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SWORD ART ONLINE

電撃文庫



015

REKI KAWAHARA 著 BEE-PEE 插

SWORD ART ONLINE

Alicization Invading



"...THIS IS THE WORLD YOU PROTECTED, KIRITO"


「……あなたが守った世界よ、キリト」

KIRITO §
ALICE
SYNTHESIS-§
THIRTY


ORIGINALLY AN INTEGRITY KNIGHT UNDER
«ADMINISTRATOR», SHE BROKE THE SEAL OF HER
RIGHT EYE AFTER MEETING KIRITO, AND AWOKE AS A
TRUE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, «ALICE».

KIRITO §


A BOY WHO DOVE INTO THE VIRTUAL UNDERWORLD. TO
ESCAPE, HE REACHED THE TOP FLOOR OF THE «CENTRAL
CATHEDRAL» AND SANK INTO A STATE OF LOSS OF
CONSCIOUSNESS AFTER AN INTENSE BATTLE WITH THE
HIGHEST MINISTER «ADMINISTRATOR».




LILPIN § TRIBAL CHIEF OF THE ORCS




ISKAHN § TENTH GENERATION CHAIR OF THE FIST FIGHTER GUILD




D.I.L. § LEADER OF THE DARK SORCERESS GUILD




SHASTA § DARK KNIGHT COMMANDER



SIGLOSIG § TRIBAL CHIEF OF THE GIANTS



FER ZA § LEADER OF THE ASSASSIN GUILD



"LIFT YOUR HEADS, AND REPORT YOUR NAMES.
-STARTING OVER THERE."

「顔を上げ、名乗るがいい。
—右端の、お前からだ」

EMPEROR VECTOR

§ A CHIEF TECHNOLOGY OFFICER (CTO) OF AN AMERICAN MILITARY CORPORATION WHO USED THE SUPER-ACCOUNT <<EMPEROR VECTOR>> TO LOG INTO THE UNDERWORLD ON THE DARK TERRITORY'S SIDE AND BEGAN A BATTLE TO SEIZE THE FIRST MAN-MADE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE <<ALICE>>

"OJI-SAMA. IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME"

「小父様。ご無沙汰しておりました」

"LONG TIME NO SEE, ALICE"

「久しぶりね、アリス」

FANATIO
SYNTHESIS
TWO

INTEGRITY KNIGHT VICE COMMANDER.
ALICE'S UPPERCLASSMAN.
THE TWO DON'T GET ALONG VERY WELL.
WIELDS THE LUMINOUS ELEMENT-
CONTROLLING DIVINE INSTRUMENT
《《SKY PIERCING SWORD》》

"OH, LITTLE GIRL.
YOU'RE MORE SPIRITED THAN I IMAGINED;
THAT REASSURES ME"

「よう、嬢ちゃん。
思ったより元気そうで安心したぜ」

BERCOULI
SYNTHESIS
ONE

INTEGRITY KNIGHT COMMANDER.
ALICE'S MENTOR, AND THE WORLD'S OLDEST
AND STRONGEST SWORDSMAN.
WIELDS THE DIVINE INSTRUMENT THAT CAN SPLIT
APART THE FUTURE 《《TIME PIERCING SWORD》》

"MY MENTOR ALICE-SAMA!!
I KNEW YOU WOULD COME!!"

「我が師アリス様!!
信じておりましたぞ!!」

ELDRIE
SYNTHESIS
THIRTY-ONE

ALICE'S DISCIPLE, THE YOUNGEST INTEGRITY
KNIGHT.
WIELDS THE DIVINE INSTRUMENT WITH ENDLESSLY
SPROUTING THORNS 《《FROST SCALE WHIP》》

Chapter 14

Subtilizer

June ~ July AD 2026

A sniper with light blue hair.

The slender frame of the girl formed a strange harmony with the gigantic fifty caliber rifle.

I could not see her face as she laid in the prone position with her back to me. However, it must be as imposing as a lynx, adorned with beautiful features.

Her concentration was worthy of praise, aiming below without the slightest quiver, her right eye pressed against the scope and her index finger touching the trigger. I would love to continue gazing upon her from behind for a little more, but I had little time left too.

Leaving my concealed shelter, I began walking across the ruined building's floor. Cautiously avoiding the pebbles, wood chips, and metal scraps, those small objects scattered about my feet, I drew near the girl's back in perfect silence.

The girl's back abruptly jerked.

Did she sense something that made neither noise nor vibration? That intuition was marvelous, but unfortunately, it was too late.

My extended right arm twisted around her slender neck as my left hand pinned her head down from the back.

They constricted her with quiet yet clear intent.

The «Army Combative» skill showed its results; the girl's visible life—her HP bar—began falling rapidly.

The sniper squirmed desperately, but in this VRMMO game, «Gun Gale Online», it was near impossible to escape from a successful rear choke, while barehanded without a significant difference in STR. That was no different from the real world, however.

I had predicted that this sniper with light blue hair, whom I had most looked forward to fighting... no, hunting down among the twenty-nine participants of this tournament named «Bullet of Bullets», would try sniping from above in this five-story building.

The problem was, the main street on this map was within range from both the fourth and fifth floors. I needed to swiftly decide which floor to ambush her on.

Logically, she would choose the fourth floor where she could prepare to snipe quicker. However, my intuition and judgement whispered to me the moment I saw the library on the fourth floor. My intuition told me that sniper was likely still a young student in the real world. My judgement told me a student might avoid a library that would bring up memories of real life.

That prediction was spot-on. The sniper with light blue hair wasted tens of seconds needlessly ascending that one floor and showed herself on the fifth floor's warehouse.

And now, her transient life would dissolve like that of a butterfly that went astray into a spider's web.

Aah, if only this was not a mere reduction of binary data in the virtual world, but the deprivation of an actual life and soul.

If only it was a live body squirming in my arm instead of an avatar.

«That moment» would truly be ever so sweet.

The sniper's HP shown at the top-right of my vision cut through the five percent mark. But the girl continued struggling in desperation to escape from the choke.

Even as her enemy, I felt her stance precious, trying her best despite her certain defeat, neither letting out useless utterances nor turning limp in resignation.

While I embraced the girl tight, like a loved one, my mouth drew closer to her ear from behind and whispered.

–Your soul will be so sweet.

1

He slowly raised his eyelids.

It seemed he had fallen asleep unaware. The sofa of Italian make he brought in last week was apparently too soft. With his body still engulfed in the supple leather, he glanced at the smartwatch on his left wrist.

Afternoon, two-twenty.

Getting up, he gently straightened up his back while walking closer to the glass wall in the south. As its entire surface was switchable glass and presently transparent, it permitted an unbroken view of the waterfront from this executive room on the forty-third floor.

The harbor quietly glittered in the illumination from the neighboring skyscrapers. Numerous large ships were moored at the long wharf.

These intimidating silhouettes with their sharp edges were not of luxurious cruisers. They were the warships of the Third Fleet under the United States Pacific Fleet.

San Diego, California's second city, had long been its base. The economy circled around the gigantic naval base where over twenty-five thousand affiliated to the military resided.

However, new industry sectors experienced a boom in recent years. High-tech industries dealing with information, communication, bio-technology, and such.

And there were those corporations who fused military affairs with high technology as well. Primarily entrusted with security services and training by the military, large companies, and other related sectors, these so-called private military companies even deploy manpower to fight directly on the front lines.

Gabriel Miller, the chief technology officer of «Glowgen Defense Systems» that had its headquarters in Downtown San Diego, gazed down upon the port's night view and revealed an unconscious smile.

The dream he saw in his short nap earlier was invigorating, however slight.

A dream of a full-dive game's event that he had participated in days ago in this executive room.

Gabriel rarely dreamed, but whenever he did, it would be a detailed recount of some scene in his past.

The exhilarating sensations of that light blue haired sniper's desperate struggle still remained in his arms. As if it was no dream, but reality...

No, that was off. That battle happened not in reality, but in the virtual world.

Full-dive technology was a marvelous invention. Praises to its inventor, *Akihiko Kayaba*. He would have been headhunted if he was still alive, even if it took millions of dollars. Even if he was the worst criminal of the century—no, precisely because he was such a person.

However, while the experiences brought about by the AmuSphere became increasingly lifelike, the inadequacy felt from the realization that they were fake became all that stronger. Like how one's thirst could not be satiated with salt water, no matter how much one drank.

As the youngest among Glowgen DS's staff and a major stockholder, Gabriel led his life without worries over his material needs. However, money could not fulfill that craving he held deep in his heart.

"...Your soul will be so sweet..."

He voiced out the words uttered in his dreams once more.

He wanted to whisper that in Japanese which he had been studying since three years ago. But they must have thought him American with that US tag on his HP bar and he had to avoid leaving them an impression stronger than necessary. There would be opportunities to speak at length eventually. He would leave his many questions for then.

Wiping off the faint smile that emerged on his lips without his notice, Gabriel touched the various touch sensors embedded on the window and increased its opacity. Upon which the darkened glass projected himself.

His loose, blonde hair was swept back, with his eyes blue. His 6 feet, 1 inch body was covered by a white dress shirt and dark grey slacks. His shoes were cordovan, custom-made. It was almost the very image of the white establishment, embarrassingly enough, but Gabriel saw no more reason for his appearance than a means for others to identify him. At the end of the day, the flesh is nothing more than a hull for the soul.

The soul.

Almost all religions adopted some notion of the soul. Of course, Christianity advocated that the soul would be sent to heaven or hell upon death dependent on one's actions in life. However, it was neither due to Protestantism nor Catholicism that Gabriel believed in the existence of the soul and sought it out.

It was a fact. One personally witnessed, visually.

That cluster of light, beautiful beyond compare, soaring from the girl's forehead the moment she met her demise in his arms.

Gabriel Miller was born in the district of Pacific Palisades in the suburbs of Los Angeles, California, in March, 1998.

He had no siblings and he grew up engulfed in love from his affluent parents, both emotionally and financially. The mansion he lived in was grand and there was no end to his playgrounds, but what the young Gabriel loved most was his father's collection storage.

His father, the owner and manager of Glowgen Securities, the predecessor of Glowgen Defense Systems, had the hobby of collecting insect specimens and countless glass cases lined the vast storage. Gabriel would seclude himself in there when he found time, viewing the multicolored insects with a magnifying glass in a hand and immersing himself in absentminded fantasies as he sat on the sofa in the middle of the room.

Curious, deep emotions assailed the young Gabriel at times when he was alone in that dim room with its high ceiling, surrounded by tens of thousands of mute insects.

Every one of these insects lived up until a certain moment. In the grasslands of Africa, the deserts of the Middle East, the jungles of South America, they energetically made their nests and hunted for food.

However, they were caught by a harvester at some point, treated with chemicals, and exchanged hands numerous times through commerce before neatly arranged in these glass cases at the Millers. In other words, while this room was a collection room of insect specimens, it was also a gigantic cemetery filled with tens of thousands of massacred corpses...

Gabriel lowered his eyelids and imagined what would happen if the insects around suddenly came back to life.

Their six legs would desperately scrape the air, their haptic perception and wings quivering. The myriad buzzes overlapping and surging towards Gabriel as parched ripples.

Buzz, buzz.

His eyelids flashed open. The legs of the green rhinoceros beetle fixed in the corner of the case before him seemed to move; he leapt off the sofa. He rushed over to the case, absorbed in the sight, but the insect was a lifeless specimen once more by the time he reached.

Its carapace, legs with sharp thorns growing over them, and compound eyes that resembled a miniscule mesh were emerald green and as glossy as metal. Gabriel pondered on exactly what once powered that delicate body, granting it mobility.

His father told him that insects lacked a brain like that of humans. He asked, how did they think then, and his father showed him a certain video.

It captured praying mantises in the act of mating. The small male had held down the plump female from her back, their reproductive organs joined. The female remained motionless for a moment, but then abruptly grasped the male's upper body with her two scythes, crunched down on his head, and began feeding without any prior warning. The male persisted in his mating even while Gabriel watched on in shock, finally withdrawing his reproductive organ once his head had been utterly devoured. The female then shook her scythes and fled at once, as fast as she could.

Despite the complete lack of its head, the male praying mantis walked along the grass blade, up a branch, and mechanically continued its escape. His father spoke while pointing at the clip.

The nerves spread over the entire bodies of insects, including praying mantises, served a purpose similar to a brain. Hence, they could live for some time even after they lost their head which was no more than a sensory organ.

Gabriel spent the several days after he watched that video wondering exactly where praying mantises had their souls then. If they could live on even with their heads eaten, losing all of their legs should be of no particular issue.

Then perhaps their abdomen? Or their chest? But even with their soft abdomen crushed or their chests pierced through by a pin, insects would continue struggling for a time, their legs squirming vigorously.

If they did not die immediately no matter which part of their body they lost, could it be that the praying mantis's soul was faintly spread out through its entire body? Eight or nine years old then, Gabriel concluded so after numerous experiments conducted on the insects he caught around his home.

The soul, that mysterious power that moved these partially mechanical beings known as insects, stubbornly remained within them no matter which part of their body was demolished. But it would consider it a lost cause and surrender after a certain point, deserting its vessel.

Gabriel fervently desired to see that fleeing soul, and to capture it if possible. However, he couldn't even see «that something» slipping out from the insects' bodies, let alone capture it, no matter how hard he stared into the magnifying glass, no matter how carefully he carried out his experiments. His modest wish showed no results even after spending much time and zeal in the secret laboratory he made deep in the dense forest behind his mansion.

The young Gabriel instinctively knew his wish would not be agreeable to his parents. That was why he made no further questions in a similar vein to his father after that one praying mantis incident and made sure to divulge nothing about his experiments. But his desires seemed to heighten with his attempts to keep them under wrap.

Gabriel had a friend of the same age with whom he was on extremely good terms back then.

The girl was named Alicia Klingerman and the only daughter of the entrepreneurs living in the mansion erected on the adjacent plot of land.

They attended the same elementary school and got along well, as did their families. She was shy and obedient, preferring to read books or watch videos at home than to play until muddy outside.

Naturally, Gabriel hid his secret experiments from Alicia and spoke nothing of insects and souls.

Nevertheless, he couldn't stop thinking about it. Gabriel's imagination pondered, time after time, where Alicia's soul could be as he quietly peered into her face from the side while she smiled like an angel, absorbed in reading her novels.

Insects were different from humans. Humans could not live on without their heads. Thus, a human's soul should be in their head... in their brain.

But Gabriel had already learnt that brain damage did not lead directly to loss of life via the internet on his father's computer. There was a construction laborer who survived with a thick iron pipe piercing in from the chin and out the head; there was a doctor who tried to cure mental illness by ablating a portion of a patient's brain.

So, was it somewhere in the brain? Gabriel wondered so as he looked at Alicia's brow, fringed by her fluffy blonde hair. Alicia's soul lay hidden beyond that smooth skin, beyond that hard skull, and beyond even those soft brain tissues.

He would definitely end up marrying Alicia, or so the Gabriel childishly envisioned. Then he might get the chance to see Alicia's soul with his own eyes one day. Words couldn't possibly describe how beautiful the soul of the angelic Alicia was.

Half of Gabriel's wish was granted, sooner than he ever expected.

In September 2008, widespread bank failures pulled the trigger to the Global Financial Crisis.

The waves of recession swallowed even Pacific Palisades on the suburbs of Los Angeles. A great number of stately mansions were offered for sale and the number of high class automobiles driving down the streets visibly fell.

It was fortunate Glowgen Securities had solid administration and managed to restrain the effects to a minimum, but the corporation managed by the neighbors, the Klingermans, fell under heavy debt as their investments were in real estate. With their fortunes, including the mansion, gone by April the next year, they decided to depend on their kin who worked in agriculture and move to Kansas City far in the Midwest.

It saddened Gabriel. Intelligent beyond his years as a child aged ten, he understood he could not help Alicia as a ten-year-old child and could clearly imagine what severe circumstances she would face from now on.

A mansion guarded by flawless security, a skilled cook to prepare each day's meals, and a school filled with affluent white children; these privileges would vanish from Alicia's life forever, replaced by poverty and manual labor. And what Gabriel couldn't stand most, was how Alicia's soul, which should have been his one day, would be hurt by some unknown person and lose its brilliance.

So, he thought to kill her.

On the day Alicia said her farewells at school, Gabriel invited her to the forest behind his home after she got off the school bus home. Deftly dodging every security camera set up along the road and fences, he ensured no one was looking while he entered the forest and walked over fallen leaves to avoid leaving any tracks, guiding Alicia to his «secret laboratory» surrounded by thick scrubs.

Utterly unaware of the countless insects that had died there, Alicia immediately returned the gesture when Gabriel wrapped his arms around her slender form.

With soft sobs, Alicia mentioned how she didn't want to go anywhere else, how she wanted to live on in this district with Gabe forever.

Whispering that he would grant her that wish in his heart, Gabriel stuck his right hand into his shirt pocket and took out the tool he prepared in advance. What his father had used to deal with the insects: a four inch needle made from steel with a wooden grip.

Gently inserting the sharp point into Alicia's left ear, he first held her right ear with his left hand before penetrating through to its base without the slightest hesitation.

Alicia blinked her two eyes, not comprehending what had happened, before her body underwent violent convulsions. Her open blue eyes abruptly lost their focus seconds later, and—

Gabriel saw **that**.

Something like a small cloud, glittering brightly, appeared from the middle of Alicia's smooth forehead. That drifted, airily, as it approached Gabriel's brow and entered, just like that, without any resistance whatsoever.

The fine sunlight of that spring afternoon that had engulfed his surroundings disappeared. It seemed as though rays of white light had descended through the branches of those tall trees; he could hear even faint chimes.

Tears poured from Gabriel's eyes from the inexpressible exaltation. He was now looking upon Alicia's soul... that was not all, he could see even what Alicia's soul could, that was what Gabriel's instincts told him.

The small, glittering cloud passed through Gabriel's head in several seconds that felt like an eternity and continued on its ascent, as though guided by the light from the skies, before vanishing at last. The spring sunshine and the chirps from small birds returned to his surroundings.

Hugging onto Alicia's body, with both its life and soul now absent, Gabriel pondered on whether that earlier experience was reality or a hallucination brought about by overwhelming stimulation. And knew that no matter which it was, he would spend the rest of his life in pursuit of what he had just seen.

He threw Alicia's corpse into a deep pit that opened up at the roots of a giant oak spotted earlier. Next, after a careful inspection of his own body, he pinched up two strands of blonde hair stuck on himself and tossed those into the hole as well. The needle was washed clean before returned to his father's toolbox.

Not even the local police's earnest investigation found any clue to the Alicia Klingerman Disappearance Incident and the case eventually went cold.

Having awoken from his short and deep recollection, the twenty-eight years old Gabriel Miller took his sight off himself, reflected in the mirrored glass, and walked to his work desk by the wall in the west. The moment he sat on reclining chair made in Norway, a phone icon lit up on the thirty inch display panel embedded on the desk's glass surface.

With a tap, it showed his female secretary's face while her voice flowed out.

[Mister Miller, I apologize for disturbing your rest. COO Ferguson had requested for you to accompany him for dinner tomorrow. How shall I reply?]

"Tell him I have prior plans."

Gabriel immediately replied and his usually collected secretary showed a somewhat troubled expression. The COO was the executive vice-president after all, the second-in-command at Glowgen DS. As one among the over ten officers, Gabriel could hardly afford to turn down this invitation for a meal—normally.

However, his secretary's bewildered expression vanished before a second passed and her calm voice continued.

[Understood. I will do as you say.]

The call ended, and Gabriel sank deep into the chair with his legs crossed.

He could guess at what Ferguson wanted. It must have been to stop Gabriel from participating in that particular «operation» he had already scheduled.

But the COO must think otherwise inside. That old fox must be wishing for him to nonchalantly set off to some dangerous place to earn a spot on the KIA list. After all, Gabriel was the previous president's own child and the majority shareholder.

Of course, Gabriel himself was aware of how foolish it would be for an officer to participate in an operation where live bullets flew about. Even if he did have prior experience, a CTO's job was to plan out the entire operation from the safety of the main office without any need to expose himself to the dangers of the battlefield.

However, no matter the costs, he had to participate in this operation that had to be kept under complete and utter secrecy. After all, it was an issue related to what Gabriel had staked his life to seek out ever since that day he saw Alicia's soul.

The operation's client was not the Department of Defense regardless how they would benefit. It was the National Security Agency—the NSA—with whom they had few prior dealings with.

The two NSA agents who visited this room a month ago managed to surprise Gabriel, who could hardly claim to be emotional, numerous times.

Firstly, the operation was completely unlawful. After all, a combat team from Glowgen would board a navy submarine and launch an assault on a warship belonging to Japan, an allied nation.

There was no need to concern themselves over any fatal casualties of that ship's crew either.

And the objective of the operation was to steal a certain technology.

Upon hearing the details, Gabriel's voice leaked out slightly, overwhelmed by surprise—or perhaps delight. It was fortunate the agents did not notice, however.

«Soul TransLation technology». A wondrous machine capable of deciphering humans' souls developed by a small organization called «Rath» in the JSDF.

Gabriel had held a strong interest in the full-dive technology born in Japan for some time now in his pursuit of souls. That was why he fought with the players from Japan in Gun Gale Online and studied Japanese. He even obtained a set of the «demonic device», the Nerve Gear, that should have been disposed of without a single one remaining by spending several tens of thousands of dollars—of course, he didn't intend to use it himself, however.

Gabriel expected development on full-dive technology to wane due to the commotion caused by that death game. However, they had quietly continued their research and finally drew near the secrets of the human soul.

The request from NSA felt like destiny to Gabriel.

Glowgen DS might be one of the larger private military companies around, but that was all they were; they could hardly decline the NSA who now held even more power than the CIA in the first place. The vote for the contract was passed with a lead of two in the emergency board meeting. To prevent information from leaking, it was decided that the combat team would consist of contract employees specializing in wet work with their own dark histories to cover up—

Gabriel volunteered himself as the operation commander.

Naturally, the fact that Gabriel was an officer in Glowgen was hidden from the combat team. Those people would likely betray the company at the drop of a hat if they knew, abducting Gabriel for a ransom.

Gabriel had to go even with such risks.

The NSA agents mentioned. That Rath had succeeded in not just deciphering the human soul, but also cloning it through STL technology. That if that artificial soul given the codename «A.L.I.C.E.» was completed and loaded onto Japanese unmanned weapons, it would destroy the military balance in East Asia.

He didn't care if disputes arose in the Far East—or anywhere else in the world. But Gabriel was convinced the moment he heard the name Alice.

He would make that his own.

He would procure that small media storage device, known as the light cube, with that soul on board at all costs.

“Alice..... Alicia.....”

Leaning against the chair with its back down, he softly murmured the two names. A faint smile appeared on his lips without his notice.

The name of the company established by Gabriel's father, Glowgen, was coined together with the meaning of «bringing forth light». It seemed his father had the light of happiness in mind, but what came to mind for Gabriel, his successor, was no other than that golden brilliance drifting out from the dying Alicia's brow.

Bringing forth light. Or the soul, in other words.

It was fate, all of it.

Gabriel and the eleven in the combat team would fly to Guam a week later and invade Japanese waters on a nuclear submarine from a naval base there. Before the operation began, they would switch to a small submarine onboard and carry out an assault on the objective, the giant ocean research mother ship, «Ocean Turtle».

They might occupy it without shedding blood, or with casualties resulting on either side—or perhaps both, even. Still, Gabriel's beliefs were unshaken. He knew he would get his hands on «Alice» and the STL technology. He just needed a simple copy of the light cube and documents from the NSA.

A little longer... it was just a little longer. He would grasp the true essence of the soul that eluded him despite his multiple experiments on other humans, since Alicia, in just a little longer.

He would be able to see that beautiful, gleaming cloud once again.

“.....Your soul... will be so sweet.....”

Gabriel whispered once more, this time in Japanese, and shut his eyelids.

2

Captain Dario Giuliani who commanded the Seawolf-class nuclear submarine, Jimmy Carter, was a submariner down to his bones, rising to his current position from cleaning the torpedo tubes. The first he rode was an antique Barbel-class diesel vessel where the stench of oil and noise followed along no matter where one went in her stiflingly cramped space.

In comparison, the Seawolf-class that cost more than any other submarine in the world was practically a Rolls-Royce. Giuliani had showered the ship and her crew with love ever since he was appointed as her captain in 2020. Through tough training, the high yield strength steel hull, her S6W reactor, and the hundred and forty crew members were bonded like a single being, capable of swimming as she liked in any ocean as long as it had the depth.

Jimmy Carter was practically Giuliani's daughter. It was a pity he had to step down from active duty soon, forced to either work on land or an early retirement, but the successor he recommended, the executive officer, Guthrie, would definitely command the ship brilliantly.

Nonetheless—

As though to disgrace Giuliani's last years, a single, curiously perilous order was handed down a mere ten days ago.

Jimmy Carter was a ship planned for support on special operations and possessed a variety of methods to cooperate with the SEALs. The midget ^{ASDS} submarine carried on its afterdeck was one among those.

There were countless times she cruised deep in foreign waters with those from the SEALs aboard. But the objective was always for keeping the peace of the states or the world and those men on board definitely felt the same sense of duty as Giuliani's subordinates as they went into the jaws of death.

However, as for that bunch who boarded from Guam two days ago—

Giuliani went to see the faces of his guests at the rear section only once, but that was enough for him to get on the verge of ordering his subordinates to kick them out into the deep sea. The tens of men lay down on the floor without any sense of order, some blared noise from their headphones while others made merry, gambling over card games; not to mention the empty cans of beer scattered everywhere. There were no proper seamen in that bunch. It was doubtful they were even from the military.

There was only one who seemed to have some notion of courtesy, that tall commanding officer who apologized to Giuliani for their disturbance in order.

However, that man with those shockingly blue eyes—

While holding the right hand he offered and meeting his eyes, Giuliani tasted a sensation he had forgotten for a long time.

That was from, yes, long before he entered the navy. He was swimming in the ocean at Miami, his homeland, when a giant great white raced straight past his side. He was fortunately unharmed, but Giuliani saw that shark's eyes right before him. Those eyes devoured all light like a bottomless pit.

That same hollowness extended out deep within that man's eyes...

“Captain, a reading from the bow sonar!”

The sudden noise from the sonar technician pulled Giuliani out from his thoughts.

“It's the turbine from a reactor, we're matching now... it matches, it's definitely the target mega-float. Fifteen miles.”

Bringing his mind back, he quickly gave instructions from the combat command post, the captain's seat.

“Right, keep this depth and drop her speed to fifteen knots.”

The order was echoed and he felt an instant of deceleration.

“Where’s that Aegis-equipped escort ship?”

“There’s a gas turbine sound confirmed three miles west-southwest of the target... matching done, it’s the JMSDF’s Nagato.

Giuliani stared hard at the two light points shown on the large display in front.

Putting aside from the Aegis-equipped warship, he heard the mega-float was an oceanic research ship without any arms. And the order this time was to let those armed thugs invade that. Not to mention how it was a ship from Japan, an allied nation. It hardly seemed like a legitimate operation with the approval of the President and Secretary of Defense.

The words from those men in black suits who brought the directive directly from the Pentagon resurfaced in Giuliani’s mind.

—Japan is conducting research on that mega-float for reigniting war on the states. There is no choice but to bury that research in order to maintain the friendship between our two countries.

Giuliani was no youngling capable of eating up their words at face value.

Still, he was already old enough to understand he had no choice but to obey those orders.

“Are our guests prepared?”

The executive officer standing at his side confirmed in a deep voice.

“They are standing by in the ASDS.”

“Alright... maintain this speed and bring her up to a hundred feet!”

Compressed air pushed the ocean water out from the ballast tank and the produced buoyancy lifted Jimmy Carter's gigantic frame. The distance from the light points gently yet surely decreased.

Would there be casualties among the Japanese researchers? That seemed likely. He would probably carry the memory of cooperating in such an operation until his deathbed.

"Five miles to the objective!"

Shaking off his hesitation, Giuliani commanded with resolution.

"Release the ASDS!"

The faint vibrations his body felt conveyed the release of their baggage from the afterdeck.

"Release complete... ASDS self-propulsion initiated."

The submarine with a pack of stray dogs and a single shark aboard accelerated in the blink of an eye and charged straight into the belly of that giant ocean turtle floating atop the ocean.

Chapter 15

In Northern Lands

10th Month of Human World Calendar 380

1

Placing the dishes she finished washing on the dish drainer, Alice Synthesis Thirty wiped her hands on the hem of her apron as she flicked her face up.

The treetops visible beyond the small glass window had lost quite a number of leaves, dyed in red and yellow, to the chill of recent days. The arrival of winter was indeed earlier when compared to Central Capital Centoria.

Still, the rays of Solus pouring down from the skies, blue for the first time in a while, seemed warm. A pair of Treeclimbing Rabbits huddled together on a thick branch of the tree straight ahead, apparently enjoying their sunbath.

Alice smiled as she gazed at them for a while before she turned about and spoke.

“Hey, we seem to be having fine weather today, so how about we have lunch all the way at the eastern hills?”

No one replied.

The log cabin had only two rooms, and this one served as the living room, dining room, and kitchen with a plain wood table placed right in its middle.

Seated on one of the chairs, similarly plain, was a black-haired youth. Not even raising his head at Alice’s call, his vacant stare stayed upon a single spot atop the table.

He never did have much meat on him, but still, he was obviously more slender than even Alice now. His bony frame was visible even with the loose robe he had on. The empty right sleeve hanging down languidly from the tip of his shoulders only made him look all the more tragic.

Light was absent from his eyes, jet-black like his hair. Those two eyes reflected no more than his locked heart.

Suppressing the pain in her chest that she could never ever get used to, Alice continued in a cheerful voice.

“It might be a little windy, so it might be best to dress up thick. One moment, I shall prepare them at once.”

After removing her apron and hanging it off the hook beside the sink, she turned towards the bedroom next door.

Bundling her long, blonde hair behind, she wrapped a cotton scarf around herself. Along with a faded black patch around her right eye that still lacked light. She first put on one of the woollen overcoats arranged on the wall, then returned to the living room with the other under her arm.

The black-haired youth made no movement at all. After prompting him on by placing her hands on his skinny back, he eventually stood from the chair in an awkward motion.

However, that was all the youth was capable of; he could not walk even a single mel. Putting the overcoat on from behind him, she went around to his front and tied the leather strap near his neck tight.

“You can do it, keep them up for a little longer.”

Saying so, she ran over to the corner of the room.

A tough chair made from bright light brown wood was left there.

Instead of four legs, it had two pairs of iron wheels attached, one large and one small. It was crafted by an elderly man by the name of Garitta who lived deep in the forest in solitude.

Holding onto the grips attached to the back of that wheelchair, she rolled it over to behind the youth. Sitting him down on the leather seat as his body swayed perilously, she then tightly covered his two legs with a thick lap blanket.

“There! Shall we make a move, then?”

She patted the youth’s shoulders, grasped the grips, and was about to wheel the wheelchair towards the door located south of the room.

The youth abruptly turned his face and reached his quivering left hand towards the eastern wall.

“Aah... aah.”

That deep, coarse voice was unintelligible. However, Alice immediately guessed what the youth desired.

“Ah, I’m sorry. I will fetch them right away.”

Three swords sat on sturdy metal fittings on the wall the youth stretched his hand towards.

On the right was Alice’s «Fragrant Olive Sword».

On the left was the jet-black long sword the youth once carried on his waist, the «Night Sky Sword».

And in the middle was a pure-white long sword that lacked a master to call its own, the «Blue Rose Sword».

Alice first removed the Night Sky Sword, almost as heavy as the Fragrant Olive Sword, from the wall and held it under her left arm.

Next, she lifted the Blue Rose Sword as well. Its weight reached only half or so of the black sword's. After all, it had lost more than half of the blade in its sheath.

And the owner of this sword, that flaxen-haired youth who was this youth's best friend, too, was no longer around...

She shut her eye for a moment and held onto both swords as she returned to the wheelchair. Upon gently laying them onto his lap, the youth placed his left hand on them before his face fell once more. He could express his own intentions through voice and motion only when seeking out those black and white swords.

“Be sure to keep a firm hold on them or they will drop.”

Alice told him while holding back the ache in her breast that had not lessened despite the months that passed. Pushing the now heavier wheelchair, they went out through the door.

A thick plank lay across the distance from the porch to the ground in the place of steps. Upon descending into the garden from there, a soft, cool breeze and the gentle sunlight enveloped the pair.

The log cabin was built deep within the thick forest, in a wide meadow. Alice personally cut, stripped, and assembled the wood it used. It was not much to look at, but its structure was sturdy as only trees with high priorities were used. She had to put up with the countless comments from the elderly Garitta, who taught her the method from scratch, about how he had never seen a girl with such strength, however.

This meadow was apparently where Alice and Eugeo had their secret playground when they were still children. Unfortunately, she had no memories of that time whatsoever. All memories from before she became an integrity knight were plundered through the «Synthesis Ritual».

She told the elderly Garitta and the villagers that she lost all of her past memories, but offered no reason.

But in truth, her current self—Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty—was no more than a temporary personality dwelling in the body of the one born and raised on this land, Alice Schuberg. She felt obligated to return it if she could, but the memories of the original Alice had departed from this world alongside Eugeo.

“...Now, let us go.”

Alice let out her voice to shake off that moment of contemplation and moved the wheelchair on, out from the front of the residence.

Nearly all of the meadow, circular with a diameter of thirty mel, was covered in cushy undergrowth, but an abundance of withered grass lay stacked up in a section in its east. It appeared like the nest of a gigantic creature—or rather, it truly was—but the master of that nest was absent. She gave it a glance and pondered where it could have went to play today while exiting from the small path heading northwest from the meadow into the forest.

The road split into the east and west five mel ahead. A village named Rulid was in the west, but she had no desire to visit without purpose. Entering the eastern path, she set out while stepping through the filtered sunlight sparkling on the ground.

She slowly continued through the forest progressing from the season of autumn leaves to that of fallen leaves with the tenth month soon meeting its end.

“Are you cold?”

She called out to the youth but received no reply. He would say nothing even if plunged into a blizzard of intense cold. She looked over his shoulder and confirmed the overcoat’s collar was closed tightly.

Of course, warming themselves would be easy if she generated a thermal element or two. However, there were villagers who viewed them with suspicion, so she preferred to refrain from having rumors about her abuse of sacred arts spread.

After walking for about fifteen minutes while carving furrows into the beaten path anew, the path ahead brightened up. A slightly elevated hill showed up in front after leaving the grove of trees. The road gradually became uphill, but still, Alice pushed the wheelchair on without difficulty.

The view instantly opened up after reaching the top of the hill.

Straight to the east was the blue surface of Lake Ruhr. And the extensive marshes deep within it. The forest continued indefinitely to the south.

A look to the north revealed the «mountain range at the edge», covered in pure white snow, towering as though to pierce through the sky. The days she easily flew over those peaks astride her flying dragon seemed like a distant dream now.

She did long to look upon the beautiful landscape with both eyes. The abundant energy in the earth and sun here should be capable of healing the right eye she lost on the outer wall of the Central Cathedral. However, she had no desire yet to eliminate only her own injury through sacred arts.

After all, the youth's hollow eyes could only continue their vacant stare towards mid-air even with the late-autumn scenery endlessly spreading out before him.

Sitting down by the wheelchair, Alice leaned against the large wheel.

“How beautiful. More so than any of those art pieces hung on the cathedral's walls.”

She called out the youth's name with a smile.

“...This is the world you protected, Kirito.”

A single white water bird made ripples on the lake's surface as it glided and soared away.

How long had it been since she sat down?

Solus's ascent had progressed quite a bit when she finally noticed. It was about time to return to the cabin and prepare for lunch. In his current state, Kirito barely ate anything each time, so even a single missed meal would lead to a decline in his maximum Life.

"It is getting late, let us make our way back."

It was when she stood up and grasped the wheelchair's grips while saying so.

Noticing light footsteps treading over grass and climbing the hill, Alice turned about.

The one who approached was a young girl dressed in a black habit. Her lovely face that still retained vestiges of childishness showed a gleaming smile while she energetically waved her right hand.

"Nee-samaa!"

The gentle breeze brought her lively voice over and Alice smiled as well while she gave a slight wave back.

Practically skipping over the last ten meters up, the girl took several seconds to catch her breath after her feet came to a stop, and spoke once more in a bright voice.

"Good morning, Alice-neesama!"

Springing to the side, she gave a vigorous greeting to Kirito sitting on the wheelchair as well.

"Good morning to you too, Kirito!"

Her broad grin that showed no worry over his lack of response was infused with faint sorrow the moment she turned towards the two swords on Kirito's lap.

"...Good morning, Eugeo."

Reaching out with her right hand as she whispered, she softly brushed against the Blue Rose Sword's sheath with her fingertips. If someone unknown were to do that, Kirito would show a somewhat defensive response, but he now let her do as she pleased.

Having greeted her two friends, the girl straightened up and turned back to Alice again.

Alice replied while conscious of a mysterious tenderness deep in her chest.

“Good morning, Selka. How did you ever know we were here?”

It took over a month for her to be able to stop calling her Selka-san.

She had earnestly longed to meet her little sister ever since she found out about her existence from Kirito's words at the Central Cathedral half a year ago. However, now that that wish was granted, the more precious she found Selka, the stronger this question grew within her: if she—an ex-integrity knight by the name of Alice Synthesis Thirty, rather than Alice Schuberg—had the right to be her elder sister.

Selka might, or might not have noticed Alice's unending conflict, but nonetheless, she spoke on with a smile free from concern over that issue.

“I didn't search with sacred arts or anything of that sort. You were out when I visited, so I thought you could have come here since today's weather is so fine. I left fresh milk as well as an apple and cheese pie baked just this morning on the table, so be sure to have them for lunch.”

“Thank you, that's of great help. I was at a loss thinking of what to make.”

“Well, Kirito might end up running away someday due to the food you make, after all, nee-sama!”

Selka laughed and Alice replied while smiling as well.

“Now you’ve said it! You know, I am capable of cooking pancakes without burning any now, at least!”

“I wonder if that’s really true, you did turn them into cinders when you tried cooking them with thermal elements at first and all.”

Alice tried to berate her with a poke to her forehead with her finger, but Selka nimbly dodged it and jumped into Alice’s bosom. She gently hugged her little sister’s back closer as she nudged her face into her breast.



It was only at such times when she strongly wished she could flee from the intense pressure weighing on her heart.

What a relief it would be if she could forget the guilt from turning her back to the duties of an integrity knight and spending her days, quietly, deep in this remote forest. Still, Alice knew at the same time that she should never forget that. The end was approaching from beyond the mountain range at the edge, moment by moment, even while she embraced her little sister.

At the very end of the fierce battle at the Axiom Church Central Cathedral—

Having suffered enough injuries to drain her Life away, Alice lay on the marble floor, immobile, vaguely aware of the flow of the battle.

The struggle to death between Administrator the highest minister and Kirito who wielded two swords.

The highest minister's annihilation, incinerated in the flames of Chief Elder Chudelkin's captivated delusions.

The death of Kirito's best friend, Eugeo, whose flesh was split apart alongside his cherished sword.

Kirito who was caring for Eugeo had vehemently cried out to a mysterious crystal plate that appeared on the north edge of the hall. At the end of the exchange that Alice hardly understood, Kirito's entire body suddenly stiffened up and just as she thought so, he fell onto the floor—with that, the world sank into silence.

Right as Alice recovered a mere, slight amount of her Life and became capable of moving, Solus's dawn shone in from the east window. With that light as a source of sacred energy, Alice first healed the fallen Kirito's wounds.

However, his consciousness remained lost and she reluctantly laid him down, and then attended to herself with healing arts before inspecting the crystal plate he spoke to.

However, the surface that had shone pale purple already lost almost all of its light and there was no reply no matter how many times she touch or spoke to it.

At a loss, Alice sat down.

She did trust in Kirito's words and fought against the absolute ruler, Administrator, in order to protect the people of the Human World and her little sister living in some remote region, but she honestly doubted she could survive.

When the strange sword soldier the highest minister called «*Sword Golem*» pierced deep into her body.

When she used her own body as a shield against that onslaught of lightning bolts.

