traffic there, but after the road expansion five or six years ago, they'd added a bicycle lane that made passage easier for cyclists like me. I pedaled as hard as I could, feeling the rain clouds looming from the south, and turned right once I was through Little Edo. As soon as I reached my home near the large shrine, large drops started to fall. I parked my mountain bike under the roof and used my waterproof bag to block the rain as I hopped through the front door.

I didn't even have time to announce my presence before Suguha, waiting on top of the step in her tracksuit, shouted, "Welcome back, Big Brother! You're late, by the way!"

"I can't help that. I have twice the commute time you do..." I started to say before suddenly feeling *déjà vu*. "Wait...didn't we have this conversation yesterday?"

"We did," Suguha agreed, confirming my suspicions.

I'm not stuck in a daily loop, am I? I wondered as she handed me the same towel she had the day before. I took it gratefully, wiping off the sweat and raindrops on my skin.

"So, uh, I'm guessing you need me to dive in as soon as I can again today...?"

"Obviously! We can't decide what to do with Krito Town unless you're there."

“Hold on...since when was that its name?!”

“Everyone calls it that now. C’mon, get to your room...Hey, what did you buy? Fancy treats?” she asked, noticing the bag with the department store logo on it in my hand. It *did* look like it would contain expensive sweets, but this was unfortunately filled with something else.

“No, um, it’s, uh...,” I mumbled, which was all Suguha needed to figure it out.

“Ohhh, okay, I get it. Wait...you bought that *today*?! That’s cutting it way too close, mister!!”

“That’s just evidence of how long I spent thinking about it... Anyway, you’re going in, too, right? Dive from your own room this time.”

“Fine, fine. There are some onigiri in the kitchen,” she said with a grin, then trotted up the stairs. I headed for the kitchen, making a mental note to get Suguha’s birthday present early next year.

Up in my room, I changed into more comfortable clothes, ate the salmon and cod roe *onigiri* Suguha made for me, then took care of my bathroom needs before I went to lie down on the bed and put on my AmuSphere.

Three days had already passed since the *UR* incident began, but the mysteries only grew deeper, rather than resolving themselves. Opinions were flying fast and furious on social media and message boards, but none of them were outside the realm of speculation, Argo told me while on the way to Ginza. All we knew for sure was that no player had yet reached the “land revealed by the heavenly light.”

We wanted to get there, too, of course, but our chances of being first were extremely low. Most of our group was made of students and adults who couldn’t stay logged in from morning until night every day. We still had the advantage of our entire home falling to a spot fifteen miles past the Stiss Ruins, the official starting point for all *ALO* converts. That meant we had to be further along than anyone from *ALO*, but within a week, we’d be overtaken by all the hard-core

gamers who could dive all day long. We'd already been attacked by PKers the last two nights. If they'd had gear and levels equal to ours, we would have been wiped out.

But that didn't mean we had the option of ditching school. I just had to fulfill my school duties to a respectable degree and play my best in the meantime. I dimmed the room lights, closed my eyes, and said, "Link Start."

The rainbow array of light that ensued erased the gravity holding me to my bed and sent my mind soaring into the virtual world.

When gravity returned, I opened my eyes. I saw a familiar log cabin ceiling...and sighed with relief. I'd been worried about a possible third attack while I was at school, but my home was safe for now. Of course, I had means of receiving communication from Alice or Yui during the day, so if there had been an attack, they would have let me know, and I'd have bolted right out of the classroom for the nurse's office so I could full-dive with an Augma. Obviously, though, I wanted to avoid doing that if possible.

I sat up, causing my now-familiar metal armor to clank as I looked around the cabin's living room. When I logged out this morning, the cabin was packed with all the friends who'd met up with us, but it was empty now, even though Leafa had dived in barely minutes before me.

"...Hey, Sugu...I mean, Leafa, are you here?" I called out, walking to the front door and opening the thick slab of wood.

Outside was our circular yard, surrounded by tall stone walls and measuring sixty yards in diameter, with an area of roughly 1,950 square feet. A number of large production stations were placed along the wall. The interior here was empty, too. Not only were Yui and Alice not here, but even the trio of guardians were nowhere in sight: Aga, the long-billed giant agamid; Kuro, the lapispine dark panther; and Misha, the thornspike cave bear.

I was starting to get worried. Again, I called out, "Hello...? Anybody...?"

But my voice just vanished into the crimson sunset. Everyone had made sure to register one another as friends before logging out this morning, so if I opened my ring menu, I could send a message to

any of them, but the eeriness of this experience gave me a primordial fear that I might find my friends list empty, too, and I didn't want to lift my hand to open it.

I stepped off the porch and onto the ground, walking diagonally across the lawn to the south gate. During the invasion last night, Asuna, Alice, and Silica had fought with their lives to defend this wooden gate. I carefully pushed it open.

Yesterday, there had been deep forest all around the cabin, but it had changed dramatically. After the invaders burned the trees, our group had taken advantage of the carnage and used the wood to build a bunch of houses. The diameter of what Suguha called Krito Town—surely impossible to rename now—was now two hundred feet. It was split into north, south, east, and west quadrants by intersecting X streets. The south area directly ahead of me was intended to be a business district, but not a single shop had opened yet, so it felt like a ghost town. The road that surrounded the log cabin's circular wall, which we called Inner Perimeter Road, branched off into Four O'Clock Road and Eight O'Clock Road to the southeast and southwest, respectively. But there was no one in any of those directions, either.

I sucked a deep breath into virtual lungs, intending to call for someone as loud as I could this time—but I held it instead after hearing what sounded like the faint sound of a child laughing.

A nasty sensation trickled down my spine. There couldn't be any children here. So was it...a ghost? Did our town being so empty summon ghost-type monsters into it?

I let out my breath quietly, listening. This time, I definitely heard high-pitched laughter. It wasn't my mind playing tricks on me. The voice was coming from the east.

I brought up my ring menu and equipped my fine iron longsword, then walked east alongside the stone wall surrounding the log cabin. A large wooden building soon appeared on the right-hand side.

The east area was the residential space for the Patter, the ratpeople NPCs Sinon had brought with her last night. The fan-shaped area had a large meeting hall at the tip, which is what I was looking at now. The middle of the area was empty space for planting

crops, while the outer edge was lined with compact homes.

There was another frolicking cry. It was not from the meeting hall...but the empty space on the other side. Envisioning some horror of invading ghosts wiping out the twenty Patter, I snuck down Four O'Clock Road. It wasn't paved yet, so my iron-plated boots didn't make much noise. I advanced along the wall of the meeting hall, then peered around the side.

And the sound that came out of my mouth was, "Weh?"

The empty space in the middle, which was split up like layers of a cake, had been naked earth just this morning. But already the northern half was tilled into rows, where the Patter tended to something that looked like corn plants. The southern half, which was still empty, featured Leafa, Silica, Alice, Asuna, and Yui, all in a row, watching over a massive four-legged guardian: Misha, the thornspike cave bear. But actually, it wasn't the bear they were all watching and smiling at but five young Patter who were lined up astride Misha's back.

Compared to their adults, the Patter children had shorter snouts and smaller ears. They squealed with delight for every plodding step from the bear. They were no bigger than infants in human terms, so if the ten-foot-long Misha wanted to eat them in one bite, it could... but there was one other thing more concerning now.

"...Hey, did those kids...?" I whispered into Leafa's ear, but my sister just turned and shouted, "Oh, you're finally here!"

That caused Asuna and the others to notice me and say hello. I gave them an automatic "Hey" and tried to ask my question again. "Did those little rats...er, little Patter come from somewhere? The party was all adults when we left that dungeon in the Giyoru Savanna, right?"

Leafa, Silica, and Asuna looked away awkwardly, so Alice said in a tone of bafflement, "It would seem they were born last night."

"B-born?!" I repeated, looking at Misha's back again. The five cavorting children were as tiny as beans on the gigantic bear, but they did *not* look like newborn babies.

"Was someone among the Patter pregnant...? And even then, they look pretty big for half a day."

This time, it was Yui who explained. “Papa, I have been with the Patter all day long. The children appeared all at once at about nine o’clock this morning. The Patter seemed to understand they would be appearing and had beds laid out for them ahead of time. When they appeared, all five were about this big...”

She held out her hands to indicate a space the size of a melon.

“They were only small children, and they have grown to what you see now in the last nine hours. They can even speak, although it’s just individual words.”

“Wowww...”

It was all I could say. Five babies were born overnight and grew this much in half a day. The town was going to be overrun with Patter within a week at this rate.

Yui sensed my concerns and explained, “Based on extrapolation from my limited data set, NPCs in the world of *Unital Ring* seem to expand and contract in number based on their living space and environment. The capacity of the homes you built for the Patter was greater than twenty, so perhaps the babies appeared to match the number that would expect to live in this much space.”

“Ahhh...so that’s what it means,” Asuna murmured. “I was shocked by all the kids when I logged in—and even more shocked when you told me they were born this morning. But no matter how advanced a virtual world *Unital Ring* is, they’re not going to model, you know...the reproductive cycle in such realistic detail.”

Without missing a beat, Alice added, “The Underworld worked essentially the same way as the real world.”

Neither Asuna, Silica, nor Leafa could say anything to that, leaving me to touch that hot iron poker.

“W-well, the Underworld was a very special exception to the rule...”

But then I recalled that there was another notable exception: *Sword Art Online*. If you dug extremely deep into the settings menu and disabled the moral code setting, it was possible to perform The Deed. You couldn’t have a baby—as far as I knew. But why would Akihiko Kayaba have put a system like that in his game in the first place?

The Seed Package didn't contain that function, so I assumed the same would be true of *Unital Ring*. Unless...

"They might not re-create all the steps, but given that this game has such a detailed sense of world-building, if an NPC can have children, maybe players can, too," I murmured mostly to myself and mostly without thinking.

"Of course you can't have babies!!" yelled Leafa, slapping my back with great force. It didn't hurt, but I cried "Ow!" anyway.

"Wh-what was that for?"

"For being weird, Kirito! If players have a baby, who's going to be the baby?!"

"W-well...I figured it'd be like an NPC, so an AI—"

But I couldn't finish that sentence. A sudden pain like silver sparks shot through the center of my head, knocking me clean off my feet.

"Ah....."

I lurched and wobbled; Alice quickly grabbed my right arm to hold me up. Leafa leaned close and examined my face.

"Wh-what's the matter, Big Brother?"

"I dunno...I'm fine. Just a bit of a headache."





Silica sounded worried, however. "Kirito, you haven't been getting enough sleep. Shouldn't you log off early tonight?"

Atop her head, the tiny dragon Pina trilled, "Kyurrrr..."

"N-no, I'm fine. I feel normal now," I claimed.

As a matter of fact, the pain lasted for only an instant. I shook my head as hard as I could—not that virtual movements had any effect on my actual brain—and didn't feel a thing. I looked around, wondering what had come over me, and met Asuna's eyes. Her expression seemed empty. Her hazel-brown eyes were looking in my direction but tunneling straight through me into the distance beyond.

"...Asuna?" I said quietly.

She blinked rapidly, and her eyes regained focus. "Oh...I'm sorry. I was spacing out there."

"Everyone's short on sleep, huh? Maybe tonight, we should let folks log out early if they need to."

"Good idea. That goes for you, too, Kirito."

"Got it," I replied, although I had absolutely no intention of going to sleep early. My instincts were telling me that tonight, the third day in the game, would mean the difference between our town surviving or not—and the life and death of our group.

In the center of the square, Misha continued to walk in a slow circle, the baby ratmen screaming and laughing on their backs. If it took half a day for them to go from infants to children, would they become adults within a few more days or would they stay in this growth state for now? Either way, we had to protect this town to keep those kids alive, too.

"So...where are Kuro and Aga?" I asked, thinking of our two other pets.

Silica glanced to the southwest and answered, "Liz and Sinon took them to collect stones from the riverside. We would have sent Misha, too, but we couldn't bring ourselves to end the fun for the children..."

"Ah, I see."

In the world of *Unital Ring*, pets would obey orders from registered friends of their owner, to an extent.

"Maybe I should go and help, too," I murmured. Asuna, Leafa,

Alice, and Yui all chimed in to agree. We left Silica, Misha's owner, in charge of the situation here, then headed for the southwest gate of the town.

But no sooner had we walked a few yards west along the inner perimeter than more footsteps approached. Lisbeth and Sinon appeared from Eight O'Clock Road, followed by Kuro and Aga. Both animals had cargo bags on their backs, likely fashioned by Asuna.

"Hey, guys," I hailed. Lisbeth replied with a hearty "Heya!" but Sinon was looking downward, deep in thought. I scratched Kuro's neck when it approached and asked the gunner, "Something wrong, Sinon?"

"Huh...? Oh yeah, it's just..."

Sinon came to a stop and looked around at the group.

"I was thinking about how it's nice that we have ample resources around Kirito Town," she said, "but it seems likely that anyone attacking us will find them useful as well."

"Uh...what do you mean?"

"Here's an example. If the Carpentry skill lists things in the menu like a catapult and a battering ram, then you could use the stones at the river and wood from the forest to build as many as you want, right? And you don't even need to go that far. They can already build pillboxes to serve as their offensive base..."

"Pillboxes," I repeated, glancing at the others.

In my ignorant understanding, a pillbox was a structure that came with some heavy armaments capable of automatic fire. The musket Sinon was carrying now wasn't going to be punching holes in our town walls, and you could easily approach while she was reloading it. Why the concern?

"Oh!" I exclaimed, finally understanding. "Other GGO players are going to have brought in huge machine guns and stuff like that, huh?"

"Yes. Like my Hecate, I'm sure they're all too heavy for the players to use them, but eventually, they'll be able. We should be prepared with a plan before it comes to that."

"Hmmmm..."

At this moment, it was very hard to realistically imagine that

scenario. Catapults and battering rams were hard enough, but it was simply impossible to envision a series of stone-made pillboxes with heavy machine guns blasting out of them.

But that was a kind of battle Sinon had participated in many, many times in GGO, I was sure. Now that the Patter had moved into this town and had children, we couldn't just abandon them to their fate. We had a duty to anticipate all possible scenarios and prepare for them.

"...All right. I'm sure that if we put our heads together and think, we'll come up with a way to prevent enemies from using the resources outside against us. But the first thing we should discuss today is"—I paused, looking around at every other person present—"what to do about the name of the town."

"Huh? It's Kirito Town, isn't it?" Sinon replied.

Asuna and the others started to nod, so I thrust out my arms and protested, "No, no, no! If you call it that, it's only going to make us *more* likely to get attacked!"

"Oh, you're self-aware enough to know they're after you?" Lisbeth noted wryly. I had no response, and soon Leafa and Asuna began giggling. With a totally straight face, Alice said, "What were you doing in ALO and these other worlds?"

We went back to the log cabin and formed a circle in the living room, along with Silica, who'd been released from baby ratpeople duty. We were missing Asuna's favorite big table, so I wanted to make her a replacement soon, but for that, we'd need to find a tree with a trunk at least five feet across. Sadly, the spiral pines and other trees around here were two and a half feet at the largest, not nearly big enough to make a table that seated twelve.

Fortunately, the built-in oven in the kitchen was still here, and Lisbeth made us a pot with her Blacksmithing skill, so we could boil water. Asuna brought out the steaming pot and shook some black powder into it.

"...What's that, Asuna?" Lisbeth asked.

Asuna replied proudly, "While I was waiting around for you last

night, I picked a bunch of leaves in the forest, then tried dry roasting them in the pot. They turned into powder, and I got the Pharmaceutical skill. Anyway, I boiled half of them and turned them into liquid, and the rest turned into dyes.”

“Dyes...,” I repeated, then noticed something. When I had left for the Guyoru Savanna, Asuna’s hair had been light blue, as it was in Alfheim, but now it was back to a light-brown color, like she’d had during the Aincrad days.

“...You dyed your own hair?”

“You finally noticed,” she said, exasperated.

“How many other dyes did you make?” I asked to follow up.

“Ummm, there’s a darker brown, a deep red, and a dark gray, if I remember.”

“Hrmm...”

For an instant, I considered dyeing my hair, but none of them sounded right for me. Silica teased her own hair, which was a light-brown color like Asuna’s. “I’m guessing that bright colors and also pure black are probably rare dye colors. It would be a waste for you to change your hair color.”

“Hrrrrmm...,” I grumbled.

Meanwhile, Asuna set out enough homemade pottery cups for everyone, then scooped out the contents of the pot with a wooden ladle.

“I also managed to make a couple kinds of tea. These leaves were the ones that got the best response.”

“Only in comparison to the others,” noted Alice, who had probably been Asuna’s tester. Silica nodded vigorously.

The color of the liquid in the cups Asuna passed around was a dark blackish purple. I gave it a sniff; if you called it tea and gave it to me, I’d accept that it was tea. But if you called it medicine, I’d probably agree as well. That was the kind of complex scent that stimulated my nose. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous, but I couldn’t be rude and ignore Asuna’s hard work.

I took a hesitant sip and discovered a flavor that was similar to barley tea with red *shiso* extract. A leaf icon appeared to the right of my HP bar, indicating a Buff.

"...It's medicine!" I cried, and Alice and Silica nodded with intense agreement.

I was curious about the Buff effects, but it wasn't bad, so I sat back and enjoyed it, giving Asuna plenty of feedback and appreciation. In no time, it was seven o'clock, and Klein logged in, too. Agil was supposed to show up by ten; he ran a café and bar, so that was to be expected.

Once the meeting started, I first raised the topic of the town name. Sadly, none of us had the sense of creativity to overwrite a hit as big as Kirito Town, so that became homework for the group.

Our next topic was the plan to accept other NPCs after the Patter. The first candidates were the Bashin people, who were already friends with Silica, Lisbeth, and Yui and lived close by. The second candidates were the Orniths, the birdpeople Sinon had met. They would be helpful in our settlement because they had muskets, which were currently the most powerful of long-distance weapons, but their settlement was on the other side of the vast Giyoru Savanna. According to Sinon, on the other side of the giant wall (and the magic-wielding Goliath Rana inside it) were huge, powerful dinosaurs. So crossing the savanna to ask the Orniths was a life-threatening endeavor, and there was no guarantee they would be interested in moving.

That left the Bashin as the natural choice to reach out to first. Lisbeth nominated herself to do the negotiation. Yui and Asuna asked to accompany her, and I wanted to go, too, but there was another crucial mission for me already.

Our third topic for discussion was Sinon's worry about the bountiful resources nearby being used against us. Despite the variety of opinions shared, our conclusion was simply to stay more alert for attacks than before. We could expand our defensive stone walls and pave the interior in an attempt to leave no stone or wood left to gather, but an increase in defensive line size meant an astronomical leap in the strength needed to defend it, and harvesting those materials would be a huge undertaking. Plus, the reason for the town in the first place was to make players think twice about attacking us, so our priority should be to grow it into a real town,

rather than simply boosting our physical defenses. For that reason, we needed companions good at collecting information.

After the meeting, Silica, Misha, Sinon, Klein, and Alice were left behind to defend Krito Town, while I prepared to leave with Kuro for the Stiss Ruins, where I was scheduled to meet up with Argo.

But before I could leave the southwest gate, Alice came rushing up with a hooded cloak over her metal armor, saying, “I will go with you, Krito.” The cat ears she’d inherited from her ALO avatar fit right into little ear pockets sewn into the hood, which was very cute.

“Huh...? You’re coming, too? Why?”

“Surely I do not need a specific reason to want to leave and travel,” Alice said with a trace of a pout. She murmured, “Plus, I would like to speak with you.”

Based on the serious look on her face, I could imagine what it was about. And I certainly couldn’t refuse her for that.

“...All right,” I said. “But I’d better let someone know you’re coming with us...”

“I told Klein and Silica. He was smiling at me for some reason.”

“.....”

I made a mental note to send him a message not to get the wrong idea about that.

“All right, then, let’s go,” I said. “But we need to hurry.”

“That’s not a problem,” Alice stated, and Kuro growled in agreement.

Two players and one panther opened the heavy wooden gate a crack and left the town, running south down the trail toward the river.

3

As of seven o'clock in the evening on September 29th, the general character data for me and my trusty companions was as follows:

KIRITO

1H Swords / Blacksmithing / Carpentry / Woodworking / Stoneworking / Beast-Taming, Level-16 (Brawn)

SINON

Guns / Thief / Stoneworking, Level-16 (Swiftness)

ALICE

Bastard Swords / Pottery / Weaving / Tailoring, Level-15 (Brawn)

LEAFA

Bastard Swords / Woodworking / Pottery, Level-12 (Brawn)

LISBETH

Maces / Blacksmithing / Carpentry / Weaving, Level-11 (Toughness)

SILICA

Short Swords / Beast-Taming / Weaving, Level-10 (Swiftness)

YUI

Daggers / Fire Magic / Cooking / Weaving, Level-10 (Sagacity)

ASUNA

Rapiers / Herbalist / Cooking / Woodworking / Pottery / Weaving / Tailoring / Beast-Taming, Level-9 (Sagacity)

KLEIN

Curved Swords / Woodworking / Stoneworking, Level-8 (Brawn)

AGIL

Axes / Woodworking / Stoneworking, Level-8 (Toughness)

MISHA

Thornspike cave bear, Level-6

AGA

Long-billed giant agamid, Level-5

KURO

Lapispine dark panther, Level-5

PINA

Feathery Dragon, Level-2

Klein's and Agil's levels were low because they'd converted only yesterday. Asuna had been logged in when *Unital Ring* started, but she was on the lower side because she'd been guarding the base more often, I figured. On the other hand, she had also acquired the most skills. But when it came to survival RPGs, the biggest lifeline was life itself: HP.

Sinon and I had the highest levels because we'd defeated boss monsters. I'd taken out the thornspike cave bear that spawned before Misha and defeated the Goliath Rana, while Sinon had beaten the *sterocephalus*. Next time, I'd have to take Asuna with me on a big hunt, so she could lift her level. Then again, the cat-eared knight at my side had been doing just as much base defense as Asuna.

I closed my friends list, which I'd been perusing while we ran along the river, and asked my companion, "Alice, when did you get your level so high?"

"During the day yesterday and today, of course. I do not attend school, after all."

It sounded like there was a hint of petulance in her answer, and I felt guilty about that. Alice had been petitioning Rath to allow her to attend returnee school, but it was easy to imagine they weren't going to let her do anything of the sort. All I could do was pray they'd at least allow her to pay a visit to the school before Asuna graduated next March.

"Were there good monsters for leveling-up around the house...er, town? All the ones I've run into are quick little critters like foxes and bats..."

"Within the forest, yes. But quick and little or not, you should know well enough that I am not enamored with the idea of killing a great number of animals for the sake of experience."

"Oh...right, right. So what did you do?"

Alice glanced at the dark river on our right and murmured, "I'm not sure if they appear near this part of the river...but directly west of the town, there is a very deep ravine, and there are monsters within called four-eyed giant flatworms."

"Four-eyed...? What kind of monsters are they?"

"It is more or less a giant leech, about fifteen cens wide and over two mels long," Alice said, spreading her hands to demonstrate. She had grown accustomed to real-world measurements recently, but when we were alone, she often reverted to the cens and mels of the Underworld. She probably didn't even realize she was doing it.

"They are a translucent gray all over, which makes it hard to see them unless it is midday, when the sunlight hits the river directly at the bottom of the ravine. As the name states, they have four eyes, and you must accurately slash the center of them to defeat them. If you slice them in the middle of the body, the second piece will grow a head of its own, then extend itself so that you face two full-grown members."

"Eugh, sounds like a planarian..." I grimaced. Then I recalled from a middle school biology class that planarians and hammerhead worms and the like were simply different kinds of flatworms.

"Of course, a four-eyed giant flatworm is also a living creature, but I find it much easier mentally to eliminate them than foxes and rabbits. I suppose this is human...What do you call it...?"

“Ego?”

“Yes. That word is one of your strange sacred real-world words... er, English, do you call it? I find it difficult to learn them all,” Alice lamented. On her other side, bounding along in the sand, Kuro growled demonstrably. I was sure that it wasn’t arguing the fact that I regularly gave it orders to attack in both Japanese and English... probably.

“Well, I agree with you there. It’s hard to learn them...but also, it’s dangerous to hunt monsters that multiply like that on your own. If you die here, that’s it for you.”

“How is that any different from the Underworld and real world?” she shot back, which was a good point. Alice placed equal weight in every world she visited. Places where you could come back no matter how many times you died, like ALO and GGO, were the exception for her.

When you got into a casual cycle of dying and resurrecting in a VRMMO, perhaps it started to change your outlook on what life was, I started to wonder, an uncharacteristically deep bit of philosophy. Alice’s voice brought me back to reality.

“Also, because cutting the four-eyed giant flatworms makes them multiply, they’re even better for leveling-up.”

“Huh...? Ohhh, I see. So if you intentionally keep doubling it and then killing the other one, you can keep farming them without having to wait for them to respawn,” I remarked, impressed. “Huh...? The deep ravine means it’s in the water, right? You can swim, Alice?”

Instantly, she jabbed her fingers into the part of my upper arm that wasn’t protected with armor. “You have a habit of making casual statements that betray your low opinion of me. Few people in the human realm are very good at swimming, I’ll admit, but I am one of them.”

“Where’d you learn how, then? You weren’t swimming in the Rul River or Lake Norkia, were you?” I asked, referring to bodies of water in the area outside North Centoria.

Alice narrowed her eyes briefly in reminiscence, then she shook her head. “No, of course not. I’m sure you haven’t forgotten that Central Cathedral’s ninetieth floor has a forty-mel-long...”

She stopped awkwardly there. Failing to notice the *Oops!* expression on her face, I shouted, “Wait, you were swimming in the Great Bath?! That had to have been after you became an Integrity Knight. So the whole time that you acted so cool and composed in front of me and Eugeo, you were secretly the type of person who swims laps in the ba—Yeow!”

She jabbed me harder than before.

After that, the proud knight was too upset to speak with me, but at the very least, I’d learned how Alice had leveled-up so quickly. In my mental notebook, I jotted down the idea to take everyone there to test it out later.

There were tons of rocks all along the riverside, but along the water itself, they turned to fine, compact sand that was much easier to run on. Although monsters appeared there, the only actively aggressive types were speedy crabs called purple scuttling crabs and gross flying bugs called saw snake flies, but neither kind had any nasty special attacks; instead, they had fairly high stats. If we were in single-digit levels, they would have been tough, but at level-16 and level-15, we handled them fine, especially with Kuro, who had reached level-5 at some point. Mocri’s party two nights ago and Schulz’s raiding group last night must have both passed this riverbank.

That meant if any new enemies were heading for our town, there was the possibility that we’d run directly into them while we were here. Therefore, we couldn’t use any torches for a while, choosing to follow the faint light of the stars instead. Thankfully, the moon was out and bright here, unlike in the real world, where it was dark and raining.

We spent thirty-something minutes rushing through darkness, earning proficiency in the Night Vision skill, until the exit from the forest appeared up ahead, and I slowed down.

The dense thickets of trees along the river began to thin out, transitioning to low-lying brush that eventually gave way, too. All that was beyond was vast empty grassland, just as reminiscent of the

African savanna as the name suggested. We were on the eastern end of the Giyoru Savanna. The river continued to travel south, but the compact sand was gone, replaced by elevated bluffs on either side. We would have to proceed through the grassland from here.

"If only we had a boat..." I murmured, feeding Kuro some bison jerky.

Alice gave me a curious look. "Can't you build one?"

"Huh? A boat?"

"Not some majestic sailboat, but surely you could manage a canoe..."

".....Good point," I admitted.

According to what the others had said, the Stiss Ruins were along this river far to the south. A canoe wouldn't do us much good going upriver, but if we were just coasting downstream to get there...

I opened my ring menu and checked out the crafting options for the Beginner Carpentry skill. I scrolled down past the housing-related items like *Crude Wood Hut* and *Crude Stone Wall*.

"Ah...there it is."

Almost at the very bottom of the list, I found *Crude Large Dugout Canoe*, and I snapped my fingers. Even better, the icon to the right of the name was a double-square mark. If it was a hammer symbol, we'd need to carve the log manually, but a double-square was something you could make with the press of a single menu button, as long as you had the materials. There was a *Crude Small Dugout Canoe* just under it, but it seated only two. Kuro needed to come with us, so we'd need to make the larger version.

"Let's see. Materials for the large dugout canoe...one sawed thick log, two sawed logs, ten thin ropes, twenty iron nails, and two bottles of linseed oil."

"That is quite an assortment, isn't it...?"

"Yeah, well, it can't *just* be a hollowed-out tree log," I replied, tapping each of the items in turn. The *Unital Ring* UI was quite excellent; if you tapped an item, it would bring up a description and tell you how many you had.

"We don't have the logs," I noted, "but we can just cut down some trees for that. Only got half the narrow ropes, but we can make them

from grass...Ugh, three nails short. And we won't be able to make those here."

To make iron nails from scratch, we needed to melt iron ore into ingots in a furnace, then place them on an anvil and hit them with a hammer. Our furnace and anvil were back in the yard outside the log cabin, and there was no way we could go all the way back now.

"Urgh, and we already have three bottles of linseed oil...Alice, you wouldn't happen to have any extra nails on you, by any chance, would you...?"

"Don't expect too much from me," she replied, opening her menu. She went to her item storage and quickly sorted it. "It seems...I do not..."

"I didn't think so..."

Alice's crafting skills were Tailoring, Pottery, and Weaving; none of them had any relation to nails. And iron nails were a precious commodity at the moment—we'd only made them to repair the cabin and build a well.

"Darn. We'll just have to run across the plain. That was the original idea anyway."

"Indeed," Alice said, moving her finger to close the menu—but she stopped. "No...wait. I'm fairly certain that among the items those attackers dropped yesterday was..."

She flipped through the list, then hit the button hard. Above her window appeared...

"A chair?"

It was a small round chair. The design was very simple, with four legs fixed to the sides of the seat, and the coloring looked ancient.

"Why would the guys who came to kill us be carrying around a chair...?"

"I don't know...Perhaps they used it for resting during a break?"

"...I mean, I guess it's more comfortable than sitting on the ground. So...what about this chair?"

"We dismantle it, of course."

I smacked my fist into my palm with understanding. Yes, the legs of the chair were attached to the base with metal nails. If we could recover the nails, we'd have the materials the dugout canoe needed.

“But the chances of recovering the nails without damaging them are low.”

“That’s why we need you to dismantle it, since you have the Carpentry skill. That should lift the chances of success a bit.”

“...True.”

Alice was correct, but while my numerical probability of success according to the game system might rise with my skill, I didn’t have nearly as much confidence in my *actual* luck. I secretly believed that all the good luck I’d been born with got expended with my survival of SAO at Asuna’s side.

I was just about to ask her to go ahead and dismantle it, when Kuro rubbed its head against my left side.

“Growr!” it grunted, and an epiphany hit my brain. It was a once-in-a-lifetime stroke of luck that I managed to tame Kuro yesterday, when we were moments from freezing to death. Based on power and frequency of appearance, lapispine dark panthers were very rare monsters. The chances of success at capturing such a creature without even having the Beast-Taming skill had to be close to zero.

“...Actually, you’re right...I guess I *am* pretty lucky.”

I scratched Kuro’s neck, then lifted the round chair. Surprised by the weight of it, I gave it a tap with my free hand, bringing up the item name of *Fine Evergreen Oak Round Chair*. The attackers from last night couldn’t have crafted this. They’d found it somewhere.

For an instant, I felt hesitation about destroying an item with the *Fine* descriptor, but the chair’s durability was almost completely gone. If I worked very hard on the Carpentry skill, I might be able to make my own *Fine* equipment, I told myself, and I pressed the DISMANTLE button in the menu.

It made a *crunch!* sound, and the round chair crumbled into pieces and vanished. The resources I recovered were set to go straight into my inventory, so I fearfully checked my window. Right at the top of the list when sorted by new items was...three *Fine Iron Nails*.

“Yesss!”

“You did it!” shouted Alice, who was peering over my shoulder

with a rare, beaming smile. I lifted my hands toward her. She looked baffled by the gesture and eventually copied me. I gave her a double high five, then sprinted into the forest before she could get mad. Once I determined it was safe, I lit a torch. Using the light, I inspected the trees for a suitable specimen. The main ingredient the recipe needed was a sawed thick log, so that meant cutting down a tree bigger than a spiral pine.

Fortunately, in the time I had before Alice caught up, I managed to find a majestic broad-leaved tree five feet across. I tapped its smooth bark, bringing up a pop-up with a *shwamm* sound. It was called *Aged Zelle Teak*. I felt like I'd heard of trees called teak in the real world, but what could *Zelle* mean? It took a few moments, but I figured it out.

"Ohhh...Zelle, as in Zelletelio Forest..."

"It's a tremendous tree," remarked Alice, who wasn't going to protest my forced high five after all.

"Yeah, maybe it's a rare species. We should remember this spot."

"Why don't you just mark it down on your map?"

"Huh?"

You can do that? I wondered. I opened the map window and tried holding down on the spot where our marker stood. A little sub-window appeared with a variety of small icons on it. I selected one that looked like a tree. It made a little *pop*, and a three-dimensional icon appeared on the map.

"Oooh. That's handy. Wish you'd told me about it earlier."

"I think you're the only person who didn't figure it out already," she noted.

"...Sorry," I mumbled. I closed my window and reached across my body for my sword.

But Alice said, "I will do it. My sword is heavier, after all. Please hold up the light."

"Really? There's a particular knack to cutting down a tree with a sword."

"I told you, I earned a living cutting down trees much larger than this one in Rulid."

"...Oh. Yeah," I murmured.

Alice flashed me a quick smile, then motioned for me to step back. Kuro and I retreated a few steps, and I held up the torch to light her way.

The knight pulled back her hood, looked up at the huge Zelle teak, then positioned her legs in a front-to-back stance. She gripped the hilt of her bastard sword with her right hand and drew it smoothly, lowering her center of gravity just a touch. Then she activated the sword skill Horizontal.

For just a moment, the image of Alice in her cloth white skirt and simple iron armor became Alice the Integrity Knight. Her longsword drew a blue line in the darkness, catching the trunk of the Zelle teak at the perfect angle and producing a loud, satisfying *thwak!* When the splash of light faded, the blade of the sword had sunk over eight inches into the heavy trunk.

“Oh...I suppose one swing wasn’t enough,” she noted.

