

ソードアート・オンライン
オルタナティブ

ガンゲイル オンライン II

—セカンド・スquad・ジャム(上)—

時雨沢恵一

イラスト／黒星紅白
監修／川原礫

Sword Art Online Alternative
Gun Gale Online II
2nd Squad Jam



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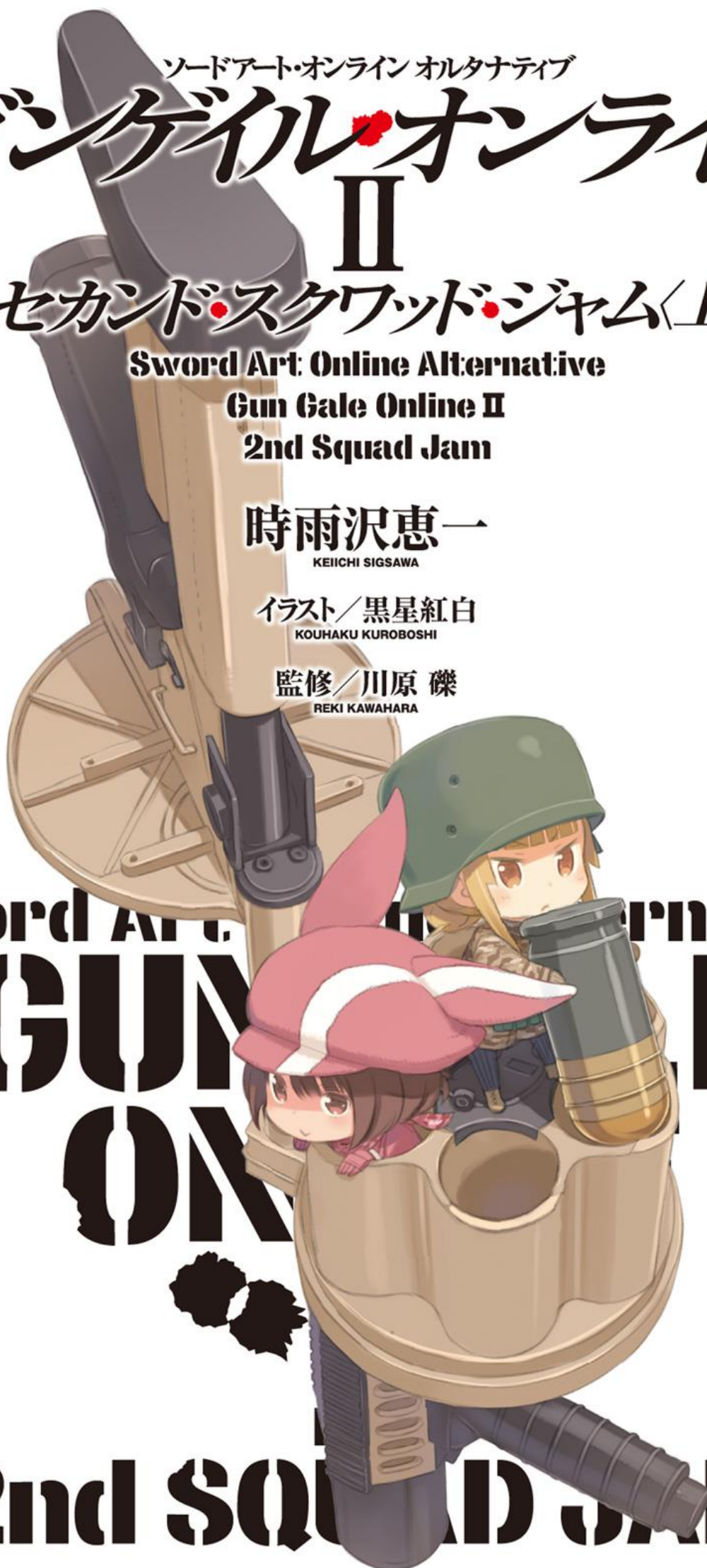
KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

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REKI KAWAHARA

Sword Art: Online Alternative
GUN GALE ONLINE II

2nd SQUAD JAM



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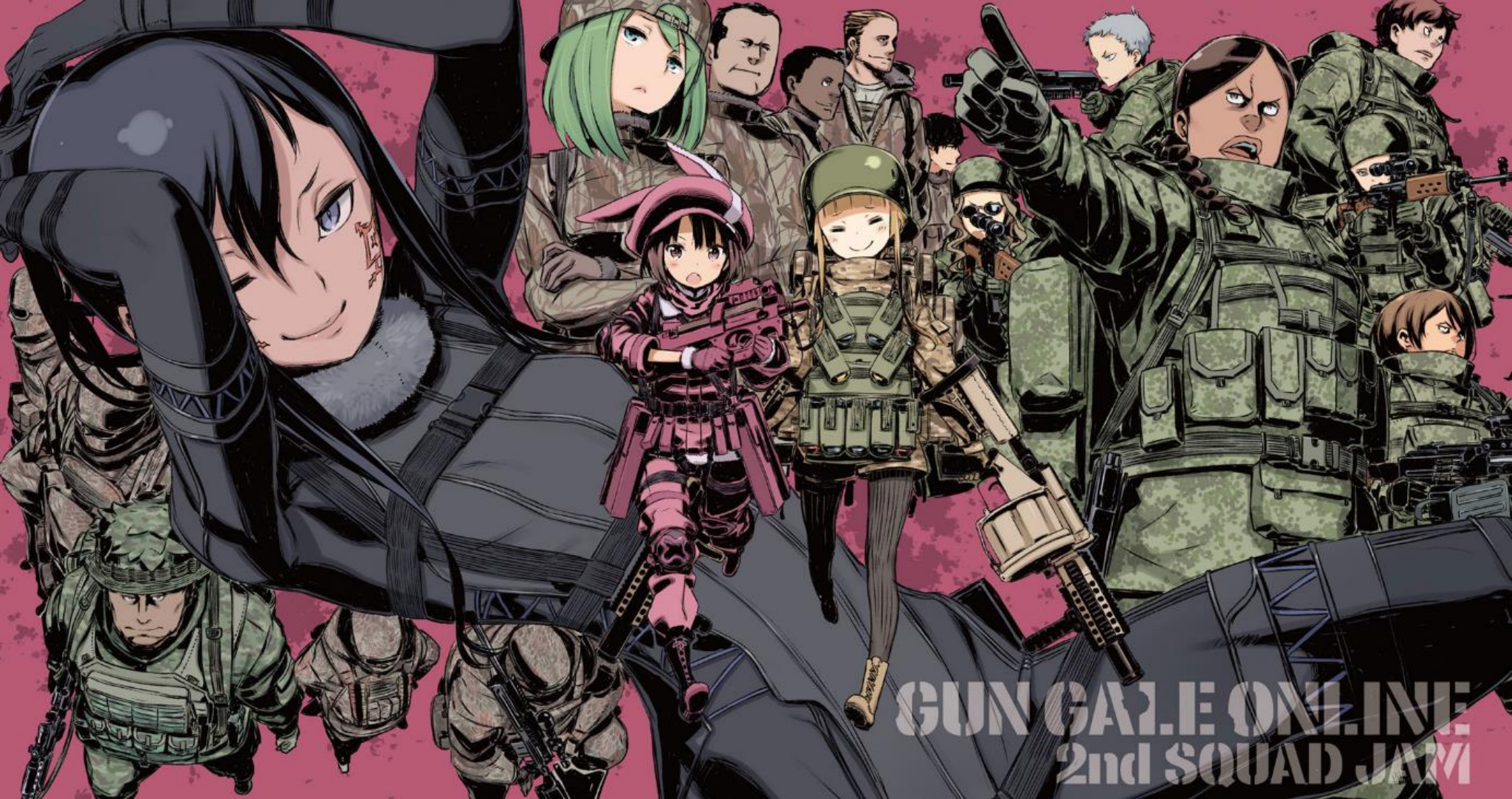
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GUN GALE ONLINE
2nd SQUAD JAW



Sword Art: Online Alternative

GUN GALE

ONLINE

II

2nd SQUAD JAM

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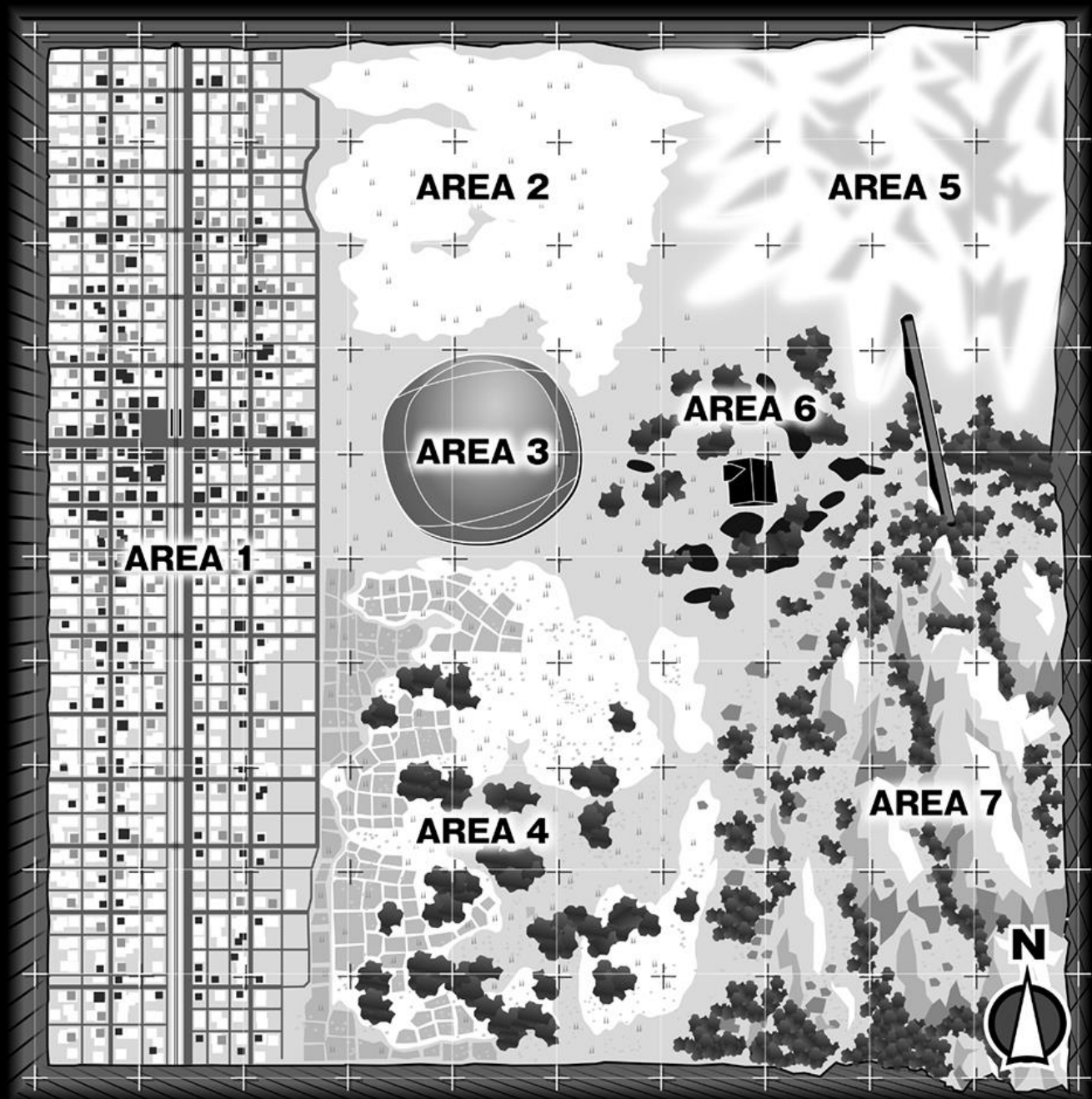
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THE 2nd SQUAD JAM FIELD MAP

第2回スクワッド・ジャム
フィールドマップ



AREA 1 : Town

AREA 2 : Hills

AREA 3 : Dome

AREA 4 : Fields and Forests

AREA 5 : Snowy Mountains

AREA 6 : Prairie

AREA 7 : Rocky Mountains



Prologue

“Ah, eh? Ehm..... Err..... err, ehm..... that is.....”

Kohiruimaki Karen was in an awful state of confusion.

‘How did I get into a situation like this?’

She did not understand. She did not understand at all.

The 183 cm-tall person, who had an atypically high stature for a nineteen year-old Japanese girl, had her back pressed against a wallpaper. She could feel the chill of the wall with her back.

Beside her head, with its short, black hair, was a hand.

The man’s muscular right hand was pressed against the wall beside her left ear.

And in front of her was of course the owner of that hand. His burly chest that caused his T-shirt to stretch, and his face with a sharp gleam in his eyes, was awfully close to her.

‘Aah....., is this..... the so-called..... 《Kabe-don》 ?

In her confusion, Karen was somehow able to understand that much.

Kabe-don.

This was explained as something like “the act of a man cornering a girl against a wall, and pressing his hand on the wall with a ‘don’ sound.”

As for what he was pressing her for, if the man wasn't seeking money, he would usually be seeking intimacy. A use of force by a man irritated by the girl's vague attitude.

She understood that, but could not even imagine that this would be done to her. Even in her wildest dreams, Karen could not imagine falling into such a *shōjo manga*¹ heroine-like situation.

'I'm glad that the man is tall to some extent.....'

Karen thought deep in her heart.

Although the person in front of her was shorter than her, he was still at least 175 cm tall. One way or another, the *kabe-don* was carried out just like in the pictures.

The man, who seemed to be an *ikemen*² several years older than her, shouted in a tense *baritone voice*.

"Have you ever seriously loved someone? Have you loved someone so much that you'd be willing to devote your life to them?"

Still confused, she did not have the time to make up a lie.

Karen answered honestly, as if she had been given a truth serum.

"W-well no....."

And then, the man,

"Then, you absolutely don't understand how I feel right now!"

Shouted once again, with an expression filled with sorrow, pain and anger.

1 Manga aimed at a teenage female readership.

2 An *ikemen* (イケメン) refers to a good-looking man. The English equivalent would be "hunk" or "cool guy".

‘Ah? Why? What’s going on?’

One after another, question marks floated in Karen’s mind and became entangled.

This was an event that took place at 15:42 on Sunday, 16th of March, 2026.

An event that took place 19 days before the opening of the second Squad Jam.



SECT.1

Soldiers' Tea Party

SECT.1

Soldiers' Tea Party

15th of February, 2026. Sunday. Around 1.5 hours past noon.

In a room of a metropolitan high-rise apartment house in Tokyo on a very cloudy day,

“Wow!”

“Yay yay!”

“Nice moves!”

“As expected.”

“How amazing!”

“That was fast!”

Several high-pitched cheers flew about.

It was a tranquil, ten jō³-sized *living room* surrounded by white walls.

There were six high-school girls dressed in uniforms, sitting on a *cream*-coloured carpet, and excitedly watching a 42-*inch* liquid crystal *TV* placed in a corner of the room.

3 A jō (畳, tatami mat) is a traditional Japanese unit used for measuring the size of a room. It is equal to 1.653 square metres (the size of a Nagoya tatami mat).

Of those six, five were black-haired girls with a skin colour typical to the Japanese. A single one of them was blonde and white-skinned.

There was a slightly older, and outstandingly tall for a Japanese female, girl behind these six. While sitting with her long legs bent at the knees,

“I have a mixed feeling about you cheering like that again.....”

She let out those words as she looked at the swaying of the girls' hair.

And, she added this.

“Even though our gunfight has yet to make an appearance on the video.....”

The *computer graphics* were so detailed that the scene depicted on the large liquid crystal *TV* screen barely differed from a scenery of the real world.

The sun was still up, yet the skies were dyed in red as if it was sunset; and an SF movie-like spaceship lodged in a swamp could be seen from a bird's-eye view.

“I want to see that *battle* again! Can we rewind it? Karen-san.”

One of the uniformed high-school girls turned around, with her black braid swaying.

“By all means. As many times as you like.”

The tall woman who was the owner of the room, Kohiruimaki Karen, answered with a smile.

Having received consent, the high-school girl repeatedly hit the “slight rewind” button on the *TV remote* in her hands. Each time, the scene would change completely, until it finally stopped at the part that the girl sought.

The scene reflected in the CG video was an open location that looked like a foreign, high-class residential area.

A crossroad on a broad street.

The video overlooked a quiet intersection from several *metres* above ground, where a cracked pavement, with various junk such as *tyres*, *shopping carts*, a small *suitcase* lying around could be seen.

Eventually, four men, dressed in camouflage and with black *rifles* in their hands, appeared on the screen. Of course, they were *characters* visualised with CG.

The men entered the crossroads and vigilantly surveyed the area. They were all wearing masks, thus it was impossible to tell their expressions. Their voices could not be heard either.

“Here it comes.....”