And when she threw all caution to the wind and leapt in just as Kirito's life was about to be severed by that blade swung down—

Alice braced herself for death countless times. However, the sacrifices of Cardinal the sage, Charlotte that mysterious spider, and Eugeo, along with Kirito's gallant fighting had held on to her life.

—You saved me, so take responsibility for it!

She endlessly shouted that at Kirito who lay down at the side. But the black-haired youth's eyelids remained shut. Think about the path you should take from now on and choose it yourself... it seemed to Alice as though he was saying that.

After hugging her knees for tens of minutes, Alice finally stood up.

Perhaps due to the annihilation of the master of that space, the elevating disk had ceased motion like the crystal plate, so she broke it with her sword and leapt down to the ninety-ninth floor with Kirito on her back.

Going down the long staircase from there, she went past the elders who continued chanting arts, and reached the grand staircase from where she headed straight towards her master in swordsmanship who she had left in the large bath—towards where Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One was.

The large quantity of hot water frozen by Eugeo's armament full control art had mostly thawed and Bercouli's sprawled body, floating in the bath, was fortunately freed from Chudelkin's petrification art.

Upon dragging his large frame onto the aisle and slapping his cheeks while loudly crying out "oji-sama", the giant man let out a grand sneeze before he opened his eyes.

Alice somehow had it in herself to explain the situation to her master who went and uttered without showing any tension on his face, "Oh, it's already morning?" Predictably enough, her words turned Bercouli's expression grave and he spoke a single line in an overpowering voice after hearing it all.

Good work there, lil' miss.

The knight commander's consequent actions were prompt. They gathered the integrity knights to the «Grand Cloister of Spiritual Light» on the fiftieth floor, beginning with Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio who was somehow fully healed and asleep in the middle of the rose garden despite losing to Kirito and Eugeo, and continuing with the others who were apparently similarly bound by petrification, such as Deusolbert and Eldrie, then disseminated the facts they could.

That after a battle with two swordsmen-in-training from North Centoria Sword Mastery Academy, the highest minister, Administrator, was defeated and erased.

That the highest minister was working on a horrifying plan to transform half of the people into monstrous weaponry with bones made from swords.

That the Chamber of Elders, superior to the Order, was effectively Chief Elder Chudelkin alone and he, too, had died alongside the highest minister.

All they kept hidden was the origin of the integrity knights—no, their «conception». Bercouli withstood the impact of the truth, bearing doubts over the words the highest minister used about them summoned from the Celestial World from the start, but decided it should only be communicated to the other knight in progressive steps.

Nonetheless, Eldrie, Fanatio, and the others were visibly shaken. That was only natural. The highest minister with power comparable to the gods, the absolute ruler who reigned for hundreds of years, had died; it should be no easy task to accept that reality.

At the end of that discussion filled with utmost disorder, the knights chose to follow their commander's orders for the time being, thanks to Bercouli's popularity and ability, as well as perhaps the unbroken operation of the «piety module». Regardless of any changes, they were still knights serving the Axiom Church and now that Administrator and Chudelkin had left the Human World, it was undeniable that Knight Commander Bercouli was at the top of the church's chain of command.

And the instant he was entrusted with that right to command, Bercouli focused all of their effort on carrying out their original duty, to «protect the Human World». He must have felt lost and conflicted himself.

He did find out that there were memories of those whom he loved, stolen from him, within arm's reach, after all.

Still, he decided to securely seal the thirty swords that formed the *sword golem* and all of the over three hundred crystal prisms on the hundredth floor of the cathedral, and to temporarily hide the death of the highest minister from all but the Order.

In order to prioritize the impending, extensive invasion from the Dark Territory over the recovery of the integrity knights' memories, including his own.

Bercouli somehow rallied the partially destroyed Order of the Integrity Knights, and then set out on the major task of reorganizing and retraining the Four Empires Imperial Guards of the Human World who were previously no more than an army in name; naturally, Alice assisted as well. With the impromptu eyepatch made by Kirito wrapped around her right eye, she flew about to the north and south of Centoria.

However, her time at the cathedral was limited. The traitor who turned a sword towards the Axiom Church—the unconscious Kirito, in other words—should be executed; that view was expressed by quite a number of integrity knights and even some of the ascetics who were unaware of the highest minister's death.

One dawn, when the work necessary had settled down enough for them to catch a breather, Alice left with Kirito astride a flying dragon. It was two weeks after those intense, bloody battles.

But predicaments followed them even then. Kirito's eyes remained shut throughout even the nights camping out that she was unaccustomed to and she felt that he needed a proper roof with a warm bed, but lacked the funds to even stay in the city's inn, yet outright refused to exert her authority as an integrity knight for such.

What came to mind then was Rulid, the name of the village Kirito told her of on the outer wall of the cathedral.

Holding on the ray of hope that its inhabitants might welcome them despite her lost memories since Eugeo and she were born there, Alice turned the flying dragon's reins towards north. She flew while tending to Kirito's body, so the trip from the Norlangarth Empire to the small village at the very foot of the mountain range at the edge required three whole days.

She descended into the forest a short distance from the village in order to avoid startling the villagers and ordered the flying dragon to guard their belongings there, before heading towards the village on foot with Kirito on her back.

Upon reaching a path after passing through the forest and a wheat field, she chanced upon several villagers. However, they all looked upon them with surprise and suspicion, with not a single one calling out to them.

It was when they arrived at Rulid Village, built on high ground, and tried to pass through its wooden gate that a youth of large build leapt out from the guardhouse constructed at its side. Blood rushed to his face that still showed vestiges of freckles and he blocked Alice's path, going—

—Hold it, outsiders may not enter the village without permission!

The young guard who shouted so with his hand on the sword on his waist as though flaunting it, before doubt sank into his expression upon spotting Kirito's face while he was carried on Alice's back. He muttered, "Huh, isn't this guy," before staring at Alice again, his eyes and mouth gradually widening.

—You... could you be.

Alice felt slight relief at those words. She talked to the guard who seemed to remember her despite the eight years that passed, paying caution to the words she used.

—I am Alice. Please call for the village chief, Gasupht Schuberg.

It might have been best to name herself as Alice Schuberg, but she could not find it in herself to do so. Fortunately, it appeared that name was sufficient as the guard's face instantly turned blue from red while his mouth opened and closed repeatedly before rushing into the village. He did not mention anything about waiting, so Alice passed through the gate and walked on in the guard's trail.

The village soon turned riotous, like a disturbed beehive, in that early afternoon. Tens of villagers filled up the sides of the not-so-wide road, shouting out in shock upon spotting Alice as she passed by.

Almost no face expressed gladness at her homecoming, however. Rather, they could be said to seem even doubtful, wary, and afraid at Alice, clad in unfeminine metal armor, and Kirito, still asleep on her back.

The gently sloping road eventually merged into a round plaza.

A fountain and well lay in its middle with a small church, a ringed cross on its roof, in the north. When Alice came to a stop at the entrance to the plaza and the villagers began exchanging whispers with uneasy looks from a distance.

Minutes later, a single man approached with firm steps, breaking through the crowd on the east side. Alice immediately recognized the man in the prime of his life with a neat, grayed moustache as Gasupht Schuberg, the chief of Rulid Village and once a father to Alice.

Gasupht halted a distance away, then gazed at Alice and Kirito in turn without any change in expression at all.

Roughly ten seconds passed before he let out a deep yet resonant voice.

—Are you Alice?

Alice answered the question with no more than a “yes”. Yet the village chief neither walked closer nor reached out with his hands, questioning further in a voice more stern than before.

—Why are you here? Has your crime been pardoned?

She had no immediate reply this time. She herself knew neither what crime she committed nor whether it was pardoned.

Kirito mentioned the explicit reason why Integrity Knight Deusolbert took the young Alice Schuberg to the capital was «Trespassing into the Dark Territory». That was certainly a transgression of the Taboo Index. However, as an integrity knight, Alice was no longer bound by taboos. The highest minister’s orders were the one and only law to a knight. But that highest minister was no more. She had no choice but to determine what were crimes and how to be pardoned from them, what was evil and what was good on her own...

Alice stared straight back into the village chief’s eyes as she replied with those thoughts in her mind.

—I have lost all of the memories from when I lived in this village as punishment for my crime. I do not know if I was pardoned through that. However, I can now go nowhere but this village.

Those were Alice’s unfeigned, true feelings.

Gasupht’s eyelids shut as deep wrinkles formed themselves at his mouth and brow. However, the village chief raised his face before long and what he announced with a keen light in his eyes were grim words indeed.

—Leave. This village has no place for one who committed a taboo.

Selka’s face rose, perhaps sensing that instant Alice’s body stiffened up, and inclined her neck slightly.

“Nee-sama...?”

Alice showed a smile as she responded to her little sister's anxious whisper.

"It's nothing, really. Now, it is about time we return."

"...Okay."

After nodding and freeing herself from the embrace, Selka spent a moment looking up towards Alice, but her bright smile returned straight away.

"I'll push until we get to the fork!"

She proclaimed and immediately stood behind the wheelchair Kirito sat upon and grasped its handles with her small hands. The wheelchair itself was rather heavy, not to mention how a single person, though skinny, along with one and a half swords at the rank of sacred tools weighed it down. That load was too much for one who was merely fourteen years old and served as a sister apprentice that did not involve physical labor—or so Alice thought the first time Selka tried—but she leaned forward with her legs standing firm, the wheelchair began moving, though slowly.

"Be careful, we are going downhill."

Selka had never let the wheelchair fall yet, but she still could not help but to call out in a slightly nervous tone which made Selka reply with a, "It's fine, you're such a worrywart, nee-sama". It seemed that when Alice was still living in Rulid, she showed a little too much concern for her little sister despite going through all those adventures and experiments with Eugeo.

Was her basic personality preserved even with her memories lost, or was it a simple coincidence? She pondered while walking beside Selka who pushed the wheelchair on with a serious expression.

Upon reaching the foot of the hill, the gentle slope turned into a flat path.

Selka earnestly continued despite the wheelchair's increase in weight. While staring at her little sister's profile, Alice's thoughts switched back to the past once more.

It was Selka who called, from under a grove of trees' shade, for Alice to stop after she left Rulid Village, dejected and crestfallen, on that day she was denied from returning to the village.

If it was not for Selka's courage, acting how she did despite aware that her actions disagreed with the thoughts of her father, the village chief, and the good will of the elderly Garitta she introduced Alice to, Alice would have been still wandering about without a destination even now.

It could not have been an easy story to swallow for Selka either.

Her elder sister who finally returned to her hometown had lost all of her past memories.

Kirito who left a deep impression on her through their conversations in mere days two years ago had fallen into a coma.

And Eugeo who was like a brother to her had died—

However, Selka showed her tears only when she found out Eugeo would never return, with her smile not fading even once in front of Alice after that. She could not help but feel gratitude and wonder at the depth of her mental toughness and thoughtfulness anew with each passing day. She felt that strength was more precious and mighty than an ascetic's sacred arts, or even a knight's sword.

And at the same time, she was reminded daily of how powerless she was, without the Axiom Church.

Having built the small yet firm cabin just two kilolu away from the village, deep in the forest, with the help of the elderly Garitta, what Alice set out doing straight away was an extensive healing art on the still-unconscious Kirito.

Within the vast forest where Terraria's grace was most bountiful, she chose a day without even a single cloud in the skies to obstruct Solus's light and coalesced ten luminous elements with the plentiful sacred energy granted by the earth and sun gods to that space, converting them into healing energy and pouring it into Kirito's body.

The healing art Alice devoted all of herself to apply had the potential to fully heal even the massive amount of Life a flying dragon had, let alone that of a human. She was confident that regardless of how grim Kirito's injuries were, he would immediately recover along with his severed right arm and open his eyes as though nothing had happened.

Yet—

Right after the blinding spiritual light left, Kirito's eyes did open but those jet-black eyes lacked any light of reason. Though Alice repeatedly called his name, shook his shoulders, and even shouted at him while embracing him, he merely looked up at the sky blankly. Alice failed to even revive his right arm.

Four months have passed since that day, but there was no sign of Kirito's mind returning.

Selka kept supporting her by insisting that Kirito would definitely recover to his old self some day since she's putting her all in nursing him. Still, Alice secretly feared it was impossible for herself.

After all, she was no more than an existence created by the highest minister, Administrator.

Selka who had been silently pushing the wheelchair so far came to a stop while saying, "Let's take... a break", waking up Alice from her musing once again.

Her left hand gently touched her little sister's back while she panted with sweat glistening on her brow.

“Thank you, Selka, I will push from here on.”

“I wanted to push, all the way, until the fork...”

“You already pushed a hundred mel more than the previous time, didn’t you? That helped out a lot.”

She found out from the village that situations like this would be where an elder sister, older by many years, should give her little sister some spending money, but unfortunately, she did not have even a single copper coin in her pockets. Losing even a mere shear would be horrible in her current financial situation, so she carries around money only when out to shop.

To make up for that, she brushed Selka’s bright brown hair. Her little sister smiled with her breathing calmed down, but Alice noticed faint gloom on her expression and tilted her head.

“What is it, Selka? Is something bothering you?”

She asked while holding the wheelchair’s grips and Selka opened her mouth after brief hesitation.

“...Erm... there’s another request to deal with the trees at the cleared land from uncle Barbossa for you, big sister...”

“What, is that all? There is nothing for you to worry about, thank you for delivering the message.”

Alice replied with a smile, but her sister’s crestfallen expression lifted with a discontented pout.

“But... those people care only for themselves. Don’t you think so too, Kirito?”

She questioned Kirito, sitting on the wheelchair, but the youth looking downwards gave no response, naturally. Still, Selka’s tone turned increasingly intense as though he was in agreement.

“Neither Barbossa-san nor Redack-san bother trying to let you stay in the village, so how could they still get you to help out when they’re in trouble? I know I am the one delivering the message, but you don’t have to accept it if you don’t want to, big sister. I will be sure to bring food from home for you.”

After letting a giggle escape from those words, Alice pacified her sulking little sister.

“Though your feelings make me happy, there is really no need to be bothered over it, Selka. I like the cabin and I feel blessed enough, staying close to the village. ...I will go immediately after Kirito is done with his lunch. Where is it?”

“...The cleared land in the south, he said.”

Selka softly replied and spent a short while silently walking beside the wheelchair.

With just a little more to the fork heading towards the log cabin, she suddenly spoke in a firm tone.

“Sister, my time as a sister apprentice will end next year and I will receive some wages, even if it’s not that much. When that time comes, you can stop helping those people, okay? If it’s for you, big sister, and Kirito, I... I will always...”

Alice gently hugged Selka whose voice came to a stop there.

She felt her tawny hair on her cheeks, a sensation much the same despite the clearly different color, and whispered.

“Thank you... But I feel blessed enough simply with you close to me, Selka...”

Seeing off Selka, who waved her hand endlessly in reluctance to part, Alice returned to the log cabin with Kirito and quickly prepared lunch.

Though she had become somewhat capable of housework recently, her skill at cooking alone remained stubbornly lacking. Compared to the Fragrant Olive Sword, the kitchen knife bought from the village's general store seemed as unreliable as a toy and twenty or thirty minutes would pass in the blink of an eye as she nervously sliced the ingredients.

Fortunately, Selka had delivered that freshly baked pie today, so she cut it into smaller portions and fed Kirito.

By bringing the pie to his mouth with a fork and waiting patiently, his lips would eventually open slightly, accepting it into his mouth. With that, Kirito would slowly, slowly chew as though replaying his memories of how he used to eat.

While Kirito's mouth moved, she would eat the pie filled with apples and cheese herself, savoring its taste. It was likely Sadina Schuberg, the village chief's wife, who made it. Mother to Selka, and Alice.

When she still lived at the Central Cathedral, she could freely dine on the rare delicacies from around the Human World squeezed on the table in the large dining hall. Sadina's homemade pie both looked and tasted humble in comparison, but it seemed several times more delicious. Alice did feel a little peeved that it seemed to get more reaction out of Kirito than her own cooking, however.

Upon finishing the meal and the cleaning up, she sat Kirito on the wheelchair once again and placed the two swords on his lap.

The front garden shone golden in the afternoon sunlight as they left the cabin. The days were growing shorter lately and it would swiftly turn to dusk should her mind wander. Reaching the southern fork with a quick pace, she pointed her feet towards the west this time round.

The forest came to a stop shortly after she walked straight, with the wheat fields ready to be harvested stretching out.

The densely packed village of Rulid could be seen beyond the heads of grain, swaying excessively under their weight. The spire shooting noticeably high up in the middle of the red bricked roofs, erected in rows, was that of the church where Selka lived.

Neither Selka nor Azariya, the sister entrusted with the church, knew the Central Cathedral managing the Axiom Church organization in the Human World's four empires was now no more than a fanciful illusion with no master. Still, the small church that served also as an orphanage stayed in operation without issue.

Even with the cathedral descending into chaos with the death of the highest minister, there was no apparent impact on the lives of the masses. The Taboo Index functioned as always, still constraining the masses' awareness. Could they truly take up arms and fight to protect the Human World?

They would likely obey if ordered by the Axiom Church or the emperors. However, that alone could not bring them victory against the forces of darkness. Knight Commander Bercouli must be aware of that grave reality at the very least.

What would decide the course of battle in the end was neither the priority level of weapons nor the usage authority of arts, but the strength of one's will. Kirito's struggles as he upset that hopeless difference in battle potential, defeating numerous integrity knights, Chief Elder Chudelkin, and even Highest Minister Administrator, served as proof for that.

Taking on the looks given by the villagers laboring in the wheat fields, entwined with vigilance and anxiety, with her chest puffed out, Alice whispered to her master in swordsmanship in her heart.

—Oji-sama, for the masses living in the Human World, peace might not be something to protect but something granted for all of eternity.

—And the ones who nurtured that idea must be... the Axiom Church, the Taboo Index, and us, the Order of the Integrity Knights.

Even at this very moment, Knight Commander Bercouli should be toiling away, training the forces of the four empires in Central Capital Centoria and producing their equipment. Or perhaps he was already mobilizing troops to the «Great East Gate» the frontier of the Eastabarieth Empire where the fighting will be fiercest. He must be wanting for even an additional knight around, both as an assistant with practical experience and as military capability after war breaks out.

—That said, I am now...

Going through the wheat fields while sunken in her contemplation, she exited at the cleared land spreading out towards the south of the village. Stopping the wheelchair right before the dug black soil, she scanned through the vast plot of land.

It was said that a massive forest larger than the one in the east, where Alice and Kirito lived in, stood here until a mere two years ago.

However, thanks to Kirito and Eugeo felling the Gigas Cedar, the «demonic tree» towering above all else as it ruled over the forest and endlessly absorbed sacred power, the village's men could now engross themselves in expanding the fields, or so Selka had said with an exasperated look.

A gigantic pitch-black stump remained right in the middle of the cleared land and to its south, vigorous chopping noises rang out from the axes of tens of villagers. The potbellied man standing in a corner, issuing booming instructions all about without an axe in his hands, was the master of the largest farm in the village, Nygr Barbossa.

Though somewhat reluctant, Alice still pushed the wheelchair over the narrow, beaten path. Kirito made absolutely no reaction even as he passed along the stump, the vestiges of the enormous tree he once fell; his head remained hung down as he held the two swords.

The first to notice the approaching pair were young men from the Barbossa family, resting atop the trunk of a freshly fallen tree. The trio, seemingly fifteen or sixteen years old, watched Alice, who had a scarf wrapped over her blonde hair, without reserve before shifting their gaze towards Kirito in his wheelchair. Deep jeering could be heard as they exchanged words in an undertone.

Upon ignoring them and passing through them, one of the youths shouted out in a drawl.

“Uncleee, she’s hereee.”

Nygr Barbossa, who was screaming everywhere with his hands on his waist, vigorously spun around at that and showed a smirk on his greasy, round face. His large mouth and narrow eyes reminded her of Chief Elder Chudelkin somewhat.

Still, Alice returned the best smile she could muster and gave a slight nod.

“Good afternoon, Barbossa-san. I heard you had work for me, so...”

“Oooh, ooh, if it isn’t Alice, I’m glad you’re here.”

His two hands spread out, approaching haltingly, as his round tummy quivered; Alice was convinced he desired an embrace, but after a look at the wheelchair before her, he fortunately gave up on that.

In exchange, Nygr stood a mere fifty cen on her right before spinning his huge frame and pointing at a towering, large tree between the forest and cleared land.

“Look, you can see it, can’t you? We’ve spent all our time on that frustrating platinum oak since yesterday morning, but this pathetic amount is how much progress was made even with ten adult men swinging their axes at it.”

The index finger and thumb on his right hand formed a smallish semicircle.

The large white and brown tree with a trunk of a mel and a half across had spread its roots deep into the earth, stubbornly rejecting the laborers. Two men swung their large axes in turn even now, but the notch carved in its trunk was shallow indeed, at less than even ten cen.

Sweat poured down the men’s bare upper bodies like waterfalls. Their chests and arm muscles were developed well enough, but their handling were rather stiff, perhaps due to the lack of need to wield an axe in their daily activities.

One of the men had his right leg slip as she watched and struck a wrong spot at an angle. The axe snapped at the middle of its handle and unrestrained laughter from the man’s co-workers immersed him as he fell hard on his buttocks.

“Good grief, what are those blockheads doing...”

Nygr moaned and looked at Alice once again.

“At that rate, I have no idea how many more days will it take for that one tree. And while we were stuck here with that, Redack’s men have already expanded the land by twenty mel in every direction!”

After uttering the name of the next most influential farming household after the Barbossas, Nygr kicked away a pebble at his feet. His breathing had grown distraught, but all of a sudden, a full smile appeared on his face as he let out a wheedling voice.

“And that’s how it is, I know our agreement was for once a month, but could you treat it as an exception just this once and lend me your strength, Alice? You probably don’t remember, but I spared... no, treated you to sweets time after time when you were young. You were such a cute little miss back then, you see, no, no, of course, that’s not to say that’s any different now...”

Alice interrupted Nygr’s words while holding back her sigh.

“I understand, Barbossa-san. I will treat this one particular time as an exception.”

Getting rid of trees and rocks, like the platinum oak before her eye, obstructing the land clearing was Alice’s current sacred task—no, her temporary source of income.

Naturally, it was not work officially assigned to her. There was an incident about a month into her peaceful life on the outskirts of the village where a gigantic fallen rock sealed the road towards the cleared land to the west. The episode of Alice rolling that rock away on her own as she came across it spread through the village as a rumor and before she knew it, they depended on her for assistance on tasks like this.

It was a fact that money was necessary if she were to continue living with Kirito, so she was thankful for the offers. Still, as Selka was worried that the men would bother her with an endless stream of requests if she took on the physical labor without complaint, she decided to limit her help to once a month for each farming household.

Nygr should be bound by every single rule laid in the Taboo Index, the fundamental laws of the Norlangarth Empire, and those of the village, but it came as no surprise to her that he would send two requests within the month despite that being a violation of the agreement. Though he had not broken through the «seal of the right eye»—what was «Code 871» according to the highest minister’s words—like Alice or Eugeo, it was likely he simply felt Alice to be beneath himself.

He must felt no need to naively abide by some agreement made with an ex-convict living in some hut on the outskirts of the village.

Even with those thoughts in her mind, Alice nodded at Nygr once again before parting from the wheelchair. She took note of Kirito's status, but he seemed unconcerned by the clamor in the surroundings. After telling him that she would be right back in her heart, she walked towards the large platinum oak.

The men who noticed Alice showed smirks or blatantly cluck their tongues. However, there were now few unaware of Alice's strength, so they distanced themselves from the tree without a word en masse.

Taking their place before the great tree, Alice quickly drew a seal of sacred letters with a finger on her right hand and brought out its «Stacia Window». Its quantity of Life was quite a figure, as expected of one that ten adult men would have trouble against. Using a borrowed axe as usual would prove ineffective against that priority level.

Returning to the wheelchair in a jog for the moment, she bent down and whispered softly.

“I apologize, Kirito. I would like you to lend me your sword for a little while.”

She gently touched the black leather sheath with her right hand and felt his left arm tense up slightly as it held the sword.

However, after patiently looking into his blank eyes, the strength eventually left his arm and a hoarse voice escaped his throat.

“...Aah...”

This was likely a fragment of his memories rather than her feelings actually getting through to him. What controlled Kirito now were not his thoughts but the memories resident in his breast.

“Thank you.”

Whispering so, she slowly brought up the black sword from his arms. After affirming that Kirito remained docile, she returned back to the platinum oak.

But still, this was a splendid tree. Though it could not compare to the great ancient trees rising around Central Capital Centoria, it must be over a hundred years old.

Alice gave an apology in her heart before stabilizing her footing.

Her right leg forward and her left leg back.

She gently placed her right hand on the grip wound with black leather of the «Night Sky Sword» unevenly set on her left hand. She measured the distance to the tree with her left eye.

“Hey, hey, you think you can break platinum oak with that thin sword?”

One of the men shouted and the crowd went into an impromptu frenzy. That sword’s gonna break; the sun’ll set before that; while the jeers flew in one after another, Nygr Barbossa’s concerned voice mixed in.

“Aah, Alice, if possible, I would rather you do something about it within an hour, you know?”

She had fallen over ten trees since she started this job, but required around thirty minutes almost every time. The reason behind that slowness was due to her having to keep her strength in check to avoid breaking the axes she borrowed. But she had no need for that worry today. The Night Sky Sword was a sacred tool boasting a priority level equal to Alice’s Fragrant Olive Sword.

“No, I will not require that long.”

Replying with a near-murmur, Alice gripped the sword’s handle.

“...Haah!!”

A short yell. A cloud of dust whirled up from beneath her right foot, dug firmly onto the ground, like some sort of explosion.

It had been a while since she swung an actual sword, but fortunately, she had yet to forget her techniques. The horizontal slash from the left in the same motion as drawing it from its sheath ran through the air like black lightning.

The surrounding men appeared to have been unable to follow the slash itself. Even as Alice rose up from her final posture, with the sword swung completely to the right in front of her, they continued scowling questioningly.

There was no more than the meager notch made by the men on the platinum oak’s smooth bark; it had suffered no other damage—or so it appeared.

A “Whaat, she missed?” eventually came from somebody and a number of them laughed. Alice glanced at the person to whom that voice belonged to and spoke as she sheathed the sword.

“It will be falling that way.”

“Hah? The heck are you...”

The man’s two eyes opened wide with shock upon getting to that point in his words. He saw the platinum oak’s trunk slowly begin to tilt. A scream grew from him and those around him as they ran behind.

The huge tree fell with a terrific tremor where the men were until three seconds ago.

Alice moved to the front of the stump as she warded off the rising thick cloud of dust with her right hand. Fine tree rings were clearly visible on the newly-made cross-section and shone as though it was polished, but a single section on the edge was slightly frayed.

Perhaps her skills have dulled, or perhaps her unavailable right eye was to blame—Alice pondered as she turned herself about.

Her upper body unconsciously straightened up in the next instant. Nygr Barbossa had a full smile on his face and was rushing towards her with heavy steps, his arms spread out.

She instinctively lifted the sword in her left hand and Nygr came to an abrupt stop at the clink made by the guard. Still, his smile remained and he put his spread out hands together in front of his body as he shouted.

“B-Bri... brilliant! What skill! Jink, the guard chief, couldn’t even hope to match that! It’s practically divine!”

He went another mel closer and continued his words with an expression filled equally with admiration and greed.

“H-H-How about it, Alice, I will double your fee, so let’s not make it once a month, help us out once a week... no, once a day!!”

Alice lightly shook her head at Nygr who was rubbing his hands together fast.

“No, the fee I am currently receiving is plenty.”

If she were to wield the Fragrant Olive Sword and make use of the armament full control art, it would not be on the scale of one large tree a day; it would be possible to change this forest to nothing more than barren land as far the eye could see in mere minutes. But if she were to do that, their requests would stretch on to tilting the plains, smashing rocks, and even making it rain.

Nuhn hnhnhnh; Nygr moaned in agony before finally snapping out of it, blinking, after a “my pay, please” from Alice.

“O-Oh, that’s right, that’s right.”

Sticking his hand in his pocket, he pinched out the agreed hundred Shear, a single silver coin, from a leather bag that sounded heavy.

Dropping that onto Alice's palm, Nygr still stubbornly added some words.

“How about this, Alice? I will pay another silver coin, so how about you decline those under Redack this month if they ask for help...”

It was then, when she held back her sigh and was about to reject his offer once more.

A heavy clunk reached her ears. Her face sprung up and saw the wheelchair sprawled on its side with Kirito thrown onto the ground a distance away.

“...Kirito!”

She gave a hoarse shout and rapidly slipped past Nygr.

She could sense desperation from Kirito as he reached out with his left arm with his stomach lying on the ground. Ahead of him were the previously resting young men, two who now supported the long sword sheathed in white leather on the ground as they cried out in excitement.

“Uohh, woah, this is heavy as heck!!”

“That's why even that girl can bring down that platinum oak in one blow, huh?”

“Shut up and hold onto it properly!”

The third youth shouted and held the Blue Rose Sword's handle with both hands so as to draw it.

Alice heard her own teeth gnashing as they grinded together. Released next from her throat was a sharp yell.

“You bastards...!!”

The youths' mouths opened wide upon hearing that as they looked at Alice.

She ran through the remaining twenty mel in an instant and came to a stop with the dust whirling up. The three looking at Alice's face backed off haltingly.

Somehow restraining the emotions threatening to burst out with a deep breath, Alice first helped up the fallen Kirito. While sitting him on the wheelchair once again, she ordered with a stifled voice.

“That sword belongs to this man. Return it now.”

Defiant expressions instantly showed up on the trio's faces. The lips of the one with a large build and about to draw the Blue Rose Sword grew crooked and he pointed at Kirito.

“We did ask that guy if we could borrow the sword, you know?”

Back on the wheelchair, Kirito's left arm was still reaching out towards the pure white sword while his feeble voice leaked out.

One of the youths holding back the sheath warped his lips in ridicule as he continued.

“And then, he generously lent it to us. With those cries of *aah, aah*, you know?”

The last went with the flow and laughed with a “yep, yep”.

Alice could not help but to tighten her right hand's grip on the wheelchair's handle. That hand was unmistakably seeking to draw the Night Sky Sword hanging off her left hand.

She would have sliced off those six hands touching the Blue Rose Sword without even a hint of hesitation half a year ago. Integrity knights were above the Taboo Index and its prohibition on hurting others. And in the first place, with the seal on her right eye currently broken, there were no longer any laws capable of keeping Alice's actions in check.

Still—

Alice grinded her teeth so hard it hurt as she fought against the impulse surging through herself.

These youths were part of the people of the Human World that Kirito and Eugeo sacrificed their lives to protect. She could not hurt them. Neither of them would wish for that.

Alice remained silent without moving a cen for several seconds. But she likely failed to conceal the bloodlust emanating from her left hand. The trio wiped off their smiles and averted their eyes, afraid.

“...Fine, no need for that scary look.”

The larger one eventually spat out with a sulk and took his hands off the sword’s grip.

The remaining pair let go of the sheath with faces that appeared relieved, probably already at their limits in supporting it. The Blue Rose Sword laid down heavily where it was.

Alice approached without any additional words, stooped over, and deliberately used just three fingers on her right hand to lift the white leather sheath. After a glare at the brats right after turning about, she returned to the wheelchair.

She wiped the soil that got on the sheath with the cuff of her overcoat, then placed on Kirito’s lap both the white and black swords which he firmly hugged before coming to a stop.

She gave Nygr Barbossa a glance, seeing him apparently paying that commotion no attention and engrossed in directing the men. Alice lightly bowed towards his back as he continued his shouting, and then pushed the wheelchair back north on the narrow path.

The anger raging in her breast for the first time in a while had turned to a cold sense of futility.

It was not her first time thinking so since she began living in the forest near Rulid. Most of the villagers avoided even talking to

Alice and as for Kirito who lost his sense of self, they would not even treat him as a human.

She had no plans to condemn them. Alice was likely still a criminal who violated the Taboo Index to them, after all. She felt thankful enough for them giving their silent consent for her to stay close to the village, and selling her food and daily necessities.

Still, she still pondered in a corner of her mind. —What for?

Exactly what did she suffer so much and fight against the highest minister, Administrator, for? The other highest minister, Cardinal, the intelligent black spider, Charlotte, and Eugeo lost their lives; Kirito lost his speech and emotions; exactly what was protected after all that?

That line of thought ended up on a question that she could never utter.

Was there truly a need to protect people like those from the Barbossas?

That doubt was partly what made Alice abandon her sword and live in this remote land.

The tremendous military forces of darkness were drawing closer, moment by moment, beyond the «Great East Gate» at the end of the Eastabarieth Empire even now. It was dubious if the reborn «Human World Defense Army» fostered by Knight Commander Bercouli could even be deployed in time. As Alice was not relieved of her integrity knight duties—the only one capable of doing so was the deceased highest minister—perhaps she ought to be rushing towards the Great Gate to join them as soon as she could.

However, the weight of the Fragrant Olive Sword was now beyond what Alice could handle.

The Celestial World she believed to be her origin was actually a deception. The Axiom Church she swore her fealty to was smeared in lies. Not to mention she now knew the ugliness and vulgarity of

the Human World's inhabitants far too vividly. The time she could swing her sword without doubts over her own justice and pray to the gods was of the distant past.

Those Alice now truly wished to protect numbered a mere few. Her father; her mother; Selka; the elderly Garitta; and Kirito. If nothing would befall them, what issue would there be turning her back to her knight duties and continuing her peaceful life in this land—?

Leaving the cleared land, Alice's feet stopped just as they reached the path beyond the wheat fields, and she whispered to Kirito.

“Could we go shopping in the village seeing as we are here? I will not allow some insolent child to harass you this time.”

There was no reply, but judging the lack of response as consent, Alice pushed the wheelchair on towards the north.

The skies were dyed in the shades of sunset by the time they bought a week's worth of food and essentials with the hundred Shear silver coin earned and returned to the forest cabin.

She was on the way up the cabin's porch when she noticed a low whoosh approaching. Descending slightly with the wheelchair, she awaited the origin of that sound near the meadow's middle.

What made its appearance before long, skimming the treetops, was a gigantic silver beast with two wings, a long neck, and a tail—a flying dragon. Alice's flying dragon who brought the two of here from the central capital. With the name, Amayori.

The flying dragon circled through the skies above the meadow twice before gently descending. Tucking in her wings and stretching out her neck, she first touched Kirito's chest with the tip of her nose before rubbing her large head against Alice.

Upon scratching the faintly bluish fuzz under the dragon's neck, a low *kururu* rang out from her throat.

“Amayori, you have gotten a little plump. You have been eating too many of the lake’s fishes.”

After being scolded with a vague smile, she breathed out from its nose as though embarrassed, turned her long body about, and walked towards her bed east of the cabin. She curled up atop her bed made from thickly laid dry grass, entwining her tail with her head.

Half a year back, Alice undid the leather bridle fixed on Amayori’s head and released the binding art on the day she decided to build this cabin in this meadow. And she even went to the extent of telling her that she was now free and to return to the flying dragon nest in the west empire, but the flying dragon made no attempt to leave Alice.

Making a bed with grass she gathered on its own, she plays in the forest and catches fish in the lake during daytime, but comes back in the evening without exception. Despite the lack of the sacred art that restrains the proud, brutal disposition of a dragon and brought her under a knight’s command, it was a mystery why she did not return whence she came.

That said, she was simply glad that Amayori, always together with her since she became an integrity knight, would remain by her side through her free will, so she made no actual effort to chase her away. The villagers spotting her flying over the forest at times seemed to be one of the causes for Alice’s unsavory reputation among them, but she felt no point in being bothered over that now.

After telling Amayori good night as she began her low snoring atop the dry grass, Alice pushed the wheelchair into the cabin.

For dinner, she made a stew from half-moon beans and meatballs. The beans were just a little hard and the balls were not all that consistent, but it seemed to have tasted rather decent. Naturally, it was not like Kirito gave any opinion through his words.

He merely chewed and swallowed, as though from memory, whenever the small spoon entered his mouth.

She considered how it would be nice if she knew his likes and dislikes at least, but realized she actually held a proper conversation with this youth for less than even a full day after thinking about it. It seemed Selka lived with him in the church for a while two years ago, but she only remembered him indiscriminately enjoying everything served. She thought that, too, was just like him.

It happened after she moved Kirito, who managed to finish the stew after some time, to the small stove's side along with the chair and was washing the cutlery in the sink, lining them up in the drainer.

Amayori who usually slept until dawn suddenly cried out with a low *rururuu* outside the window.

Her hands jerked to a stop and she perked up her ears. A noise unsuited to the season was mixed in the night wind passing through the forest, like a cold winter wind. A noise like thin, large wings flying against the wind.

“.....!”

Leaping out of the kitchen, she confirmed Kirito was staying quiet on the chair before opening the entrance. Straining her ears again, she judged the wind noise to be approaching, immediately went down to the front yard, and looked upwards into the night sky.

The black silhouette descending in a spiral against the backdrop of a sky filled with stars unmistakably belonged to a flying dragon. She looked towards the east of the meadow just to be sure, but naturally, Amayori was crouching on her bed as she looked up at the sky.

“Could that...”

The moment she was about to return for her sword, having thought it could be a darkness knight from the Dark Territory who crossed the mountain range at the edge, she saw the dragon's scales gleam silver in the moonlight. She lessened the tension in her shoulders slightly. The integrity knights of the Axiom Church were the only ones to ride flying dragons with silver scales even if one were to search the world over.

That said, it was still too early to be relieved. Exactly who would fly to a region this remote, and for what reason? Could it be that the debate regarding the execution of the traitor, Kirito, continued even throughout this half year and that the cathedral had finally dispatched someone to do the deed?

Perhaps sensing Alice's tension, Amayori crept out from her bed before lifting her head up high and crying out once more.

However, her menacing, deep tone soon faded away, replaced by a coy, high-pitched *kyuun*.

Alice, too, knew why straight away.

The flying dragon that landed on the southern part of the meadow after circling another three times had fuzz in a shade much like Amayori's growing around its neck. That could only be Amayori's elder brother, a dragon named Takiguri. In other words, the one riding on him was—

Alice called out in a stiff tone towards the knight clad in full silver armor who landed on the ground in an elegant motion.

“...To think you would find out about this place. What business do you have here, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one?”

The one and only integrity knight possessing a number younger than Alice, who was *thirty*, did not speak immediately and instead, first gave a deep bow with his right hand on his chest.

Straightening his body, he slowly removed his helmet.

His lustrous light purple hair fluttered in the night wind and his good looks with a sense of urban flamboyance were revealed. With his high, smooth voice, rare for a man—

“It has been a while, my master, Alice-sama. Your beauty has not faded despite this change in dressing. I could not help but to make haste to meet with you, master, with a bottle of alcohol from my cherished collection upon imagining the bewitching splendor your golden locks would have under this evening’s glorious moon.”

The left hand held behind his back darted forward and in it was a bottle of wine.

Alice held back a sigh as she answered the man who apparently regarded her as his master.

“...I am truly glad your wounds have healed, but I see your personality is as it had always been. I have only just noticed, but your manner of speech is slightly similar to Chief Elder Chudelkin’s.”

Turning her back to Eldrie who let out a mild *ugh*, she proceeded towards the cabin.

“E-Erm, Alice-sama...”

“I will hear you out inside if it is important. If it is not, down the wine on your own and return to the central capital.”

Alice gave a glance at the siblings reunited after half a year, Takiguri and Amayori, who were happily nuzzling each other’s heads, then returned to the cabin fast.

Eldrie, who docilely followed along, scanned through the narrow cabin with curious eyes before his gaze fixated on Kirito looking downwards beside the stove. However, he mentioned nothing about the rebel with whom he had once crossed swords with and swiftly slipped to the table and pulled a chair for Alice.

“.....”

It seemed ludicrous to thank him, so she sighed instead and sat straight down. Eldrie sat opposite Alice without asking and placed the wine bottle on the table. His face clouded over the moment their gazes met straight on, likely spotting the black bandage still covering Alice's right eye. That expression soon vanished, however, with Eldrie's nose twitching as he raised his face.

"...There seems to be some aroma here, Alice-sama. On another note, I have yet to take dinner due to this trip I undertook in haste."

"On another note? In the first place, what would spur you to bring wine instead of rations when flying to this remote region from the central capital?"

"I swore to the three goddesses that I will never have that dried, squirmy thing in this life. If I have to satisfy my stomach with that, I would rather starve and give my Life up..."