“It’s unbelievable that you could cut that deep with a single swing to begin with,” I said with admiration. A bit louder, I called out, “Alice, I’ll make the ropes while you work on the tree!”

She gave me a thumbs-up while I stuck the torch into a nearby branch to stabilize it, then I crouched over the grass at my feet.

Five minutes later, all the materials in hand, we headed back to the river.

I opened the Beginning Carpentry skill menu again and pressed the button to create a crude large dugout canoe. Promptly, a translucent purple boat appeared on the black surface of the water. It was a ghost object, the same thing that appeared when deciding where to place a stone wall, for example.

With my right hand, I controlled the placement of the ghost. As soon as it lifted above the water, the outline turned gray; apparently, it had to be touching the water for me to create the canoe. Once the ghost was almost next to the shore, I clenched my hand shut.

The canoe parts tumbled out of thin air with pleasant sound effects and fell perfectly into place within the ghost object. It splashed down and rose again—a perfect example of a dugout

canoe, over sixteen feet long and three feet wide. But this was not simply a boat carved out of a single tree trunk. There were two arms extending from the right side that ended in a long, narrow float—an outrigger. With that taken into account, the total breadth of the boat was more like six feet wide. There were also long oars resting atop the canoe and an anchor rope submerged off the stern.

“Well, well. This is rather impressive.”

“All thanks to the excellent lumber you provided for us, Alice,” I replied, hopping into the boat. It was more stable than I expected, probably due to the outrigger. I stuck the torch into a socket along the side of the vessel, then reached out to pull Alice in after me. Kuro leaped nimbly onto the fore. It was a “large” canoe for good reason; with two people and one animal, there was still plenty of room left in its sixteen-foot span.

It was currently eight o’clock at night. We’d taken about half an hour to make the canoe, but this should have allowed us to cut down on the movement time by quite a lot, compared to walking over land and fighting with monsters.

“Okay, let’s go!” I announced, pulling up the anchor. At the fore, Kuro growled magnificently.

“*Grurrrr!*”

Within two or three minutes of practice, I had the gist of rowing the canoe—largely because it controlled exactly the same way the gondolas on the fourth floor of Aincrad did. If you tilted the oar forward to row, it would go forward, and if you stood it upright, you would brake. Tilt it back and row, and it would pull you back. Tilt to the right to turn left, and tilt left to turn right. We were following the flow of the river, so even light rowing would send the canoe slipping forward faster and faster. After a while, I saw a message that said *Ship Handling skill gained. Proficiency has risen to 1.* I checked it to see the effect, and it said that it would make turning faster and decrease the chances of capsizing.

Steering the ship was fun on its own, but unfortunately, due to the overhanging cliff sides, the views were nothing to write home about,

compared to the fourth floor of Aincrad, even if you accounted for the fact that it was night. As I steered, I thought back fondly on my time gliding through the waterways with Asuna in our white-painted gondola, the *Tilnel*. Up front, Alice turned her head and pulled me out of my memories.

“So...what is it that Dr. Koujiro wanted with you?”

“Huh...?”

My mind blanked for a moment, and then I realized she was talking about the message regarding the “expensive cake shop.”

“Ah, right...Dr. Koujiro was just sending along a message from someone else, actually.”

“Aha...I had a feeling that was the case,” Alice murmured. She turned to face me directly. “It was Kikuoka who summoned you, wasn’t it?”

Based on her tone of voice and expression, I could tell that she did not have a high opinion of Seijirou Kikuoka. I couldn’t blame her—she’d hardly ever had a real conversation with him.

He’s very fishy, I’ll admit, but he has his good sides, too. Like when he pays for fancy pieces of cake.

“Did you come with me just because you wanted to ask about that?” I prompted.

“That’s not the only reason. So...what did Kikuoka say?”

I hesitated, then remembered that I was probably going to explain it all tonight anyway. I slowed the speed of the dugout canoe and put it briefly:

“Someone from somewhere infiltrated the Underworld.”

“.....!”

Her blue eyes went wide, and she rose slightly from her seat.

“An intruder...?! Who was it?!”

“Total mystery. He said there’s no way to investigate from the real world.”

She froze in her half-standing position, then sighed and sat back down.

“...I wonder why Dr. Koujiro did not tell me.”

“Because she knew you’d dive-bomb right in at the first chance.”

“It is only recently that I learned your slang term *dive-bomb* does

not necessarily refer to an aerial bombardment technique," she remarked, which I took as a sign that she'd calmed down a bit. "Yes, I cannot deny it. I suppose I might have a tendency to bristle and lose myself in anger faster than others."

You mean you never noticed that before?! I thought, wisely keeping it to myself.

"Look, I know how it feels to not be able to sit still in an emergency. But it's completely impossible to find a single individual hiding in the Underworld if you don't have a plan for it. You know that..."

"So they're just going to be left on their own?"

"Not at all. Kikuoka called me up to ask me to dive into the Underworld, actually."

"...! If you are going, then I would also—," she started, rising from her seat again, until I held out a hand to stop her.

"Of course you're coming with me. I only agreed to it on that condition. Don't blame Dr. Koujiro for not telling you about the intruder. She's thinking of our safety above all else."

"...I understand. She is one of the people in the real world whom I trust the most."

"Uh...am I one of them, too?"

"Questions like that are what lowers one's trust in you," she said, looking supremely annoyed. But she did add another question of her own. "Was I the only person you asked to take along?"

"No, I...uh...also asked for Asuna."

"I had a feeling."

I attempted to read her profile, but I did not have the required skill to decipher the emotions held there.

As we conversed, the canoe bobbed down the dark river until the distance we'd traveled beyond our forest town surpassed ten miles. The route to our destination, the Stiss Ruins, was close to twenty miles, so if nothing else delayed us, we should arrive in another thirty minutes.

Before leaving, I drank plenty of water and ate, too, but now that I

looked at it, my TP bar was nearly down to half. But as long as we were in the boat, I didn't need to worry about running out of water. I pulled a clay cup out of my inventory and scooped it into the river, then took turns with Alice drinking. I was a bit nervous sourcing in the dark, when I couldn't actually see how clear the water was, but it didn't taste bad, and Kuro drank from it, too, so I figured I wouldn't get sick from it.

The river was getting wider and wider, but the sheer cliffs on either side continued endlessly. The repetitive nature of the landscape was making me sleepy. But it seemed like that moment of nodding off was exactly when monsters that looked like dragonfly nymphs and pond snails chose to leap into the canoe and start fighting, so I didn't end up sleep-steering us into any accidents.

I kept the map open the whole time. All around us was the gray color that indicated undiscovered terrain, except for one thin line of blue for the river. My Ship Handling skill had risen to 5 already, which was making me wonder if I should change my class to sailor.

Then Alice said, "Kirito...do you hear something?" and Kuro lifted its long tail and growled, staring forward.

Enemies? Is there a field boss up ahead?

I watched and listened, my hackles raised. There seemed to be a faint but deep sound in the distance. Something like an enormous beast roaring—except the sound wasn't changing. It was just a constant roar. And getting steadily louder.

"Kirito, stop the boat!" Alice shouted, and then I understood. It wasn't easy to see by the light of the torch and moon, but the surface of the river up ahead was simply gone.

"...W-waterfall!" I shouted and pushed the oar backward as far as I could. But a dugout canoe moving at full speed was difficult to slow down. The sound was already deafening, drowning out our voices.

Then a floating sensation came over my body.

In fact, I was floating. The canoe had gone over the top of the falls, and I was flying through the air.

"Waaaaah!!"

"Eeeeeek!!"

Our screams were matched only by the sound of Kuro yowling,

“Aroooooo!”





4

“Well, it’s a river. There are going to be falls,” I commented, water dripping from every part of my body.

Alice muttered lifelessly, “I wish you had thought about that five minutes earlier.”

“Hey, even if we knew it was coming, there are cliffs on either side, so our only options would have been to jump over the edge or try to paddle all the way upstream...”

“If we had looked, there might have been a place to climb.”

Kuro added, “*Grau!*” in agreement, then shook violently to spray off the excess water. Most of the droplets struck me, but all that did was take me from soaking to drenched, which wasn’t much of a distinction.

“...Anyway, at least it didn’t turn into a *total* disaster. Nobody drowned, and the boat capsized, but it didn’t get wrecked.”

“Both of those things are miracles—that was a fall of thirty mels. You should thank Stacia we are still alive.”

“Okay...”

The truth was, that would be hard to do. To me, the Underworld’s Goddess of Creation, Stacia, was none other than Asuna. In her head, Alice managed to hold on to separate concepts of the Stacia she’d always believed in and Super-Account 01 Stacia. But whenever I closed my eyes and thought of Stacia, the face that popped into my mind was Asuna’s.

At any rate, I said a silent prayer to Asuna-Stacia, then examined the situation.

After going over the falls, Alice, Kuro, and I drifted a few hundred yards down the river, clinging to the overturned boat, until we finally managed to get up onto the shore. Downstream from the falls, the

sides of the river were proper banks again, but if it had stayed cliffs, we might have washed all the way to the mouth of the river. Assuming there was sea somewhere near all this land.

The silver lining was that the place where we washed up on the shore was not that far from where we initially meant to disembark. Our destination, the Stiss Ruins, was still about three miles away from this spot, it seemed. Under the light of the moon, the terrain ahead was flat grassland that reminded me of the space around the Town of Beginnings on the first floor of Aincrad. If we sprinted, we could get there in fifteen minutes. That put the expected arrival time at eight forty-five PM. My initial plan was to get there by nine, or nine thirty at the latest, so the canoe had saved us a good amount of time.

With some difficulty, Alice and I turned the boat back over and anchored it on the riverside behind us. It wouldn't go into my inventory, so we had to leave it here. I'd hoped to take it back the way we came, but the waterfall made that impossible.

Alice must have been thinking the same thing, because she glanced back and said, "If needed, we'll just have to tear it down for the materials again."

"That's true...though I'm guessing we won't get the Zelle teak wood back."

"Because it was carved out of the log. I can cut another one, if needed. That's why we marked the map."

But I knew that she didn't really want to break it down. We didn't name the canoe like we did the *Tilnel*, but a boat was always something more than a simple item.

"We'll think about a better way to deal with it. But for now...let's get going," I said. Our equipment had dried in the meantime, so Alice and I set off.

The rabbit and snail monsters that appeared in the grassland were noticeably weaker than the ones in the forest. They could each be defeated with a single sword skill, more or less, but they gave almost no experience, and the dropped items were uninspiring.

But every mountain starts as a molehill, as they say, and during our run, each of us gained a level: level-17 for me, level-16 for Alice, and level-6 for Kuro. That put my stock of ability points at six, so I decided to open my menu and spend one.

For the moment, I'd raised Brawn to rank-8, and its advanced ability Bonebreaker to rank-1. As a second-tier ability, Bonebreaker needed two points for a single rank, so I decided to just go ahead and bump Brawn to rank-10. I was about to hit the button to accept but paused to check on Alice first.

"What abilities did you take again?"

"I have Brawn at rank-10, Bonebreaker at rank-1, Assault at rank-1, and Ironbreaker at rank-2."

"I-Ironbreaker?" I repeated. That name didn't sound familiar to me, but then I realized why. "W-wait...is that a tier-4 ability? And you gave it two levels? You spent eight points on it?!"

In contrast to my shock, Alice's response was quite matter-of-fact. "I liked the effect."

"Wh-what effect is that?"

"Increased damage to enemy armor when attacking. After all, an Integrity Knight's sword is meant to break through any shield or armor with a single swing."

"...Ah, good point..."

In the Cloudtop Garden on the eightieth floor of Central Cathedral, I'd exchanged blows with Alice Synthesis Thirty. I remembered thinking that if I threw a combo of sword skills at her, I'd have a chance of victory, but Alice's Osmanthus Blade was so powerful I couldn't even block it, and she had me trapped against the wall in no time.

The gamer in me wanted to say that taking higher abilities at a low overall level was an inefficient use of resources, but that wasn't my business to say, really. *Unital Ring* wasn't just a game, but it was still something you played. The best way to build your character was by following that voice inside you.

"Well, I'll know who to turn to when we face a heavily armored foe."

"And I'll allow you to take care of the slimes and worms. I am tired

of slippery, squirmly things for now.”

“You got it,” I said, wondering just how many four-eyed giant flatworms she’d killed. I pressed the ACCEPT button on my Brawn purchase.

We didn’t run across any monsters worth mentioning after that, but we did end up taking a few detours for unexpected reasons. The closer we got to our destination, the more we started to see groups of players leveling-up with torches in hand. If we came running up on them in the darkness, they could very well mistake us for PKers.

We put out the torch and headed southwest, wary of running into others. Our destination came into view just as we crested a small hill.

It was a gigantic walled city that loomed over the flat plains like a small mountain. There were several concentric walls that curved gently, forming a shape like an upside-down top. The moonlit city seemed to be about two-thirds of a mile across and six hundred feet tall. In scale alone, it was larger than the Town of Beginnings.

But upon closer examination, the walls were collapsed in places, and there were almost no lights to be seen. There was a faint orange haze over the center, but overall it looked more like a dungeon than a town.

“...So those are the Stiss Ruins,” said Alice from the top of the hill. She lifted the edge of her hood. “That wall doesn’t look like a natural collapse. It’s as though there was a great battle there.”

“Now that you mention it, yeah...There’s that huge hole in the middle, too. Those walls look like they’re six feet thick. You’d need a cannon to do that kind of damage, right?”

“Perhaps that’s what it was. Or an equivalent kind of sacred art...I mean, magic.”

If this world had flintlock muskets, then perhaps they had equivalent cannons, like smoothbore muzzleloaders. Could some army in the distant past have lined up their artillery on the plain and bombarded the city? Or was Alice right, and it was some kind of powerful magic...?

“So...where in the ruins are we meeting her?”

“Oh, right,” I said, recalling the actual reason we’d come all this

way. My eyes rolled over the right side of the city. “Ummm... underneath a large willow tree five hundred yards directly north of the ruins at nine o'clock.”

“Then you only have five minutes left.”

“If we were gonna be late, I’d send her a message in real life, but I think we’ll get there just in time. Kuro, you hungry?”

I had no idea how much of my speech the panther, sitting politely to the side, understood, but it yowled “*Gau!*” and stood up.

I figured that finding the actual tree in question would be tough in the dark, but after eyeing the proper direction and running south-southwest, I soon spotted a silhouette that seemed to fit the bill. Even in the dark, it was hard to mistake those long, dangling willow branches. It seemed like the perfect place for some astral-type monsters to appear, but I trusted that Argo wouldn’t pick a haunted location as a meetup spot.

As we approached the gnarled old tree, I called out, “Hey, Argo, are you there?” at what I thought was a reasonably quiet volume.

“Kirito!” Alice immediately shouted.

“*Grurrrr!*” growled Kuro.

And lastly, an eerie voice called out, “*Byohhhh!*”

I grabbed my sword hilt on instinct and scanned our surroundings. There was what looked like a broken gravestone at the foot of the huge willow—and some kind of fuzzy light. No sooner had I seen it than a pale shape slipped straight up out of the ground. It wore a tattered, old-fashioned dress and had long hair that covered its face and extended arms like dead branches. Every part of it was translucent.

“There *is* a ghost!!” I shouted, drawing my sword. Alice readied her bastard sword, and Kuro entered its leaping stance.

“*Byohhhh!*” the ghost roared again, cold, pale light issuing from the eyes behind those hanging bangs. It had targeted only me so far, but there was already a red spindle cursor over its head. The name below its HP bar was *Vengeful Wraith*.

English, huh? I noticed. The names of all the other monsters we’d encountered were descriptive Japanese. The only other exception to this pattern was the fire-breathing frog in the giant wall, the Goliath

Rana. If there was a rule that all boss-type monsters had their names in English, then I couldn't take this spirit lightly.

It was the wraith that ended our staredown.

"Byohhh!" it wailed, sliding to the side in the air before charging me. A hand with long, sharp nails swiped at my neck.

I reacted swiftly, lifting my sword and jumping backward. I chose to put distance between us, just because I wasn't sure if I *could* block its attack. That premonition was immediately proven correct, because the wraith's hand hit my sword, slowed briefly, then proceeded straight through it with a smokelike effect.

"Whoa...!"

I lurched backward in midair. The sharp claws missed just an inch from my throat, leaving five pale lines that hung in the air.

As soon as my feet hit the ground, I delivered a counterthrust. The tip of my fine iron longsword caught the wraith's side, but this, too, produced the same puff of smoke effect and had no physical feedback. A few pixels fell off its HP bar, nothing more.

"Alice, physical attacks do almost nothing to it!" I warned, backing away again.

"That's how ghosts work!" she replied.

Ghosts didn't exist in the Underworld—though I once encountered something like a living spirit—so she must have learned that from ALO. Hopefully, it wasn't from real-world experience...

Either way, there were two general methods for dealing with astral-type enemies that physical attacks didn't harm. Either you used attack spells, like fire or light magic, or you used a weapon that had been enchanted somehow. Neither was an option here. I was certain that the Holy Sword, Excalibur, could banish this ghost in a single hit, but it was back at the cabin, and I couldn't even lift it with my current stats.

"Byohhhh..."

The wraith's torn mouth hung open in a mocking smile. But that image gave me an idea.

What happened to the person we were meeting at this willow tree, Argo the Rat? She was nowhere to be seen. Argo was speedy, but she wouldn't stand a chance against this nasty wraith as a freshly

converted level-1 character. Had Argo already died before we'd gotten here? Had she been forever banished from the world of *Unital Ring*?

My worst fears caused me to freeze for a moment, and the wraith did not miss its chance.

“Byoaaa!”

It sank down into the ground up to its waist, then lunged from that height. I reacted late but managed to cross its left arm with my sword; however, the upward claw swipe coming from the ground passed through my blade and gauntlet, gouging my forearm deeply.

I felt a numbing shock and an intense chill. More than 10 percent of my HP bar dropped, and a Debuff icon that resembled an ice crystal appeared. It was the sign for continuous freezing damage, the effect that happened to us during the ice storm on the savanna.

“Dammit!” I swore. Alice grabbed my shoulder and yanked me backward so she could take my place.

“Yaaaa!” she cried, her bastard sword shining in her hands.

It was a brilliant, heavy horizontal slash that reminded me of her old Integrity Knight days. The bastard sword, which was two or three inches longer than mine, caught the wraith's torso, but it only split it like smoke and did hardly any damage.

Next, Kuro leaped on the wraith, digging its huge fangs into the creature's shoulder. The bodily attack had more of an effect than the iron swords, taking away 3 percent or so of its HP, but the wraith wasn't going to go down without a fight.

“Byohhh!” it howled with rage, jabbing both sets of nails into Kuro's back.

“Gyipe!” the panther yelped, red damage effects spilling as it jumped away. It lost over 10 percent, too, and suffered the same freezing Debuff.

I tried to ignore the bone-chilling sensation as I rushed over and wrapped my left arm over Kuro's arched back. I didn't think of myself as a real beast-tamer, and my successful beast-taming yesterday had been a true stroke of luck, but the thought of losing my brand-new pet after just a day terrified me so much that my legs quaked.

We didn't stand a chance at this rate. Should we retreat for now?

Was it even possible to get away from a foe that moved so quickly through the air?

And for that matter, was it right for such a dangerous enemy to be located just five hundred yards from the starting spawn point? We were frontline fighters at level-16 and level-17 with a combat-focused pet, and we were fighting for our lives. Any brand-new characters just out of the town would have no chance. What was the point of placing this wraith here...?

I was torn, unable to decide whether to keep fighting or give up, when I heard a voice from behind me:

“Kiri-boy! It’s weak against fire!”

Something shiny came flying toward me. It was a ring of fire—no, a *spinning torch*. I barely managed to catch the spark-spraying projectile with my free hand.

“Alice, I need five seconds!” I shouted.

“I’ll give you ten!” came her bold response.

I dropped my sword and opened my menu as fast as I could. In my inventory, there was a single bottle of linseed oil left. I brought it out, popped the cork with my thumb, and poured the contents onto my sword. Once the oil coated both sides of the blade, I tossed the bottle away and stood back up.

Alice had just brushed off the wraith with her bastard sword. It had barely lost any HP, as usual, but the swing did actually knock the wraith back a bit, rather than simply passing through it. Upon a closer look, I noticed that Alice was holding her sword upright and bashing the base of the flat side inside of slicing.

Very *interesting*, I thought, then gave the command. “Alice, switch!”

The knight promptly jumped out of the way as I held the torch up toward my sword.

With a *fwoom*, the oil caught fire, covering the blade with glowing red flames. It was the quickest and easiest way to give my sword a fire aspect, but the effective time would be much shorter than a

magical enchantment, and if I swung it too wildly, I could blow out the fire.

“Byuueee!” groaned the vengeful wraith, raising its hands and backing away from the torch and flaming sword. But this was my chance. *Don’t go out!* I urged my weapon, holding up the improvisational fire sword. The red of the flame and the yellow-green of my skill effect mingled.

“Hah!” I jumped with a cry. Sonic Leap kicked in, and I shot through the darkness, slashing as I went.

“Byohhh!!”

The wraith thrust out its right hand. A complex sigil appeared, and shining needles shot forth from its five fingers. A magical attack...but if I tried to switch to defense, it would cause the sword skill to fumble. Trusting in Lisbeth’s armor to do its job, I ignored the needles and continued the charge.

“Raaah!”

I could feel three needles hit my body in different places as I swung the sword. My flaming weapon withstood the boosted speed of Sonic Leap and sliced through the ghostly body from its left shoulder to its right flank.

“Byaaaaah!” screeched the wraith, pulling back. Its HP bar plunged downward. All of its hardy stubbornness was a thing of the past, as it instantly went below halfway to 40 percent...30...and stopped at 25.

White smoke issued from the place where I’d severed the wraith’s upper half in two, connecting the parts back together like glue. I wanted to deliver the finisher, but my sword’s flame was guttering, and I couldn’t move yet after using the sword skill.

That was when someone grabbed the torch from my left hand and stuck it into the closing gap in the wraith’s midriff. Immediately after that, the two halves closed for good. But the torch stuck in between them was still aflame and growing larger as it burned away at the wraith’s insides.

“Byohhhhhhhh!” screamed the spectral foe, writhing in agony, until even its screech turned to flame. Fire burst from its eyes. The HP bar continued to drop, and this time went to zero.

The white astral substance and red flames created a marbling effect as they swelled into an explosion that shook the ground beneath my feet. There was no way some random nobody monster would have a death effect that spectacular. For one last instant, I thought, *So why did they put a freakin' boss here?!* and then it was gone from my mind. There was a small blue light in the spot where the wraith had exploded. It slowly began to rise, approaching the branches of the willow tree.

"W-wait!" I called out, scrambling frantically up the tree's gnarled trunk. Once I'd reached the part where it split in two, I leaned back and jumped as hard as I could. My outstretched fingers just barely brushed the blue light. It expanded and burst like a bubble, and I did a double backflip before landing on the ground.

With a sigh of relief, I turned to the player who'd finished off the vengeful wraith with that torch stunt.

Simple sandy-brown leather armor. Small dagger on the left hip. Short, unruly hair the color of straw. Big light-brown eyes.

"Hey, Ar—"

I had to stop myself mid-sentence. The small avatar's feet were enveloped by glowing blue rings of light—the sign of a level-up. Three rings, four, five, six...At last, they stopped appearing after seven.

"Welp, thank ya for the assist up ta level-8. Didn't expect to get *that* much."

"Well, sure you did. It was a maneuver worthy of that kind of reward...but that's not what I wanted to say."

I glanced back to see that Alice and Kuro were all right before I continued, "Argo, why did you tell us to meet in such a dangerous spot? You had me thinking that wraith killed you."

"I assumed it was a trap meant to kill *us*," Alice declared as she walked closer.

Argo grimaced. "Well, I suppose I can't blame ya for bein' suspicious," she said, hopping forward so she could look up at Alice, who was half a head taller than her.

At last, I realized that Argo's avatar was noticeably younger than her real-life appearance. Somehow, it felt more familiar to me than

strange or off-putting. After all, it was the exact same avatar Argo had in SAO. But yesterday, she'd said...

"Wait, didn't you say that you never copied your SAO character data over to ALO?"

"Yep, I did say that. I made an entirely new character from scratch to meet up with Chrysheight. I coulda taken that account here...but if I was gonna go on adventures with you and A-chan, I figured this look was best."

"Meaning...you moved your SAO character to ALO for the first time today and logged in here with it...? Which fairy race did you select?" I asked, examining her head and skin in detail.

"Don't stare at me so hard," she complained, grimacing. "I didn't get a chance to select a race. I tried to go into ALO, and it just shot me straight here. I woke up dressed like this."

"Ohhh...so I guess you're just human. Or at least, human by Aincrad terms...I gotta imagine Ymir is in total chaos, having ALO ripped out of their control like this. I'm surprised it allowed you to move your data at all."

"That's the thing," she said. "I put my SAO ID and password into Ymir's website, and as soon as I hit the button, they sent a new ID. No person was handling that process manually."

"Huh...they used to do it that way before. I guess they automated the process at some point," I murmured, surprised. I shrugged, figuring it wasn't that important. "Anyway, you didn't answer my initial question."

"Ah, the reason I chose this spot ta meet up?" Argo said, glancing at the huge willow tree. She made a face. "I guess I didn't do my homework for once. One of those *UR* wikis folks are workin' on had a map of this area uploaded, and there was a willow tree marked on it, along with a helpful caption like *safe here, no monsters appear.*"

"Huh?! How was that safe...?! Any low-level player wouldn't stand a chance!" I protested. Alice nodded, and even Kuro growled in agreement.

Argo eyed Kuro and said, "That's a cool panther ya got there. Whose pet is it?"

"It's mine. For being the Rat, how is it that you're afraid of dogs

but fine with cats?"

"I'm surprised ya remember. Just so ya know, dogs hunt rats, too. There's literally a breed called rat terrier."

"Oh, wow...but who cares about that? I'm talking about the wraith! Was that strategy wiki you checked just wrong about it?"

"Doesn't seem like it to me. Check it out."

Argo opened her ring menu and switched to the quest window. There were three quests there already. Their titles were *Protecting Rabbits* (Rec. Level-1), *Lost Item in the Sewer* (Rec. Level-3), and *The Ancient Spirit's Curse* (Rec. Level-20).

"Wait, is that it?! That wraith was a quest boss?!"

"Seems like it. It won't show up unless you've got the quest and ya meet the requirements."

"But neither Krito nor I have taken this quest," pointed out Alice. I nodded. Just in case, I checked my own quest list. It was empty.

We looked at Argo. The info dealer seemed apologetic. "I'm guessin' it was just a combined coincidence."

"Huh...?"

"I came by here about ten minutes before our meetin' time of nine o'clock. That grave at the foot of the willow tree started glowing, and then..."

She pointed at the mossy little grave marker, lit by the moon above. Nothing about it seemed wrong for now, but I seemed to recall that it'd had a pale glow of its own when we first arrived.

"...All it did was light up, no monsters or anything, but I got a real bad feelin' about it. I thought about lettin' ya know and changing our spot, but I didn't wanna just log out here, so I tried to go back to the ruins. Then I heard some horrible sounds behind me and turned back to see...this."

"Aha...so having the quest meant you activated the grave, and we must have fulfilled some requirement for the wraith to appear. What was the criteria?"

"Apparently, it was that you had to have a silver item materialized on your person."

"Huh? Silver...?"

I closed my window and checked the few items I had in my

pockets and pouches.

“...There’s nothing like that on me.”

When I melted down my Blárveld from ALO, I got a couple of fine silver ingots, but I gave them all to Lisbeth, and even if I still had them, I had no reason to hold them as physical items.

“Oh...perhaps it is me,” said Alice, realizing something. She checked in the cloth pouch at her waist. Out of it, she pulled a small, clinking leather sack, inside of which was a small flat circle. She dropped the shining silver object onto my palm.

“A silver coin...?”

It was old and faded, but I had to assume it wasn’t aluminum or nickel. In size and thickness, it reminded me of a 100-yen coin. And in fact, on one side was the number 100, and on the other, a design of two trees. I tapped it, and the properties window said *100-el Silver Coin, Currency, Weight: 0.1.*

“...A hundred el...You know, this is the first coin I’ve seen here...”

Nearly all the monsters we’d killed so far were animal types, and they dropped materials like fangs and hides but no money. I looked up and returned the coin to Alice.

“Where did you get this?” I asked.

“Sinon gave it to me before we left Krito Town. She said, ‘If there’s an NPC shop in the Stiss Ruins, buy me all the musket ammunition and gunpowder this money can buy.’”

“Ahhh, I see...”

We could recover our swords’ durability by sharpening them, but if Sinon ran out of musket rounds and gunpowder, that was it. The Orniths who gave her the gun also taught her how to make the ammo and powder, but she said that one of the materials could only be harvested deep in the Giyru Savanna. Sinon’s gun was a valuable weapon in battle, so I’d hoped to help her get more bullets before she ran out, but if we could just buy some at a shop, that would be best. However...

“Hmm, I don’t remember any spot that had bullets and gunpowder,” Argo said to my dismay. “Most of the place is an actual ruin, with monsters an’ all, but there’s a proper town right in the middle. Couple o’ NPC shops, too. But all they sell are simple tools

and food. That and starter gear.”

“Uh...food? Like what?” I asked, knowing that we’d need to recover our SP soon.

Argo just shook her head. “Well, that’s one part o’ you that’s no different between the real world and virtual world.”

Alice giggled. “It reminds me of the time when you pulled that steamed bun out of your pocket...Anyway, Kirito, would you introduce us?”

“Huh...? Oh! Right, you haven’t met before.”

I cleared my throat awkwardly, wondering how I should describe them to each other. It was not easy.

5

While we hadn't counted on that extra fight, I nevertheless met up with Argo just as we planned on the train earlier in the day. My initial idea was to head straight back to the Great Zellelilio Forest.

But Argo said that she wanted to go back into the Stiss Ruins. There were two reasons.

One was to find out what happened with the Ancient Spirit's Curse quest.

The other was to infiltrate a group meetup of strategic-minded players that was supposed to take place at the center of the ruins at ten o'clock.

"...Look, I'm intrigued, too...but is this little get-together open to outsiders, too?" I asked.

We were walking toward the north gate of the Stiss Ruins. Argo curled her finger through her hair as she replied, "Oh, just fine. There should be close to a hundred folks there. Though we'll probably wanna tweak our appearances a bit."

"True...this obviously isn't starter gear, and it doesn't look like it came over from ALO, either," I said, looking down at the simple metal armor I was wearing. Then something occurred to me. "Actually, we can just take off the armor, but what about Kuro? It'll stick out like a sore thumb."

On my right, Kuro padded along elegantly, a majestic beat easily over seven feet long from head to tip of the tail. I would assume that hardly any players had pets of their own, so a panther was bound to draw attention.

"Ah, good point...There are a bunch of empty houses, so maybe

you can leave it there to wait for us?"

"I suppose that would be an option..."

While I was at school, Kuro played with the other tamed animals, patrolled the town, and took naps on its own, apparently. Over eight hours away from its owner didn't undo the beast-taming effect, so I figured that thirty minutes or so apart should be fine, but I couldn't help but be nervous about it, here in an unfamiliar territory, with plenty of other players wandering around.

"In that case, I will stay with Kuro," Alice announced from my left.

I turned to her. "Are you sure?"

"I do not enjoy being in the midst of crowds. In return, you can handle Sinon's shopping request for me," she said, holding out the leather sack and coin. I stuck them in the pouch I had on my belt.

"Sure, of course I can do that...but I feel like we're not going to find any bullets or gunpowder."

"If it's not there, it's not there. Just do not embezzle that money and spend it on food."

"I'm not a child," I argued. Argo snickered to herself.

I put all my metal armor back into storage and donned a cloak of rough linen over my clothes instead. That made me look like a low-level player who'd lost his cool inherited gear after the grace period ended. Alice had been wearing her hooded cloak all along anyway, so she didn't look much different with her armor off. We kept our swords equipped because it was too nerve-racking without them, but the cloaks kept them mostly hidden anyway.

"Awww, man, I want one of those hooded cloaks, too. Just doesn't feel right ta have my face out in the open all the time," Argo complained as we approached the north gate of the Stiss Ruins. The ground around us was packed and hard. There were almost no plants.

"You should've mentioned it earlier. We could make fabric like this in a place with lots of grass to pick loose."

"Really? That's made outta grass?"

"Not just any kind of grass, though."

"Then gimme that one."

"N-no!" I protested.

Alice opened her ring menu. "I'm sure I have some fabric left over. I can make you a hooded cloak of your own."

"Really? You sure, Alicchi?"

"C'mon, don't give her that lazy nickname."

"Hee-hee, I don't mind. It is fun to have a special nickname," said Alice magnanimously. She went to her Tailoring crafting menu and hit a few buttons, and just like that, a gray hooded cloak appeared over her floating window.

"Wow, with the tap of a button, huh? Nice and easy," said Argo, impressed.

"It's only simple items like this one that can be made from the menu," Alice warned, handing her the cloak. "This is for you, Argo."

"Thanks, Alicchi. I won't forget this favor I owe ya," Argo finished, then dropped the cloak over the leather armor she must have brought over from ALO. When the hood was up, she looked just like the old Rat from SAO—except that her cheeks were missing those three drawn-on whiskers.

I was just thinking about how I'd hold her down and draw them on if I only had a permanent marker when she promptly glared at me.

"Kiri-boy, ya shouldn't stare at a lady like that."

"S-sorry," I mumbled and faced forward.

Up close, the Stiss Ruins were larger than I'd ever imagined. The outer walls alone had to be a hundred feet tall. Each stone block that made up the structure was over three feet to a side, but I couldn't begin to guess how they'd stacked them in the first place—or how they'd been destroyed.

The decorations on the gate were ornate and suggested that, before its destruction, this city must have been as beautiful as it was massive. But now there were no civilians or merchants passing through the gate.

To my surprise, I didn't see any players, either. At least five thousand players must have been converted into *Unital Ring* from ALO, and nearly all of them had to still be active around the ruins. It was after nine o'clock at night, which was prime time for VRMMO players. I would have expected to see players going out to hunt in the wilderness and returning to refuel on supplies.

When I brought this up, Argo had a very simple answer.

“Oh, that’s because the north gate ain’t so popular.”

“Huh? Popular?”