A moment after one of the high-school girls muttered this, the on-screen *suitcase* cracked. It suddenly opened on its own like a baked hamaguri⁴, and what came out was...

“There!”

A *pink* girl.

A small girl who wasn't even 150 *cm* tall. Her combat uniform, *boots*, *gloves*, *cap*, *magazine*, and even the strangely-shaped device in her hands were all *pink*.

4 Common orient clam (*Meretrix lusoria*).

Then, the device spewed fire and a series of high-pitched gunshots came from the *TV's monitor*, demonstrating that the device was a gun. The face and body of the man closest to the pink girl was showered with in bullets, parts of his body that were hit shone in red, and small particles of light scattered from them. It wasn't a depiction of fresh blood, only a CG "hit effect" created from light.

Then, the man lost his strength, collapsed on the spot, and a **【D e a d】** — in other words, a red marker denoting "death", lit up with a *pikon* sound. He was dead.

The *pink* girl then fired at the next man closest to her while charging towards him. The man did return fire with his *rifle*, but not a single bullet hit the *pink* girl. Conversely, the man was turned into a beehive.

Thus, the second person was also killed in the time it takes to say 'ah', then the *pink* girl leapt to the side of his corpse to hide.

The surviving two men trained their *rifles* at the girl, but one of them obviously hesitated to fire, while the other fired, but could not hit the small target that was using the corpse as a shield. Like the ones before, he was shot and died.

The *pink* girl then rolled on the ground like a spinning top, and drenched the last man in a bloodbath of hit *effects*. Having killed all of them in several seconds, the *pink* girl ran away from her current position with an extreme *dash*. She disappeared outside the screen at an unimaginable speed.

Having pressed the stop *button* on the *remote*, the high school girl,

"Yep, no matter how many times I see it, it's still amazing! Karen-san!"

Said as she turned around once again, and Karen answered with a bitter smile.

“That was— I was able to do it because it was “LLENN.”

At that moment, she heard a strong reply from that small body.

“That’s the same thing! It’s the *player* who controls the *avatar*! That’s why, LLENN, the victor of the *Squad Jam*, is Karen-san right here!”

By 2026 AD, *games* had achieved tremendous evolution.

It was the prosperity of “*FullDive-type virtual reality (VR) games*, which cut off all sensations of the body, and instead sent new senses to the brain, allowing the player to enjoy the illusion that they were actually in the game.

Anyone in the possession of a *computer*, the *game software*, and a large, *goggle-type* device called the 《*AmuSphere*》 could easily take a trip to a different world.

The *AmuSphere* cut off the senses of the body, and sent fake sensations directly to the brain.

Because of this, *players* would enter a state that felt like “a dream where one knew that it is a dream”, and could manipulate one’s alter ego in a VR world — an “*avatar*”, as if controlling one’s own body.

Being able to control another self, just like a “*dream game*.”

A great variety of VR *games*, having blossomed simultaneously like flowers, were available—

But among them was a VR-MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer *Online Role Playing Game*) that specialised in battles with guns.

Its name was— 《*Gun Gale Online*》 . Abbreviated to GGO.

Set on an Earth that was laid to ruin during the last war, mankind unexpectedly returned via a spaceship and began rampaging with guns in their hands. Sometimes fighting against *monsters* and the like, sometimes against other *player characters*.

The weapons used were guns.

Both optical guns fitting for an SF setting, and live ammunition guns as they appeared in reality, were available. It was a *game* where it was possible to fight relentlessly with guns in a *virtual* world, and where *gun maniacs* could let loose.

Moreover, exchanging in-*game* currency to electronic *money* was officially not prohibited in GGO. Because of that, it became a place rampant with *professional players* who were in a frenzy to earn a living through playing— no, it could already be called “working” .

In this game called GGO, a *battle royale* tournament to “decide the strongest *player*” is held. It’s called the 《*Bullet of Bullets*》 . Abbreviated to BoB.

The BoB is an event that raises a wave of excitement throughout GGO. The tournament had been held thrice thus far, and its scale continued to increase.

Having seen one such BoB tournament, a certain person was struck with an idea. “I want to see a *team battle royale* rather than a one on one fight” .

That person sent a request to GGO's management company, an organisation, known as 《Zaskar》, that is registered in the United States. And it decided to organise a *game* tournament with him as the *sponsor*.

It was a *battle royale* tournament, like the BoB, that consisted of *teams* up to six members—

And it was called “Squad Jam”. Abbreviated to SJ. In the army, *squad* was the term for “^{buntai}team”. *Jam* had the meaning of “being cramped”.

As an individual-sponsored *mini* tournament, the SJ was held two weeks earlier on the 1st of February. It could not be compared to the level of the BoB, which had a live broadcast on a net broadcaster, but it was considerably exciting nonetheless.

The battles were only given a live broadcast in an in-game bar that became the *main* venue for the event. A fierce gun battle among twenty three *teams* unfolded in a special *field* that was 10km wide in all four directions.

The audience watched the broadcast, while enjoying drinks, to see which *team* would survive, and—

To everyone's great surprise, the winners of the battle, which took 1 hour 28 minutes and totaled 49,810 bullets spent, was a *team* that participated with only two players, the bare minimum.

One of the two was a rough-looking giant who excelled in shooting and whose *character name* was “M”.

The other was—

A tiny girl, dressed entirely in *pink*, controlled by Kohiruimaki Karen.

A *truck* advancing along the road of a residential district was displayed on the screen.

It was a rustic military truck that had numerous armour plates attached to the side of the cab and hood. Crushing the scattered trash on the cracked, paved road with its large tyres, the truck drove at a considerable speed until it stopped in front of a mansion.

“So Saki-chan and the others managed to get there from the edge of the *map* that fast because you had that *truck*, huh.”

Karen said to the braided girl.

“Yep!”

The girl quickly turned around and answered in a cheerful voice.

Her name was “Nitobe Saki”. She was a second-year at a school affiliated with the prestigious women’s university that Karen attended, and the head of the rhythmic gymnastics club.

At that moment, the *TV* screen showed a rough-looking, huge female *character* being the first to get off the passenger seat.

Being at least 180 *cm*-tall, having well-developed muscles and a massive chest, the woman looked like a female *pro wrestler*. If it weren’t for the three brown braids hanging down from her right and left, it would probably be hard to even tell her gender. Age-wise, she looked like she was in her mid-thirties... or more like easily older than that.

She was wearing camouflage clothes, with small green dots, from top to bottom. And she was holding a large *backpack* in her hands.

This strong-looking female soldier, whose *character name* was “Eva,” was Saki’s GGO *avatar*.

“Hmm, no matter how many times I see it, it still looks scary—strong.....”

Saki quickly reacted to Karen’s voice. Cutely puffing her cheeks,

“Hey! Karen-san, you were just about to say “scary” !”

“Sorry sorry. Yeah, but, it does look scary.”

Karen apologised with a smile and then affirmed it, after which, one of the girls, who had *ashortcut* hairstyle, *followed* up.

“Boss is the strongest of us after all!”

The name of the girl who said that with a carefree smile was “Fujisawa Kana.” She was a girl with shoulder-length hair and a determined expression.

Like Saki, Kana was a second-year at the attached high school, and she was Saki’s childhood bosom friend who also supported the rhythmic gymnastics club as its vice-president.

Saki, who was called by the *name* “Boss” in both *RL* and *VR*, said,

“Kana-cchi’s *avatar* is the same! —There, please look at it, Karen-san! “Sophie’s” burly figure!”

With her small hand, she pointed at the screen.

On it, a *character* jumped off the load-carrying tray. It was a short, and appropriately wide, woman with a grim expression. Her name was Sophie.

Her small but wide outfit made her look like a *fantasy world dwarf*. Her long, brown hair was tied together at the back of her head.

The weapon in Sophie's hand was a Russian-made 《PKM *Machine Gun*》 that looked considerably heavy.

“Ahaha. —You both look really strong.”

Smiling carefreely, Karen...

Remembered the time she tried to “kill” them.

She arbitrarily imagined that they were insulting her, and thus she was driven by the urge to find a gun—

And as a result, that was deciding factor for her participation in SJ; it was foreshadowed.

‘I don't know how my life will change.’

Karen thought.

“Okay! Next up is *me*⁵!”

One of the girls raised her white hand.

She was a Caucasian girl with transparent, golden, shoulder-length, *wavy* hair and blue pupils.

Her height was about the same as the other girls', but for a Caucasian girl, she was considerably short. Her Japanese was very good, and her pronunciation did not feel out of place at all.

5 Milana uses the first-person pronoun *watashi*, but in katakana. This is probably because Milana is not a native Japanese speaker.

“Okay, Milana-chan.”

Karen responded by calling her name.

The first-year girl was “Milana Sidorova”. Her parents were Russian traders. Milana had traveled back and forth between Tokyo and Moscow since she was a child, but starting with her second year in middle school, she had continuously attended their school.

A *character* holding a long and narrow gun stepped out of the driver’s seat on the screen.

The *character*, who was Milana’s other self, was named “Tohma”. The at least 175 *cm* tall figure had a matching slender body. Underneath her green *knit cap*, was glossy, black short-cut hair. Her garments were camouflage clothes, similar to her companions’. And as for her weapon, she had a famous, Russian-made *semi-auto* sniper rifle, the 《Dragunov》.

Saki halted the footage, and explained to Karen.

“You see, surprisingly, Milana-chan can operate a *manual transmission* car! She was taught that by her car-loving father in Russia.”

“Oh. So that’s how.....”

Karen expressed her understanding. If one was able to do something in *RL*, they would be able to do it in *GGO* too.

“Now for the next one!”

With Saki’s words and her press of the *button*, the video resumed. The next *character* quickly stepped down from the load-carrying tray.

It was a female *character* that looked considerably old, had red hair and a freckled face. She was tall, had broad shoulders and gave off the feeling of a strong mother. Her armament was a PKM *machine gun*. She had a *rucksack* with spare gun barrels and spare ammunition cases. On the sides of the *rucksack* hung three *plasma grenades* on each side.

“Yeah yeah! That’s me~e!”

A girl, sitting at the side of the *table* full of sweets and bearing absolutely no resemblance to the old lady on the screen, raised her voice. She was a beautiful Japanese girl with a cute, Japanese-style *bob cut*.

Her *real world* name was “Noguchi Shiori”. A second-year high school student. Her name in GGO was “Rosa”.

While looking at both the scary face of Rosa whom she had seen in SJ, and the face of the cute girl who had been controlling the avatar, Karen,

“I see, so that was Shiori-chan.....”

Said seriously.

“Hehehe!”

Seeing the genuinely shy and smiling Shiori, Karen also squinted her eyes.

On the screen, the fifth member descended.

It was a character with golden hair waving underneath her green *knit* hat, and from her appearance, she looked younger than the other *members*, around her early twenties.

She was wearing *sunglasses* and had a beautiful appearance, as if she was a foreign actress. She was holding a *Dragunov* sniper rifle.

“Ehm, that, is me.....”

The one who had moderately raised her hand was the girl with the longest black hair in the group, tied at the back of her head, who wore a gentle expression. She was a first-year named “Annaka Moe”. Her *character* name was “Anna”, so she was the one in the group whose in-game name was closest to her real name.

Karen had not even said a word, but...

“Ehm, sorry..... that my *avatar* looks, kinda stuck up.”

Moe shrunk even more than she had until now, and abruptly began apologising.

“Huh?”

Karen was unable to understand her, so Saki cut in.

“Moe-chan is ashamed that her *avatar* is far too similar to a cool *Hollywood* actress. Even though I said that there’s no need to worry about that!”

“Ah, I see...”

Finally, the shortest, though she was still at the very least 160 *cm* tall, *character* got off the truck on the screen.

Her hair was silver and *very short*. Her sharp eyes and face made her look like a fox. Her camouflaged clothes and equipment matched the other *members*, but she also had a pistol *holster* identical to *Boss’s* on her waist. The weapon in her hands was the Russian-made *submachine gun* 《PP-19 Bizon》.

“Yeah yeah! That’s me! I^{boku boku} am the person inside Tanya!”

The one who raised her hand was a girl who used the ‘boku’⁶ first person pronoun.

She had short, outstanding hair, and had an appearance that could be described as a crossdressing bishounen. Of course, she was really a girl and a first-year member of the rhythmic gymnastics club. Her name was Kusunoki Risa.

“Risa’s *RL* appearance resembles her *avatar* the most!”

Just as Saki had declared, aside from the black-silver colour difference, they both had identical *very short* hair. Though *avatar* Tanya’s eyes were probably a bit sharper.

“And that’s it! That’s the end of the attached high’s rhythmic gymnastics club’s *full member* GGO-self introduction!”

After Karen replied with ‘Yes, thanks’ to Saki’s words,

“Ehm..... Are we really, going to watch it now?”

She asked Saki and the other five, reluctant to continue.

‘Naturally Of course Obviously That’s what we came for We are!’

6 Boku (ボク) is a first person pronoun usually used by boys.



They answered simultaneously, like the rapid-fire of a machine gun, and Saki calmed her club members with her hand,

“We are, of course! Karen-san, please explain in detail how you “killed” us! Since we will reflect on it and study to become the victors of the next SJ!”

* * *

In the *Squad Jam* tournament that took place two weeks before, Karen’s, no, her *avatar* LLENN’s final—

And most formidable enemies were these girls.

Having their “*RL* leaked” unexpectedly, in other words, their real world identity discovered 2 days after the tournament, Karen and the six members of the attached high’s rhythmic gymnastics club began exchanging greetings every time they passed each other by.

Eventually, this turned into short conversations, which became somewhat long conversations, then even longer chit-chats; however, they did not have the free time for these conversations then and there, thus...

“So, why don’t you come over to my place on a day off from school? It’s just one stop by subway from here, and it shouldn’t take long to walk either.....”

Karen said without putting much thought into her words.

And just after she finished,

‘When did I become so proactive to invite someone over!’

At first, she was surprised.

And at the same time,

‘Ah, did I say something that I shouldn’t have by going with the flow?’

Karen felt pain in her heart.

‘We haven’t known each other for that long yet, and, moreover, if I say “Then come to my place, , wouldn’t the girls be cautious? Moreover, wouldn’t it be difficult to refuse?’

‘Shouldn’t I have suggested going to a cafe first?’

‘I have been feeling strangely proactive ever since the SJ, but has it gone too far, leading to me ending up reckless?’

She thought of such things in her mind while frowning, but then—

The reaction came like a storm.

‘Wha, can we We will come We’re definitely coming Thank you for having us⁷ Yay, please do let us come!’

Having received the simultaneous answer from the six girls, Karen ended up inviting friends (?) from Tokyo to her place for the first time.

The girls came over on their way back from club activities, which was why all six of them wore uniforms on a day off.

Karen prepared a large quantity of sweets and tea.

⁷ This one is using ojama shimasu (お邪魔します, lit. (excuse me for) disturbing you), a set expression used when entering someone’s home.

After eating a little, Saki asked 'Can we borrow the *TV*?'.

Karen gave her consent, but to her amazement, the girls chose to watch a recording of their battle on the *Net*-connected *TV*.

The game's management had compiled the highlights of the SJ battle broadcast into a video that was around an hour long.

It was possible to watch it either while *playing* GGO, in other words, watching it from within the *game* world after *diving* in, or by watching it in the *real* world via a *Net* connection like this.

Karen was considerably surprised, but having given them permission, she could no longer take back her words. 2 weeks had passed since the end of the SJ, but she had not seen the broadcast video yet.

In the first place, she had not even been to GGO since then.

The reason was complex: having gone that wild in SJ, she had a strong "I've had enough" feeling, and she ended up being reluctant because of the incident with M mid-way.

"Then it's the perfect time to do it! Let's watch it for research!"

Having been forcibly persuaded by the younger Saki, she had watched the *digest* thus far.

"Saki-chan, you and the others sure are serious, huh....."

Karen remarked like an old lady as she saw Saki and the others watching the battle that they had lost many times over, reflecting on it, and using it as material for research,

"Well of course! It is a part of our club activities after all!"

“Come again?”

‘GGO and rhythmic gymnastics have some sort of link?’

Karen tilted her head at those unexpected words. Saki stopped pressing the video playback *button*, and,

“Come to think of it, we have not told you about it yet, huh——”

Began talking as the representative of the club.

“Around last April, in other words, after the three first-years joined, our *teamwork* was horrible”

“Is that..... so?”

Seeing the currently close group of six, this was extremely surprising, thus,

“I can’t imagine that at all.....”

Karen remarked honestly.

“It was awful. It wasn't on the level where we would fight upon seeing each other, but whenever we had to perform together, we'd all fall apart..... Under the university's *coach's* instructions, we underwent *training* using *FullDive* technology—— Karen-san, do you know about “*FullDive Sports Simulators*” ?

“No.”

Karen could guess what it was based on the name, but shook her head. Saki then explained.

“It's training with an *avatar* with your physique using an *AmuSphere*.