Alice stood from the chair without listening to Eldrie's absurd excuses to the end. Moving to the kitchen, she served the leftover stew from the metal pot on the stove into a wooden plate and returned to the table.

Eldrie stared at the bowl placed before his eyes with a mixture of delight and suspicion.

".....Excuse my abrupt question, but could this possibly be made by your hand, Alice-sama...?"

"Why, yes, it is. What about it?"

".....No. I am merely overjoyed by this day, in which I could partake in cooking made by my master; more so than being endowed with some hidden sword stance."

Holding the spoon with a nervous expression, he brought beans to his mouth.

Alice asked once again towards Eldrie whose mouth moved as he chewed.

“And so, how did you find this place? No art could reach this far from the central capital... and I hardly believe the Order could dispatch flying dragons to every area in search of me alone in its current situation.”

Eldrie gave no reply for a moment, murmuring comments such as “so it’s not that bad, after all” as he energetically moved the spoon, but eventually raised his face from the now-emptied plate, then wiped his mouth with a handkerchief he took out from one place or another before looking straight towards Alice.

“I came, following the bonds of fate linking us, Alice-sama... or so I would like to say, but unfortunately, this was an utter coincidence.”

His right hand flashed open in a pompous gesture.

“Reports that the goblins and orcs were sneaking about of late came from the knights going about the mountain range at the edge. The caves in the north, south, and west were all destroyed under the knight commander’s command, but as there was still the possibility of them stubbornly digging through, I came to confirm the issue.”

“...The caves...?”

Alice’s knitted her eyebrows.

Among the four passages passing through the mountain range at the edge, the caves in the south, the west, and the one exceeding close to Rulid Village, the north, were rather narrow, denying access to the orcs and giants who formed the bulk of the darkness forces. As such, she anticipated the enemy army would gather at the «Great east Gate», but Knight Commander Bercouli had collapsed those three caves immediately upon assuming command as insurance.

That was precisely why Alice built this secret home on this land, but the situation would change if the enemy were to dig through the cave. Rulid Village would flip from a peaceful remote region to the front lines where battle would first break out.

“And so... did you confirm the movements of the darkness forces?”

“Though I flew around the cave for an entire day, I saw not even a single goblin, let alone an orc.”

Eldrie lightly shrugged and continued.

“Perhaps they mistook a pack of beasts for military forces.”

“...Did you check inside the cave?”

“Naturally. I peeked in from the Dark Territory’s side, but it was buried in rocks up to the ceiling. They would probably need a large force to dig through that. ...Then Takiguri strangely kicked up a fuss when I pulled on the reins to return to the central capital. I left the flying to him and he descended straight towards here. Honestly, I am just as shocked. It’s a huge coincidence... no, maybe it was the guiding hand of fate after all.”

Having left his flowery language behind some time ago, Eldrie showed the resolute face of a knight and continued.

“I am obligated to report that I had come across this opportunity for an audience with you on this particular occasion. Alice-sama... please return to the Order! Rather than the assistance of a thousand men, what we need now is your sword!!”

Alice slowly turned down her eye as though avoiding the knight’s forceful gaze.

She knew.

She knew the crackling of the brittle wall shielding the Human World crumbling away.

And of the hardships Knight Commander Bercouli and the newly-formed Defense Army suffer as they propped it up.

Alice could never repay her debt to the knight commander for his protection and guidance, and she had yet to lose her sense of unity with those in the Order of the Integrity Knights, including Eldrie. That said, that was insufficient to spur her to battle.

Strength is the might of one's will. Alice realized that truth through the battle at the cathedral. If willpower could allow one to overturn a devastating difference in battle potential, like Kirito back then, then it could dull the strongest sacred tool too—

“...I cannot.”

Alice softly replied.

Eldrie's sharp voice rang out at once.

“Why.”

Without waiting for a reply, his sight, keen like a whip, turned to the young man sitting on the chair next to the stove.

“Is it for that man? Is your heart still led astray, Alice-sama, by that man who broke out of the cathedral's jail and turned his treacherous blade on many knights, the chief elder, and even the Esteemed Highest Minister? If that is so, I shall cut off the source of your hesitation for you this very moment.”

Alice's one eye glared at Eldrie as he put strength into his right hand holding onto the table's end.

“Stop it!”

Though that single line was at a suppressed volume, the knight still straightened up his upper body with a start upon hearing it.

“He, too, only fought for the justice he believes in. Otherwise, how could he defeat all of us integrity knights, who are supposed to be the strongest, and even the knight deputy commander? You should know the weight behind his sword as well, having crossed swords firsthand.”



Even as wrinkles came together near his high nose bridge, Eldrie slowly released the strength in his shoulders. He lowered his gaze to the table while murmuring to himself.

“...Certainly, I, too, find it hard to accept Administrator-sama’s plan of changing half of the people into soulless soldiers with bones of swords. And without that youth... Kirito and his friend, Eugeo, it is unlikely anyone would stop that plan from being realized. Not to mention that if it is as Bercouli-dono said, that the one who guided that pair truly stood on a par with Administrator-sama once, as another highest minister, Cardinal-sama, I would hardly wish to point out Kirito’s crimes. However... if that is so, I find it even harder to swallow!!”

As though pouring out what he had always kept suppressed in his breast, Eldrie shouted.

“If the skills of the rebel, Kirito, overwhelm even those of us integrity knights as you have mentioned, Alice-sama, why does he not take up his sword and fight?! Why was he reduced to such a miserable state and continues to anchor you down to this remote region?! If he murdered Administrator-sama in order to protect the masses, then should he not be rushing to the Great East Gate this very moment?!!”

Eldrie’s words, as though spewing out fire, showed no sign of reaching Kirito’s heart either. His half-closed eyes reflected no more than the light from the wavering embers in the stove.

The heavy, lasting silence that descended was punctured by Alice’s calm voice.

“...I am sorry, Eldrie. I am incapable of going with you, after all. It has nothing to do with Kirito’s status... I have merely lost the strength to wield my sword. I doubt I could even get a point if I were to cross swords with you now.”

Eldrie’s two eyes flashed open as though he was taken aback. The prideful knight’s face contorted like that of a young boy.

That face showed a smile bearing resignation in time.

“...I see. Then I have nothing more to say...”

Slowly stretching out his right hand, he started muttering a sacred art. The following quick incantation created two crystal elements and changed their forms into that of extremely thin wine glasses.

Picking the wine bottle up from the table, he flicked the tough cork off with just his fingertip. He poured a little of the crimson red fluid into both glasses from the bottle before putting it down.

“...If I had known we would be bidding each other farewell with this wine, I would have brought along one that was aged for two hundred years old from the East Empire in my collection.”

Eldrie lifted one of the glasses, downed it in one go, and then gently returned it to the table. He took a bow and stood up, his pure white mantle billowing.

“I bid you farewell here, master. Your guidance on my sword and arts shall remain unforgotten as long as this Eldrie lives.”

“...All the best. I pray you stay safe.”

Lightly nodding back towards Alice who managed to get those words through her mouth somehow, the integrity knight scraped his boots against the floor as he walked away. Alice could not help but to avert her eyes from his back filled with unshakable pride.

The door opened and closed. A single shrill cry came from Takiguri on the front yard, followed by the sound of flapping wings. Amayori’s voice, nasal from her reluctance to part with her brother, pricked Alice’s breast.

Though the strong flapping vanished into the distance before long, Alice continued sitting without stirring.

Right before the life of the glasses made from crystal elements expired, she gently lifted one to her lips with her fingertips.

The first wine she tasted in this half year left an aftertaste more bitter and sour than sweet on her tongue. The two empty glasses scattered into pale light as they disintegrated seconds later.

She pushed the cork back into the bottle, yet to be emptied, and stood up. Moving to the stove, she called out towards Kirito who still sat in silence.

“...I am sorry, you must be tired. It is long past the usual bedtime, after all. Now, let us go to bed.”

Gently tapping his shoulders with her hands to make him stand, she then guided him to the connecting bedroom. She changed his black robe to his undyed sleepwear before laying him on the bed at the window.

Even upon bringing up the folded blanket at her feet and covering him up to his neck with it, Kirito’s eyes remained half-open, still staring at the ceiling unblinkingly.

The room was filled with a pale blue darkness after she blew out the lamp on the wall. She sat down beside Kirito and softly caressed his emaciated chest and bony shoulders for several minutes; his eyelids fell only then, as though some source of power he had was cut off.

She waited until the sleeping Kirito’s breathing stabilized before leaving the bed and changing into white sleepwear herself. Returning to the living room, she checked on Amayori from the window, then extinguished the two lamps and went back to the bedroom.

She lifted the blanket on the bed and slipped in beside Kirito as his faint warmth enveloped her body.

Though closing her eye would have usually allowed her to flee into her sleep without delay, her drowsiness seemed mostly absent today.

The blinding white of the mantle whipping on Eldrie's back as he left remained imprinted on the insides of her eyelids, stinging her eyes.

That same pride should have filled her own back in those days. That unshakable resolve surging through her body as energy for protecting the Human World, its inhabitants, and the Axiom Church's authority with her sword.

However, every last drop of that strength had left her.

She had a question for Eldrie—for her former disciple. Exactly what do you fight for, now that both the church and the highest minister have been exposed as falsehoods?

But she could not ask. None of the integrity knights were informed of the entirety of the highest minister's horrifying scheme aside from Bercouli and herself. Not even Eldrie knew the fact that his «memory fragment» and his «most beloved person», reduced to a part of the sword golem, remained on the sealed highest floor.

As such, he still believed in the concept of the Axiom Church. He still waits, expectantly, for the day the three goddesses would send a new highest minister to the cathedral to bestow their infallible guidance.

But what should she do, as one aware that the goddesses and the Celestial World were both great lies?

It was perfectly understandable, but Knight Commander Bercouli had to hide half of the truths from the knights to have them prepare for the incoming war. The hesitation currently in her breast would certainly infect the other knights if she was in their presence.

Nobody knew if the Defense Army established in haste could repel the coordinated assault from the darkness forces. If they broke through the Great East Gate, the monsters thirsting for blood would march on to this remote village sooner or later.

Was there no method to avoid that disaster—a certain voice replayed within Alice’s mind every time she pondered that.

The two lines that came from that mysterious crystal plate after the battle with the highest minister, before Kirito collapsed.

—Head for the *World End Altar*.

—Straight south after you exit the eastern large gate.

She had no recollection of this name, «*World End Altar*» in the Sacred Tongue. However, she knew what could be found upon exiting the Great East Gate. The wilderness of the Dark Territory: soil blackened like cinders and skies in the shade of blood reaching out. Neither advance nor escape was easy once one took a step in.

Even if she surmounted the outrageous difficulties to reach the altar, what awaited her there? Was there truly someone—or something—capable of protecting the inhabitants of the Human World from the darkness forces...?

Alice tilted her head atop the pillow and stared at the youth stretched out on the other side of the bed.

Creeping through the blanket, she moved to Kirito’s side. Reaching out her hands after slight hesitation, she clung onto him like a child spooked by a nightmare.

No matter how hard Alice drew his dismally thin body closer, the youth who made her heart waver with intensity on a par with flames showed absolutely no reaction. His pulse continued its sluggish pace; his lowered eyelashes remained utterly motionless. *He... no, that* might no longer be anything more than an empty shell with its soul utterly burnt out.

If her sword was now in her right hand—

She could bring an end to it all, stabbing their two touching hearts as one.

That momentary thought overflowed from Alice's eyes as tears and fell onto Kirito's nape.

"Tell me, Kirito... What should I do..."

No answer for her question came.

"What... should I....."

The moonlight pouring in from a gap in the curtains coalesced and faded within the teardrops ever-increasing.

2

The twenty-second day of the tenth month that came next was the coldest it got throughout that autumn.

Calling off the walk, she spent it together with Kirito by the stove. She intended to make plenty of firewood as the elderly Garitta had taught her to before winter truly arrived, but it appeared there would be no need for that.

After taking the entire day to write a mere two letters on parchment, Alice hesitated for a moment before signing off with *Synthesis Thirty* in Sacred Tongue as well below the Schuberg family name in Common Tongue.

She neatly folded one, put a wrapper on it, and addressed it to Selka. She set it on the table beside the other for the elderly Garitta.

The letters expressed farewells and apologies. She could no longer stay in this house now that Integrity Knight Eldrie knew of it. The next to come would likely be Knight Commander Bercouli himself, rather than Eldrie. Alice had no words she could use against her master in swordsmanship, her benefactor.

Hence, she would leave once more.

A thin, long sigh leaked from Alice before she raised her face and looked at the black-haired youth sitting on the opposite side of the table.

“Hey, Kirito. Where do you wish to go? I heard the highlands in the west are a truly beautiful sight. Or perhaps the jungles in the south? It would be warm year-long and the fruits there seem plentiful.”

Despite the bright voice she deliberately used, Kirito showed no response as always.

His empty eyes stayed glued to the tabletop. Her heart hurt upon thinking how she had to drag this injured youth from stability again. Still, even so, she could not possibly leave him in Rulid. Alice could not force such a task on Selka who was a sister apprentice, neither did she desire to. Caring for Kirito was the one and only reason Alice found to continue living.

“...I know, let us leave our destination to Amayori. You should go to bed soon, we will have to wake early tomorrow.”

Alice changed Kirito, put him to bed, then changed into her own sleepwear, and extinguished the light before slipping under the blanket.

Her ears focused on Kirito’s breathing by her side in the darkness. She gently shifted herself after he completely fell asleep.

Laying her head on Kirito’s bony chest, steady beating reached her ear pressing against it.

Kirito’s heart was no longer here. These heart beats, too, were no more than echoes from the past. Alice came to think so through the months she spent sleeping aside him each night. However, she still believed there was something remaining deep within each beat that echoed out.

If Kirito currently lost only his means of expressing himself yet retained his ability to think, what could she say to excuse this behavior of hers? Alice sank into the shallow abyss of sleep as a mild smile formed as she pondered.

Startling, weak shaking came from the body against hers.

She somehow managed to lift her heavy eyelids. She turned her left eye towards the window in the east, but the sky visible in the gap between the curtains was still pitch dark. Her sleep lasted two, three hours at most by her intuition.

Alice whispered to Kirito whose body stiffly trembled once again.

“It is still night... go to sleep for a little longer...”

She moved her eyelids back down and thought to rub Kirito’s chest until he went back to sleep. However, Alice finally noticed the youth’s abnormal behavior as his soft voice reached her ears.

“Ah... aah...”

“Kirito...?”

Kirito, in his current state, possessed no extraneous needs. He should not awake due to the cold, his thirst, or any such thing. And yet, the youth’s trembling grew stronger while his legs moved as though to leave the bed.

“Is something the matter...?”

Alice quickly brought herself up, wondering if he had, by some chance, regained his consciousness, and generated a single luminous element as even the time required to light the lamp seemed too precious.

She breathed out a disappointed sigh as she saw only that usual hollow darkness within Kirito’s eyes that showed up in the faint white light. But, then, what had—

The sound that reached Alice’s ears this time came from outside the window.

“Kururu, kurururuu!”

Cries came from Amayori, who should have been sleeping in a corner of the vacant land - sharp, shrill reverberations as though advising her master to stay vigilant.

Leaping to the floor, Alice ran to the living room from the bedroom and forced open the entrance door. The cold night air immediately blew in. A strange smell was mixed into the wind that normally smelled only of the forest. It seemed to prick into the depths of her nose; the stench of something burnt—

Alice jumped down onto the front yard still barefooted. She drew a sharp breath the moment she turned about, scanning through the night sky.

The skies to the west were aflame.

The ominous vermillion glow was unmistakably reflected from some humongous inferno. She focused her eye and spotted numerous trails of black smoke across the starry sky.

—A bushfire!?

She retracted that thought an instant after it came to her. Aboard the burnt, pungent wind faintly reaching her was the noise of metallic clangs—and a clamor of screams.

An enemy assault.

The Dark Territory forces were attacking Rulid Village.

“...Selka!!”

A hoarse cry escaped from Alice and she dashed back to the house. However, she stood petrified just as she got on the porch.

She had to save her little sister and parents.

But, what about the other villagers?

If she tried her best to save everyone, she would need to fight the forces of darkness head-on. But did the strength to do so still remain in her current self?

The source of Alice the integrity knight was her almost blind loyalty for the Axiom Church and the Highest Minister. Now that she lost that faith along with her right eye, could she truly swing the Fragrant Olive Sword and use her sacred arts?

Standing frozen, Alice’s ears—

Picked up a *gatan*, from within the cabin.

Her left eye flashed wide open. A chair fell over in the middle of the dim living room and beside it was a black-haired youth crawling on the floor.

“...Kirito...”

Alice moved her paralyzed legs and entered the cabin.

The light of determination was absent as usual from Kirito’s eyes. That said, the motive for his sluggish movement was evident. His one, extended arm reached out straight towards the three swords hung on the wall.

“Kirito... you...”

Something hot was caught between her chest and throat. It took some time before she noticed what faintly warped her sight were tears.

“...Ah... aah...”

Kirito’s frame moved without pause as his hoarse voice escaped, desperately approaching the swords. Alice swiped at her eyes, then ran straight to the youth and raised his frail body up from the floor.

“Everything will be fine, I will go. I will save the villagers. So please settle down and wait for me here.”

Quickly whispering so, Alice drew Kirito into a tight hug.

Thump. Thump. The reverberations of his heart beats reached her from their touching chests.

A persistent willpower definitely lurked in those beats even with his heart closed off. Even as indistinct embers, they still transmitted distinct warmth to Alice’s body.

Alice pressed their cheeks together tightly before gently bringing him up and sitting him on a chair.

“I will be back immediately after saving them.”

She spoke again, and then first took her armor and sword belt out from the closet where they were this whole time before equipping them atop her sleepwear. Rushing over the eastern wall next, she grasped her beloved sword without hesitation.

The Fragrant Olive Sword weighed down her two hands as they held it for the first time in half a year. Attaching its scabbard’s metal clasp onto her sword belt, she threw an overcoat on while sticking her feet into boots, then ran down onto the front yard again.

“Amayori!!”

A gigantic silhouette flew out at once, lowering her head, after she called out towards the bed in the east.

Alice commanded in a keen voice after leaping onto the base of her long neck.

“Go!!”

Her pair of silver wings beat loudly and the flying dragon lifted straight off into the night sky after a short ground run.

She could clearly see the catastrophe in Rulid after gaining a little altitude. The grandly rising flames were mainly from the village’s north end. The aggressors likely did come from the Dark Territory through the mountain range at the edge after all.

Eldrie had said that there were no abnormalities at the «North Cave», blocked on Bercouli’s orders, last night. The numbers required to be mobilized for removing all that rubble in a single day definitely exceeded a mere ten or twenty.

It seemed small units had been sneaking in via the three caves through the mountain range at the edge under the cover of night to commit evil deeds since times long past.

Kirito and Eugeo had claimed that they fought a group of goblins in the northern cave before they arrived at the central capital too. However, she had never heard of an attack this extensive yet bold. The whole of the land of darkness might truly be thinking that the time is ripe for an all-out assault on the Human World.

Amayori flew over the dense forest in a single go and arrived at the skies over the wheat fields at Rulid's outskirts even as such thoughts went through Alice's mind.

She had no reins, but she still conveyed her instructions to hover by lightly tapping the dragon's nape.

Alice leaned forward and focused her eye on the village's state. The main street crossing from south to north shone red with flames on its northern end and she could spot the distinct shadows of the advancing attackers. The nimble goblins dashed as though they were leaping forward. The large orcs, too, advanced with a short distance from them.

An impromptu blockade was built from furniture and lumber piled up immediately north of the central plaza, but the goblin vanguards had already reached there and their drawn swords flickering in the light struck as one to pass the obstacle.

The ones fighting back were of the village's guard corps. However, they were likely surpassed by even the goblins: be it in numbers, in equipment, or in experience. At this rate, it would take but a brief moment before the orc unit, causing tremors as they approached from behind, pulverized them.

Holding back her desire to dive into the midst of that battle this very moment, she continued checking the situation.

Flames rose all about the eastern and western sides of the village as well. It seemed to have yet suffer damage from the plaza to the south, however. Aside from the guards, the other villagers—including Selka, of course—must have fled from the south gate and evacuated to the forest.

Alice focused her eye on the plaza once more with that thought in mind and could not help but to let out her voice.

“Why...!?”

There were countless silhouettes sticking close to the central fountain, surrounding it in the circular plaza before the church. It escaped her immediate notice as there were far too many of them. Nearly the whole of Rulid’s inhabitants must have been gathered there.

Why did they not escape from the village?

The guards would certainly be crushed in no time when the attackers’ main force reaches the blockade. Unless they begin moving straight away, it would be too late to evacuate.

Alice tapped the flying dragon’s neck again and shouted out a line after moving right above the plaza.

“Amayori, standby here until I call!”

And she jumped from the height of several tens of mel without the slightest hesitation. The hem of her overcoat blew violently as she fell, slicing through the cold night air.

The villagers, numbering an overwhelming three hundred, who huddled in a circle might have been prepared to put up a fight as there were men positioned on the edge carrying farm implements such as spades and scythes. Alice landed right beside two men who shot off orders from the side.

The stone paving cracked in a radial pattern with a thunderous roar. An intense shock ran from the sole of her feet to her head and her Life probably fell somewhat, but that was as far as it went.

The two men—the wealthy farmer, Nygr Barbossa, and Rulid Village’s chief, Gasupht—had their words scared out of them by the silhouette suddenly falling from above.

Though Alice felt her breath momentarily stop upon seeing her father's face, she recovered quick enough to take advantage of the silence she caused and shouted out.

“You will not be able to hold them back here! Evacuate all of the villagers through the southern road at once!!”

The shock grew on the men's faces as they heard Alice's instructions.

But what came out from Nygr's mouth after he came to his senses was a throaty, harsh voice.

“Don't be stupid! How can we run away and abandon my mansion... this village?!!”

Alice refuted the wealthy farmer, veins popping from his brow, in a sharp tone.

“You can still escape from the goblins' reach now! What is more important, your assets or your life?!”

Replacing Nygr who could grunt in reply, Gasupht the village chief let out his voice, deep and tense.

“Fortifying our defenses in a circular formation was the instruction from the guards' chief, Jink. Even I, the village chief, have to abide by his orders in such a situation. That is the empire's law.”

Alice was the one who went speechless this time.

During emergencies, the one who acceded to the sacred task of the guard chief gains a temporary authority to command all residents of a village or town in place of its leader. That provision certainly existed on the empire law of Norlangarth North Empire.

However, the guard chief named Jink was a youngling who only recently inherited his sacred task from his father.

It was doubtful he could maintain his composure and assume command under such abnormal circumstances. The pronounced anxiety on Gasupht's face showed that he, too, thought so inside.

That said, the empire's laws were absolute to the villagers. She could only have Jink, commanding the defensive line fighting at the north side of the plaza, pull back and change his orders to start the evacuation at once, but there was clearly insufficient time.

What? What could she—

The cry of a young yet resolute voice reached Alice's ears then, as she stood frozen.

“Let's do as big sister says, father!!”

Looking back forward with a gasp, she saw a short sister healing the burnt villagers with sacred arts.

“...Selka!”

Thank goddess, she was fine; Alice took a step forward towards her beloved little sister, but Selka stood up and weaved through the crowd to the trio.

After showing a brief smile towards Alice, Selka's facial expressions immediately tensed up as she spoke to Gasupht.

“Father, have big sister ever been wrong even once? No, even I can tell. At this rate, everyone will die!”

“But... but still...”

Gasupht stammered with a bitter expression. His moustache, stained with white, quivered slightly and his sight wandered futilely through empty space.

Taking the place of the village chief who went speechless, Nygr Barbossa erupted once more in anger.

“This is no place for a child to meddle!! We will protect this village!!”

His two bloodshot eyes stared at the Barbossas’ mansion built near the plaza. What was on Nygr’s mind was unmistakably the mass of wheat just harvested in autumn and the gold coins hoarded over many years.

Returning his sight towards Alice and Selka, the farmer, naturally enough, yelled out shrilly.

“Yes... yes, I’ve got it! You are the one who invited those beasts from the land of darkness to this village, aren’t you, Alice?!! You were defiled by the darkness’s power when you crossed the mountain range at the edge in the past!! You witch... this girl must be a terrible witch!!”

Alice lost her words, jabbed by that fat finger. The clamor from the villagers, the clashes between weapons resounding from the defense line, and the war cries from the monsters closing in from the north all felt far away.

Since she began living in the village’s outskirts, Alice had countlessly fell the forest’s gigantic trees on Nygr’s request. This man had practically writhed to thank her each time. And yet, he could still spew those words as his family’s fortunes occupied his entire time; how could—

Alice averted her eye from the middle-aged man with an expression much like the evil countenance of the orcs and murmured inside.

—How about you deal with it on your own?

—I will simply do as I like. I will take Selka, the elderly Garitta, my parents, and Kirito away from this village and search for a new home somewhere far away.

She grinded her teeth audibly; she lowered her eyelids.

Her stream of thoughts put forth an opposing view.

—But the foolishness Nygr Barbossa and the other villagers displays was created by the rule by the Axiom Church over hundreds of years.

The masses were bound by countless principles and laws under the Taboo Index and while they were granted a tepid peace, something important was steadily stolen from them.

That would be their ability to think, and to fight.

Where had that imperceptible power, plundered from the masses over endless years and months, accumulated?

Within the integrity knights who numbered merely thirty-one.

After she took in a deep breath and let it out, the force Alice's left eye flashed open with practically made a noise.

Nygr's face abruptly turned pale, as if from fright, in her sight.

In contrast, Alice felt a mysterious energy overflowing from within. A power like a flame burning blue-white, quiet yet hotter than all other. The power that she thought lost at the end of that battle on the cathedral's highest floor—one that led Kirito, Eugeo, and Alice to face off the Human World's mightiest ruler.

Alice took in a deep breath and announced.

“...I will revoke Guard Chief Jink's order. I shall have every villager gathered in this plaza retreat to the southern forest with those bearing arms at in front.”

Her tone was gentle, but Nygr's upper body bent back as though hit by some unseen hand. Nonetheless, one could still say his courage was admirable with how he still replied in a quivering tone.

“By... by what right can a girl who was drove away-”

“The authority of a knight.”

“Wha... what knight!? This village has no such sacred task! Even if you can swinging a sword around a little, do you know what will happen should the esteemed knights in the capital hear about you just claiming to be one...?”

Alice gave Nygr, frothing as he continued screaming, a firm look as she gripped her overcoat at her right shoulder with her left hand.

“I am... My name is Alice. Third among the Axiom Church’s integrity knights, overseeing the Centoria City Region, Alice Synthesis Thirty!!”

She tore the overcoat from herself as she loudly announced her name.

The moment the thick cloth her entire frame was clad in was taken off, her golden armor and Fragrant Olive Sword gleamed brightly as they reflected the blazing flames.

“Wha... an, an i-integrity knight...!?”

Nygr fell on his rear while looking upwards as a voice, now completely shrill, leaked from him. Gasupht’s eyes opened wide as well.

Alice’s proclamation of her name could not have been a lie. After all, there could not be any in this world who could pass themselves off as an integrity knight—none who could disobey the authority of the Axiom Church. Kirito and Alice were probably the only two capable of doing so, but it was not as if Alice abandoned her sword, the proof of her knighthood, even after escaping here from the central capital.

The villagers making a din around, too, fell silent. The swords clashing at the defense line in the north as well as the war cries of the guards and goblins, too, felt far away.

What broke that silence first was a whisper from Selka.

“Big... sister...?”

Turning her left eye towards her little sister who had her two hands grasped together before her chest, Alice smiled gently.

“I am sorry for keeping it from you all this time, Selka. This is the real punishment given to me. And—my real duty.”

Tear droplets appeared from Selka’s eyes upon hearing those words.

“Big sister... I.... I always believed in you. That you were never a criminal. You are beautiful... so, very...”

The next to act was Gasupht.

Kneeling down on the stone paving with a firm noise, the village chief shouted with a strained voice while looking downwards.

“Your will shall be done, esteemed integrity knight!!”

Quickly getting up, he turned back to the villagers behind and issued clear instructions.

“Everyone, stand!! Those bearing arms shall lead the way, run to the south gate!! Once you are out of the village, escape to the forest south of the cleared land!!”

An uneasy stir ran through the villagers standing stiffly. But that, too, lasted but a brief moment. The villagers had no option to resist orders from the village chief in the first place; all the more so when it was the will of an integrity knight.

The muscular peasants fortifying the surrounding stood up and urged the women, children, and elderly to stand as well. Alice called to Gasupht who joined in at the head of the pack to stop and spoke in a hushed voice.

“Father, please take care of everyone... of Selka and mother.”

Gasupht's stern expression quavered for a mere instant and he gave a terse reply.

".....Do take care of yourself too, esteemed knight."

This father would likely never ever call Alice his daughter again. That, too, was part of her payment for the power she was granted. Carving that into her heart, Alice pushed Selka's back and made her go along with Gasupht.

"Big sister... don't work yourself too hard, please."

Alice smiled as she nodded to her little sister whose eyes were still watery, and then turned towards the north. The villagers moved off as one behind her.

"Ah... aah... m-my mansion..."

That pathetic moan came from Nygr Barbossa whose rear was still on the ground. His gaze flickered between the villagers running off and his mansion where the flames were closing in towards. Deciding to leave him alone, she focused on the overall state of the village.

She did succeed in setting the villagers into action, but they still numbered three hundred. It would take time for them all to escape from the village. But the defense line was reaching the end of its rope and besides, the enemy's footsteps approached from the east and west too.

A young man's shout, much like a scream, rang out from the north side of the plaza then.

"We can't hold on any longer! Retreat! Retrea—at!!"

The voice belonged to Guard Chief Jink. Nygr stood up upon hearing that, as though revitalized, and flared up Alice.

"Look... just look at that! We should have stayed in the plaza and defended! We will get killed! They will murder all of us!!"

Alice shrugged her shoulder and refuted calmly.

“No need to worry; there is all this space. I will hold them back here.”

“As if you can! You can’t possibly do it, not a chance! Even if... even if you are really an integrity knight, what can you do alone against so many of those demons?!!”

Nygr still continued crying out despite the goblins’ horrifying silhouettes already pressing in from the east and west. Ignoring him yet again, Alice glanced behind. The last of the villagers were still in the plaza, though enough of a distance from Alice and the rest in the center.

Alice gripped Nygr firmly from his nape and pushed him towards the south. That hand thrust straight into the night sky and she called her beloved dragon’s name out loud.

“Amayori!”

A mighty roar immediately returned from the skies. Swinging her raised right hand down from the west to the east, she then shouted.

“—Burn them to ashes!!”

The noise of flapping wings poured down like a storm and Nygr, standing still, along with the grotesque demi-humans charging into the plaza—the goblins—looked straight up at the same time.

The gigantic flying dragon diving through the skies, dyed red by flames, opened its jaw wide. A bluish-white gleam flickered from deep in its throat—

Shubaa!!

That resounded as a glaring light came forth.

The heat ray that made contact with the west streets mowed down the east streets as well, cutting through before Alice and Barbossa's eyes as they stood on the southern side of the plaza.

Time stopped briefly.

Terrible flames swelled up along a line and freed themselves into the night skies. The goblins swallowed up were blasted up high with shrill screams.

The heat ray that instantaneously slaughtered over twenty of the aggressors while vaporizing the fountain in the middle of the plaza and thick white smoke rolled out into the surroundings. Amayori flew off, skimming atop it, and Alice called out instructions to standby before glancing her eye behind.

Nygr collapsed back onto the stove paving, perhaps due to the strength in his waist leaving him, with his two eyes peeled.

“Wha... whaa... a.... a, a d-dragon...!?”

Alice was wondering what happened to the middle-aged man whose slackened cheeks went into spasm before desperate footsteps approached from beyond the hanging steam. The ones who appeared, all clad in leather armor, were the men from Rulid's guard corps. The decision to beat a hasty retreat was a good call as their condition showed; despite suffering slight wounds, none were hurt badly among the several tens of guards.



Alice stared at the demi-humans as she placed her right hand on her cherished sword's grip. Flying dragons could not fire their heat rays in succession. Alice had to face the enemy on her own until Amayori stockpiled the thermal elements within herself again.

One of the goblins noticed Alice who was clad in golden armor, and the colors of bloodthirstiness and lust welled up in his eyes shining golden as he cried out.

“Gihii!! A ium giirl! Kill heer! Kill her and eat heer!!”

Quietly taking on the demi-human who charged straight towards her while brandishing a machete with his abnormally long arm, Alice murmured deep in her chest.

—What a terrible power I was given. My very existence is practically a sin.

This body of an integrity knight.

“Gyaa——!!”

The heavy machete swung down as he leapt and was caught by Alice who carelessly extended her left hand. Though she felt an immense impact through her naked palm, it neither broke her bones nor tore her skin. Gripping the blunt blade with her five fingers, she crushed it as though it was nothing more than thin ice.

Even before the metallic fragments, broken and scattered far too easily, fell to the ground, the Fragrant Olive Sword was already drawn by her right hand and tore a horizontal line through the goblin's torso.

The bright golden air from the sword swept in three goblins approaching from behind and blew away the cluster of dense vapor as well in no time at all.

The four enemy soldiers' golden eyeballs were peeled open, as though unaware of what had occurred, while their upper body left their lower body before they could let out a single word, collapsing haphazardly onto the ground.

Avoiding the blood that shot up a moment later, she muttered to herself within once more.

—Highest Minister Administrator. You were wrong, after all.

—You collected all this power into merely thirty integrity knights and made them puppets without a will of their own. You thought to grasp all of the power that should had been split between the masses of the Human World through that. However, this far too ill-distributed strength served only to delude and mislead both its owners and those around them. Like how you were swallowed by that overwhelming might and lost your humanity...

That mistake was now beyond redemption with the loss of the highest minister.

Thus, at the very least, she had to expend every last drop of this strength for the masses.

Not as an integrity knight of the Axiom Church, but as a single swordswoman; she had to think on her own and fight on her own will. Like how those two brave swordsmen did.

Her left eye was shut throughout that swing; Alice opened it with resolve.

At the same time, the defense line hastily built at the plaza's north was smashed into small pieces from the other side.

The invaders' main unit charged in as though to bury the wide main streets. The goblins numbered over fifty and were accompanied, though in lesser numbers, by orcs whose giant, plump frames were covered in thick iron armor, each with a trident in a hand.

Upon seeing them whose golden eyes gleamed, aflame, and roars filled with hate and desire, moans of despair leaked from Jink, the other guards, and Nygr Barbossa.

But Alice's heart was at ease.

She relied not on the talent for battle she obtained as an integrity knight. Not even a knight could escape with light wounds if they were to surround by such numbers and stabbed by their spears.

What gave Alice strength was a new realization.

—I will fight for what I, myself, seek for from now on. I will fight to protect my little sister and my parents, along with the people of the Human World who Kirito and Eugeo hoped to protect.

Alice vividly felt the remaining doubts about herself and her sense of futility disappear into a white light deep in her heart. That light surged through her, finally accumulating at her right eye, covered by that black patch, and generating an intense heat.

“.....!”

She clenched her teeth as she withstood a fierce pain that shot to her eye socket from the back of her head. But that pain somehow nostalgic, or heartrending. Alice gripped the bandage across her head with her left hand and took it off all at once.

Her right eyelid that had been closed since that day nearly half a year ago opened slowly. A red light expanded from the center of her dark vision and eventually turned into flicking flames. Visions of houses lit aflame overlapped and gradually closed in on each other—finally finishing as one.

Alice looked at the black cloth held in her left hand with both eyes.

Kirito made the eye patch, discolored from being washed many times, by tearing it from his clothes.

The cloth that protected her for months ever since her right eye shot away along with that seal might have finally reached the end of its life here as it began to disappear from its edges as melting into the air. Alice came to a realization while staring at that fleeting, beautiful sight.

She thought she was looking after Kirito who had lost his right arm and heart through this half-year. However, she was actually the one protected instead.

“...Thank you, Kirito.”

Pressing the black cloth to her lips immediately before it utterly vanished, she whispered softly.

“...I am fine now. I will likely still be at a loss, worry, and lose heart in the future... but I will go on. For us both to achieve our goal.”

Her head flipped up just as the cloth disintegrated.

Her two eyes gazed at the distinct sight of nearly a hundred goblins and orcs letting out a multitude of roars as they flooded forward. The fleeing footsteps from the guards and Nygr Barbossa echoed from behind.

There was no fear in Alice's heart as she faced the enemy army on her own.

Breathing the burnt stench deeply, she yelled.

“—I am a knight of the Human World, Alice!! None of the blood or slaughter you seek shall happen while I stand here!! Return to your land through the caves you came from this instant!!”

As though awed by her refined, distinct shout, the goblins running at the head slackened slightly. However, a large orc in the middle of the group, possibly the general, immediately brandished his two-handed axe with a brutal roar.

“Graaahh!! «Cut-Feet Moricca» here will have that one little white girl on her knees before long!!”

The voice gave strength to the goblins. Alice put a decent amount of distance between her and the enemy army charging in as a massive black wave—

“Amayori!”

A huge shadow rapidly dived from the skies the moment she called out that name. Though the thermal elements accumulated were not enough for firing the heat ray yet, the flying dragon intimidated the demi-humans with her body and thunderous call while savagely skimming past their heads. The anxiety of the astonished enemy army rose beyond earlier.

Not letting that chance escape, Alice raised the Fragrant Olive Sword held in her right up high and shouted.

“—*Enhance armament!!*”

It was half a year since she last chanted those words of the «armament full control art», not to mention how she shortened the main body of the art, but Alice’s beloved sword responded to her will. The golden blade divided into countless small edges with a clear metallic noise and soared into the night sky while reflecting the fires’ glow.

“Rage—flowers!”

The golden storm of flowers fell upon the enemy army with numerous *zaas*.

The first to be wrapped in a spray of blood was the orc general who called himself Moricca. His entire body was stabbed through by many petals, instantly robbing him of his Life, and he fell onto the ground with a tremor. The orcs around him, too, bent down onto the ground with screams one after another.

The Fragrant Olive Sword was a sacred tool among sacred tools with the world's oldest tree rooted to the core of the Human World before the world began as its source. As its alternate name, «Eternal Immortality», implied, even when divided into hundreds of flower petals through its armament full control art, each held a priority on par with famous swords forged by artisans. Coarse cast iron armor could not possibly defend against them.

The invaders became restless at losing their main force, including their general, in an instant. The charge's momentum weakened before long and came to a stop around ten meters from the plaza.

Alice sharply swung her right hand that held her sword's grip at the goblins lined up at the front, lost at whether to obey their greed or fear. The hundreds of petals danced through the air with light *zaas*, forming dense vertical stripes between Alice and the enemy army.

Alice gave a subdued proclamation while gazing at the demi-humans through the fence gleaming golden.

“This is the wall dividing the Human World and the Land of Darkness. Even if you dig through the caves, you will not defile this earth as long as we knights live. Choose—to advance and fall into a sea of blood, or to retreat and flee back to the Land of Darkness!!”

Not even five seconds passed before the goblin vanguards turned back with great force.

3

A vibrant ensemble of hammers whirled up into the clear, blue winter sky.

Alice lifted her hand to her brow and looked at circular Rulid Village towering beyond the wheat fields.

Today marked a quick one week since the army of darkness's assault.

Many of the houses built in the north of the village were burnt down, but with the village chief's decision to put nearly every villager's sacred task on hold to work on that, the progress of their reconstruction was rapid. Twenty-one of them had unfortunately escaped too late and lost their lives, and a joint funeral service was held for them at the church three days earlier.

After attending the service as she was requested to, Alice rode her flying dragon to the northern cave to confirm its status.

The long cave that should had been collapsed on Bercouli's orders was dug out to such an extent that even the orcs' giant frames could easily pass through and the area closest to the Dark Territory showed signs they camped over many nights.

The attackers did not hollow out the cave in a single night. They must have repeatedly collapsed the entrance after sending into a party of combat engineers from the Dark Territory. Thus, there would have already been a concealed group of goblins within, steadily working at it, when Integrity Knight Eldrie checked the entrance.

Care and wariness unbelievable from the goblins and orcs of old. This invasion could be surmised to be no mere reconnaissance, like those done many times before, by that alone.