“According to that same wiki, at least. The pathways are too complex, so it doesn’t offer easy access to the city center, plus the mobs don’t show up very much north of the ruins. That’s why I chose it as our meetup point, actually.”

“Aha...but even still, not a single person...?”

“Listen, Kiri-boy. Not every *ALO* player—or player from any other Seed game—is still playin’ this thing. In my mind, it’s less than half... maybe a third. Everyone else is just bidin’ their time, waiting for this situation to resolve itself. That includes the fairy leaders in *ALO*. ”

“.....”

Now that she said it, that did seem like the more practical response. The *UR* incident was just that—an incident. Given that players were paying a monthly fee to the various companies running their VRMMOs, it was practically criminal in nature. Only someone truly addicted to online gaming could be optimistic or egotistic enough to actually follow the announcement about the “land revealed by the heavenly light” when you didn’t know if it was true or not.

Meaning that the people we were attempting to infiltrate were the ones with that mindset. People like Mocri and Schulz. People who took things *too* seriously.

At some point, I had stopped walking, and I looked up to see that Alice, Argo, and Kuro were farther ahead, waiting for me.

“Oh...sorry,” I murmured, picking up the pace.

After passing through the half-collapsed gate, I felt like my body temperature dropped. The wide stone path lasted for only a few dozen yards before hitting another wall and splitting left and right.

“There was a useful empty house around here, I think,” Argo said, taking the lead. We followed her without complaint.

The homes inside the Stiss Ruins were built as if stuck to the inside of the many layers of castle walls. It was a terrible way to get

sunlight, if you asked me, but that couldn't have been the reason the city fell into ruin.

The buildings were grand stone apartments that seemed reminiscent of some of the great, ancient cities of Europe, but nearly all of them were falling apart, just like the walls. We rushed past them because it appeared that insect and vermin monsters had taken up residence in most of them.

The home Argo led us to had a huge hole in the ceiling, but its front door and inside stairs were intact, leaving one room on the second floor that was usable. Argo and I left Alice and Kuro there, then headed to the center of the ruins.

The complex series of right and left turns through the streets left me totally disoriented, but Argo must have had some kind of special sense for these things, because she kept us moving without a second thought. After we'd walked for what felt like a third of a mile, a waterway appeared. It served as a boundary line of a kind; as soon as we timidly crossed the crumbling bridge, the area immediately looked different.

Here, there were cast-iron torch holders at regular intervals, their flames flickering and orange. Farther beyond them, little roadside shops appeared here and there, and more NPCs and players came into view. Unlike in SAO, in *Unital Ring* you couldn't call up a target cursor just by staring at someone, but the NPCs all had deathly pale skin and wore Roman-style tunics, so it was easy to tell them apart. All the shops sold low-quality materials, and there were no bullets or ammunition.

"The Bashin looked so hale and hearty, but all the NPCs here are really pale..." I murmured.

Argo shrugged. "I mean, I get it. Yer bound to get pale, livin' in a place like this."

"Honestly, they seem like a different race altogether. What race are the NPCs here?"

"Dunno...It's almost impossible to tell what any of the NPCs are sayin'. Talk to 'em, and you'll see. The only exceptions are the shopkeepers."

"Ahhh, I see..."

That was the same as the Bashin and Patter, then. According to Sinon, the NPCs you could speak to would teach you some vocabulary words, and repeating the pronunciation enough would help you learn those language skills.

It would be nice to eventually command all the different tribal languages, but how much time would that take? I was considering this thought when the street stalls began to transition into small interior shops: items, medicines, and weapons.

“Do you mind if we go into that weapons shop?” I asked.

“Already looked in there. No bullets, no powder, and of course, no guns.”

“...No surprise, either.”

That meant we’d have to go to the Giyori Savanna to get the ingredients for gunpowder. Here, the little commercial district ended after about fifty yards, as a magnificent arch came into view.

After passing through it, we came to the center of the Stiss Ruins.

The circular space was surrounded by large buildings such as castle manors and churches, with a massive stone structure like the Colosseum of Rome in the center. Numerous arches lined its outer wall, which was half-collapsed like all the rest of the ruins, but we could sense the presence of many people inside it.

“...Is that the place for this so-called friendly meetup?”

“That’s it,” Argo confirmed. She leaned closer to my ear and whispered, “Listen, if anyone asks ya what team you’re with, just say Announcer Fan Club. That’s the loosest group of ‘em all, and they barely keep track of membership, so it’s the least likely ta get us exposed.”

“Aha...And just so I’m clear, the announcer in question is the voice that spoke to everyone on the first day when the grace period ended, right? The ‘all shall be given’ person?”

“Well, I didn’t hear it.”

“Oh, right...”

But that was the only time a voice like a system announcement had shown itself in *Unital Ring*, so that had to be the reference. It was a very alluring voice, I had to admit. Still...

“These guys gotta be down bad if they’re making a fan club for a

voice. We don't even know if the voice belongs to a human or a god or a devil, or if it's even in a humanoid shape or not."

"That's probably what they like about it. If I had ta guess," Argo said without any evidence. She started trekking toward the stadium, crossing the worn-down stones to the main gate. After walking through the darkened tunnel beyond it, we emerged not in the stands but in the arena itself.

In the space, 160 feet across, there were nearly a hundred players hanging out, as Argo's tip had said. Most of them had cloth gear, but I could see some leather armor and chain mail, too. Based on their designs, these were inherited gear from ALO, not freshly crafted. If these were the top players out of the converted ALO playerbase, none of them had reached the Iron Age yet.

On the north end of the arena was a stone stage with many decorative fires atop it. Whoever had set this up was probably going to show up there. Argo and I took a spot on the far wall to wait for things to start. Fortunately, the other players were too busy exchanging information to pay much attention to us.

"...Argo, you okay on SP and TP?" I asked, just in case. The info dealer's head swung up and to the left.

"Hmm. I've still got water from that well, but I'm not so sure about my food stock."

"Here."

I took out two pieces of bison jerky and gave one to her.

"Aw, thanks," she said, accepting it, but she did not put it in her mouth. "Even with you, though, I don't feel good about takin' something for free."

"Well, get used to it. You can't be one of us if you get hung up on little things like who owes what. You can easily die of hunger and thirst in this place...so water and food are like shared resources, in my opinion."

"One of us,' huh? Heh...the phrase makes my ears feel all prickly," she said, which I took to be a combination of *prickly* and *ticklish*. On that mysterious note, Argo went ahead and bit into the jerky, and I joined her. The flavor of the bison meat I'd harvested from the Giyoru Savanna was similar enough to beef. It wasn't as

gamy as the thornspike cave bear, and it was easier to eat.

Argo was apparently much hungrier than she let on, because she finished her jerky in no time. Then she pulled something that looked like a long, narrow fruit out of her waist sack. She twisted off the cylindrical stem, then lifted it to her lips. There was some kind of liquid inside—water?

"Wh-what is that?" I asked once she'd finished drinking. Argo stuck the stem back on to cap it and replied, "There's a well a bit to the south of this center square, and there's a tree growin' next to it. The NPC who manages the well gives one fruit to each player, which you can use as a canteen...Doesn't hold a lot, though."

"Huh! Well...it's true that even getting containers for water isn't easy," I remarked, impressed. I materialized the ceramic water jug Asuna had made and drank some water from it. The jug held three times as much as that fruit, but it was heavy and fragile, so I couldn't just leave it within arm's reach on my person. I wanted to get a leather skin that was lighter and tougher, but there were too many higher priorities at the moment.

In the meanwhile, it was approaching ten o'clock, and murmurs arose at the front of the crowd. I glanced up and saw four people climbing the steps on the right of the stage.

The first was a tall man with studded armor and a one-handed sword. The second bore scale armor and a scimitar. The third had cloth armor but a huge two-handed sword on his back, while the fourth was slender, with a white hood...a woman, perhaps. They were almost 150 feet away, so I couldn't make out the details of their faces.

"Hey, let's go up closer," I whispered to Argo and started to lean off the wall, but she held me back.

"All we need is to hear their voices. Don't do anything to make yourself more visible."

".....Yes, ma'am."

When an info dealer with expertise in infiltration gave you advice like that, you followed it. I trained my ears on the speakers, intending to catch every word.

"Hey, guys, we're gonna get started!" said the first man to take the

stage, the one in the studded armor. His voice was loud and clear. “I’m the person who set this informal event up. I’m Holgar, and I run a group called the Absolute Survivor Squad! Many, many thanks to you all for coming together!”

I didn’t recognize his name, but I felt a wave of familiar nostalgia, and I recognized the source at once.

In the town of Tolbana on the north side of the first floor of Aincrad, there was a similar circular stage, if much smaller than this one, and that was where the very first boss strategy meeting had been held. A swordsman named Diavel had led the way, and he’d introduced himself with a loud and cheerful style.

My name’s Diavel, and I like to think of myself as playing a knight!

Someone in the crowd had yelled back, *I bet you wish you could say you’re playing a hero!* and gotten a laugh from the audience. One simple comment from Diavel had helped to warm up the crowd, and I keenly remember feeling his charisma in that moment.

And now that I thought about it, Argo had first come to me as a proxy for him. She had said that he wanted to buy my Anneal Blade +6. He ultimately offered close to 30,000 col, a massive sum, but I refused all the offers.

Sometimes I thought back on that event. If I had gone through with selling my sword, would Diavel not have taken such a huge risk trying to get the Last Attack bonus on the floor boss and not have died as a result...?

I brushed aside that momentary bit of sentiment and listened to Holgar continue.

“Let me introduce these other nice guys who helped set up this gathering! First of all, the leader of the Weed Eaters, Dikkos!”

The man with the scimitar raised his hands, and a cheer arose.

“Next, the leader of the Announcer Fan Club, Tsuburo!”

Applause for the greatsword-user was more reserved, but the voices and cheers were deeper and manlier.

“Lastly, the leader of the Virtual Study Society, Mutasina!”

A rustle ran through the crowd as a collective *Who?* But that confusion lasted only until Mutasina pulled back her hood, exposing long black hair and pure-white skin. Even from this distance, I could

tell from her air and the reaction that she was a considerable beauty.

Over 90 percent of the gathering was male, and they erupted into the loudest cheers and whistles yet. Mutasina waved her hands cheerily, working them up into a frenzy.

When the crowd calmed down, Holgar stepped forward again. "We're going to be leading the discussion today! Unfortunately, they're saying Team Fawkes got wiped out last night, so they're not here!"

Murmurs rippled through the arena. I hadn't heard of that group. I looked toward Argo, but she just averted her eyes and said nothing.

Voices from the crowd demanded an explanation, but the answer Holgar gave was unhelpful.

"Unfortunately, I don't know the details, either. Apparently, the people in Fawkes invited some others to leave the ruins with them last night, and it seems like they got into a group battle somewhere to the north and lost."

Some players closer to us discussed this news among themselves.

"North, like, against the Bashin?"

"Those guys are dangerous...There were people who challenged the Bashin during the grace period, when they still had their inherited gear to use and their best skills, and they all got their asses kicked."

"There's no way Fawkes wouldn't know about that. Why would they engage in such a dangerous gamble...?"

As I eavesdropped on the conversation, a sense of foreboding came over me, but I pushed it down and ignored it, trying to focus on the stage. Holgar stepped forward, the light of the flames reflecting off his armor's studs.

"At any rate!" he shouted. "All I can tell you for now is that *Unital Ring* isn't going to be simple or easy! This is the third night since the incident started, and there still isn't any sign of restoring the game, according to Ymir! So let's reach the land revealed by the heavenly light, us ALO folks, and solve this thing from the inside!"

Cheers of excitement and agreement issued from the crowd, filling the vast arena.

My friends and I (including Argo) were technically part of the "ALO

folks,” which made our goal the same as everyone else’s here. We weren’t trying to sneak ahead of anyone, like Mocri’s group on the first day, and if we had the chance to cooperate with others, we ought to do so. The reason we’d built a town in the forest was so that the *ALO* players leaving here would view us as the first checkpoint on their way—as long as we could protect against a third attack.

And yet...

I waited for Holgar’s next statement, unable to dispel the sense of foreboding, even as I kept it in check.

When the fervor died down, the tall swordsman returned to his previous light and amicable tone. “The intent of tonight’s friendly meeting is to deepen the ties and information sharing between our four teams, who have decided to play cooperatively! We’ve got food and drink, too, so charge up your TP and SP all you like! As long as you like rabbit meat and the local grasses and fruit!”

There was another cheer from the crowd. A number of wooden wagons, which had clearly been built with the Carpentry skill, rolled out of the tunnels on either side of the stage. The ingredients that Holgar humbly disparaged had been properly cooked, though, and the large pots and dishes steamed with fragrant, alluring seasonings.

“...Where are they getting those spices?” I asked.

“They’re selling ‘em at the markets outside,” Argo replied. I made a mental note to buy some before we left. The only cash I was carrying came from Sinon, but I was sure I could get enough to buy spices by selling off some of the materials in my inventory.

While I was very curious about the food, sneaking free grub while I was supposed to be infiltrating a meeting was the very height of poor manners. For now, I’d seen the general attitude and capabilities of the converted *ALO* players who were taking the game seriously. That was enough of a reward.

“Sure ya don’t wanna eat before we go?” Argo smirked.

I gave her a stern look. “I’m not interested in giving you evidence for your ‘Kirito is a glutton in the virtual world’ theory. C’mon, let’s get outta here while they’re carrying on.”

“Got it. We can stock up on food at the stalls, anyhow. I bet Alicchi and Kurocchi are starving right about now.”

"Yeah, let's do that," I said, severing my longing for the dishes and turning back toward the tunnel we'd come through.

But just then, bluish-purple light lit the stones at my feet.

"Wha—?!"

"What's that?!"

Argo and I turned back in alarm. But none of the hundred heard us—they were screaming on their own. This was not a predetermined part of the night's events.

I stood up on my toes and watched the ground carefully. It was not the stones themselves that were glowing but a complicated texture floating over the stone itself. It consisted of many rings, patterns, and symbols, just like...

"A magic circle...?" I murmured, following the lines with my eyes to the middle of the arena. There was a huge crest there, shining brighter than the rest of it—the center of the circle. There was a 150-foot magic circle completely filling the circular arena, in other words. In ALO, this would be considered a major spell, above the category of regular magic. Or perhaps even beyond that, a grand spell.

The symbol in the center abruptly began to move on its own. It wriggled, rippled, and swirled. In moments, it grew to a pillar of light over thirty feet tall, then split apart and collapsed, forming a bizarre new silhouette.

A narrow head covered in endless thorns. Long hair, tangled and tortured. Four arms with two joints each. The upper body of a skinny woman and a lower half of writhing feelers.

It was a monster that could be described only as some dark, deviant god. It lifted its four arms high overhead and bellowed something in some inhuman language. Blue-black orbs grew from its open palms.

Magic? What? Who? Why? Where?

Questions burst through my mind like sparks. This was clearly some malicious act of magic. The best method of dealing with it would be to attack the caster and interrupt the spell, but identifying them in this crowd would be difficult.

"Kiri-boy, we gotta go!" Argo shouted, and she began to run for the north exit. But my instincts told me she wouldn't make it in time,

so I grabbed the collar of her hood and held her back, drawing my sword.

“Stay hidden!” I shouted, right as a huge number of light projectiles shot from the deviant god’s palms.

They made a hideous *greeeee!* squeal as they shot forth, each on its own complex trajectory. They struck players of all sorts—those still with shock, those in abject terror, and those who tried to evade. It was extremely high-level homing magic. Those who were hit didn’t drop immediately, but they were surely hit with some kind of Debuff or delayed damage effect.

I had no desire to find out what those effects were myself. I held up my sword, tracking two shots that came my way. It was impossible to dodge them, and no armor would block them, either.

But if the magic here worked on the same logic as in *ALO*, there was a way to deal with it: the special nonsystem skill I developed while playing in Alfheim, spell-blasting.

Magic in *ALO*—accumulations of light fired from a spellcaster—had no physical form as a general rule, so it was impossible to block with sword or shield. But in the very center of the spell, there was a hurtbox no larger than a pixel width, which, if struck by nonphysical damage, could shatter the spell...sometimes.

For some reason, *SAO*’s sword skills existed in *Unital Ring*, but I hadn’t confirmed yet whether they held *ALO*’s elemental damage effects. For the moment, I just had to trust they would.

Watching the light rounds hurtle down at me from an angle, I prepared to unleash the two-part sword skill Vertical Arc. But they did not follow simple parabolas; they wobbled and curved like knuckleballs. It would be nearly impossible to destroy both with a two-part sword skill. The better choice would be to give up on one and focus on destroying the other instead.

With that split-second decision made, I switched to Sonic Leap, jumping toward one of the projectiles raining down on me. In *ALO*, this sword skill added wind damage to its physical effect. Trusting that it would do the same in *Unital Ring*, I aimed for the center of the light.

“*Grahhh!*” I bellowed, slicing.

It felt like crushing an extremely small but tough kernel. The blue-black spot of light split in midair like a viscous liquid. The other projectile, however, did a sharp turn in midair and struck the base of my neck.

An extremely strange sensation, neither heat nor chill, gripped my throat. It was like being strangled by some transparent demon's claw. I gritted my teeth and landed from my jump, then turned around.

"Argo, you okay?!" I asked.

She was backed away against the wall, staring at me with huge eyes. She squeaked, "I'm fine, Kiri-boy...but...you..."

"We'll talk later! Let's get to a spot where we can escape at a moment's notice! If the caster notices I spell-blasted that one, we're in trouble!"

".....Got it," Argo replied. We crouched and rushed out of the way, stopping next to the exit tunnel so we could monitor the situation.

At that moment, the menacing god looming over the center of the arena melted into the night. The magic circle on the ground contracted as it rotated, then vanished. Between the toppled wagons and food littered over the ground, the players stood around in shock and horror.

Eventually, someone said, "Hey, your neck..."

At that, everyone observed below the chin of the nearest player, or they felt at their own necks. Without thinking, I looked at the neck of the man standing closest to me and saw something that looked like a black ring lodged around it—but that wasn't right. It was a ring pattern, drawn directly on the skin.

I tried to look down at my own chest, but I obviously couldn't see my neck, and I didn't have a mirror. When I glanced at Argo instead, she just nodded back at me nervously. Apparently, the ring was on my neck, too. But for now, I hadn't lost any HP, MP, TP, or SP, and I didn't feel any sensations with my avatar. What kind of Debuff was it? And how was it possible to use such a massive spell at this early point in the game?

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" someone yelled from

the stage. Holgar, Dikkos, and Tsuburo had their swords drawn and pointed at Mutasina, the one woman of the group.

“Mutasina, you told us you were gonna put on a huge Buff to pump up the crowd! This is obviously some kind of Debuff! That ain’t funny! Not even as a joke!” Holgar roared, but Mutasina was not intimidated in the least. She slumped against her long staff and replied with calm intensity.

“It is not a joke, of course. All of this was planned.”

“Planned...?! Then you accepted the offer to have this get-together just so you could cast this magic on all of us?!”

“That’s what I told you. There’s no other reason I’d have chosen to take part in such a pointless gathering, is there?”

That statement was met with howls of fury from here and there in the crowd.

“Screw you! Take this stupid magic off us!”

“You think you can beat a hundred of us together?!”

Spurred on by their anger, Holgar took a step forward. “You heard them. Undo the Debuff. Or else we’ll solve this problem in a different way.”

Clearly, this “different way” meant killing the person who cast the spell. On Holgar’s cue, Dikkos and Tsuburo surrounded Mutasina from the sides. The people in the arena crowded closer to the stage.

This put a thought into my head. Elsewhere in the arena should be other members of Mutasina’s group...the Virtual Study Society, was it? Had she placed that Debuff on them, too? Or did she get all of her fellow members to evacuate before she’d started the magic...?

I wasn’t about to get the answer to that. Whatever effect this Debuff had, it was going to be impossible for her to avoid simultaneous attacks while surrounded like this. Mutasina probably expected to be killed here, quitting *Unital Ring* forever and leaving only this mystery unanswered.

“...Fine, then. We’ll take matters into our own hands!” Holgar shouted, and he pulled back his sword. At the same time, Tsuburo’s two-handed sword and Dikkos’s scimitar began to glow with sword skills.

Mutasina simply stood there, lifted her long staff with one hand—then slammed it down against the ground. The bottom tip made a high-pitched *kraaack!*

Instantly, I was unable to breathe, and I fell to my knees.

It was like something sticky had blocked my windpipe. I pressed my hands to my throat, desperately trying to breathe, but I couldn't force air inward or outward. Through my sudden panic, I could see that the aggressors onstage, and nearly a hundred players around the arena, were all struggling on the ground in agony. There was a slight blue glow over the group, the dim light of all the rings shining at once. My neck was probably doing the same. On my HP bar, there was no ongoing damage, but I could see a Debuff icon on the right side that looked like hands wrapped around a throat.

“Kiri-boy!”

Argo leaped to my side and smacked me on the back, but it did not dislodge the sense of something blocking my throat. Ten seconds, twenty...I could feel the panic growing larger and darker within me. The sense of suffocation was truly real—I felt like my body in real life wasn’t breathing, either. But was that possible? If it was possible to stop a player’s respiration despite the many layers of protection built into the AmuSphere, this was SAO all over again.

I swung my right hand, trying to open my ring menu. The only way to escape this agony had to be logging out. After a few failed attempts, I finally got it open, and I looked for the system icon out of the eight in the ring.

Then there was another loud *kraaaack!*

Just like that, my airway was clear again. I was drowning in air, sucking it into my avatar’s lungs, with my hands pressed to the ground.

Several seconds later, when I was finally emerging from my state of panic, Argo grabbed my shoulder and pulled me upright.

“You all right, Kiri-boy?”

“Y...yeah, I’m okay,” I responded weakly. Before looking toward the stage again, I checked to confirm the Debuff icon was gone.

Holgar, Dikkos, and Tsuburo were all frozen, hunched over on all fours. Standing regally above them, Mutasina reminded me a bit—

just a tiny bit—of Administrator, who ruled over the human realm of the Underworld as the head of the Axiom Church. Despite having just stopped the breathing of a hundred, she was neither gloating nor afraid of what she'd done. Her only outward display was a pale smile. It took an iron will to do something like that.

"Do you understand now?" she asked coolly, waving her left hand. "The spell I placed upon everyone here is called the Noose of the Accursed. You just experienced its effects for yourself...and once it has been successfully cast, its area of effect and length of time are infinite."

The other players in the arena murmured with horror. The words "No way..." escaped my throat.

Infinite? Endless? So every time Mutasina hit the ground with the butt of her staff, every player here would be unable to breathe, no matter where in the world they were?

The murmuring grew louder and louder until Mutasina lifted her staff, silencing them all.

"But have no fear. I did not cast this magic upon you all to torment you. Just like you, I want to beat this game...I'm simply following the most effective path to achieving that."

"...Most effective?" snarled Tsuburo boldly, getting unsteadily to his feet. "The most effective path is to threaten your fellow players with sadistic magic? There are other members of your Virtual Study Society here, aren't there?"

"Members...?" Mutasina repeated, then chuckled. "The reason you chose to meet in this place was because of a temporary alignment of goals, wasn't it? Let me be clear: You might cooperate now, but the closer the goal becomes, the more our teams will compete with one another. In the end, even the players within a team will fight and kill one another. But as long as my magic is active upon you, we can avoid that situation. Do you see...? This is the best and most effective means of getting to the finish line, isn't it?"





It almost sounded playful, coming from her lips. Tsuburo was at a loss for what to say. Instead, Dikkos spoke up from the seat of his pants.

“Of course that ain’t true! We trust each other...me and Holgar and Tsuburo are in it together! If it turns into a race at the end, we’d never betray or kill each other! We’ll help each other out until the last moment, then line up to race the very last length and congratulate the winner...Isn’t that how VRMMOs work?!”

“Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha.”

Her slender shoulders shook with laughter.

“Ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha...I’m sorry, it’s just...that’s so ridiculous. Trust? Congratulate? Do you really think those things happen here...in this virtual world?”

Where her voice was lighthearted before, it suddenly turned as cold as though encased in ice.

“Of course they don’t.”

Her black eyes glared at the players in the arena.

“In the virtual world...at least, in The Seed’s VRMMOs, things like trust, love, and salvation are nothing more than illusions. The only things that are real are hatred, betrayal, deceit, and despair. After all, the origin of all full-dive virtual worlds is *Sword Art Online*. A pure hell that took four thousand lives with it, kicking and screaming.”

I had to grit my teeth to keep from shouting, *What would you know?!*

A vast number of players had lost their lives in Aincrad. In terms of victims of a single person’s actions, it was undoubtedly one of the greatest atrocities ever committed in human history. But hatred and despair weren’t the only things that had existed in that world. If that were true, then I wouldn’t still be with Asuna, Silica, Liz, Klein, Agil, and Argo...all players whom I’d met in Aincrad.

But Mutasina’s cold voice held nothing but mockery for my thoughts. “The darkness SAO gave birth to has only spread throughout The Seed Nexus and multiplied. Now those infinite worlds have coalesced into one. In *Unital Ring*, the darkness will be compressed again, and when its density surpasses its peak, something new will result...something even darker and deeper. And I

want to see that.”

Then, as though remembering something, she added, “Of course...there are members of the Virtual Study Society here, too. They agreed to be exposed to the Noose of the Accursed. It might seem contradictory, but there is an unshakable connection of trust among us. And that is why I am certain you will be able to find that trust, too.”

A heavy silence that lasted for a good ten seconds or more settled over the scene.

It was Holgar, sitting flat on the stage, who broke it at last. “What is it...that you want us to do?”

“Haven’t we all been saying it? I want us to pool our strength and work together toward the goal of the game...the land revealed by the heavenly light,” Mutasina said like the captain of a sports team. She laughed. “But of course, a tangible road map will be necessary. Don’t worry—our first goal is already clear.”

“Goal...?”

“Holgar, in your introductory speech, you said that the team called Fawkes was wiped out last night. It was neither a boss monster nor the Bashin who killed them. In a large forest, east of these ruins and far upstream from the Maruba River, they attacked a stronghold built by another team and were defeated.”

As the players rumbled and murmured again, I felt the foreboding from before, and I realized what I feared was true.

The team they called Fawkes was clearly the one led by Schulz that attacked the log cabin last night. And Mutasina bringing up this topic now could mean only one thing.

“The first thing you will do is destroy that team.”

“...Why would we do that?” Dikkos protested. “Just use your magic on them and make them your slaves, too, why don’t ya?”

Mutasina just shrugged it off. “It is not easy to succeed at casting Noose of the Accursed. The motions are lengthy, and the magic circle is impossible to miss. It will not work this effectively without the right situation and audience, such as a group of people who would believe an easy lie about casting a grand Buff spell on an entire gathering.”

Holgar and the others were stunned silent. The black-haired witch continued gently, "Don't give me those looks. It's not that you were especially stupid. It's that the foe we're going to face is especially powerful. You see, based in those woods to the north, the Great Zellelilio Forest, is none other than the team of Kirito the Black Swordsman."

6

It was 10:40 PM.

After its very unexpected twists and turns, the “friendly” gathering dispersed, and Argo and I slipped out of the arena among the crowd.

I wanted to leave early after checking it out, but the developments had required us to stay and watch every last bit. Alice and Kuro were left all on their own for too long. I wanted to get back to them now, but if we didn’t at least visit the shops, I’d have suffered this Debuff for nothing.

We asked a passing player where to find a shop that would buy our items and made our way to a building at the corner of the market. The elderly merchant, who was well-built but pale, took a look at all the hyena, bison, and newt skins and bones and such, then quoted us a value of three el and seventy-eight dim.

“.....Three el?”

Argo and I put our heads together. The hyenas were one thing, but the bison—officially named long-haired gale cattle—were one of the more dangerous monsters on the Giyoru Savanna, and the newts and axolotls from the giant wall dungeon were anything but weak. That was all he’d give us?

The shopkeeper seemed to sense our skepticism of his offer. “Listen, folks, I’m sweetening the pot for you. They’re all rare materials around these parts, you see. But there’s only so much value in these untreated hides and such.”

“Ahhh, so they’d be worth more if we tanned them ourselves first...”

I considered retracting the offer to do that first, but I had no idea what tools would be necessary and what the steps were, and it was even less clear when we might actually visit this town again. I was

hemming and hawing over the options when a man dressed in leather armor inspecting the shop's display case in the corner turned and said, "Hey, buddy, three el and seventy-eight dim is a *huge* fortune, you know that? I've been sitting here wondering whether to buy ten of these items for a single dim, if that puts it into perspective."

...Is he an NPC? Or a player?

"In fact, where'd you get such high-quality furs? Is there a good collection spot around here? I'll pay three dim for the details."

Judging that he was a player after all, I said honestly, "It's not very close. Farther north of where New Aincrad fell."

"Ugh, you've been that far already? So I guess you're one of those fancy frontline guys, despite the shabby duds."

"F...frontline? You call people that?"

"At first, we had terms like *hard cores* or *sprinters* or *top players*, but at some point, we settled on that one. Hey, weren't the front liners gathering at the coliseum? They were making all kinds of noise before it got real quiet. Something happen?"

I almost reached for my throat but resisted the urge.

"Nah...but I did peek in on them. Thanks for the advice."

"Sure thing."

The man turned back to the shelf, so I returned to the shopkeeper and said, "I accept your offer."

"Then we've got a deal. Thank you."

There was a jingling sound effect, and the materials on the counter vanished. A message appeared in my view, informing me that I'd earned *1-el Brass Coin ×3, 1-dim Copper Coin ×78*.

Just in case, I peered around the interior, but I didn't see any bullets or gunpowder. I waved to the shopkeeper and left the building, exhaling and walking north.

"So I guess Sinon's hundred-el silver coin is serious cash. I guess it's like the equivalent of ten thousand col in SAO or so? Wonder where she got it," I said to my partner but didn't get an answer. In fact, ever since we left the arena, she'd been extremely reticent.

"Um, Argo?" I said, staring under her hood. Argo came to a stop. When she finally spoke, her voice was uncharacteristically hoarse

and limp.

"...I'm sorry, Kiri-boy. You took the shot from that screwed-up spell in order ta protect me..."

"What, you feeling self-conscious about that?" I asked after a split-second pause. I had to remind myself, *That's the Rat, not Little Miss Tomo Hosaka!* and slung my arm around her shoulders. "If we're going by that, I couldn't even tell you how many times Argo's strategy guides saved my hide. Compared to what I owe you from the SAO days, this is nothing. What have I always said? Every night ends in the dawn, and every curse wears off one way or another."

"Can't say I've ever heard ya say that. But yes, it's true that there should be a way to dispel that magic," she said, nodding.

That brought something to mind. "Uh, and speaking of that magic," I said, "would you mind not mentioning it to Alice or Asuna for the time being? I'd rather wait until I've got the means to undo it before I talk about it."

"That sounds just like you, Kiri-boy."

She slipped out from under my arm, looking a bit more like the scheming info dealer I knew so well.

"I won't tell 'em. But I can't guarantee what'll happen if they slip me money."

With my new coins, we bought food from the stalls here and there, and scooped up as much free water from the well as we could carry, before we sprinted back to the abandoned room near the north gate. We put on our armor again at the entrance, then went inside. I sent a message while we traveled, but just in case, I knocked twice before opening the door.

"You're late!" Alice promptly scolded me.

"*Gra-rooo!*" whined Kuro, the two coming in stereo. I rubbed at the black panther's neck as it leaped on me and said to Alice, "Sorry, sorry, things didn't exactly go to plan..."

"You couldn't have at least given me an estimate for when you'd return?"

"Uh...good point. I'll report in next time...In fact, I suppose I

should do the same for everyone guarding the town while we're out..."

"I already sent a message that we wouldn't be back until midnight at the earliest."

"Th-thanks for that. Um, this is for you, if you want it."

I pulled out some of the food we'd bought and laid it on the aged table in the center of the room. It was just from a food stall, so the ingredients weren't the finest, but each one had a rather enticing look and smell, from the pita-sandwich-like thing consisting of crisped pouches of bread with grilled meat and vegetables inside, to the shish-kebab-like thing with heaps of sliced meat jammed onto a skewer and fragrantly seared, to the quesadilla-like thing with thin batter enveloping cheese and onions and cooked until melting.

But when Alice saw the food, she just glared at me.

"Kirito, did you...?"

"Oh! No! I didn't spend Sinon's money on this. I sold some of my materials to make the money. Here, you can have it back... Unfortunately, we didn't see any bullets," I said, returning the leather pouch with the hundred-plus el in coins.

At last, Alice's expression softened. "I will trust you on the contents. So in that case, I happily accept your offer."

She took a bite of the quesadilla, chewed a few times, then said, "It's quite good." Alice was an Integrity Knight in the Underworld, a position more exalted than even the emperors of the human realm, but her tastes were not as refined. If anything, she preferred more rustic, common food. Of course, her machine body in the real world didn't have the ability to eat, so she could experience cooking only in the virtual world. But in ALO, she typically requested hamburg steaks, stew, and spaghetti for meals. Asuna did her best to re-create curry and ramen for Alice, but that ongoing experiment had been interrupted partway by this whole incident.

Praying that we'd one day get the chance to sit around the meal table with Alice in the real world, I took the shish kebab. Kuro pressed its head against my waist, so I slid some pieces off the skewer and fed them one by one to the panther.

Idly, I wondered what would happen to the world of *Unital Ring*

once someone reached the land revealed by the heavenly light. Would it disappear forever? Would Kuro, Aga, and Misha go with it?

“Aren’t ya gonna eat, Kiri-boy?” asked Argo, holding a shish kebab in one hand and a quesadilla in the other. I looked up.

“I’m eating, I’m eating.”

I grabbed a pita sandwich and lifted it to my mouth. I didn’t have much appetite, to be honest, but I needed to refill my TP and SP before we left. I took a huge bite out of the sandwich, getting a realistic sensation of thin-sliced meat and raw vegetables crunching between my teeth. *Unital Ring*’s graphics were far beyond those of any existing VR visual engine—and so was its taste modeling.

Who would do this and why? I wondered for the umpteenth time as I ate the pita.

The moment we passed through the north gate into the field, I realized that I had forgotten to do one thing.

“Oh...Argo, did your ancient ghost quest update at all? Did you need to take care of that?”

“It’s fine. We had more important things ta do,” Argo admitted.

On her other side, Alice asked, “What in the world happened?”

“We’ll explain as we move.”