It's currently popular among open-minded *coaches*, as there's no danger when suddenly trying risky techniques."

"Wow....."

Karen felt admiration. Thus far, Karen had only used VR technology to play (GGO), but in essence, it should be used for something like that.

"Of course, in the end, it's just a *simulation* in terms of *real* physical strength, but it could be used to practice moves. It would be different if there were *in-dive* tournaments, but there aren't any yet. Though there are rumours that they might eventually be held."

"It's educational. So your moves are so splendid because you've had training like that, huh."

"Ehehe. But, astounded by how bad our relationship was, or more like how poorly we matched each other⁸, our *coach* had to throw in the spoon⁹ on technique coaching in the *simulator*!"

At Saki's words, Kana, who had been listening quietly to her story from behind,

"Po~n!"

Ill-manneredly *tossed a marshmallow* that was on the *table*, as she made the sound effect for throwing,

"Okay!"

8 The original text used a modification and negative form of the expression *uma ga au* (馬が合う; lit. to suit a horse, to be a good match with one's horse), which is used in the sense "to get on well with someone".

9 Throw a/the spoon (匙を投げる, *saji o nageru*) is the Japanese equivalent of "throw in the towel".

The boku-girl Risa opposite her easily *caught* the *marshmallow* that flew for a long time, barely moving her face.

‘Bravo!’

Karen applauded in her mind.

As expected of a rhythmic gymnastics club. The thrower had excellent aim, and the catcher also did an excellent job. It did not feel like they would *miss* no matter how many times they did it. It also appeared that they could do it at longer distances.

That was probably how they managed to pull off the stunt of loading their pistol by catching a *magazine* thrown from afar.

“Hey! This is another person’s abode!”

Saki rebuked them in an old-style speech pattern, and then continued explaining.

“Astounded, our *coach* told us. 『First, become a “*team*”. We can talk then.』 . When we were troubled by how we should do that, the answer that came was——”

“I see. *Games*.”

“That’s right! With VR *game party play*, we would aim for a single goal, right! Besides, since we can have *avatars* in a different world, we can temporarily forget *RL* restraints, we thought.”

“I see.....”

Karen listened, half in surprise, half in excitement.

“*RL* restraints and so on” described Karen perfectly. A woman who could not look at her exceedingly tall self and had thus escaped to a *virtual* world was right here.

“We played a different VR *game* at first. It was the kind where you could have boisterous adventures on an unpopulated island. But, we ended up losing interest after around a week. And there was no improvement to our relationship. Eventually, just when we began to think that *games* were useless, we discovered GGO, and thought “Why don’t we try a slaughter *game* that is extremely different from our *real* selves then?”

“I see. And then, when you tried it, it all turned out w—”

“That’s right! Using guns to exterminate *monsters* and killing others is so exceedingly unrealistic that it wouldn’t come to mind, right. Nevertheless, all of us got into it— we formed a 《*Squadron*》 by the name “Shinkura”¹⁰ and became engrossed in playing as much our free time allowed.”

Squadron was the name of *teams* in GGO. A group formed together with associates. It would be equivalent to a 《*Guild*》 in a *fantasy*-type *game*.

“And so, although we still quarreled a lot along the way, lots of things happened, and the result is as you can see. After fighting *monsters* or other *players*, and going through numerous experiences of being on the verge of death, all of us became friends.”

“That’s lovely!”

Saying this with a smile, Karen pondered.

10 Shinkura (新クラ) is made from the first kanji of rhythmic gymnastics (新体操, shintaisou) and the first two kana of club (クラブ). That’s where SHINC came from, but I decided to leave the romaji version here because the name is in Japanese in this case, and no mention of the alphabet version is made.

Although they began playing to unify their *team*, they became the runner-up of SJ, so it was considerably important to them as well. She herself was winner of the tournament, but that was entirely because of M's *support* and because luck was on their side.

“And so, we are aiming to win the second SJ that might be held, and we will continue to do our best!”

“Huh? —Not, your club activities?”

“That too! Thus, we hope to receive Karen-san's, no, the *pink slaughterer girl*, LLENN's unforgivingly harsh *commentary* about the following *battle scenes*, and how we died, please!”

‘Please!’, the chorus of five followed,

“O-okay.....”

LLENN acquiesced with a bitter smile.

For the next hour or so——

Karen watched how the battle to the death between her and the six high-school girls' *avatars* unfolded.

The video was rewound again and again, changing the camera *angle* at times, and she answered Saki and the others' questions.

At the lake that became the stage for their first battle,

“Yeah, I thought I was done for when I was sniped by Tohma. That sniping was truly magnificent. If it had been just a bit higher, an instant death would have been registered. I was saved by M-san’s rapid action here.”

After disembarking in the wilderness,

“Eh? The internal discord.....? Ehm, how should I put it..... He had his circumstances, but couldn’t tell me about them clearly, so we ended up quarreling over a petty misunderstanding, you see; he was no longer able to continue with SJ, and tried to bring me, the *leader*, down to be able to drop out of the tournament. But, we resolved the misunderstanding afterwards. In the end, he did show up like he was supposed to, right? It wasn’t really a plan to use the *leader* as a decoy, but result-wise, that was the cause of our victory; strange, huh.....”

At the first battle in the wilderness,

“As for the battle with Tanya, I believe that I probably won because I was much smaller than her. It was really a close call. I heard the sound of bullets coming from behind.”

At the *scene* where she was shot by *Boss*,

“I was startled by *Boss*’s silent gun. What a scary weapon it was. I didn’t notice it at all, , and let my guard down completely falling for your trap back then. I would have died there if my *magazine* wasn’t hit instead.”

At the point when she ran away from the *machine gun* shower,

“I had no knowledge about *plasma grenade barriers*. I just didn’t have any other options, so I tried it out.....”

After she began counterattacking and took down Anna,

“When I was glared at by Rosa with her *machine gun* pointed at me, I thought that I was done for. I wonder how many times I had that thought that day..... As for M-san’s sniping later on— it didn’t produce a *Bullet Line*. Since he sniped by manually aiming. Sly, but it can’t be helped.”

After the beginning of the grand one-one-one fight against *Boss*,

“The fact that that I was shot in the chest but the bullet hit the *scan* terminal, saving me, was..... a complete fluke. I think I’d probably be NG¹¹ next time. Because you all would have followed suit.”

And, at the scene of the final conclusion,

“Ah, yeah, “P-chan” is the name of the P90 and— Ah! Don’t worry about it! I used it as a shield myself! I’ll probably buy another identical one! And dye it in *pink!*”

After the end of the video and Saki’s group’s review meeting,

“There’re still some sweets left— want some?”

Karen enquired, and

“Su~re!”

Carefree smiles and a fully in-*sync* answer came from the six. There wasn’t the slightest deviation. They were awfully close.

Karen offered the remainder of the heap of sweets that she had bought.

11 Abbreviation for “no good”.

She thought that she had bought too many of them and figured that she would just give the leftovers to her niece or eat them herself, but it seemed that they would be cleaned out today.

Despite their small bodies, all of them were big eaters. Even so, none of them put on weight. Typical of a sports club.

Holding consommé-flavoured *potato chips* in her right hand, Saki enquired.

“Karen-san, I’ll ask frankly. If a second SJ is held, do you plan to participate?”

“Hmm.....”

Halting her hand that held some shiokombu¹², which she had bought a large amount of as it was her favourite dish, though the other six hadn’t really touched it, Karen pondered.

She had magnificently won the first SJ. Considering herself back then, it was a most spectacular victory that was beyond her imagination. All the more so, for her feeling of satisfaction.

At the same time, there were a lot of issues. Getting into situations where it seemed that she would die many times over, due to carelessness, losing her P90 and so on.

The belief that she will try to do better if another one was held went up into smoke in her mind. There were no other *team* battle tournaments on that scale, and she had many dreadful experiences during the tournament, but she could not deny that she got the fruits of battle, the chance to go wild and had enjoyed it.

12 Shiokombu (塩昆布) are thin strips of kombu (edible kelp from the family Laminariaceae widely eaten in East Asia) cooked in soy sauce etc. then dried.

‘If I get an invitation from Pitohui, or team up with M—’

She had thoughts like that as well, but when she thought about M’s strange behaviour near the end of the *last* battle in the previous SJ, and Pitohui (in *RL*) who was probably the cause of it, she hesitated recklessly participating with them.

No, truth be told, even if she was invited this time, the possibility of her rejecting the invitation was high. Though she believed that she would not end up quitting GGO.

As for Pitohui, the next day after the SJ,

『Yay, congrats ! 』

She received this excessively short congratulatory *message*, but no other messages thereafter. Was she busy with work?

She had not received any *contact* from M either; well, he probably had nothing to say, so he kept quiet.

“A second one..... unless something really extraordinary happens, the chances of me participating are low, I guess..... Although some issues still remain, I can’t deny that I’m feeling like “I’ve had enough\ . Also, the *team* I had formed with M was only for that time.”

After Karen answered honestly,

“I see..... We are half happy, half disappointed. The thing that makes us “happy\ is that a formidable enemy will not be taking part. But the thing that makes us “disappointed\ is that we thought ‘We’re going to beat you next time!’”

Saki replied, representing her group's opinion. Feeling the fighting spirit of the girls staring at her fixedly from behind—

'Your motivation is greater than mine. If we have another battle, I believe I'll definitely lose.....'

Karen thought, but kept quiet. Instead,

"But, if a second one is going to take place, is it really going to be held this quickly?"

"Hmm, I don't know. But, if someone contributes money like what happened for the first one, I think that it can be held relatively easily."

"I see, it's *sponsor*-dependent, huh."

At that point, the discussion on SJ was over, and thereafter, they continued with girl-talks until around 1700 hours.

The topics kept *jumping* from *RL* to *GGO* to *RL* again in succession.

The rhythmic gymnastics club girls talked a lot about themselves, and, at the same time, asked about Karen as well.

Meanwhile, Karen told them the story of her height *complex* and even how she began playing *GGO* relatively easily.

She also told them about how she had got over it; how it resulted in resolutely cutting her hair without telling anyone anything, and surprised her elder sister's family, who lived above, so much that they jumped in surprise; and then how they suspected that she suffered a broken heart, and had thoroughly questioned her about it.

'I probably haven't told anyone aside from my old, close friends about my height *complex* that had tormented me for nearly 10 years', Karen thought.

‘And now I have no problem telling it to younger girls that I have just met.’

Karen was once again surprised by the changes brought about by GGO and the SJ.

『Worries will torment you for as long as you are worried. Just forget them. Just abandon them, like throwing out old things. If you throw them out, there will no longer be a need to worry whether you should throw them out.』

Karen had heard such words somewhere. And her personal experience showed that they were right.

“Hey, that’s... a P90, right! Can I see it?”

“I want to see it too!”

“Me too!”

The six of them that pestered Karen into showing them the P90 *air gun* hanging on the clothes hanger,

“This is the first time I’ve touched a gun-shaped object in *RL*!”

All said unanimously.

‘True, it’s not something that high-school girls would buy, huh’, Karen replied.

In the first place, it was a toy meant for people who were at least eighteen years old.

And in the first place, it was not really something that female university students would buy.

Thereafter, they started talking about *RL* hobbies, and Karen asked the six girls about “Kanzaki Elsa”, the *singer-songwriter* who was currently her favourite.

As expected, all of them knew of Kanzaki Elsa, who was in the midst of a sudden rise in popularity.

And of course, the girls told her that they did not have all of her songs, thus Karen set Kanzaki Elsa’s *album* as the BGM¹³.

“I want to go to her *live* performance, but there are few *tickets*. I can’t get my hands on them no matter how many times I try to order them.”

Karen complained, and Saki,

“We could buy them if they were still on sale! The *tickets* for *live* performances have been excessively expensive lately! We want to spend our allowance on some other things as well, so it’s impossible for us to spend that much on tickets! We already spend quite a lot on GGO’s connection fees!”

Complained like a high-school girl would. The others nodded while making *mhm mhm* sounds.

Indeed, 3,000 yen¹⁴ every month on GGO alone was quite the amount of money for high-school girls. Karen only now recalled that her parents were affluent.

The topic then changed,

“Karen-san, it’s already spring break for you, right? Being in university is nice, huh.....”

13 Abbreviation for “background music”.

14 About 24 US Dollars / 23 Euros / 16 Pounds Sterling. Depends on the current exchange rate.

Saki and the others, who still had lessons for at least another month, until the last third of March, gave bitter expressions.

At any rate, these girls will go to the same university in another 2 or 3 years. In that case, they would become her juniors.

“It is spring break for me. I plan to return home to Hokkaido within the week.”

“I’m so jealous! You can *dive* as much as you want to!”

Said the Japanese beauty with a *bob cut*, Shiori, but Karen shook her head,

“Since I’ll be going back home, I won’t be able to play *games* during that time. I won’t be bringing my *AmuSphere* either.”

“Oh. Is that so?”

“It would be bothersome if my parents saw me playing. Since they probably know about the SAO incident. I’ll be taking a break from GGO for a while.”

“You do know that we’ll be training even more during that time and become stronger?”

Shiori said, peering into Karen’s face.

‘Well, you’re all already quite strong.’

Karen thought, with the face of the *machine gunner* Rosa, Shiori’s *avatar*, floating in her mind.

“Do your best. If it is all of you, you can aim to win the next SJ!”

Karen said with a carefree smile, thus,

“Mmm..... Truth is, I wanted you to participate.....”

Saki spoke out what she truly thought.



SECT.2

The Second Squad Jam

SECT.2

The Second Squad Jam

On the 17th of February, 2 days after the girls' gathering with Saki and the others, Karen went back to her home in Hokkaido.

Having returned home, where the intense cold had just begun and thus it was *minus* 20 degrees Celsius or lower outside, but far warmer indoors compared to Tokyo, Karen...

Shocked her parents with her short hair. It seemed that her elder sister had not informed them of her new hairstyle at all.

She was assaulted with questions on the reasons for this change, but by no means...

“As a result of a murder game, I killed a lot of people with my gun, and in the end, beheaded someone with a *knife*, and then I felt that something..... burdening me had been cut away like this, so I cut my hair.”

Could she say that. There was just no way she could say that.

And she did not have a broken heart. Although she had deceived her elder sister like this, it was still awfully hard for her.

Like she had told Saki, she did not bring her *AmuSphere* with her, and thus she could not *play* GGO.

Although she remained connected with her *notebook* with its *software*, so she could read *messages*, she had received no particular contact from either Pitohui or M. Those two were on her mind, but she could not bring herself to proactively ask them herself.

She did receive a *message* of complaint full of exclamation marks:
『The end-of-term *tests* are hard! I want to chat at Karen-san's home again! I want to eat sweets! And, I want to play GGO! I want to shoot with a gun!』

From *Boss-Eva*, in other words, Saki's *character*.

Karen had given her cell-phone's *mail address*, but it was just like Saki to use GGO's *message* function to send her messages.

* * *

1 week later, on Tuesday, 24th of February.

“Yahou! Kohi! Welcome to Hokkaido! It's certainly colder than Tokyo, right? Wha?”

Karen's high school bosom friend, Shinohara Miyu, came over to Karen's family home after the end of her spring vacation abroad.

Miyu was Karen's *game* sempai, who had taught her about VR *games* from scratch last summer. If it wasn't for Miyu, the Karen as she is right now, and LLENN, would not exist.

“Ye~p! A *short* cut suits you, nice, nice! Can I take a picture? You don't mind right? Right, turn back! Now the front! Nice nice! Now, how about you try undressing a bit?”



Having only seen the short-haired Karen in pictures until today, and now seeing her in person, Miyu was very cheerful. She began taking pictures left and right with her *smartphone*.

Without taking anything off, Karen replied,

“You’ve changed quite a bit again yourself, Miyu. You look great.”

“I know right? Everything suits me well.”

Miyu, who frequently changes her hairstyle based on her mood, currently had her shoulder-length hair wavy, and dyed in a brown brighter than ever, and was wearing red-*framed* glasses instead of *contact lenses*.

Although, naturally, Miyu was shorter than Karen, she was actually at least 165 cm tall, a considerable stature for a female¹⁵. She actively participated in the *tennis* club in middle school, thus her reflexes were quite considerable as well.

Attending a local Hokkaido university, Miyu was a *heavy virtual gamer* who had not had a day without games as long as she had a *Net* connection.

The game that she was always playing was 《*Alfheim Online*》. Abbreviated as ALO.

It was a *game* where one became a fairy with transparent wings on their backs, and could literally fly about in a vivid and beautiful *fantasy* world, and fight against *monsters* and other fairy races with swords or magic.

ALO was the first VR *game* that Karen had chosen, and tried to play with Miyu.

15 For reference, the average female height in Japan is about 158 centimetres.

But it was also a game where the initial *character* creation gave her an avatar that looked like an overly tall beauty, and thus the *shock* made her hate it.