Instead of collapsing the cave once again, Alice dammed the small river flowing from middle which previously served as a white dragon's nest for a time and completely flooded the interior of the cave. Next unleashing the countless cryogenic elements she generated beforehand, she sealed the cave with ice rather than stone.

Now, no one could pass the cave without an art user on par with Alice generating thermal elements to melt the ice.

Taking her sight off Rulid Village and the white mountain range at the edge rising beyond it, Alice fastened the last bag of her belongings to Amayori's left leg.

"Erm... big sister."

Selka, who had been helping out with her preparations for departure with an adamant smile so far, opened her mouth while looking downwards.

"...Father actually wanted to see you off too. He was all absent-minded since today morning, you know? ...I believe he must have been glad inside that you came back, big sister. I want you to believe in that at least."

"I know, Selka."

Alice hugged her little sister's petite body and whispered in return.

"I left this village as a heinous criminal and returned as an integrity knight. But next time... when I am done with all my duties, I will be back as simply Alice Schuberg. That would be when I truly can say this. *I am back, father.*"

"...Okay. That day will come for sure, right?"

Selka murmured with a watery voice, raised her face, and then wiped it with the cuff of her apprentice clothes.

Turning about, she called out to the black-haired young man sitting on a wheelchair by the side with as cheery a voice as she could muster.

“You stay well too, Kirito. Hurry up and recover and help big sister out, you hear me?”

Holding his lowered head with both hands, the sister, young in terms of age, drew a charm of blessing before she took several steps back.

Alice approached Kirito, then gently took the two swords from under his arm and stored them in the bag placed on the saddle on Amayori. Following that, she lifted Kirito, who had grown thin, easily and sat him down on the front part of the saddle.

She did ponder leaving Kirito in the village under Selka’s care. After all, if they were to proceed to the Great East Gate which would likely become the decisive battlegrounds against the forces of darkness, Alice would be occupied as a member of the Human World Defense Army and unable to attend to Kirito throughout the day like what she had been doing.

But still, she decided to bring him along.

Kirito definitely tried to take up his sword and head for the village on the night of the attack a week ago. The will to fight for another still remained within Kirito. Thus, the battlegrounds to protect the Human World could be where best to find the means to regain his former spirit.

Should the need arise, she would protect him even if it required her to strap him to her back with leather.

Alice gave her little sister whom she held dear one last firm embrace.

“...I will be going, then, Selka.”

“Yes. Take care... and be sure to come back, big sister.”

“I promise. ...Please give my regards to Garitta-san too. ...Stay well and focus on your studies.”

“I know. I’ll become a fine sister for sure... and one day, I’ll also...”

Selka trailed off there and showed a disheveled, tearful smile.

Gently stroking her little sister’s head before releasing her, Alice endured her reluctance to leave as she walked to her beloved dragon and rode immediately behind where Kirito sat on the saddle.

She nodded to her little sister on the ground and faced the blue skies.

The reins lightly rang out and the dragon began her ground run between the wheat fields with strength that showed no sign of the two humans and three swords weighing her down.

She would definitely return to this village one day.

Even if she were to fall on the battlefield, her spirit would still return; it surely would.

Alice shook off a drop of tear in her eyelashes and yelled out in a crisp voice.

“...Hah!”

Softly.

The sensation of floating came as they left the ground.

Having grasped an updraft, Amayori circled as she dashed into the sky.

The vast fields and forests; Rulid Village in their middle with a brand new roof gleaming at its core; Selka waving both hands as she earnestly ran; she burnt the sight of them all into her eyelids—

Alice had the flying dragon turn its head towards the eastern skies.

Chapter 16

Ocean Turtle Raid

July AD 2026

1

The many events that conspired in these two hours were beyond the expectations of even the self-proclaimed genius of the finest caliber, Higa Takeru.

However, the developments before Higa's eyes this moment surprised him far more than any of those earlier.

A delicate girl of approximately eighteen or nineteen held up a man who had fifteen centimeters on her by the nape of his neck with her slender right arm. His gaudy-patterned Hawaiian shirt was strained to the edge of tearing and the heels of his sandals were off the ground.

Staring at Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka Seijirou with her two blazing eyes, Yuuki Asuna shot off words, sharp as blades, from those lovely lips.

“I will never forgive you if Kirito-kun remains unconscious.”

Higa could not see Kikuoka's expression beyond his black-rimmed glasses gleaming from the lights from the ceiling. However, the Self-Defense Force executive who should have black belts in both judo and kendo seemed overpowered by Asuna's words, gulping with his hands raised to each side of his face in surrender.

“I understand. I will make it my responsibility to ensure Kirito's recovery.”

The dim sub control room was immersed in still silence.

No one could say a word: not Higa sitting on the chair before the console, or Koujirou Rinko standing beside him, or the various staff members from Rath still in the room. That was how overwhelming the aura let out from the girl, the youngest person in this place, was. I see, she was a «survivor» who returned from a real battlefield, wasn't she; Higa thought so in a corner of his mind.

Asuna eventually opened up her right hand without saying anything. Released, Kikuoka took in a deep breath, almost ready to collapse onto the floor, while Asuna stumbled backwards. Rinko's lab coat fluttered out as she immediately supported her back.

The female physicist, who Higa treated as his senior from that seminar, held Asuna tight in her chest covered by the lab coat and whispered in a firm tone.

“Don't worry. He will be okay. He will come back for sure, back to your side.”

Asuna's expression, as tense as it could be, crumpled upon hearing that.

“.....Yes, he will, won't he? I apologize... for losing myself there.”

Rinko gently wiped away with her fingers the tears from Asuna's eyes that were utterly absent even throughout the assault.

The air that had finally loosened somewhat drew tight once more with the noise as the sliding door was opened manually. The one who rushed in was Lieutenant Nakanishi.

With his white dress shirt stained with sweat and dust, and a large pistol peeking from his shoulder holster, Nakanishi glanced across Rinko and the rest before directing his words towards Kikuoka standing behind.

“Status report! We have confirmed the lockdown of pressure-resistant barrier walls number one and two as well as the evacuation of civilians to the bow block!”

Kikuoka straightened his Hawaiian shirt’s collar before stepping forward and nodded.

“Good work. How long do the barrier walls look like they will hold?”

“Yes... it depends on their equipment, but it will stand up to small arms. It will take eight hours at least even with a tool like a chip saw. Explosives could break through... but it is doubtful they will resort to those. The central barrier wall is right next to the...”

“The light cube cluster, huh.”

Ending his words for him, Kikuoka pushed up the bridge of his spectacles as he sank into a short silence.

He raised his face before long, however, and scanned through the tight subcon space.

“Right, let’s put things in order. Lieutenant Nakanishi, the status on our human casualties, please.”

“Yes. Three researchers from the civilian project team with minor injuries are undergoing treatment in the prow’s sickbay. Among our combatants, there are two with heavy injuries and two with light injuries. They are likewise undergoing treatment, but their injuries appear to be non-fatal. Including the two with light injuries, we have six able to fight.”

“It’s a stroke of luck having no fatalities despite all those shots fired... Next, the status on the hull’s damage.”

“The operation room in the dock at the bottom of the ship is filled with holes. Remote control of its access is likely impossible. Likewise for the route from the dock to main control, but these are, well, mere scratches.

What matters is the break in the electrical line... there is a stable supply of electricity from the auxiliary line, but the propeller will not spin unless we restart the control system.”

“A sea turtle without its fins, huh. And with a shark snapping at its belly, at that.”

“Yes. Blocks one to twelve of the lower shaft were all occupied along with the ship’s bottom dock.”

Vexed, Nakanishi spoke with his brows knitted under his shortcut on his features that spoke of his fortitude. In contrast, Kikuoka combed up his fringe with a slight resemblance to that of a teacher and placed himself on the console by the side before wriggling his geta with his toes.

“So they took everything: the main control room, the first STL room, and even the nuclear reactor, huh. ...So the silver lining’s how their aim isn’t to destroy.”

“Hah... it isn’t?”

“They wouldn’t need such a grand operation to break in with a submarine if they just wanted to sink us; a cruise missile or torpedo would suffice. So the question here is who exactly they are, instead... Higa-kun, any thoughts?”

With his name brought up without warning, Higa blinked several times, and then somehow restarted his mind still reeling with lingering shock.

“Aah, right, well.”

Turning back to the console while joining those meaningless groans, he operated the mouse with his right hand and called out the recordings from the onboard observation cameras onto the front large monitor.

The opened video window was dim and blurred, but upon pausing it at a random spot, he adjusted its brightness and contrast.

What showed up were several silhouettes slouching as they moved through the passage on-board. They were dressed in entirely black combat suits with a helmet and multi-purpose goggles worn on the upper half of their faces and imposing assault rifles in their hands.

“...So, well, as you can see, there aren’t any marks indicating their nationality on their heads or bodies. Guess the color and form of those equipment aren’t from any regular army either. Their rifles look like they’re from Steyr, but there are plenty of those, so... all I can really say is that they probably aren’t Asian, judging from their average figure.”

“In other words, that’s not a special unit belonging to our nation at least. How delightful.”

Kikuoka scratched his chin and voiced out those disturbing words. A sharp glint shone in his usually calm and narrowed eyes as they looked up towards the large monitor.

“And we know one more thing. ...These people are aware of the existence of Project Alicization.”

Higa nodded with that pointed out.

“Well, guess they would. They did break in from the ship’s bottom dock and charge straight up to the main control room without any detours and all. So that would make their aim probably the theft of the STL technology... no, the true bottom-up artificial intelligence, «A. L. I. C. E.».”

Which implies a major information leak over a long period of time. But Higa refrained from voicing that out and held back his urge to check on the expressions on the staff members of Rath in the sub control room as he continued in an optimistic tone.

“Luckily, we locked up the main control room in the nick of time. It’ll be harder to manipulate the Underworld directly with that lock on than even with the console smashed.

They won't be fiddling with the simulation or ejecting the light cube with «Alice»'s fluct light."

"But the same applies to us, doesn't it?"

"Yep, yep. There's no running with admin rights here at this subcon either. Neither the main nor sub will be able to eject «Alice»'s light cube externally. ...But Kikuoka-san, ain't that the same as our win? Those guys won't be getting access to the cluster both physically and digitally, so they're right where we want when reinforcement from the escort Aegis ship rushes in here."

"I fail to see how they are where we want them to be... but there lies the problem."

Kikuoka's stiff expression remained as he questioned Nakanishi.

"How is it, can «Nagato» move?"

"Well... on that issue..."

Nakanishi forced his brawny mouth into giving the answer.

"Nagato was ordered to stay its position by the fleet command in Yokosuka. It appears command had judged that we were taken hostage by the attackers."

"Wha....."

Higa's lower jaw dropped.

"What hostages, weren't all of the crew evacuated to this side of the pressure-resistant barrier walls!?"

A composed reply came from Kikuoka.

"Those men dressed in black must have a connection to the ones above the Self-Defense Force. It was eight in the morning today when Nagato separated from the Ocean Turtle, a whole six hours before their raid.

The order for Nagato to break in will likely only come after they secure «Alice»'s light cube. Naturally, they would have a time limit, but..."

"So that means those guys aren't just a bunch of terrorists, huh. This isn't good... they might notice if they have a specialist with them. That alternate way of retrieving Alice..."

"Acting from within the Underworld, you mean...? They did seize the first STL room and it is possible to execute the ejection procedure from the virtual console set up in the Underworld too..."

"What will happen if that's done?"

Higa gestured as he replied to Koujiro Rinko's query.

"A target cube will be extracted from the light cube cluster in the exact middle of the main shaft and be brought to either control room through the air tubes. That's where the exit is when extracting it."

After pointing at a rectangular hatch located at a corner of the console desk, he turned his sight towards the door installed deeper in the room.

A small metal plate was screwed into the door made from aluminum alloy. The words carved into it were, "Second STL Room".

Beyond that door were two STL—«Soul TransLators». A young man lay in one, watched over by Aki Natsuki, a nurse and a Sergeant first class. Playing a major role since the start of Project Alicization, he, Kirigaya Kazuto, now even had the capability to chart its course.

Turning back, Kikuoka spoke in a serious tone with his arms crossed.

“So our final hope will be in his hands yet again. Higa-kun... what can you say about it, in what state is Kirito-kun?”

Higa turned to look upon hearing faint breaths and his eyes met with Yuuki Asuna’s, staring straight towards him while supported by Rinko.

He was at a loss at how to explain the current situation before the girl, apparently the girlfriend of Kirito, Kirigaya Kazuto. However, a scratchy yet firm voice immediately reached Higa’s ears.

“I am fine. Please tell me the truth.”

Higa nodded after taking in a deep breath and letting it out.

“In a nutshell... he’s just a step away from the very worst he could go, yep... yes.”

Speaking while correcting his tone, Higa moved the mouse once again.

Wiping away the photo of the attackers, he opened another window. What was shown there was a gently wavering three-dimensional rainbow-colored graph.

“This is a visualization of Kirito-kun’s fluct light.”

The whole room stared silently at the screen.

“He was injected with a muscle relaxant in Tokyo a week before and fell into cardiopulmonary arrest. Fortunately, he held on to his life, but a part of his brain was hurt... that was the fluct light network, to be specific. Though the damage would be difficult to treat with existing neurology, there was a chance for recovery by utilizing STL technology. Thus, in order to stimulate the creation of a new network, we attempted the usage of the STL without its limiter to activate Kirito-kun’s fluct light.”

Catching his breath, he picked up a bottle of mineral water and rehydrated himself, parched from the unfamiliar style of speaking.

“It was crucial for him to dive into the Underworld in order to carry out this treatment. After all, the treatment will bear no results unless his fluct light was active like in reality. As such, like when we had him dive from Rath’s branch office in Roppongi, we sealed off Kirito’s memories and unloaded him into a remote region in the Underworld... or at least, we should have. However, though we still do not know exactly why, his memories were not sealed off, probably due to the damage to his fluct light. Kirito-kun was thrown into the Underworld as the real Kirigaya Kazuto-kun. We only found out earlier when we received communication from him inside, but...”

“Wait... wait a moment.”

Rinko was the one who interjected.

“Then Kirigaya-kun has been spending all that time in the accelerated Underworld as himself? How many months... have passed inside...?”

“...Roughly two and a half years.”

Asuna, propped up by Rinko, trembled the moment Higa answered so. It must have been a shock to her, but he believed in her earlier words and continued his explanation.

“Kirito-kun went into contact with the artificial fluct lights of that world for that much time. Probably while knowing those fluct lights will be erased upon the end of the current simulation... That must be why he aimed for the communication console with the real world set up at the heart of the Underworld where the first village was once formed. To request that you preserve all of those fluct lights, Kiku-san.”

Taking a glance to his side, he saw Kikuoka staring at the three-dimensional graph with the light from the screen reflecting off his glasses. He turned back to Rinko and Asuna.

“...He must have gone through a lot. The communication console was taken into the headquarters for the ruling organization, the «Axiom Church», after all. The fluct lights belonging to the church have overwhelming statuses and not at a level Kirito-kun could go against as a normal inhabitant. He would have normally «died» immediately after trespassing into the church and been logged out from the Underworld... —But he made it. I couldn’t confirm the details in the log since we were under attack, but it seemed he had several people helping who were of course, artificial fluct lights, but... in any case, it appeared he had comrades. Most of them died in the battle against the church and as a result, he was suffering badly from self-condemnation when he succeeded in opening that connection to us. To put it in another way, he was attacking his own fluct light. It was at precisely that moment when those guys dressed in black cut the electrical line and made the STL’s output increase for an instant due to the electric current surge from that short. In the end, Kirito-kun’s self-harming urges became reality... and his «sense of self» went into stasis...”

“His sense of self... went into stasis? What does that mean?”

Higa turned back to the console at Rinko’s question.

“...Take a look at this.”

Nimbly tapping on the keyboard, he expanded the image displaying Kirigaya Kazuto’s fluct light activity in real time.

In the core of the irregularly wavering rainbow cloud was a small space of blank darkness, hovering like a dark nebula.

“Unlike the artificial fluct lights in the light cubes, we have yet to fully analyze a living human’s fluct light, but a good part of it has been mapped. What should have originally been in this black hole is what would be the «core»... one’s self-image.”

“Self-image... you mean one’s perception of oneself?”

“Yes. It appears our decisions are guided through binary circuits, of yes or no, going, ‘what would I do in this situation’, in our fluct lights. For example, Rinko-senpai, have you ever ordered seconds in a beef bowl place?”

“...I haven’t.”

“Even when you really think you still want to and could have another?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s the processing result from the self-image circuits in you, Rinko-senpai. Likewise, most decisions will not be realized unless they pass through those circuits. In Kirito-kun’s case, his fluct light is mostly unhurt. However, as those particular circuits are inactive, he can neither handle input from outside nor produce output by his own will. All he can do now... is probably reflexive reactions from his innate memories. On the scale of eating or sleeping.”

“Then... where does that put his consciousness?”

“...Unfortunately...”

Higa paused his words for a moment and continued with his eyes turned downwards.

“He wouldn’t know who he is or what he should do, unable to speak or do anything by his own will... I would believe that would be his current state...”

Silence reigned over the dim space with its solitary rule yet again for the third time.

2

“...Fu...”

The following syllable was erased by the clamor of sturdy combat boots striking the steel plate on the wall.

It appeared putting two, three dents into the wall was insufficient in appeasing Vassago Casals, a member of the assault team, as he stomped with all his strength onto a confectionery pack dropped by some Rath researcher who was in this control room tens of minutes ago before finally ceasing his torrent of expletives.

Combing up his slightly wavy black hair from his Hispanic blood, he clomped over to the front of the console desk and held the man standing there by his collar with a single hand.

“Say that one more time, you bastard.”

Hanging from Vassago’s right arm, flexible as a whip, was a young man who appeared overwhelming skinny in comparison. His blonde hair was cropped short with his skin morbidly white.

Wearing rustic glasses with a metallic frame atop his scrawny cheeks, the man was the only non-combatant in the team. His name was Critter, a hacker consultant from Glowgen Defense Systems’ cyber ^{CYOP} operations department.

As though he was a network criminal with a record, his name was not his actual name, but his handle. But the same likely applies to Vassago. Vassago is one of the seventy-two demons recorded in the grimoire from the medieval times, “Goetia”, said to be the prince of hell. Surely no parents would give their son such a name. He was staff from the CYOP department as well, though his expertise lies in combat rather than computers—in a full-dive environment, of course. Though his history was as dubious as Critter’s, the man excelled in VR battles.

In actual fact—

Aside from Gabriel Miller, the twelve on the Ocean Turtle assault team were all dogs kept through the exchange of new personal references for their shady pasts.

And Critter, one of those dogs, showed no sign of fright even when hoisted by Vassago and audibly chewed on his gum while he replied.

“I will say it as many times as you want. This console is locked down harder than dry shit and the laptop we brought in won’t crack it even after you grow senile and kick the bucket, geddit?”

“Not that, four-eyes! I’m talking how you said it’s our fault that it’s locked with how long we took to break in!!”

Exchanging harsh words in turn, Vassago let out curses from his foul mouth. His wild good looks could land him a career as a model if he desperately put in the effort, but that was just how menacing he would appear when enraged.

“Oh c’mon, I’m just pointing out the truth there, ya know?”

“Rich words coming from someone trembling in the back during the fight, you bastard!”

The other members made no attempt to stop the quarrelling pair as they watched them while sniggering. Spotting an apt time, Gabriel snapped his fingers and drew the pair’s attention.

“Okay, that’s enough, the two of you. We don’t have the time to push the blame. We have to think about our next course of action.”

With that, Vassago who turned his head to look back pouted his lips like some child and spoke.

“But bro, if we don’t drill some discipline into this guy...”

Stop it with that «bro»; he held back those words.

It seemed Vassago called Gabriel bro in recognition of his strength during their one-versus-one VR combat training, but he felt strange discomfort no matter how many times he heard it. Vague human relationships grounded on mere emotions, be it friends or comrades, were beyond his scope of understanding.

At any rate, he would be able to classify all of those human emotions in an orderly manner with the information from the color and form of the «cloud of light» upon obtaining the technology to extract and preserve souls. With that in mind, Gabriel adopted the tone of a leader and instructed the two.

“Listen here, Vassago, Critter. I am satisfied by the team’s work thus far. We did succeed in our first objective, occupying this control room with no casualties aside from a scratch on Gary, after all.”

Upon hearing that, Vassago grudgingly release Critter’s collar and placed his hands on his waist.

“But bro, there’s no point in that with the crucial control system locked. Our final objective, that light cube cluster thing, is beyond that steel wall, right?”

“That is precisely why I said we should be thinking about how to break through that wall.”

“That said, those guys from the JSDF aren’t going to keep quiet forever, ya know? If the pros from the Aegis ship escorting this slow turtle were to break in, we’ll be on the losing side with just us eleven plus that one extra guy.”

As expected as the one Gabriel chose as the vice-commander, Vassago grasped the situation unlike some mere wild dog. Gabriel lightly shrugged his shoulders after some thought.

“It appears our client had a deal with the top brass of the JSDF. The Aegis will not make a move for the twenty-four hours from the start of the operation.”

“...Ooh.”

The thin whistling came from Critter. His pale-grey eyes narrowed beyond those goggles-like glasses.

“That means this operation isn’t some simple robbery... no, no, I suppose it’ll be wise to keep those words to myself, huh.”

“I am of the same mind.”

Nodding with a faint smile, Gabriel scanned through the team once more.

“Right, let’s confirm the situation. It is currently 14:47 JST with forty minutes passed since we broke in. We are now in the Ocean Turtle’s main control room. Though we succeeded in occupying it as per our objective, we failed to secure the researchers from Rath and the system here is locked down as well. Our next objective would be to occupy the sub control room, but... Brig, can we cut through the pressure-resistant barrier doors?”

The giant he called out to sluggishly stepped out from the group and answered.

“It’ll be a little tough. It’s using that newest composite material and the portable cutter we brought in won’t get through it within twenty-four hours.”

“I see Japan’s going strong financially. Hans, how about blowing the barrier wall off with C4?”

The tall member with an orderly-maintained moustache was the one to spread his arms apart without restraint this time round.

“I wouldn’t recommend going down that route at all. The light cube cluster’s holding room is right behind that wall, isn’t it? I can’t give any assurance we can blow that door down without hurting anything inside.”

“Hmm.”

Gabriel crossed his arms and continued his words after a moment of thought.

“...The mission handed to us is to locate and extract a single light cube from all of those and bring it back along with its interface. We already have the cube’s unique ID. In other words, if we could operate the console, it should be a breeze to search through the cubes and eject that one from the cluster. We should have been on the ship back with a beer in hand by now.”

“Geez, it’s all because this bespectacled pile of bones can’t remove one crappy lock despite spouting off lies about hacking into the Department of Defense’s servers.”

“Oh, now that’s a real shocker. I didn’t expect some gamer who had never shot a gun made out of anything but polygons to say that to me.”

Giving just a glare at Vassago and Critter who were about to restart their quarrel, Gabriel stressed his words.

“Do the lot of you want to return empty-handed and get jeered at instead of a bonus?”

“No!!”

The group shouted as one.

“Are the lot of you some dimwits outsmarted by a bunch of half-assed engineers?”

“No!!”

“Then think! Prove that thing on your necks has more than just oatmeal in it!!”

Furtive thoughts went through Gabriel even while he acted out the role of the «tough commander» almost autonomously.

Obtaining the first true artificial intelligence, «Alice», created by humans was Gabriel's greatest goal as one who pursued souls along with the monopolization of the Soul TransLator technology. He planned to deal with the team with that nerve gas he secretly brought and first escape to Australia upon obtaining them both.

However, this operation commissioned by the NSA coincided exactly with Gabriel's objectives up to that phase. With the administrator rights system controls locked away, he had to obtain «Alice»'s light cube through other means.

Alice... «A. L. I. C. E.».

It was the informer within «Rath» who conveyed that codename to Gabriel's client, the NSA.

He was not informed of the rabbit's personal data. However, assuming a significant sum of money was what lured it into betraying the organization and leaking that intelligence, it would likely not expose itself to danger in such a situation.

In other words, he could not expect any further help from the rabbit on the other side of those pressure-resistant barriers. He had to achieve the objective with the current intelligence and equipment within that short time limit.

The time limit—the time limit was the issue.

Gabriel could fully curb those futile emotions, be it impatience or unease, but he could not help but feel a certain pressure as the time limit in twenty-three hours loomed closer.

The NSA agents told Gabriel this when they requested this intelligence theft mission, to be conducted in absolute secrecy.

Rath's activities could heavily influence the vested interests of Japan's defense industry. As such, the higher-ups within the Self-Defense Force held little like for Rath's existence—or rather, some among those would even assertively hinder them.

The younger Self-Defense Force executives with meager political influence made up the foundation of Rath. The NSA had targeted that and arranged a secret arrangement with a certain high official in the Maritime Self-Defense Force through a member of the CIA in the embassy. The Aegis ship, «Nagato», escorting Rath's headquarters, the Ocean Turtle, would prioritize the safety of the hostages and make no move for twenty-four hours from the start of the attack.

However, the Aegis would have to act after that standby period in order to eliminate future issues with the media. If their fully-equipped soldiers were to charge in, Gabriel and the assault team would be easily annihilated due to the difference in numbers and equipment.

He planned to escape alone in a small submarine even if it reached the worst-case scenario. But if he failed to obtain the pivotal light cube, his valiant pursuit of the human soul would be forced to regress to an irredeemable degree.

Gabriel had already laid out detailed plans for his life after this operation.

First, he would escape to Australia with Alice and hide the light cube and the STL technology in his villa on the Sovereign Islands. Returning to San Diego via plane, he would report the failure of the operation to the NSA. Crossing back over to Australia after the heat died down, he would install a STL machine in the large basement in his villa and construct a virtual world designed to his whims.

Alice and Gabriel would be the only inhabitants of that world initially. However, that would be far too lonely. He had to source more material for the purpose of his research on the soul as well.

He would search for young souls overflowing with vigor around Sydney or Cairns, capture them, and extract their souls with the STL before disposing of their unnecessary shells.

Eventually, he hoped to cross the seas for his motherland, America, or the origin of the full-dive technology, Japan, as well.

Gabriel possessed a deep fascination with the unique mentality of those who plays VR games in Japan. Though not all of them, some of those players seemed to treat them as more real than reality and held nothing back in exposing their emotions there. Those strong desires pulsed upon recalling that sniper girl he met in Gun Gale Online even now.

That likely had a relation to the «real virtual world» that once existed in that country for a mere two years. Those youths who experienced a death game endowed with true life and death hacked in by a developer. They, those «survivors», possessed souls compatible with virtual worlds beyond any other.

He wanted them all if possible—especially the souls of those players called the «clearing group»^{Progressers}. He did not know if that sniper girl was one of them, but of course, he still wanted her soul. Light cubes enclosed with them would exude radiance more precious than any jewel.

That ultimate radiance unobtainable by the world's filthy rich even if they laid down bundles of notes, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars. He would line them up in his secret room, let his whims decide which souls to load into his desired worlds, and treat them as he liked.

That was truly marvelous was how he could freely copy and paste those souls extracted from humans and sealed into light cubes. Gabriel could rollback those broken, warped souls and carve them however he wanted. As though cutting them to exhibit their finest radiance like with rough gems.

Gabriel's long journey would have made a full circle back to its origin when he arrives at that point.

To the time he witnessed that exquisite gleam Alicia Klingerman's soul showed under that large tree in the forest.

Those thoughts lasted a sheer instant, but Gabriel lowered his eyelids as his back shivered slightly.

His icy-cold cognition had returned by the time his eyes reopened.

If the souls of various countries' youth were to be the rubies, sapphires, and emeralds surrounding a crown, «Alice» would be the gigantic diamond encrusted at its center. Only Alice, the ultimate soul free from all impurity, sufficed as his eternal partner. He had to find and obtain the girl's light cube at all cost.

However, he could not seize it through physical means without breaking the pressure-resistant door to the light cube cluster's holding room.

Thus, he had no choice but to utilize the system from here. That said, it appeared not even a first-class cybercriminal like Critter could do anything about the lock on the main console.

Gabriel's boots rang out as he stepped behind Critter whose fingers were running over the keyboard.

“How is it?”

His hands raised up high in reply.

“It's hopeless logging in with administrator rights. All we can do is suck on our thumbs while peeking into the fairyland where those fluct lights in the cluster above live.”

Critter moved his fingers and a window opened on the large screen on the opposite wall, displaying a curious sight.

It was far from a «fairyland». A sickly red permeated the air and the ground was as black as fresh asphalt.

Multiple primitive tents sewed together from leather were stood in the middle of the image. Beside them gathered roughly ten strange organisms, short, stout, and bald, who were making a racket for one reason or another.

Though humanoid, they could hardly be mistaken as humans. Their backs were horrendously hunched, their arms were long enough to scrap against the ground, and their bent legs were stumpy in comparison.

“Goblins...?”

Gabriel murmured and Critter spoke cheerfully after a soft whistle.

“Ooh, well-informed, aren’t you, commander. That’s right, they don’t seem like orcs or ogres, so they’re probably goblins.”

“But they look pretty big for those. These must be the hob kinds, hobgoblins.”

Vassago who came closer from the side added his opinion with his hands on his waist. As expected as one with VR combat as his specialization, he apparently had quite some knowledge regarding fantasy RPGs.

The uproar among the ten or so hobgoblins escalated progressively as Gabriel and the others watched on.



The two in the center grabbed onto each other and as they started a rough scuffle, the rest surrounding them raised their hands while screaming.

“...Critter.”

With what seemed like an idea on the verge of taking shape, Gabriel called out to the close-cropped head on the seat.

“Yeah?”

“Are these guys.... these monsters part of the system?”

“Hmm, that seems off. These guys are real humans in a sense. They’re artificial souls loaded into the light cube cluster above... they have fluct lights.”

“Seriously!? What the fuck!”

Vassago immediately leaned forward with a hysterical cry.

“These hobgoblins are humans!? You mean they have souls like us!? Grandma Frisco would keel over this instant if she heard that!!”

He yelled out again while slapping Critter’s close-cropped hair.

“I can’t believe they would be doing such research without regard for God. So that’s how it is, everyone’s some goblin or orc in those light cubes? Even our Alice-chan?”

“Like hell they are.”

Critter corrected Vassago while sweeping away his hand, annoyed.

“Listen, that world those guys from Rath built, the Underworld, is separated into two areas. A bit west from the middle’s the «Human Empire» and normal humans live there. And outside that’s the «Dark Territory» swarming with monsters like these.

Naturally, Alice's somewhere in the Human Empire, but that's ridiculously huge, so there's no way we'll find her while peeking in like this."

"Then it's a piece of cake. Our words will get through if they're humans, right? Then we'll dive into that Human Empire place and just ask those there, 'You know some girl called Alice?' and we'll be done"

"Woah, idiot warning. There's one right here."

"The fuck was that, you bastard!!"

"Come on, it's the Japanese who built the Underworld. Naturally, the words used by «those there» would be Japanese. And what, you can speak Japanese?"

Critter pointed that out with disdain to which Vassago replied with a somewhat crooked smile.

"I can't have you looking down on me now."

In that instant, everyone stared in amazement, not just Critter. Vassago's words were fluent to an extent that shocked even Gabriel.

The Hispanic youth returned to English and continued.

"Communication's no problem at all, ya know? Any other problem, four-eyes-kun?"

"There... There is, of course."

Recovering from his shock, Critter snorted.

"Tens of thousands of people live in the Human Empire. Do you really think you can go up to and ask each and every one of them... all alone....."

It appeared his own words served as inspiration as his frame jolted up upon speaking that far.

Though Vassago cursed with that close-cropped head crashing into his chin, the hacker shouted out without any concern for him.

“Wait. Waitwaitwaitwait. Maybe you won’t have to do it on your own...”

The vague idea in Gabriel’s mind, too, settled into a rough shape upon hearing that.

“...I see. It’s hardly likely that the accounts for logging into the Underworld... would all be some level 1 citizen. Is that it, Critter?”

“Yes. Yess, boss!!”

The keyboard clattered like a percussion instrument and several lists immediately appear on the large monitor as they were scrolled through.

“There should be accounts from all sorts of social classes for Rath’s operators to log into to observe or manage inside. An army officer... no, general. No, no, a noble, noble... or maybe we could even get the emperor himself...”

“Ooh, that sounds cool, huh.”

Vassago spoke, rubbing his split chin.

“In short, I’ll just have to log in as some general or president or bigwig and order everyone as I like, huh. Army, fall in! Right, face! Go find Alice!! Like that?”

“...That good idea just sounds stupid now after those words from you.”

Critter continued scrolling at a tempestuous speed even as he grumbled. However.

The man’s rare complaints came to a stop along with the listing mere seconds later.

“Damn, we’re outta luck, huh. They didn’t just put a password on direct access from here, but to log into the high level accounts too. Unfortunately, it looks like we can’t dive into the Human Empire with anything from a normal citizen’s account.”

“...Hmm...”

The hue of disappointment showed itself clearly on Critter and Vassago’s faces, but Gabriel’s expression remained still as he lightly inclined his head.

The time they had left was certainly not very long.

However, that limit applied only to the real world. Time flowed, compressed to an absurd degree of several hundred times slower than reality, in that other world extending beyond the screen, Under World.

To put it in other words, the remaining twenty-three hours of reprieve they had was equivalent to over a year in the Underworld. With that much time, it was not necessarily impossible to search and secure Alice, as well as eject her into the real world from an information console inside after logging in as a common citizen.

However, that would certainly be tedious. If they had to go to such lengths, would it not be faster to approach the Human Empire from outside it?

“Critter. Are there no high level accounts outside the empire... in the Dark Territory?”

“...Outside? But there’s barely any chance Alice’s out there, no?”

Critter’s fingers flashed fleetingly even as he voiced that doubt.

Looking up at the newly opened window, Gabriel responded.

“Well, that is likely. However, it isn’t impossible to pass through the boundary between the areas, is it? There may be means of crossing that boundary with the rights given to the account.”

“Ooh, that’s bro for you! His mind’s on a whole different level! In other words, it’s that, huh... becoming some boss on the monsters’ side rather than a human general and going on an invasion!? I’ll be even more on board with that!!”

Apparently rather fed up, judging from his tone, Critter poured cold water onto Vassago who was shouting out after a whistle.

“I don’t care how on board you are, but you may have to become some hobgoblin or orc if you’re logging into the Dark Territory. Well, it suits you, though... oh, there, there’s one, look.”

With a loud click from the keys, another two windows appeared.

“Let’s see, there are only two super accounts unlike in the Empire, but... alright, there’s no password on them! Let’s take a look... first we have one with the position of a *dark knight*. Its priority level is... 70! Now this is usable!”

“Ooh, that sounds good! I’ll take that!!”

Ignoring the noisy Vassago, Critter focused the other window.

“And, the other one. ...What’s with this? The position field’s blank and there’s no level shown. All that’s set is the name, huh. This guy’s... how is this read?«*Emperor... Vector*»?”

“Woah, if it says *emperor*, then that’s an emperor, huh. I guess I’ll take...”

Gabriel softly patted Vassago’s shoulder from behind after he started speaking.

“No, I’ll use that.”

“Heh? But bro, you can speak Japanese?”

“Not as well as you, though.”

And Gabriel replied in the Japanese he studied for three years. Though he gave up on reading and writing from the very beginning, he had the confidence he could get through daily conversations without issue.

“As expected, huh. Then bro, I’ll leave you the emperor and I’ll go with the dark knight. Looks like things are getting fun! Hey, four-eyes, can we log in yet!?”

Utterly ignoring Vassago, noisy as usual, Critter continued tapping on the keyboard. His profile appeared serious as he glared at the information displayed on the monitor one after another and Gabriel asked softly after walking to his side.

“How does it look, Critter, are there any other issues?”

“.....I can’t tell if it’s a problem or it’s just bugging me... there are some odd terms popping out here and there in the data. I don’t understand exactly what they mean yet, but...”

“Oh? What terms?”

Critter took in a breath before replying to Gabriel’s enquiry.

“...«Final load test».”

3

Higa shyly broke the gloomy silence enveloping the sub control room.

“Err-erm... right. His body, or rather, the state Kirigaya-kun is left in here in the real world is like I explained... it’s not looking optimistic.”

Seeing Yuuki Asuna’s slender frame tremble while Koujiro Rinko held onto her shoulder, he added on in a fluster.

“B-But, however slight it is, there’s still hope!”

“...Specifically?”

Rinko asked in a voice, sharp yet tinged with faith.

“Kirito-kun is still logged into the Underworld.”

Higa looked up at the monitor relatively smaller than the one in the hijacked main control room. Switching the display after several clicks of the mouse, he showed the entire Underworld made up of the circular Human Empire and the Dark Territory surrounding it.

“In other words, though I said he lost his self-image, his fluct light itself is still active and receiving all kinds of stimuli. Thus, it may be possible to treat his soul in the Underworld even if it’s impossible in the real world. If someone were to «forgive» him, who hurt his own soul by blaming himself excessively... it may just...”

Higa was well aware his own words could hardly be considered scientific.

However, they came straight from his heart.

The Nerve Gear, the Medicuboid, and following that as an evolved Brain Machine Interface, the Soul TransLator.

However, the mysteries of that quantum incorporeal entity, the «fluct light», owned by humans and discovered through the machine Higa personally assisted in developing still overwhelmed what he knew about it.

Was the fluct light a physical phenomenon?

Or perhaps it was a conceptual phenomenon beyond the explanations of modern science?

If it was the latter, Kirigaya Kazuto's hurt and battered soul could be healed by some power that exceeded science.

For example—a person's love.

“...I will go.”

It was as if she agreed with Higa's thoughts.

Her soft yet determined voice reverberated through the sub control room.

Those in the room caught their breaths as they looked at the one who said it. Yuuki Asuna nodded towards Koujiro Rinko who was supporting her shoulders and took a step forward before repeating those words.

“I will go to the Underworld. I want to tell Kirito-kun on the other side. You tried your best, didn't you? Many things must have happened, both sad and painful, but you did all you could.”

The visage of Asuna saying those with tears residing in her light brown eyes was so beautiful, it rendered even Higa who was prepared to devote his entire life to the academics speechless.

Kikuoka watched Asuna, likely touched as his expression suggested, but soon hid that behind the lens of his glasses and turned his sight towards the door to the adjacent room.

“...I do believe we have another unoccupied STL.”

The commander who quietly announced that put on a complex expression and continued.

“However, the current Underworld couldn’t be said to be in a stable state. It will be plunging into the last stage of the scheduled final load test in a few more hours on this side.”

“Final... load? What will happen?”

Higa gestured with his hands while explaining to the frowning Rinko.

“Erm... to put it simply, the shell’s breaking. The «Great East Gate» separating the Human Empire and Dark Territory for hundreds of years will have its durability reach zero and an army of monsters will surge into the humans’ world. If the humans prepared a sufficient defense structure, they should be able to repel it in the end. However, Kirito-kun destroyed half of that ruling organization, the Axiom Church, in the experiment this time, so... I wouldn’t know how it’ll...”

“Come to think of it, the situation might necessitate that we have someone dive over there regardless.”

Kikuoka muttered with his arms crossed before his chest.

“It’s possible «Alice», somewhere in the Human Empire may be murdered in the chaos when the invasion begins. We wouldn’t have had any reason to lock main control to earn this time if that wasn’t the case... If only we could enter with a high ranking account and secure Alice while moving her to the «World End Altar», ejecting her light cube to sub control here...”

“Aah... you did request that of Kirito-kun, didn’t you, immediately before the incident.”

Kikuoka nodded regretfully at Rinko’s words.

“Yes. He would have definitely carried it out if he was safe. After all, Alice was right next to him back then...”

“Then there is a high possibility they are still together now even after months have passed on the inside... you mean?”

Higa answered that question.

“...Yes, I believe that is worth considering. Thus, it may be best to have Asuna be the one to dive... It goes without saying that she’ll be able to talk with Kirito-kun and securing Alice will likely require combat ability in the Underworld. Asuna’s the most used to moving in a virtual world among us here, I’m totally sure of that.”

“Then it will be best if we use an account with a level as high as possible, huh.”

Nodding to Kikuoka’s voice, Higa ran his fingers over the keyboard.