Once I was sure there were no other players in visible range, we started running northeast.

I described the events at the gathering, leaving out one specific piece of information, and Alice’s expression grew more disturbed the further I got. When I was done, she couldn’t hide the fury in her voice.

“Who does that Mutasina woman think she is?! If I had been there, I would have cut her in two!”

“Actually, she had a really high level. Probably higher than any of us.”

“That does not matter! But...it is good to hear that neither of you were hit by that curse, if it got everyone else.”

My omission, of course, was the fact that I had taken the Noose of the Accursed spell as well. Fortunately, the neck protector of my

armor hid the curse line branded on my throat. When I admitted the truth to her later, she would be more than furious, of course, but if I told her now, she would turn back to the ruins and attempt to avenge me against Mutasina.

"Well, I had plenty of practice cutting through magic in ALO," I replied, glancing at Argo. The info dealer shot me a look that said, *I know, I know*, so I moved the conversation forward.

"The real problem is that Mutasina and the hundred-plus high-level players under her control are going to be attacking our town. This isn't the kind of situation we can defuse with discussion. We've got to be ready to fight back."

"When will they attack?"

"Mutasina said it would be the day after tomorrow...the night of October 1st. Their plan is apparently to take two days to boost everyone's equipment to a minimum of fine leather, so it might be later than that but definitely not earlier," I explained.

Argo deftly tilted her head with surprise as she ran. "But, Kiri-boy, you really think all hundred people who were there are gonna take part in the attack? Mutasina's suffocation magic is pretty crazy, but she can't do nothin' to 'em if they log out, ya know?"

"Sure, that's true...but not logging in to the game means not taking part in trying to beat *Unital Ring*. Those were advanced players in that stadium, the kind you called front-runners back in the day. If their only other option was to throw in the towel and give up, I think they'd submit to Mutasina's hand around their necks and keep pressing onward to the finish line."

"...I suppose you're right. I mean, the frontline folks in SAO kept pressin' onward, and their very lives were on the line."

"Yeah. They were insane."

"I'd like ta go back to those folks and give 'em a survey. Ask who they thought the *most* insane was," she said with a smirk.

As this conversation continued, we blazed across the grassland at top speed. We had to make our way around a number of hunting parties, but there was no real trouble, and we made it back to the river—what Mutasina had called the Maruba River.

I had given it a greater-than-half chance of being gone, but our

dugout canoe was right where I'd anchored it in the water. Argo was quite impressed with our creation; I sat her in a spot near the stern, put Alice in front of her, and let Kuro take the helm again. I pulled up the anchor, tilted the oar, and sent the canoe swimming upstream.

If only we could float upstream all the way back to the Great Zellelilio Forest. It wouldn't take that long before we heard that same deep rumbling that we did on the trip out. It was hard to make out the scale of it by moonlight, but Alice estimated the drop at a hundred feet, a massive waterfall. There was no way this canoe—or any other boat—was getting back up there.

"That'll be it for the boat," I murmured.

Alice replied ruefully, "I'm afraid so. We'll have to pull over to the side and break it down into materials."

"Aye, aye, sir," I said, then wondered, *Wait, shouldn't that be, "Aye, aye, ma'am"?* But then I realized Alice might not understand the English words anyway.

I was about to turn the oar to starboard when Argo abruptly snapped, "Not so fast! Kiri-boy, you know there's somethin' you oughtta do before you break down this boat!"

I blinked with surprise. "Do? Like what?"

"C'mon, you've got a giant waterfall in a virtual world! There's only one thing to do, dummy!"

"...Ohhh."

I smirked as I realized what she meant. But it wasn't as simple as that.

"Listen, Argo, this might be a game world, but it's a realism-based VRMMO. One wrong move could completely shatter this boat."

"So don't make a wrong move! C'mon, full speed ahead!" Argo instructed irresponsibly. Kuro yowled in agreement. I told myself that the boat would get destroyed one way or another anyway, and I pushed the oar forward again.

"Ah...what are you doing?" asked Alice with some consternation.

I gave her a vague "There, there" and continued our forward motion.

"But, Kirito, the falls—"

"There, there, there."

“The waterfall!”

“There, there, there, there.”

While this was going on, the canoe reached the wide waterfall basin. The massive falls and their ever-present roar were right in front of us.

I focused on the falls, lit by the moon and stars, and saw huge rocks jutting out on either side that made it impossible to swing around. There was one point near the center of the falls, just to the right, where a single tree stuck out and left the stream a bit weaker beneath it. If we were going in, that was the spot.

“Okay, here goes! Hold on tight!”

I tilted the oar with both hands as far as it could go, rowing left and right at maximum power. The canoe accelerated swiftly, charging toward the deluge from above, which shone silver in the light of the moon.

“Kirito! Don’t be reckless! Miracles don’t happen twice!”

Presumably, Alice was referring to the fact that we’d fallen down this cliff and survived. I didn’t necessarily disagree with her, but I tended to play the wild card to her straight man.

“No, there *will* be a miracle! I’ll make it happen!” I shouted baselessly. The canoe charged into the roaring falls at maximum speed.

First Kuro roared, “*Graoowr!*” then Argo hollered, “*Yahoooo!*” and Alice screamed, “*Kyaaaaaa!*”

All I could see was blue. Incredible water pressure clamped onto my shoulders, pushing the boat downward. If the side of the canoe dipped any lower, the water would flood in and sink us.

“Hrrrrrrg!”

In my mind, I wailed, *I shouldn’t have done thiiis!* but nevertheless, I kept rowing for all I was worth. The canoe did not move forward, however. Just when I expected it to sink for good, the pressure on the oar eased up. I looked back and saw Alice, water beating down directly on her back, holding the tip of the oar.

With the strength of two together, the oar creaked against the great pressure of the water, but it helped shoot the canoe forward to break through the torrent at last. In an instant, the roaring and

pressure were gone, and I had a brief moment of disbelief before I quickly stopped our forward progress. The boat slid several feet forward in calm waters and came to a stop.

"...Is everybody all right?" I asked, since there was no way to tell through the pitch-black surroundings. Argo and Kuro responded from the front, and a moment later, I heard Alice's exasperated huff behind me.

"Well...we've survived, I'll give you that. But I absolutely refuse to be party to a third attempted miracle."

"Thanks for the help," I said, pulling a torch out of my inventory and lighting it. As I raised it higher, I thought about how much I'd like a lantern by now...or even better, light magic.

The firelight exposed a mammoth natural cavern. Clusters of stalactites hung from the ceiling, and stalagmites grew from the banks of the water in strange configurations. Behind us, I could see a narrow exit through which the back of the waterfall was visible. If we'd hurtled into the waterfall even three feet to either side, we would have crashed into solid rock and sunk.

With that done, I looked around the cave again. The floor was covered in gently flowing water, which meant we could keep moving the canoe forward...but something else was more important.

"There...iron! Iron ore!" I cried the instant I spotted the reddish-black rock jutting from the gray walls, all the unpleasantness of being doused forgotten. "Whoa, and there...and over there!"

"Look, calm down, Kiri-boy. We should be thinkin' of what to do now, not worryin' about ore..."

"No, ore is more important than the future!" I paddled the canoe closer to the right bank. "Take the oar, Alice...The flow is gentle here, so you can just hold it upright in the water."

"...Very well," said the knight, accepting the helmsman position with resignation. I stuck the torch into the socket on the side of the canoe and jumped onto solid ground. The surface was slick and slippery, so I carefully made my way around the stalagmites to approach the ore.

The first time I'd discovered iron ore, in the bear's cave in the Zellelilio Forest, I'd had to use a primitive method, chipping at it with

a stone ax. It took lots of time, and I didn't get much from it. But now, I had a fine iron pickax, courtesy of Lisbeth. I took it out of my inventory, gripped it tight in my hands, and smacked it hard against the ore sticking out of the wall.

The impact made a high-pitched *clink* sound and created sparks that leaped and bounced. In the real world, you'd extract ore like this by breaking the other rock around the vein, but here, that would only give you plain rock. You had to smack the exposed ore itself. An ore vein this size would take at least thirty hits with the stone ax, but my trusty iron pickax created a big crack in the ore after just eight swings. Two or three more, and the ore would crumble to the ground in several chunks. I just had to be careful that it didn't roll into the water behind me...

"Kiri-boy, above you!"

"Grau!"

Argo's and Kuro's warnings drew my attention upward. I thought it was going to be a monster, but instead I saw two massive stalactites swaying and shivering above me.

"Whoa!"

I jumped backward as hard as I could, right before the spires fell soundlessly and smashed into the spot where I'd been standing. I wasn't wearing a helmet, so a strike on my head would have killed me instantly...or at least taken 20 or 30 percent of my health.

"A-are you all right?!" Alice called out. I lifted my hand to wave.

"I'm fine...Interesting. So the stalactites are set up to fall when you tap on the ores without paying attention..."

If I were alone, I would never have seen it coming, I thought, grateful to my companions for being here.

Argo, meanwhile, sounded more annoyed by the experience. "You don't have a helmet to wear, do ya? Maybe you shouldn't bother with this, Kiri-boy."

"Urgh..."

It was true that I had no headgear in my inventory. In fact, from the SAO days until now, I had almost *never* worn a helmet of any kind. Not because I thought I looked cooler this way, but because, in a full-dive RPG, the downside to your sight and hearing outweighed

the upside of the extra defense. Even Heathcliff, leader of the Knights of the Blood, who was a monstrously defensive-minded player, did not wear one, and that told me my logic was sound. After all, he was none other than Akihiko Kayaba, father of the VRMMO...

These were the thoughts passing through my mind as I returned to my spot in front of the cracked iron ore. "I don't have a helmet, but I bet I'll be fine as long as I pay closer attention," I said to Argo, then raised the pickax.

Once I was sure there were no stalactites threatening to fall, I resumed smacking the rock. On the third hit, the ore broke into four pieces and tumbled to the ground. I quickly scooped up the pieces and tossed them into my inventory. The only place around the log cabin where iron ore could be found was Misha's old cave, so our supply was not exactly robust. If I could fill my carrying capacity with ore and bring it back, it would be a huge help to our growing town.

After that, I stopped the canoe each time I spotted iron ore and resumed striking with my pickax. In addition to iron, there were small amounts of copper and silver ore. There was even a crystal, though I didn't know what they were used for yet. I collected them all as we went farther into the cave.

It might have been a natural cave, but this was clearly a dungeon, so there were monsters now and then. The worst were giant bats that flew over three or four at a time, trying to extinguish my torch. Once the light was out, the three of us couldn't swing until we got fresh illumination, lest we accidentally hit one another. But Kuro, true to its name as a dark panther, could see our enemies even in the darkness, and it batted down the speedy bats with its powerful front paws.

In less than half an hour, Alice, Argo, and I had filled our storage with natural resources, and I was feeling very satisfied...or at least, I should have been.

"...You don't seem very happy," Alice noted. I closed my window and acknowledged her.

"Yeah...the thing is, I realized something very inconvenient."

"What is it?"

"This cave isn't all that far from the Stiss, right? Which means it's

only a matter of time before Mutasina's group of players finds it. And if you can get this much ore from here, it won't be hard to outfit all one hundred of them in iron equipment."

Alice's expression tightened. The team led by Schulz, which had attacked us last night—apparently named Fawkes—numbered twenty-something, and about half of them had iron weapons. And we had just barely won that battle. If an army of a hundred all wearing iron attacked, we didn't stand a chance.

"...Yes, that would be as disadvantageous as the Battle of the Eastern Gate," she said, her voice hard.

The Battle of the Eastern Gate was the opener to the Otherworld War, which had embroiled all the Underworld. When the battle had happened, I was still comatose, so I had only the vaguest recollection of an oppressive atmosphere hanging over the human camp. But to Alice, it was the battle where she'd lost her one apprentice, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-One.

I felt bad that I was causing her to view PvP battle in *Unital Ring* the same way as the War of the Underworld...but then I reconsidered. To Alice, both were true battles that required her very best efforts.

I smacked my cheeks to scold myself for that moment of foolishness. When she gave me a curious look, I explained, "That doesn't mean I can just give up. If a hundred people with iron weapons pull off an ambush on us, that's that. But we know the enemy's camp, and we know we can get iron ore here. If we put our minds together and come up with ideas, I'm sure we can find a way to win."

"...Yes, that's right," said Alice with a smile.

"In that case, I'll give ya a good idea right now. For free, even," said Argo, who was stroking Kuro's neck at the prow of the canoe.

"Wh-what idea is that?"

"We don't want the enemy mining iron ore from this cave, right? So why don't we just seal off the whole thing?"

"Seal off...the cave?!"

I was aghast for several seconds, then cast around. The cave was twenty to twenty-five feet wide—and about as tall, too. There

were many branches, making its full size hard to grasp. We'd been moving slowly, gathering resources, but it had been thirty minutes without reaching the end, so it could be a good mile or two long, for all we knew.

"If we try to fill this place in, we'll need ten trucks full of dynamite. And even here in *Unital Ring*, I'm guessing that kind of major landscape change is impossible to do," I argued, using plain common sense.

But Argo just smirked back at me. "I'm not sayin' we should fill the entire thing in. Just the exit behind the waterfall. If we seal it there, they can't get in."

"Oh...r-right. Yes, that's true...but even that's a huge task. Just whacking at the ceiling with a pickax isn't going to do it..."

"Ah...that's it. I understand." Alice smacked her fist into her palm. "You don't mean to destroy but to build."

"Build...? Oh! I get it. You mean craft a stone wall right at the entrance," I said, finally realizing what Argo was implying. I lifted my hand to snap my fingers but stopped myself before that. "But wait, that won't work, will it? I mean, if a player could build a wall or staircase in a dungeon, you could make your own map shortcuts and mess with other players all you want."

"Well, test it out and see," Argo said.

I realized she had a point. So I took my unsnapped fingers and opened the menu instead, pulling up the Beginner Carpentry creation menu and finding *Stacked Rock Wall* on the list. The translucent ghost wall that appeared was colored gray because its initial position intersected with the wall of the cave, but sliding it to the side turned it light purple.

"...I think it works..."

"There, see? I had a feeling this aligned with the design philosophy of *UR*," said Argo with confidence.

Out of the frustration of not thinking of this myself, I shot back, "What's the design philosophy of *UR*?"

"In a word, excess. An excessively huge world map, excessively detailed graphics, excessively extensive skills and abilities...This entire game is designed ta challenge our gaming experience as

players. Those who place boundaries around what they can do die first, and those who come up with ideas beyond the bounds of common sense are the ones who survive.”

“.....”

I had no rebuttal for that.

When fighting the vengeful wraith, I’d used flaxseed oil to light my sword on fire and cut through the ghost, which was immune to physical attacks. But that was still an idea that relied on gamer knowledge. When the wraith was coming back together, however, Argo had snatched the torch from my hand and jammed it into the cut, causing it to explode. That was pure creativity, an idea that surpassed common sense.

In the SAO days, I’d come up with all kinds of wild ideas, too, and attempted them without fear. Ninety-nine out of a hundred of those ideas failed, but there were numerous times when that one successful idea had saved my life. But once I’d started playing and enjoying ALO as just a normal game, I’d lost that enterprising spirit. I’d lost my spark.

I wanted to smack my cheeks again, but I was still holding the stone wall ghost, so I clenched my fists instead. A number of rough-hewn stone blocks fell into place from nothing. A wall six feet to a side appeared at the edge of the cave wall.

“...Ya did it,” Argo said proudly.

“I did it,” I repeated, considering this.

If we could build walls here, we could even build a house and production facilities inside this cave, with enough space. In other words, we could make our own base. We could not just seal off the mouth of the cave with a wall—we could build up a base inside and produce a huge amount of iron ingots and make Krito Town out of iron ore, right in here. It would be much more effective than hauling all of it to the distant forest. That, too, was a commonsense idea, rather than an uncommon one, but I felt it was worth trying.

But for now...

“All right. We’ll go with your good idea, Argo, and block off the entrance. It sucks that we won’t be able to explore all the way to the end of the cave, but oh well...”

"Why don't we go to the end first, then? Mutasina's army isn't going to leave the ruins until the evening after next, right?"

"Well, that's true..."

The march to attack might happen in two days, but they were already gaining levels and gathering leather, I knew. There was no guarantee that at least one of them wouldn't find the waterfall and try to search beneath it, like we did.

"The thing is, I'm still a little worried, so I'll go back to the entrance. You two search around here for now."

"What?!" Alice exclaimed. "Then we should all go back..."

"It's much faster to run along the water than make the trip there and back with the canoe. And I've learned how to deal with all these monsters."

"Then go with this guy here," Argo said, patting the back of Kuro's neck. The panther growled, "*Grau!*"

"Uh...are you sure you two will be all right?"

"There you go, disrespecting me again," Alice muttered, her cheeks puffing up like a sulking child's. "My level is almost matching yours by now. Argo is an excellent fighter, too. You should be more worried about yourself."

"That's right. Listen, we're not gonna try anything reckless, so you just take Kuro there with ya. In fact," said Argo, patting the panther's broad, powerful back, "do you suppose you could *ride* on this guy?"

"What, on Kuro's back?"

"Give it a try."

"But what if it gets mad about it...?" I replied. But in terms of physique, the panther certainly looked capable of it. I hopped from the canoe to dry rock, and Kuro followed me out, light on its feet, and went to lie down next to me without needing an order.

"...Kuro, do you mind if I ride you?" I asked. The creature growled, "*Grau.*" I interpreted that as a yes and timidly straddled its back. The moment my weight was resting on it, Kuro easily stood up, carrying me in full gear.

"Whoa...I think this might work...?"

"See? Now give it the order to run," Argo insisted.

After a brief hesitation, I directed my panther mount, "Kuro, go!"

Immediately, it roared enthusiastically and began to race along the water's edge inside the cave—despite the fact that there was only about four feet of dry space there.

"Aaaaah!!"

I was holding the torch with my left hand, so my right hand was all I had to grab onto the lapis-blue hair on the ridge of Kuro's back. Behind me, I heard voices call out "Come back quick!" and "Be careful!" but they were growing quieter by the moment.

The floor of the cave was not flat but rippling, with sharp stalagmites sticking out here and there, but even so, the black panther nimbly leaped over all obstacles without slowing. Upon reflection, Kuro had initially run into that cave in the middle of the Giyoru Savanna to escape that hailstorm. Perhaps lapispine dark panthers made their homes in caves from the start.

It was my first time riding a panther, but I'd been on horses many times—virtual world only, of course. I recalled how to absorb the fierce rocking and shaking of the experience, and once I felt like I was in sync with Kuro, a new message appeared.

Riding skill gained. Proficiency has risen to 1.

So the system categorized Kuro as a mount. That meant Misha, the thornspike cave bear, was, too, since it was holding five of those Patter children at once. As for Aga, the long-billed giant agamid, it was the same size as Kuro...but I couldn't say anything for sure. I could ask Asuna to give it a try once we were back at the town.

Meanwhile, Kuro raced through the darkness. When we got to a fork in the path, it would follow my lead as long as I tugged in a direction on its back fur. Occasionally, monsters appeared, but I gauged that we could speed right past them. And even if I was building up a train of them behind me, there were no other players in the cave who might be endangered.

The trip that took thirty minutes on the canoe—including mining and battle time—took Kuro only seven or eight to finish on foot, as we entered a single straight section I recognized. I tugged back on the panther's pelt to slow it down. The sound of the roaring falls was faint but growing.

"Kuro, stop."

The panther immediately came to a halt, so I got off and gave the back of its neck a good ruffling as thanks, then I pulled out a piece of bison jerky to give it as a treat. For myself, I had some leftover shish kebab from the Stiss Ruins to chew on as I headed for the entrance to the cave.

When more light appeared ahead, I put out the torch, and I could see the opening, which let in the pale moonlight.

I took another good look at the size of the exit; it was about eight feet tall and wide. It felt narrow when we rammed the canoe through, but now that I was thinking of blocking it off, it seemed huge. On the other hand, I was just placing crafts there with the help of the menu, not stacking rocks one by one, so the size didn't matter that much. The real problem was whether I could place a stone wall through the path of the river flowing through the cave, and to find out, I would have to test it.

My inventory was full of ore and crystals, so I materialized some of the ore nuggets and stacked them on the ground, then grabbed my pickax.

The wall of the cave still featured a hole where I'd extracted the first iron ore earlier. Resources in this world regenerated over time, but the cycle was quite slow compared to the average RPG. I aimed the pickax at a spot just to the side of the hole, and a single swing broke out a gray chunk. I picked it up and checked its properties: The name was *Favilliteresite*. If the familiar favillite found in unlimited quantities upriver was a kind of brittle limestone, then this was a smooth limestone, I supposed. That might make it a higher-tier material, but I doubted it was valuable enough to come here to mine.

After a while, I'd filled my inventory with all the favilliteresite I could hold, then collected a bit of clay from the water's edge and selected *Crude Stone Wall* from the crafting menu. I put the ghost object just in front of the exit, but it turned gray, indicating that I couldn't place it there. I sank it down into the water, but there was no change.

“I figured...”

That was all within my expectations, so I slid the ghost to the right, and it finally turned purple again when over half the base was

resting on land. I clenched my hand there and created the stone wall. Then I dug out some more stone and clay and tried to snap it in place with the first bit of wall, but it wouldn't turn purple.

“Hmm...”

Well, it stood to reason that a huge stone wall wouldn't just float in the air without any support. And it was kind of crazy to attempt to block off the entrance to a dungeon anyway. I was about to call off the whole experiment when Argo's words repeated themselves in my head.

This entire game is designed to challenge our gaming experience as players.

I had to think, not like a gamer but like a carpenter.

The reason I couldn't put the wall in the river was because it would block the flow of the water. So what if it was a structure that didn't impede the flow? I scrolled through the Beginner Carpentry menu until my eyes landed on the name *Crude Wooden Pillar*. It required only one log. I knew I had a few logs of spiral pine left, so I hit the craft button, creating a simple circular ghost pillar. I swung it over the water, then pulled it downward, and when the bottom touched the riverbed, the object turned purple.

“Yes!”

Without thinking, I clenched a triumphant fist with my free hand, which caused Kuro to swish its tail from the ground nearby. Then I carefully adjusted its positioning and created the pillar. With a few more repetitions, I had created four pillars that acted as an extension of the original stone wall. That used up all of my logs, so I had to pray it would be enough.

I selected the stone wall from the menu again. This time, I snapped it to both the original wall and the four wooden pillars. Instantly, the gray ghost object turned purple, and I shouted, “Yes!!” After clenching my fist, a huge amount of stone tumbled into place, blocking 80 percent of the cave entrance. It was suddenly much darker, so I lit the torch again.

From there, it was just simple repetition. I put more stone and clay into my inventory, then added to the wall. I placed three side by side and two more on top, and then the exit was completely gone from

sight.

But that was not truly sealing off the exit. It was just a crude stone wall, after all, and its durability wasn't high enough to prevent it from being destroyed by appropriate means. The wooden pillars under the water were even weaker. But the walls I'd built were made of the same favilliteresite as the cave itself, so from the outside, its color and texture should be seamless enough that it would be very hard to detect that it was blocking the entrance to a cave.

It probably wouldn't last forever, of course. But right now, all we really needed to do was prevent Mutasina's army from equipping itself in iron gear.

I stuck my hand behind my throat guard to touch the choker-style symbol that I was keeping hidden from the rest of the world—my Noose. The breath-stopping magic hadn't activated once since I'd left the ruins, so that probably meant Holgar and the others were playing nicely on her orders for now. I didn't blame them. I never wanted to experience that terror again. It was like staring headlong into an encounter with death.

But I had to resign myself to it. When I eventually had a direct meeting with Mutasina, and she learned that I was under her Noose, she would activate the spell without a second thought. And the chances of finding the solution to the curse before then were slim.

In any case, I had to do what I could for now.

I lowered my hand and opened the ring menu, then sent Alice a message: *Done sealing entrance. Heading back.* She promptly replied with *Got it. We've found the boss room.*

"...‘Boss,’ she says,” I told Kuro, shaking my head. The panther just yowled, as if to say, “I’ve still got energy!”

7

“...When we get back to the town, the first thing we should build is a bathhouse,” Alice said with a sigh, sitting on one of the canoe’s seats.

Normally, I would reply with something like “We can worry about bathing later. Use the river if you really want to,” but in this case, I had to agree with her. Ahead of Alice, Argo murmured, “A bath would be nice,” and Kuro added a little “Gaur...”

The boss monster of the cave behind the falls was a giant slug. Its proper name was the Stinking Snail—Argo explained to me what the English words meant—and I had to agree with them. The gigantic ten-foot slug expelled a truly abominable-smelling liquid that had more of an effect on our willpower than our HP.

Of course, the smelly liquid was more than just odorous; it inflicted a trio of status effects in gradual MP loss, vision abnormalities, and increased cooldown time. Plus, the battlefield was a dome-shaped cavern in which the slug raced across the ceiling at high speed, forcing us to chase after it in the canoe and perform jumping sword skills just to hit it.

The slug’s actual physical attack value was low, so after a while, we stopped trying to dodge the liquid attacks and just powered through with sword skills, but we were so covered in disgusting slimy coating at the end of the battle that we couldn’t be bothered to even celebrate our level-ups. The first thing we did was dive into the cavern lake to wash off the slime, but I could still smell it somehow.

“So...the boat is taking us to our destination, ya said...right?” Argo asked. I stopped sniffing myself and looked up. The underground lake boss chamber seemed like a dead end, but when the creature died, a wall in the back rumbled upward to reveal a new

waterway. We proceeded onward, but I couldn't guess what we'd find ahead. And the same rumbling sounded after we went through, so I had to assume there was no going back to that boss chamber.

"In New Aincrad, there would be a staircase to the next floor..." I mumbled without thinking.

Alice seized on that. "Speaking of which...what happened to New Aincrad after it fell?"

"Huh? Well...it's probably still where it landed, right?"

Neither Alice nor I had witnessed the spectacle of the gigantic floating castle smashing into the earth, but according to Liz and Silica, it was on par with the Tunguska event. I thought, *You didn't see the Tunguska event happen, either*, but according to Yui, who still had access to the map data at the time, the fall completely destroyed the first through twenty-fifth floors of New Aincrad, so it must have been a hell of an impact.

Alice had heard all that, too, so I gave her a quizzical look. The knight pouted.

"Yes, I know that. But my question is: Can anyone still get inside?"

"Oh...Hmm, I'm not sure about that. If we can get close, we might spot a route that takes us inside...You wanna go there?"

"Yes, I suppose. I've been curious."

"About what?"

"All the players who died as a result of New Aincrad's fall would have resurrected at the Stiss Ruins. But what happened to the people who lived in the towns and villages on all those floors?"

".....!"

I sucked in a sharp breath. Yes, there were many civilian NPCs who lived in New Aincrad. What had happened to them when those twenty-five floors were obliterated? NPCs in ALO were immortal as a general rule, so they probably wouldn't take damage and die like players would, but I hadn't heard anything about others being teleported to the ruins. Plus, there was the possibility that they were now like the NPCs of *Unital Ring*, such as the Bashin and Patter, who were certainly not invincible.

"...Argo, do you know what happened to New Aincrad's NPCs?"

"Nope. I didn't look into that...", the info dealer admitted,

prompting Alice's expression to grow severe.

At this point in time, Alice understood logically what NPCs in a VRMMO really were. But emotionally, she was still finding it difficult to keep them separate. I couldn't blame her; the residents of the Underworld had souls—fluctlights—just like any biological person, but in some senses, they were like NPCs, too. And I didn't want to think of simple question-and-answer AI NPCs as empty-headed game objects that moved around like robots.

"...After we get back to the forest, we'll go check on what happened to New Aincrad," I murmured. Alice glanced at me, then nodded.

The dugout canoe slid silently down the natural canal. I checked the map screen, but you couldn't see the world map while in a dungeon, so I couldn't begin to guess where we actually were in the world. But in terms of direction, at the very least, we weren't getting farther away from the Great Zellelilio Forest—I told myself.

After switching to my inventory, I noted, "Oh, by the way, we got a magicrystal from that slug boss."

Argo spun around at attention. "You did, Kiri-boy? But it didn't use any magic on us."

"Wouldn't it be gamer's common sense that only enemies who use magic can drop magicrystals?"

"Urgh..." She blanched but recovered with a quick grin. "So what kind of magicrystal is it?"

"Let's see..."

I sorted my inventory by most recent, then found what I was looking for just under the slug's bodily materials.

"It says...magicrystal of rot."

"Rot? What does that mean?" Alice wondered.

"Rotting. Corruption."

".....Then it is a magicrystal for decay magic?"

"I...suppose so. You wanna eat it, Alice?"

"No thank you," said the knight at once.

I turned to the info dealer. "You want, Argo?"

"I'll pass."

"....."

I thought, *Awww, c'mon!* but I knew saying it out loud would lead to some unpleasant conversation. Before I could close my inventory, however, Argo said, “That reminds me...wasn’t there a magicrystal sort o’ thing the willow tree ghost dropped, Kiri-boy?”

“Huh? Oh...right, there was.”

The vengeful wraith left a pale-blue light behind when it dissipated, and I’d run up the trunk of the tree to grab it. I scrolled through my item list, all the way past the materials I collected in the cave, then the food I bought in the ruins, then...

“Oh...hey, this one looks good! It’s a magicrystal of ice.”

“Oooh, not bad. Go ahead and learn it.”

“Huh...? Me? Are you sure?”

I looked at Argo, then Alice. Both of them nodded encouragingly. I moved to press the button to materialize the magicrystal but stopped myself.

“...No. I’ll hold off,” I said.

“Why?” asked Alice.

I considered the question, then said, “Well, I’ve started down the Brawn ability tree, right? I think it would be better to give the magic skills to people focusing on Sagacity instead.”

This was true, but it wasn’t my only reason. In an emotional, not rational sense, I didn’t think ice magic would suit me. Ice magic—or more specifically, frost arts—were the specialty of a late, close friend of mine. I was never able to make more than five frost elements at a time, but he could handle up to seven or eight.

Alice could sense my sentiments, and she flashed a gentle smile. “I see. Then you should hold on to that ice magicrystal until we can find the right person to take it.”

“I’ll do that,” I said, starting to close the window, but Argo spoke up again.

“In that case, learn the decay magic instead.”

“Awww...I don’t want that! Dark magic would be better...”

“Really? You’re gonna be picky about this? Your MP ain’t doin’ anything else right now, so find a use for them!”

Then you learn it! I thought. But in terms of overall MP, I had more, being level-18—I’d leveled-up in the fight against the giant

slug—while Argo had just reached level-11, having gained three. The only way to increase proficiency in a magic skill was repeated use, so having more MP meant more chances to cast spells.

“...All right,” I said, summoning my courage and materializing the magiccrystal of decay.

It was an orb about half an inch across. The size was the same as the fire magiccrystal I’d given Yui yesterday, but unlike that beautiful ruby-red orb, this one was a cloudy gray, like boiled sludge.

To learn a magic skill, I had to put this magiccrystal in my mouth and break it with my teeth. When Yui did it, she breathed out fire. So what was going to happen when I...?

“Go on—hurry up,” urged Argo.

She’s totally enjoying this! I thought ruefully. But I bravely stuck the gray stone in my mouth. It was slick and hard, but it had no flavor for now. I caught it between my right molars and added steady pressure.

Eventually, there was a cracking sensation. Resigning myself to the consequences, I bit down.





“.....*Bleaaaargh!!*”

Despite being in the presence of ladies, I covered my mouth with my hands, hunched over, and gagged for all I was worth. I didn't have any other choice, because when the orb burst, it filled my mouth with a liquid possessing the most putrid taste and odor I'd ever experienced in my entire life, real or virtual. If I had to compare it to something...No, trying to think of a real comparison was actually going to make me puke.

“W...wada...Wadduh...” I groaned, thrusting out my hand. Argo handed me a simple vessel full of well water—a hollowed-out fruit. I grabbed it, removed the top, and desperately downed the chilly water. Even after finishing every last drop, the horrible aftertaste did not disappear, but at least I'd gotten over the convulsions.

“...Th-thanks...”

I handed back the vessel. A new message appeared before my eyes.

Decay magic skill gained. Proficiency has risen to 1.

“.....”

Just the sight of the word *decay* made my stomach roil again. If the requirement to gain the skill was not spitting out that horrible liquid, I'm sure nine out of ten people would have failed the test.

In any case, I was now the second magician—no, magic swordsman?—after Yui. I went over to my skill window to check the details, and it said there was only one spell I could use with a proficiency of 1.

“What's this...? Rotten Shot: Shoot a mass of something rotten. Something rotten...? Like what? And what kind of a name is that...?” I grumbled, while Argo looked like she was desperately trying not to burst into screams of laughter.

“Go on and use it,” she dared me.

“If you laugh, I'm hitting you with the second one,” I warned, tapping on the decay magic name, then read the tips that appeared. It said that the basic gesture for activating decay magic was to extend your hands in a rounded shape, like holding a ball, touching the tips of your fingers together. After trying it, I had to admit that compared to the gesture for fire magic—pressing your right palm to

your left fist—this one didn't look as cool.

But the magic did activate, and a greenish-gray light infused my hands. Next came the finger motions for Rotten Shot. This one was simple: pulling my hands apart so that my fingertips were eight inches apart instead. Between them, an orb the size of an orange appeared, the same color as the aura. Its surface rippled with liquid like a living creature. It truly did look like “something rotten.”

A light-purple targeting circle was visible, too. It was currently stuck on the bottom of the canoe, but when I lifted my hands, the circle moved, too, until it was over Argo's face. The other two didn't seem to be able to see it.

I was briefly tempted by a mischievous streak to let it fly right now; I had to stop myself by thinking, *You're about to be eighteen years old, so act like it!* Instead, I moved the targeting circle to a stalactite hanging over the riverbank to the left, and I squeezed my hands to fire.

The gray orb shot out with a horrible *splurp!* sound. It struck the middle of the stalactite, right on target, and splattered everywhere. Nothing more happened, however. It was a very slender and delicate stalactite, but there wasn't a single crack on it.

“...Doesn't seem like it does much physical damage,” Argo noted dryly.

“But maybe it will serve well as a way to harass enemies?” Alice added in an attempt to be helpful. Kuro just swished its tail at the prow of the canoe, trying not to get caught in the middle of this.