Incidentally, in VR *games*, the player's *real* gender and the gender of the *avatar* were unquestionably the same, except in the case of minor *system errors*, thus a female player could not become a male.

In ALO, Miyu became a wind fairy race 《*Sylph*》 beauty who flew about the world with the *character name* “^{Fukajirou}フカ次郎” (F u k a z i r o h) .¹⁶

For some reason, she used an unusual masculine¹⁷ name, Fukaziroh. It came from the name of her dog at her family home.

And as for why she named herself thus, when Miyu was very young, a friend of hers was willing to give her a puppy that was birthed by their dog, thus Miyu had sought permission to keep the puppy, but her parents would refuse time and time again, so she was always “^{f u k a}not allowed” to have one. The dog was a male, and she used to keep a Java sparrow named “Shinohara Tarou” , so she loved it like her second son.¹⁸

The dog Fukaziroh was greatly loved by Miyu, and they grew together, until Fukaziroh expended its life span. Miyu took over his name in VR *games*.

16 Fukajirou is the Hepburn romanisation of フカ次郎, while Fukaziroh is the official Latin alphabet spelling for it. In the Hepburn romanisation system, the kana じ (the reading of 次) is transcribed as “ji” while in Kunrei-shiki romanisation it is transcribed as “zi”. Hepburn is a romanisation system suited for English pronunciation, while Kunrei-shiki is a more standard (i.e. fewer exceptions) and the officially adopted romanisation system in Japan. A “u” vowel after “o” in Japanese just makes the “o” longer - the equivalent of the function of “h” in English.

17 郎 (rou/roh, son) is a commonly used last character for boy names, just like 子 (ko, child/girl) is for girl names.

18 In this case, the word 次男 (jinan, second son) is used. But the 男 kanji is replaced with 郎 in the name, since it's more common to use 郎 in names.

Karen did not want her parents to hear about VR *game*-related topics at home, thus she and Miyu went out.

They went to a familiar karaoke *box*¹⁹ that they frequently visited in their high school years, and chatted endlessly about SJ excitedly.

Miyu had watched the video of LLENN's victory in SJ, thus,

“Wow! It was like a battle among fierce gods! So much killing! Amazing! You sure put those lessons to good use! Awesome!”

She was engulfed in great excitement. She asked about the details of the battle in a thorough manner.

Emphasising the details about the shady Pitohui and M, and without keeping any secrets, Karen told her everything from meeting them to the incident during SJ, and even the fact that they appeared to be in a good relationship in *RL* too, and Miyu,

“Hmm, well, there are lots of weirdos in VR *game* worlds. As long as your *real* name and address aren't exposed, doncha worry!”

Gave her these reassuring words.

For the time being, Karen felt relieved that there was no need to worry.

As for Miyu, her progress in ALO was quite impressive: her well-developed Fukaziroh possessed a powerful sword, and she was becoming equally²⁰ strong. Coupled with her weird name, she was quite the celebrity in ALO.

19 A karaoke box (カラオケボックス) is a common type of karaoke establishment in Japan. Each of these have several rentable rooms with karaoke equipment.

20 Possibly implying that Fukaziroh became strong enough to wield the sword. Or just that the sword used to be too good compared to her stats.

“Of course, greatness is comparative. Sometimes, some unbelievable guys show up. Like, just recently, there was a fellow who wagered an eleven-hit combo ^{Original} ^{Sword} ^{Skill} and invited people to duel them for it; that power was out of this world.”

ALO’s battles, where *characters* could fly around and not only use swords, but magic as well, were outside Karen’s understanding, but the “greatness is comparative” part alone was quite familiar to her.

Speaking of Fukaziroh, the *guild* that she belonged to had just recently come into possession of a cabin, which served as their base of operations, using the *Yrd* (the currency in ALO) they had earned. She could safely store her *items* there, thus if she felt like it, she could now transfer—and *convert* her *character* to a different *game*.

Using the same ID, one could change *VR games* with their avatar, and in such a case the relative developed strength of the avatar would be transferred over. Miyu was the one who taught Karen about this *conversion system*. However, *items* and money could not be taken along. It was necessary to have a place where the player could keep their items, or a person that they could trust them with.

Having met this requirement, Miyu could visit GGO whenever she felt like that, but,

“Well, for the time being, I’ll probably stick with ALO! Kohi, you don’t have any intention of leaving GGO either, right? LLENN-chan is very small and cute, right!”

‘That’s right She is cute I won’t hand my daughter over to anyone!’

After firmly nodding with a paternal mental state, Karen changed the topic to Kanzaki Elsa.

Miyu was a big *fan* of Kanzaki Elsa ever since her *debut*, and she had been anxious to go to her *live concert* in Tokyo, and was still anxious to do so.

The last live performance coincided with SJ, and as she could not get her hands on any *tickets* for it, Karen decided to participate in the SJ.

“Hmm, I wonder when the next *live* performance is going to be held? It seems that Elsa is currently *offline*. She hasn’t made any *blog* updates at all, even though she’s abroad. They have a small office there right? There’s been no particular news from the *staff* either. Well, it can’t be helped, so let’s sing ourselves!”

Although Karen did not quite understand what “can’t be helped”
“ —

The two earnestly and energetically sang Kanzaki Elsa’s songs for as long as their time and throats allowed.

* * *

Karen leisurely spent her spring vacation free of Tokyo’s congestion and the stench of gunpowder of GGO, having a good time with Miyu and her other high school girlfriends.

Before long, March began.

On Wednesday, the 4th of the month, with the university’s new academic year and Hokkaido’s Spring, still being far away.

After lunch, Karen received a *message* from GGO on her *notebook*, which was connected to the *Internet* at her family home.

‘What could it be?’, opening it with this thought, she found out that it was *news* from *Zaskar*, the management organisation, sent to all the *players*.

And the contents were quite surprising.

The *message* reported.

That a second *Squad Jam* would be held.

The *Second Squad Jam*.

Nicknamed S J 2. *Ess Jay Two*, if that is how it should be read.

It would be held exactly 1 month later, on Saturday, 4th of April, 2026. Starting at 1300.

It would be another private cooperation hosted tournament; however, the sponsor would not be the author who sponsored the previous tournament, but rather a different person who remained anonymous.

The basic *rules* would mostly be the same as the previous SJ; however, there were minute adjustments, thus going through the *rule book* via the attached *link* was required.

The winner's prizes were still under consideration, but they would be announced before the registration deadline.

The tournament was currently accepting applicants.

The registration deadline was the noon of the 1st of April. If over thirty *teams* participated, the *team* versus *team* preliminaries were planned to be held the day before, starting at 2000.

However, the “*leaders* of the *teams* that took the top four places in the previous tournament, and their current *teams*” will be *seeded* and automatically exempt from these preliminaries.

And, the *teams* that this exemption applies to: the fourth ranked Self-Defense Force (?) *pro team*. The third-ranked skull *emblem team*. The runner-ups, Saki’s attached high school rhythmic gymnastics club’s *team*.

And herself.

The winner, LLENN.

What a surprise.

A second *Squad Jam*, will actually be held. And moreover, it’s going to take place next month.

Karen opened her mouth wide as she looked at the screen, and then an electronic sound *bakyū* was emitted, notifying her that she received a new *message*. However, as expected, or perhaps shockingly, the *default* ringtone for this *game* was a gunshot. Although it could be changed.

‘Who could it be?’

‘It can’t be... Pito-san? Another order to participate? In that case, what do I do? Should I participate or refuse? Even if I do participate, what do I do about that incident in SJ? Listen? Ask? Or ignore it?’

As Karen’s heart beat fast, she opened the *message*, and found out that it was from Saki.

The title was:

『Have you seen the *official message*? SJ2 is going to be held!』

‘Yeah, I saw it.’

Answering in her mind, she read the contents of the letter.

『Of course participating we all are! An anastrophe²¹ ! Hence we are going to train for it! Our *tests* are over too! And spring break is almost here! Exemption from the preliminaries is really helpful! Karen-san, if you happen to change your mind and decide to participate, I, and the others, too would all be very happy! I want to see LLENN’s gallant figure filled with fighting spirit again! I want to fight! I want to shoot! I want us to kill each other again! P.S. I want to eat sweets as well! Please invite us over again!』

Well, the *message* was full of boisterous sentences of fighting and killing. Saki and the others' enthusiasm was conveyed well.

However,

“I guess I don’t have to participate.....”

Her own enthusiasm was not present at all.

And in the first place, she had no one to form a *team* with.

It was not impossible for her to contact Pitohui and M herself and form a team with them, but, naturally, she did not feel like doing it.

If, on the other hand, they contacted her..... well, she would think about it when the time comes.

‘Currently, I’m not proactively considering to participate in SJ2.’

21 An anastrophe is the inversion of the syntactically correct word order in a sentence for emphasis. Basically, imagine Yoda’s speech.

Having concluded thus, Karen threw her thoughts on SJ2 to the back of her mind.

* * *

And so, over 10 days later.

As her spring vacation continued, and having enjoyed her time with Miyu to the fullest, Karen returned to Tokyo by plane on Sunday, the 15th of March.

She had various reasons for returning, like preparing for the new term, seeing the never before seen Tokyo's spring and sakura, but the most important reason was,

“I haven't used a gun for a long time.....”

After such an awfully long time, she now wanted to play GGO. She wanted to become the chibi LLENN.

She took a flight in the morning, so early that she surprised her parents, thus she arrived before 10 o'clock.

Mentally deciding to *dive* as soon as possible once she returned to her room, she dragged her *carrying case* along, and with light steps, arrived in front of her apartment complex.

As Karen held out her *keycard* at the *entrance* of the high-rise *tower* apartment complex, and went through the automatic *door* after giving a light bow to the familiar, resident guard...

“

There was a person, watching her with binoculars.

In a multi-storey car park 200 *metres* away from the apartment complex, and separated by a main street. A high-class, German-made SUV (*sport utility vehicle*), with *smoked* glass for its rear seat windows, was parked close to the wall.

Therefore, unless one approached it very closely, the large binoculars that were mounted inside the car would probably go unnoticed.

The man inside moved the orientation of the camera platform mounted on the windowpane via suction pads. The objective *lens* of the binoculars on top of it moved as well. And, it was fixed on a new target across the *smoked glass*. A room on the fifteenth floor of the apartment complex. Those movements lacked any hesitation.

2 minutes later, the *curtains* of the room were opened from inside. Next, the *glass* door opened, and the room's owner appeared. A 183 *cm*-tall, high-statured woman.

Possibly having finished its role in ventilation, the *glass* door was closed after about 3 minutes. And then, although it was still morning, the massive curtains were once again closed.

The person inside moved his eyes away from the binoculars, immediately opened his *notebook*, and launched a single program.

The *logo* that came up — was

【 G u n G a l e O n l i n e 】 .

The person lay down on the rear seat, and quickly equipped an *AmuSphere* on his head. And then,

“ *Link Start.*”

He *dived* into GGO from the car.

“Found it! Oji-san, I’m buying this! Buying it now! Buying it right now!”

Having come to GGO for the first time in a while, the small child LLENN dressed in a dark brown *robe* saw the thing that she had been looking for.

“Yay! Yay! Yay! Yaaaaay!”

Her great joy was already like that of a child.

Hopping from one small back alley *gunshop* to the next, the item that she decided to purchase as soon as she laid eyes on it in the third shop, was a strange-looking *submachine gun*.

That’s right, it was the Belgian FN *Herstal*-made P90. A gun that was completely identical to her former partner that she had lost by protecting herself in the SJ.

Naturally, she requested a *custom* job on it on the spot. She had it dyed in dusky *pink*, the same as her uniform and equipment.

She could no longer tell the difference, but this gun was the second generation P-chan.

‘Should its name be “P-chan II?” Or, should it be “P-chan *the Second*?”

Since the name was unwieldy, LLENN considered calling it just P-chan, equipped the *sling* that she had used for her initial gun on it, hung it on her shoulder underneath the *robe*, handling it with care, and stepped out to an SF world with gaudy, shining *neon* signs on tall buildings.

Seeing as she was the winner of SJ, she feared that she ended up becoming instantly famous, and would be greeted by strangers as she walked through town—but such a thing did not happen.

It could have been because she was hiding her appearance and face with her *robe* as always, but thus far, she had only surprised people with her small size. The *scale* of the SJ and BoB really was different.

‘But it’s for the best.’

With this thought, LLENN cheerfully walked along the street.

As buying a P90 was sufficient for her for today, she thought that she would refrain from any battles, and return to *RL* after some adequate shooting practice. Her goal was a large *mall* with a wide shooting range.

“Shooting with P-chan is fun! 900 bullets every minute! Empty shells come descending! Ah, that wonderful sound!”

She began singing an impromptu questionable song to herself because there were no other *characters* around.

In this merry state, she absolutely could not notice.

That an *avatar*, which had the appearance of a feeble looking youth, had been tailing her continuously since she left the store.

* * *

16th of March. Monday.

Although it was a *weekday* for the public, it was still a day off for Karen who had a long spring vacation from university. The sky outside was heavily cloudy.

Having cleaned her room for the first time in a while, and unpacked her luggage sent to her from her family home,

“.....Nothing else to do.”

Karen ended up running out of things to do. It was the afternoon.

As for *diving* into GGO,

“I really should pass on it.....”

She restrained herself.

After all, yesterday she thought that she would “only have shooting practice”, but while firing at the shooting range, she developed an itchy desire to go wild, and went *monster* hunting with the thought “just a simple *field* won’t hurt”, but ended up engrossed for nearly 4 hours.

Deciding not to play *games*, Karen considered studying for university, reading a book, listening to music, or a *combination* to kill time, but...

“I guess I’ll go for a walk.”

Going against all those options, Karen set out for a walk in the neighbourhood despite the bad weather. Deciding to take the opportunity to go shopping as well, she brought a folded *shopping bag* along.

She closed the curtains to her *room*, turned off the lights, descended to the first floor by *elevator*, then went out through the *entrance*, and,

“To the park, I guess.”

Turned towards the lush green park in the neighbourhood.

As it was day time, and there was high pedestrian traffic, and as Karen was not being at all vigilant, she did not notice.

That a man had been tailing her ever since she left her apartment complex.

After a walk nearly an hour long, and dropping by the *supermarket* to restock on food, Karen was on her way back.

She was walking through a narrow alley.

When returning from the nearby station, this was the shortest *route* home that she frequently used; to her right was the wall of an *apartment*, to her left a small factory.

Of course, she would absolutely not pass through here if it was night, but it was still 1500 at the moment. She had long legs as she was tall, thus, as a result, she was walking at a brisk pace.

A young woman with two children riding on an electric bicycle came her way, thus Karen avoided them. The woman nodded in thanks, and passed by.

When she let them pass, she noticed for the first time.

That a man was standing about 10 *metres* behind her. And that he was looking at her.

Karen did not even think that there could be a person behind her, and walking in the same direction as her, thus she was considerably surprised, and fixedly stared at the man.

‘He looks like an actor, huh.’

Karen’s first thoughts were words of praise.

The man was around 175 *cm*-tall. His high stature was not outstanding (and he was shorter than her), but for a Japanese man, he was probably a tall person.

And, he had a wonderful constitution. His *jeans*-clad legs were long, his chest, with a leather *jacket* on top of a white *T-shirt*, was burly, and his body was lean like an athlete’s.

His face was so neat that it could be called beautiful. His eyes were slightly sharp, but not to the extent that they would look scary.

As for his age, Karen thought he might be in the later half of his twenties. His hair was black and, although she did not know if it was natural, it was slightly *wavy* and of shoulder-length.

‘Oops, I shouldn’t stare.’

Karen took her eyes off the man, and faced forward.

Even if he was an *ikemen* with a nice physique, staring at others was still a breach of *manners*. Once again, she began walking with her long legs to return to her apartment complex.

4 minutes later,

“

Karen once again noticed. That the man was still 10 *metres* behind her.

The high-rise apartment complex would soon be in sight. When she stopped at a pedestrian crossing to cross the road, the aforementioned man entered her field of vision, and thus she noticed that he had been constantly tailing her since then.

‘This is kinda scary.....’

Karen’s vigilance *mode* went up a notch.

Even if she was taller than most men, Karen was still a young woman, thus it was natural for her to be cautious around unfamiliar men.

She had taken several complex turns from the alley where she first laid eyes on him, thus it was natural to think that “being tailed” was more likely than going in the same direction by chance.

If it was at night, she would have definitely taken action to deal with this problem. For example, taking a *taxi* or calling someone with her mobile phone and talking to them while walking. But then, if it was night, there was no way that she would be walking through a place like this.

Since it was daytime, and she was walking along a main street which naturally had pedestrian traffic, and on top of that, her apartment complex was close by, Karen calmed down, and began crossing the road when the traffic lights turned green.

Once she was across, Karen turned left, and thus, after moving away from the crosswalk a bit, she moved her eyes without turning her face.

The man crossed the road and—

‘Uugh, he’s following me.....’