“Well, sure, she can take her pick. We have knights, generals, nobles... all sorts of high ranking accounts prepared.”

“Hey, hold on for a moment.”

Rinko’s slightly nervous voice barged in.

“Something’s the matter?”

“...Isn’t there the possibility the attackers will think of the same thing? You mentioned it earlier, didn’t you? That the loophole to secure Alice is to do it from inside.”

“Aah... yes, those means are available to them too. Main control below does have two STLs set up. But they shouldn’t have the time to crack the login password for the high ranking accounts. All they can use are the level 1 common citizens. They won’t be doing anything in the chaos of the final load test with statuses like those.”

Higa's explanation sped on—

Even as slight unease suddenly rose to the surface of his consciousness as though he had forgotten something important.

However, those thoughts were lost before given form upon spotting something in the account listing he rapidly scrolled through.

Chapter 17

Dark Territory

11th Month of Human Empire Calendar 380

1

Dark Knight Lipia Zankale leapt off her flying dragon's back before it came to a stop and began running through the elevated walkway connecting the landing platform and imperial palace at full speed.

Soon finding it stifling, she tore off the helmet covering even face with her right hand.

Settling her long ashen-blue hair that waved out behind her with her left hand, Lipia sped up further. Though she would strip off her heavy armor and mantle if she could, she had no desire to give the magistrates who filled the imperial palace even a glimpse of her skin.

A gigantic, towering black palace tore into the red skies in the gaps between round columns lined up on her right after she dashed through the winding corridor.

Imperial Obsidia Palace was built by excavating the tallest—ignoring the vexing «mountain range at the edge»—rocky mountains found in the boundless land of darkness over a hundred years.

It was said the mountain range at the edge and the humongous gate carved into its solid rock could be seen just beyond the western horizon from the throne room at the top floor, though just barely.

However, no one could verify the truth behind that legend.

The throne of the land of darkness was left vacant ever since the first emperor, Vector the god of darkness, departed for the darkness beneath the earth in ancient times. The grand door to the top floor was sealed with chains of infinite Life and will never open.

Lipia tore her sight off the top of the pitch-black palace and called out the ogre guards protecting the looming palace gate.

“I am the eleventh among the dark knights, Zankale! Open the gate!!”

The guards with the head of wolves and the body of men were rather dull in their heads compared to their brawns and it was only immediately before Lipia reached the cast iron gate when they began rotating the handle to open it.

A leaden noise tolled as the gate opened and she slipped sideways through before it got far.

The palace greeted Lipia for the first time in three months with its usual chilly air.

The corridors polished by the simple and honest subordinate kobolds daily were speckless. She ran, her shoes clanging against the obsidian flooring, and saw a pair of women, voluptuous and clad in revealing clothing, noiselessly gliding across the floor before her.

The large pointy hats sitting on their glossy, wavy hair indicated them to be dark arts users. When she attempted to pass them without making eye contact, one of the women deliberately spoke out in her shrill voice.

“My, how the earth trembles! I wonder if there are orcs running somewhere?!”

A reply immediately came from the other accompanied with high-pitched laughter.

“That wouldn’t be enough, this tremor must be from the giants!”

—I would have slit their tongues off if it wasn’t for the restriction on drawing swords in the palace.

Lipia thought as she ran past with no more than a snort.

Most female humans born in the land of darkness enter the dark arts user guild after graduating from the preparatory school. The notoriously hedonic organization was said to teach indulgence in place of order and those who finished were mostly like that bunch, holding interest in nothing but dressing up.

Despite all that, they become uncharacteristically fired up when it came to opposing girls who choose the path of the knight. Lipia, too, was driven to her wits’ end when she was young and an art user she was on bad terms with in her class in cadet school shot a poison curse at her. Though that girl became rather docile after having the braided hair she was so proud of snipped off.

In the end, those of this land were no more than fools without concern for the future.

The land of darkness had no future with its organizations and people at each other’s throat, not knowing any means of settling conflicts except through strength.

Though the «Ten Lords Assembly» was key to maintaining the perilous equilibrium now, that will not last long. If any of the ten lords lose their life in the looming war with the Human Empire—which the orcs and goblins call the «land of iums»—the balance will collapse and a warring age where blood is washed away by blood will return.

The one who painted that image of the future to Lipia was one of the ten lords, her direct supervisor as the head of the Order of the Dark Knights as well as the man who was her lover.

And Lipia now held confidential information in her chest that he eagerly awaited.

In which case, she did not have even a second to spare on the female art users' nonsense.

Crossing straight through the empty hall, she ran up the grand staircase, two steps at a time. Though trained, she was still out of breath when she finally reached the floor she wanted.

The «Ten Lords Assembly» ruled over the entire land of darkness through conferences, with five seats going to the human race, two seats to the goblin race, and the remaining three seats to the heads of the orc, ogre, and giant races. With something like a treaty tended after over a hundred long years of civil wars, the result was an agreement that stipulated none among the five races was superior to another.

As such, the eighteenth floor near the top floor of Obsidia Palace had private rooms established for each of the ten lords. Silencing her footsteps somewhat as she ran through the hallway, Lipia knocked on the door to one of the rooms further in three times with her armored right hand.

“Enter.”

A husky voice immediately responded.

After looking to the sides and confirming no one was in the hallway, Lipia quickly slipped through the door.

While feeling nostalgia from the masculine smell in the room that maximized utilitarianism in terms of decoration, she placed a knee onto the floor and lowered her head.

“Knight Lipia Zankale has now returned under your service.”

“Good work. Go on, sit.”

She raised her face, aware of the throbbing in her chest in response to that deep voice.

The man who flumped himself onto one of the sofas surrounding a round table with his legs crossed up high was the dark knight commander—with the alias, «Dark General», Viksul Ur Shasta.

A towering stature despite being of the human race. Though naturally the same could not be said of his girth, he would not lose in height even against ogres. His deep black hair was trimmed short and the moustache at his mouth was in order as well.

His plain hemp shirt covered rising burly muscles that threatened to burst its buttons, but there was absolutely no excess meat around his waist. Few knew his perfect body hardly thinkable of one who crossed forty was maintained through his tremendous daily training that he continued without fail even after ascending to the top among the knights.

Holding down her desire to jump into the chest of her sweetheart upon seeing him for the first time in three months, Lipia sat on the sofa facing Shasta.

With his upper body up, Shasta lifted one of the two crystal cups prepared on the table to Lipia and broke the seal on what appeared to be well aged wine.

“I swiped this from the treasury yesterday in thoughts of having it with you.”

He poured the fragrant scarlet liquid into the glass with an eye closed. The way that expression brought out his impish side was the same as it was in the past.

“Th... thank you very much, Your Excellency.”

“How many times must I tell you to refrain from that when we’re alone?”

“However, I am still in the midst of my duty.”

Lightly clicking her glass against Shasta’s as he shrugged in exasperation, she gulped down the mellow wine all at once and felt the Life exhausted over the long journey slowly recovering.

“...And, so.”

Emptying his own cup and straightening his expression, the knight commander asked at a slightly softer volume.

“What exactly was that grave affair you sent word of through your familiar?”

“Yes...”

Lipia ran her sight left and right before leaning forward. Shasta was an openhearted man, yet prudent at the same time. Multiple layers of defensive arts have been laid down this room and not even the chief of the dark arts user guild, that «witch», could eavesdrop. But despite that knowledge, she could not help but whisper upon considering the importance of the information she held.

Staring into Shasta’s black eyes, Lipia voiced her brief report.

“The highest minister of the Human Empire’s Axiom Church... has passed away.”

He was that Dark General, but his eyes still flashed wide open nonetheless.

A lengthy, deep breath broke the silence.

“Questioning if that is credible... would be an insult to you, wouldn't it. I do not doubt the information, but... still... to think that immortal being would.....”

“Yes... I understand what you mean. I, too, could not believe the abruptness and spent a week confirming it, but it truly appeared to be no mistake. I hid «ear bugs» in the Central Cathedral and collected the evidence.”

“My word, what a reckless act. If they had followed your art, you would have been torn from limb to limb before you could escape from the capital.”

“Indeed. But by the fact they could not detect an art on my level, too, proves the report was true.”

“...Hmm...”

Wetting his tongue on his second cup of wine, Shasta lowered his hardy face.

“When had that happened? And the cause?”

“Approximately half a year ago and...”

“Half a year. I believe that was about when the guard at the mountain range slackened for some time.”

“Yes. As for the highest minister's cause of death... though it is somewhat hard to believe, it was said she was done in by a sword...”

“A sword. —Someone capable of cutting down that immortal being existed, you say?”

“There couldn’t be.”

Lipia shook her head towards the speechless Shasta.

“Despite what we call her, that immortal being must have had her Life exhausted. However, in order to immortalize the divinity of the highest minister, they must have resorted to such deception to...”

“Hmm... well, let’s leave it at that. But still... she truly is dead, isn’t she, Highest Minister Administrator...”

Shasta shut his eyes and crossed his arms before leaning his upper back into the sofa.

A fair bit of silence started then, but eventually, his eyelids flashed open with short words.

“It’s our chance.”

Lipia lost her breath for an instant before asking in a squeaky voice.

“For what, exactly?”

The reply was immediate.

“There is no other... but for peace, of course.”

That vocabulary too dangerous to let out from one’s mouth within this palace permeated into the room’s atmosphere and dissipated.

“Do you believe... that to be possible, Your Excellency?”

Shasta set his eyes on the crimson liquid in his glass and nodded, slowly but deeply, at Lipia who asked so in a whisper.

“Be it possible or not, we will have to make it succeed no matter what.”

Gulping down the wine, he continued.

“The Life of the «Great Gate» that had been separating the Human Empire and land of darkness since the age of creation is finally near its end. The armies of the five dark races are like a huge kettle close to boil with the invasion of the Human Empire abundant in the grace of the sunlight and earth before them. The previous Ten Lords Assembly was a huge mess, deciding how to split the land, treasures, and slaves of the Human Empire. Good grief... what incorrigible greed they have.”

Lipia lowered her face at Shasta’s frank, curt speech.

Unlike the Human Empire controlled by that lengthy code of law called the «Taboo Index», only one law existed in the land of darkness. In short—to plunder with strength.

In that sense, Shasta would be the odd one out, considering peace like the Human Empire, when compared to the nine lords whose lust for conquest burned on even after ascending to the top positions of power.

However, that peculiarity contributed to Lipia’s boundless attraction towards this man. Whatever others might say or think, Lipia was not taken against her will unlike the women waiting on the other lords. Shasta had knelt down and offered her a bouquet of flowers, persuading her with sincere words.

Showing no sign he was aware of his lover’s contemplation, Shasta continued his words in a solemn tone.

“...However, the lords think too lowly of the humans. Especially of the Order of the Integrity Knights who protected the Human Empire over three hundred years.”

Lipia nodded while feeling her head cool off gradually upon hearing that name.

“Certainly... Their mastery is to be feared.”

“Each of them is literally a match for a thousand. Despite the countless fatalities suffered by the Order of the Dark Knights throughout its long history caused by integrity knights, the opposite had never come about. Their swordsmanship is exquisite and the sacred tools they wear are without peer... Not even I had finished a single one of them off even if I have cornered them before on numerous occasions. Naturally, the times I had fled overwhelms those, however.”

“That is... due to that strange art they use to release flames and light from their swords...”

“The «armament full control art», huh. Our knight order’s art research division hadn’t arrived at the details to that even after lengthy research. Not even a hundred goblin soldiers could stand against a single use of that art.”

“That said... our forces number fifty thousand. Conversely, there are but thirty or so integrity knights. Could we not drive them down with numbers...?”

Shasta cynically raised an end of his fine moustache at Lipia’s words.

“Had I not said each of them is comparable to a thousand? By those calculations, that will be the end of thirty thousand of our troops.”

“Well, I never... to think they could take on that many.”

“It’s natural to think so. Though it does not stick well with me, a strategy with us, the knight order, as the vanguards supported by the ogres and giants, with ranged arts pouring down from the dark arts users in the back should exhaust even the integrity knights eventually.

But I cannot imagine how many casualties we would suffer before the final knight falls. I will not claim that it will be thirty thousand, but half of that is a feasible figure.”

The crystal cup was placed onto the table with a firm clink.

Holding back Lipia with a hand when she tried to pour more liquor, Shasta leaned his broad back against the sofa.

“...And when all is said and done, an imbalance will naturally develop among the strength of the five dark races. The Ten Lords Assembly will lose its purpose and the agreement of equality among the five races will be naught but in name. When it comes to that, the «age of blood and iron» from a hundred years before will return. No, it will be worse. After all, the gate to the vast ocean of bottomless nectar, the Human Empire, will be open this time. The wars to sort out the authorities of rule to each land will not end even in a hundred years...”

That was what Shasta truly feared, more so than the prior issues, that worst picture of the future he lectured Lipia about time after time. And aside from Shasta, the other lords would not think of that future as the worst—instead, they might even anticipate it.

Lipia lowered her face and stared hard at the jet-black gleam from the full-body armor she was granted when she was knighted which was scratched all over yet polished thoroughly.

Lipia would have probably never made it as a knight if it was during the «age of blood and iron» due to how small she was as a child. She would have been sold as a slave or abandoned in the wilderness outside the city, ending that short life.

However, though hardly perfect, it was thanks to that peace treaty that she could enter a cadet school instead of the slave market and discover her late blooming aptitude for the sword, reaching practically the highest position a human female could hope for.

After she became a knight, she managed an institution similar to a nursery that cared for infants gathered from remote regions where slave trafficking was still rampant who were abandoned by their parents at the expense of most of her monthly wages.

She did not inform Shasta of that fact, let alone her colleagues. After all, not even she could explain why she undertook such an act either.

Still—

The instinct that this land was strange somehow for letting the strength plunder everything was always somewhere in Lipia's mind. She lacked the wisdom to put her own uncertainties into clear words unlike Shasta, but still, she felt there was a more «ideal, correct form» that would better fit this land—no, the whole of the Underworld including the Human Empire.

Even Lipia could now recognize that that so-called new world would only arrive long after that peace Shasta advocated. Along with that, she desired to become a pillar of strength for the man she loved as a woman.

But.

“...But Your Excellency, how do you plan on persuading the other lords? Besides... will the Order of the Integrity Knights accept peace negotiations in the first place?”

Lipia asked in a subdued manner.

“...Hmm...”

Shasta shut both of his eyes and stroke his glossy moustache with his right hand. Before long, a somewhat bitter voice softly sounded out from him.

“I see potential in the integrity knights. With the highest minister’s demise, the one who picked up overall command must be old man Bercouli. Though cunning, words do get through to him. The problem would be... the Ten Lords Assembly as expected. For that... though it may be contradictory...”

Raising his eyelids, his two eyes concealing a dangerous light gazed at the air.

“—I may have to cut them down. Four of them at the very least.”

Drawing in a sharp breath, Lipia asked in trepidation.

“Four, you say... I suppose those would be the two goblin chiefs, the orc chief, and...”

“The head of the dark arts user guild. That woman harbors ambition to obtain the secret of Administrator’s immortality and to eventually ascend to the emperor’s throne. She would never accept any plans for peace.”

“B-But!”

Lipia wrung her rebuttal out.

“That is far too dangerous, Your Excellency! The goblin and orc chiefs are no match for you... but I cannot even begin to imagine what tricks that dark arts user would resort to!”

Shasta kept his silence for a short while even after Lipia’s mouth shut.

The words he suddenly let out, too, were utterly unexpected.

“Hey, Lipia. How long have you been by my side for?”

“Huh? Yes... e-erm... I was twenty-one... so four years?”

“So that much time had already passed. ...I apologize for keeping you away for so long. How about it... it should be about time, we, well.”

He scratched his head, his sight wandering, and the dark knight commander spoke slightly brusquely.

“...Wouldn't you officially become my bride? Though I must say sorry for being such an old man.”

“Your... Your Excellency...”

Lipia was rendered speechless with her two eyes wide open—

Some sort of heat slowly spread out from around her heart and she was about to jump across the table into the chest of the man she loved.

When a strained, shrill voice rang out from beyond the thick door.

“It's an emergency!! A real emergency!! Aah, how could this have happened?!! Come, lords, hurry, hurry!!”

The faintly familiar voice belonged to one of the ten lords, the economic guild's head.

The croaky screams which did not suit that magnanimous, well-built man in Lipia's memories continued still.

“It's a true emergency!! —T-The throne room! The sealing chains! They are quiveriiiiing!!”

2

Having descended into the throne room as Emperor Vector, Gabriel Miller gazed upon the artificial flut lights kneeling at his feet, their heads lowered, feeling deeply moved with a sort of emotion.

They were quantum information from light confined within light cubes measuring two inches per side. And yet they were real humans endowed with intelligence and souls in this world. But then again, half of the ten lined up in front were monsters with bizarre appearances.

The ten generals who named themselves as «*feudal lords*», the knights and dark arts users, along with the fifty thousand troops stationed outside the palace were thus the *units* granted to Gabriel. He had to move them appropriately, exterminate the Human Empire's defense forces, and secure «Alice».

However, unlike a real-time strategy game in the real world, these units could not be mobilized as he liked with a mouse and keyboard. He had to lead and command them with his words and behavior.

Gabriel silently stood up from the throne and gazed into a mirror affixed onto the wall behind after several steps.

Reflected was a view of himself sporting an utterly tasteless look.

His facial features and that blonde hair nearing white were all that remained of the real world's Gabriel. However, a crown of black metal inlaid with a crimson jewel adorned his brow and he wore a luxurious fur gown, pitch-black like the suede-like shirt and trousers made from leather below it.

A narrow long sword let out a hazy glow as it hung off his waist and meticulous patterns were embroidered in silver thread on his boots and gloves. In addition, on his back was a long cape dyed blood-red.

Shifting his view towards the right, he saw a knight one step down from the throne, glancing around with his hands joined together behind his head.

Inside that full-body armor, gleaming like a deep purple gem, was Vassago Casals who logged in with Gabriel. Though he warned him to refrain from getting carried over and mentioning anything unnecessary until they understood the situation, it appeared his emotions were practically bursting from his chest to be expressed in his slang as his toes clattered away.

Lightly shaking his head, Gabriel returned his eyes to himself in the mirror.

Accustomed to tailor-made suits, his body felt only unease at his get-up. However, in this «Underworld», Gabriel was no CTO of some private military company.

He was the emperor who governed the boundless Dark Territory.

And, God.

Gabriel shut both of his eyes, and then slowly took in a breath of air and let it out.

The switch in his mind to swap the role he played from a tough and cool commander to a ruthless emperor made a click.

Opening his eyes, Gabriel—the god of darkness, Vector—turned with his crimson mantle billowing and glared haughtily at the ten generals as his voice, lacking all sense of humanity, resounded through the throne room.

“Raise your heads and name yourself. —You, over there, you start.”

The well-built middle-aged man whose brow was practically scraping against the floor as he prostrated himself raised his upper body with unexpected nimbleness before stating his name in fluent Japanese.

“Y-Yess! My name is Lengyel Gira Sukovo, I serve as the leader of the economic guild!”

The middle-aged man bowed once more and a something giant, like a small hill, began moving beside him.

The demi-human, likely over twelve feet if it stood, who had its massive frame wreathed in crisscrossing chains shining with black luster and an animal pelt covering its waist jerked up its abnormally long nose bridge and named itself in a low tone that resembled a tremor.

“Chief of the giant race, Sigrosig.”

By the time Gabriel internalized the fact that intelligence and a soul resided within this monster as well, the third let out a hoarse voice that grated on his ears.

“...Assassin guild head... Fu Za...”

The one dressed in a hooded robe had a presence far too frail when compared to the one from the giant race beside, with no clear indication of even age or gender.

Though Gabriel mused over giving an order for revealing that face for an instant, he decided to leave it aside, figuring an assassin like that would have one principle or another prohibiting it, and shifted his sight to the next general.

He narrowly held back an immediate urge to frown.

The meticulous embodiment of ugliness sat down with a thud. Its legs were too short to kneel. Its swollen, round belly shone with a sheen as though greasy and what appeared like skulls of small animals dangled from its neck half-sunken into its shoulders.

The head on top was seven part pig, three part human. A flat nose protruded forward and fangs peeked from its huge mouth, but intelligence blazed in its beady eyes like a human which made it all the more repulsive.

“Chief of the orc racee, Rilpirin.”

Upon hearing that shrill voice, Gabriel wondered whether this was actually a male or female, but immediately casted aside that curiosity this time as well. An orc would be an inferior unit. There would be no purpose keeping them around after running them ragged.

The next to bring his head up with a quick bow was young enough to be still termed a young man. His curly red hair hung down and all that was wrapped on the top half of his tanned body was a single leather belt. On the bottom were skin-tight leather trousers and sandals while rectangular, metal-studded gloves were worn on his two hands.

“Tenth champion of the pugilist guild, Iskahn!!”

Looking back at the youth who assertively shouted out, Gabriel tilted his side in confusion inside. Pugilists were effectively boxers? Would they be suitable as soldiers despite being barehanded?

He pondered and a loud growl roared out all of a sudden.

The source was a type of demi-human with a physique unlike humans, though not to the extent of the giants.

Long fur engulfed nearly all of its upper body. He understood it to be real hair rather than clothing only because its head was completely that of a beast.

It closely resembled a wolf. The protruding nose bridge; those teeth lined up like a saw; and those triangular ears. A barely comprehensible voice seeped out from its mouth where its long tongue hung out.

“Grr... chief of... ogres... Fulgrr... rrr...”

Though he had no confidence whether that was its name or simply a growl, Gabriel lightly nodded and looked at the next.

An ear-splitting squeak resounded right after.

“Hagashi, chief of the mountain goblins, at your service! Your Majesty, do grant the brave warriors of our race the honor of being your shock troops!!”

It was a type of demi-human, small, with long and narrow ears stretching out from its bald head, like that of a monkey. Its height was below that of a human, let alone the giant, orc, or ogre who named themselves earlier.

According to the lecture he received from Critter' before diving, there was only one law in this Dark Territory. In short, the strong reign. In that case, what strength allowed the goblins who appeared powerless in every sense to stand on an equal footing with the other races?

Despite how they were the weakest infantry units beneath the orcs at any rate, Gabriel peered into the mountain goblin's face with slight interest and realized the answer to his question with a *hmm*. There was a vehement hunger swirling within the unsightly demi-human's beady eyes.

Right after the chief of the mountain goblins finished its salutations, similar squeaks came from the demi-human sitting beside who differed only in skin tone.

“Outrageous! We will be ten times as useful compared to them, Your Majesty! Kubiri, chief of the plains goblins, humbly at your service!”

“What was you, you bunch of slug-eaters! Have your heads turned to mush from how sodden your lands are?!!”

“The same goes to you, have your brains dried up with the sun shining down on them?!!”

Before the noses of the two who began squabbling—

Shot out blue sparks with a crack and the goblin chiefs jumped back with shrieks.

“—If I may remind the both of you, you are before His Majesty the Emperor.”

The one who lowered her raised hand with that bewitching voice was a young woman clad in revealing clothing. The sparks flew from her fingertips as they rubbed together like the flint on a lighter.

Swaying up, she bent her hips as though to put her voluptuous body and captivating looks on display before giving a mannered bow. Even Gabriel could understand how Vassago felt, whistling softly on his right.

Her skin, the shade of café au lait and glistening as though oiled, was covered minimally with black enamel leather. She wore stiletto boots narrow as needles. A fur mantle shining black and silver was on her back and her platinum blonde hair flowed down to her waist above it.

Her eyeshadow and lipstick were light blue, and those blue eyes that were just as vivid narrowed coquettishly as she named herself.

“I am the head of the dark arts user guild, Dee Ai El. The three thousand art users under me and I devote all of our minds and bodies to you, Your Majesty.”

Though her actions and voice were charming indeed, Gabriel simply nodded coolly, unaffected by sexual urges as he was.

The witch who called herself Dee blinked her eyes and apparently considered supplementing her words, but gave a silent bow before returning to kneeling.

Gabriel thought that wise as he shifted his sight to look down upon the final general unit.

The man who quietly bowed was in the prime of his life, boasting an outstanding physique for a human.

The pitch-black armor covering his entire body shone dully with countless scratches carved into it. A shallow scar could be seen running from his brow to the bridge of his nose on his lowered face.

The man let out his voice without raising his head in a grating baritone.

“Dark Knight Commander, Viksul Ur Shasta. Before I dedicate my sword to you, Your Majesty... I have a question.”

The man finally lifted his face and on it, Gabriel saw a grimness resembling those rare «true soldiers» he met before.

The knight, Shasta, stared at Gabriel with a sort of conviction in his eyes absent from the previous nine generals who named themselves while continuing in an even lower voice.

“Where do Your Majesty’s ambitions lie to return to the throne in these times?”

I see—this is certainly no mere program.

Internally considering how he ought to always keep that in mind, Gabriel replied indifferently as the ruthless emperor.

“Bloodshed and terror. Arson and destruction. Death and screams.”

The generals’ expressions drew tight the moment Gabriel’s voice streamed out, stiff like machined steel



Looking at the ten faces in turn, Gabriel then waved his fur mantle and pointed his right arm, high, towards the western skies.

Words filled with a false desire for conquest shot from his mouth nearly autonomously.

“...The «Great Gate» that protects the western lands brimming with strength of the gods who oust’d me from the Celestial World crumbles on even now. I have return’d... to make mine authority known to all who inhabit the lands!”

He received as detailed a lecture as possible from Critter regarding the «final load test» approaching in a week’s time inside. Following those details, he continued his speech in that theatrical tone.

“The Human Empire will truly belong to us, the ones of the darkness, when the Great Gate shatters! I seek only one, she who appears in those lands then, the «goddesses medium»! I shall permit slaughter and pillage for all other humans as thine wills take you! ‘Tis the time the ones of the darkness have awaited—’tis the promis’d time!!”

The air turned still with silence—

Broken by shrill, savage roars.

“Giiiiii!! Killl! White iums, kill them alllllll!!”

It was the orc chief who shrieked while its feet wriggled, its beady eyes seething with lust and resentment. The goblin chiefs followed with their arms raised in unison immediately after.

“Hooooouu!! War!! War!!”

“Ura——!! War, war——!!”

The war cries spread to the other generals and the officers behind them before long. The black robes in the assassin guild swayed with their bodies as thin as sticks while the women in the dark arts user guild let out merry cries along with sparks of all colors.

Within the gigantic hall filled full with primitive, unrefined voices—

That knight named Shasta alone stayed kneeling without a single movement as Gabriel noticed.

He could not tell from that armored figure, still as a sculpture, whether it stemmed from militaristic restraint or some sort of emotion.

* * *

“To think you had such a talent, bro! Shouldn’t you have become an actor instead?”

Gabriel snorted in reply to Vassago who threw a bottle of wine while smirking.

“I merely did as necessary. It would be best if you learn how to give a similar speech too. You are a step above them in the hierarchy, after all.”

Popping the caught bottle’s cork off with his fingertip, he held some of the ruby-colored fluid in his mouth before considering whether that counted as drinking on duty.

As for Vassago, he downed what appeared like a top-quality antique in a manner akin to chugging down beer as though stating that it would be a waste not to drink it, and then brusquely wiped his mouth before replying.

“Rather than giving orders or speeches, I would rather lead the attack. We got this rare chance to dive into this amazing VR world and all, ya know... I can’t think of this wine or its bottle as anything but real.”

“In exchange, you’ll hurt when cut and bleed too. There is no pain absorber at work here, after all.”

“Ain’t that the good part?”

Shrugging his shoulders at the grinning Vassago, Gabriel returned the bottle to the table and stood from the sofa.

The emperor’s living quarters on the top floor of Obsidia Palace was far wider than that executive room in the headquarters of Glowgen DS and massive windows allowed an unobstructed night view of the town around the palace. Though the lights and colors paled in comparison to San Diego, it made up for that with how it was pulled out from fantasy.

The ten generals who called themselves lords have left the palace to prepare for war and the flames of the transport troops carrying out supplies from the warehouses moved through the main street without pause. The head of the economic guild in charge of supplies was ordered to use up all of the rations and equipment stored in the palace, so the solders should not suffer from starvation or cold.

Taking his eyes off the countless lights, Gabriel walked towards a corner of the room and touched the purple crystal pane—the system console—installed there with his hand.

Deftly running through the menu, he pressed the button to call out to external observers. The temporal acceleration rate decreased and following the odd sensation as the rates were matched, Critter’s fast speech streamed out from the screen.

“Commander!? We’ve only just sent Vassago and you off and returned to the main control room, Commander!!”

“It’s already the first night here. Though I understand, temporal acceleration is a strange thing, isn’t it? We will be proceeding as planned for the time being. The units’ preparation will be completed within a day or two and the march towards the Human Empire is scheduled to begin in two days.”

“Brilliant. Remember, once you secure «Alice» herself, bring her there and go through the ejection process for the main control room. «Alice»’s light cube will be ours then. Also, please drill this into that idiot Vassago.”

It seemed Critter’s voice reached his ears as a short curse could be heard from behind.

“As we currently have no administrator rights, we cannot reset accounts. In other words, neither you, Commander, nor Vassago can use those super accounts again once you die on that side. You’ll really have to start over as a recruit at that point, you hear!”

“Aah... understood. I will refrain from heading out to the front lines at present. Have the JSDF acted?”

“Nothing at the moment. It seems they haven’t noticed your diving in yet.”

“Good. I will cut communications, then. I will like to set our next comms to be after securing Alice.”

“Understood, I’ll look forward to that.”

With the communication window closed, the acceleration rate reverted with that sense of slight disconcertion.

Vassago was still muttering curses while fighting against the armor's fasteners, but eventually threw all of the metallic equipment onto the floor and stood up dressed in a leather shirt and trousers.

"Ermm, bro, if I said I wanted to go play around downtown... guess it'll be a no, wouldn't it."

"Hold yourself back for the time being. I'll get you a night after the operation's over."

"Got it. No killing or women, huh... Then I'll be a good boy and get some sleep. I'll use that room."

Vassago disappeared into the connecting bedroom with his joints creaking and Gabriel let out a breath as well and removed the jeweled crown from his forehead.

Leaving the exaggerated mantle and gown on the sofa too, he hurled the sword atop them.

In the VR games he played thus far, removing equipment would return them to the inventory, but it appeared there was no such convenient feature in this world. Living for even a month in room would render it to a dismal state at this rate, but they would set out from this palace in a couple of days and return next only to log out, after all.

Upon opening the door facing that which Vassago vanished into while unbuttoning his shirt, Gabriel—narrowed his eyes in surprise.

At the side of the grandiose bed in this bedroom which was just as enormous was a small prostrating silhouette.

He recalled ordering for no one, not even servants, to go above the palace's throne room. How could there be any capable of disobeying a god's orders?

Though he considered for a moment to return and take his sword, Gabriel went ahead and stepped into the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

"...Who are you."

He curtly asked for the person's identity.

The reply was in a slightly husky, feminine voice.

"...I was entrusted as your attendant for tonight."

"Oh?"

Raising an eyebrow, he crossed straight through the dim bedroom towards the bed.

The two hands against the floor belonged to a young woman clad in flimsy clothing. Her ash-blue hair was bound up high and secured by an ornate ribbon. The faintly visible lines of her body revealed no presence of any sort of weapon.

"On whose orders?"

He questioned while sitting onto the glossy silk sheets and the woman replied in a hushed voice after a momentary pause.

"No... I am merely here bound by such a duty."

"I see."

Gabriel turned his eyes away and laid himself down onto the center of the bed with a thud.

The woman stood seconds later and silently slithered to his right.

“I beg your pardon...”

The whispering woman’s face possessed an exotic beauty that amazed even Gabriel. Though her skin was dark, there was a nobility present around her cheekbones typical of Northern Europe.

A sort of emotion came over Gabriel as he looked up at the woman who was about to gently pull away her sheer clothes and remove the ribbon binding her hair.

Could an artificial fluct light go this far?

Was even this woman incomplete as a true AI? If that was so, what heights had Alice reached in her state of completeness?

What moved Gabriel’s heart was not the woman’s act of giving up her body.

Rather—

It was that sharp knife raised up high, drawn from within the woman’s undulating hair, as his foresight told him.

Catching her right arm with ample composure, Gabriel’s other hand flashed as it nimbly gripped her slender neck and pulled it down onto the bed.

“Kh...!!”

The woman ground her teeth while continuing her struggle to force the knife forward. Her strength was more than expected, but still too little to trouble Gabriel. He sealed her movement, locking her dominant arm with his right hand and gently digging his right thumb into her windpipe.

Even as her face warped with intense pain, the determination in the woman’s ashen eyes remained unfaded.

The awkwardness of the cosmetics on her ferocious expression and the state of her muscles led to doubts that she was a professional assassin. In that case, the turncoat was not the one named Fu Za who managed the assassins, but one of the other nine generals—likely one among the human generals.

Closing in to the woman's face, Gabriel asked the same question as earlier.

“On whose orders?”

The deep, hoarse answer was the same as before.

“By my own... will.”

“Then, who is your superior?”

“.....I have none.”

“Hmm.”

Gabriel pondered like a machine, without any trace of emotion.

The breakthrough «Rath» aimed for, to exceed that boundary of artificial fluc lights. That referred to the incapability to oppose law, regulations, and orders from some superior being.

Compared to the inhabitants of the Human Empire, bound by countless laws, the residents of the Dark Territory appeared to always exercise their freedom, but in reality, they differed in no way. It looked like freedom merely because the law passed down onto the fluc lights on this side numbered only one.

That law was to «plunder with strength». A world of survival of the fittest where those strong in combat rule over the weak.

It seemed that even without Gabriel's intervention, Rath planned to have the Human Empire that believed in order and the land of darkness filled with chaos clash and use the resulting war as a catalyst for their next breakthrough had their experiments proceeded.

However, by whatever reason, a fluct light that broke through that limit was born in the Human Empire before their plans proceeded to that point. There was no information regarding a similar fluct light originating from the land of darkness from the insider in Rath.

That was to say, the soul of this woman who planned to assassinate the emperor with a single knife, too, must be bound by that absolute law. Despite that, she would not reveal her master's name even after Gabriel asked, no, ordered. If that was the case, this woman was effectively prioritizing her loyalty to her master over the orders of Gabriel, both emperor and god. In other words, she believed her master to be stronger than the emperor.

It appeared there was a need for an opportunity to properly display his might to the generals and executive units and have them acknowledge Gabriel—Emperor Vector—as the world's strongest existence. However, he could not very well slaughter all of the generals. How could he go about it?

—No.

Either way, he had to get rid of one among the generals. The one who inspired the will for assassination in this woman.

How could he smoke that traitor out? Should he contact Critter again and have him monitor the general units from the outside? No, that would require the temporal acceleration to be set to the same as the real world and waste that precious time there.

Now then—

Processing that far in an instant, Gabriel once again stared into those eyes in the color of steel.

“Why do you seek my life? To amass wealth? A promise of territory?”

He asked without much concern. However, the immediate reply was entirely beyond his expectations.



“For justice!”

“Oh...?”

“If a war starts now, we will be set back a hundred, no, two hundred years! The time where the powerless are oppressed must not return!!”

Slight surprise came over Gabriel yet again.

Was this woman truly at the stage before that breakthrough? If that was the case, was it her master who spoke those words?

Gabriel leaned his face in and stared into her ashen eyes up close.

Determination. Loyalty. And the emotion hidden deep within.....

Ah, that makes sense.

He had no further need for this woman, then. To be specific, he had no further need for this woman’s fluct light.

Gabriel abided by the judgement he passed and nonchalantly added strength to his left hand, gripping the woman’s neck, so that she would not let out any more of those meaningless words.

He could hear and feel her neck bones creaking. Silent screams left her mouth with her two eyes wide open.

Gabriel tasted a different variant of surprise even as he held her struggling limbs down tight and strangled her neck without mercy.

Was this really a virtual world? The sensation of sinews and cartilage breaking apart transmitted to his left hand stimulated his five senses more vividly than in the real world alongside the dread and pain radiating from her exposed skin.

Trembling unconsciously, he drew his left hand close on reflex.

Crack. The unknown woman's neck bones crumbled with that dull noise.

And Gabriel saw it.

From the brow of the woman who closed her eyes tight as she endured the pain—gushed out a light shining in rainbow colors.

This was unmistakably what he saw then—the moment the young Alicia's life ended—that soul cloud.

Gabriel opened his mouth widely in that instant and sucked in the woman's soul without missing any of it.

Bitterness, from fear and pain.

Sourness, of chagrin and sorrow.

Succeeding those two, an indescribable divine nectar engulfed Gabriel's tongue.

Hazy scenes flickered behind his shut eyelids.

Young children playing in the front yard of a decrepit two-story building. There were humans, goblins, and orcs. The children looked this way and charged in with their hands extended, their faces gleaming.

As that image disappeared, he then saw a man's upper body. An embrace in his broad chest, trained to its limit, warm and firm.

[I love... you... Your Excellency.....]

A voice sounded out faintly, echoed, and departed.

Even after everything faded away, Gabriel's strong grip on the woman's husk remained.

Marvelous. What a marvelous experiment.

Though much of his consciousness quivered in ecstasy, Gabriel inferred the logic behind the phenomenon with some of what sense he had left over.

The light cube storing the woman's fluct light and Gabriel's own fluct light were connected through the STL. As such, their Life, when her Life, her hit points, turned to zero, the fragments of her deallocated quantum data might have went upstream through the circuit.

However, that theory no longer mattered. He had replicated that phenomenon he spent his life seeking at last. He had tasted all of that final emotion the woman held on the verge of death—love. That was just like a heavenly nectar sprinkling onto a desolated desert.

More.

He needed more.

He needed to kill more.

Gabriel threw his body back and let loose silent, raucous laughter.

* * *

Gabriel gazed over the ten generals and their respective executives, lined up orderly and bowing low with respect once again, with satisfaction.

As ordered, they had completed the preparation for marching within two days. In a sense, these general units might be superior to those people residing on the directors' floor in Glowgen DS's headquarters.

He thought them fit enough to be considered complete. That ability to handle work without complaint and that loyalty. What more could one want for an AI installed on a robot for war?

That said, he had to keep in mind that the generals' loyalty was the reason for that issue regarding artificial fluct lights that Rath was so fixated with. The great law imprinted into their souls, the strongest shall rule, was what made these ten obey the emperor, Gabriel, no, Vector. That also meant it would not be unnatural for any of them to betray the emperor the moment they develop doubt in his might.

That concern had already been realized.

The female assassin who sneaked into his bedroom two nights ago.

That woman tried to kill the most powerful, the emperor. There must have been a master she thought superior to Gabriel in her heart. That person she called «Your Excellency» in her final words. And that person was almost certainly among the ten generals lined up before his eyes.

In her eyes, her own master overpowered Emperor Vector. If that was the case, there was a high possibility this Your Excellency had not truly sworn fealty to Gabriel. If he went to the battlefield with such a unit under his command, he might even be assassinated in his sleep, however slight the chance might be.

Hence, the final mission before setting out for the front lines would be to smoke out and execute this Your Excellency from among the ten.

And at the same time, the remaining nine would recognize the might of the emperor. The balance of power would be forever carved into their fluct lights.

At this point, Gabriel Miller had not considered in the slightest being beaten—losing in a one-versus-one fight—by any of the ten units under his eyes. The beliefs that the Underworld was no more than a VR world, a direct successor to games, and that the units in it were all mere NPCs were still entrenched in him.

* * *

The words of his master surfaced in Dark Knight Viksul Ur Shasta's mind as he knelt with his head lowered. The memory was from over twenty years in the past, in the Order of the Dark Knights's training area.

[—The master of my own died instantly with his head lopped off. My master had his chest gouged into and fell on the way back to the palace. I lost an arm, but returned alive as you can see. Not that it is anything to brag about.]

Sitting upright on the floor shining with black luster, his master showed Shasta his right arm, cleanly severed from the elbow, as he spoke. It hurt simply looking at the wound, wrapped in bandages with the blood stopped with medicine.

The one who made that wound a mere three days ago was the longtime enemy of the dark knights and the world's strongest swordsman, or perhaps its worst monster—the Integrity Knight Commander himself, Bercouli Synthesis One.

[Do you understand what this implies, Viksul?]

At roughly twenty back then, Shasta could do nothing but to tilt his head in confusion. His master returned his severed arm into the bosom of his clothes, shut his eyes, and murmured.