Even without having any abilities in the Sagacity ability tree, I had enough MP to shoot three consecutive Rotten Shots, so I kept blasting the darkness with wasted shot after wasted shot to up my magic proficiency. After fifteen minutes, something changed up ahead. There was a vague, reflective blue shine everywhere—moonlight was entering the cave.

I didn't want to jinx it by saying “There's the exit!” out loud, so I silently kept the oar moving. Argo and Alice were staring straight ahead. The waterway narrowed bit by bit, then began to bend left

and right until I started to worry that the sixteen-foot canoe might actually get wedged in a curve.

Then, without warning, the walls were gone. The canoe glided forward onto a large, flowing surface. It was a river.

Behind us, there was a narrow opening at one spot in a sheer rock wall. With all of the protrusions, it would probably look like any other hollow from a distance. I quickly opened my world map and saw that we were right at the middle point between the falls where we entered the dungeon and the southern tip of the Great Zelletelio Forest. That would mean this was the same Maruba River that Alice and I had traveled down hours earlier. With that in mind, the scenery *did* seem familiar to me.

“...So there was a cave entrance right here,” Alice murmured.

“I never even noticed it,” I replied. “But I’m sure the door in the boss chamber wouldn’t have opened from this side, so it would have been just a dead-end cave.”

“Do you really suppose we couldn’t have opened it?” she asked.

“Hmm, I don’t know...”

In game logic, you might be able to get through the back door once the boss was already beaten, but *Unital Ring* also seemed determined to overturn such assumptions. The best way to find out was to try it, but I didn’t want to be anywhere near that cave for a while.

“Well, in any case, we got this boat past that waterfall. So ya didn’t hafta break it down after all,” said Argo. She lifted her hands high and took a deep breath. Alice closed her eyes in brief relaxation, and even Kuro performed a very catlike stretch at the end of the boat.

For a moment, I stopped rowing the canoe and breathed the fresh air deep into my lungs. However, it did not loosen the feeling of blockage at my throat. I’d probably have to live with that sensation until I dispelled the curse.

The game clock in the lower right of my vision said that it had just passed midnight. It felt like we’d been in the cave for ages, but it had been only about an hour. Even going upstream, the canoe could manage a speed of twelve miles per hour, so from here, we could

get back to the Zelletelio Forest in about thirty minutes, assuming no trouble.

I switched my open window to the message tab, then typed up a quick text to Asuna: *Everyone safe. Be back before one.* Then, another thought coming to me, I added, *Happy birthday.*

7:15 AM, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30TH

As the express train rumbled into motion, I leaned back against the seat and closed my eyes.

The express left from Honkawagoe Station, the closest to my house, on the Seibu Shinjuku Line, which at this hour promised a good chance at a seat if you waited long enough. On normal school days, I'd often be standing all the way through Tanishi, but today I wanted to do everything I could to alleviate my sleepiness. Since the *UR* incident began on Sunday, three nights had passed, and I'd taken consecutive all-night dives. Even I was reaching the limit of my exhaustion. I didn't know who was responsible for the *UR* incident, but I wanted to ask them why they couldn't have done it during summer vacation. Then I could have powered through twenty hours a day and reached the land revealed by the heavenly light by the third day. (Or so I told myself.)

I could feel these thoughts pulling my mind deeper toward the abyss of sleep, but I held firm just before the moment of no return. There were two reasons for this: One, I was worried about dropping the bag I was carrying with both arms, and two, I couldn't get the high-pitched sound of Mutasina the sorceress slamming the bottom of her staff into the ground out of my mind.

In the end, she did not activate her suffocation magic again before I logged out at four last night—er, this morning. It was possible her threat about the range being infinite was only a bluff, and her spell just didn't reach me, fifteen miles away from the Stiss Ruins, but that was only wishful thinking. It was a ridiculous enough spell to work on a hundred people at once, so of course it could probably last to the ends of the earth as well.

Last night, Alice, Kuro, Argo, and I returned safely to a warm welcome from our companions, despite the late hour. To my surprise, it wasn't just the Patter but another ten Bashin.

Lisbeth, Yui, and Asuna had left for the Bashin a bit after Alice and I had headed out. They had encountered their fair share of troubles—chased by a giant whip spider field boss, falling into a giant antlion pit—but the trip across the southeast part of the Giyoru Savanna had taken them less than two hours.

When they'd reached the Bashin village, they'd offered some bison jerky, much to the Bashin's delight, and brought up the topic of resettlement. When they admitted that our new town wasn't necessarily safe, the leader of the settlement, Yzelma, pulled out her sword and said, "Then show me that you have the strength to protect your town and its people."

At that point, Lisbeth was level-12, Yui was level-11, and Asuna was level-10. And Asuna and Yui had chosen the Sagacity ability tree, so they weren't suited for close combat. But Asuna put her hand on Lisbeth's shoulder before the other girl could stand, and she said, "No, I'll do it."

Her weapon was the fine iron rapier Lisbeth had forged, but her armor was the same light breast armor Yui wore, plus guards for her arms and legs. Captain Yzelma wore only leather on her chest and waist, too, but she was a full head taller than Asuna and impressively muscled. Her weapon was an ultrathick curved cleaver, like a combination of sword and ax. Upon seeing the delicate rapier, which seemed likely to shatter if their weapons met, Yzelma and the other warriors assumed Asuna was simply the warm-up act for Lisbeth, the macer.

But Asuna avoided Yzelma's furious attacks with simple footwork, waiting for the moment her opponent was unbalanced, and then she struck the center of the cleaver with the two-part Rapier skill Parallel Sting. Yzelma admitted defeat, then named the next captain right on the spot before personally requesting to join the expedition to the Great Zellelilio Forest.

After Yzelma nominated herself to go, nine other Bashin joined in, and the traveling party of thirteen scattered the whip spider and

antlion on their way back to the forest town by eleven o'clock. So we ended up coming back two hours late, by which point the Bashin had split up the living space on the west quadrant of the town and gotten busy building the furnishings they'd need. Asuna laughed and said that our delay felt like it was over in a blink.

They were worried about the Bashin viewing Kuro and Misha as potential hunting targets, but apparently the warriors saw more heroic valor in one who had tamed such beasts than one who had hunted them. Naturally, a bear beast-tamer was a higher rank than a panther beast-tamer, so to the Bashin, Silica was the most exalted member of the town. I had no qualms with that, of course.

After a simple welcoming party, the members of the main group met in the living room of our cabin to hold another meeting. When Klein and Agil learned that our newest member was the same Argo as the one from the strategy guides, they were stunned, but we didn't have time to reminisce about the old days. We needed to talk about Mutasina's threat as soon as possible.

When I told them about the tremendous dark power of the Noose of the Accursed, and the possible invasion of a hundred players as early as tomorrow night, even Klein couldn't crack any jokes. But we all agreed that abandoning the town and fleeing ahead of them was not an option. If they attacked, we would fight back.

As a positive bit of news, I was able to explain that we'd camouflaged the entrance to the cave behind the waterfall, delaying their ability to outfit every member with iron gear—and told them that Holgar's, Dikkos's, and Tsuburo's groups were being threatened by Mutasina, which couldn't be good for morale. Still, the difference in numbers was overwhelming. With ten Bashin and twenty Patter, plus Argo, we now had forty-one, plus four pets. If you counted Misha and Pina as having a combined strength of five people, and two each for Kuro and Aga, that put us at fifty, only half of the enemy's numbers. To make up for that deficit, we needed one more big wrinkle to our advantage.

The meeting lasted until two in the morning, and we threw around many ideas, but none of them were practical or realistic, and it became overnight homework. On the other hand, the previous bit of

homework about replacing the name Krito Town turned up a rather clever suggestion from Leafa.

Her choice was Ruis na Ríg. It was the name of a king's castle in ancient Celtic myth that was surrounded by a circular wall, like our forest town. Our town didn't have a king, but no one opposed the choice. In fact, it was unanimously accepted on the spot, becoming our official name. Whether Ruis na Ríg became a true town or turned into a ruin after just three days would depend on the battle tomorrow night.

Argo kept shooting me glances during the meeting, which I took as insistence that I tell everyone that I had suffered Mutasina's magic, too, but I was unable to bring it up in the end. If I did, everyone would have worried about me, gotten angry, and made undoing the spell our top priority. But I harbored a nasty certainty that the only way to cure it was to kill Mutasina and break her staff in two. Our time was precious, and I didn't want to waste anyone else's. We needed to focus on raising everyone's levels and skill proficiencies for the sake of defending our town.

Argo approached me after the meeting and whispered, "You stubborn goat." But she did respect my decision, adding only, "I'll do everything I can," before returning to the group.

She was right about my stubbornness, but it wasn't like I'd decided the curse was impossible to dispel without any evidence. After I explained the Noose in detail at the meeting, Yui found the information troubling. She said that the scale was too vast and the effect too strong.

Assuming Mutasina had inherited the dark magic skill from ALO, her proficiency should have dipped to 100 after the grace period wore off. At that point, whatever magic she could use would be equivalent to my three-part Sharp Nail for the One-Handed Sword skill. But Noose of the Accursed was a tremendous work of magic greater than even the ultimate sword skill, the ten-part Nova Ascension—or perhaps the ultimate attack of the Dual Blades skill, which didn't exist in ALO, the twenty-seven-part Eclipse...

No one could say a word after Yui's proclamation, but it was undeniable that Mutasina had used magic with a proficiency of

1,000. So undoing that curse would require magic of the same level or an item that was suitably powerful. It just wasn't worth focusing on dispelling the curse until we understood *how* Mutasina had used that magic.

I was nodding off with these thoughts coursing through my mind when the express slid into Hana-Koganei Station. At the next station, Tanishi, I would need to get off and take the local-service train instead. I didn't get a power nap in, but I'd at least have twenty minutes or so to sleep once I got to school.

I adjusted the paper bag resting atop my schoolbag in my lap and mentally prepared myself to get up from the comfort of my seat. The train completed a gentle curve, bringing the morning sun's prickle to the back of my neck through the window. The clouds that brought rain through the night had fled to the east. The weather looked like it would be clear today.

Somehow, I made it through my morning classes without nodding off. Like yesterday, I hurried off to the outside secret garden bordering the library. In one hand was the bag of snacks I'd bought from the cafeteria, and in the other was the bag with the department store logo on it.

After I passed through the narrow space hidden by the planters, the fresh scent of plants tickled my nose. The grass was pretty much dry, but the leaves on the trees were bright green, and I could practically hear the water flowing through their veins, having been greedily sucked up by the roots.

I paused just one step into the green space, staring at the sight of the girl standing beneath the white siris and sandalwood trees in the center of the little hill, her back toward me.

In the pale-green light dappling through the branches, her long hair shone brilliantly. Despite wearing our familiar school uniform, she felt like a creature of the fey, as ethereal as if she might vanish if I came any closer.

Just then, sensing my still presence, the girl spun around.

She grinned briefly upon seeing me, then pouted. I rushed up to

her, but she turned her head away in a huff.

“Why do you always watch me from behind like that, Kirito?”

“Oh, come on, I don’t *always* do that...”

“You’ve been like that since the beginning.”

“B-beginning...?”

“In the first labyrinth tower of Aincrad, you were secretly watching me fight those kobolds, weren’t you?”

Stunned at the mention of something that’d happened nearly four years in the past, I could only grimace and argue, “W-well, I couldn’t interrupt your fight...and I talked to you as soon as you were done.”

“Yes, and what you said was, ‘That was overkill.’ In all honesty, my very first impression was that you were somewhere between a weirdo and a crazy person.”

“Hey, that’s messed up...I was honestly concerned for your well-being, and that was your reaction...?”

She suddenly cracked a smile and chuckled, and I laughed, too. But the truth was that the reason I didn’t say anything to her until that fight was over was because I’d been lost in the sight. I’d been captive to the beauty of Asuna’s sword technique, piercing the darkness like a shooting star.

After laughing, Asuna threw her arms wide and wrapped me in a big hug.

“The truth is, I was kinda happy you said something. At least that way, I knew there were still players in that world who might actually care about someone else.”

“.....”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. The only thing I could think to do was hug her back, but I couldn’t do that, either, because my hands were full. Instead, I pressed my head against hers, hoping to relate my feelings directly. I didn’t know if I succeeded, but after a few seconds, she lightly pulled back with her usual gentle smile.

“Well, let’s eat lunch. Sorry to make you run the errand.”

“Of course. I mean, today is your...”

She placed a finger over my mouth to stop me.

“I’d like to hear that one *after* we eat.”

“...Got it.”

I moved the bags to one hand, allowing me to pull the polyethylene sheet out of my pocket and place it on the grass. The long, thin store bag went on the corner out of the way, so we could focus on the baguette sandwiches and vegetable juice from the cafeteria. We'd had baguettes for lunch yesterday, too, but they changed the menu around each day, so I never got bored of it.

"Here's your niçoise, Asuna."

"Thanks. What did you get, Kirito?"

"Gorgonzola and sun-dried tomato."

"Oooh, that sounds good. Shall we share half-and-half?"

"Okay, if you want..."

On the other hand, I couldn't cleanly tear the firmly toasted baguette sandwich in two with my hands, and I didn't feel right about giving her a piece that was already bitten. Thankfully, Asuna pulled something silver out of her skirt pocket. It was a key chain with two keys on it—no, a tiny multi-tool. She extended a knife about two inches long, then presented it to me handle-first.

"Here. Good luck!"

".....Th-thanks..."

I took it and gave her a funny look.

"...Do you always carry this around?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why would you...? You're going to have some tricky questions to answer if a police officer ever has to question you."

"Teenage girls don't get questioned by the police."

I wasn't so sure about that, but Asuna made a more serious face and declared, "I've made up my mind. Next time, I'm going to keep you out of harm's way."

"Huh.....?"

After a brief bit of confusion, I understood what she meant. Roughly three months ago, I fell into cardiac arrest after being injected with a muscle relaxer by Atsushi Kanamoto, aka Johnny Black from the PK guild Laughing Coffin, right before Asuna's eyes. All I needed to do to feel the fear and concern that experience put her through was to imagine the reverse position. I would swear to myself that I'd do anything in my power to prevent it from happening

again. But...

"...It's all right. Xaxa and Johnny Black were arrested. There's no one left to come after me," I said, trying to explain that I didn't want her carrying a knife around, even if it was for my sake. But Asuna's expression did not change.

"That might be true, but I refuse to feel that kind of regret again," she stated, brooking no argument. I had to accept it.

".....All right."

After a long look at the knife, I used the folded-up wrapper as a cutting board and pressed the blade to the middle of the sandwich. It might have looked like a two-inch toy knife, but it cut alarmingly well, and with enough pressure, it easily split the hard French bread. I cut the first sandwich in two without much trouble and started on the second.

"...All done."

I rewrapped the halves of niçoise and sun-dried tomato sandwiches and offered them to Asuna, who thanked me. A tissue came in handy to wipe the knife blade clean before I folded it back in and returned it.

Both the baguette sandwiches were delicious, and I was glad we shared them, but there was still a note of unease in my chest, like a pebble that refused to be dislodged. If there were some unknown members of Laughing Coffin still lurking out there, and they attacked and got Asuna to fight back with her knife, she might be arrested for excessive self-defense. Of course, I didn't want either of us to get hurt. But surely the optimal solution was not to have Asuna carrying around a weapon all the time.

Perhaps I should be the one to carry the knife with me. But no... there had to be a better way.

I was chewing in silence, pondering this depressing topic, when Asuna murmured, "I'm sorry to worry you like this."

"Er...no, I'm the one causing the worry here. I nearly died right before your eyes...I should have been taking better care of myself."

"No, it's true. I know I've been overthinking things, too. I feel like I'm going crazy, carrying this around with me. But...you've always had this thing about dragging people closer to you, ever since SAO.

Good people...and not-so-good people..."

I wanted to deny that, but I knew I couldn't. The people in Laughing Coffin had first tried killing me at the very, very start of Aincrad, on just the third floor.

Thinking back on it, even after the conversion to *Unital Ring*, three times people had said my name as they attacked: Mocri on the first night, Schulz on the second, and Mutasina last night. In middle school, I was the guy even my own classmates forgot about. What combination of buttons on my shirt had I put on wrong to cause this intense of a difference?

On the other hand, I couldn't go around renaming myself at this point. And if Asuna was worried, it was my job to help put her mind at ease.

"...I'll be a little more careful about my safety. Maybe I can ask Kikuoka if there's a way to ensure better personal security."

Asuna lifted an eyebrow, still holding the last piece of sandwich. "Just so you know, I place him directly in the middle between good people and not-so-good."

"Ahhh. Well...you might be right," I said, grimacing. Asuna giggled.

We finished our sandwiches together, then drank the vegetable juice. After tidying up our trash, we sat together side by side on the sheet, looking at the sky.

There was still a feeling of summer in the blue expanse, but something about this little green space had a way of keeping the heat at bay. Despite being surrounded by buildings on all sides, a pleasant breeze ruffled Asuna's hair. For at least the tenth time, I wondered who was tending to this space; there were no other students or faculty around, as always.

Overhead, the leaves of the sandalwood and white siris rustled softly. The sandalwood tree was slightly larger, but according to Asuna, it was a half-parasitic species, and it was absorbing some of the water and nutrients from the roots of the white siris next to it. That had to be a royal pain for the siris, but trees couldn't talk. They

could only rustle their leaves in the wind.

I'd received so much from Asuna. Was I giving something back to her? Setting the thought aside for the moment, I turned and stared right into her eyes.

"...Happy birthday, Asuna."

I put as much feeling into it as I could. Asuna looked back at me, seemingly savoring the feeling. After a while, she said softly, "Thank you, Krito."

Both of us leaned in close and shared a brief kiss. We were still at school, but surely it could be allowed in the secret garden.

"...The truth is," she whispered, resting her head on my shoulder, "I didn't like this moment last year. I didn't want to be two years apart from you for this one week."

"Uh...you thought about that?"

"It's a big deal! But...in the Underworld, you passed me in terms of mental age, didn't you?"

She was right, now that I thought about it. I'd spent two years in the time-accelerated Underworld, but it was less than a week in the real world. Mentally, I was almost twenty, which would make me older than Asuna, although I didn't feel that way in the slightest.

"Oh...then I guess today you've caught up to me by a year, instead."

"Let's just call it that. Still, I'll be wishing you a happy eighteenth birthday next week, Krito."

"Please do."

We laughed.

That was the moment. I reached back for the store bag I'd kept behind me and lifted it over to her, holding it up from the bottom with both hands.

"Um...here's your present."

I had to hold back my urge to make minimizing comments like *It's nothing fancy* or *I didn't know what else to get you*. Asuna favored me with a radiant smile as she accepted the bag.

"Thank you, Krito. May I open it?"

"Y-yes. Go ahead."

She carefully peeled off the sticker keeping the gift bag shut and

looked inside. Her head inclined with curiosity, and she set down the bag so she could reach inside.

She pulled out a long package tied with a red ribbon. After removing the tape holding the top shut, the nonwoven fabric opened like flower petals, revealing the contents inside. It was a plant about eight inches tall, contained in a white pot. From the bottom of the narrow stem, a number of distinctive jagged-edged leaves were sprouting.

Asuna brushed one of the leaves gently and looked up. "This is a sugar maple seedling!"

"Y-yes. You could tell just by looking at it...?"





"Of course I could. This tree's had so many memories for us...I love it. Thank you, Kirito," she whispered, hugging me tight. I wrapped my arms around her slender back and felt distant memories return in vivid detail.

The tree Asuna was talking about from our memories was not a whole one but a tree in lumbered form. Back in our original forest cabin on the twenty-second floor of Aincrad, there had been a rocking chair carved out of maple on our wooden deck.

That rocking chair was made for us by a woodworker named Mahocle, and it served as a kind of symbol for our brief two weeks of marriage. Asuna always had me sit in it first, then would hop onto my lap like a cat. A virtual piece of furniture for a virtual marriage—but the time and emotions we had shared were all too real.

When Argo told me yesterday that there was no point to separating virtual Asuna and real Asuna in my mind, I came up with the idea of giving her a present that symbolized our past and our future in one.

"I thought we'd raise this seedling together and make it a great big tree one day...although it'll be in your care for a while still," I said.

Her face was buried in my shirt, but I could hear the tears in her voice. "Yes...yes. It'll be a big beautiful tree...When I get home, I'll transfer it to a larger pot, and....."

She came to an unnatural stop. I gave her a curious look, and Asuna suddenly looked up at me, the corners of her eyes gleaming, then swiveled around.

"Wh-what's the matter?"

".....I was just thinking...Do you think we could plant this here? That way, we could both take care of it."

"Ah..."

Now I understood. I figured that Asuna would take care of it with the plants at home for a while, but the seedling itself would surely appreciate proper ground more, with all the room for roots and branches. We'd need to look into whether we could move it again in the future, but for now, planting it in the secret garden felt like the best option of all.

"Good idea...but we don't even know who takes care of this

space...," I murmured.

"I wanted to find out for myself," she admitted, "but I also didn't want to tell anyone and ruin our little secret..."

"That's the problem. For now, the only people who know about it are us, Liz, Silica, and now Argo, after yesterday...Oh!" An idea popped into my mind. "In that case, let's have Argo find out. I bet she'd be able to figure it out real easy, don't you think?"

"What?" Asuna's eyes opened wide. A faint hint of a worried smile teased her lips. "Yes, I'm sure Argo could find the answer...but if she demands payment, that's all on you."

"Hmph...W-well, caretaker aside, what do we do with the plant? Should I take it home with me?"

"No way. I'll take it," Asuna said at once. She felt the dirt in the planter to confirm it was moist, then rewrapped it and placed it back in the paper bag. It was six inches wide and a foot and a half tall that way, but it was less than four pounds all told, so it wasn't an outrageous burden for a girl to carry around all day.

"But...you know what today is..."

Asuna's expression turned to one of surprise. The two of us were supposed to be absent from our afternoon classes. Not to ditch class, of course, but because, like yesterday, we had applied for a workplace visit. Yesterday's was a fake, but today's destination was the company that I actually wanted to work for. An independent administrative agency that called itself a "marine resource search and study organization"...in other words, Rath.

"Hmm..." Asuna gave it a few seconds of thought, then agreed. "Well, Rath's air-conditioning is good, and I'm sure it'll be fine if left alone for several hours. This maple seedling is really lively."

"You can tell that sort of thing?"

"By looking at the color and shine of the leaves. It's a good plant that's been well cared for."

"Huh..."

After I parted ways with Argo in Ginza yesterday, I'd searched for places in the city that sold sugar maple seedlings. There was a hit at a gardening shop in a department store in Ikebukuro, and I stopped by to find it a very respectable business. I'd have to take Asuna there

someday.

"In that case, I'll at least negotiate a taxi ride back. In fact, we ought to get going. One fifteen at the front entrance, let's say?"

"Got it," she said. "In fact, I've already got my stuff with me."

"Huh? Really?"

I looked around and saw a familiar schoolbag on the bench in the corner of the garden. Unfortunately, I hadn't thought that far ahead; my stuff was still in the classroom.

"...Well, see you at the gate."

"Okay. Thank you for the present, Kirito."

She beamed, clutching the store bag with both hands. I gave her a quick wave and hustled out of the garden.

9

The marine resource search and study agency known as Rath owned a small office building on a backstreet in the district of Roppongi in Minato Ward, Tokyo.

This was initially the Roppongi branch office, while the main location was the *Ocean Turtle*, which was floating out at sea off the Izu Islands. But since the government had shut down that megafloat, this was the base of operations by default.

At the appointment time of two thirty, we buzzed in at the intercom on the first floor and waited for the automated door to open, then we took the elevator up to the fifth floor. At the end of the hallway was another smart lock, which required a bio-ID and smartphone check before the door slid open for us.

“Kirito, Asuna, welcome!” cried a delighted voice as a blond, blue-eyed woman dressed in a white blouse and navy-blue skirt held out her arms.

“It’s nice to see you, Alice!” shouted Asuna, hopping forward and hugging her. I followed by raising my fist for a knuckle bump.

Of course, we’d just been with the Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty in *Unital Ring* this morning. But there were few opportunities to see her in the real world. After the public announcement unveiling her as the world’s first true bottom-up artificial intelligence, Alice was very busy with media, business, and school appearances, and she was still very much in the middle of a public debate over whether she truly existed.

What made things complicated was the fact that Rath was an independent administrative agency—in other words, a research agency that was half-public, half-private, so ultimately, legal ownership of Alice resided with the government. Plus, there was a

battle between three different government agencies over who should have the lead in that regard: the Department of Defense, home to the leader of Project Alicization, Seijirou Kikuoka; the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, which operated the *Ocean Turtle* as a marine research vessel; and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, which was spearheading the country's next-generation AI strategy.

Undeterred, Kikuoka and Dr. Rinko Koujiro were using the situation to slow the government's action and bring the debate over human rights for AI into the public's mindsphere. What they needed was for as many people as possible to recognize Alice's humanlike qualities—her actual humanity, in fact—and that required trotting Alice out at as many events and parties as possible. It was only recently that her schedule had slowed down a little, which was how we were able to go on *Unital Ring* adventures with her. In real life, we hadn't seen her in two weeks.

"Come—let's go to the STL room," she said, turning in a hurry. The motion came with a faint but audible actuator whirring. Takeru Higa's advanced machine body was undergoing daily improvements and updates, but it was sadly not quite at the level of being indistinguishable from a biological human being.

Still, Higa claimed that one day we would be more like Alice, too—and that in the far future, human and AI would become one, creating an all-new form of life called technium.

I hoped to see that day while I still lived, I thought as I followed Alice and Asuna down the hall.

As I suspected she might, upon seeing us for the first time in two weeks, Dr. Koujiro apologized for Kikuoka's sudden request. But we were looking forward to the opportunity to visit the Underworld again, and we didn't need an apology.

Naturally, Dr. Koujiro and her employees looked into having someone from Rath inspect the Underworld from the inside. But because they couldn't use any of the super-accounts or other high-level accounts, and because they knew too little about the workings

of the human realm there, they'd reached the conclusion that it was best for me to dive in myself. I appreciated the decision, but to be perfectly honest, I didn't know much about what was happening in there, either.

In our last dive, Asuna, Alice, and I had appeared in space, where we'd seen Integrity Pilots named Stica and Laurannei, who flew us to Centoria in their spaceships(!) and then took us to Laurannei's home by hiding us in the cargo space of a strange vehicle. There were no windows in the space, so I couldn't see much of Centoria, and our time limit was up after just a bit of conversation with the girls, so it was woefully inadequate as a fact-finding mission. Currently, the Underworld was locked to real time, so it was not accelerated. We wouldn't find ourselves centuries further in time the next time we dived in. And yet...

"...I wish they could turn it back to a thousand-times speed just for while we're in there," I grumbled as I took off my uniform jacket in the STL room.

Dr. Koujiro looked up from checking the machinery and gave me a smirk. "I hear that five times a day around Rath. They want us to speed it up because the tasks take forever, or they don't have time to play games."

She looked quite tired, to be honest, so I asked her the honest question on my mind. "Can you not actually use the STL that way? Not just for the Underworld, I mean. Can you dive into a random virtual office and use the fluctlight acceleration rate to get your work done faster...?"

"In short, yes. But to do that, you need hardware like the Main Visualizer on the *Ocean Turtle*. And to build one of those, it would cost as much as ten state-of-the-art mainframes."

I thought about asking how much one of those mainframes cost but decided better of it.

Dr. Koujiro chuckled and continued, "But in the distant future—let's say thirty or forty years from now—wearable devices with FLA capabilities might be common, so everyone can work or study in a time-accelerated environment. Or play games, of course."

"Thirty years...?"

In 2056, I'd be nearly fifty. Would I still be playing VRMMOs then? Would the concept of the MMORPG still exist at that point?

"It would be nice if it happened sooner. In ten years, if possible....," I replied, glancing at the reclining chair set up next to the STL. Alice was already seated there, patiently waiting for us to finish getting ready.

"Alice, how are things going in Krito Tow—I mean, in Ruis na Ríg?"

The knight's answer was as smooth and practiced as if she were waiting for me to ask. "At the point that I logged out thirty minutes ago, it was very peaceful. The Patter were hard at work on their fields, and the Bashin had gone hunting and brought back a large deer. Everyone was trading their crops and meat and getting along surprisingly well."

"That's great to hear. I was a little worried the Bashin might try to eat the Patter," I said, only half joking. It wasn't Alice who responded but Asuna from the other side of the screen that separated the two STLs.

"The Bashin eat a mostly plant-based diet," she said, sounding annoyed. "They're not allowed to hunt animals until they've prayed to the Trees of God, and there's a limit to how many they can hunt in a day."

As she spoke, I heard the sound of clothing shifting. I took off only my jacket before the dive, but Asuna, as she did the last time, was changing into the provided STL gear (which was what Rath called the simple pajama gown). When I asked her why, she claimed her uniform would get wrinkled.

"...Are the Trees of God those gigantic trees in the Giyoru Savanna?" I asked, lying down on the STL's gel bed. Asuna, already changed, popped out from behind the wall to answer.

"That's right. I saw them last night. They're like baobab trees, two of them, standing three hundred feet tall at the top of a hill. It was an amazing sight. I can see why you'd pray to them."

"Ahhh...That reminds me, the silver coin Sinon gave me was carved with two trees on the back. I wonder if those are the same trees you saw."

"I don't know. I didn't see the coin," she replied, shrugging.

"No," said Alice from the other direction, "the trees on the 100-el coin were not like the baobab trees of the real world. If anything, they looked more like broad-leaved trees, such as platinum oak."

It was a bit tricky, because platinum oak was a species unique to the Underworld, but I understood what Alice meant. Most likely, there was another culture in the world of *Unital Ring* aside from the Bashin that also worshipped an image of dual trees. I made a mental note to ask Sinon, if I met up with her tonight, where she'd gotten the coin.

"Well, we're all ready," Dr. Koujiro told us. She'd finished fiddling with her tablet. "How are you feeling?"

"Good to go!" I said, speaking for the group. Asuna and Alice nodded eagerly.

"In that case...it's almost three o'clock now. When it turns five, use the same gesture command as the last time to log out. If you don't emerge on your own, I'll disconnect you at five ten."

"...Are you sure we can't push it to six o'clock?" I pleaded, but Dr. Koujiro was not convinced.

"No," she said firmly. "This dive is to check for safety. We can't allow you to dive for longer periods unless we know you two are able to connect without any issues."

"Fiiine..."

"The actual investigation into the break-in will have to wait for Saturday. You're free to look around Centoria, but do not approach Central Cathedral!" Dr. Koujiro said, making her point very clear. She turned to Alice and continued, "I'm sure there is much that you wish to know, too...but I'll ask for a bit more patience. I'll make sure you can visit the Underworld every day for as long as you want. Very soon."

"Yes, Dr. Koujiro. I know," Alice replied with a smile. She leaned back in the reclining chair and closed her eyes. Asuna and I went to lie back on our gel beds and fit our heads into the depression on the headrests.

"Let's begin, then."

Dr. Koujiro tapped the tablet, lowering the lights in the room. With a deep rumbling sound, the head block of the STL slid down and

over my head.

The mechanical sounds became distant, turning into a strange noise like a breeze or waves lapping at the shore. The machine accessed my fluctlight—my very soul—pulling me away from the world of reality.

I felt peaceful, weightless. As I fell into darkness, it felt almost nostalgic to me.

First, I saw light.

The tiny little brilliance expanded, refracting into an array of color—enveloping my sense of vision—and even beyond.

I blinked several times at the light, then realized I was staring directly at the sun through a window. After pulling my gaze from the large arched window, I stared at my surroundings. The ceiling was high in the room, and the walls and supports were finely decorated in a medieval European...no, in a Centorian way. This was the guest chamber at the Arabel home, where Laurannei had brought me in my last dive. I was sitting on a small sofa in a large room.

On the right, there was a three-seat couch where Asuna and Alice sat side by side. Both were looking around the room without a word. Asuna assumed the appearance of the Goddess of Creation, Stacia, with pearlescent armor over a white dress. And Alice was dressed in golden armor over a blue dress, her Integrity Knight outfit.

Next, I looked down at myself.

I had on a black jacket with an elongated, coat-like hem, with pants of the same color. There was a large fold of fabric in the fly-front style (to hide the buttons) and shoulder epaulets, plus sleeves and collars made of white fabric with gold stitching. This was...similar to but not exactly the uniform of the elite disciple of Swordcraft Academy. It was what I'd borrowed from the armory of Central Cathedral after escaping the underground cells. I'd been wearing it through all the battles against the Integrity Knights, Prime Senator Chudelkin, and Administrator, so it was tattered and torn at the end, but now it was perfectly pristine.

“...Say, Alice, whatever happened to these clothes?”

“Huh?”

Alice frowned and blinked.

“Errr...I put them among your belongings when taking you to Rulid from Central Cathedral. Selka gave me needlework lessons, and I repaired them, then put them back on you when we took part in the battle to defend the realm. I don’t know what happened after that...”

“Hmm...but there are no signs of repair on this at all...”

“Kirito, is that really something you need to figure out right now?” wondered Alice with exasperation. Then, as though playing back the words she’d said just seconds earlier, she bolted to her feet, armor clanking. “Selka!”

She rushed across the floor to the arched window to the south, pressed her hands against the glass, and was still.

Asuna and I shared a look, then got to our feet. We moved to stand next to Alice and saw what had been impossible to see through the sunlight earlier.

Beyond the city stood a vast white tower that split the evening sky. The Axiom Church’s Central Cathedral, the very center of the four empires of humanity...

At last, I truly realized I was back in the Underworld, and I breathed in deeply. My hands moved of their own accord, searching for the source of the weighted feeling on my hips.

On my left side was a black sword with a powerful design: the Night-Sky Blade.

On my right was a beautiful white sword with an elegant design: the Blue Rose Sword.

I lifted the hand holding the sheath of the Blue Rose Sword, tracing the fine rose carving on its hilt. I continued brushing and rubbing it to see if I could feel anything. But the only sensation coming through my skin was cold and hard. There was, of course, not a single trace of the body warmth of this sword’s rightful owner, the boy with the flaxen-colored hair.

Next, I moved to grab the slender handle. I tried to pull the sword loose, but I could not.

During the battle against Administrator, the Blue Rose Sword

fused with Eugeo and became giant, then was broken in half by her rapier. During the Otherworld War, after I recovered from my coma, I repaired the sword using Incarnation, but I couldn't tell now if it was still whole or if had reverted to its previous broken state. Incarnation in the Underworld used the power of the imagination to overwrite the state of things, but it was a temporary power and did not permanently alter anything.