He turned to the left as well. There was no mistake about it anymore. This man was tailing Karen.

‘Where did he start following me? Could it be from the *supermarket*? Or before that, all the way from the park?’

As things have come this far, she did not know the answer to her questions, but assuming that she was followed the whole time, she had a bad feeling about this. The man’s nice appearance turned from a *plus* to a big *minus*.

‘I need to get back quickly.’

Karen began walking the last 100 *metres* or so to her apartment complex in order to escape. Suppressing her desire to break into a run, she feigned being calm as best as she could.

There were plenty of cars moving along the main street, and there were also pedestrians and cyclists passing by, thus she probably would not be attacked here, but even so, shivers went down her spine.

If this was within GGO, it would be a situation where she would want to turn around and draw out a *knife*, but if she did that in *RL*, she would immediately be arrested.

The apartment complex’s *entrance* required IC *keycards* that only residents had. There was a resident female *concierge* and a male guard past the first *door*.

If Karen passed through it, and the man pursuing her managed to pass through as well, she could probably manage by shouting.

Just as she thought of this and sighed in relief, Karen was struck by a different possibility, as if additional electrical signals activated within her brain.

‘Could it be that my address will be exposed if I entered the apartment complex like this?’

Assuming that the man came across Karen somewhere and was tailing her, if she held out her *key* and entered the apartment complex, would she not be exposed as a resident here?

What if the man’s goal of following Karen was to discover her residence?

‘Oh, that woman is huge, but cute. Where could she be living, I wonder? I know, I’ll tail her and find out. When I do, I’ll be able to wait in front of the entranceway and follow her every day, uhehe—’

Having thought of this, she became scared and her imagination forcefully *shut down*.

The entrance to the apartment complex was right over there.

‘Should I continue walking like this, or should I pass through the front so that he wouldn’t discern my residence. That’s the question.’

‘But where should I go after passing through? Should I kill time at some shop? But what if he stands guard the whole time? What if the other party is a thoroughly persistent *stalker* overflowing with zeal?’

‘Uhyaa what-what do I do what do I do what do—’

As Karen reached the extremity of confusion,

“You are Kohiruimaki— Karen-san, right?”

Someone spoke out to her.

“Yes. That’s right but—”

In front of Karen, who had stopped, affirmed her name in foolish honesty, before turning around, stood that man.

“..... Hya—”

As Karen was about to scream after being momentarily flabbergasted,

“Please don’t shout! LLENN! It’s me! M!”

The man’s voice narrowly stopped her.

‘How on earth did it end up like this?’

Karen was still confused.

Karen’s current location was the observation room in her apartment complex.

On the thirtieth floor of the high-rise apartment complex was a common *space* for all the residents. It was a *lobby*-like room, with huge windows, at the corner of the building, and was equipped with a *table*, *sofa* and a vending machine for drinks.

Nevertheless, it was a questionable room that was only full on days when firework displays could be seen in the distance, while on other days, in other words usually, there was barely anyone who would use it, and honestly, who knows what it was made for.

Karen and the man were the only people in this room with a *sofa* and *table* arranged orderly.

Several minutes ago, at the *front* of the first floor of the apartment complex,

“Please don’t shout! LLENN! It’s me! M!”

Hearing the man’s voice,

“Haah…….? That can’t be!”

Karen exclaimed in a loud voice.

An old lady, who happened to be passing by on a bicycle, ‘Hiku!’, shouted in surprise and staggered with her *handle*. She did not fall down, but it was a considerably close call.

Even so, Karen couldn’t help but shout.

‘The actor-like *stalker* in front of me is M?’

‘That *body builder*-like *macho avatar*— the *player* controlling the avatar with whom I fought with in the SJ?’

She could not believe it.

Well, it was quite normal for the appearance of the *avatar* and *player* to differ.

After all, she herself was a 183 *cm*-tall *sky tree* woman. And her *avatar* was a less than 150 *cm*-tall *chibi*.

That was not the problem,

“If you are the *player* behind M-san……. how did you figure out that I was LLENN? How did you know?”

Karen assaulted him with questions.

The only people aware of the fact that LLENN was Kohiruimaki Karen, or vice versa, were Miyu and Saki's group. M, who she had only met twice within GGO, should not have known this.

It was a big mistake to confirm the fact that she was LLENN with her question, but Karen did not think of that.

"I will explain later. I have something very important to talk with you about, thus I came to meet Karen-san, the *real* LLENN, in person. We can't talk here, so I would like to go to a place, no matter where, away from the public where we can have a calm conversation without being overheard."

Said the man self-proclaiming to be M with the very seriousness of an ikemen.

And Karen asked with an expression like she was looking at a swindler.

"And if I refuse?"

The man answered immediately.

"Then, on the night of the second *Squad Jam* in April next month, people will die."

She couldn't really believe him, but she couldn't ignore it either, thus,

"If you try anything, I'll shout!"

After giving this reminder, Karen brought the man to this observation room.

Of course, she couldn't just bring him to her room, and there was no one here for the time being.

As this apartment complex was the tallest building in the vicinity, there was no need to worry about being seen from the neighbouring *buildings* on the thirtieth floor as long as they didn't stand at the window.

'How on earth did it end up like this?'

Karen was still confused.

Immediately after they entered the room, Karen attempted to buy some warm black tea from the vending machine to calm down a little, but the man cut in line, and pressed his cell phone on the machine, paying for the tea.

"I am grateful that you agreed to hear me out. My treat."

"Well..... thanks."

And then, she drank it, but couldn't taste it. It didn't really have much of an effect.

On the other hand, the man who self-proclaimed to be M bought some black, canned *coffee* next, and drank it in a way that it seemed tasty.

Was he feeling accomplished that she would hear him out?

'Hmph', after making a big sigh, Karen enquired with a suspicious look.

"Are you..... are you really the *RL M-san*?"

Although the other party had been using a polite tone, Karen didn't feel like using keigo²² when speaking to a suspicious man like that, thus she used a considerably blunt one.

“Yes.”

The man, while fixedly gazing at Karen with a *handsome* expression that was the very image of seriousness, nodded.

Of course, she could not just believe him on his word alone, thus, not worrying about whether or not it was rude, Karen enquired.

“And the proof for that?”

“None.”

The man answered immediately.

“Haah? Then, how are you going to get me to believe.....”

“None is none. I am not lying.”

As Karen was really shocked,

“You could just tell me something that I and M-san had said during the SJ.....”

She even ended up letting out those lifeboat-like words.

Although the SJ's battles were broadcast, voices were not picked up, unless one intentionally approached the *camera* or shouted. Thus, only LLENN could have heard M's words back then.

22 Keigo (敬語) is Japanese for "honorific speech". This can mean anything from turning all verbs to the polite (masu) form or using the copula です (desu) to special words etc..

But then, then man,

“That would not serve as any kind of proof.”

Resolutely rejected the idea.

“For example, even if I told you that “During the SJ, LLENN said this to me. , I could have just heard it all in detail from “the real *player* behind M. .”

“

‘Well, that really is true, but, you know, that’s not something that a man who should be proving something would say.’

Karen was shocked.

“That’s why, all you can do is trust my words, Karen-san.”

“That’s mean!”

“True.”

“

‘I so want to just leave this guy here and return to my room now.’

Karen thought, but just couldn’t put her foot down. Because her mind was fixed on the boisterous words 『People will die on the day of SJ2』 .

And thus, she decided to ask another question.

“Then if, although unwilling, I give in and temporarily believe that you’re M-san..... can I ask another question? No, I will ask.”

“Feel free to do so.”

“How did you know that my name was Kohiruimaki Karen, and that I am LLENN? Also, how did you find out this address? That should have been totally impossible!”

In *online games*—

If too many *hints* were given away via conversation or behaviour, it was possible for one’s *RL* to be exposed, in other words, allowing others to discover their personal information in the real world.

Even Pitohui,

“Watch your words! Is that really something that you should be saying? Is it?”

Kept telling her this till her mouth went dry.

She learnt that through experience just last month.

When Saki realised that Karen was LLENN. Even Karen realised that Saki was Eva, although she initially dismissed the thought. This happened because both parties gave each other plenty of *hints*.

The *hints* that Karen gave were the fact that she did something with her life on the line on the day of the SJ, and managed to become unbound from her worries and, more importantly, she was walking with a *pink P90 keyholder* appended to her bag; something no normal female university student would do so.

As for Saki's *hints*, it was the fact that they were a six-member rhythmic gymnastics club that would be proficient in passing, and the nickname "Boss" .

Thus, what *hints* could she have given this man?

The kind of *hints*, aside from her name 'Karen' that was similar to her *character name* (although even that would not be simple to realise), that allowed the man to deduce her surname, appearance, and even her address with *pinpoint* accuracy.

Absolutely nothing came to mind.

"Don't tell me..... you're from *Zaskar*?"

Karen voiced as the thought hit her.

In that case, it is possible, albeit unlikely. If he was a part of the management, then it could be possible to deduce one's name and address from one's *game ID* and *mail address*.

In fact, Karen did send *Zaskar* her personal information to be able to receive SJ victory prizes.

The man quickly shook his head.

"No."

"Then how? By what means did you find out my name and address?"

"....."

The man kept quiet for a few seconds, and then,

"I cannot tell you that right now"

He said, followed by ‘I will explain later.’

Karen thought, ‘If only I had a truth serum in my *pocket*. Or a gun that I could force against his throat.’

“But please hear out what I have to say now. It is important. It is, very important.”

“My ears are open, so feel free.”

Dumbfounded, Karen answered quite negligently.

“But before that — who are you? What’s your registered name, M-san?”

And bluntly enquired, irritated by the fact that she was the only one with her *full name* exposed.

“Ah, my apologies for the late introduction. My name is Asougi Goushi. 阿僧祇 comes from the number unit 阿僧祇²³ — it’s written with the “阿” from 阿蘇山, the “僧” from ‘僧侶’, and “祇” from 祇園. 豪志 comes from 豪快志.”

Based on the fact that he explained his name with such experience, Karen felt that it wasn’t an alias— though it was possible that he was simply used to using it as an alias.

“Asougi Goushi-san, I see. Then, which name should I address you by?”

Karen asked in sarcastic keigo,

23 Asamkhya is a Hindu/Buddhist name for an incalculable number. Depending on the translation, it can be as small as 1056, 1064, 10140 etc. or as big as 1074,436,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. In countries using Chinese characters, the value of one asamkhya differs based on the history period, region, country etc. In Japan, it is usually used to refer to 1056, though some people have 1064 in mind instead.

“Whichever you prefer.”

And the man, Goushi, answered easily.

In amazement, Karen,

“Then..... it’s only *manners* to use a *real* name in *RL*, thus I’ll call you Goushi-san.....”

Thought that, for the time being, if anything happened, or she got out of this room, she would report “Asougi Goushi” to the police.

With a rare surname like that, there probably wouldn’t be that many people with it. She memorised it. ‘Officer, it’s this man.’ Well, there was, of course, the possibility that it is an alias.

Goushi faced straight forward with his neat face. And then,

“Karen-san. I beg of you, please help.”

“.....”

Karen did not answer. With a cold expression, Karen continued listening to Goushi’s words.

“There’s something that only you, Karen-san, of all people in the world, can do.”

‘What’s up with that! A pick-up line!’

Karen thought. But didn’t say.

“Without your help, Karen-san.....”

‘What will happen then?’

“Two people, will die.”

Why? Who will? How?

“The first, is me. The other, is Pitohui’s *RL* self.”

“What the!”

The mention of Pitohui’s name provoked Karen’s response.

“You said it during the last SJ, right, that “I’ll be killed by *RL* Pitohui\ or something like that! Is this a continuation of that?”

“That’s right. I did say that time, right? That Pitohui is crazy.”

“.....With a horrible tear-strained expression.”

She recalled an unpleasant scene. The tear-flooding expression of a rough-looking macho.”

“Pito will be participating in SJ2 this time. With me and some currently gathered *members*.”

“And you want me to join that *team*?”

‘I see! Things are finally making sense!’

In other words, this was the case.

‘LLENN had not declared her participation in SJ2 yet. If I joined Pitohui’s *team*, they would be *seeded* in the preliminaries. That’s what this person has come to request.’

‘No, it can’t be that simple, can it.....’

Karen dismissed her own idea.

If it was for such a simple reason, he wouldn't have resorted to such *stalker*-like behaviour. It would be sufficient to send a *message* by normal means. The preliminaries would probably be easy as well. Furthermore, the death and so on of Goushi and Pitohui('s *RL*) would not make sense.

“And that's not it, huh. —Go on.”

“Okay. This time, there is no plan to invite LLENN to the *team*. And, although it sounds like self-flattery, we're not particularly concerned with the preliminaries.”

“Right. If M-san and Pito-san formed a *team*, you'd be that strong. You'd probably wi— be able to aim for victory.”

The reason why Karen began saying 'win' and stopped was because she remembered Saki and the others.

《SHINC》, the runner-up *team* of the previous tournament, were full of determination. They would probably go really wild in the upcoming tournament as well, and they were definitely the favourites. A bit of a digression, but Karen learnt from Saki that SHINC is an abbreviation of 'rhythmic gymnastics *club*'.

'Pitohui's *team* versus Saki's *team*, who'd win in the end?'

Karen has not considered participating in SJ2, but she did think that she could at least *dive* in that day and watch the live broadcast in a bar.

Putting that aside, Karen had to finish listening to Goushi's story.

“Pito is, of course, participating with the intention of aiming for victory. I believe that anything other than victory would be entirely meaningless to her, no matter what place she takes.”

“That’s so like Pito-san.”

“So— she told me this. ‘If I can’t win, I’ll die.’”

“Wha?”

“Pito, no “Pito’s *RL* self said this. 『If I don’t win SJ2 or I get killed during the *game*, I’ll commit suicide.』”

“.....”

“And, I too shall die. If I don’t commit suicide, I’ll be killed.”

“.....”

“And, when that woman says she’ll do something, she really will do it.”

“.....Just like when she threatened to kill you, Goushi-san?”

“Yes.”

Seeing Goushi nodding, Karen was astounded.

‘Not only did I have to worry about it during that SJ, but now I have rack my brains again here!’

The large muzzle of a pistol, an 《HK45》, being thrust right towards her all of a sudden came to mind. As well as it beginning to shine. Even now, she could recall that scene clearly.

If she had not dodged it— Karen’s hair would probably still be long.

Having somehow avoided the attack, she interrogated M with her P90 thrust at him, and she was told about Pito’s abnormality.

Truthfully, she could not understand it then, nor can she understand it now.

Due to the astounded LLENN taking individual action back then, M did not die and everything ended well. Since the man controlling M was right in front of her.

Of course, if that really was him but— Having heard this much, Karen had mostly cast aside the possibility that he was a fake.

As words like ‘kill’, ‘die’ and so on continued, Karen looked around her surroundings for a moment.

She would have heard the sound of the *door* opening and closing if someone had come, but she was still worried. This was definitely not a discussion that they could have in a place where there were other people. Though, she had no intention of bringing Goushi up to her room at all.

“Goushi-san.....”

“Yes.”

“Why is.....Pito-san imposing such weird things? Like, killing herself and others if she died within a *game*, why is she this—”

‘Out of her mind?’

Karen was about to voice out, but stopped herself, and in response to her,

“I did say during the SJ, didn’t I? She’s out of her mind. She’s crazy. Her mind’s captivated by “death” itself, and she always yearns for a fight where she can put her life on the line.”

“.....”

‘Should I or should I not ask for the reason’, Karen pondered.

However, if she did not ask, they could not continue the conversation. With the thought that she did not mind even if Goushi did not know the reason,

“Why is that?”

Karen enquired.

And Goushi answered the question with a question.

“Have you heard of, *“Sword Art Online”* ?”



SECT.3

SAO Loser

SECT.3

SAO Loser

“Have you heard of, “*Sword Art Online*” ?”

In response to Goushi’s question,

“Of course.”

Karen immediately replied. There was no way she could have not heard of it.

Sword Art Online. Abbreviated to SAO.

It was the world’s first VR-MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer *Online Role-Playing Game*) that launched its official *service* 4 years ago, on the 6th of November, 2022.

It was a fiendish *game* that imprisoned approximately ten thousand *players*, who *dived* to play on that day, in the *game’s* world.

Due to the work of the genius developer Kayaba Akihiko, SAO was turned into a horrifying trap.

The *players’* ability to voluntarily *log out* was blocked, and if their *characters* died in the *game*, or if someone attempted to forcibly interrupt the *dive* from the outside—

The *players* would have their brains fried by powerful electromagnetic *pulses* from the first-generation VR *game machine* for home use, the 《*NerveGear*》, which was fastened to their heads, and thus die. It was a literal *death game*.

Kayaba Akihiko provided but a single way to escape.

To *clear* the *game*.

Karen did know the details, but after a long period of two years, SAO was cleared and the people trapped in the game returned to the real world.

However, that did not apply to everyone. She heard that nearly four thousand *players* had lost their lives as a result of the incident.