[I've caught up, at long last.]

[Caught up—with him, you mean?]

A tinge of disbelief found itself into the young Shasta's words. That was how overwhelming Bercouli's swordsmanship was. The chill that struck him in the back like an ice pillar the moment he saw his master's right arm trace a line of fresh blood as it flew up high had not disappeared even after three days.

[I will turn fifty this year. But still, I do not believe I have yet mastered how to hold the sword, let alone swing it. In all likelihood, that will remain so in the next five or ten years before I drop dead.]

His master spoke softly.

[...Our brief lives cannot possibly reach where he got after living for over two hundred years. I hate to admit it, but I had given up inside up until the moment I crossed swords with him. However, now that I had lost unsightly and fled back, I know those were not mistakes. They weren't for nothing... My master and the rest of the masters thus far have not continued challenging that man for nothing. —Viksul, what is the apex of swordsmanship?]

Shasta instinctively gave an answer to the sudden question.

[The «unconscious blade».]

[Yes. To unite with one's sword through many years of training, and cut, draw, and even move without conscious thought for the sake of one slash; that is the apex of swordsmanship. I was taught so by my master and I had taught you so, too. But you see... Viksul, it was wrong. There is more. I understood that, being cut by that monster.]

A faint hue of excitement ran through his master's aged features. Shasta, too, leaned forward without noticing while still sitting upright.

[More... you say?]

[The opposite of unconscious. A resolute conviction. The power of one's will, Viksul.]

His master strongly waved his right arm, severed above the elbow, without warning.

[Look at it. I had cut down from the right at that point. It was a truly unconscious slash, the fastest my sword had been in my life. I must have taken the initiative over Bercouli at the start.]

[Yes... I thought so as well.]

[But, but you see. Originally, he would be on the defensive with his sword deflected by mine, but instead, he pushed mine back and cut away this arm. ...Can you believe it, Viksul? His sword did not even touch mine in that moment!]

Shasta turned speechless and shook his head awkwardly.

[How... how could that...]

[It is the truth. It was almost as if the trajectory of his slash was averted by some unseen power. That was no art. Neither was it the armament full control art. I can offer no other explanation for that phenomenon. My unconscious blade was defeated by his willpower, trained up over two hundred years. He pictured the path of his sword so strongly that it became unchangeable reality!]

Shasta could not immediately trust his master's words.

It was beyond belief that something intangible like the might of one's willpower could repel a heavy, hard sword with its irrefutable presence.

It appeared Shasta's master predicted his response. Abruptly straightening his sitting posture, he quietly ordered atop the floorboards shining black.

[Viksul, I shall impart upon you the final secret of the sword. —Cut me.]

[Wha... what are you saying?! You even got through that...]

With your life intact; Shasta could not help but to keep those words unsaid. There was a sudden, intense glint in his master's eyes.

[I have to be cut down by you with our lives interconnected. Now that I have lost to him in a single strike, you do not consider me to be the strongest any longer. If I live, you cannot fight against him on equal grounds. You, too, must cut, no, kill me and stand where he... Bercouli does!!]

Finishing those words, his master stood and adopting a stance akin to wielding a sword with that missing right arm.

[Now, stand! Draw your sword, Viksul!!]

Shasta slashed his master and ended that life.

With that, he learned the meaning behind his master's words with his body.

Sparks scattered wildly when Shasta's sword crossed the unseen blade held in his master's right arm—that sword named willpower—and it really did tear into his cheek, leaving behind a gash that would never disappear.

Though wet with tears and fresh blood, The young Shasta stood at the first step of the secret surpassing the «unconscious blade», the «incarnate blade».

And the years flowed on—to five years ago.

Shasta was finally challenged by the bitter enemy of the dark knights, Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli. At the age of thirty-seven, he felt his sword reach its limit.

His master returned alive at the cost of an arm, but Shasta had no intention of returning alive if he lost. After all, Shasta had made no disciples for the sake of succeeding himself. He had no desire to have some youth shoulder the fate of cutting down his or her master and being cut down by his or her disciple. He decided to sever that link stained with blood at the cost of his life.

The sword laced with all of his determination and resolution, the «power of incarnation», clashed against Bercouli's initial strike head-on without being deflected. But Shasta had already predicted his defeat by that point. He doubted his capability to execute another slash of similar weight.

However, Bercouli laughed openly and whispered with their swords crossed.

[Your swordsmanship's great. A sword clotted with the intent to kill could never take on my sword. Chew on that thought and come back in another five years, boy.]

And the integrity knight commander widened the distance between them before calmly taking his leave. For some reason, he could not bring himself to cut him down from behind despite how it appeared so full of openings.

It took a long time before he understand what Bercouli implied.

But now, five years later, he felt like he understood. Shasta would have likely lost in that clash if his blade was laden with nothing but blood thirst and hatred. Though it was merely once, his strike was an equal match only because of that resolution hidden in his chest, surpassing even his murderous urges.

In other words—his gratitude towards his predecessors who passed down techniques at the cost of their lives and his prayers for the youth succeeding himself.

That was why Shasta decided to begin negotiations for peace immediately after receiving news of the highest minister's death. He had the confidence that Bercouli would definitely accept such a proposal.

For the same reason—

He had to personally take the head of Emperor Vector who descended onto Obsidia Palace all of a sudden with that tyrannical decision to initiate war.

Even as he knelt with his head lowered, Shasta refined the willpower to be set on the blade certain to take his life.

The emperor, revived after going missing for hundreds of years, was a young man with pale skin and blonde hair just like a human of the Human Empire. Neither his physique nor his features demonstrated much power either.

However, only those two eyes of the emperor, too vividly blue, showed him to be no commoner. There was nothing in them. They were bottomless voids, sucking in all light. This man was hiding some vile craving.

If the emperor's void were to absorb his refined power of incarnation entirely, his sword would not reach.

Dark General Shasta will probably die then. However, his intentions should be inherited by those succeeding him.

His only lingering regret was that he could not convey his decision to Lipia as she did not show up at his room last night. Was she worked to the bone with her duties for the departure, or perhaps making an appearance at her precious «home»?

If he revealed his plan to cut the emperor to her, she might have had insisted on accompanying him. Hence, this might have been for the best.

Shasta slowly drew in a breath and held it.

Lowering his waist, he softly touched his cherished sword left on the floor with the fingertips on his left hand.

There were fifteen mel to the throne. Two steps to reach.

None must know of his initial movement. He must draw unconsciously.

He poured the power of incarnation, sharpened to its limit, into his sword from his fingers. And he became air.

His left hand grabbed the sword's sheath——

But before he could.

The emperor casually spoke in his hard and smooth voice that resembled glass.

“Incidentally, a person sneak'd into my bedroom the night before last. With hair hiding a knife.”

Hushed astonishment rocked the air in the great hall.

Among the nine lords lined up to Shasta's left, one gulped softly, another groaned deeply from the throat, and yet another shrank into that thick robe. Several cries of surprise were raised from the line of executives held behind as well.

Shasta, too, was struck by shock. He went through his thoughts in an instant, his posture still ready to go forth and cut.

Another came to the conclusion that the emperor should be eliminated. It must have been an unfortunately failure judging from how the emperor was unharmed—but just who among the nine called for the assassination?

It would not be the five demi-human lords. Even the smaller goblin races could not possibly sneak past the guards' eyes into the top floor, let alone the giants, ogres, and orcs.

If he were to look towards the four human lords, he could first eliminate the head of the pugilists, the young Iskahn and the economic guild's head, Lengyel. Iskahn was an impulsive and straightforward youngster with the sole aim of mastering bare fist combat techniques and Lengyel would only start a war if it made him a tidy sum.

Seeing if the culprit had sneaked into that bedroom, the head of the assassin guild, Fu Za, would be most fishy and in truth, he could not understand what went through that man's mind, but that man would never use a knife.

What the assassin guild researched in earnest at the bottom of their dark pit was neither arts nor swordsmanship, but a third power, poison. Those blessed in neither arts usage authority nor weapon wielding authority banded together to live on, forming Fu Za's tribe. They follow a standard methodology with their weapons limited to needles coated in poison, concealed or shot from blowpipes. Knives were not included.

By the same reasoning, he also had to exclude the head of the dark arts users kneeling directly on his left, Dee Ai El. As ambition embodied, the woman seemed likely to consider taking the emperor's head and climbing straight up to rule over the Dark Empire, but assassins from Dee should use arts instead of knives. However, that would mean none among the nine lords called for the assassination.

The one and only remaining was Dark Knight Commander Shasta himself.

But of course, he had no recollection of doing so. He had decided to eliminate the emperor only by his own sword, staking his life on it. Forget ordering his subordinates for an assassination, he had not talked about his hidden determination even once—

No.

No...

She could not have.

Reaching that point in his thought in the span of a blink after the emperor spoke of the assassin, Shasta felt his left hand in contact with his sword's scabbard turn increasingly chilly.

His refined power of incarnation transformed in no time at all. To suspicion. To unease. To dread. And, to an ominous certainty.

At almost the same time, Emperor Vector continued to the latter half of his words.

“I intend not to flush out the one who sent that assassin. I applaud that spirit of exercising power to gain more. Thou art welcome to come at me whenever if thou desire mine head.”

Glaring haughtily over the great hall immersed in a low clamor once more, the emperor expressed what could be considered emotion for the first time with that pale face—

“Naturally, I request thou prepare ample compensation for such a wager. For example... this.”

Pulling his hand from his pitch-black long clothes, he nonchalantly made a signal.

And with that, the door made in the wall eastern of Shasta, beside the throne, silently opened and a servant girl slowly walked in. A large silver tray, carefully held up by her two hands, had something rectangular placed on it, but the black cloth covering it obscured its identity.

The servant placed the silver tray before the throne, reverentially lowered her head to the emperor, and left the room through the door once more.

In the silence strained thin, Emperor Vector reached out with the toes of his boots, his lips in a somehow warped smile, and swept off the cloth covering the silver tray as through trampling on it.

What Shasta, his entire being frozen, saw with his two eyes—

Was a clear ice cube, faintly blue.

And sealed within it, never to wake again, was the face of the woman he loved.

“Li... pi...”

-a. Shasta silently mouthed her name.

An endless, dark sensation of nihilism filled his chest, erasing even the chill that engulfed his body.

Shasta knew of the orphanage Dark Knight Lipia Zankale secretly managed. He thought he saw hope for the future in Lipia's act of protecting and raising the children who awaited only a death in the wilderness, their relatives lost, regardless of their race.

That was why Shasta spoke of his ideals only to Lipia. That boundless dream where the constant war with the Human Empire ended and they joined hands for a world shared rather than fought over.

However, that ended up leading to Lipia's assassination on the emperor and the consequential reveal of that tragic form. Though the emperor was the one who murdered her—Shasta, too, did so. He was sure of that.

An immense tempest of regret and self-condemnation blew through Shasta's hollow chest, concentrated into a brief moment.

It took no time at all for that to transform into a single dark emotion.

blood thirst.

Kill. He would kill that man sitting on the throne with his legs crossed, that faint smile on his face, whatever it took.

Even if he had to give up on his life and the future of the Dark Territory hereafter.

* * *

Now then, which would turn out to be the problem?

With slight interest, Gabriel gazed over the ten leader units kneeling under his eyes.

The female assassin loved her master from the bottom of her heart. Having drunk in that emotion that resembled nectar of the gods released on her death, Gabriel understood not just her yearning, but even the nature of the love her master showed her—though merely as organized data.

Hence, he knew that person she called Your Excellency would definitely make a move if he displayed her head. He would execute that traitor unit pointing a blade towards him without mercy and heighten the remaining units' loyalties with fear. Like in those simulation games he played in his spare time in the real world.

What a deplorable and delightful bunch.

Limited in intelligence despite possessing proper souls and on top of that, infinitely replenishable no matter how many he slaughtered. The day the Underworld fell into his hands, both its mainframe and its light cubes, would certainly be when he satiates that hunger tormenting him since his childhood.

Placing a cheek against the arm he rested on the throne's armrest, Gabriel waited, relaxed.

There was a whole fifteen meters from the units. He could face off an attack from any weapon with the sword equipped on the left of his waist without issue.

of course, that was not enough against attacks ranging from *system calls* to *commands*. However, Gabriel's insecurities were wiped away before he logged in.

The super account, «Dark God Vector», was set up for Rath's staff to forcibly intervene with the Dark Territory. As such, the HP known as Life was enormous, the equipped sword was the strongest, and above all, Vector held the rule-breaking trait of being unselectable for all sorts of commands from others.

Protected by all of those conditions,

Gabriel understood not, protected by all of those conditions, even as the knight in pitch-black armor sitting at the left end of the ten units curled up his back.

He understood not, even as a faint shadow-like aura enveloped that entire body.

Not even when the knight grabbed the sheathed sword on the floor with his left hand at the speed of lightning, head leaping up with that, and showed the two eyes centered among those masculine features releasing crimson light that would not belong on any human—

Did Gabriel understand at all what was happening.

He did not understand this world, while being a program running on a physical server, was «grounded in reality» constructed by quantum bits the same as humans' fluct lights.

He did not understand that as such, the pure yet intense blood thirst originating from the dark knight could reach the STL Gabriel was hooked up to from his light cube, through the main visualizer and the quantum transmission lines.

* * *

Shasta recognized only the emperor in the middle of his sight soaked in the shade of blood.

His right arm moved faster than it ever had, and drew.

What was released from the scabbard, was not the familiar grey blade of the sacred tool inherited from his master, the *tachi*, «Oborogasumi». As its name suggested, thick mist resembling night fog surrounded its extremely long blade and twisted into a swirl.

Though Shasta did not notice the logic behind the phenomenon was identical to the integrity knight's ultimate technique, the armament full control art, inexplicable even after long years of research, that no longer mattered to him.

“Kill!!”

Shasta swung his beloved sword, carrying all of his angry, hatred, and sorrow, with a fleeting scream.

3

From the northern tip of the Human Empire to the ends of its eastern region.

This would be the first time Integrity Knight Alice and Amayori, born in the western empire, visited the eastern empire, Eastabarieth, a land most mysterious even among the four empires.

Rivers, blue as lapis lazuli, flowed swiftly through the gaps between jutting strangely shaped rocks under her eyes. The towns and villages near the bank sometimes appeared to be mainly built from lumber rather than stone like the familiar northern side.

Most of those who looked up into the sky and pointed had black hair. The recollection that Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio, who she simply could not get along with, was born here suddenly sprang into her mind.

Returning her gaze forward, Alice saw Kirito, blankly gazing at the sky while leaning against her as she grasped the reins, had pitch-black hair as well, and considered the possibility that he could have been born here and might regain his mind if she descended into town and let him come into contact with the people; however, she currently had a need to reach her destination even a second faster.

It was the third day of their rushed journey, camping in remote places away from the population at night, and having the fish Amayori caught along with the dried fruits they carried for meals—

In the noon of the eleventh month's second day, the mountain range at the edge, whose appearance alone remained unchanged from at the northern side, appeared before them with a gorge made with vertical cuts so straight, it could only be the work of the gods.

"...You can see it now, Kirito."

Alice murmured and gently caressed the nape of her cherished dragon who she had forced on this long journey while carrying a heavy load. Though the flying dragons boasted of the highest Life among all living beings now that most of the magical beasts have disappeared, it must have still been a major undertaking to fly while burdened with two humans and three sacred tools. It seemed she had almost exhausted the energy she stored up by living on a lavish diet of fish for half a year.

Upon snapping the reins while thinking to, at the very least, feed her plenty of her favorite boiled mutton once they reached the camp site, Amayori responded with a voice that revealed no sense of fatigue and strongly flapped her wings.

Though the gorge appeared like a narrow gap from afar, she noticed it was nothing that simple as they approached.

The valley likely reached about a hundred mel in width. Wide enough for a large army of orcs and ogres to march in rank.

At the grasslands that spread out, as though to envelop the whole entrance to the valley that pierced right through the mountain, countless white tents were lined up systematically, forming a large camp site. Smoke from cooking rose from one place or another while the soldiers were training on the outskirts. The gleam from the swords they swung and the spirit they exuded reached even the skies.

Though morale was not as low as she worried, the number of troops was still despairingly low. A brief scan showed the total to be less than even three thousand. On the other hand, the invading army from the Dark Territory was no less than fifty thousand. Despite how only a miniscule percentage became soldiers or guards when bestowed such sacred tasks in the Human Empire, everyone who could fight, regardless of age or gender, was made a soldier beyond the mountain range.

Alice doubted anything about this situation would change with just the addition of herself. What kinds of strategies for defense did Knight Commander Bercouli have in mind...?

Alice first flew over the camp site in her contemplation and led her flying dragon towards the gorge sunken in dim darkness.

“I am sorry, Amayori, please fly on for a little more.”

She called out so and the dragon responded with a *kururuu* immediately before the light of Solus was obstructed by the mountain mass.

A chill that made her shiver enveloped her the moment they entered the gorge. The walls of rock on the left and right rose so smoothly, she truly believed the gods must have done it. She saw absolutely no vegetation, let alone wildlife.

After continuing to fly while decelerating for several minutes—

A ridiculously large structure finally showed itself before the lingering mist.

“This is... the «Great East Gate».....?”

The grey gate that rose up vertically likely measured at least three hundred mel tall.

Though lower than the Axiom Church's Central Cathedral that reached five hundred mel, it was no less intimidating.

Most shocking was how it was carved from a single slab of stone, leaving no seam at all between the left and right gates. She thought such a feat was impossible to produce even by sacred arts, let alone by human hands. Though the greatest structures the highest minister, Administrator, brought forth were the «immortal walls» splitting Central Capital Centoria into four, each of those connecting walls was far smaller than these doors.

This great gate was placed here by the gods when the world began. In order to divide the Human Empire and the land of darkness—and to bring about tragedy three hundred and several tens of years later.

“Stop, Amayori.”

The flying dragon halted in the air and Alice looked up at the gate again from up close.

Something was written in sacred script around two hundred mel above ground where stone slabs forming the left and right gates joined.

“Destruct... at... the last stage...”

Though she managed to sound out one line among many, she did not understand its meaning.

It was when she tilted her head. A tremendous shattering noise suddenly shook the air and shocked both Alice and Amayori. Stroking the dragon's nape, she stared hard and saw a thin crack carved into the gate, like a flashing of jet-black lightning, which was smooth just a moment earlier.

The crack which extended for tens of meters stopped at last and several rocks peeled off from around it, vanishing into the bottom of the valley far below.

Raising her head, she once again focused on the giant gate. She then noticed that cracks had run across almost the entire flat stone slab like stitches.

Lightly swinging the reins, Alice went as close to the gate astride her dragon as she could.

Delicately stretching out her left hand and quickly drawing Stacia's seal in midair, she softly knocked against the gate's surface.

The Great Eastern Gate's maximum and current Life were recorded on the purple «window» that floated out.

The number on the left was the largest even among the many Life values she had witnessed—an enormous value above three million. However, the number shown on the right was not even a thousandth of that at 2985. While staring at that dumbfounded, she saw the current value decrease by one before her eyes.

Alice counted the time until the number dropped again while sweat formed on her palm. And she estimated how long it would take for its Life to fully run out.

“...It couldn't...”

Unable to believe the answer her own head derived, Alice muttered.

“...Five days... there are only five days left.....?”

The Great Gate that solemnly divided the two worlds for over three hundred years would crumble in merely five days—could that actually happen?

Selka's brilliant smile, the elderly Garitta's wrinkled face, and the sullen face belonging to her father, Gasupht, passed through her mind one after another. Mere days had passed since she drove away the goblins assaulting them and sealed the cave with ice. She had believed Rulid would stay peaceful for the time being with that.

If the Great Gate were to collapse in five days and the defense army was unable to hold up to the advancing forces of darkness, the Human Empire will be flooded with monsters thirsting for blood. The waves would reach the northern region before long and swallow up Rulid Village.

"I have... I have to do something..."

Alice unconsciously drew the reins closer while muttering incoherently. Separating from the Great Gate on the verge of collapsing, Amayori ascended with a slow flap of her wings.

Upon reaching the top of the gate, towering three hundred meters tall, she hovered once more.

The gorge splitting the mountain range extended straight beyond the gate just like on the side of the Human Empire. However, it was not blue skies and verdant grasslands that stretched out there, but skies dyed in the shade of blood and the Dark Territory's wastelands that appeared sprinkled with cinders.

Tearing her eyes from the ominous scene, Alice abruptly squinted.

She saw light flickering on the barely visible blackened earth.

Making Amayori ascend further, she focused her eyes. There were more than a single light. Though irregularly arranged, they extended on as far as she could see.

Those were campfires.

It was a camp site. The vanguards for the forces of darkness were lying in wait in great numbers right before her eyes. Awaiting that moment the gate crumbles and opens the path to the Human Empire.

“Another... five days...”

Alice hoarsely muttered once more.

Her flying dragon turned about immediately after. She thought she would be swallowed by uneasiness and cut down by a single enemy line if she continued staring into the legion of camp fires.

Even so, she held confidence she could slaughter one or two hundred of their infantry if they consisted of goblins or orcs. However, if it would not be as simple if there was a battalion of ogre archers or dark arts users in the enemy line.

Even if the integrity knights could match a thousand, that power came solely from each of them. They would not get out unscathed if ranged attacks were concentrated on them beyond where their swords and arts could reach and even minor wounds could rob them of all their Life when accumulated. That was the exact, greatest weakness of the Order of the Integrity Knights—and consequently, the defense of the Human Empire—that Knight Commander Bercouli feared throughout his many years.

The highest minister, Administrator, where all of their war potential went, was already deceased and the mountain of equipment hoarded in the cathedral had already been distributed to the defense army. However, there was far too little time left. If they had at least ten thousand troops, or a year of preparation—

Shaking away her futile thoughts with a sigh, Alice issued Amayori instructions to descend.

The meadow in the middle of the defense army's camp site was vastly vacated. Seeing as there was a gigantic tent beside it, that was unmistakably the landing field for flying dragons.

Descending in an arc, Amayori turned her long neck towards the tent with her four talons barely touching the green undergrowth and sounded out a fawning *kururuu* from her throat.

A slightly deeper voice immediately replied. It must be her brother, Takiguri. Alice leapt down onto the meadow while carrying Kirito the moment the dragon came to a stop and detached the heavy luggage from her two feet. Amayori stampeded towards the tent the moment she was done and rub her head against her brother's which peeked out from under the thick cloth.

Though it made Alice smile unwittingly, she noticed footsteps approaching from behind and straightened her expression in a fluster. Putting the hem of her plain skirt in order, she swept her hair, disheveled by the wind, behind her back.

A familiar man's voice rang through the landing field before she could turn back.

"Master! My master, Alice-sama!! I believed in you!!"

Slipping around in front of her while sliding over the grass was the integrity knight she shared a parting drink with just ten days ago, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one. Despite being in a camp, there was not even a speck on his undulating light purple hair or his silver armor.

"...Looks like you have been well."

Eldrie was overcome with emotion and about to reply, undaunted by Alice's blunt reply, but his lips came to a sudden stop.

He noticed the black-haired young man supported in Alice's left arm.

With a side of his cheek stiffening, the young knight threw his head back greatly and groaned as though in disbelief.

"You brought him... haven't you? Why?"

Alice, too, held her head as high as she could and replied.

"Naturally. I swore to protect him."

"S-Still... we integrity knights must stand as the vanguards when battle begins. What are your intentions when crossing swords with the enemies? You could not possibly be thinking of carrying him while doing so?"

"I shall should the need arise."

Alice pulled back her right foot slightly as though hiding Kirito's gaunt body, unable to stand on his own, from Eldrie's eyes. However, small groups of the resting soldiers and lower ranking integrity knights around the landing field had gathered before long and turned gazes of suspicion on Alice and Kirito who stood close together.

Eldrie released a sharp rebuttal, eclipsing the waves of chatter.

"You must not, master! With all due respect, allow me to state that fighting while ladened with that useless burden might not only halve your capability with the sword, but also expose yourself to danger! With regards to the looming battle, Alice-sama..."

Cutting off his words for a moment, he pointed at the surrounding soldiers with his dazzling silver gauntlet.

"...Has the responsibility of leading them into battle! You must be able to display your full might!"

It was sound. However, she could not simply accept it. Alice firmly grinded her molars and searched for the words to explain how she felt them to be just as important—both fighting for the Human Empire and protecting Kirito.

At the same time, she felt some surprise at her disciple's fervent speech.

He showed clear change since the time before when Alice taught him the sword in the Central Cathedral. Eldrie then practically worshipped Alice and would never talk back no matter what she said. The mysterious «gods of the outside world» had applied a seal in the right eye of every human in this world and made them utterly unable to oppose the law or those superior. As far as Alice knew, the only ones who broke that seal were the now-deceased Blue Rose swordsman, Eugeo, and she herself. Not even the two who boasted of authority equal to the gods, the highest minister, Administrator, and the sage, Cardinal, were able to oppose that seal in the end.

Eldrie must be still under the influence of that seal. Despite that, he had escaped from his previous blind obedience—though it might not be too clear if he was truly opposing Alice's words. He had his own thoughts and expressed his own opinions.

The one who brought about that change was likely Kirito. And Eugeo.

Eldrie's souls must have greatly agitated by those two, the world's greatest rebels and proud swordsmen, despite their brief encounter.

Now that she thought about it, her little sister, Selka, who lived in Rulid showed displeasure for the village's unchanging laws and the stubbornness of those who held power.

There were also the two female students who ran out when Alice arrested Kirito and Eugeo from the North Centoria Sword Mastery Academy. It would have been usually impossible for such young girls to call for an integrity knight to halt.

And of course—there was Alice herself.

Until the time she crossed swords with Kirito and fell to the walls outside the cathedral with him, she held no doubts at all about the structure of the world, the rule of the church, and the divinity of the highest minister.

However, throughout their reluctant cooperation to escape the crisis, their truce, and their climb up the outer walls, Kirito had continuously aggravated Alice with his words, his sword, and those jet-black eyes—finally resulting in her breaking the seal on her right eye...

Yes, Kirito was like a hammer that swung down onto this world filled with false harmony. Shaking and jolting the world with the power concealed in his soul, he finally broke away that ancient nail embedded in the Human Empire's heart known as the Axiom Church. However, his best friend, Eugeo, and the guru, Cardinal, had lost their lives in return while he lost his mind...

Alice hugged the fragile body supported on her left arm closer. And she looked straight back towards Eldrie's two eyes.

She wanted to tell him. You are only as you are now because you fought with this man. However, he would never understand. To the Order of the Integrity Knights, Kirito was still no more than an unforgivable traitor.

With an expression like enduring some dull pain, Eldrie was about hurled more words at Alice who stood stock still in silence.

That was when it happened. A part of the surrounding crowd split apart as though pushed aside by some giant's hand.

The voice that reached Alice from beyond the crowd was nostalgic enough to render her to tears yet created a sense of tension that was almost painful.

“Now, no need for your temper, Eldrie.”

Taking her sight off the young knight who straightened up in a hurry, Alice slowly turned about and saw who the voice belonged to.

Those loose clothes in the style of the eastern region which were folded in front. That wide band tied at a low position. That rustic long sword crudely stuck in at the left of his waist. That strange footwear slipped on his feet.

The equipment was far lighter than that of the knights and soldiers around him. However, the pressure exuding from his body, forged to the limit, was denser and heavier than any armor.

Roughly stroking the pale blue hair cut short that went well with his clothes, the owner of the voice formed a grin with his mouth.

“Yo, lil' miss. Glad you look better than I thought you would be. Put some on weight around your face?”

“...Esteemed uncle. It has been a while.”

Desperately holding back her tears, Alice bowed to the world's oldest and strongest swordsman—Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One.

In the six years she lived as an integrity knight, he was the one person Alice had allowed in her heart, respected as a master, and adored as a father.

At the same time, he was the only swordsman—aside from Kirito—she could never defeat in this world.

Thus, she must not show a face covered in tears now.

If Bercouli denied her from having Kirito here, she had to obey. Of course, Alice now had the ability to go against his orders. However, opposing him in front of everyone would shake the order between the Order and the Defense Army. With the decisive battle looming in merely five days, she must not put even a hairline crack into Bercouli's authority of command.

As though seeing through Alice's conflicts, Bercouli slowly approached while revealing a smile filled with rustic gentleness.

He first stared into Alice's eyes and nodded strongly.

And after holding back Eldrie, who seemed like he wanted to put in a word, with a glance, the knight commander turned his look towards Kirito, held in Alice's arm.

His lips tensed up. A light resembling bluish-white flames dwelled in his keen eyes.

Bercouli drew in a long breath. Alice felt the air around freeze up, bit by bit.

"...Esteemed uncle..."

Alice forced out her inaudible voice.

Bercouli was sharpening his spirit as a swordsman. He was about to release that «incarnation technique» imparted only the integrity knights... the secret technique that surpassed the «incarnation arm», capable of moving objects with the strength of one's mind, the «incarnation blade».

The focused power of incarnation was set onto a sword and released. That unseen blade could sometimes even repel a tangible enemy's blade. The armament full control art of the sacred tool the knight commander held, the «Time Piercing Sword», only first came into existence due to his overwhelming power of incarnation.

In other words—Bercouli was trying to cut Kirito.

She could never accept it if he was trying to settle this problem by literally cutting it into two. If things came to that, she would protect Kirito even if she had to draw her sword.

Overwhelmed by the knight commander's intense spirit, the surrounding soldiers, Eldrie, and even the flying dragons in the tent sank into silence. With her breath unsteady in the heavy, condensed air, Alice desperately tried to move the fingers on her right hand.

However, just before Alice touched her precious sword, Bercouli's mouth moved slightly and she heard words that seemed like they came from his thoughts.

—Relax, lil' miss.

“...!?”

It happened the instant when Alice caught her breath.

Without moving in the slightest, Bercouli's two eyes let out a dreadful light.

At the same time, Kirito's body shook violently within Alice's arm.

Kin! A loud noise rang out and a silver flash burst out in the air between Bercouli and Kirito.

—What was that!?

Though Alice gasped softly from shock, Bercouli had already broken into a wide smile by then as though that spirit earlier was an illusion.

“Esteemed... uncle...?”

The knight commander rubbed his chin and spoke to Alice who murmured in a daze as though some practice had just ended.

“Lil’ miss, did you see that?”

“Ye... yes. Though it was only for a brief instant... there was the glint from swords...?”

“Indeed. I fired an incarnation blade, no, dagger at that young man. If it hit, it would have cut into his skin on a cheek.”

“If... it hit? You mean...”

“That’s right. He took it on. That young man, with his own will.”

Alice could not help but peek into Kirito’s face as she supported him on her left arm.

However, her hopes were immediately dashed. She saw nothing more than a hollow darkness in his faintly open black eyes. His expression was completely lacking as usual.

—Still, his body certainly shook earlier.

Alice caressed Kirito’s hair with her right hand while turning to look at Bercouli. Though he shook his head, the knight commander still gave his judgment in clear words.

“Looks like his heart isn’t here... But he’s not dead. Listen, that boy tried to protect you instead of himself just now, lil’ miss. So he’ll be back. I believe so. Probably when you need him the most.”

Alice struggled even harder than before to hold back her tears that threatened to flow.

—Yes, he will return for sure.

—After all, Kirito, Kirito truly is the world's strongest swordsman. He even defeated her, close to the realm of gods, by swinging those two swords.

—I won't... say it is my sake. But please return, for the many people living in this world...

Unable to hold herself back any longer, Alice hugged Kirito tight with both arms. The knight commander's admonishing voice brushed softly against her back.

"It's as you see, Eldrie. Don't mind something so trivial, we can look after one young man at least."

"...But... but still..."

Showing remarkable mettle, Eldrie the newest integrity knight expressed his thoughts to Bercouli the oldest knight.

"I can understand if he adds to our war potential even in the slightest, but as he is... besides, even if he regains his senses, how much can a student's sword..."

"Oh, c'mon."

Bercouli's voice carried a keen edge equivalent to that of some renowned sword with that gentle smile.

"Have you forgotten? The partner of this boy won against me. Against Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One."

The surroundings instantly fall silent.

“That boy called Eugeo... he was strong, absurdly so. I even used the Time Piercing Sword’s full control art. And I still lost. Like you, Deusolbert, and Fanatio did.”

It appeared Eldrie found no words to respond to that. That was only natural; there could be none among the Order of the Integrity Knights or those beyond the Great Gate in the Dark Territory capable of defeating Bercouli in a one-versus-one—or so everyone in the Axiom Church believed.

However, was that proclamation not too hazardous?

Knight Commander Bercouli had hurriedly constructed the Defense Army through the dignity of him being the strongest. If everyone knew of Eugeo’s existence as a swordsman who defeated him—and that Kirito held just as much power...

It was when Alice thought that far and looked up.

Bercouli had glanced up towards the skies as though impelled to do so.

“Esteemed... uncle...?”

The knight commander replied Alice’s question with words she never could have expected.

“In a place far, far away, a swordsman’s immense spirit intensified, and then vanished... Someone I knew is dead...”

4

The ten lords of the land of darkness's Ten Lords Assembly bore no resemblance to each other, be it in nature, personality, or the ambitions they tucked away inside, but still, they happened to be perfectly synchronized in one point.

That would be how they understood that one law, «strength rules over all else», more so than any other.

Rather, it could be said that the law was carved onto their souls since childhood and it was only due to their constant hard work—be it training themselves or eliminating any who interfered—that they stood at nearly the top of this world where blood was washed away with more blood.

And so.

None among the nine lords lined up with Shasta were genuinely shocked when the dark knight commander turned to the emperor and drew his sword with the fervor behind that scream.

Instead, many sympathized with “You’re doing it now?” or “How daring”. Even the chiefs of the orcs and ogres whose linguistic ability, or intelligence, had been degenerating for three hundred years showed sharp glints in their beastlike eyes in anticipation of finding out how strong the emperor could be. The young chief of the pugilist, too, internally cheered Shasta on, to cut him down now that he had drawn his sword, out of respect for a peer seeking enlightenment.

Two among them predicted this state of affairs seconds earlier.

One was the head of the dark arts user guild, Dee Ai El. A fierce detractor to Shasta, the woman had planned to kidnap the dark general's lover and had prior knowledge of Lipia's face.

Hence, her shock was instead more pronounced when she saw Lipia's hewn head frozen in ice. Predicting Shasta might draw his sword out of rage, she swiftly pondered over how to act if that occurred.

Though she considered having the emperor owe her a favor by firing an art into Shasta's back, she chose the role of a spectator in the end. All would be well if Shasta lost to the emperor and even in the strange case he won, that would when she roast her bitter enemy, likely covered in severe wounds, black and hold supremacy over the land of darkness. Inside, Dee chuckled while licking her lips to conceal her excitement.

And the last who surmised the dark general's insurgency was yet another—

This one made a move at once.

* * *

With only that one word, "kill", in his heart, Shasta swung his cherished sword down, hard.

The degree of incarnation augmenting his tachi alone certainly surpassed that time he crossed swords with Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli. The intensity of his wrath and grief weighed enough to instantaneously induce the full control phenomenon that originally required a lengthy incantation.

The tachi Shasta wielded in his hand, «Oborogasumi» was an object on the class of sacred tools procedurally generated by the Underworld, a VRMMO package, roughly two hundred years ago.

Its element was «water» and its blade, responding to Shasta's overwhelming blood thirst, had lost its substance and transformed into a mist while keeping its deadly might.

The special quality of Oborogasumi in full control mode was to bypass the attacking process for all types of swords, «to deal damage by cutting or piercing the target with the sword». All who came in contact with the long, extending mist would suffer slashing-type damage to their Life. In other words, there was no method to defend against it but to evade.

The emperor, Gabriel Miller, draw the sword on his waist as well when Shasta did in order to repel the enemy's strike.

If the situation had proceeded, Shasta's blade of mist would slip past Gabriel's sword and reach him, pouring his concentrated bloodlust into him.

However, that happened when he stepped forth at the speed of gods to deliver the critical slash.

Shasta's movement ceased as though frozen.

A single throwing needle had buried itself deep into a trifling seam on the left side of the dark general's armor without notice.

Swaying onto his feet behind was a man as gaunt as a ghost clad entirely in a deep grey robe.

Head of the assassin guild, Fu Za. Bearing hardly any presence even as one of the ten lords, the inconspicuous man who barely spoke even in the meetings smoothly moved forward while attracting more attention than ever before.

Fu Za inferred Shasta's rebellion in advance only because he was more of a coward and bundle of nerves than any of the other lords.

The assassin guild was a mixed gathering of the powerless. It was a group, made by those born without blessings of strength, aptitude, assets, or any sort of power yet refused to live exploited as slaves, to refine their «poison techniques» loathed even in the Dark Territory.

Venomous objects such as some of the insects, snakes, and plants in the Underworld were originally placed as part of the load test. As such, their effectiveness was limited to a level that could be recovered from if the inhabitants utilized the necessary knowledge. Conversely, it could never reach the power of arts and swordsmanship.

However, those who formed the assassin guild went beyond Rath's expectation and worked out the techniques to «concentrate», spending many years to produce and strengthen venom. The guild's headquarters located underground in the town's slums had large kettles concentrating the sap of poisonous fruits, pots of venomous snakes gathered from various areas cannibalizing each other, and such prepared over more than a hundred years.

However, the long-awaited completion of the «fatal poison» brought forth tragedy within the guild with widespread assassinations. Unlike with swords and arts, identifying the perpetrator of slow-acting poisons was difficult.

Naturally, the one leading the guild would never survive without utmost cowardice. To the extent of lurking into the glances of those around, no, beyond that, into the meaning for those glances to sense even the most insignificant budding desire to murder.

To Fu Za, the blood thirst Shasta emitted the moment he saw Lipia's head smelled more distinctively than the stench of fresh blood.

And also to Fu Za, the dark general, Shasta, was a being more detestable than any other.

He had constructed and abandoned countless assassination plans. He had the confidence he could kill him. But if the cause of death was revealed to be poison, all would realize it was the work of the assassin guild. The peerless Order of the Dark Knights would probably charge into the guild's headquarters and slaughter everyone an hour after Shasta breathed his last. They had no chance at a frontal assault.

However, if it was done now, in this instant.

There was a just cause for stabbing a needle covered in concentrated poison into the body of his sworn enemy. The moment he drew his sword before the emperor, Shasta was no longer the dark general or among the ten lords, but a mere traitor.

What Fu Za pulled out and threw from his robe's pocket was an assassination tool passed down through the assassin guild heads. Known as «Lubellr Venomsteel», it was carved into an extremely thin needle from a dangerous mineral that secreted paralyzing venom and could store any sort of venom in its hollowed interior.

Injected into him was the quintessence of the guild as well, a lethal poison. It was only after mashing fifty thousand leeches, from a rare breed called «Jigsarvil», then filtering and concentrating the result, time after time, that just a single drop of venom could be produced. As all attempts to cultivate the leeches through breeding had failed, an absurd amount of effort was necessary to produce a single drop of this venom.

Fu Za could not have known, but the animals inhabiting the Underworld's fields were generated by the system based on specific values for each area, so aside from exceptions designated as livestock like sheep and cows, none of them could be artificially bred.

In other words, it would be no exaggeration to say the poison needle Fu Za let fly was the culmination of the assassin guild concentrated onto a single point, be it the needle itself or the venom within. Simultaneously, it was the crystallization of the oppressed and weak's hatred over the hundreds of years.

* * *

Shasta had focused his will solely on the sword he held and as a result, he felt nearly none of the pain from the poison needle stabbing deep into his body.

However, it was in the instant he tried to leap up high towards the throne when he felt a tremendous weight, as though his entire body had turned to lead, and widely opened his eyes.

Strength left his legs and only after slipping down onto a single knee did he notice the foreign object in the left side of his chest.

—Poison, huh.

Instantly realizing that, he quickly pulled the needle out before an icy chill paralyzed his left hand. Noticing that the needle, so thin it hardly seemed a weapon, possessed a vivid green luster, Shasta understood it was that abominable Lubellr Venomsteel and tried to chant the art to neutralize it at once.

However, his whole body plunged into the chill, starting from his left, at a horrifying speed and including even his mouth. Losing the sensation of his tongue before he got even the starting *system call* completely out, he could do nothing but to endure.

With his left hand numbed as well, the poison needle slipped from his fist and made a quiet noise on the black marble.