A notable exception was Alice's beloved sister, Selka Zuberger.

Though I didn't remember it myself, after awakening in the real world on August 1st, I told Alice, "Your sister, Selka, chose to go into deep freeze to wait for your return. She's still slumbering now, atop that hill on the eightieth floor of Central Cathedral."

If that was true, then she would still be waiting for Alice there, in that white tower before our eyes. She had been waiting all this time. But according to Stica and Laurannei, it was currently stellar year 582. That was just a change in calendar name from the HE (Human Era) designation and was not a replacement, however. The Otherworld War broke out during 380 HE, so over two hundred years had passed. Had the people managing the cathedral left Selka as untouched as a stone statue during that time?

According to the girls, it wasn't the Axiom Church that controlled the Underworld anymore but a body known as the Stellar Unification Council. It sounded vaguely familiar to me.

After stopping Gabriel Miller, who'd acted as the God of Darkness, Vecta, I'd returned to Centoria with Asuna and the Human Guardian Army. We found ourselves working, as a natural course, with the Integrity Knights to quell the situation. Apparently, the new ruling group that we settled upon was the Human Unification Council.

"Hey, Asuna..."

I turned to her, intent on asking if she had the same memory. But the moment I did, I flinched and froze.

Behind Asuna, who was staring at me in surprise, I could see a door slightly ajar. And peering through the crack at us was a small figure.

Alice and Asuna noticed just as quickly. After attracting the

attention of three people, the little figure quickly withdrew, but Asuna called out, “W-wait! We’re nothing out of the ordinary.”

Uh, yes, we are, I thought. If that was someone who lived here, we were basically trespassers who’d broken into their home.

But Asuna’s natural virtue—if you wanted to chalk it up to that—was convincing enough, and within a few seconds, the person appeared again. We waited patiently as they came into the room with agonizing slowness.

It was a child of eight or nine years, probably a boy. He wore a white shirt and black velvet half-pants, and his black hair was cut short. He looked just like a fancy little boy from a rich family to me. Based on his features and the color of his hair, I guessed he was Laurannei’s brother.

The boy looked at me, then Asuna, then Alice. He bowed and spoke in a voice that was much louder and crisper than I expected.





"I have heard about you all from my sister, Laurannei. I am Phercy Arabel. It is a pleasure to meet you."

I was just thinking that it was a very brave introduction from someone who was trying to run away moments earlier, but then I noticed that his slender limbs were trembling.

Of course he was scared. I didn't know how Laurannei had explained us to him, but we were coming through time from the distant past, so we were closer to ghosts than trespassers. But Phercy clasped his hands and straightened up tall.

The girl from the Arabel family who served as my personal page at Swordcraft Academy was the same way. Normally, she seemed timid, but when the time came for it, she could be stunningly courageous. As a mere student during the Otherworld War, she'd joined the Human Guardian Army and fought to protect me while I was in my comatose state.

Laurannei and Phercy were probably distant family of Ronie's, or perhaps direct descendants. And Laurannei's fellow pilot, Stica Schtrinen, was a descendant of Ronie's friend Tiese.

Yes, in stellar year 582 of the Underworld, Ronie and Tiese were long gone. And not just them; Sortiliena, Miss Azurica, Old Man Garitta, Sadore...everyone who had helped and guided me had returned to the root of their fluctlight. Even though I had logged out of the system only a bit more than a month ago...

Stricken by a sudden stabbing pain in my heart, I couldn't react. So Asuna carefully proceeded toward Phercy instead; the boy flinched with fear. She crouched down when she was about six feet away, putting herself at his eye level.

"It's nice to meet you, Phercy. I'm Asuna. That man there in the black is Kirito, and that woman in the gold is Alice. Hello."

"....."

Phercy spared barely half a second on me before staring at Alice. His blue-gray eyes went wide with shock.

"Lady...Alice..."

There was deep fear and reverence in the boy's frail features. Apparently, the legend of Alice Synthesis Thirty still lived among the people of this world, two centuries later. According to Laurannei,

Asuna and I possessed the stately titles of Star King and Star Queen until thirty years ago, but Phercy didn't seem to recognize our names. Personally, I didn't believe two-thirds of that Star King mumbo jumbo anyway.

The boy kept his eyes locked on the golden knight as he spoke. "Are you...really her? The same Alice, the Osmanthus Knight, who shows up in all the history books and tales...?"

Alice didn't seem sure of how to react to this.

"I do not know how you would know I am 'really her' or not...but my name is indeed Alice Synthesis Thirty, and this is the Osmanthus Blade."

She patted the longsword on her left hip, and Phercy's face sparkled. Just like in the real world, boys of this age in the Underworld seemed to be fascinated by weapons.

"The Osmanthus Blade! Holy cra—I mean, that's incredible! It's a real divine weapon from the ancient times...The one that eradicated a mountain and silenced storms with a single swing...!"

"....."

Alice couldn't help but flinch at that. The Osmanthus Blade's Perfect Weapon Control art had incredible power—I'd experienced that for myself—but the stories about it might have grown a little in two hundred years of telling.

By resisting the urge to tease the proud knight, I noticed that the sting of my grief was ebbing. I exhaled and asked the boy, "Hey, Phercy, you said 'real divine weapon'...Does that mean Divine Objects no longer exist in this era?"

Phercy's expression hardened somewhat again. "That's right," he said. "When the Integrity Knights—not the Integrity Pilots, like my sister, but the ones who rode on living dragons—were sealed away for good, all the existing Divine Objects were sealed with them, it is said."

"Sealed...?"

I shared looks with Alice and Asuna.

A bit over a month ago, Stica and Laurannei had given us a lesson on the current state of the Underworld in this very room, but due to time constraints and the fact that they had questions for us,

too, the best we could glean was a picture of the world balance and ruling structure at the moment. I knew almost nothing about what had happened in the past two hundred years. On top of that, the word *sealed* felt more than a little ominous.

"Phercy, when were the ancient knights sealed away?" Alice asked.

The boy's cheeks flushed the tiniest bit as he replied, "I've heard it was right after we switched from the Human Era calendar to the Stellar Era...so about a hundred years ago."

"A hundred years....," Alice repeated. She gazed at the cathedral through the window again.

Time in the Underworld was in sync with the real world now, so it was after three o'clock in the afternoon here, too. But the seasons didn't seem to be aligned—probably because the Underworld's months were uniformly 30 days, and their years 360 days—so the sky here looked significantly darker already. The air in the room was distinctly chilly.

Asuna, who was dressed the lightest of us, shivered a little, which Phercy noticed.

"Oh...it's rather cold in here, isn't it?" he said. "I'll turn on the heater."

H-heater?

But I had barely a moment to wonder about this before the boy walked to the wall near the entrance and pulled one of two levers on the wall. There was a thunking sound from five or six long slits along the wall, just above the floor. A low hum followed them, and suddenly there was warm air flowing over our feet. It was much faster than even the air conditioners in the real world.

"H...how did you do that?" Alice asked.

Phercy was momentarily taken aback by the question. He trotted back and said, "Oh, of course, there were no coolers in your era, Lady Alice."

C-coolers?"

"Yes. In the basement are sealed canisters of eternal-heat elements, eternal-frost elements, and eternal-wind elements, and the control panel. They provide cooling and heating for air and water

throughout the house.”

““Sealed canisters?!”” Alice and I shouted at the same time. Frost elements were one thing, but putting heat elements into a hardy sealed container was extremely dangerous. It was very easy to put them into an uncontrollable overheated state, leading to a huge explosion.

That was probably how Laurannei’s and Stica’s dragoncraft worked, but who would have developed such a wild, reckless usage of them? Alice and I were racked with both surprise and exasperation.

Asuna spoke up for the group. “Ohhh, so that’s how it works. How fascinating. Do all the other homes have the same thing?”

“Yes, and they’re making their way into some commoner homes, too, not just noble mansions. But,” Phercy said, his childish face taking on a note of very adult solemnity, “about three years ago, all the major cities, not just Centoria, started suffering from a lack of spatial power supply. We use sealed canisters not just in homes and businesses but also in factories, public facilities, and the mechamobiles and mechamotives that travel about the city.”

“Mecha...motives...?”

I shared another look with Alice. The last time, we were escorted to this home from the airport by something like a horseless carriage. So that was called a mechamobile. Out of the eight elements, heat elements consumed the highest amount of spatial sacred power, so it stood to reason that utilizing them in limitless amounts around a huge city was going to dry up the power supply.

Who would have thought they’d be dealing with depleted natural resources in the Underworld, too? I lamented, listening to the faint groan coming from the air-conditioning system. Then I realized I wasn’t hearing anything else.

“Hey, Phercy, are Laurannei and your other family members not home?” I asked, not bothering with any special form of address for the boy. He didn’t seem to mind.

“No. My sister is on duty at the base, of course. My mother is there, too, and my father works for the North Centorian government. Oh, but...”

He opened the door and clapped twice, loudly. There was a jangling in the hallway, out of sight. Within seconds, a huge gray mass bounded into the parlor, and all three of us leaned backward in alarm.

It was a sheep...no, a dog. But I'd never seen a real dog that looked like this. In a single phrase, it looked like an Afghan hound with large, puffy curls. Its face was slim and handsome, but decorative hair curled around its ears, which reminded me of medieval European noblemen for some reason. In fact, I realized it looked like a specific person: the portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach that hung in my elementary school music room.

The large gray dog sat politely next to Phercy, its front paws neat and lined up, and stared at us with big eyes. Phercy petted the back of its head and said, "This is Beru, a Bruha Curl from Wesdarath. He might be older than me, but he's my best friend."

The curly-haired dog barked happily, as though agreeing with the statement. Asuna immediately clasped her hands before her chest and shouted, "Oh...what a big doggy! May I pet him?"

"G-go right ahead," said Phercy, but Asuna was already on the move. She approached low and from the side, so as not to intimidate the dog. She crouched and said soothingly into its ear, "Hello, Beru. I'm Asuna."

"Wuff!"

The reply did not seem hostile. Asuna let Beru sniff her hand for a good while before she scratched softly behind the dog's ear. It looked very pleased with that, so she scratched harder.

"...Asuna really does love dogs," Alice whispered. I nodded back.

"I thought she was more into little dogs, but she seems to like big ones, too."

"It makes me wonder how she would react to a canine Divine Beast."

"Huh...you have that in the Underworld?"

"Very, very long ago. More importantly," Alice said, dropping her voice even quieter, "don't you find this odd? If his sister and parents are out working, this would presumably not be a day of rest. So why is a child of his age not in school?"

"Huh...? You don't think he's already come home from school?"

"It's only three fifteen," Alice said, looking at an analog clock hanging on the wall. When I was diving into the Underworld, the way you told time was with special bells in every town and village that played distinct melodies on every hour and half hour. I couldn't count how many times I'd wished, *If only I had a clock*. Apparently, someone had invented them in the two centuries since then.

In any case, the golden hands were indeed pointing at three fifteen. I didn't know the details of elementary school times and after-school activities here, but if you told me it was too early for him to be home, I might believe you.

"...Ask him directly, Alice."

"...Ask him yourself."

"You're the one who brought it up."

"I just said it was a little odd."

While the two of us bickered and refused to act, Asuna, whose hands were rubbing all over Beru's neck, asked, "So did you already finish school today, Phercy?"

The two of us looked his way. Phercy's blue-gray eyes widened briefly before he cast them to the ground. Asuna's expression didn't change, however; she waited for the boy to speak. That gentle, all-encompassing aura of hers, her very presence rather than words or gestures, was Asuna's greatest asset.

Phercy lifted his face just a little to look at her. Beru leaned over and licked his master's hand. That seemed to give the boy the courage to speak.

"Actually...I haven't gone to school in nearly three months," he said.

First environmental problems, now an educational crisis! I thought glibly. Of course, I wasn't going to say it out loud, because regardless of the world, a boy his age not being able to go to school was a grave problem.

Asuna gave him a very kind and gentle smile, nodded, and asked, "And what year are you in, Phercy?"

"...In the third year of North Centoria Primary Juvenile School."

As I expected, that put him at around eight or nine years old. He

spoke older than his age, but on the inside, he was still very young. Based on Laurannei's example, it didn't seem like his family was totally dysfunctional, so perhaps there was a bullying problem? Were there still issues with hazing, like the things the upper nobles did to Eugeo and me after we showed them up?

Depending on how this shakes out, I might have to storm into that juvenile school and tie some kids up, I thought.

But Phercy just scratched Beru's neck for a while. He looked at Asuna, who was patiently keeping her silence, then at Alice, who stood at the windowsill. With clear anguish, he explained, "I'm not going to school...because I'm bad at swords."

For some strange reason, I didn't immediately parse what he meant by "swords." Asuna and Alice seemed momentarily confused, too, until Asuna brushed the rapier at her side—it was a GM-only weapon called Radiant Light—and asked, just to be sure, "You mean...like this sword? You use swords in juvenile school?"

Now it was Phercy's turn to look surprised. "Of course we do. Swordsmanship is a very important part of our lessons. Any student who wants to attend the North Centoria Imperial Swordcraft Academy must receive high marks in swordsmanship."

".....!"

I sucked in a sharp breath and took a step closer to the boy.

"The Integrity Knights are gone, but Swordcraft Academy is still around?! In the forest in District Five?!"

The boy seemed alarmed by my intensity, but it was replaced by sheer surprise. "Did you say your name was...Kirito? My sister told me you were an otherworlder. You know about Swordcraft Academy?"

In the previous dive, I persistently told Stica and Laurannei that I was just a person from another world, not some stuffy Star King or whatever, and they had obliged by describing me as such to the boy. I was curious as to what Phercy made of the concept of another world, but I could ask about that later. For now, I said proudly, "Of course I do. I graduated from that school."

I regretted it as soon as I said it. As a matter of fact, Eugeo and I had committed a violation of the Taboo Index in May, just after

becoming elite disciples in our second year, and were kicked out of school. Fortunately, there wasn't a single person here who could call me out on my—

“A-hem.”

Alice cleared her throat pointedly, and I hunched my shoulders. The very Integrity Knight who showed up to arrest us for our expulsion-worthy crime was none other than Alice Synthesis Thirty. But to issue a correction now would ruin my newfound esteem from young Phercy, so I pretended I didn't hear her.

Fortunately, Phercy didn't catch on to what had just happened. His face sparkling, he said, “Y-you graduated from there?! But how did you get in if you're an otherworlder?!”

“I received a recommendation in Zakkaria and took the entrance test. I wasn't very good at sacred arts, so my first year was rough, but in my second year, I was the sixth seat elite disciple.”

That part, at least, wasn't a lie. If Swordcraft Academy was still an active school, then if you checked the school registry, there should still be a two-century-old entry that said I was the sixth seat, and Eugeo was the fifth seat.

Phercy clutched his tiny hands together with excitement. His body was positively trembling. “The sixth seat...?! Th-that's incredible...No wonder they say you're a follower of Lady Alice!”

“Oh, I wouldn't say I'm *that* specia—Wait, what?” I stammered, realizing what he actually said. Asuna and Alice burst into laughter.

Apparently, Laurannei had explained to her brother that Kirito the otherworlder was a follower of Alice the Integrity Knight. But I couldn't really blame her for that. The girls grilled us, asking why we had returned if not to be the Star King and Queen again, so in a panic to get them off my back, I explained that we were Alice's guards. Somewhere along the way, *guard* got turned into *followers*, but if it was anyone's fault, it was mine, not Laurannei's. So I accepted my new status as Alice's servant.

“Yes, you do need sword talent to get into Swordcraft Academy,” I explained to Phercy, “but you're only in the third grade of primary

school, right? You won't take the entrance test until graduating middle school, so you have at least six years left. You'll grow plenty by then, so don't start panicking like you've got to handle it all right now."

With his hand on his dog's head, Phercy gave me a smile that contained sadness well beyond his years. He slowly shook his head. "My sister and parents said the same thing to me. But...I've been abandoned by Terraria, Goddess of Sword and Earth."

"...?"

Two things about that statement struck me. I shared a look with Alice. Two hundred years ago, Terraria was the goddess who managed the blessings of the earth, and she had no connection to swords. And what did he mean by "abandoned"?

Phercy gave us a glance, then let go of the dog to stare at his own palm.

"In the three years since I first held a sword, I have never once been able to activate an ultimate technique. I hold my wooden sword and assume the stance, just like my classmates, but I can't even do the most basic Lightning Slash. My parents hired a private teacher for me out of concern, but that teacher threw in the towel after just a single week."

He clutched that hand and expelled the words from his throat as if they caused him physical pain.

"With each pathetic excuse for a swordfighting lesson, I shame the Arabel family. I am personally smearing mud upon the name of my ancestor, who was named Integrity Knight at the age of seventeen for her great exploits during the Rebellion of the Four Empires: Ronie Arabel Thirty-Three."

The moment I heard that name, I felt like lightning had just struck my brain, and I moaned.

Ronie...that sweet little girl who had worked as my page, an Integrity Knight? I had never heard the phrase Rebellion of the Four Empires, either. Had there been another terrible war here after the Otherworld War?

Once again, I felt frustrated that I had almost no memory after defeating Vecta. During the maximum acceleration phase, in which

one second in the real world was five million seconds here, Asuna and I supposedly lived in the Underworld for nearly two centuries. But what happened here and what we did were completely absent from my memory.

My last memory, for some reason, was getting into a fistfight with Commander Iskahn from the Dark Army during a peace negotiation at the ruins of the Eastern Gate. I had a mental image of Iskahn, cheeks swollen, saying, *I admit, you're stronger than me*, so I was sure the negotiation was successful, but my memory stopped right there.

Yes...thinking back on it, the time acceleration stopped just three minutes after Asuna and I logged out of the Underworld, so we were still present in this world until about thirty years ago. That wasn't recent, but it wasn't the far-flung past, either. The part about me being a king was probably some kind of mistake, but I doubted we were living in the distant mountains, so there should be *some* people still alive who'd had direct contact with us.

But finding them would be difficult. I couldn't just walk around Centoria asking every older person I saw, "Do you know me?" And the purpose of this dive was to figure out who had infiltrated the Underworld and what they wanted. Making a big display of myself would be counterproductive, frankly.

So for now, I had to suppress my desire to learn more about Ronie and Tiese. I asked Phercy, "When you say that you can't activate an ultimate technique, do you mean you can't finish the full effect? Or does it not even produce the, uh...colored light?"

"The latter...No matter how many times I try, I can't make any light or sound."

"Hrmm...?"

Asuna and Alice were just as stumped as I was.

Yes, an ultimate technique—what we called sword skills—had a trick to it, but even a total beginner to VRMMOs could get the hang of it within twenty or thirty minutes. You just had to hold the sword at the right position and angle, and once you were used to it, you could even activate it while jumping or upside-down. Was it even possible to practice for three years and never once execute a proper sword

skill?

"...Ummm, Phercy? I won't force you if you don't want to, but do you think you could try it out for me, just once?"

The skinny boy tensed and stared at the floor. A few moments later, he rasped, "I'm...sorry...I know it's a great honor to be observed by Lady Alice and her follower, but my wooden sword is in the farthest box at the back of the toolshed. I can't easily retrieve it..."

That didn't seem like a lie, but it was clearly an excuse. If he didn't take this chance, all the feelings of futility and self-doubt that had built up in the boy would only be amplified.

I thought about lending him a sword but decided against it. The Blue Rose Sword and Night-Sky Blade were both Divine Objects with a priority level over forty. The same was true of Alice's Osmanthus Blade and Asuna's Radiant Light. A nine-year-old boy wouldn't even be able to lift them. I started to wonder what I had in my inventory—and then remembered there was no virtual storage in the Underworld. The only belongings I had right now were my two swords and whatever small articles were in my belt pouch and pockets.

In that case...

I looked around the spacious parlor, and my eyes landed upon a silver candlestand on the table. It seemed to be a simple piece of interior decoration, because there wasn't a single candle in it.

I walked over and picked it up. Asuna was befuddled, and Alice had a suspicious look in her eyes, but before they could say anything, I focused my attention. Beru sensed something and barked, "*Wuff!*" but a caress from Phercy kept the dog calm.

Suddenly, the candlestand flashed and began to change shape. The three arms fused into one—a short blade. The wide base shortened into a delicate handle.

Within five seconds, the stand had turned into a short sword that was just the right size for a child. I swung it up and down to test the balance as Alice strode over to me.

"You fool! How many times must I tell you that you cannot simply use Incarnation to solve every little problem?!"

I grimaced and hunched my shoulders, looking to Asuna for help. But the Goddess of Creation just shrugged. I had to argue my own case.

“W-well, there’s no better option...and that was just a simple shape change. I didn’t alter its material...”

“That’s not the problem!!”

I figured she would say that. To be honest, I also wanted to test if I could use Incarnation the same way I did when fighting Vecta. My power hadn’t waned, it seemed, but if I got too used to it, I was going to be very frustrated when I had to go back to *Unital Ring* without it.

“Sorry, sorry, I’ll take it easy. But look—it’s pretty good, huh?” I said, showing Alice the little sword. As for Phercy, the boy’s blue-gray eyes were bulging so wide they might pop out of his head, and his mouth hung open. Eventually, he found the strength to speak.

“K...Kirito...was that...Incarnation?” he stammered. “The secret art that the ancient Integrity Knights developed and that, even now, only the very highest of pilots can use...? Even though you’re just a follower...”

“I-is that true about Incarnation?”

Two hundred years ago, it wasn’t just the Integrity Knights. Even students at the academy could use it...but then again, maybe changing the actual material makeup of objects was something that only knights like Alice could do. Best to play it off, then.

“Well, anyway, among her followers, I’m closer to an actual knight.”

“I suppose you must be. You have two swords, after all...”

“Yeah, exactly. Anyway, take this,” I said, pinching the tip of the silver sword and offering the little weapon to Phercy.

The boy hesitated, but he steeled his courage and grabbed the handle. As I had done, he swung it up and down a few times, then looked up with great surprise.

“It feels...very easy to use. It’s much heavier than the wooden sword, so why...?”

“I concentrated the weight into the hand. It’s more powerful if the weight is greater toward the tip, but that makes it harder to use.”

“Oh, I see...”

Phercy stared at the sword in his hand, then took a deep breath.

“In that case...I’ll try Lightning Slash.”

“Really? Here?”

The skill—which I knew as Vertical—had a surprisingly long range, so I was afraid it might damage furniture inside the house, but Phercy just nodded.

“If it starts to activate, I’ll simply stop there.”

“Ah.”

I was concerned about the note of resignation in the boy’s voice, but I said nothing more than that and stepped back to the window. Asuna moved from near the door to stand next to Alice.

Phercy put some distance between himself and Beru, with his back toward the wall with the door, and made a stance.

First he held the short sword at medium height, pulled his right foot back a bit, then moved the sword higher. His wrist was only slightly inclined, holding the blade at a forty-five-degree angle. Vertical Arc was nearly level, and the four-part Vertical Square was much deeper, at about minus-forty-five degrees. But for a simple Vertical, this was right.

“He’s got it,” said Asuna.

“Very impressive,” whispered Alice.

As they said, Phercy’s form was perfect. The sword’s position and angle and the wielder’s posture could not be improved. But there was no blue light and no high-pitched vibration.

“Why not...?” I murmured and drew the Night-Sky Blade from my left side without thinking about what I was doing.

With that familiar weight in hand, I raised it above my right shoulder. I went into the Vertical motion, a gesture I’d made thousands, if not tens of thousands, of times since the SAO days. A familiar whine filled my ears, and blue light infused the sword’s blade.

Phercy glanced my way, and resignation and despair filled his features. He lowered the sword helplessly. I quickly canceled my sword skill and returned the sword to its sheath. Asuna and Alice glared at me.

“I—I was just making sure it still worked,” I protested weakly.

Phercy hung his head, so I crouched down to catch his eye. “Your stance was perfect. But I suppose that’s not much consolation...”

“No...it’s good to hear you say that, Kirito,” the boy said, smiling awkwardly. He looked at the sword in his right hand. “Then...you’re saying it’s not my fault that I can’t use these techniques?”

“No, I don’t think it is. There must be some external factor at work. Although, I couldn’t say right away what it might be...”

In truth, I could’ve worked with Phercy for the next few hours to pin down what this external factor was, but that wasn’t possible. Dr. Koujiro had given us only two, and we’d already used forty minutes of it.

The boy, who was mature beyond his years, visibly suppressed his emotions to put on a brave smile. “I’m just happy to learn it’s not my fault. At least this way...I can lament my poor fortune that the gods have forsaken me.”

“.....”

I couldn’t agree with that. I bit my lip.

The Underworld did not actually have gods. The three goddesses—Stacia, Solus, and Terraria—were simple stories using the names of Rath’s super-accounts in order to prop up the authority of Administrator’s Axiom Church. It wasn’t some godly whim that was preventing Phercy from using a sword skill—it had to be something more concrete.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t any other answer at the moment that would satisfy the boy.

“Here...thank you,” said Phercy, holding out the silver sword with both hands.

“No, you keep it,” I said.

“Um...but...”

“It feels good in your hand, doesn’t it? You don’t have to practice with it. Just hold it and swing it around regularly when you have nothing else to do.”

“...”

Phercy still seemed reluctant to accept it. From over my shoulder, Alice said, “Keep it, and maybe something will change. That was originally an item of the Arabel family anyway.”

Yeah, that's true, I thought. I couldn't very well take it.

"Kirito, why don't you make him a sheath?" Asuna suggested.

I straightened. "What? But I don't have the material to..."

"Then use this, please," said Phercy, offering the thick leather mat that was underneath the candlestand on the table. If I kept going at this rate, the parlor would run out of items to transform, but the mat did look unnatural just sitting there without the stand resting atop it. Plus, I couldn't resist when the boy's eyes were sparkling with delight in a way they weren't just moments ago.

"W-well, if you insist..."

I took the mat, glanced at the sword in Phercy's hand, and focused on the image in my head. The rectangular mat shone white and began to change shape, moving as though alive. It rolled itself up, then squashed flat, and one end tapered. When the light vanished, I was holding a reddish-brown leather sheath.

"There," I said, holding it out.

Phercy took it with wonder in his eyes. He fit the short sword inside it.

"...Amazing. It fits perfectly!"

"I made it that way."

"I can't believe you can do this with Incarnation..."

"But remember, I'm only a follower. Lady Alice's Incarnation is even more incredible," I claimed. Alice jabbed me in the small of my back, and I just barely managed not to yelp.

Asuna simply watched me with disbelief. She put her hands on her knees. "Say, Phercy, do you think you could show us around the city?"

"Huh...?" said the boy with surprise—and he wasn't the only one. My brows knitted with concern, but then I realized it was actually a good idea.

To investigate the infiltrator, we would have to venture out into Centoria. But things had surely changed in two centuries, and it would be much better for us to have a guide than for the three of us to just wander around blindly.

Phercy hung the short sword from his belt and thought over the request. He quickly agreed to it. "All right. My parents have forbidden

me from leaving on my own, but I think it will be fine if I am with you. However..."

He looked at Asuna and Alice, narrowing his eyes as though staring at something blinding, and added, "I think your clothes might stand out, Lady Alice and Asuna. Even the palace guards do not wear full plate armor anymore."

"Oh...hmm, what should we do?" Asuna murmured. She began whispering with Alice, but I was distracted by something else he said.

"Uh...palace? Meaning, the emperor's castle?"

Now it was Phercy's turn to look confused. "Emperor...? No, the imperial families were disbanded after the Rebellion of the Four Empires two hundred years ago. The castle in District One is now the home of the North Centorian government. When I say 'palace,' I mean Central Cathedral."

"Oh...but isn't the Stellar Unification Council in charge of the human realm now? Is there a king above them, too?"

"There was many years ago. Someone called the Star King, who ruled not just our realm but both twin stars, Cardina and Admina..."

Here we go with the Star King again, I thought, looking at Alice and Asuna. They both appeared suspicious of what they were hearing, and I must have looked the same way.

I didn't know why Laurannei and Stica had assumed the two of us were the Star King and Queen, but the more I thought about it, the less likely it seemed that I could have filled such a role. On the other hand, the last scene I remembered was facing off with Commander Iskahn of the Dark Territory, as the representative of the human realm. Presumably, I had been looking for the right moment to hand off that role to an Integrity Knight. Had that never happened, and I'd got stuck in the role, then become king at the end by default? And that had made Asuna the queen...?

"No, no, no way...", I mumbled. Then I asked the boy, "What was the Star King's name?"

Phercy hadn't reacted when he heard my name, so it couldn't have been "Kirito." But what if it was a name that could be connected to mine? I fretted, awaiting the answer.

"It is not mentioned," Phercy replied.

"Huh?"

"The names of the Star King and Star Queen have been removed from every official record and story of them. It is claimed that this is to prevent any relations or descendants from coming forth after their deaths, thus throwing governance into chaos...but..."

"....."

I shared another look with the girls. It couldn't be possible to completely erase the name of a head of state from history. Perhaps there were kings from Ancient Egypt or Babylon whose names were unknown, but that was thousands of years ago. The Star King of the Underworld was in control just a few decades before now.

But it would be cruel to grill the nine-year-old any further on this topic. I put aside the matter of the Star King for now and got back to the topic at hand.

"All right...so I guess we'll have to leave their armor here at this house?"

"...I do not mind taking off the armor," said Alice, brushing the Osmanthus Blade with her hand, "but what about my sword...? I do not wish to let it go."

"Actually, I agree on that front," I grunted, scowling.

But Phercy just grinned. "Swords will be fine. It's not uncommon for nobles to carry around swords. Even some commoners do it."

"Ahhh..."

According to Laurannei and Stica, the six-rank system of nobility had been abolished but not the concept of nobility itself. I wasn't able to determine if that was a good or bad thing for the Underworld.

But for now, we decided to take advantage of it, and the two of us kept our swords on. It seemed unbalanced to me that people were still using swords rather than guns in a place where airplanes were traveling out into space, but I supposed the existence of sacred arts meant that guns were never necessary to develop.

Asuna's and Alice's armor went into the cabinet in the corner of the guest parlor on Phercy's suggestion. He also gave them discreet brown cloaks that would cover them up, and by the time we were ready to head out, the clock on the wall was approaching four

o'clock. To my relief, the moment the minute hand hit the twelve at the top, a familiar melody came in through the window. Even in an age of clocks, the Bells of Time-Tolling were still playing those hourly melodies every single day.

When the bells stopped, we had one hour left before the time limit. First, we'd have him guide us to the busiest area in North Centoria, then we'd walk around and eat—er, *gather information* for as long as time allowed.

We followed Phercy out of the parlor into a long hallway that stretched in both directions. On our earlier visit, it was too chaotic for me to notice that the Arabel mansion was much larger than I expected. Ronie the page said that her and Tiese's fathers were sixth-rank nobles and that their life was quite humble. Perhaps they had rebuilt or moved their home in the last two hundred years.

The boy and dog led us out into an enormous entrance hall. *We could probably fit our entire log cabin in this hall!* I thought.

"...You could put four whole Ping-Pong tables in here," I whispered to Asuna, who gave me a suspicious look.

"Since when did you like Ping-Pong?"

"Never, really."

"Then why did you compare it to Ping-Pong tables...?"

"Well, a tennis court didn't seem like an accurate comparison, so..."

While we bickered pointlessly, Phercy took a wool coat off a heavy hanger and put it on over his short sword. He said something to Beru, who replied, "*Waffuh!*" and trotted back down the hallway.

"Let's go, then," he said, pressing on the large double doors. A chilly breeze snuck in and rustled the girls' long hair. This wasn't the dusty breeze of Tokyo in the winter, however. It was the air of North Centoria, full of moisture from Lake Norkia—the air of the Underworld.

I'm back, I thought, following the three of them out the door.

The Arabel mansion had a spacious front lawn in addition to its interior. Neatly trimmed short trees lined the stone walkway leading

away from the door, with a black cast-iron gate beyond them. On the right side of the yard was a long building with shutters on the front. Perhaps it was a garage for the mechamobile, or whatever they called it. Of course, I wasn't going to admit that I wanted to try driving it.

Turning back to get a full view of the mansion, I could see that the main building was far grander than I'd imagined; it was two stories tall with a symmetrical design. By my judgment, it was a first- or second-ranked noble home. The Arabels must have been very successful in the last two centuries...but what did it mean that the house was so huge, and yet I didn't see a single servant?

I faced forward again. Beyond the gate, there were more stone mansions, not as fine as the Arabel's but very impressive in their own right. Behind them, Central Cathedral split the sky. Its height hadn't changed in two hundred years, and I could see an observatory-like dome on the roof. That had once been the bedchamber of Administrator, but most likely, no one lived there now.

"Let's go, Kirito."

That summons brought my gaze back down to where Asuna, Alice, and Phercy stood, waiting for me.

"Oh, sorry."

I trotted to catch up and tried to prepare myself mentally for my first visit into Centoria in two centuries.

But then I noticed something strange off in the distance, like a massive woodwind instrument playing the same note incessantly. *Fwaum, fwaum*, it went, getting slightly louder each time. It wasn't that the volume was increasing but that the source of the sound was getting closer.

Suddenly, Phercy shot around as if struck, and he pointed to the right of the stone path. "Hide behind those shrubs now!"

The sound of his voice and look in his eyes left no room for argument. On pure instinct, I grabbed Asuna's and Alice's arms and ran, pulling them with me, and leaped into the three-foot-tall plants around the garage. Fortunately, it was a soft landing; I pushed them in first, then hid beside them.

Through the leaves, I could see a large moving object appear just

beyond the front gate.

It was a simple box-shaped vehicle with large wheels on each corner. That had to be the mechamobile Phercy mentioned. On the previous dive, we'd ridden one of them from the airport to this mansion, but this one was definitely larger than the other. The body was painted a light shade of gray, and there were kanji and katakana on the side—here, they just called that the common tongue—although I couldn't make them out because of the bars of the gate. I could see sirens on the roof, which had to be the source of the strange sound, so perhaps this was equivalent to an ambulance or police car.

The sirens stopped, and a door on the side swung open violently, issuing a number of people from the inside. They pushed open the large gate from the outside and raced into the mansion grounds. They were six in total...all wearing gray uniforms and caps, with short swords on their belts.

"Where are those uniforms from?" Asuna whispered. Both Alice and I shook our heads.