The remainder of the player base were equated to “survivors” of a grand incident or a large-scale disaster—in other words, they were called 《SAO survivors》.

A genuine *death game* where the *player* themselves would die if their *character* died in-*game*. That was SAO.

‘Why did Goushi suddenly ask about that...’

“Ah!”

A hypothesis came to Karen’s mind.

Could it really be—that Pitohui, whose mind was captivated by death, and who desired fights where she could unnecessarily put her life at stake.....

However, in that case, everything would make sense: the reason behind her strength, and why she is so captivated by death.

Pitohui had once said “I have been playing VR *games* before the SAO incident was resolved”; could she have been referring to SAO?

“Hey..... be honest with me..... Could Pito-san..... be an SAO *survivor*.....? Did she have some horrible experience during the 2 years in the *game*..... and it ended up leaving a thorn in her heart..... and she still can’t forget putting her real life..... on the line.....?”

Karen timidly enquired,

“No.”

But saw Goushi firmly shaking his head.

“No, that’s not it. Pito is not an SAO survivor.”

‘What? So she wasn’t burdened by cruel fate?’

Karen felt relief from the bottom of her heart, but she could not help tensing up again after hearing Goushi’s following words.

“It’s the opposite. Completely.”

“Huh—?”

She did not understand what he had in mind. So, she had no choice but to ask.

“What “opposite” ? What do you mean?”

“Pito is the opposite of an SAO survivor—I’m not sure such a term exists, but, so to say, she is an SAO *loser*.”

“SAO loser.....?”

“That’s right.”

Goushi nodded with a serious look. And then, with a look that could adorn the cover of a *fashion* magazine, he threw Karen a question.

“It’s a bit off topic, but Karen-san, are you aware of the terms “*beta version*” and “*beta test*”?”

“Ehm……, I’ve heard of them somewhere.”

“Then, I’ll explain that first. A *beta version*, crudely put, is “a *software* that is under development, but finished to some extent”. The trial of such a version is called a *beta test*, and the people who try it are called *beta testers*. During the *beta test*, the *software’s* issues are checked, and this influences the official version.”

“I see……”

“Even SAO had a *beta test* before its official *service*. A mere thousand *players*, selected via raffle, could *play* the world’s first VRMMO before anyone else. Also, they could get priority on purchasing the official version during its initial distribution, thus they could easily enter the ranks of the ten thousand players.”

‘If a *player* had the enthusiasm to apply for the *test* version, then they’d definitely *play* the official version the day and moment the *service* began’, Karen thought.

Karen recalled,

“What if I knew about SAO beforehand? Then, I think I’d have got it no matter what, and would have definitely played it the moment the *service* began. Scary, huh.”

That Miyu had once told her this.

Goushi continued.

“But, among the ten thousand who got their hands on the official version, there were people who had important affairs in *RL*, and could not play on the day it *started*, the 6th of November 2022, no matter what. Tearfully, they had to give up *playing* on that day.”

“Then, then.....”

Hearing this much of the story, and the term ‘SAO *loser*’, the answer came to Karen’s mind. She asked Goushi to confirm it.

“Pito-san is of those *beta testers*, and got her hands on the official version, but couldn’t play that day.....”

This time, Goushi firmly nodded.

“That’s right. Pito was an SAO *beta tester*. She was one of the lucky thousand, so she’d put on her *NerveGear* and continue to play SAO like mad. Naturally, she also planned to play the official version just as it began.”

“But, she couldn’t do that.....”

“Yes. Perhaps because of some prank of fate, some business that she absolutely could not ignore came up. The business was so important that it was a once in a lifetime opportunity to determine her future. After thoroughly weeping her eyes out, she made the wise decision to put her future first. She decided to play SAO the next day.”

Weeping one’s eyes out just because of not being able to play on the first day gave the impression of a *game* addict, but, honestly speaking, Karen could not understand it.

‘Also, if Goushi knows so much about Pitohui’s circumstances, does that mean that he’s been with Pitohui since then?’, Karen considered unnecessary details.

With some effort, she drove such thoughts to a corner of her mind,

“But because of that, Pito-san..... continued living without being trapped in SAO, right?”

Karen asked sincerely.

“That’s right. Because no one could *log in* to SAO as of the moment the incident began”

“Isn’t that..... really *lucky*.....?”

“Normally, one would think so. But, Pito is different. She has always had a yearning for death that she can’t hide. What do you believe a person like that would think, if they were forced into a *game* that decided whether they would live or die?”

“.....”

Karen knew the answer, but still did not say a thing.

“Do you believe that they would suffer from intolerable fear like a normal person would?”

“.....”

“No, that’s not the case. It’s the opposite. They would probably think “I can play the best *game* in my life!”, with delight from the bottom of their heart. —And then, what if they knew that they most likely missed their once in a lifetime *chance* to play it?”

“.....”

“That night. When she returned home after finishing her important business. The moment she found out that SAO had become a genuine *death game*, via the *news*, Pito went into a fit of anger. She cursed her fate that she could not participate in it, then shouted, lamented, cried, and raged. She inflicted self-injury, and when I tried to stop her, I was blown away, and broke three ribs and three finger bones.”

“.....”

Karen did not have the capacity to throw in the appropriate words in this conversation.

Pitohui’s actions were obviously frightening, but Goushi, to whom these memories should have been considerably painful, yet he had still talked about them disinterestedly without showing any change, was scary too.

“But, nothing could be done about it at that point. Because joining SAO was impossible from then on. Having cried, shouted, and raged for some time, perhaps her feelings cleared up at least a bit, as after that, Pito put in great effort in her work. Probably in an attempt to subdue her anger of being an SAO *loser*. The job she began went on track immediately, and she has achieved considerable success now.”

“Is Pito-san a company manager or something.....?”

Probing into others’ *RL* was against the *rules*, but Karen unintentionally ended up asking such a question. With some surprise showing on his face, Goushi,

“Yes, that’s right. She’s a female company manager. And I’m one of the company’s executives.”

‘Please don’t say that you’re lovers or something while you are at it.’

Perhaps Karen’s *telepathy* went through, as Goushi did not reveal any further *private* details.

“After VR *games* returned but before the SAO incident was resolved, Pito, with me being forced to accompany her without having a say in it, spent all her time which wasn't dedicated to work playing games all day. Pito, venting her anger of becoming an SAO *loser*, instantly became as strong as a demon no matter what *game* she played, but “*games* where one didn’t really die” could not make her blood boil from the innermost depths of her heart.”

‘Well, it doesn’t have to boil It’s okay for it to be normal It would be bad if you died. And in the first place, you can’t play anymore if you die!’

Karen furiously thought, but kept quiet.

“And so, 2 years of her living on work and VR *games* passed, and the SAO incident was resolved—”

Goushi continued with words that seemed like a report.

“When Pito heard details of the in-*game* situation leaked by SAO *survivors*, she once again exploded. Officially, this is an entirely unrecognised rumour, but it’s “almost certainly true” information. That there were *player killers* who intentionally killed *characters* in the game. And that there were even *guilds* for that.”

“—Wha?”

Karen's brain was momentarily stunned, unable to understand the meaning behind Goushi's words.

Her thought process, as if untangling itself, slowly restarted.

In *Sword Art Online*.

Even though a *player* actually dies if their *in-game characters* die, yet PK happens.

Namely, that is—

“Isn't that actual murder!”

“That's right.”

Having her words, which were shouted with the desire to have them denied, affirmed without any concern,

“.....”

Karen was at a complete loss for words.

Goushi's ear-pleasing voice spoke about dreadful things unconcernedly.

“It seems that there were some *players* in SAO who did not consider banding together to survive or *clearing* the game as soon as possible to escape— and among them, some found their purpose in life in killing other *characters*. Including both the people killed by them, and those among them killed in “legitimate self-defence”, a considerable number of *players* were killed by other *players*.”

“I... can't....., believe it.....”

Until now, Karen had thought that all the casualties of the SAO incident were killed by *in-game monsters*. In other words, the developer who devised this incident killed them.

And yet there was murder among fellow humans.

‘What on earth could the SAO survivors who killed someone with their own hands, even if in legitimate self-defence, be feeling?’

Karen was on the brink of thinking about it, but forcibly stopped her train of thought.

“I questioned the sanity of these “murderer *players*” as well, but Pito was entirely different. Hearing this *news*, she had a great explosion similar to the one 2 years ago. She went into a fit of anger, breaking everyone’s belongings, including mine.”

“In..... what sense? I don’t really want to ask, but I will.”

“You sure have grown used to it, huh. Karen-san.”

“Stop it. So?”

“In both ways. She had the regret “I could have become a murderer *player* like that if I played SAO!”, just as well as the regret “I could have killed those guys in the name of justice!”.”

“That’s crazy.....”

In response to Karen’s honest thoughts,

“Haven’t I said so before?”

Goushi gave a smile, the first that looked genuine. If they were in town, his expression would look like he was inviting a girl he chose based on appearance to come with him.

“Thereafter, Pito’s mental state wasn’t healthy for a while, but— highly ironically, as her work schedule got really hectic, at least she didn’t cause any problems for others. Although she was out of her mind, she did have common sense and sociality. She wasn’t a person who’d commit crimes like hurting others in *RL*. Well, she beat the hell out of me, as I was close, every day though.”

Of course, Goushi said this with a smile, thus,

“.....”

Karen gave up on giving a reply.

“As I said during SJ, even now that woman has her heart captivated by that crazy *game* called SAO. Even so, for some months, I had believed that she had come out of it..... Having begun playing GGO, she should have had a good way of letting off her steam, since she could kill other *characters* with guns and *knives*..... But perhaps it suddenly became the trigger for a relapse when she could not participate in SJ.....”

“Is that..... so.”

Karen said, even though she honestly did not comprehend it, nor did she want to, but she did understand the story. Of course, as the story had no proof, the possibility that Goushi was full of lies was not zero, but, based on her experience thus far, Karen decided to drop that idea.

And she clearly recalled. That Pito said this when inviting her to SJ.

“Say, LLENN-chan. In my opinion, LLENN-chan has a lot of problems in real life, right? *IRL*, something is making you gloomy, right? So, putting it nicely, you came to GGO to vent your anger. Putting it bluntly, you came here to run away. You're making a
“How did you know” expression, but it was simple to comprehend. —I'm the same after all! There are far too many times when I get angry and feel like I can't do anything, so I go wild. And thus, I shoot with my gun to kill *monsters* and people to my heart's content.”

‘I see. I see.’

Karen recalled the gentle smile that Pito-hui gave then.

‘Being too tall is tough?’

‘Honestly, that's not really that big of a worry.’

Karen faced the man sitting in front of her, bent forward, and enquired.

“As Pito-san can participate in SJ2, she's planning to *play a death game* with her life at stake, right?”

“That's right.”

“And you, Goushi-san, want to stop it, right?”

“That's right.”

“Then I've got a question. —Why didn't you try to stop it by going to the police, or making use of psychosomatic medicine, or telling your story to someone else? That would have been much, much more beneficial to Pito-san than relying on someone like me, wouldn't it?”

Those words were not something that she wanted to voice out, but still had to do it.

It was obvious that Pitohui (*IRL*) had sunk into madness, but how could Goushi, who knew that better than anyone else, leave that alone? Karen could not understand it.

“That’s simple.”

Goushi answered in the same tone as before.

“No matter how much something is beneficial to Pito, I don’t wish for anything that Pitohui doesn’t want.”

Karen needed several seconds to understand the meaning behind his words.

She understood what he had said, but now needed to confirm whether he was really fine with it.

“Say what.....? So, you’re saying that, in the end, you decided to “respect the person’s will, ?”

“That’s right.”

“Even if it’s something insane? Even if it’s the worst case—suicide?”

“That’s right.”

“..... I can’t understand you at all.”

‘This is hopeless.’

Karen concluded.

She knew that Pitohui was weird, but this man named Goushi was just as crazy.

Karen finished up the now completely cold black tea which was on the table.

Wanting to quickly throw the empty can away, Karen stood up.

‘At this rate, I want to get out of here.’

With this thought in mind, she stepped towards the trashcan next to the vending machine that stood alongside the wall, and threw it in.

As she turned around, she saw Goushi, who perhaps thought that Karen was running away, right in front of her.

And then, his large right hand grazed Karen’s head as it extended to the wall, and she heard *don* as his hand struck the wall.

“Ah, eh? Ehm..... Err.... err, ehm..... that is.....”

Looking at Goushi’s face that had a sharp glint in the eyes—

‘Aah....., is this..... the so-called..... 《Kabe-don》 ?

In her confusion, Karen was somehow able to understand that much.

Giving Karen a sharp look, Goushi shouted.

“Have you ever seriously loved someone? Have you loved someone so much that you’d be willing to devote your life to them?”

Still confused, she did not have the time to make up a lie.

Karen answered honestly, as if she had been given a truth serum.

“W-well no.....”

And then, the man shouted once again with an expression filled with sorrow, pain and anger.

“Then, you absolutely don’t understand how I feel right now!”

“Which means.....”

Still pressed against the wall, Karen looked down at the man in front of her.

“Goushi-san..... you..... like Pito-san?”



“I love her!”

This was her first time experiencing a Kabe-don, but who would have thought that, in this state, she would hear a confession of love to someone else.

‘Life is full of surprises, huh.’

Karen thought.

“For now..... sit down. I’ll still hear your story out. And, I’ll have you listen to my questions as well.”

After saying so, she added this.

“Do you want anything to drink? My treat.”

After picking a highly carbonated drink, thinking that it might be invigorating, Karen bought Goushi the same black coffee that he requested.

“Here you are.”

“Thank you very much. I’m not good with coffee. Especially black. My stomach becomes irritated when I drink it.”

“Ain’t Japanese strange?²⁴”

“There’s still more to it. But, Pito loves coffee. Especially black. So, I drink it as well.”

“.....”

24 Japanese as in the language. Most likely referring to an expression Goushi used for stomach ache.

‘Love is scary.’

Karen thought, but kept quiet.

After both of them sat at the same place as before,

“Goushi-san.”

Karen decided to ask what was on her mind bluntly.

“Goushi-san, you were that scared of dying IRL during SJ. I do think that it was a normal response and I can understand that now. But, for someone like that, you don’t seem to be scared about participating in SJ2 that could similarly lead to “IRL death” . Isn’t that strange?”

“It’s not strange. Since dying after Pito has died isn’t scary. Only dying alone first and leaving Pito behind is really scary.”

‘Ah, you’re both really weird. Is that what they call a mended lid for a cracked pot?’²⁵

Karen thought, but kept quiet.

‘Still, I guess Goushi, who’s still seeking a solution, is slightly better? I don’t really know.’

“Goushi-san, you said it a while ago, right? That I can save Pito-san. And that you wanted me to do it.”

“Yes. That’s the main topic. And the reason for me being here.”

“Then I’ll ask. —How am I able to do that?”

25 An expression for “there is a suitable spouse for everyone”.

“Please participate in SJ2 as LLENN. And then, during the tournament, please have a serious, direct match with Pito, and defeat her.”

“Hah?”

“Defeat Pito. With LLENN’s hands, please mercilessly kill her. If you do that, Pito will be saved. She definitely will not commit suicide. And I’ll probably be able to live through this too.”

“W-why?”

‘Mercilessly killing a person during SJ2 who insists on committing suicide if she died during SJ2 is the solution?’

‘Goushi-san, did you drink too much coffee and go mad?’

Thought Karen, but,

“Goushi-san, did you drink too much coffee and go mad?”

She was unable to keep it to herself. She ended up voicing it.

“I know that I’m not exactly sane. However, I don’t think that’s the fault of the coffee, probably. I don’t think something like that was added to the coffee.”

‘Well, you don’t really need to answer me so seriously.’

Karen thought. Goushi continued his speech.

“But, this is the one and only solution. So, please, participate in SJ2 as LLENN, somehow find our team, and defeat Pito. Naturally, Pito, me, and the other team members will fight with all we have to stop that.”

Hearing those words, Karen was confused.

“Huh? Huuh? —So wait, you’ll be my enemy all the way? Shouldn’t you as M-san spread negligence among the team to set the tables for me defeating Pito, or something? Am I wrong?”

As she thought that this was a given, Karen enquired, without considering that it would cowardly or unfair at all.

“In that case, it wouldn’t be a “direct match”, I believe. It would be cowardly. Unfair. That’s why we can’t. I too shall fight with all I’ve got again.”

This is what she got after he suggested a solution.

‘Is this man, Goushi, a faithful dog or something?’, Karen felt that love encouraged lots of mistakes.

Perhaps her shock showed on her face,

“Please don’t give me that look.”

As he told her this with his handsome face.

“I am humbly sorry. But all of this is beyond my grasp.”

Beginning her reply in sarcastic keigo,

“So, Goushi-san, persuade me. How, why, due to what reason would Pito-san not commit suicide upon me killing her, enlighten me!”