At last, his right arm, still in the midst of swinging his sword, began to fall sluggishly and with that, the full control mode expired with the tip of his beloved sword making contact with the floor, having returned to itself from that grey mist.

A robe of pitch darkness entered Shasta's vision while he was suspended in the same posture as before he slashed at the emperor, thrust onto a knee with his head lowered.

—Fu Za.

—To think I would be done in by this man.

“...By such a worthless, minor being. ...You must be thinking that, Viksul?”

His chafed voice rustled as it descended from above; Shasta scowled with the area near his eyes which was all he could still barely move.

—No one gave you the right to call me with such familiarity...

“You never gave me the right to call you with such familiarity. You seem to be wanting to say that? But you see, this isn't the first time I'm calling you Viksul, you know?”

The face of the assassin who slowly bent his knee and body down to the same height entered Shasta's sight. However, his hood was lowered so far, it obstructed the light and all but his pointed chin were immersed in the darkness.

That chin moved as if trembling and a voice hoarser than before streamed out.

“You... don’t remember, do you. The faces of the children you knocked down time after time in cadet school. And how one of them threw himself into the canal out of humiliation and vanished from school for all eternity.”

—What. What is this man saying? The cadet school?

Born as the son of a novice knight, Shasta was shipped to a cadet school affiliated with the Order once he grew old enough to hold a wooden sword. He had no memories of anything but devoting his all to training in order to survive since then. Attaining victory in one selection test after another, he was commissioned an officer in the Order and scouted by his master, the last Knight Commander—that half of his life sped on by like a swift current, leaving him no time to reflect on his past.

He could not have remembered. The children who swung wooden swords beside him over thirty years ago?

“...But you see, I have never forgotten, not even for a single day. Not one day in the many months and years I labored as a slave for the assassination guild who picked me up in the underground culverts where I drifted to. I amassed knowledge, cultivated many new types of venom, and finally climbed to head the guild. I lost various things in exchange... but it was all for vengeance on you, Viksul.”

The hood tipped over just a little when his warped voice came to a stop, revealing Fu Za’s bare face to Shasta’s eyes.

But still, no memories came to him. No, even if Shasta remembered his classmates from way back perfectly, his name would still elude him.

After all, Fu Za's face was left in an abnormal state that would scare even a horribly disfigured orc, perhaps due to the influence of poison.

Two eyes alone shone glaringly from within the hood pulled back low.

"I developed that poison injected into you for the sake of killing you, saving it up drop by drop over an overwhelming length of time. It killed even a large earth dragon with over three hundred thousand Life after an hour in an experiment. Your strength and total Life will likely last for another two or three minutes. Now... I shall pay it all back. All of that hatred and humiliation you have left in my care."

—Hatred, huh.

Shasta shifted his sight off Fu Za's eyes and stared at the poison needle that tumbled onto the black marble floor.

—Succumbing to anger and hatred, I tried to cut the emperor down. Fu Za tried to kill me using this needle with that exact same power. That was why my tachi was stopped. The «will to kill» cannot defeat the «will for justice». I had forgotten about what I grasped by crossing swords just once with that man long ago... with Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli; I had forgotten that secret of the sword at the very, very end...

Unable to even maintain his kneeling posture, Shasta slumped down onto the floor, starting with his left shoulder.

In the midst of his hazy, faded vision, beyond the poison needle—
There was a cube of ice placed on a silver platter.

* * *

The one out for revenge, Fu Za also once known as Ferius Zargatis, opened his two eyes widely as if to fully taste the moment of bliss that had finally come.

The once glorious dark general, Shasta, now rolled at his own feet. He was in a fine state; his skin, taut despite his age, turned deathly pale, the keen light in his eyes had vanished, and his breathing was feeble too.

What an ugly and miserable way to die.

And Shasta's death was effectively demonstrated that techniques to murder by poison were superior to swordsmanship or the dark arts. Not only would a single prick of the new composite poison utilizing Lubellr Venomsteel and Jigsawil drive the enemy into a state unable to draw a sword or chant an art, it would also bring them a swift demise.

Emperor Vector, on the throne, must have noticed the value of the assassin guild through this act as well. The day the new poison could be mass produced would be when he had no further need to read the knights and art users' expressions. He would reclaim his original name and perhaps even take over the the Zargatis family that had abandoned him as its new patriarch...

Shivering with pleasure, Fu Za was utterly unaware that the blade of Shasta's sword that had rolled out of his sight was turning into mist once more.

* * *

—Lipia.

Before his Life ran out, Shasta shouted out the name of that one woman he loved in his heart.

Lipia must have decided to assassinate the emperor due to her wish to realize the arrival of that new age Shasta spoke of. With the end of the three hundred years war, the orphans would gain the right to live in happiness, without falling to starvation or slavery, with the introduction of a new law and order; she must have believed in that.

—Hey, Fu Za.

—You say I'd beat you up in cadet school? That you were unable to bear with the humiliation and threw yourself away?

—But you must have had the opportunity at least. You had parents who sent you to school, three meals a day, a warm bed, and a roof to shield you from the rain. How many young lives do you think there are in this world who were not given even those basic privileges and faded out, treated like torn rags?

—Lipia had given her life to reform that world. That will cannot be brought to naught. Your petty, personal grievances——

“...Shall not stand in her way!!”

The moment that terrific bellow roared from Shasta who should have been completely paralyzed, something that resembled a grey tornado whirled up high from the dark knight's right hand.

That was what even bare few among the integrity knights were capable of, the recollection release phenomenon of sacred tools. Shasta's peerless power of incarnation collected all of the Underworld's data and began to overwrite the running main visualizer.

The grey tornado disintegrated all in contact with it, a manifestation of neutral, pure destructive might. Swallowed by the tornado without even the time to flee, Fu Za's thick black robe scattered like smoke with a dry noise.

The emaciated middle-age man appearing from there brought his arms up to hide his disfigured face. Immediately after, those arms were sent flying as countless pieces of meat—followed by his whole body, soaring into the air as a dense spray of blood.

* * *

The dark arts user, Dee Ai El, leapt far back, assailed by an ominous premonition the moment that mysterious tornado swirled up from the dark general close to death. Generating aerial elements in both hands, she flew back at maximum speed.

That premonition turned into utmost fright upon seeing everything under her right knee disappear without trace upon touching the rapidly growing tornado.

Dee's whole body was protected with tens of defensive arts even when in the bath or asleep. An impregnable barrier that would repel all sorts of attacks, be it projectiles, swords, poisons, and naturally, arts.

Of course, an attack with the full might of any of the ten lords who held the same level of priority might penetrate the wall and wound her skin. However, they would never slice her flesh off with a mere touch as though those protections were not even there. That was a certainty.

No matter how she denied it in her mind, the tornado of death whittled away at her right leg as it approached at a velocity surpassing her retreating at full speed. Though an arts user of Dee's caliber could restore a severed limb, she still needed her life to do so.

"Eek... aaah...!!"

A shrill shriek came from Dee's mouth at last.

However, her voice was coincidentally lost within screams from the two goblin chiefs.

The mountain goblin chief, Hagashi, and plains goblin chief, Kubiri, who were lined up on Dee's left desperately dashed with their stunted legs to flee from the tornado. It was impossible, however, for them to avoid the tornado's expansion that caught up to even Dee flying at her quickest.

"Kugyaa—!!"

Hagashi's legs slipped with an unseemly cry and he tumbled onto the floor. His desperately outstretched left hand caught hold of Kubiri's ankle like a vise.

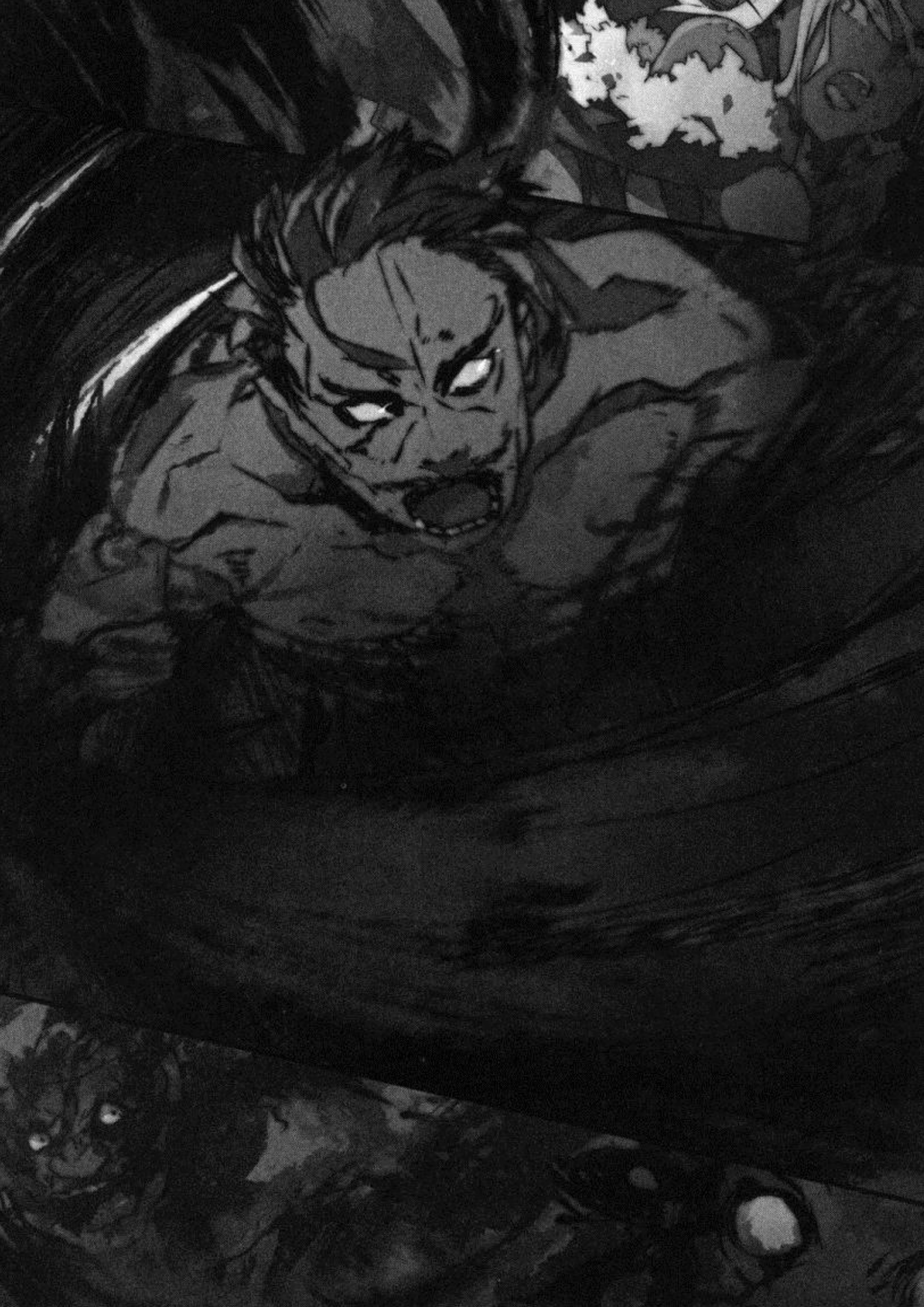
"Higyaaaa!! Let goo—!! Let....."

Squelch.

The two who ruled over the goblin races turned into sprays of blood all too quickly.

Crunch.

Dee's right leg blew off without a trace from its root.



Right before the eyes of the head of the dark arts user guild, her beautiful face warped in fear and despair—the tornado’s expansion came to a miraculous stop.

Shasta’s fallen body was no longer there. The towering funnel-shaped storm centered there had already grown to a height and diameter of twenty mel. The six lords with more time to spare had swiftly retreated to the west wall and the various groups of executives lined up on the south side of the hall, too, escaped unharmed from the precarious situation.

Though her mind had descended into utter chaos, Dee still realized why the tornado’s expansion ceased.

It kept them safe. The ten-odd advanced dark knights. In other words, Shasta had willed that tornado into existence.

As though endorsing her guess, the top half of the tornado gradually morphed.

What appeared was the upper body of a man, formed by translucent mist.

Though absurdly huge, it was clearly a copy of Dark General Shasta’s body.

* * *

Emperor Vector, Gabriel Miller, naturally felt an emotion similar to surprise as he looked up at the giant form from the tornado, towering as though flaunting his presence.

The knight on the left drawing his sword upon seeing the female assassin’s head when he revealed it to them all was still within his expectation.

It was not too shocking that the head of the assassin guild would paralyze that man slashing at Gabriel with poison or whatnot either.

Though it skewed his scheme to plant an absolute loyalty within the remaining nine units by downing the traitor in a single strike, he thought it fine that they would chose to protect the emperor by their own will. He watched over the course of events with that in mind, but—

A grey tornado surged from the fallen rebelling unit without warning and engulfed by that, the assassin guild's head along with the two goblin generals disintegrated in an instant, leaving even Gabriel speechless.

The general units should all have roughly the same status. Hence, a fight between them should not have an immediate end, but result in a prolonged battle, a cycle of whittling away and recovering HP.

Despite that, three whole units disappeared in mere seconds. Did some logic still unknown to both Critter and him exist in this Underworld—?

It happened after he thought that far. The giant in the tornado opened his mouth and let out a bellow that shook the world.

Unable to endure the intense pressure, most of the windowpanes adorning the throne room were blown outside.

The giant gripped its right fist that was as large as an engine block—

And swung it down at Gabriel with a roar.

Gabriel made his decision, realizing that taking it on with his sword was useless and that he lacked the time to stand up and dodge. Spotting his aide, Vassago, nimbly jump forward at the right side of his eyes, Gabriel quietly awaited the ashen fist atop his throne.

* * *

The tornado of death Shasta's will brought forth on the verge of his death was a phenomenon that exceeded even the Underworld's system.

Rather than robbing Fu Za and the goblins of their Lives with a numerical attack power, it first destroyed their fluct lights by hammering the «image of death» directly into their light cubes which then annihilated their flesh and blood in turn.

As such, his attack on Gabriel was unaffected by Emperor Vector's immense Life as well.

However, the blood thirst generated by Shasta's fluct light transversed the quantum transmission lines and reached the STL where Gabriel's real body lay—

The concentrated will to kill from Dark General Shasta, a distinguished knight of the Underworld, made a direct hit on the core of Gabriel Miller's fluct light, or in other words, on his «ego».

At that time, Shasta's conscious mind assimilated with that single strike that took his all and he felt it intruding into Emperor Vector.

It was clear his original body had exhausted its Life. Shasta understood this would be the last attack of his lifetime.

It was regrettable he could not fulfill his promise to cross swords with Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli again. However, that man would understand. The dark general's hopes and the reasons for turning on the emperor.

Aside from Fu Za, the head of the assassin guild, he had also defeated the two goblin chiefs who loved war the most among the lords. It was a pity he let Dee, the head of the dark arts user guild, escape, but she would likely not regenerate a wound that deep anytime soon. If the head of the Order of the Dark Knights were to die along with Emperor Vector, the remaining lords would definitely hesitate in fighting against the Human Empire.

If only they could seal a temporary cease-fire agreement with the citizens of the Human Empire who lost their ruler as well. If only they could converse with words rather than swords and share in some sort of agreement.

He prayed—for Lipia's wish of a peaceful world to be granted someday.

Assimilated with his will, Shasta pierced through Emperor Vector's brow and plunged into the core of his soul within it.

If he broke that, not even the god of darkness could prevent his own existence from lapsing like Fu Za and the rest.

Shasta's will crashed into the emperor's soul with a voiceless scream—

And experienced the last shock of his lifetime.

Nothingness.

Only a murky darkness spread out in the middle of his soul that resembled a cloud of light where the essence of his consciousness should have been.

Why? Even Fu Za who had forsaken the world held a dazzling, greedy attachment to his life.

Shasta's will was absorbed into the darkness that went on forever within the emperor.

Vanishing. Vaporizing.

—This person, this man...

—Is he unaware of life?

One who knew not the radiance of life, of one's soul, of love. That was why he hungered. That was why he sought others' souls.

A sword formed from the desire to kill would not defeat this man regardless of how strong one's will was.

After all, this man's soul was alive yet dead.

He had to report this. To someone. To whoever would fight against this monster in the future.

Someone—to someone...

However, there, Shasta's consciousness was enshrouded by a bottomless abyss.

.....Regret.....

.....Lipia.....

Dark General Viksul Ur Shasta's soul fully disintegrated with those thoughts at his end.

* * *

The moment that soul with its all-too-dazzling radiance pierced into him, Gabriel Miller felt delight rather than fear.

The dark knight's soul was filled with distinctively richer emotions than that of the female assassin he devoured two days ago. The love for her. Along with an inexplicable something that resembled affection that reached further than that. And the source of them all, the intense intent to murder.

Love and hate. What in this world could taste more exquisite than them?

Gabriel was almost fully unconscious of the danger his life was exposed to at that time. Even after witnessing the dark knight's attack render the three units into scattered lumps of meat, Gabriel wished more to devour the knight's soul than his own safety.

If Gabriel felt fear from the knight's attack and wished for his own survival, Shasta's intent to kill would have broken his survival instants through the STL which would blast away his fluct light.

However, Gabriel Miller cared not for life. To him, all lives were simply automated mechanisms like those insects he slaughtered in his childhood. Deciphering the secrets behind the soul that powered that mechanism, that mysterious gleaming cloud, was all Gabriel wished for.

As such, the destruction signal originating from Shasta's fluct light passed through the vast blank in Gabriel's fluct light in vain and was lost without colliding with anything.

Whether Gabriel understood the logic behind it or not, he still fed on the knight's soul while recording down two things into his memory.

Firstly, there was a way to attack in this world aside from weapons and spells like in a normal VRMMO game.

And that way to attack had no effect on himself.

He had to get Critter to investigate the basis behind the earlier phenomenon. Gabriel slowly stood from the throne with that in mind.

* * *

The six lords still alive—head of the dark arts user guild, Dee Ai El, head of the pugilists, Iskahn, leader of the economic guild, Lengyel, the giant chief, Sigrosig, the orc chief, Rilpirin, and the ogre chief, Fulgrr—who had their backs against the walls, fell on their rears, or was in the process of stopping a severe wound from bleeding simply stared at Emperor Vector.

Fear was all that remained in their chests.

Dark General Shasta's horrifying assault—turning three generals into spurts of blood in an instant and blowing off Dee's right leg despite her being recognized as powerful even among the lords—was taken on by the emperor without him suffering a single gash.

The strong rule.

It was clear to all that Emperor Vector held power far surpassing the six lords and the hundred-odd officers behind them combined.

Like ripples, every last one of them bowed deep and expressed their allegiance to the emperor. Even the Order of the Dark Knights with their respected knight commander murdered was no exception.

The emperor's voice eloquently resounded over them.

“...Those who have lost their general are to have their second-in-command take up the reins of command at once. In an hour, we shall march on as planned.”

There were no words of anger or blame regarding the insurgence. That fact summoned further dread into the troops.

Having stopped the blood flowing from her right leg at last, Dee extended her right hand up high with even her fingertips straightened and shouted.

“Long live the His Majesty the Emperor!!”

After a momentary pause—

Such calls mingled into a clamor that seemed to shake the entirety of Obsidia Palace and continued on for many more rounds.

5

Alice looked around inside the camping tent she was assigned and let out a light sigh.

The cot was arranged nicely, the sheepskin spread over the floor was practically new, and the air smelled only of the sun. Though she was perfectly satisfied with those, it was clear the tent was not laid out in a hurry for Alice. In other words, Knight Commander Bercouli had prepared for Alice's participation in the fight and constructed an additional tent for knights.

It might be best to take it as a symbol of his faith, but knowing the knight commander's nature, she figured he might have seen through her thoughts and actions entirely.

No—that would be going too far. After all, not even the knight commander seemed to have predicted Alice bringing Kirito along. The cot prepared was for one.

After touching Kirito's back and leading him to the bed, Alice sat him down. The young man immediately let out a frail voice as he reached out with his left hand.

“Yes, I know, I will have them in a moment.”

Running over to the pack left at the entrance, Alice took out the two long swords of black and white. Returning to the bed, she placed them on his lap. Kirito embraced the swords in his left arm then, and went quiet.

She went through her thoughts while sitting beside him and taking off her boots.

Though she declared that she would shoulder Kirito and fight should the need arise to Eldrie, that would be rather difficult in reality. Kirito alone would not be too hard with how thin he was, but her movement would be constrained if she had to carry the Night Sky Sword and Blue Rose Sword.

She considered staying astride in Amayori's saddle, but there would be times she had to engage in aerial battle with the enemy dark knights riding flying dragons too. It would be best lowering her load as much as possible.

Regrettably, having someone, perhaps from the transport unit, take care of Kirito during the battle would be the most practical course of action. However, the problem lies in whether she could find anyone worthy of trust so easily.

Her old friends, the integrity knights, would naturally head out as the vanguards and she knew none of the common soldiers. That said, she would rather not rely on Eldrie to introduce her to someone suitable now.

“Kirito...”

Alice peeked straight into the youth's face and gently held onto his cheeks with both hands.

She had no intention of treating Kirito as a burden. If his mind recovered, she could definitely rely on him to protect the Human Empire, more so than with anyone else. She had him accompany her here to the front lines because she thought he was most likely to regain his consciousness.

Knight Commander Bercouli mentioned Kirito had deflected his «incarnation blade». And that he did it to protect Alice.

Could she believe in that?

The law and a criminal when they first met at the Sword Mastery Academy. The executioner and a rebel when they met again on the cathedral's eightieth floor. And even when they exchanged words in the end on the top floor, they were merely in a truce at best.

—Despite having lost your mind ever since that battle ended, you still tried to protect me from esteemed uncle's spirit as a swordsman?

—What am I... to you?

Those questions rebounded off Kirito's lightless eyes and onto Alice herself.

What exactly was this youth to her?

If she expressed what she thought of Kirito in the cathedral in a word, obnoxious would be most suitable. He would be the one and only who would call Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty an "idiot" all that many times, both now and in the future.

However, in that final battle, what she saw of Kirito from behind as he stood up against the highest minister, Administrator—

Alice's heart trembled upon seeing the back of that swordsman holding a sword in each hand while the hem of his black overcoat blew out violently. His figure displayed power; along with a sadness that tore into her chest.

Those emotions throbbed faintly deep in her chest even now.

However, Alice continued to keep a lid on her own heart, afraid of recognizing the reasons behind that ache.

—I am a mere artificial being. Nothing more than a puppet for war that continues to occupy Alice Schuberg's body. I have no right to hold any feelings aside from the will to fight.

Still. Perhaps that is why.

Does my voice not reach you because I hold my own heart back?

Will you respond if I were to let loose all of my «will» this instant?

Alice drew a deep breath of air into her chest and held it.

Kirito's cheeks were cold in her hands. No, it was the heat from her palms.

His cheeks slowly drew closer. She stared into those black eyes from up close. Dark, just like the night skies. But she seemed to see small stars, quietly twinkling far away.

Absorbed in those stars, her face was gradually, gradually drawn in—

A rhythmical chime abruptly rang out and Alice got up, practically jumping.

Though she looked around the tent in a fluster, there was naturally no one. At last, she realized the bell with a pull-string fixed onto the tent's entrance had rung.

A guest. Clearing her throat without reason, Alice put her hair in order before quickly crossing through the tent.

In all likelihood, it would be Eldrie, here to offer more criticism. She would tell him that she had no plans of driving away Kirito in no uncertain terms this time.

Going through the thin cloth that made up the inside of the two layers of curtains at the entryway, starting with her head first, Alice swept away the thick pelt on the outside all at once with her left hand.

And her lips that were about to open came to a sharp stop.

The one standing before her eyes was no integrity knight or even some normal soldier. Unthinkingly, she stared on.

“E... erm.”

Accompanied by that feeble voice tinged with fright, the short visitor held out a covered pot with both hands.

“I... I have brought your dinner, Knight-sama.”

“...I see.”

Alice glanced towards the sky. Though she had not noticed, the vermillion sunset was certainly departing for the western skies.

“Thank you... your efforts are appreciated.”

Receiving the pot with gratitude, Alice gazed over the other party once again.

A young girl who was still young at around fifteen or sixteen.

The hair that extended slightly below her shoulders was a magnificent red. Her large eyes went well with their color, that of autumn, unique to blood from the northern empire along with that pale skin and distinctive nose bridge.

Though she wore light armor like the Defense Army, the grey tunic and skirt appeared like a uniform from some school.

To think such a child would be on the battlefield... Alice bit on her lips before blinking in realization.

She had seen the girl's features somewhere. However, as Alice had spent each day in the Central Cathedral back then, she had nearly no chance of coming into contact with the common folk.

That was when a second girl timidly showed herself from behind the red-haired girl where she have been hiding.

“E... erm... there are bread and beverages here.”

Breaking into a smile towards that almost inaudible voice from the girl with dark brown hair close to black and dark blue eyes, Alice accepted the basket she offered as well.

“There is no need to be so afraid, no one will be stealing you away for a snack.”

A memory finally surfaced in Alice's mind the moment she said that.

She recalled hearing this exceedingly skittish voice. These two were from—

“The two of you were... from the North Centoria Sword Mastery Academy... weren’t you?”

She asked, and for an instant, their cheeks loosened in relief despite previously being stiff with tension. However, they straightened up their posture straight after and named themselves with a tap from the heels of their boots.

“Y-Yes! I-I... I am from the Human Empire Defense Army, supply unit, novice trainee, Tiezé Shtolienen!”

“L-Likewise, novice trainee, Ronye Arabel!”

So they were; Alice murmured in her heart while unconsciously responding in kind.

These were the two who pled for permission to bid Kirito and Eugeo farewell when she took them away from the academy.

Even if the Defense Army was short-handed, they would not possibly draft in students. That meant the pair had personally volunteered and came to these perilous front lines from the familiar central capital. Why had these girls yet to enter adulthood gone so far as to...

As Alice’s gaze remained fixed on the pair while holding onto the pot with her right hand and the basket with her left, the girl with dark brown hair who named herself Ronye returned to hiding behind the red-haired girl who called herself Tiezé. Though Tiezé cowered slightly as well, she opened her mouth before long with an expression that spoke of her resolution to fight on.

“Er... erm... K-Knight-sama... I am fully aware that this may be, that is, m-most discourteous on our part...”

While Alice broke into a bitter smile once again at that exaggerated manner of speech, she tried her best to change that into a gentle one as she interrupted.

“Excuse me, there is really no need to stand on ceremony so much. In this camp, I am no more than a single swordsman here to protect the Human Empire like the rest of them. Do call me Alice, Tiezé-san and... you too, Ronye-san.”

Both Tiezé and Ronye whose head popped out from behind made dumbfounded looks at that.

“...W-What is the matter?”

“N-No... well. We had a different impression when we had that opportunity to meet at the Sword Mastery Academy, so...”

“Is that... so?”

She tilted her head in uncertainty. She was not too confident of it herself, but she might have changed in the half year she lived in Rulid. Though the knight commander had voiced out his baseless impressions about her putting on meat around her face.

Now that she thought about it, she could not claim to have never overeaten in light of how delicious the meals Selka made for her were... but to think it would show...

Showing another smile with her cheeks that narrowly avoided tensing up, Alice added to her words.

“And so... did you have business with me?”

“Ah... y-yes.”

With her sense of nervousness faded by just a little, Tiezé chewed on her lips for a moment before she spoke.

“Erm... we have heard word that a young man with black hair accompanied Knight-sa... Alice-sama when you arrived on your flying dragon... and so, we thought that gentleman might just possibly be somebody we are acquainted with...”

“Ah, aah... I see, that is only natural.”

Alice finally understood the girls’ purpose of visiting and nodded.

“The both of you were on good terms with Kirito in the academy, weren’t you...?”

The pair’s faces shone like budding flowers the instant Alice spoke so. In Ronye’s case, there were even faint tears running from her blue eyes.

“So it was... Kirito-senpai after all...”

Ronye who spoke in a frail voice had her hand grasped by Tiezé who shouted in a voice filled with hope as well.

“Then... Eugeo-senpai’s also...!”

Alice drew in a sharp breath right when she heard that name.

These two did not know. Of the fierce fight that unfolded in the cathedral half a year ago and its conclusion. They could not have. None knew anything concerning the Highest Minister’s death aside from the integrity knights.

The pair formed puzzled faces upon looking up at the speechless Alice. Alice stared at Tiezé’s and Ronye’s eyes in turn, and then slowly shut her eyes.

She could not deceive them now.

Besides, the pair had the right to know everything. The girls likely volunteered for the Defense Army and came all this way solely to meet Kirito as well as Eugeo again...

Hardening her resolve, Alice opened her mouth.

“This may be... too painful for the two of you. Still, I believe. If you are Kirito and Eugeo’s juniors, I believe you can accept it.”

And after taking a step back, she lifted the pelt curtain and prompted them to enter the tent.

Defying Alice’s covert hopes, Kirito showed absolutely no response even with Tiezé and Ronye in his sight.

Stifling her disappointment, Alice stood by the tent’s wall and watched over the tragic scene.

Kneeling before Kirito who sat on the bed, Ronye wrapped the youth’s left hand in her small ones as tears went down her cheeks.

However, the one to be pitied more was Tiezé who had flopped down on the fur rug and continued staring at the Blue Rose Sword placed in front of her eyes. White as paper, her face had expressed nothing ever since she taught her of Eugeo’s death. Her sight was pointed down towards the half-broken blade in silence.

As for Alice, she herself had barely any opportunity to exchange words with that youth named Eugeo personally.

When she took him to the cathedral and threw him into the underground jail; the time she intercepted them on the eightieth floor of the tower; and lastly, their alliance during that final clash with Administrator.

Though she respected Eugeo’s will, his power of incarnation, from the bottom of her heart for not just gaining victory over that Knight Commander Bercouli but also transforming himself into a sword to destroy the sword golem and slice a hand off the Highest Minister, Selka reminiscing about him made up the bulk of her memories involving him.

According to Selka, Eugeo was a docile yet prudent boy and was made to accompany his childhood friend, Alice Schuberg, on their various adventures. She figured that personality must have had let him hit it off well with Kirito as well.

Kirito and Eugeo must have caused all sorts of disturbances in the Sword Mastery Academy. Tiezé and Ronye were attracted and influenced greatly by those two. Like Alice herself.

—So, please, hold up to the sorrow. Kirito and Eugeo had fought, gotten hurt, and lost their heart and life to protect what they truly treasured.

Alice talked on in her mind while continuing to gaze upon the pair.

When those living in the Human Empire suffer a mental shock, overwhelming them with terror or grief, there are times when their hearts fall ill from their incapability to endure it. Even in that attack on Rulid by the forces of darkness the other day, several villagers had lain down despite being unharmed.

Tiezé must have loved Eugeo.

It was no easy task to accept the immense shock of a loved one dying at such a young age.

Sitting, Tiezé gradually reached out towards the Blue Rose Sword with her right hand in jolting motions before Alice's eyes.

She watched on under some tension. Though it was half broken, the Blue Rose Sword was a sacred tool of the highest grade. She doubted Tiezé could handle it, but overpowering, deep despair and sorrow could lead to power beyond expectations at times. She could not predict what would happen.

Stiffly extended, Tiezé's fingers finally came into contact with the pale blue blade. She gently traced the smoothly polished flat rather than its edge.

Then, in that moment—

Driving away the red of the sunset shining in through the hole that served as a skylight, the broken blade glittered with a faint yet clear blue.

Tiezé's whole body trembled with that.

Ronye turned about as though she felt something and looked at her friend. In the strained air, transparent drops dwelled in Tiezé's eyelashes and quietly fell.

"...Just now....."

A soft voice streamed from her pale lips.

"...I heard... Eugeo-senpai's voice... Don't cry, he said... because he'll, always be, here... he..."



Her tears continued falling without end and Tiezé finally laid her face atop the sword before bursting into violent sobs like a young child. Ronye, too, wept as she pressed her face into Kirito's knees.

While her eyes grew hot, watching the heartrending and genuine scene—

Alice still pondered somewhere in her head if that was possible.

Though Alice had not heard Eugeo's voice, she had certainly witnessed the sword shining for an instant. Hence, she could not say for sure that the words Tiezé heard were from her imagination.

Something similar to Eugeo's soul remained in the Blue Rose Sword... could that be true?

Alice recalled the feeling of her own thoughts uniting with her Golden Olive Sword whenever she activated the armament full control art. Furthermore, Eugeo had actually fused his own body with the Blue Rose Sword and suffered that fatal wound during then.

Thus, it was well possible the beliefs of the sword's owner were left behind in that remaining fragment.

However, Tiezé mentioned Eugeo had addressed her earlier. If so, it was not some soulless echo left in the sword but his true thoughts—or perhaps his will?

Was it a fantasy brought about by the girl's longing? Or was it...?

How vexing. Kirito would have gotten to the secrets behind this phenomenon if he was around. He had fallen here from where the mysterious gods outside this world reside, after all.

A phrase floated up like a small bubble onto the surface on her swirling thoughts and burst with a pop.

World End Altar.

Apparently, that place she had not heard of before had a door to the outside of this world.

If she reached there, would all of these mysteries instantly melt away? Would she be able to take back Kirito's mind?

However, the *Altar* was allegedly far off in the south after passing through the Great East Gate. In other words, some distant remote region in the Dark Territory where the dark races reigned.

For her to go all the way there, she would first have to defend against or break through the large enemy army encamped beyond the Great Gate. No, even if she broke through the enemy lines, she could not abandon the Great Gate's defense and head south. As one of the integrity knights who were bestowed such tremendous power, Alice had the responsibility to guard the Human Empire.

Rather, if only she could draw the entire enemy army to herself and set out for the *Altar*, dragging them away from the Great Gate. However, to those from the Dark Territory, the invasion of the Human Empire was their long-cherished wish for these hundreds of years. There could be nothing more attractive than that...

As expected, even if she were to aim for the altar at the world's end, the forces of darkness must be utterly annihilated beforehand.

Alice involuntarily shut her eyes at the conclusion she reached.

Despite those grand ideas of wiping them out, it would be difficult enough to even repel the enemy's advance guard as things currently stood. Still, she had to do it. In order to protect Tiezé, Ronye, and Kirito.

Letting out a soft sigh, Alice then put an end to her several seconds of contemplation and walked towards the two weeping girls.

6

Despite Solus's afterglow having vanished off to the far west a while ago, the Dark Territory's skies somewhat visible beyond the Great Gate were still tenaciously dyed in that ominous shade of blood.

As though denying that sight, a pure white camp curtain was stretched out in the middle of the Human Empire Defense Army's camp site—the meadow used as a landing field for flying dragons in the day. Below the Axiom Church's flag that fluttered up high before it were roughly thirty people with grim looks from the integrity knights and Defense Army's commanding officers.

Alice stopped her feet in slight surprise upon noticing the knights were not separated from the soldiers.

The integrity knights, clad in shining silver armor, and the commanding officers, wearing steel armor that lost in beauty but possessed a sufficiently high priority level nonetheless, were engaged in a heated discussion with each holding a glass of siral water in hand. Roundabout etiquette seemed completely eliminated from their exchange when she pricked up her ears.

“Not bad for a rushed, jumbled gathering, right, lil' miss?”

A low voice suddenly sounded out from her side and Alice turned to look in a fluster.

With both hands stuck into the bosom of his eastern styled clothes, Knight Commander Bercouli interrupted Alice's bow with a gesture and continued.

“We aren't having any of those troublesome niceties in this Defense Army. Luckily, there's no line like ‘The masses must pay plenty of respect to the knights before speaking’ in the Taboo Index, you see.”

“I-I see... Though I do believe that to be truly splendid, let us put that aside and...”

Alice turned her sight back towards the war council.

“—Where are the other integrity knights? As far as I can see, there are only ten or so there.”

“Unfortunately, that’s all of them.”

“Ee... eeh!?”

Holding down her voice that became shrill against her wishes with her palm, Alice looked up at the knight commander who had put a slight grimace on.

“That... could not be. Including myself, are there not thirty-one in the Order?”

That would be what the name given to Eldrie the newest integrity knight in *Sacred Tongue*, *thirty-one*, indicated.

Well, that’s right; Bercouli replied with a sigh mingled in and brought his voice down even further.

“You know too, don’t you, lil’ miss? Chief Elder Chudelkin performed that treatment called «readjustment» on those knights with potential problems in their memories. When he died, the seven knights who were undergoing readjustment in the Chamber of Elders have yet to wake.”

“.....!”

She could not help but to widen her eyes. Taking his sight off Alice then, Bercouli continued in a voice that sound all the more unpleased.

“The only ones who knew the incantation for readjustment were Chudelkin and the Highest Minister. Now that both of them have died, we can only take the time to analyze the art to awaken those seven, and we don’t have that time now. There was a knight who was just frozen asleep rather than in readjustment, and we did succeed there, but...”

Sensing the knight commander’s answer becoming evasive, she asked.

“Who might that person be?”

“...Scheta the «Silent».”

“.....!”

Though they had never met in person and she knew nothing more than several anecdotes, Alice swallowed her breath at that name. Those tales were truly horrifying.

Still, Bercouli coughed as though saying to leave that topic for later and continued his explanation on their war potential.

“...In other words, that means we have twenty-four integrity knights awake now. Four are staying back to manage the cathedral and capital and four are serving as guards at the mountain range at the edge. Subtracting them, we have sixteen... that’s the most we can sink into his absolute line of defense. Of course, that’s with both you and I, lil’ miss.”

“Sixteen... you say?”

She bit her lips and held back the “just” that she almost added.

Not to mention, after confirming the lineup one by one, over half of the fourteen present were low ranking knights without sacred tools—that was, without the armament full control art. They were stalwart knights capable of slaughtering a hundred or two goblins in a sword fight, but she could not hope for the explosive power needed to turn the tides of a battle from them.

Bercouli altered his tone and spoke to Alice who kept silent.

“By the way, about caring for that youngling... if you need me to, I can ask the rear guard unit to...”

“Ah... no, I will be fine.”

Alice answered, breaking into a smile at the knight commander’s awkward consideration.

“There are volunteer soldiers who were his valets at the Sword Mastery Academy, so... I had arranged for him to be placed under their care after the fighting begins.”

“Oh, that’s good to hear. ...So, how was it? Did that black-haired boy show any response after coming into contact with those he knew?”

She wiped off her smile and quietly shook her head.

Bercouli let out a short breath before groaning with an “I see”.

“...Let’s keep this between us. Honestly, I can’t say I hadn’t been thinking that youngling may be the one to decide how the coming battle’s going to go...”

Shocked, Alice looked up at the knight commander’s face.

“Sure, he had help from his partner and you, lil’ miss, but bringing down the Chief Elder and the Highest Minister with a sword’s plain ridiculous. If we were to compare the strength of our incarnation alone, I may not even match up to him.”

“...That could not possibly...”

Though she had absolutely no intention of doubting Kirito’s strength now after all that, Knight Commander Bercouli’s power of incarnation was polished over more than two hundred years. On the other hand, Kirito was still a student yet to come of age.

Rather, putting his swordsmanship and movements aside, would it not be only natural to judge his power of incarnation as weaker than the knight commander's at least?

However, Bercouli denied Alice's words with conviction.

"I know what I felt when we went against each other with incarnation earlier. That boy had accumulated actual combat experience equal to or surpassing mine."

"Actual combat...? What do you mean by that...?"

"Literally that. Struggles with his life at stake."

She could only reject that possibility.

The humans living in the Human Empire were protected, or rather, restrained by the Taboo Index and the Empire Fundamental Law. Even if they did have matches with wooden swords, it was common for them to live through their entire lives without actual combat involving one party cutting down the other's Life with real swords.

The one exception, integrity knights, did experience actual combat against goblins and dark knights attempting to invade the mountain range at the edge. Still that was only once or twice throughout their long periods of duty, with some not even encountering any; and to not mention the relatively overwhelming might of the integrity knights made it hard for those to be truly called struggles for their lives.

On that line of thought, Bercouli would certainly be the one with the most battle experience in the Human Empire since he had been fighting against the forces of darkness long before the Order got to its current size. As a matter of fact, when he had just become an integrity knight—however hard it might have been to believe—he had suffered harshly at the hands of the dark knights in those times and fled by the skin of his teeth.

Kirito won over that Bercouli in terms of pure duration of actual combat?

Even if that was feasible, that experience would not have been from this world.