"I have no idea."

"I do not recognize them."

If even Alice didn't know them, it had to be the uniform of some group that did not exist two hundred years ago. The youngest of the six was in his twenties, and the oldest was fiftysomething, so they weren't students.

I held my breath as a young man took out something like a bento box from his shoulder bag and started pointing it around. The eldest man, who had a long beard, approached him and asked tensely, "Is the Incarnameter still picking up readings?"

"Nothing new, but the traces are clear. Two battle-art Incarnate weapons were activated in short order within this mansion very recently, Captain."

"Hrmm..."

The bearded captain surveyed the spacious front yard and finally seemed to notice Phercy standing right there in the center of the walk.

"Hey! You!" he shouted more forcefully than was necessary,

causing Phercy to flinch. I could sense Asuna and Alice tensing next to me, so I discreetly grabbed the bottom of their cloaks to keep them from leaping right out of our hiding spot.

Three of the men, including the captain, rushed over to Phercy, shouting loudly enough that we could hear every word, despite being at least twenty yards away.

“Do you live in this mansion?!”

Phercy backed away, intimidated by their manner, but bravely recovered and stood his ground. “Yes, I am Phercy Arabel.”

“But why are you home at this hour...? No, never mind that. Are nobleman Nogran Arabel, former pilot Rochelinn Arabel, or pilot Laurannei Arabel home?!”

“No...my father, mother, and sister are still at work.”

“I see...”

The captain peered around the grounds. My heart leaped into my throat when his sharp gaze passed over our direction, but it seemed he overlooked our hiding spot, and he turned back to Phercy.

“Did anything happen here about thirty minutes ago? Did you hear any strange noises or see any strange people about?”

Phercy may not have heard any strange noises, but he *definitely* saw some strange people. He shook his head.

“I didn’t notice anything, sir.”

“Hmm...very odd. We detected battle-art Incarnate weapons at this mansion earlier...,” the captain grumbled, folding his arms.

One of his men said, “Captain, do you think it could be the same mistaken signal we got last month?”

“But in both instances, all the Incarnameters in the office went off at once. They are precision instruments, to be sure, but they could not *all* break at the same time, in the same way.”

Upon hearing the conversation, Alice wondered, “What are... Incarnate weapons?”

“I dunno...”

“And that Incarnameter tool...is it capable of detecting the use of Incarnation?”

“I dunno...”

I couldn’t say anything else, but it didn’t stop Alice from glaring at

me for my unhelpfulness. She returned to spying.

The six men were still staring around the front yard of the mansion, but not one of them was stepping off the path to investigate further; perhaps there was some rule against it. Eventually, they seemed to settle on the answer of “device error,” huddled together to discuss something, and the five aside from the captain returned to the gate.

The captain stayed with Phercy, and he crouched to look him in the eye so he could apologize. “I’m sorry for startling you like this, Phercy. It seems we were mistaken. But I can see that you do your famous family proud—you’re very brave for being so young. Are you planning to be a pilot like your sister?”

Quit chatting and get back to your job! I hissed, knowing how difficult this topic must be for Phercy.

But the boy was very bold. “No, I want to be a scholar,” he said. “Most of the Arabel family pilots have been women.”

“Aha. Well, you shouldn’t close off future possibilities when you’re so young,” the man said, rather insensitively, I thought.

Just as the captain was about to leave, one of his subordinates—the youngest, with the Incarnameter—came rushing back to him.

“We’ve got a new but very faint Incarnate signal!”

“What?!” exclaimed the captain, standing up straight and peering at the box. It was humorous the way they pointed the box all over the garden, however, the situation was anything but. I almost wondered if my silent outrage earlier had involved the accidental use of Incarnate, and I did my best to keep my feelings still.

“Ah...” Alice gasped yet again.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Do you suppose that Incarnameter is reacting to the sword you gave to Phercy?”

“Huh...? But it’s been over thirty minutes since I transformed it.”

“The former pontifex once said that it takes time for an item transformed through Incarnation to settle into its new form. I did not know what she meant at the time, but perhaps the item retains traces of its Incarnate power, like the way newly cast metal still keeps its heat...”

“.....”

It seemed crazy, but I couldn't rule it out. After all the usage I'd made of it, I really didn't understand the exact workings of the Underworld's unique Incarnation system.

But now that I thought on it, I remembered that when I'd used Incarnation to revive the zephilia flowers my classmates at Swordcraft Academy had torn up, there was a faint glow that had remained around them. To borrow Alice's metaphor, if the Incarnameter was picking up that residual “heat,” then the men were going to realize Phercy's sword was the source very quickly. We couldn't expect the nine-year-old boy to both hide us and talk his way out of trouble at the same time. We had to solve this right away, or else the situation might further damage the boy's spirit at a time when he was already struggling.

“Asuna, Alice,” I whispered, releasing the bottom of their cloaks, “once I go out there, wait for your chance to get back inside the mansion, put on your armor, and log out.”

The answers I expected came back at once.

“What are you talking about? I'm going, too!”

“Who cares about armor? I'm going!”

“If we don't recover them now, we might not get the chance again. Besides, we have to avoid conflict here at all costs, don't we, Alice?” I said, pointing at the leather pouch on Alice's belt.

The knight bit her lip. I knew the pouch contained something incredibly important to her: two eggs for Amayori and Takiguri, the dragons who'd given up their lives to protect Alice and whom I'd rewound to their pre-hatched forms. If the guards were rough with her and cracked the eggs, even I couldn't fix that.

She clutched her pouch gingerly, protecting the contents, so I turned to Asuna and said, “I'll be fine. I'll use this to escape if I need to. Just tell Dr. Koujiro to wait until five o'clock, like we discussed.”

I lifted my left hand, stopping Asuna from saying whatever protest had been about to come forth. Because the Underworld did not have any user interface aside from Stacia Window, Dr. Koujiro and Chief Higa implemented a special gesture command we could use to voluntarily log out. You had to extend the fingers of the left hand, and

if the STL detected that you folded up the pinkie, middle finger, thumb, ring finger, and pointer finger, in that order, it would immediately log you out. When I tried it in the real world, my hand muscles screamed at me, but I could perform it within two seconds in the Underworld. And unlike the world of *Unital Ring*, I was leaving no soulless body behind here, so it worked as an emergency escape.

“...All right. But be careful, okay?” Asuna whispered, the concern clear on her face.

I smiled and said, “Of course,” then nodded to Alice and removed the swords from my waist. “Will you hold on to these?”

I gave the Night-Sky Blade to Asuna, and the Blue Rose Sword to Alice—simply because each one was so heavy—and snuck out of the shrubbery.

The captain and his men were still busy pointing the Incarnameter all over the center of the front lawn. Phercy was carefully, subtly avoiding the device, sensing it was his sword that was setting it off. But that wasn’t going to last for long.

There was no time to find a quiet way out of this.

I crouched and moved behind the garage, then generated twenty wind elements silently, placing ten beneath each foot. Then I released their wind energy, using them like rocket engines to shoot straight upward with tremendous speed. I could use Incarnate Arms —i.e., psychokinesis—to move myself, but elements were quicker when speed was of the essence.

After shooting upward about three hundred feet, I switched to free-falling. Neither the men nor Phercy had noticed me yet. I spread my arms to fine-tune my route, falling feetfirst. Before I hit the ground, I shot off the last few wind elements remaining to control my fall. With a deafening *bang!* I landed just six feet in front of the captain.

“Aaah!!” he screamed, springing backward in surprise. The young member holding the Incarnameter fell right onto his bottom. I pointedly glared at young Phercy, sending him a silent signal to play dumb. Of course, I didn’t have telepathic powers, but the boy blinked and took some distance anyway.

“Wh-who are you?!” bellowed the bearded captain, drawing his

sword. It was not just a simple blade; it had some kind of mechanical contraption on the grip. I was just wondering what it might do when the captain hit a round button with his thumb. *Zzzap!* Yellow sparks ran up and down the entire blade.

"Whoa...is that electricity? How are you causing that?" I asked, unable to resist my curiosity. There were no electrical elements in the Underworld.

But he did not answer my question. "Speak! State your name and address!"

"Ummm...my name is Kirito, but I don't have an address..."

"No address?! Then where do you sleep?!"

"Ummm, I don't remember. Or should I say, the first thing I knew, I was in this mansion..."

"Don't be ridiculous. Do you expect me to believe you're a lost child of Vecta in *this* day and age?" the captain said, prompting a wave of nostalgia in my brain. But his next statement was less familiar to me. "State your civilian number, then!"

"Huh? I...don't have a number..."

"That can't be possible! It's written in your Stacia Window!"

"O-oh, right..."

I traced an S in midair with my right hand, then tapped my left arm. An old, familiar bell chime heralded the appearance of a window that contained a string at the top reading, *UNIT ID: NND7-6355*.

"Ummm, it's NND7-6355."

"NND7? That's all the way to the north...Wait a moment. In the six thousands?! Now that's just nonsense!" fumed the captain, inching closer with his electric sword to peer at my purple window. Then his whiskered chin plummeted.

"What...?! Even my grandmother was in the eight thousands. How can this mere boy be so low...?"

That jogged my memory. The unit ID listed in the Stacia Window was the serial number for all people born in that particular area. I was "born" in Rulid in 370 HE. So two hundred years later, it stood to reason that the numbers would have gotten much higher since then. So how should I explain this?

“C-Captain!” yelped the member with the Incarnameter, still sitting on the ground. “He’s the one setting off the Incarnameter! I assume he’s in possession of some kind of Incarnate weapon!”

“Whaaat?!”

The captain shot backward and held up his electric sword. The other four men rushed closer from the gate. But most importantly of all, I was successfully pulling suspicion away from Phercy. I cleared my throat and spoke in as fierce a voice as I could manage.

“That’s right. I’m the one who just used Incarnation. It was less than an hour ago.”

“So you admit it?! Unauthorized use of Incarnate weapons is a violation of Basic Human Law!!”

“Um, it wasn’t really a weapon...”

“Then what was it? Are you trying to say it was your *own* Incarnation?!?”

I didn’t even have time to say, *Yes, it was*, before the captain issued commands to his subordinates.

“Apprehend this man! If he resists, do not hesitate to use your electroblades!”

Oh, darn. I thought they were “electric swords,” I pondered, holding out my hands together. One of the men pulled out a simple pair of cuffs and clicked them over my wrists.

The feeling of the cold steel on my skin was strangely familiar, and I wondered why it was hitting me that way until I remembered that this was the second time I’d been arrested in this world. After violating the Taboo Index at Swordcraft Academy, Eugeo and I had been taken to Central Cathedral by the very same Alice who was now hiding in the bushes nearby, and we were chained up in the underground cells there.

Back then, we’d crossed the chains that held us prisoner against each other and pulled as hard as we could to wear down their life until they snapped. But I couldn’t manage that on my own.

When the chains snapped, we lost our balance, and you complained when you bonked your head on the wall, I thought, speaking to my long-lost partner. I glanced at Phercy one more time. The boy seemed to understand exactly what I was doing, and he

nodded very slightly.

I might never see him again. I sent him a look that said, *Good luck, kid*, and turned to march toward the front gate.

Despite being stuffed through the door, the inside of the mechamobile was surprisingly nice.

The wheels were covered with a shock-resistant substance like black rubber, and it even had plate-spring suspension. The road was cobblestone, so there was some amount of vibration, but it wasn't like I had to hold my tongue lest I bite it.

Of course, I didn't say a word on the road—I was too busy staring out the window with my mouth half-open.

North Centoria in stellar year 582 was still using the building design that I remembered from two centuries ago, but everything else was completely different. The expanded roads featured vehicles in all sizes, the streetlights were bright and everywhere, and most surprising of all, about a third of the people on the sidewalks were demi-humans, like goblins, orcs, and ogres. I even saw ten-foot-tall giants.

Initially, I assumed they were tourists from the Dark Territory, but the way they spoke at street corners with other races and enjoyed tea at open-air cafés made them look utterly at home here. There were similarities in their clothing, too, so I had to assume the majority of the nonhumans were residents of Centoria.

When I had lived here, the demi-humans from the Dark Territory were treated like wicked monsters by the humans in the four empires. They were truly separate worlds. The rulers over the generations must have worked very hard to make this sight a reality. Although, according to Stica and Laurannei, it was the Star King and Star Queen who had taken the reins of the Underworld for two hundred years—and that was supposedly me and Asuna.

"Nah...it just can't be," I murmured to myself.

The young uniformed man next to me jabbed my side and snapped, "Be quiet!"

"Yes, sir."

I clammed up and sank into the shallow seat cushion.

The mechamobile headed straight down the main road and entered North Centoria's District One—the place where the Imperial Palace once existed. From what I could see through the front windshield, the castle itself was still there, but I could no longer see any of the flags bearing the insignia of Norlangarth Empire or the Axiom Church. Instead, there were banners of pure white with an unfamiliar blue symbol upon them. It was a circle accompanied by three points...a design that did not exist two hundred years ago.

"...What does that symbol signify?" I whispered to the young man next to me. His disbelief seemed to win out over his anger this time, so he gave me a very unsavory glance and said, "Are you telling me you don't recognize the Stellar Unification Council's logo?"

"Ohhh, *that's* what it is..."

"Everyone learns that in their first year of primary school. The big circle is the orbit of the twin stars. The dot in the upper right is Cardina, the dot in the lower left is its companion star, Admina, and the point in the middle is Solus."

"Ahhh, I see now..." I murmured, focusing on the tapestries again. On the tapered ends was a different insignia, I realized. It was smaller and hard to make out, but it looked like two vertical swords wrapped up by some kind of flower. "What's that one at the bottom...?"

"Are you truly asking me these things? That's obviously the symbol of the Star King..." whispered the young man.

The mechamobile turned left at that point, jolting heavily. We were crossing the sidewalk to enter Norlangarth Castle—or more accurately, the government building on its grounds. The black writing on the gray vehicle mentioned the North Centoria Imperial Guard, so this had to be their headquarters.

The parking lot, which was not especially large, contained two similar vehicles already. If three vehicles were all they had to cover North Centoria, it wasn't much, but then I remembered that Underworlders essentially never broke the law. That couldn't have changed much in two hundred years, and since the threat of the Dark Territory was presumably gone, too, they would need only a

minimum of forces to maintain order.

The vehicle stopped in the parking spot farthest in, and the members quickly hopped out, lining up in front of the door on the right side, where I sat. The captain opened it and barked, “Out!” I was feeling the need for a proper stretch anyway, so I happily obliged—but not before glancing at the small analog clock installed in front of the driver’s seat. It was 4:40, meaning I had twenty minutes left until the time I promised Dr. Koujiro—and thirty until I was forcefully yanked out of the simulation.

“Make it quick!” the captain barked again, so I quickly did, thinking, *Yeah, yeah, I hear you*. The men promptly surrounded me on all sides.

The headquarters of the Imperial Guard, to the west of the parking lot, was a tremendous four-story building, but in the presence of the government building looming just to the north, and the mind-boggling scale of Central Cathedral farther beyond that, it was hard to be all that impressed. We crossed the tiled lot and went inside, the guards maintaining formation around me.

Facing the door of the lobby was a large reception counter, with both men and women at work. They all stared at me—it was probably quite rare to catch an actual criminal—so I wanted to give them a wave, but the cuffs prevented that.

They took me to a barren little room in the back of the second floor. The only things inside were a desk, two chairs, and a round clock on the wall. It was such a pitch-perfect take on an interrogation room that I almost laughed out loud when I saw it. I took the chair farther away from the door, looked up at the captain standing across from me, and asked, “Aren’t you supposed to tempt me with a steaming bowl of *katsudon*?”

“Wh-what?”

“Erm, nothing.”

“Just sit there and behave yourself! The director will be here to question you in person!” the captain announced before marching out of the room. The guards shut the door, but I didn’t hear a lock clicking, and they didn’t even perform a body search on me. I was a bit worried about the North Centoria Imperial Guard’s work

standards.

Leaning against the hard-backed chair, I considered that getting arrested was not something I expected to experience, but it was, in a sense, rather convenient. Whatever this Imperial Guard director was like, they would certainly be in a position to understand the events happening in North Centoria better than anyone else. If I could ask the right questions, I might gain some kind of clue about the Underworld's infiltrator.

I waited impatiently, but the door did not open after one minute, or two. After three, I hit the limit on my patience and decided I might as well figure out how their clocks worked. I stood up and moved the chair over to the wall. Giving the chair a silent apology, I stood on the seat with my boots and listened closely to the device hanging on the wall.

There was no mechanical ticking to be heard. Instead, it was emitting mysterious, faint vibrations that sounded like the chirping of crickets. There was no way to guess how it worked based only on the sound. I pulled my ear away and checked the wooden face for the name of a manufacturer or crafter, but there was nothing on it except for the twelve numbers...

Hold on.

Above the numeral 6, there was a tiny symbol carved into the surface, barely a fraction of an inch in size. It was so fine that it was difficult to make out the detail by the naked eye, but it seemed to be two lines over a diamond shape, rather similar to the symbol at the bottom of the banners hanging from the government building.

I looked around the room, hoping for a magnifying glass, but of course, there wasn't one. So I raised my hand with the intent of creating a crystal lens instead, when I heard several footsteps approaching the door. I quickly hopped off the chair, moved it back to its original position, and sat down.

The door flew open without a knock. The bearded captain entered first.

"On your feet! His Eminence, the noble Director Boharsson, will see you now!"

When titled "eminence," it was hard not to form some opinions

before seeing the guy. Even with the noble ranks abolished and demi-humans living in Centoria now, it seemed the class consciousness carved into the souls of Underworlders was alive and well.

I rose to my feet obediently, while the captain stepped inside and waited beside the door. Boot heels clicked heavily through the doorway, revealing a short, wide man who seemed to be around sixty years old.

His uniform's basic design was the same as the captain's, but there were brilliant golden epaulets on his shoulders, various colorful service awards on his chest, and the sword on his left hip was not the practical design of the electroblades but a highly decorative saber. He even had a fanciful mustache that he curled upward at the ends. Even two hundred years ago, I had never seen such a stereotypical puffed-up nobleman as this guy, I felt.

His Eminence sat down and made himself comfortable in the seat across from me, then heavily cleared his throat in preparation to speak.

But he did not get the chance.

“Stop right there!” cried a sharp voice, causing the nobleman’s barrel-like torso to jiggle with surprise. The captain started to barge out of the doorway but was promptly pushed back inside.

Stomping into the cramped questioning room was a pair of people wearing matching deep-blue cloaks. Both were short but possessed commanding auras that overwhelmed the bearded captain and mustached director. They wore sailor-style caps with folded-back brims low over their brows, so I couldn’t make out their faces very well.

“Wh-what is the meaning of this?!” spluttered nobleman Boharsson at last.

One of the blue cloaks snapped, “This case is under the purview of the Integrity Pilots. Effective immediately. Hand over the suspect at once.”

“Hrrg...,” the portly man grumbled as they thrust the hat’s insignia under his nose. The combination of crossed arrows and circle belonged once to the Integrity Knights—and the Axiom Church.

The church no longer existed, but Boharsson backed down as though the genetic memory of that fear still lurked in his fluctlight.

“Fine! Do your worst with him! Let’s go, Torev!”

“Yes, sir!” said the bearded captain, who was named Torev, I was finally learning. He rushed out after the fuming director, sparing not a single glance for me.

Only the two blue cloaks and I were left, and I had to wonder what was going to happen next—when they closed the door, doffed their hats, and spoke my name in remarkably friendly tones.

“Lord Kirito, you’ve finally returned to us!”

“We’re so happy to see you again, despite the circumstances, Lord Kirito!”

“.....Ah.”

At last, I realized that the two cloaked people were none other than the young pilots I’d met in my last dive, Laurannei Arabel and Stica Schtrinen.

With fresh eyes, it was clear to me how much of Ronie I could still see in Laurannei—and Tiese in Stica. I blinked several times before I was able to return their greeting.

“N-nice to see you again. I’m pretty sure I said before that you don’t need to call me Lord.”

Both of them promptly shook their heads.

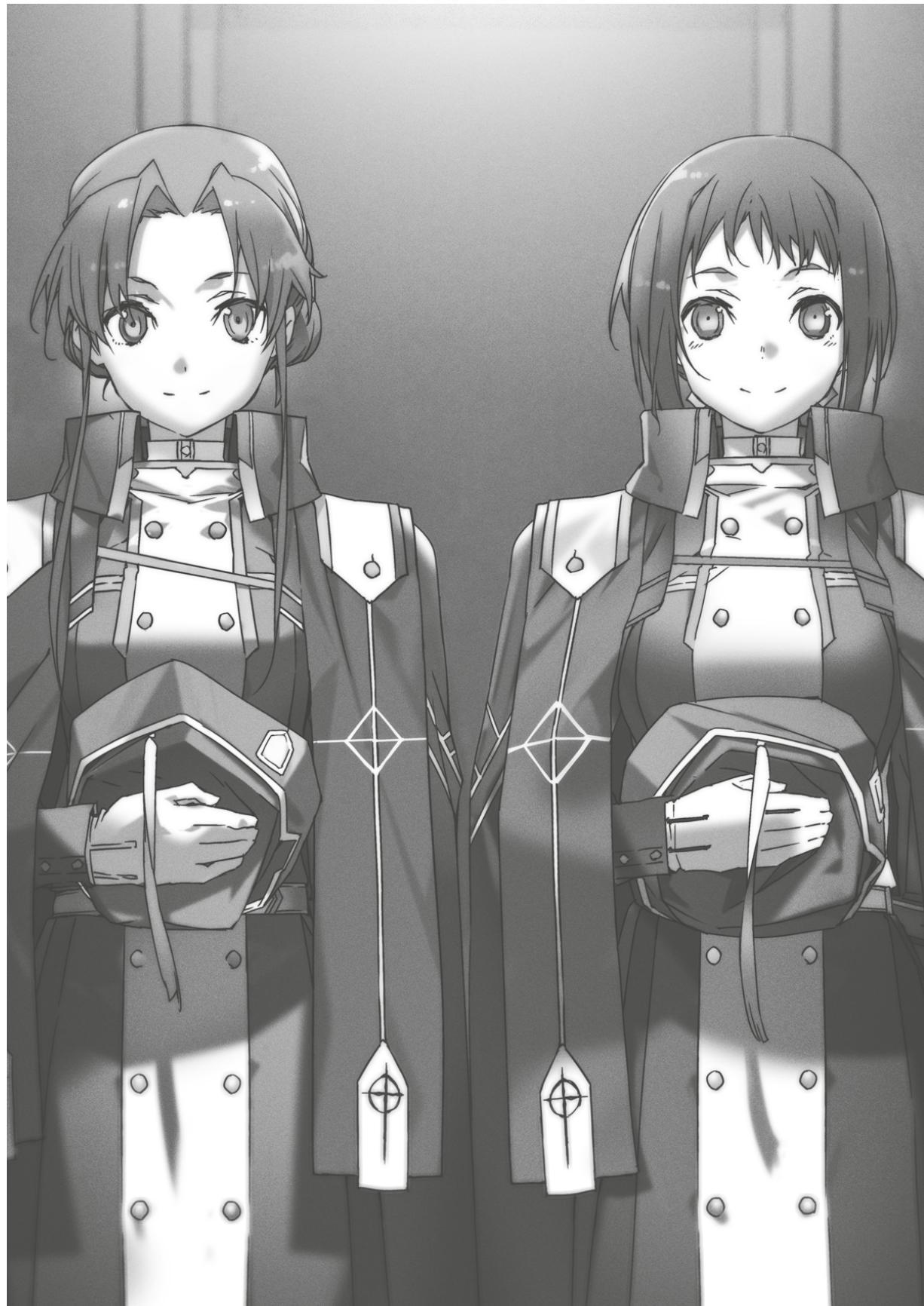
“We can’t do that, Lord Kirito.”

“The truth is, we would *rather* call you Your Majesty the Star King.”

“...Absolutely not,” I said, feeling a shiver run down my spine.
“So...why are you here?”

“Phercy told me,” said black-haired Laurannei. That initially seemed to answer my question, but I caught myself before I took it at face value.

“Wait, but...the mechamobile took me straight here. And the pilots’ base is outside the city, right? There’s no way Phercy could have run to get you in time.”





Redheaded Stica said worriedly, “I suppose you haven’t regained your memory yet, Lord Kirito...As the Star King, you invented the vocal transmitter.”

“V-vocal transmitter? What is that?”

“Just as the name says, it is a Designed Object that transmits one’s voice.”

“D-Designed Object?”

That doesn’t answer my question! I thought. Perhaps it was short for *human-designed Divine Object*? If it transmitted the human voice, it was presumably a telephone of some kind, then? So the Underworld had not only automobiles and airplanes but phones, too...?

“Hmm, I really think this Star King was someone else, not me...I have absolutely no memory of this vocal transmitter thing...”

“We can discuss that later. First, we should leave,” said Laurannei, putting her cap back on.

“Sounds like a great plan...but are we going back to your house?”

“I’d like to do that, certainly, but the guards might intrude again...I’ll explain where we’re going once we’ve left the building.”

Laurannei opened the door and checked both ways, then looked back and gave a signal, so I followed Stica out of the interrogation room.

I couldn’t see any of the guards in the hallway. We quickly proceeded down to the first floor, crossed the lobby, and went outside. There was a new mechamobile at the entrance to the lot.

If the official city guard vehicles were simple box-type cars, this was a more stylish sedan. The front bumper had a heavy grill above it, then a long engine compartment and a low-ceiling cabin. The vehicle was a shiny black color with no words that I could see on the sides, only a proud silver insignia of the combined circle and cross on the nose of the car.

Laurannei circled around to the driver’s seat—the wheel was on the right-hand side, like in Japan—while Stica opened the rear left door and gave me a look. I didn’t want to be a child and proclaim, *I wanna sit in the front!* so I took the seat that was offered to me. Stica shut the door, which had the heavy, thick sound of luxury.

The seat was soft and cushioned, making the difference in comfort from the Imperial Guard's vehicle even more stark. I sank into it, exhaled, and glanced to my right.

There was someone already sitting there, and I flinched and leaned away.

This person was dressed in a cloak the same color as the girls' and wore the same hat. Based on the build, I guessed it was a man, but the large brim of the hat was pulled low, and the collar was popped high, so I couldn't see any facial features. The person's legs were crossed, stuffed into polished boots, and their hands rested atop their legs, fingers folded together but utterly still. I stared at the mystery person, then leaned toward the driver's seat and said quietly, "Um, Laurannei...who is this?"

"The commander of the Integrity Pilots."

"Commander...?!" I squawked as the passenger side door closed.

Laurannei stepped on the accelerator, and heat elements under the hood growled softly, moving the huge vehicle smoothly forward. I didn't think the previous mechamobile was all that uncomfortable, but this sedan was clearly superior. The Underworld's level of technology didn't even have inflated tires yet, so how were they absorbing all of the vibrations so well?

But in this situation, the automotive technology didn't matter. I was more curious about the person to my right.

I presumed that "Commander" was the highest rank of the Integrity Pilots. From what the girls told me earlier, the Integrity Pilots were part of the Underworld Space Force, which had a supreme commander of its own, but in practical terms, the space force and ground force were both under the Integrity Pilothood's lead. The Human Guardian Army during the Otherworld War two centuries ago had a similar relationship with the Integrity Knighthood of the time. So that meant the person sitting next to me was in control of the entire military might of the Underworld.

So why was this ultra-VIP riding in the car that had come to get me? And why were they staying silent and refusing to even look at me, much less speak?

I kept sneaking glances to the right, trying to figure out how I

should respond to the situation. Mostly, I couldn't tell why Stica and Laurannei weren't saying anything, either. You'd think they would provide an introduction or explanation.

Without anything better to do, I decided I would mimic the commander's pose, leaning back, crossing one leg over the other, and folding my fingers together. I glanced to the right to see if it prompted any reaction.

Just then, the car turned left at an intersection, and the sunlight came through the window, alighting on the commander's shoulder.

Between the brim of the hat and the folded collar of the jacket, the sun shone on gentle, wavy hair. It was not blond but a darker golden brown.

In a word: flaxen.

Suddenly, my heart began racing without reason. My breathing quickened and became shallower; my fingertips went cold and numb.

Awkwardly, I craned my neck to the right, capturing the entirety of the commander in my sight.

If he was a man, he was neither skinny nor bulky. If either, he was on the slender side, similar to my figure. But even through the thick coat, I could tell his muscles were well honed.

I wanted to reach out and feel his shoulder to see how hardy it was. In fact, I wanted to rip off his mask, pull those collars apart, and stare at him full in the face. The sooner I could tell who he *wasn't*, the sooner I could set my heart at ease.

This pressing desire turned to unconscious Incarnation, reaching for the commander, trying to touch his shoulder.

There was a sudden jolt that smacked me back; my eyes went wide with surprise. The commander had forcefully brushed back my Incarnate Arms with his own powerful Incarnation.

"Er...no, I didn't mean..." I stammered.

The words, "Very interesting," cut me short. The commander finally moved, pulling his left hand slowly from his pocket. "So this is the Incarnation of the man who called himself the Star King. I can see why the Imperial Guard mistook it for an Incarnate weapon."

His voice.

There was nothing grating about it. The tone was as smooth as velvet, with a bit of an effeminate treble, but containing a strong, firm core.

The commander lifted his hand, pinched the brim of his hat, and gently lifted it. The wavy flaxen hair spilled out, gleaming beautifully in the setting sun.

Stica spun around in the passenger seat, clearly bursting with something she'd been keeping to herself all this time.

"There, you see, Commander? Isn't it really him?!"

"I did not say that yet. There are several in the Integrity Pilothood who can use Incarnation at this level."

"No, this is different!" protested Stica, clutching her hands to her chest. "Kirito used a technique I've never seen before against the Abyssal Horror, that mythic spacebeast...He did it with nothing more than sword arts! No one but the legendary Star King himself could do such a thing!"

"Let's not rush into judgment," said the man, who was probably the most powerful person in the Underworld today along with the head of the Stellar Unification Council. He wasn't putting on airs, however. He cleared his throat and added, "Ah, Laurannei. If you don't mind, could we swing by East Third Street in District Six?"

"No, we can't. There are leftover honey pies from the Jumping Deer back at the base."

"But they taste the best when they're freshly made."

"So does everything else."

All I could do was stare at the profile of the commander's face.

I couldn't identify his facial features. Not just because of the sunlight coming through the window behind him but because of the white leather mask that covered the upper half of his face. Even then, the exposed mouth looked just like *him*. Or maybe it was just my hope that was making me think that way.

"Fine, fine. Then just head straight back to base," the commander said with a disappointed sigh. He turned to me casually. Behind his soft, flowing bangs, the white mask covered from his hairline to his nose, but behind the eyeholes, shielded by thin lenses of glass, his emerald-green eyes were sharp.

“.....Eu.....”

He frowned slightly at the sound that escaped my lips, but it turned promptly into a little smile.

However, it was not the warm, gentle little grin I'd seen so many times. This man had the same eyes and voice as my partner, who died two hundred years ago, but his smile was sly, sarcastic, closed off from anyone else. He held out his hand to me.

“You'll have to pardon my mask. The skin around my eyes is very sensitive to the light of Solus. I am E...Pardon me. I am Integrity Pilot Commander Eolyne Herlentz. It's nice to meet you, Kirito.”

“Eolyne...,” I repeated hollowly, pondering the unfamiliar name.

Could it just be a case of total coincidence? A freak similarity within the bounds of the physical parameters that determined the appearances of Underworlders? Or were the eyes and voice the only things that resembled his, and beneath the mask, the rest of his face would be unrecognizable?

It took all of my self-control not to rip off his mask. Even without seeing his face, if I could touch him, I might learn something meaningful, anything.





I took a deep breath, let it out, and moved to grab the hand of Commander Eolyne, who was patiently waiting for me.

But just inches away, I found myself overtaken by a strange, paralyzing sensation. It was a feeling that I was being stripped away from my body, that the bond of flesh and consciousness was coming undone. It felt like...

Logging out.

Automatically, I glanced at the driver's seat. The clock set into the dashboard was pointing to a time for 5:11. I didn't exit at five o'clock, so as Dr. Koujiro warned me, she was beginning the log-out process, with a merciful extra minute, to boot.

"No...wait!" I cried, speaking to the scientist in the real world, then tried to grab the hand of the stunned Commander Eolyne. But just as our fingers made contact, the world was surrounded by rainbow light and vanished.

10

I opened the door to the house, and Suguha was once again waiting for me in the entrance hall.

“Welcome back, Big Brother! You’re late, by the...”

But the same greeting that she gave me last night died before it could finish. I must have had a very strange look on my face. I tried to compose myself and give her a normal greeting.

“I’m home, Suguha.”

“...Welcome back. Did something...happen?”

It did. Almost *too many* things happened. But they weren’t the kind of things I could explain in a quick chat at the door.

“Yeah...I guess. Is there any food?” I asked, taking off my shoes and straightening them.

Suguha blinked and replied, “Uh, yes. I had practice after school, so I just got home. Mom made some curry, and there’s some fresh cooked rice, too. You can eat right away.”

“That’s good. Yui said the town in the forest...I mean, she said Ruis na Ríg was still fine for the moment. I can tell you what happened while we eat.”

“All right. I’ll go and get it ready.” My sister trotted off to the kitchen in her tracksuit, and I headed upstairs to my room.

My mother’s work schedule started and ended much later than the typical office worker, and she also cooked curry and made sure to air out my blanket. The bed was perfectly made for me.

Your typical teen boy might protest this. *Don’t come into my room without permission!* But I was thoroughly grateful. My sweet but somewhat bratty sister would come in here on her own, but my mother respected my autonomy, and while my father was home only a few times a year, I respected him greatly. I couldn’t be any luckier.

But as I stood in my room, neatly vacuumed by my mother, the only thing I could think about was getting back to the Underworld as soon as humanly possible. If I closed my eyes, I could vividly envision those powerful green eyes behind Eolyne Herlentz's mask.

If it was all a big coincidence, great. But until I confirmed it was just a fluke, the disquiet in my breast was not going to go away.

After logging out at 5:11, I didn't even wait for the STL's head block to rise before I shouted, "Let me go back inside right now!" But Dr. Koujiro did not allow me to go back in. There were two reasons: The STL's self-diagnostic programs detected a number of slight mechanical issues, and after reawakening, my pulse and blood pressure exceeded normal levels. I couldn't do anything about the former, but the latter was undeniably due to mental factors, not physical.