Karen ordered.

Goushi answered that in about 30 seconds. Or rather, responded to the order.

Having heard the answer, Karen thought.

‘Ah, so that’s it.’

And then, she spoke.

“Okay..... I’m gonna participate in SJ2! And so— I’ll be the one to defeat Pito-san!”

With a gentle smile, Goushi

“Thank you. You are our only hope.”

Said such words that set one’s teeth on edge, and, after leaving an email address to contact him without Pito-hui noticing, left the observation room.

“Ah, that’s Karen-oneechan! Yahou!”

“You’re right. So Karen uses this place too, huh.”

Karen’s four year old niece, and her mother, Karen’s sister, entered the room.

It was great timing, as Goushi should have just passed them at the elevator. If they had arrived just 20 seconds earlier, they would have probably seen that Karen and Goushi had been here alone.

Karen,

“Ya....., Yahou!”

Had her blood run cold deep down as she answered. And, she was thankful that Goushi’s personality ensured that he threw away the empty can of his coffee.

Karen’s sister’s room was above this room, thus Karen did not understand why they bothered to come all the way here, but...

“Juice!”

Seeing her niece going towards the vending machine, she understood why. This was the closest place for it.

Touching the vending machine with her mobile phone, Karen’s sister asked her.

“Say, how’s the remainder of your spring break looking? We’re planning to go spring skiing this time, how about coming with us?”

“Come with us!”

Karen was glad to get an invitation from her sister’s family, but right now, Karen had tons of things to do before the 4th of April. That’s why, she could not waste even a single day.

“Ah, sorry. I kinda decided to read a ton of books during spring break.....”

Karen made up a silly lie, but it seems that it was not seen through.



SECT.4

SJ2 Preparations

SECT.4

SJ2 Preparations

Having returned to her room, Karen looked at the *calendar* on her *PC's* screen.

Today was the 16th of March. There were approximately 2 and a half weeks till SJ2 on the 4th of April.

Karen began formulating a plan to defeat Pitohui. Hence, she put down ideas on what she should do to achieve her goal into her *schedule app* as she thought of them.

Firstly,

“I’ve got to become stronger……”

To train herself, in other words, LLENN, in GGO.

LLENN was a quick-witted and agile *character*, but honestly speaking, that was her only characteristic.

Although she had won the previous SJ, she had been saved by luck time and time again. There was no guarantee that she would be so blessed next time.

That is why she needed to fight as much as her time allowed from now on, earn experience points and *credits*, *power up* her abilities and weapons, and increase the number of her *skills* (special abilities) that were useful in battle.

At the end of SJ, LLENN had to fight with a *knife*, thus she felt that she certainly needed a *side arm* in case her P90 ran out of ammo or broke down.

She had returned that *knife* to M, thus she decided to buy an identical *knife*. As it was a rather expensive *knife*, she required more *credits*.

However, this was not such a big problem. If she made the most of her spring break and *dove* every day, she could probably get considerable training done. She would also save up enough money.

More importantly, there was an issue that she absolutely had to resolve. Also, it had to be done before the SJ2 registration deadline on the 1st of April.

“This time..... who should I participate with.....”

That’s right, SJ was a *team battle royale*. Although LLENN was *seeded* in the preliminaries as the winner of the previous tournament, she would definitely be unable to submit her *entry* alone.

‘Anyone will do. So, do I have an acquaintance who will fight with me?’

“

She did not.

Before SJ, Pitohui was her sole acquaintance in GGO.

She did meet M during SJ, but it’s not like he could form a *team* with her. He would be an enemy this time.

“Saki-chan and the others..... won’t do either, huh.....”

Her post-SJ acquaintances were the rhythmic gymnastics club *team* led by Eva-Saki.

However, they were a six-member *team* of close friends. They were strong specifically because they knew each other’s movements, supported each other, and fought together as a *team*.

She did not wish to ask them to leave someone behind in order for her to join, nor did she wish for one of them to leave the group to team up with her.

She did consider if she should explain the circumstances — but gave up on that idea as well. She had no desire to involve high-school girls in this.

And then,

“So, I have no choice but to talk some strong-looking person into helping me.....”

This was probably the easiest course of action.

She could go to the *main street* of GGO’s capital 《SBC *Glocken*》 ,

“Hey, mister. You’re lookin fine. So? Wanna go to the SJ2 with me?”

And, stating that she was the victor of the previous SJ, she could use a pick-up line like that to ask a guy out.

However, would that really go well?

Moreover, would the invited person be skillful enough to be reliable? Would he be able to work as a team?

Or, if she just told him “We’re just forming a *team* to be able to participate, so once SJ2 begins, you can just do whatever you want\ , would he agree?

“It probably won’t work.....”
Karen was at her wits’ end.

She would be in trouble if she only had someone register as a *member*, and that person said “I’m out\ on the very day of the tournament.

Or, if he agreed to fight seriously as a *team*, what would he think of LLENN’s behaviour when she only went after Pitohui?

LLENN’s goal in participating in SJ2 wasn’t victory, but to murder Pitohui. If that went well, she could just resign and end her participation in SJ2, and she wouldn’t mind being taken out along with Pitohui either.

A *player*, who Karen could entrust with some details of her circumstances, understood her goal, and would definitely participate. It would be even more splendid if their controlled *character* was strong.

Could such an exceedingly convenient person exist in this world?

‘No, there’s none. I don’t know any. LLENN doesn’t have many friends.’

“Uuu—”

Karen’s groan was interrupted by the clear voice of Kanzaki Elsa.

It came from her mobile phone placed on the charging *base* beside her desk. A ringtone.

Karen extended her long hand, lifted up the mobile phone, and on the screen she saw,

“There is! Such a person exists!”

The name Shinohara Miyu was displayed.

Karen had a one-sided conversation with Miyu, who had called to talk about Kanzaki Elsa’s *mini live* performance to be held in town around mid-April.

Karen wanted to kill a *character* operated by an insane female manager, whom she knew nothing about, to save her.

And to do that, Karen needed Miyu’s help. She needed her to *convert* to GGO and participate in SJ2.

Having poured her heart out,

“I know that this is an unreasonable request. But, I have no one else to turn to. P-please—, I beg you!”

And, Miyu answered Karen’s plea.

“Fu..... This spring, Fukaziroh will go really wild in GGO..... I’ll have to go easy so I don’t accidentally end up killing this Pitohui myself in overenthusiasm.”

* * *

The days of training for Karen and Miyu, as well as LLENN and Fukaziroh, began.

First, Miyu had to *convert* Fukaziroh from ALO to GGO.

This by itself was simple, but when Fukaziroh told the ALO *sylph* players whom she shared a *guild* with, and arranged for them to safeguard her *items* while she was gone, she was naturally asked for the reason.

“To participate in a *mini* combat tournament in GGO with a friend who’s the previous winner.”

Miyu told them just this,

“What, that sounds interesting! Hey, let us join too!”

“Nice! Let’s all storm into GGO!”

“Let’s show them the power of fairies!”

And the matter escalated thus.

Of course, she could not disclose the complicated circumstances about a person’s life being at stake, and why Karen was involved in this, to her large family. Though it was difficult, Miyu rejected their offer to help.

LLENN was waiting at the *starting point* in GGO for the moment Fukaziroh *converted*.

The *starting point* in this *game* was located in a corner of the capital, *Glocken*.

It was hard to tell whether this world, with its buildings on sparkling metal ground stretching outward to soar in the sky, and gaudy neon shining under the always red, out-of-order sky, was magnificent or crazy.

The *conversion system* allowed transferring to a different VR *game* under the same ID, but when this happens, the *avatar's* appearance was determined as a “thing that’s specific to the game.”

Some time ago, having wandered between numerous *games* in search of a chibi *avatar*, she was able to obtain her current LLENN. What appearance would Fukaziroh, who was a beautiful fairy with long hair in ALO, take on in GGO?

Having concealed her body with a brown *robe*, LLENN anticipated with her heart pounding in excitement, until particles of light began to assemble, and slowly formed the shape of a human.

“Ooh!”

For the first time, LLENN saw how a new *character* was born in this world. The particles finally assembled into a shape with colour,

“O— o? Ooo!”

In front of the sparkly-eyed LLENN, a single *character* formed.

The *character*, who raised her head and blinked,

“Yo! Kohi! —Whoops, LLENN!”

Was definitely Fukaziroh.

Her self in the world of GGO,

“What is it? Does my face look weird?”

Was a blonde beauty—

“No! You’re cute!”

Who did not lose to LLENN in shortness.

“Uhii! Is, this,— me?”

GGO Fukaziroh was slightly taller than LLENN; probably around 150 *cm* tall. In a world filled with *machos* and bean poles, her physique was out of the ordinary.

She had beautiful, sparkling, *straight*, golden hair down her back. Her eyes were brown, tinged with red. Her face had very attractive features, but *parts* of it looked *sharp* enough to cut someone if touched.

On the topic of blonde beauties, Milana-chan from the rhythmic gymnastics club was one too, but their aura was quite different.

If Milana-chan was as cute as a “doll that makes you smile on sight,” —

Fukaziroh had the aura of a “demonic servant that causes your wariness to surge on sight.” . She might even be called a “witch’s apprentice.” .

“Nice nice! Though the lack of breasts bothers me a bit!”

As Fukaziroh rubbed her chest through her initial uniform,

“Hold on! Miss, that’s an F8000 series, right! Since you’ve just started, you haven’t formed any attachment to it yet, right? Would you like to sell your *account* and that *avatar*? You’d get a hefty sum of money, y’know?”

A *broker*, who seemed to deal in the trade of rare *avatars*, brought his clearly middle-aged man face right in front of her.

“Hmm, what should I do? How much'd I get, mister?”

Pulling away Fukaziroh, who seemed to be beginning compensated dating²⁶ negotiations, LLENN broke into a run from that place.

LLENN and Fukaziroh began their strategy meeting in a private room of a rundown bar.

There were a lot of preparations that had to be made in order to fight in SJ2 and defeat the formidable Pitohui.

First, they *checked* Fukaziroh's *stats* in GGO.

During the *conversion*, the *character's* strength was “relatively” transferred over.

In other words, a *character* that mainly trained in physical strength in the previous game would receive a new *character* with a high strength value even in the new *game*.

For example, if LLENN *converted* to another *game*, she would of course get a *character* with high agility. Even if she looked like a sumo wrestler appearance-wise.

In GGO, and most other VR *games*, a management *window* would appear in the air via a specific motion using the left hand. Although it was basically only visible to the user, it was possible to make it visible to others by facing them and pressing “send” .

26 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enjo_k%C5%8Dsai, “the Japanese language term for the practice of older men giving money and/or luxury gifts to attractive women for their companionship”

Looking at the *character status* screen that Fukaziroh brought out, “Wh— what..... is this.....?”

LLENN was astounded.

Strength, Agility, Vitality (Endurance), Dexterity, Sensibility, and Luck.

Among these six *stats* that GGO *characters* had, LLENN was better only in Agility and Dexterity. Fukaziroh was far better in the rest of the stats.

Her Strength and Vitality were especially high. With these, she could carry a considerably heavy gun and a large amount of equipment, and she had a *tough* body that could withstand a lot of punishment.

She had a delicate-looking girl’s body, yet her Strength and Vitality might be equal to M’s. It was as if she was a *cyborg*.

“Well, I guess this’ll do.”

Fukaziroh said very naturally while toying with her long, golden hair in front of her face. She was completely unsurprised.

‘Just how much does Miyu play VR *games*? Has she sunk in hours, tens of hours— no, hundreds of hours on them?’

LLENN now felt alarmed. But at the same time,

“She’s! Reliable!”

She could not hold back her inner thoughts.

The next thing to do was fit her with GGO weapons.

Fukaziroh came from ALO without any possessions, thus her sole piece of equipment was the initial uniform. She had no *items*. And as for her funds—

“Let’s see, a thousand *credits*.”

“.....The initial amount, huh.”

With this, she would use up all her funds by buying a single cheap pistol. With such equipment,

“It’s alright, nothing to worry about.”

“There is!”

She could not possibly survive in SJ2. She needed the best ones possible.

However, that did not mean that LLENN had that much money to spare. After all, she had just bought a new P90. She did not even have any spare equipment to lend out. She had ended up selling her optical *submachine gun* and the 《Škorpion》 she once owned.

As such, they had no choice but to fight *monsters* to earn *credits*, but it would certainly be quite hard to do that in 2 weeks. A *character* being this strong yet with no money was cruel.

“So..... we have no other choice..... I’ll just take some from my savings.....”

LLENN muttered.

GGO allowed *real money trade*, so there was the possibility of investing real world electronic *money*.

However, Fukaziroh reacted immediately.

“That’s not good! Sure, Kohi - I mean LLENN - wait no, since we’re talking about *real* money in this case, would Kohi be better? You do have a rich allowance! And that money is meant to treat me to loads of high-class sushi at Ginza when I come to Tokyo for Kanzaki Elsa’s *live* performance, right?”

“I made no such promise! Well, if SJ2 goes well, I will treat you though.....”

“Aww yeah! You heard it, right! I’ll serve as the witness!”

“Well then, what should we do Miyu— I mean, Fukaziroh— that’s kinda hard to pronounce.”

“ “Fuka_u is fine; everyone calls me that. In that case, we have no choice but to call on that person, who asked you to save a life, for help, right?”

“Uh—”

She had not thought of that.

LLENN pondered on the idea for a moment,

“We’ve got no other choice, huh.....”

She could not think of any other ideas. Considering that M has spent a lot of time playing, she thought that he would probably have spare *credits* and equipment, thus she decided to try it out.

But for that, she had to temporarily *log out*.

Goushi had given her his *RL email address*.

Since there was the danger of their conversations in GGO and messages sent in GGO being noticed by Pitohui.

“Well, I’m going to explore this colourless world today! I’m going to *challenge* the record of getting the most nanpas²⁷!”

Leaving Fukaziroh, who said that as she had come from the *colourful* ALO, Karen temporarily returned to the real world. Immediately, she sent a *mail* to Goushi.

‘Because of such reasons, please, could you help with equipment and *credits* for my SJ2 partner?. But, I don’t want you to use *real money* for this.’

The answer came just short of a minute later.

‘I’m the one who asked for help, so by all means, allow me to help. I’ll leave an *item box* at a certain place in town.’

Of course, it wasn’t an actual box, they would just receive *data* by going there and touching the item. She also got the *password* to open it. The reason for not transferring the items directly was probably to avoid leaving records of their transaction.

Having *dived* into GGO once again, LLENN,

“Forty three people called me in this short time! Not bad! Though, this *game* really does have very few female chars, huh! It’s possible to get a reverse harem here!”

Went to the designated location together with Fukaziroh, who had to dress in a *robe* because her excessive beauty made her stand out. Indeed, they found a present from M behind a trash can in a back alley.

27 In modern Japanese, nanpa (ナンパ) refers to boys who try to pick up girls on the street or some other public place.

Fukaziroh touched it, entered the *password*, and a certain amount of *credits* entered her completely empty wallet.

Seeing that, LLENN,

“WHA!”

And Fukaziroh too,

Were both so surprised at the displayed number that they jumped up in astonishment.

“LLENN..... you're sure that this isn't a mistake, right.....?”

“Probably.....”

“And afterwards, I won't be told to sell my organs or go on a tuna boat²⁸, right.....?”

“Probably.....”

There was a short *message* from M, along with the enormous amount of monetary aid.

『This should do for now. Let me know if you need more.』

Having read the letter, Fukaziroh faced LLENN with an expression that was the very embodiment of seriousness, and said.

“I wanna marry this guy right now. Give me his *email* now.”

The problem of money was resolved.

28 There's an urban legend that people who borrow money and can't pay their debt can work off their debt by going on a tuna boat.

Next up was Fukaziroh's equipment. For starters, a weapon for attacking, a principal *main weapon*, was necessary.

"Since I have Strength and endurance, I can carry any *heavy* weapon, y'know? Like a two-handed sword, or a battleaxe would do fine. I also like long *lances* quite a bit."

Such things did not exist in GGO, and even if they did, they would probably be quite useless. LLENN and Fukaziroh headed for a weapon store in a large *shopping mall*.

'What kind of weapon should Fukaziroh get, I wonder?'

LLENN pondered, then consulted with Fukaziroh as well, and the two came to the conclusion that it would be good to get something with heavy firepower to support her nimble self.

Optical guns—the so-called *ray guns*, *beam guns*, and *blasters*, would suffer a loss in power due to an 《Anti-beam Defence Field》, thus the *theory* was that live-ammunition guns should be used in battles against people. Actually, almost everyone in both the BoB and SJ used live-ammunition guns.

LLENN showed Fukaziroh the various live-ammunition guns while in the gun store at the *mall*.

For instance, she introduced her to machine guns that could cover a large area due to their rapid-fire, and *assault rifles* (automatic rifles) that struck a *balance* between firepower and size, but no matter which kind she introduced,

"I don't like them."