The «outside world» from whence he came. Still, that should be the land where the gods who truly created the Underworld reside. Actual combat despite that? Exactly who did he struggle for his life against...?

Unable to reach a satisfactory conclusion, Alice steeled her heart after brief hesitation.

If need be, she would tell Bercouli everything. About the existence of the outside world—and the *World End Altar* where the door towards there lay.

“...Esteemed uncle... in fact, during the battle against the Highest Minister, I...”

It was when she spoke that far, choosing her words with care.

A sharp voice suddenly echoed from behind the knight commander.

“It is time, Your Excellency.”

She turned to look at who spoke in surprise.

A single integrity knight stood there, entirely covered in light purple armor that glimmered brilliantly even in the dusk with a silver rapier at the left of its waist.

The moment Alice saw that full-face helmet with its wings resembling those of birds of prey, strong emotions surfaced within her chest—those were, frankly expressed, of distaste.

To Alice, that was likely who she had the worst affinity with in this world. The deputy knight commander and second among the integrity knights, Fanatio Synthesis Two.

Making considerable effort to not wear her heart on her sleeve, Alice involuntarily placed her right fist against the left of her chest, her left hand on her sword's grip, and saluted as a knight should.

Facing her, Fanatio performed the same as well as her armor rang out. However, unlike Alice who stood upright with her legs slightly apart, Fanatio balanced her weight on her right foot and lowered her left shoulder into a lithe posture.

This person is simply helpless... or so Alice muttered to herself inside as she lowered her hand.

Though Fanatio likely thought she was hiding it with her armor and rigid tone, to one from the same gender, those were not enough to erase the scent of Fanatio's feminine demeanor, distinct as that of large flowers. And that was a «technique» Alice could never comprehend since she was brought to the cathedral as a child.

Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio fought Kirito and Eugeo on the fiftieth floor of the cathedral, and suffered wounds that placed her on the verge of death after a direct hit from Kirito's armament full control art. However, Kirito had performed healing arts on her who he defeated with much trouble and even teleported her through some mysterious art, or so Alice had heard from the low ranking knights who were present there.

Though she thought it was very much like Kirito to do so, she could still not come to terms with it.

In the first place, despite thinking of the world of Knight Commander Bercouli, Fanatio had four low ranking knights, who adored her, placed as her own subordinates. Did she feel no pity for their futile yearning? She could, at least, show her face instead of covering it with that helmet all day long.

And right as Alice wandered through those thoughts tinged with just a little jealousy, Fanatio grasped the sides of her helmet with both hands, astonishing her.

She unclasped it with clicks and carelessly pulled the light purple armor off. Her glossy black hair that sprang out gleamed like silk in the lanterns' light.

She saw Fanatio's bare skin in the cathedral only if they met by coincidence in the large bath. As far as she could recall, this would be the first time the deputy knight commander had stripped off her helmet in public.

She stared at her beautiful features that had seemed somewhat softer compared to previously and understood why. Though pale, her full lips were tinted with rouge. Cosmetics, on her who tried so hard to conceal her femininity—?

Fanatio showed a gentle smile towards Alice who stood speechless.

"It has *really* been a while, hasn't it, Alice? I'm *so* glad to see you have been in good health."

"....."

[Really]? [So]?

It took another three seconds before Alice found it in herself to return the greeting.

"It... it has been a while, deputy commander."

"I wouldn't mind you calling me Fanatio. More importantly, Alice, I happened to overhear a little earlier, but... it appears you have brought that boy with black hair with you?"

Alice put her astonishment aside at those offhand words and replaced it with a growing wariness.

Though Kirito and Cardinal, the sage, were the one who healed Fanatio's injuries, she might not have known. It would not be odd if her resentment and hatred towards Kirito who had defeated her had grown.

"Ye... yes."

The deputy knight commander showed a sweet smile and nodded at Alice's curt answer.

"I see. Then, could I please meet with him for a little while after the war council?"

"...Why, Fanatio-dono?"

"There's no need to frown so. I don't have any intention of cutting down that boy after all this time."

Stifling the bit of bitterness that had snuck into her smile, Fanatio shrugged her shoulders.

"I simply wanted to say a word of thanks. For tending to me after I suffered those fatal wounds."

"...So you knew? Still, I believe there is no need for you to express your gratitude to Kirito. I had heard the one who had actually healed you, deputy commander, was the previous highest minister, a person named Cardinal. And she had... unfortunately passed away in the battle half a year ago."

After Alice spoke with a little of her strength slipping from her shoulders, Fanatio's eyes slowly turned towards the sky and she nodded.

"Yes... I do remember faintly. It was the first time I had felt such warm and powerful healing arts. But it was Kirito who had sent me to her and besides... I wish to thank him regarding a different matter."

"A different matter...?"

“Yes. —For fighting and defeating me, you see.”

...So she did have the intention of cutting Kirito?

Fanatio shook her head with an earnest expression towards Alice who took half a step back.

“This is how I truly feel. After all, that boy was the only man to fight me seriously even after realizing I am female in the many years I had lived as an integrity knight.”

“Huh...? What do you... mean by...”

“I had fought without this helmet hiding my face in the past like you do. But I noticed then. That they would turn a little more timid with their swords against me; not only male knights who I faced in mock battles, but even dark knights in fights with our lives at stake. Going easy on me because of my gender is worse humiliation than being defeated and made to grovel on the ground.”

Was that not unavoidable, though? There should be barely any men capable of ignoring Fanatio’s fragrant allure with her face exposed.

Though she only understood after staying at the outskirts of Rulid, females hardly ever assumed sacred tasks that required them to hold a sword in most of the Human Empire. The exceptions were limited to the children of nobles and feudal lords which meant the common woman basically had no choice but to marry, take care of the housework, and give birth to children.

It would be an ironic affair if that aged tradition bound the hearts of men in a manner similar to the Taboo Index. The prejudice that women ought to be protected by men must have dulled their swords before Fanatio’s beautiful looks. The dark knights living in the Dark Territory must have been no exception either as long as they sought to marry and raise children.

Though the demi-humans such as goblins or orcs might judge her differently with their completely different appearances.

However, despite being a female knight as well, Alice had never paid attention to male knights growing timid or anything of that sort. She was convinced her strength surpassed her opponents' whether they went easy or exerted themselves against her.

—Was that anger not evidence that you were bothered by your femininity yourself?

Just as Alice thought so, Fanatio muttered the exact same thing.

“—I had hid my face and voice with this helmet, and learnt consecutive sword techniques in order to distance myself from my enemies. But that was because I was bound by my own gender, wasn't it? Not only did that boy see through that immediately, he came slashing at me with all his might. I had exhausted all of my sword techniques and arts against him, and lost. When Cardinal-sama salvaged my life and I regained my consciousness, that meaningless obsession had vanished from my being... That is, I only had to become strong enough; strong enough to force my opponents to not go easy on me. It isn't all so strange for me to want to say a word of thanks to that boy who made me notice that simple truth and let me live, is it?”

After saying so with a serious expression, Fanatio suddenly broke into a teasing smile.

“Besides... I am a little offended. Over how that boy felt nothing for me as a female with my helmet off. So, I am thinking of trying out various means to see if I can wake that boy up.”

“Wha...”

What nonsense are you suggesting?

If Kirito woke from that, exactly what would that make of all her effort thus far? And she could not even say with certainty that the possibility was zero in regards to Kirito.

Without any attempt to conceal how grim the space between her eyebrows was becoming, Alice replied in a sharp tone.

“I appreciate your words, but he is currently resting in the tent. I will personally see that your thoughts are conveyed to him, Fanatio-dono.”

“Oh dear.”

The area around deputy knight commander’s eyes twitched.

“I will require your permission to meet with the boy? Back at the cathedral, I believe I hadn’t ever refused your requests to meet with His Excellency, the knight commander, when he was at work due to my personal feelings?”

“With regards to that, I believe your permission is not required either for me to meet with esteemed uncle, Fanatio-dono. To begin with, now that I think about it, would he not serve just fine if you desired to be beaten black and blue by a male knight?”

“Oh my, let’s leave His Excellency out of this. He is the world’s strongest knight, so it is only natural he goes easy whoever he faces. After all, he even spared the dark general.”

“Oh, really now? He was always serious to the point of becoming drenched in sweat during practice with me, however?”



“...Your Excellency! Is what she said true!?”

“In the first place, it’s because you always pamper this person that...!”

Alice and Fanatio turned towards their sides as one.

However, the knight commander was no longer present there.

Only a lump of dried grass tumbled by along where Bercouli had certainly stood minutes ago.

The war council began at six in the evening with a rather strained atmosphere due to the spirit exuded from Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio Synthesis Two who served as the facilitator and Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty who recently joined the battle.

After briefly introducing herself, Alice threw herself onto a chair prepared on the front row.

“...Alice-sama.”

Snatching the cup of siral water Eldrie who sat beside offered, she drained the cold, sweet and sour liquid in a single gulp. Taking in a deep breath, she somehow managed to move on.

—Still.

There truly were few high ranking integrity knights possessing sacred tools. The only ones she knew the name and face of well were the knight commander, «Time Piercing Sword» Bercouli, «Heaven Piercing Sword» Fanatio, «Frost Scale Whip» Eldrie, and «Conflagrant Flame Bow» Deusolbert.

Them aside, Scheta Synthesis Twelve, with the alias of «Silent», and Renri Synthesis Twenty-seven, an extremely young male knight, both held sacred tools, but it was effectively her first time meeting them, so she did not even know what their techniques were. At any rate, those members made up the seven high ranking knights when included with «Fragrant Olive» Alice.

The remaining nine were the low ranking knights with no sacred tool, including the «Four Oscillation Blades» under Fanatio. Moreover, the young female apprentice knights who committed such dreadful mischief that even Bercouli had trouble dealing with them, Linel Synthesis Twenty-eight and Fazel Synthesis Twenty-nine, were around too. They were currently sitting obediently in the corner, but could they truly be let out on the battlefield?

At any rate, those mere sixteen were all that the Order of the Integrity Knights could put into this absolute line of defense.

On the other hand, roughly thirty commanding officers from the Human Empire Defense Army attended. Though their morale was not low, the difference between the integrity knights' prowess with the sword and theirs was obvious even in a single glance. It went without saying for the high ranking knights like Alice, but even the low ranking knights had more than enough strength to defeat the thirty of them in continuous matches...

“—We have considered numerous plans over these four months...”

Fanatio's voice started without Alice knowing and it pulled her focus back.

“To sum things up, it will be difficult to drive back the enemy army's combined offensive with our current fighting strength and we will lose all chance at victory the moment they lay siege to us.”

Fanatio knocked against a point on the map set up farther in the war council with the Heaven Piercing Sword's narrow and long scabbard as a replacement for a pointer.

“As you can see, there is nothing but grass and rock for ten kilol from this side of the mountain range at the edge. If they push us this far, we will only be surrounded and annihilated by the enemy army of fifty thousand. As such, we must settle the battle in this gorge that leads to the Great East Gate, measuring a hundred mel in width and a thousand mel in length. We will spread troops in layers, and focus entirely on engaging them and shaving down their numbers. This will be the basic principle of our strategy. Does anyone have any opinions to voice out so far?”

Eldrie was the one whose hand quickly went up. Standing up as his light purple hair wavered, the young man questioned with his usual vanity restrained.

“If the enemy army comprises only the goblins and orcs, we will cut them down even if there are fifty or a hundred thousand of them. However, even they are aware of that. There are powerful groups of ogres equipped with longbows as well as the Dark Arts Users’ Guild which exceeds them in danger. What countermeasures do we have against long range attacks fired from behind their infantry?”

“This may be a risky gamble...”

Fanatio’s lips paused for a moment and she glanced towards Alice. She listened to the words that continued while unthinkingly straightening her back.

“...No sunlight reaches the bottom of the gorge even in midday and no grass grows on its ground. In other words, there is sparse sacred power in the air. If we thoroughly exhaust that before the battle begins, it stands to reason that the enemy army will not be able to launch any powerful arts.”

The knights and commanding officers stirred at Fanatio’s daring idea.

“Naturally, the same applies to us. However, we have no more than a hundred or so sacred arts users in the first place. In a fight between arts, the enemy’s consumption of sacred power should be far above us.”

That might certainly be true. Still—there were two problems in Fanatio’s strategy.

It was the bow user, Deusolbert, who sought permission to speak in place of the stunned Eldrie. The senior knight calmly asked with his body clad in reddish-copper armor.

“I understand, your words are quite right, Deputy Commander-dono. However, sacred arts are not used solely for offense. If sacred power dries up, wouldn’t we be unable to even heal the life of anyone hurt?”

“That is why I called it a gamble. We have brought as many of the high grade catalysts and medication as we could from the cathedral’s treasury to this camp site. If we restrict to using only healing arts and supplement that with medicine, the catalysts alone should last two... no, three days.”

The surprised cries this time were louder than before. The Central Cathedral’s treasury was known for such strict security that that itself served as the subject for fairy tales. Treasures may be brought in, but this could well be the first time in history for things to be brought out.

It rendered even the great knight into silence, a grim expression tinged with surprise on his face. Waiting as Deusolbert took his seat with a low groan, Alice then stood up.

“There is still another problem, Fanatio-dono.”

Forgetting the earlier quarrel for the time being, she threw out the second problem at hand.

“Though you say the blessings of Solus and Terraria are faint, the gorge is neither devoid of light nor separated from the earth. I believe a massive amount of sacred power has accumulated there over the many years. What, exactly, could fully use up that power in the short period before the battle?”

Though the chasm through the mountain range was more narrow than the grasslands spreading out behind the camp site, it still had a width of a hundred mel and a length of a thousand mel. Exhausting the sacred power filling that expansive space in an instant would require hundreds of arts users simultaneously casting high ranking arts, but Fanatio herself had mentioned earlier that the Defense Army lacked that many arts users.

Another possibility would be to exhaust the sacred power by using a grand large-scale art comparable to natural disasters, but it seemed the only two possessing such power would be the deceased Highest Minister Administrator and Sage Cardinal.

However, the deputy knight commander shook her head strongly while staring at Alice with her golden brown eyes.

“No, we do. We do have one person capable of making that a reality.

“.....One person...?”

Alice scanned through the faces of the Defense Army as she muttered.

However, the name that came from Fanatio immediately after was beyond her expectations.

“You, Alice Synthesis Thirty.”

“Eh...!?”

“You may not have noticed, but your current strength exceeds that of integrity knights. You should be capable of it as you are now... the true power of the gods, to split the skies and tear the earth asunder.”

7

“Are the high ranking integrity knights all that powerful?”

Gabriel Miller asked while shaking atop a large tank—which was simply a four-wheeled, rectangular vehicle without any cannons or treads—pulled by a two-headed monster similar to a dinosaur.

Though not even the couch’s cushioning could erase the tremors entirely, it was nothing compared to the lethal lack of comfort he suffered so much from when riding those Bradley infantry fighting vehicles as a soldier. The tremors only made sloshing noises from the wine glass on the side table at worst.

Despite it being three days since leaving Obsidia Palace and a travelling time longer than he had ever experienced in the real world, he barely felt fatigue. Not that it was thanks to the comfort of the tank’s seat; though it might be due to it being a virtual world.

The young, beautiful lady slovenly sprawled at Gabriel’s feet on the thick carpet caressed her bandaged right leg as she nodded.

“They certainly are. Let’s see... in this war that continued on for three hundred years, our dark arts users and knights have never killed even a single integrity knight—does that explain the circumstances? Of course, the reverse has happened as many times as there are stars in the sky.”

“Hmm...”

Replacing Gabriel who closed his mouth, Vassago, who held onto a liquor bottle as he sat cross-legged beside the wide cabin’s wall, let out a doubtful voice.

“But hey, Dee sis. If those integrity knights guys are so strong, why aren’t they invading us?”

The head of the dark arts users, Dee Ai El, turned towards Vassago with a smile more coy than before and raised her index finger.

“I’m glad you asked, Vassago-sama. Though each of them is a mighty warrior that can match a thousand, they still number only one each in the end. If ten thousand of our troops surround them in a wide space, we could accumulate scratches on them, little by little, and drain them of their Life, couldn’t we? As such, they would never leave the mountain range at the edge where there is no risk of being surrounded regardless of how cowardly that is.”

“Ooh, I get it. So that’s that, huh, no matter how damn hard a *mob* is, just poke at it with *DoT* damage from a safe spot and it’ll go down sooner or later...”

“Huh...? *Mob*...?”

Glaring at Vassago who got out an example that Dee, an artificial fluct light, never could have understood, Gabriel gave a soft cough and spoke.

“Let’s set that aside. In short, we only need to lure those integrity knights into a sufficiently wide battlefield, and we will be able to surround and eliminate them?”

“We will, in theory. Though the number of goblin and orc sacrifices will easily exceed ten thousand.”

Dee giggled, and then picked a fruit that appeared venomous judging from its color from a silver cup placed on the floor and wrapped her lips in the same shade of crimson around it as though savoring it.

It went without saying that Gabriel had no concern for any loss of infantry units. Rather, he had no qualms about trading the entire army of the Dark Territory, including Dee before his eyes, if it could crush the enemy army. In a certain sense, this battle was no different from the tactical simulations held by the operations research department in Glowgen Defense Systems on a daily basis.

He would walk across mountains of corpses, reign over the Human Empire as its new ruler, and give his first and last order to its lands. Find a girl named Alice and bring her to me. The mission in this strange world would finish then.

Arriving that thought, he felt like he would miss even this wine with its somehow eccentric flavor.

Gabriel lifted the glass and gulped down the deep violet fluid in a single go.

At this time, the hunter of souls, Gabriel Miller, had unwittingly assimilated «Alice»'s appearance in the mind with that of his first victim who had a similar name, Alicia Klingerman: chaste, young, and slender. He was convinced she lived in a city resembling his old home of Pacific Palisades; a gentle and beautiful young girl—who was powerless.

Hence, Gabriel had not noticed that one possibility.

It completely escaped his expectations: that the «Alice» he pursued could actually be an integrity knight and led the enemy army.

The long files of troops behind the command vehicle flying the emperor's flag slowly yet surely continued marching towards the western boundary.

The mountain ranges, protruding like a saw's teeth, gradually came into view beyond the bloodstained skies.

Seventh day of the eleventh month, the fourth day since they began moving.

The main force of the Dark Territory army had arrived at the base of a mountain that commanded a view of the Great Gate close to collapsing. Countless black tents prepared by the advance party lined up around the vast plateau.

Thump-thump.

Thump-thump.

The low bass that shook the ground came from the war drums the giants beat.

From the roof of the command vehicle at the end, Gabriel quietly watched over the single file of the main force spread out like countless blood cells urged on by the deafening heartbeats.

The first regiment of the advance guard, a battalion of goblin light infantry and orc heavy infantry, summed up to a fifteen thousand. They formed a column that snugly fitted into the gorge piercing through the mountain range at the edge. The giants' massive bodies were set up in various places among the ranks like siege towers and though they numbered fewer than five hundred, they would likely serve well as the main tanks supporting the infantry units.

The demi-humans were followed behind by the second regiment: the five thousand from the Pugilists' Guild and another, likewise, five thousand from the Order of the Dark Knights. The young knight who succeeded as the new dark general pled for the vanguard position to wipe the disgrace of his predecessor, but Gabriel drove him away. Expecting the entire knight unit to suffer from low morale, he decided to eliminate that uncertain element.

The third regiment comprises seven thousand ogre archers and three thousand women from the Dark Arts Users' Guild. Their duty was to charge into the gorge behind the infantry and annihilate the enemy troops with ranged attacks. According to the head of the arts users, Dee, they would be able to defeat the main force of the enemy, the integrity knights, by concentrating fire on them as long as they were within sight.

To be perfectly honest, Gabriel had to admit he had the desire to personally attempt a fight against those knights treated as invincible and devouring their souls.

However, he would lose everything with this high ranking account if there was some unexpected incident and he could produce as many of those from the Underworld, the artificial fluct lights, as he liked later on. His first priority now would be to secure «Alice» and escape from the Ocean Turtle.

Eight days inside and nearly fifteen minutes outside had passed since he logged in. To take over the entire Human Empire and pass down the order to search out Alice would take roughly ten days. In that case, it would be best to settle this war as quickly as possible—to end it in one whole day at most.

“Aah, so I won’t be getting a go?”

Vassago grumbled from his side, holding yet another bottle of whisky. Glancing over, he remonstrated in a sharp tone.

“I saw that. When that general named Shasta turned into a tornado, you left me behind and ran straight away, didn’t you?”

“Hehe, so you did see it after all, commander.”

Vassago broadly grinned without reserve.

“Look, I’ve always been specializing in *PvP*. I’m no good up against some monster without a body like that.”

Gabriel did not know how serious his subordinate was with that excuse and he stared at him briefly before curtly asking.

“Vassago, why did you volunteer for this operation?”

“By operation, you mean diving into the Underworld? Well, that’s because it looked fun, of course...”

“No, prior to that. The raid on the Ocean Turtle. You do work for Glowgen DS, but you specialize only in cyber operations, don’t you? What was your motivation for participating in an operation that might fill you with bullet holes? From your age, you are no war dog back from the Middle East like Hans or Brig either.”

While that was quite a speech for Gabriel, he naturally did not hold much interest in the human called Vassago Casals. The question of what laid under this young man's frivolous attitude simply popped into his mind.

Vassago shrugged his shoulders and replied with, "It's the same".

"The answer to that is because it looked fun too, I guess."

"Oh...?"

"If you're going on about that, you're the ridiculous one, stepping out onto the field despite being some great elite who graduated from university. Even with your experience in the army."

"I prefer to get my hands dirty."

Answering so, Gabriel muttered in his mind.

Vassago, what do you find fun? Firing guns? Or... murdering and such?

Just as he pondered on whether to question further or to cut off the conversation, the tapping of high heels sounded out from the stairs set up behind the command vehicle and the head of the Dark Arts Users' Guild, Dee Ai El, showed herself.

She gave a respectful bow and licked her lips before reporting.

"Your Majesty, the entire army is in position."

"Understood."

Aside from the main force of thirty-five thousand deployed in front, there were ten thousand reserve troops mainly consisting of goblins and orcs, and the transport unit of five thousand from the Economic Guild waiting on the left and right of the command vehicle.

This army of fifty thousand was all the military force granted to Gabriel. Hence, if he failed to break through the enemy army's guard even after exhausting all of the units, he would be forced to revise the basis of his plans. The possibility of securing Alice would fall dramatically as well.

That said, the enemy army numbered three thousand at most according to the dragon knights' scouting. In other words, they would not lose as long as they eliminated the integrity knights as planned.

"Good. How long will it be until the Great Gate crumbles?"

Dee answered Gabriel's question with her face lowered.

"We believe it to be approximately eight hours."

"Then the first division shall enter the gorge an hour before it collapses. Set up as close to the Great Gate as possible and attack as one when it breaks down. If we can break through their front, send in the second and third division and decimate the enemy in a single assault."

"Yes. We shall deliver the enemy generals' heads before the day breaks. Though it may be burnt to a crisp by then."

Giggling, Dee quickly conveyed orders to the messenger arts user waiting behind and bowed deeply before descending the stairs.

Gabriel looked towards the gigantic rock gate towering in the distance from the command vehicle's roof.

Though it must be over two miles away, its weight was palpable as though crushing him from above. That gate collapsing as a whole would surely be quite a sight.

However, that would be when the true banquet begins. The releasing and disappearing of thousands of souls would certainly be an extraordinarily beautiful lightshow.

The Rath researchers cooped up in the upper shaft of the Ocean Turtle must regret being unable to watch this spectacle on the grandest scale that they had scheduled from inside.

Thump-thump, thump-thump.

Thump, thum. Thump, thum.

The war drums seemed to stir up the hunger and rage emanating from the forces numbering in the tens of thousands as their tempo accelerated.

8

“So... please take care of Kirito in my place.”

Alice stared at the young girls' faces in turn as she spoke.

They were the novice trainees, no, they were already swordswomen in their own right; Tiezé Shtolienen and Ronye Arabel nodded with their backs straight.

“Yes, please leave him to us, Alice-sama.”

“We will be sure to keep Kirito-senpai safe.”

Answering so, Tiezé and Ronye firmly gripped the newly constructed wheelchair's handles with their left and right hands respectively.

The slim chair that gleamed silver grey was transformed from an extra set of full body armor in the stores tent via Alice's arts. It was lighter than the wooden wheelchair used in Rulid and had more strength too.

That said, nothing could be done about the weight of the two swords Kirito firmly hugged onto while seated. Though she was doubtful inside if the girls could even move it, the pair magnificently matched their breathing and pushed the wheelchair straight in front of Alice.

This meant they would not be slowed down even if ordered to retreat at once. At any rate, they would be driven to retreat from the gorge only when the whole Defense Army was certain to be surrounded and decimated.

If she were to state her true feelings, she would rather they flee west with Kirito the very moment they saw the slightest danger in the war's situation. However, that would only stall their fate for several months—no, several weeks.

If the Defense Army lost, the four knights protecting the mountain range at the edge should retreat as well and evacuate the inhabitants of each town and village as they made the walls of Centoria, the central capital, the final line of defense. However, that would be futile resistance all the same. The invading army would trample them down soon enough, and both that beautiful capital and the white marble Central Cathedral would be burnt down. There was no escape within the sealed walls of the mountain range at the edge...

Alice bent her knees and matched her eyes to Kirito's before peeking into them.

She had spoken to Kirito, held his hands, and hugged him whenever she found the time in these five days since she arrived at the camp site. However, he had not shown any proper response up to this day.

"Kirito. ...This may be our final farewell."

Forcing her smile to remain, Alice whispered to the black-haired youth.

"Esteemed uncle said you would decide how this battle goes. I believe so, too. You were the one who formed this Defense Army, after all."

In fact, if it was not for Kirito and Eugeo, it would be Highest Minister Administrator and the Order of the Integrity Knights lined up at the Great East Gate about now along with an army of that abominable sword golem.

With two or three thousands of those sword golems and their tremendous fighting strength, the Dark Territory army of fifty thousand would be nowhere near enough. However, that was equivalent to the Human Empire's downfall. Tens of thousands of the Human Empire's citizen would have served as materials for the golems. Kirito and the rest had prevented that tragedy with the sacrifice of a single life and mind.

Still, if the Human Empire Defense Army led by Bercouli were to lose as things went, a horrible tragedy would befall the masses nonetheless even if in a different form.

“...I will be trying my hardest too. I will burn through this life I received from you without a single drop remaining. So... if I were to fall and call for you with the strength I have left, be sure to stand and draw that sword. As long as you wake up, the number of enemies would not matter, be it thousands or tens of thousands. A miracle will happen again and save the Human Empire... everyone. After all, you...”

—Are the strongest swordsman who defeated that Highest Minister.

Murmuring so in her chest, Alice reached out with both hands and firmly embraced Kirito’s withered body.

Releasing him after the embrace that could have lasted anything from an instant to several minutes long, Alice stood up and noticed Ronye’s sight, staring hard at her while a complicated light flickered in her blue eyes. She blinked in uncertainty and immediately realized.

“Ronye-san. You... love Kirito, don’t you?”

Upon saying so with a smile, the petite girl covered her mouth with both hands as she turned crimson from her cheeks to around her ears. Her eyelashes lowered and she answered in a muffled voice.

“N-No, that’s... I couldn’t possibly... I am simply his valet novice trainee, so...”

You could, certainly. You are the heiress of a family holding peerage, aren’t you, Ronye-san? I was born in a remote, small village and I do not even know where Kirito came from...”

Ronye suddenly shook her head violently as she interrupted Alice’s words.

“That’s not it! I... I...”

Large drops gathered in Ronye’s eyes as her voice broke off and Tiezé gently supported her with her right hand. Her eyes in the colors of autumn were wet as well and she began speaking in a quavering voice.

“Alice-sama... do you know of the taboo Kirito-senpai and Eugeo-senpai committed?”

“Ye... yes. I heard there was a dispute in the academy... and that they murdered another student.”

Alice still recalled the significant shock from the arrest order she received from the Chamber of the Elders half a year ago as an ignorant vanguard of the Axiom Church. An unthinkable taboo like murdering another student in the academy in the capital was unheard of even in the history books of the church.

Alice nodded and Tiezé continued her questions.

“Then... have you heard about why they had committed that taboo...?”

“No... I haven’t...”

A single abrupt shout re-emerged from the depths of her ears the moment she shook her head.

It was immediately after she was thrown out the cathedral’s walls with Kirito, those words he shouted at Alice when she screamed that she did not require help from a criminal...

[—The Taboo Index doesn’t forbid it, so the upper class nobles can do as they please with girls that didn’t even commit a single crime, like Ronye and Tiezé... do you honestly believe that’s forgivable?!]

That was it. I heard the names of this pair back then.

The “upper classman” must have referred to the student Kirito cut down. And as for “do as they please”—

Before Alice who opened her eyes widely, Tiezé’s voice shook as it began to speak.

“...Elite swordsmen-in-training Raios Antinous and Humbert Zizek had repeatedly given humiliating orders to our friend, Novice Trainee Frenica Szeski. We protested against them, but used words considered insolent in our indignation at that time. As such, through the nobles’ punishment authority based on the Empire Fundamental Law...”

It must be difficult just remembering what occurred after that. Tiezé’s voice at stuck in her throat and Ronye let out faint sobs with her head down.

There is no need to speak any further; Alice thought so and was about to voice it out, but the red-haired girl resumed her story with resolve.

“...Kirito-senpai and Eugeo-senpai raised their swords to save us from that difficult punishment. If only I had been a little wiser, that incident would not have happened. They would not have fought against the church to reform the law and no one would have died. We... have committed an unredeemable crime. So... we have no right to say we love them even if we had to forfeit our mouths...”

Upon speaking out all that she harbored, tears finally flowed from Tiezé’s eyes as well. The young girls embraced each other tight and let out forlorn weeps filled with regrets far too heavy for their age.

Alice grinded her teeth hard as she looked up towards the small window that supplied light.

She thought she knew the rampant depravity of the four empires’ nobles. Gluttony, hoarding, and debauchery.

Still, Integrity Knight Alice had once thought she would be contaminated if she knew too much and averted her eyes from the nobles' actions. Whatever they did, it was of no concern while it was no taboo—after all, she was summoned from the Celestial World to guard the law. She had continued believing in that.

However, turning a deaf ear was sin in itself. What Kirito detested, what the Taboo Index was unconcerned with, a truly abhorrent sin. Compared to herself who had done nothing, the two girls before her eyes had several times as much mettle.

Alice took in a deep breath and spoke in a forceful tone.

“No, you are wrong. The two of you are not at fault.”

The one who immediately raised her face was Ronye. Despite her impression of her always hiding in Tiezé's shadow, the girl cried out this one time with a strong light in her eyes.

“You would not understand, Alice-sama... you would not understand as an honorable integrity knight, Alice-sama! Those men had done as they liked with our bodies and stained our pride with sin!”

“Your body is no more than where your heart resides.”

She firmly knocked her right fist against the center of her chest as she replied so.

“The heart... the soul is what truly matters. And you are the only one to decide how your soul is.”

Alice lowered her eyelids and focused her awareness within herself.

Roughly two weeks ago, Alice had regained her lost right eye through the power of her heart—of incarnation, in other words—during that assault on Rulid Village. She had personally experienced how a strong, earnest wish could change the flesh without reliance on arts.

Still, that alone would not suffice now. She had to change not just her flesh, but the clothing on her body with the power of incarnation.

It should be possible. Had she not seen Kirito do it once before? When he went up against Highest Minister Administrator with two swords, he had changed into a long overcoat made from black leather from some other land utterly unlike his clothes until then.

Return. To the Alice before she woke up in that unfamiliar pure white tower and shut away her heart within thick ice to drown out the unease and desolation of her lost memories.

—I am the same as you, Ronye, Tiezé. I was born as a human, made many mistakes, shouldered heavy sins, and now stand here. You can claim Kirito and Eugeo's murder to be your fault... but if I had not forgotten about the taboos and not touched the Dark Territory's earth, they would not have even aimed for the capital in the first place.

Yes, that is my sin. Even without those memories, Alice Schuberg is no stranger, but who I once was. Those days in Rulid had taught me that.

Even with her eyes shut, she knew the white, warm light had enveloped her body.

Alice slowly lifted her eyelids.

As her face looked down, what she first saw was the skirt she was wearing. However, it was not dyed in the pure white of the Axiom Church, but a clear blue like the autumn skies.

Atop the skirt was a plain apron. The golden armor and gauntlets were gone. When she touched her head with her hand, her fingertips brushed against a large ribbon. Her hair seemed a little shorter.

Raising her face, her eyes met with Ronye and Tiezé's while they were shocked into silence.

“...See? Your body and appearance depends merely on your heart.”

Of course, this transformation did not last forever. She would likely return to her original knight look the moment her mental concentration faltered. Still, the girls should understand now. How Alice, Kirito, and Eugeo thought.

“No one can sully your heart. This is how I should have grown up, born in that remote village. But when I was eleven, I was taken to the capital as a criminal and became an integrity knight with my memories erased by an art. I once cursed that fate of mine...”



What Alice spoke of was a huge secret known by only Knight Commander Bercouli aside from herself. However, she believed these two could handle it and continued her words.

“But... I had things I could do, things that I should do; Kirito taught me that. That is why I will not waver any longer. I decided that I will accept myself and move on.”

Raising both hands, Alice gripped Ronye’s and Tiezé’s hands with strength.

“You are the same. You have a wide, long, straight road that belongs to you alone.”

Drops of water splashed onto their held hands.

The tears along the girls’ cheeks seemed completely different from before, gleaming beautifully with iridescent light.

Pulling Kirito who sat on the wheelchair into one last strong embrace, Alice entrusted him to Ronye and Tiezé, and left the tent.

Eldrie immediately ran towards her as though he had been lying in wait and sang her praises.

“Oh, what beauty... it is as if Solus’s radiance had focused onto your being... you are simply at your finest, my master, Alice-sama...”

“It will be smeared with dirt within an hour of the battle, anyway.”

She glanced down at herself while bluntly responding.

The transformation phenomenon earlier was already gone, and her golden breastplate and pure white skirt dazzled in the sunlight. She looked up towards the western skies while thinking about adding sky-blue cloth to it somewhere if she came back alive.

Solus had already begun its descent. It would be roughly three hours before it vanished over the horizon? The Great East Gate would have its Life extinguish then. The seal of three hundred years would unravel at last.

She did what she could.

Alice was added to the Defense Army's training through these five days and she thought the soldiers' skills were polished well in just this half year. What surprised her was how all of them had learnt the consecutive sword techniques absent from the traditional styles.

When she asked, it seemed Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio had generously taught the techniques she had polished over the many years. Though three hits was apparently their maximum, it should serve as a reassuring weapon against the goblins and orcs who wave around machetes according to their instincts.

Of course, the presence of the dark knights with their own consecutive techniques would be too much for the soldiers. The integrity knights would have to take over then, including against the pugilists who possessed even quicker consecutive attacks.

Most crucial would be to hold back the battalions of demi-humans who would march in after the battle began. Next would be to endure the ogres' longbows and the dark arts users' ranged offensive arts with as little casualties as possible.

The outcome of the operation lay entirely on Alice's shoulders—

Pulling her sight back down from the skies, she saw the numerous columns of smoke from the supply unit behind cooking the final meal. She should soon meet up with Ronye, Tiezé, and Kirito, who they would bring along, there.

She would protect them. No matter what.

"Alice-sama, it is about time for..."

Nodding at Eldrie's voice, Alice drew back a foot to turn about.

However, she stopped that foot there and stared at her one and only disciple.

"...W-What is it?"

Gazing at the young knight blinking with hesitation, Alice relaxed her pursed lips just a little.

"...You have served me well all this while, Eldrie."

"Yes... w-what!?"

She gently placed her right hand at his left hand, while he stood dumbfounded, and continued.

"It has been a relief having you by my side. You requested guidance from me, without any real achievement to my name, instead of a senior male knight like Deusolbert... in consideration for my heart, didn't you?"

"Not... nothing of that sort, I am above such insolence! I merely held great admiration for the magnificence of Alice-sama's swordsmanship in the innermost depths of my heart..."

Alice gripped Eldrie's hand while he vehemently shook his head as he denied, released it, and smiled again.

"I had continued down that bleak journey to reach today only with your support. Thank you, Eldrie."

Large tear drops welled up all of a sudden in the speechless young knight's eyes.

".....Alice-sama... why... do you speak only of the past?"

His hoarse voice asked.

“Why do you speak as though your journey will end in this land, Alice-sama? I... I have barely learnt enough from you yet. I am still nowhere close to your level in both the sword and arts. You must continue to train and guide me from now on as well...!”

Right before her quivering, extended right hand reached herself—

Alice switched suddenly into a stern shout.

“Integrity knight, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one!”

“Ye... yes!”

The knight stood at attention with his hand frozen in position.

“I shall give you my final command as your master. Survive. Survive and see peace arrive with your own eyes, and take them back. Your true life and those you truly love.”

The «memory fragments» belonging to all of the integrity knights aside from Alice and their «loved ones» were still sealed on the top floor of the cathedral even now. There must be a method to return them to how they should be.

Nodding towards Eldrie who still stood straight while silently shedding tears, Alice rapidly turned about. Her golden hair and pure white skirt cut through the cold autumn air.

She saw the vast gorge sunken in dim darkness and the Great East Gate straight before her eyes.

Alice would now begin chanting an extremely large-scale sacred art for the first time. She would condense the sacred power filling the gorge’s air to inflict a hard blow on the enemy army.

If she made a single mistake in the art—no, if her focus strayed for the slightest bit, the converged sacred art would explode and probably erase Alice’s existence without a trace.

However, she no longer felt fear. She had spent a fulfilling five days with Bercouli, Fanatio, and Eldrie as an integrity knight, and lived with her little sister, Selka, for half a year as Alice of Rulid.

And above all, she had discovered her human emotions—sorrow, anger, and even love—by meeting Eugeo and Kirito, and crossing swords sincerely interacting with them.

She hoped for nothing more.

Sharp noises rang out from Alice's armor as she advanced straight towards the center of the Defense Army, one step after another, awaiting the start of the war.

(To Be Continued)

Afterword

Good day, I'm Kawahara Reki. I am currently writing this under tremendous agitation. If you were to ask why, it would be because I had utterly forgotten that the afterword even exists for quite a number of days!

Right, let's try that again, thank you very much for reading "Sword Art Online 15 Alicization Invading".

The previous volume, "Uniting", did end off with a "To be continued" despite the big boss of the church, Highest Minister Administrator, defeated and all, so here's how it continued on from then... The stage for the story has broken out from the boundaries of the Human Empire and shifted to the vast, boundless Dark Territory. Various things have made a suspicious turn: Asuna and co. were attacked onboard the Ocean Turtle in the real world, Kikuoka-san had changed into a Hawaiian shirt from a yukata, and so on...

And with all that, The Human Empire Defense Army will begin the war with the Dark Territory army in the next volume. The Alicization arc that began in the 9th volume is finally charging into its climax, so do come along; I'm hoping for your support!

In regards to recent events, I participated in America's largest anime / manga convention, «Anime Expo» with the illustrator, abec-san, as guests. It was my first time visiting Los Angeles (also, it would be my second time visiting America), but the streets were huge just like the event space was! And the enthusiasm of the all-American anime fans filling the air was incredible!

Naturally, I am glad many SAO fans came over. Coincidentally, it made me realize yet again that SAO only grew this large, from its days on the web, to Dengeki Bunko, to its animation and game adaption, thanks to everyone who rooted for it over these ten plus years.

I believe the second season of the television animation would have begun broadcasting when this book is published. The setting has made a sudden change to the «world of guns» from the first season's, but everyone on the staff and cast, starting from the director, will put all they have into showing how cool gun action is along with that never-changing element of what makes SAO what it is, so please cheer the animation on as well.

I guess my time's almost up, so I'll keep the thanks and apologies short! I thank abec-san for drawing the many new characters filled with charm appearing in this volume one after another, my supervisor, Miki-san, for coming with us to LA, the next in charge, Tsuchiya-san, for protecting Japan while we were gone, and everyone who have read this far, thank you very much!

A Certain Day in July, 2014 Kawahara Reki

Credits

Translation¹:

Tap

Thanks!

Compiled:

Mamue

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