And Dr. Koujiro said that in this Underworld investigation mission, nothing was of a higher priority than the well-being of me and Asuna. I must have seemed very out of sorts, because both Asuna and Alice warned me against it, too. I was totally outnumbered and had to give up on going back into the dive.

We'd fill out a report on the dive at a later date. Asuna and I said good-bye to Alice before the security checkpoint, then got into the taxi Rath called for us. I got off at Shibuya Station, and I must have been off in the clouds during the ride. It was a terrible waste of Asuna's birthday, but the feeling of urgency never left me.

What if—what if it wasn't just a crazy coincidence? What if there's some connection between Commander Eolyne and Eugeo?

That would mean...That might mean.....

"Hurry up, Big Brother!" Suguha called from downstairs. I came back to my senses with a start.

"Oh! Sorry! Right away!" I called back and hastily changed from my uniform into my home clothes. It wasn't like Eolyne or the Underworld had gone away. If anything, I was the one who had vanished before their eyes. It must have been quite an alarming event. I'd have to apologize the next time I saw them.

Our full investigation was scheduled to happen on Saturday, three days from now, lasting from morning until night. I'd just have to

manage my anxiety and try to focus on *Unital Ring*—as well as my schoolwork, of course.

I took my uniform shirt and undershirt into the hallway for the laundry, and caught a whiff of curry floating up from below. The realization of just how hungry I was sped up my feet and took me downstairs in a rush.

The fourth night of *Unital Ring* arrived with thick, splattering rain.

According to Alice and Yui, there had been brief showers here and there throughout the day, but this was the first time it had rained so hard since the game began. The Seed program's rain wasn't quite as unpleasant as the real thing or its simulated counterpart in the Underworld, but there was no denying its effect on one's eyesight. *At least it's not life-threatening, like that ice storm on the savanna*, I told myself as I stared at the dark, intimidating sky from the porch of the log cabin.

Agil emerged from inside, holding a pottery mug in each hand, and scowled at the sky.

"I was going to focus on leveling-up tonight. Not gonna be easy in this weather," he said, holding out one of the mugs. I thanked him for it.

"You can still hunt in the rain."

"Nah, I'm a Tokyoite. I don't do well in the rain."

".....I've never heard of that being a thing with people from Tokyo," I noted archly, bringing the mug to my lips. The liquid inside was not the red *shiso* barley tea Asuna had made for me last night but something that tasted like black coffee flavored with ginger and cinnamon. It was a strange flavor, but if I had to choose between the two, this one was a bit more to my taste.

By eight o'clock, everyone except Argo was present, so we ran through our customary meeting, then headed into free time. We could wait until nine to see if the rain stopped, and if it didn't, we needed to get started on building more town defenses, regardless. An army of a hundred could be rolling into our forest by tomorrow night, after all.

The town of Ruis na Ríg received a major boost in strength from the arrival of the warrior Yzelma and her ten Bashin, but if possible, I didn't want to just hurl them into the most dangerous roles. Death was final for both players and NPCs here, but we suffered only the loss of access to *Unital Ring*; NPCs would most likely be erased from existence forever. In SAO, most NPCs would respawn again a certain amount of time after death, and NPCs in ALO were immortal, impossible to damage. There was no such mercy in this place.

So it was our job to face the enemy head-on, but we couldn't afford losses, either. And complicating matters was the fact that the enemy players didn't really have a choice but to attack us. They were compelled to do Mutasina's bidding due to her Noose of the Accursed spell. My initial hope was that they would *use* our village as a base of operations, not attack it.

Therefore, we spent some time at the meeting discussing how to prevent a battle to the death like the one against Schulz's team, and it proved to be a very difficult question to answer. Freshly out of the Underworld, I couldn't help but think ruefully, *If only I had the Blue Rose Sword and my Incarnation power. I could bind all hundred of them in an instant and remove Mutasina alone.* But in *Unital Ring*, Kirito had only level-18 stats, an iron longsword, and decay magic. No doubt it would be supremely satisfying to spit a Rotten Shot into smug Mutasina's face, but it wasn't going to defeat her for good.

Within less than a minute, it was Sinon who provided the first idea that was actually useful.

She had inherited the ultrapowerful Hecate II antimateriel rifle from GGO. It instantly killed the gigantic dinosaur boss in the west Giyoru Savanna, so it would have to be powerful enough to take out Mutasina the witch in one shot, whether she was level-20 or level-30—assuming the shot was accurate.

"That's the problem," Sinon added bitterly.

The Hecate II was as demanding as my Excalibur and Asuna's Ray Grace in terms of required stats. She couldn't even lift the gun, much less aim it. Against the dinosaur boss, she had the help of several brave Orniths to steady the barrel, but according to her, it was a miracle that she'd managed to hit the monster's weak point

even with that help.

If we were going to snipe Mutasina, we needed better odds than *miraculous*. We needed to find a creative solution to firing the Hecate somehow. The simplest answer was to affix it to something heavy, but that would just make aiming it harder.

"If this were the real world, it would be a cinch to go to a hardware store for materials, then whip up a simple rifle stand," claimed Klein. Whether he could really do that or not, it was true that in this world, you could only make things contained in your skill's production menu. And there was no rifle stand under the Carpentry, Stoneworking, or Blacksmithing skills.

"If we're going with Sinon's idea, I'll be the carrier," Agil offered. I glanced at the ax wielder to my right. His avatar looked muscled and powerful, but appearance was not linked to numerical stats in a VRMMO.

I grimaced and said, "It's a very generous offer, but you're still level-10, Agil. Silica could beat you at arm wrestling right now."

"Hmph..."

The large man's mouth twisted. He'd gained a few levels last night while I was away at the Stiss Ruins, but he was still the lowest of our group of friends. It was unavoidable, since he was the last to convert and had a day job running his café, but I was sure that had to rankle him, having played a stout and sturdy tank who protected his comrades all through SAO and ALO.

"That's why I was going to focus on leveling-up tonight. But nothing good comes from being desperate on a rainy night..." he grumbled.

"That's true," I said. Compared to traditional video games, sensory information played a huge part of the VRMMO experience. Plenty of things aside from visibility were important in terms of detecting danger: the faint sounds and smells of different monsters, the marks left on floors and walls, even the subtle taste of water could tell you crucial information. I took it so seriously, I even independently studied a phenomenon I called hypersensing, instances where I received a kind of sixth sense warning of enemy attack before it happened.

So a forest at night in the rain, where all five senses were impeded in some way, was at least as dangerous as a dungeon, if not more so. I'd heard many stories of players in Aincrad who had tried to monopolize a good monster spot during perilous conditions and died as a result. I wasn't going to assume everything in SAO and *Unital Ring* was the same, but it was true that death was a grave matter in both.

Even the smells get overtaken by the rain, I thought, my nose twitching. Amid the dampness, I caught a whiff of something fragrant. The wind was blowing from the west, so perhaps the Bashin were cooking meat in their gathering area on the west side of Ruis na Ríg. The smell was very faint, despite the log cabin being only sixty feet away, a good example of how heavily the rain could cover up a smell.

"...At last night's meeting," I murmured, "Alice mentioned a point along the Maruba River that would be good for grinding during the day."

"The problem is, time is synced up in *UR*," Agil replied. "Maybe I'll have to close the café again tomorrow..."

"Hey, don't go getting in trouble with your wife on our account," I added hastily, but for some reason, he just smirked at me.

Agil's Dicey Café was an American-style coffee shop during the day and a cocktail bar at night; Agil managed it during the day, and his wife handled the night hours. In the two years that Agil was trapped in SAO, she had kept the business running day and night—and just barely managed to keep things together. That made me worry that Agil's ongoing VRMMO habit might be presaging trouble of a different kind...

"My little lady's busy playing during the day," he said with a grin. My mouth fell open.

"Uh...she is?"

"In fact, she's been into online gaming longer than me."

"Wow...but...hang on. Is your wife playing a Seed game? Doesn't that mean she...?"

I was still speaking when Kuro, who was curled up along the wall of the porch, lifted its head and growled briefly. In the front yard, Aga

stopped frolicking happily in the rain to stand still, its pointed snout raised to the east.

"What is it, Kuro?" I asked, walking over to scratch the panther's neck, but it did not stop growling. I listened closely but could hear only rain...

No.

There was something else. Not a sound. Something coming through the skin on the soles of my feet. A faint but abnormal vibration.

"...An earthquake?" murmured Agil, who noticed it at the same moment I did, keeping his feet firm against the porch.

"Since when did virtual reality have earthquakes...? Not that it can't..." I replied, placing a hand on the porch itself.

There was a violent *jolt!*, a shock wave more than a simple vibration, that shook the entire cabin.

I wobbled, losing my balance and dropping the mug in my other hand. The fragile piece of pottery immediately smashed to pieces, vanishing into blue particles. The sound of its shattering was lost amid the screams of the girls inside and Klein's shout:

"Agil, the east!"

I leaped out into the downpour. In the real world, it was impossible to tell which direction was the center of seismic activity from your senses alone, but here in VR, I could get a sense of it from the direction my body was wobbling. Kuro and Agil followed me into the yard, and the others quickly rushed out of the house behind us.

I ran into the middle of the open space and turned around, but the cabin and walls were too high to see into the forest. I could hear squealing coming from the other side, presumably from the ratlike Patter.

The ground shook once again. Whatever the source, it was getting closer with each repetition.

"Out of the Four O'Clock Gate!" I called out, rushing onto Inner Perimeter Road and turning left. That put me on Four O'Clock Road, where many Patter were already emerging from their homes to look at the sky with worry.

"Stay inside. It's too dangerous out here...Er, tell them that!" I

asked Yui, who was right behind me, and made a mental note to work on my Patter and Bashin language skills as soon as I got the chance. Right after opening the southeast gate out of town, the third tremor hit. It almost threw me off my feet.

“Aaah...”

“Whoa, there!” Lisbeth held on to my left arm, keeping me upright.

“Th...thanks.”

“You’re good. What should we do, though?! If this isn’t just an ordinary earthquake...,” she remarked. The others looked tense. If this shaking wasn’t some natural phenomenon of the Great Zelletelio Forest but was caused by monsters or other players, it was something devastatingly powerful, on the level of grand magic.

“...Let’s try to figure out what’s causing it first,” I said, to everyone’s approval. Eight was the maximum party size in *Unital Ring*, and there were ten of us, so we split into two groups of five and linked them as a raid party. Asuna, Yui, Leafa, Klein, and I were Team A, and Sinon, Alice, Lisbeth, Silica, and Agil were Team B. Argo wasn’t going to make it in time, but if she did show up, she’d be in Team A.

I instructed Sinon, the leader of Team B, to head to the left, then I rushed into the dark forest with my four party members and two pets. Team B, which had Misha with them, followed in parallel, thirty feet to the left of us.

The rain showed no sign of slowing. The soggy undergrowth was constantly threatening to make us slip, so we had to be careful as we ran to the east. The moon was behind the clouds, so five yards was the best I could see up ahead, and the rain meant any torch was going to be snuffed out in moments. Thanks to my Night Vision skill, I could barely make out the trees and bushes, so I led the way for the others, running just slow enough that I didn’t trip and fall.

There was no fourth quake yet, but I could still feel intermittent vibrations through my feet. I thought I was picking up faint sounds of cracking and crunching destruction, too.

“What’s ahead in this direction, Kirito?” asked Asuna, just loud enough that I could hear her over the rain, pulling Yui along by the hand.

"We haven't explored too much this way, but I'm pretty sure there was a big valley over here."

"Meaning there could be landslides happening because of the rain?!" Klein wondered optimistically, running with long strides.

I couldn't help but smirk at that one. "If everything fell apart in a VRM MO each time it rained, the whole place would be a torn-up mess."

"And it's not like there are construction workers to build public works," Leafa noted.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Klein grumbled.

Meanwhile, the trees ahead were starting to thin out. If my memory was accurate, there would be two sizable hills soon, with a huge canyon running straight between them. I hadn't checked to see what was on the other end of the canyon.

"We're leaving the trees!" I warned my companions, running past an especially large spiral pine.

The forest opened up in a V-shape, giving way to deep grass. Black clouds swirled above, lashing us with their rain and illuminating the ground with the occasional bolt of white lightning.

To the sides up ahead, as I remembered, there were two hills—or probably just one, in the long-distant past, split in two by the huge gash in the earth that now separated it. The canyon was about a hundred feet wide, its floor littered by boulders larger than Misha.

I was anticipating that the source of the earthquake was somewhere in this field, but I couldn't see anything abnormal at the moment. There were still faint microtremors coming through my feet, but it had been several minutes now since any vertical displacement large enough to knock me off my feet.

Was it truly just some natural phenomenon? I started to relax the tiniest amount.

But then an especially bright flash of lightning lit everything in white, and a mammoth rock formation reaching up from the floor of the canyon, over thirty feet tall, simply shattered into pieces, as though it had exploded from the inside.

The shaking that followed was the greatest yet, and I had to grab Kuro's shoulder to keep from tumbling over. Asuna, Yui, and Leafa

kept one another upright, but Klein toppled spectacularly onto his bottom.

Normally, such a fall would be followed by furious swearing, but in this case, even he didn't have time for that. A figure had appeared from beyond the shattered boulder, impossibly vast, beyond comparison.

We were at least two hundred yards away, and the bottom of the canyon was well below our current position, but the pressure I felt was overwhelming; it made my breathing quick and shallow. It wasn't just the size but the *shape* that was stirring the primordial fear within me.

"What *is* that...?" Leafa asked.

"What the hell...?" Klein muttered at the same time.

I didn't have anything insightful to say, either. The shape I'd seen by the lightning's illumination was too bizarre to even describe.

It was undoubtedly the largest monster I'd encountered yet in *Unital Ring*. Sinon had said the *sterocephalus* dinosaur boss she'd fought was thirty feet from head to tail, but the monster I was looking at now was at least twice that length.

Its head was barely within the realm of humanoid, but there were four eyes glowing red, and its mouth was split not just up and down but left and right as well. The back of the head was elongated, and a number of horns jutted out of the sides.

Just below its head were two arms, which featured extremely long forearms that ended in scythe blades. The torso bulged like a barrel, and a vertical mouth yawned in the center of it.

That was as far as the humanoid features went. Its waist bent backward at a ninety-degree angle, connecting to a vast midsection that was segmented like a centipede's. Multijointed legs proliferated, ending in sharp points similar to the scythe-arms, and the end of the body was a spearlike protuberance.

Its entire body was covered in a gleaming black shell, but what made it even more grotesque was that rippling muscle could be seen under that shell. The shape was insectoid, but the texture of the creature was vertebrate. There was only one word I knew that could encapsulate this creature: *demon*.

The cause of the tremors that shook Ruis na Ríg was probably that titanic creature smashing through the boulders. If it reached the town, all that work we'd put into construction and repairs for our log cabin would be for nothing, as it crushed the settlement flat.

Watching the creature on the canyon floor, which had momentarily paused in its advance, I muttered to no one in particular, "What is that thing...doing here...?"

The man-faced centipede, all seventy-plus feet of it, didn't share a single thing in common with the animal monsters of the Great Zellelilio Forest. We'd seen bears in the forest, leopards in the grasslands, and crabs in the river—these all made a certain kind of sense. Why throw away that logic now? The only place a monster like that should exist was in the bottom of a deep, dark dungeon—or hell itself.

But then something sparked to life, tickling the deepest part of my brain.

Had I seen a monster that bore a resemblance to this one before...in some other VRMMO world? But where...?

"Hey, Krito..."

I looked over and saw that Asuna, who was holding Yui in her arms, wore a blank expression.

"I think...I've seen that monster before..."

But before she could elaborate, another voice cried out from the left. "Look at its feet!"

That came from Sinon, the leader of Team B, which had exited the forest a few moments after us. The sniper's eyesight was just as sharp in this world as in the last, and she'd spotted something we'd missed. I stowed that prickling in my head for now and stared carefully. At the bottom of the canyon, lit intermittently by lightning flashes, were numerous smaller rocks in addition to the wreckage the man-faced centipede caused. And between them...

"Oh..." I gasped when I saw it.

Ten—closer to twenty small shapes moving slowly. They were actually human-sized, only small in comparison to the man-faced centipede, but their silhouettes were not human, either. Bodies covered in hard shell, long horns and chins, six legs. They were

insect-type monsters—minions of the man-faced centipede.

Suddenly, the great creature's four eyes flashed, red and baleful, and it raised its right scythe-arm.

“Jyaaaaaa!”

Even at two hundred yards, the force of its roar nearly buckled our legs. The beast swung one of its scythes with terrifying speed. It easily shattered a rock ten feet across, knocking over two or three of the insectoid monsters standing behind it.

The other insects in the vicinity hurried to lift up their overturned kind. The twenty of them then proceeded to run toward the exit of the canyon.

“Jyashaaa!” howled the demon again, lifting both scythe-arms. It slammed them a few times into the earth, the smaller insects just barely avoiding the blow.

“Are they...fighting each other?” I muttered.

“Doesn’t seem like fighting,” Klein said, having gotten back to his feet. “More like the big one’s attacking the itty-bitty ones while they run away. But more importantly...they’re comin’ this way!”

Indeed, the human-sized insectoids were quickly rushing up the gentle slope of the hillside. The man-faced centipede resumed moving, chasing after them. Both would reach the edge of the forest, where we now stood, in less than a minute.

The worst thing that could happen would be for both to target us for attack. Should we hide in the forest and wait for the giant centipede-thing to wipe out the twenty insectoids? The insectoids might slip into the forest and reach all the way to Ruis na Ríg. Perhaps we should attack from a distance to stop their forward progress—and let the centipede kill them. Based on what we’d seen so far, the smaller creatures’ algorithm seemed to include a pattern of helping one another, so we might be able to use that to our advantage.

Monsters or not, I didn’t exactly feel great about that tactic, but if that was what it took to protect the town and its NPCs, so be it. I steeled myself for what had to be done and called out to our two long-distance fighters.

“Yui, Sinon, use your fire magic and musket to stop the insect-

type monsters at the front!"

"Right away!" "You got it," they said, taking a few steps forward.

Sinon pointed her gun, and Yui held out her hands, aiming for the orchid mantis look-alike in the lead. The light-pink body stood out through the rain, giving them an easier target to hit.

Yui performed the activation gesture for her fire magic, then pulled back her right hand. Sinon pressed the rifle against her cheek and put her finger to the trigger. The distance to the orchid mantis was 100 yards, 150 to the man-faced centipede behind it.

They took aim, sucked in deep breaths—and then Agil shouted, "Hold on!!" and leaped in front of them. Sinon was so startled, she lifted the muzzle of the gun, and Yui moved her hands out of the way.

"Hey, what's the big idea?!" Sinon groused, but Agil could only say a quick "Sorry!" in response. He rushed out into the pouring rain, not even bothering to draw his double-edged ax.

"Wh-whoa...what in the world?!" I shouted, but the man did not turn back. I could only run after him.

The swarm of insectoids was getting closer by the moment. They must have noticed us by now, but in this game, you didn't see an enemy cursor until you or a party member inflicted or received an attack, so I couldn't be sure if they'd targeted us yet. I just had to act under the presumption that they had.

"Agil, at least draw your ax!"

I lifted my sword to my shoulder, preparing for a sword skill. But the warrior wouldn't even reach for his weapon. Agil was always calm under pressure—in some ways, he was the real brains of the team—but it was like he had just lost his mind.

The light-pink orchid mantis was already within thirty yards. Its arms were folded before its chest and ended in nasty-looking scythe blades, although they were tiny in comparison to the demonic centipede's. If it got off a good hit, it was going to tear away huge chunks of HP, even through iron armor. If Agil wasn't going to fight, I had to handle this one myself.

With that in mind, I adjusted the angle of my sword to execute a Sonic Leap. Suddenly, the image of young Phercy Arabel's sad smile

from my earlier trip to the Underworld passed through my mind. I had to figure out the reason he couldn't use sword skills. With that determination riding on my sword, like everything else, I prepared to unleash a truly full-powered skill.

"*Stoppp!!*" Agil bellowed like a thunderclap, spreading his arms and coming to an abrupt halt. I put on the brakes, too, and the shift in posture caused my sword skill to fizzle out.

Agil's thick arms were extended in a straight line. He stood in the center of the sodden field, forbidding and intense. Up ahead, twenty insectoids were charging straight toward us. The orchid mantis in the front was close enough that I could see its huge compound eyes gleaming as it raised its scythe to attack.

Then Agil shouted, "Trish?! Is that you, Trish?!"

.....*Huh?*

To my shock, the mantis came to a screeching stop, its scythe arm dropping a little at an awkward, surprised angle—and then it spoke with a human woman's voice.

"Andy?! What are you doing here?!"

.....*Huhhh?!*

Why is that praying mantis talking? And who is Andy?!

Suddenly, I realized. Agil's character name was taken from his first and middle names, Andrew and Gilbert. This orchid mantis monster knew Agil's real name.

"Wait...No way," whispered Asuna from my right; she'd just caught up to us. I turned my head in her direction and asked, "No way' what?"

"Do you think that praying mantis is...Agil's wife?"

".....Excuse me?"

My mind ground to a halt again.

Outside the log cabin, I had just heard Agil describe his wife as a VRMMO player, but this praying mantis could not be anything other than a monster. Was she a human who'd been transformed into a monster through magic? Did the same go for *all* the insectoid monsters behind her...?

It took only a moment for confirmation, thanks to a green stag beetle that came to a stop behind the mantis. Its fierce jaws opened

and closed, emitting a man's voice—speaking fluent English.

"Hey, Hyme, what the hell are you doing?!"

He was followed by a squat rhinoceros beetle that swung their horn to and fro.

"Who are they?! Friends or foes?!"

They were speaking so fast I couldn't be sure of what I heard, but I was pretty certain I'd gotten the gist of it. And the one who responded to them was not the orchid mantis, who was apparently named Hyme, but Agil himself. The African American burst into English so fast that I couldn't hope to understand it.

Thankfully, he did seem to convince the stag and rhinoceros beetles that we were not their enemies, because they lowered their horns and jaws. Other insects were catching up quickly; the stag beetle shouted something to defuse their aggression.

For now, we'd avoided battle with the insect army, but that was only half—no, 10 percent of the problem. The gigantic man-faced centipede was still charging through the canyon behind them. If we made the wrong strategic choice, both we and the insects could get wiped out.

Just then, a small light flashed, bursting on the face of the centipede monstrosity. A moment or two later, I heard a small corresponding *boom*. It was too small to be called an explosion, but even through the rain, I could clearly see poisonous yellow smoke issuing in great amounts; it shrouded the centipede's head. The monster stopped charging and roared "*Jyashaaa!*" with irritation.

The insect—errr, person—who threw the smoke-grenade-like object was in the back row of the insect army. Hooded cloak flapping in the wind, the short player raced through the rain with incredible speed and came to a screeching stop right in front of me.

"Sorry, Kiri-boy! Things got bad!"

There was no way I could mistake that distinctive voice.

"Argo?!"

"Is that you, Argo?!" cried Asuna.

I followed that up by stammering, "You—Why—?" which Argo somehow correctly interpreted (probably through telepathy) as *Why are you with these insects?*

She pulled back her hood and replied, “I’ll explain later! We gotta do something about the big one now!”

“Do something? The only thing we can do is pull it somewhere else far away and hope to escape its range.”

“That won’t work. There’s just no way ta break its aggro. It’s been chasin’ us here almost twenty miles.”

“Twenty miles...?!”

That was indeed absurd. If you traveled the distance from Ruis na Ríg to the Stiss Ruins under continuous pursuit from an enemy, you’d have to assume that outrunning it was simply not possible.

“Can’t you just throw a bunch more of those smoke bombs, Argo?!” Asuna asked, but the woman just shook her head.

“That was the last of ‘em. Plus, they might stop it temporarily, but it just keeps chasin’ right after. Terrain makes no difference to it, so it’s gonna catch up to ya somewhere or other.”

“I mean, it was bustin’ right through those huge freakin’ rocks...,” noted Klein.

For once, Argo actually looked regretful about something. “I’m real sorry. I wasn’t planning to run this close to yer base, but once we got into the forest, there was nowhere ta escape aside from the canyon...”

“Hey, it’s way better than you dying off somewhere else without us knowing,” I replied, thinking hard. “Let’s beat it,” I announced. “It’s obvious at a glance that this is an insane boss, but we’ve got everyone here. If we take our time and watch for its patterns as we attack, it should be possible to beat it without losing anyone.”

“That’s exactly the point,” said Alice stridently. The knight’s proud golden hair was full of rain droplets, her bastard sword pointed at the mammoth shape a hundred yards away. “We cannot escape from every threat that exists. No matter how powerful the enemy is, there are times that you must fight. Especially when it means protecting something precious.”

The others at her sides nodded in agreement. Even Kuro, Aga, Misha, and Pina issued brief noises of assent.

The man-faced centipede, shrouded in yellow smoke, resumed moving this way. I caught the movement out of the corner of my eye

and asked Argo, "We can save the small stuff for later. I assume those insects are friends?"

"Yep. They're players from the American Seed game *Insectssite*."

"*Insectssite*..."

So they weren't transformed into bugs by magic—that was just how they looked. Something about a VRMMO where you could play as an insect sounded familiar, now that I thought about it. But I wouldn't have expected them to look so...*realistic*. Almost all of them were walking upright on two or four legs, but that was as far as the human similarities went. What about the six-legged ones—or the spiders, with eight legs? How did they control all those limbs?

But I could ponder these questions later. Right now, I had to focus on the biggest challenge yet since I'd been forced into this game.

"What attack patterns does it have, Argo?"

"All physical so far. It swings with its arm hooks and its tail spear, does a body charge, and bites with the mouth on its stomach."

"So the main attack is the scythes, I assume," I murmured. Suddenly, the center of my mind went numb again. But there was no time to go digging through memories. "Me, Alice, and Liz will keep it occupied and stop the scythe attacks. The rest of you, attack from the sides. If we can sever its legs one at a time, it should eventually be immobilized."

"Got it!" they said heartily.

I turned to Agil, the one person who seemed less than enthusiastic, and said, "I'll need you to tank for us when you're a higher level. And can you translate the plan for the bugs...I mean, the players from *Insectssite*?"

"You got it," Agil said, conveying the instructions in rapid-fire English for the insect warriors. I'd once hoped to study at an American college, so it wasn't like I had no skill for the language, but the last thing we needed right now was any mix-up in communication.

When Agil finished, the largest of the stag and rhinoceros beetles came forward and spoke.

"*We'll fight at the front, too!*"

"*Our skin's gonna be harder than your armor!*"

I certainly couldn't turn down an argument like that.

"*I'm counting on you!*" I told them in English, and the two raised their claws in what I had to assume was an insectoid thumbs-up.

Again, the ground shook violently; the man-faced centipede had resumed its charge. If we were going to fight something so huge, an open space would obviously be better than the cramped ravine. Our battlefield would be the open square of space a hundred yards to a side, from the exit of the canyon to the start of the forest.

"*Hyme, join our raid!*" I said in English to the orchid mantis, Agil's wife, and sent her an invitation. The mantis used the fingers at the base of her right scythe to hit the ok button on the prompt.

Twenty more HP bars appeared in a line on the left edge of my vision. They'd all taken damage, but none of them had dipped under half their HP, and they had TP and SP to spare. The fact that they'd run for nearly twenty miles and experienced only this much wear and tear was either a sign of skill or luck—probably both.

"*Do you have any healing methods?*"

"*You bet!*"

Hyme the mantis called out to her companions, and a brown-winged insect came forward. Their overall shape looked like a cicada, but the head had strangely shaped feelers on it. They branched into four parts, each ending in a large sphere that made them look like satellite antennas.

The antlered cicada said, "*C'mon, guys!*" and the insects promptly rushed over and huddled up. The spheres at the end of their feelers sprayed out a shower of glowing white liquid that fell upon the others.

The twenty insects' HP rapidly restored itself. That was a helpful power to have, but it didn't seem likely to work in rapid succession. Meanwhile, we each had two or three "potions"—the pottery jars full of slow-regen tea that Asuna invented—and they couldn't be relied upon to get us out of every jam. We'd need to focus on defense first and get a total grasp of the enemy's patterns.

"Here it comes!" I shouted (in Japanese this time) as the man-faced centipede rushed out of the canyon and into the field.

Up close, it was impossibly huge. The head alone was fifteen feet long, and the huge scythes on each arm were ten feet to the blade, while the centipede portion was over sixty or seventy feet. Even the Deviant Gods in *ALO*'s Jotunheim didn't have anything on this devastating scale.

But as I had said to Agil earlier, size and appearance were not tied to strength in a VRMMO. Games in the Seed engine had a general inclination to strength rising faster for larger avatars, and higher agility for smaller ones, but if Silica, the smallest member of the group, were at level-100, she could probably beat that giant man-faced centipede in a shoving match.

Of course, our group was only at an average of around level-13 or level-14. Still, if we could pull off perfect cooperative play, we could hold our own against a colossal, horrific demon—I chose to believe.

“*Jyashuaaaa!*” bellowed the titan, opening its jaws in four directions.

As though one caused the other, lightning rained down from the black canopy above, lighting the mammoth creature.

“Kuro, you attack from the side on Asuna’s order,” I told the panther, rubbing its round head. The predator growled with a hint of reproach, then moved to wait next to Aga. I squeezed the grip of my sword in preparation, making brief eye contact with Asuna.

“*Go!!*” I shouted, pushing off. With Alice and Lisbeth, my companions at the front, and the new recruits of the rhinoceros beetle and stag beetle, we spread out as we ran. The grass at our feet was thick, but the rain was tamping it down, so it wasn’t tripping us up like I feared. The monstrosity loomed closer, over twenty feet off the ground.

“*Jyaaa!*”

The man-faced centipede slowly pulled back its right scythe. When the movement was this big, it would be easy to get the timing down.

“It’s coming from the right! Prepare to guard!”

We all steadied ourselves, Alice and I with our swords, Lisbeth with her mace, the rhinoceros beetle with their horn, and the stag beetle with his jaws.

The ten-foot scythe began to swing forward with the sound of a gale. The grass along the ground tore loose and flew into the air, despite not being touched.

It's okay! We can stop it!! I told myself, practically praying, as I squeezed the grip of my sword. I pressed the flat of the blade against my left arm to augment the defensive positioning.

The gleaming scythe was right before me. I leaned forward, bracing for impact. Alice, Liz, Rhino, and Stag did the same.

The scythe touched my sword.

For a moment, I thought my avatar had exploded.

Not that I'd experienced it myself, but it made me wonder if riding my bicycle at top speed and smashing headlong into a trailer truck would feel the same way. The impact made me feel like my body was disintegrating into pieces. The world spun wildly. For half a second, I didn't even realize the scythe had knocked me clean off my feet and thrown me through the air.

"Kirito!" called a voice, right before I slammed into someone. I instinctually knew it was Asuna who had stopped me.

"...!"

I heard the breath catch in her throat. She tried to keep her feet steady, but the momentum of my body knocked her down to the wet grass with me.

In the upper left, my HP was dropping at a terrifying rate. I'd started topped off, but now it was at 70, 60, 50, before finally stopping a bit before 40 percent.

"No way..."

I simply couldn't believe that I'd lost nearly two-thirds of my health in one hit when I was guarding against it. Somehow, my sword had survived the impact, but my chestpiece and left gauntlet were miserably cracked. Nearby, Alice and Liz were splayed out in the grass, and Rhino and Stag were on their backs. Everyone had taken a similar amount of damage.

I focused on the man-faced centipede ahead of us. It had finished the follow-through of its scythe, its side jaws opening and closing in apparent mockery.

By taking damage, I'd gotten the monstrosity's spindle cursor to

appear over its head. The HP readout had three bars. Below them was its name, written in the English alphabet.

The Life Harvester.

The instant I saw that name, I finally understood why I found the man-faced centipede so familiar.

“Kirito...look...,” said Asuna, her voice a tremulous whisper. She’d remembered, just like I had.

The centipede monster known as the Life Harvester was the same boss that’d wiped out half the best players in SAO on the seventy-fifth floor of Aincrad: the Skullreaper. The only difference was that it was covered in flesh and carapace, rather than exposed bone. But the shape, the attack patterns...even its tremendous offensive power was exactly the same.

But why? What was a floor boss from SAO doing in *Unital Ring*?

My mind was blank. I couldn’t move. In the distance, the freakish demon’s two scythes rose high into the air. Purple lightning crackled through the storm clouds, framing the vicious silhouette in stark black against the light.

(To be continued)

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Sword Art Online 24: Unital Ring III*.

I ended the previous volume on an enticing note, so I was hoping to follow it up consecutively in short order...but in the end, it took five months. And if that one was bad, this one is a major cliffhanger (*sweats*). I-I'll try to work quickly on the next one!

(Warning! Spoilers for this volume to follow.)

With the third book in the Unital Ring arc, it feels like the story is finally starting to move. Argo's joining for real now, we've got the introduction of Mutasina the dangerous witch, and the Skullreaper has returned with a new coat of flesh. There's a lot to draw your interest, but the biggest one has to be that figure who appeared in the Underworld, Commander Eolyne.

He's a character I drew up to appear in my plot notes for the continuation of the story after the end of the Alicization arc. Some of the details I had in my head appear as they did here—the suspicious mask and the image of him seated in a luxury sedan. But once I put him into the story, I got the hunch that his role might not be exactly what I originally anticipated. I can't tell you exactly what that means yet—only that I intend to keep writing, to find out the future ending the story desires for itself.

I'll admit, writing the Underworld two hundred years later was much harder—and more painful—than I imagined it would be. All the characters Kirito loved, whom I loved, too, are no longer around, and

that was a thought that stopped me in my tracks on many occasions. But there must be some measure of hope there, too. I'm planning to write plenty of the Underworld story in the next volume, so look forward to that!

The Alicization arc of the anime was scheduled to be airing its fourth cour at the time of this book's publication, but the effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have delayed it. Considering all the work the staff has put into the show, and the anticipation that all the readers and viewers have, this is a very painful development. But just like Kirito and Asuna, fighting through difficult circumstances in the story, I can only believe there is a light at the end of this tunnel. Please have patience.

To abec (Congratulations on the second art book!), Miki, and Adachi, I'm so sorry for taking things down to the last minute! Hope to see you all next volume!

Reki Kawahara—March 2020

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