They did not match Fukaziroh's expectations.

"Like, they all look strong, but none of them are beautiful."

She said.

‘Well, who cares about the aesthetics!’

LLENN wanted to say, but refrained, of course, as she herself bought the P90 solely based on appearance.

Choosing a weapon for Fukaziroh proved to be difficult,

“This is troublesome.....”

LLENN was at her wits’ end. ‘If only the wealth of gun knowledge that is Pito-san, or M-san, were here at a time like this’, she thought, but that was impossible no matter how much she hoped for it.

As she had no other choice,

“Fuka. Let’s head to another shop.”

“Okay.”

In this case, all they could do was to search until they found something. The two left the large mall, and went to a back alley store like the one where LLENN got her hands on her P90.

In the world of GGO, optical guns were the weapons that people who had left and then returned on a colonist spaceship used. Live-ammunition guns were the weapons that were used on Earth, designed from either the schematics or the actual guns that were left behind; that was the setting.

Middle- and higher-class firepower-wielding weapons could not be created. They were uncovered or found by *characters* who explored dangerous ruins, or defeated the *bosses* found there.

As the *game* progressed, new weapons would be implemented, thus players would say “I wonder what weapon we will find this time?” in excitement.

The back alley store was a place that dealt in such rare, high-power, and high-priced weapons.

And so, Fukaziroh’s eyes sparkled just as she entered the store.

“LLENN! This one! What’s this gun? It’s super cool! Pretty! Lovely! *Beautiful!*”

“Huh! Which one?”

‘What gun caused Fukaziroh to cheer so much?’

With Fukaziroh looking as cheerful as she once was, LLENN rushed over towards her. And so,

“This one!”

She looked at the gun on a shelf that Fukaziroh was pointing to.

“What..... is this.....?”

LLENN’s face twitched.

‘Ugly!’

LLENN’s sense of friendship stopped her from putting that thought into words.

It was an awfully ugly object.

Its overall length was around 70 *cm*. About the same as a rather

long *submachine gun*. As it had a *stock* for holding against the shoulder, the gun was probably a gun²⁹. As for the colour, it was mostly *desert tan*, a soil-like shade of brown. Though the *grip* and some other parts were black.

Nevertheless, it was actually an unattractive gun.

The most unsightly part of it was the protuberance in its centre.

Its revolver-like rotating cylinder protruded like the stomach of an obese middle-aged person. Its excessively large and short barrel was nothing more than another bad part of its appearance.

‘The gun looks like a crossbreed between a *revolver* and *submachine gun* that had a mistake in *size* adjustment and thus ended up growing a belly.’

LLENN had such an impression about it.

“LLENN, you don’t know about it either? But, it does look good, right! I’m set on it! What kind of gun is it?”

“Ehm.....”

Even though she was asked what kind of gun it was, LLENN did not know anything about it other than the fact that it was “awfully unsightly”, as this was the first time she had seen it after all.

LLENN read the displayed *tag*. 《MGL-140》. That was probably its name.

Even if she knew its name, she could not say anything else about it. For example, what kind of gun it was and what kind of bullets it used.

29 Sigsawa has a redundant style, this wording is intended: 銃は銃なのでしょう

At that point, having greeted another customer, the shop assistant came in front of the two girls.

He was a young man who wore *jeans* and a *T-shirt*, as well as an American Marine Corps camouflage-patterned *apron* on top.

He wasn't a *computer*-controlled NPC (*Non-Player Character*) like the shop assistants working at the huge *mall*. It was a *player character*, who was doing business in GGO to earn money.

"Miss, that is a continuous-fire *grenade launcher*! It's the first time I've seen one too. It seems that they have just recently been implemented, and then someone discovered them in some ruins, thus yesterday, we got 2 of them at our store!"

The shop assistant said in a cheerful, merchant-like tone, and gave an invigorating smile.

"A *grenade launcher*. Ah, so that's it, huh....."

LENN realised. Even though she knew about them, this was the first time she saw the actual thing.

"What's a..... *grenade*?"

As Fukaziroh, who did not even know about them, asked this question, the shop assistant politely answered.

"In Japanese, *grenade* means high-^rexplosive^ū projectile^d. You can just think of it as "a shell packed with gunpowder that explodesⁿ". A *hand grenade* is a ^shand^h-held^u high-^rexplosive^ū proje^d. It's literally a bomb thrown by hand."

"Hmmhmm."

As the shop assistant's explanation was polite, and he was clearly more well-informed than LLENN, she kept quiet.

“A *grenade launcher* is a gun that can discharge *grenades* farther than by hand. Using the power of gunpowder, it can send 40 *mm*-diameter *grenades* flying up to 400 *metres* away.”

“Ho! This gun's not just cute, but superb too!”

“That's right! The way the grenades fly in a parabola is fun right! Normally, they're single-shot— in other words, you can only load in 1 *grenade* at a time, and then need to remove the empty shell and load in a new one after firing, but this gun is different. It has a rotating cylinder. You can load in 6 grenades into it, and fire 2 per second just by pulling the trigger. In other words, you can fire all 6 of them in 3 seconds!”

“Hoho. A hail of bombs, huh!”

“Right! The explosion of a single grenade can scatter fragments in a 5 *metre* radius, and then multiply it by 6. This is undoubtedly one of the strongest *grenade launchers* in GGO at this moment.”

“Nice nice!”

“And there's a large variety of 40 *mm* grenades; rather than just the exploding kind, there are tons of them that you can try, like ones that create a smokescreen, *thermite* incendiary grenades that burn people to a crisp with super-high temperatures, or flares that shine as they descend by *parachute*!”

“Even nicer!”

“Moreover, there are 《*plasma grenades*》 , which don't exist in *RL*, in GGO! Oh the pleasant feeling when you fire those, and blow away your opponents with super-high power!”

“Hyahaa!”

At the end of the high-spirited *talk* that sounded like a sale on the way to the station,

“Mister! I’m buying it! Sell it!”

Fukaziroh shouted as she jumped around in excitement, but the shop assistant *toned down* a bit.

“But, it is expensive, you know? Have you..... seen its price?”

‘Come to think of it, I still haven’t looked at it.’

When LLENN looked at the *price tag*,

“Guh— hah!”

She felt like vomiting blood.

As is usual with powerful weapons, even the price packed a punch. How many of her beloved P90s that were by no means cheap could she buy with this? She did not want to calculate that.

But, however, Fukaziroh right now—

“I can afford it I can afford it!”

Was super rich because of a certain someone,. Having manipulated her window, she showed the shop assistant an amount of money enough for the purchase, and at the same time,

“I’m buying 2! I wanna hold one in each hand and fire them like a badass! I’ll also buy all the ammo you have!”

“

The shop assistant, who seemed like he was looking at an unbelievable idiot, at a loss for words,

“Th-thank you for your patronage!”

Quickly shouted, smiling from ear to ear. And then,

“Aah..... with this, I’ll make enough for next month’s expenses too.....”

It seemed that this person was facing quite the hardship in *RL*.

‘Even if I fail at job hunting, I’ll pass on making a living via a *game*.’

LENN carved this thought into her heart.

1 week has passed since Fukaziroh came to GGO.

Thanks to the funds received from M, nicknamed “M funds”, she now had all the necessary equipment as well. There was no longer a single trace of her being a newbie that had just *converted*.

After a lot of trouble, the equipment that Fukaziroh chose in the end was—

For the top, she wore a long-sleeved, camouflaged *combat suit*. It had a pattern of various shades of brown and green, a pattern used by the US armed forces known as 《*MultiCam*》. It also had a solid green, bulletproof vest on the front. There were a great number of *pouches* for *grenades* on it. She wore brown gloves on her hands.

As for the lower half of her body, she wore identically camouflaged *shorts* that looked like a skirt. Her legs were covered in black *tights*, and she wore brown *short boots*.

Her long, golden hair was arranged into a bun at her nape, with an ornate hairpin inserted into it. When LLENN wondered where she found such an *item*, Fukaziroh told her that she had bought a small *knife* and had it made thinner at the store.

And as for her head, she wore a green *helmet* that was rather unproportionately big.

Based solely on appearance, the outfit made her look like a mountain climbing girl. Miyu, being far more feminine with her choice of clothes, was quite particular about what she wore. However, she settled for camouflage.

As for her arms, she had 2 brutal MGL-140 *grenade launchers* that could fire 6 grenades in succession, equipped by *slings* on her right and left. Their colour was left the same as before.

There was also a *plastic holster*, bought who knows when, on her right thigh, and inside was a 《Smith & Wesson M&P》 9 mm calibre automatic pistol.

‘Was this meant to continue attacking in case she couldn't settle a battle against a *monster* with 12 *grenades*?’ When LLENN asked this during pistol shooting practice,

“If someone gets close, I’ll manage somehow!”

She gave such a reassuring answer.

On her back she wore a green *backpack*. It was filled with tons of *grenades*.

Even her *storage* was filled to the brim, as much as her *stat*-determined weight limit allowed, with spare *grenades*. The number actually exceeded 100.

“Shooting with guns is fun too! LLENN! Let’s go!”

Having gone to the *fields* to fight formidable opponents since the very day she bought her gear, Fukaziroh had completely become a GGO girl.

LLENN fought under the *pressure* that she had to bring down Pitohui, but Fukaziroh was in good spirits, as though she had forgotten that.

Nevertheless, her becoming stronger made her nothing but reliable to LLENN. It also served the goal of training herself, thus LLENN and Fukaziroh continued to fight.

Fukaziroh would keep a watch on her surroundings under the red sky, and once she saw a striding *monster*,

“Hyahaa! Time to take out the trash!”

Ponponpon, she would discharge costly *grenades* without restraint.

The discharged 40 mm grenades would fly in a parabola, and land diagonally from above. And then, once the fuse ran out, they would explode.

Even a large monster would vanish without a trace if it took a direct hit to its body, or receive heavy damage from the fragments even if the grenades exploded nearby instead. When it became immobile, LLENN would rush over at her superhuman speed and deal the finishing blow with her P90.

If there was no need to use her bullets, she would draw her recently-acquired *knife* from her waist, and slash it.

That was how the two long-time bosom friends, who got along from the start, worked. Their *communication* was like A-un breathing³⁰

“The 《*Bullet Circle*》 makes it easy!”

Fukaziroh *mastered* the *system assist* unique to GGO right away.

The *Bullet Circle*, ^{chakudan yosoku en} impact prediction circle³¹ in Japanese, was a green circle that could only be seen by the *character* who was shooting.

Once the user readied their gun and touched the trigger with their finger, a circle would appear in the shooter’s field of vision in less than a second.

The size of the circle depended on the variety and ability of the gun and bullets, as well as the estimated distance to the target, *character* abilities and so on. And, matching the *player’s* heart rate, the circle decreased and increased in size.

Once fired, the bullet would hit somewhere within the circle *randomly*, thus it was an ironclad rule to fire at the moment it was at its smallest. Naturally, if the heart rate sprung up due to nervousness, it would be awfully difficult to grasp the *timing*.

With guns that were basically aimed pretty much straight towards the target, like LLENN’s P90 and normal guns, the *circle* appeared pretty much straight ahead.

30 A-un breathing” (阿吽の呼吸, aun no kokyuu) is an expression for a harmonic relationship. A-un (阿吽) is the Japanese transliteration of the first and last letters of the Sanskrit alphabet (अहं), which symbolically represent the beginning and end of things.

31 For those interested, Sigsawa has used the same term as Kawahara in this case, unlike in Volume 1.

‘So, how on earth does it work for a *grenade launcher* which, aside from at super-point-blank range, attacks in a large parabola, like throwing a *ball*?’

LLENN wondered, and,

“The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Seeing is believing. In one ear and out the other.”³²

Fukaziroh fired a single shot after saying that, and presented her beloved gun to LLENN.

“It’s heavy……”

To LLENN, the MGL-140 felt like a mass of lead. There was no way she could hold and shoot it one-handed.

According to actual gun *data*, the gun alone weighed nearly 6 *kilograms*, but there were 6 *grenades* that weighed at least 300 *grams* each in it, thus the whole thing weighed at least 8 *kilograms* when firing.

It was entirely different from her P90, which weighed just 3 kilograms even including the bullets.

LLENN realised how strong Fukaziroh was, as she could move around carrying 2 of them.

“Then, just 1 shot.”

Grasping the *grip* under the *barrel*, LLENN held it against her waist, rather than her shoulder, and then touched the trigger with her finger.

³² The literal translation of the proverbs is “Evidence is better than debate. Seeing once is better than hearing a hundred times. Praying into a horse’s ear.”, but since the last one didn’t really make sense in English, we decided to use English equivalents instead.

And then, a green circle, tilted by about 45 degrees, emerged clearly on the surface of the wilderness about 200 *metres* away. When she tried moving the muzzle slightly upwards, the circle moved farther away.

When she squeezed the trigger, *pon*, along with this lovely sound and less recoil than she had anticipated, possibly due to the launcher's body being heavy, a black mass flew out, and the rotating cylinder turned 1 grenade to the right at the same time.

About 3 seconds after discharging, the launched *grenade* exploded within the *circle*. A cloud of smoke whirled up high, and the sound of the explosion came late by a beat.

Returning the MGL-140 to Fukaziroh,

“I see.....”

This definitely made aiming easy. The shop assistant,

“Optical sights are attached to a *real* MGL-140 to help aim while changing the angle of the stock as it is held against the shoulder, but you see, in GGO where we have the *Bullet Circle*, it instead becomes a hindrance, so you don't need it.”

Said this, and now she understood what he had meant. There really were no optical sights attached to Fukaziroh's MGL-140.

She now understood how the *Bullet Circle* worked in this case.

“What about the *Line*?”

LENN expressed a question. In GGO, there was another *system* that corresponded to the *Bullet Circle*, called the 《*Bullet Line*》 .

It was an *assist* that was applied for the defenders, a red line that informed a *character* being targeted that “Bullets are going to fly here right now”, which was impossible in reality.

However, as an exception, it would not be displayed if it was “the first bullet fired by an unspotted sniper”.

Upon seeing them, GGO *players* were able to avoid incoming bullets, which would mostly be impossible in *RL*.

In order to confirm the *grenade launcher’s Bullet Lines* with her own eyes, LLENN stepped away by about 200 *metres*, and had Fukaziroh target her.

“Ah, I see.”

As expected, it drew a large parabola. Going diagonally upwards in the distance, the *line* then descended in an arch.

LLENN conveyed,

“Yeah, I got it. Just as I imagined.”

Via the communication item, which allowed them to converse as if they were on a phone, that Fukaziroh had bought, but,

“Well then, let’s try practicing dodging for a bit. I’m firing 3 of them.”

Right after LLENN was suddenly told this, she heard *pom pom pom*, sounds of her gun discharging, and became shocked.

“Uhyaaaaa!”



LLENN panicked, broke into an extreme *dash*, escaped, and then heard three consecutive explosions behind her. She felt the ground shaking at her feet. The blast then hit her from behind.

Turning around, she saw that the spot that she had just been standing in had been entirely gouged out. Such terrifying power.

“That was close.....”

As the *grenade* came flying in a parabola, there was a several-seconds-long window between discharge and impact. In this sense, it was much easier to dodge than a regular bullet—but, it was completely different from bullets that could be dodged by moving several *cm* or several tens of *cm*, after all, it was a *grenade* that exploded and scattered metal fragments.

Fukaziroh, who mercilessly opened fire on her,

“Yep yep. You’re fast on your feet. Bravo.”

“It’s not “bravo” ! That was scary!”

“Whatcha saying, SJ2 is scarier, right?”

“..... Indeed.”

When LLENN returned to her side,

“Wow, what a strong and fun weapon! I’m glad I bought it. I’m glad it was on sale!”

Fukaziroh shared her glee.

However, she also added this.

“But, it’s excessively *peaky*³³. I can’t fight if it’s this much.”

As could be expected from a hardcore VR *gamer*. She realised it before LLENN was able to put her thoughts to words.

A rapid-fire *grenade launcher* did indeed have a lot of striking power. However, at the same time, it was a weapon with many faults.

The fact that it was a *rare* and costly weapon was the first. It could not be bought that easily.

The fact that it was heavy and had a huge Strength requirement was another. It could only be handled by burly *characters*, and even then it would not be that easy to carry other weapons as well. Machos like Fukaziroh were the exception.

And most importantly, the fact that “once all 6 shots are fired, it takes time to reload” was a major flaw.

Reloading the MGL-140 requires unfastening the *lock*, turning the gun, and exposing the rotary magazine.

Then, emptying the used shells, winding back the spring by turning the rotary magazine by hand, and finally, putting in new *grenades* and inserting the magazine back into the gun. No matter how Fukaziroh hurried, she still needed close to 10 seconds for these *processes*.

It was self-evident that Fukaziroh would be turned into honeycomb during this time if she fought alone.

“This gun is only meant to be used for a *support* role in *party play*, right! Just like long-incantation powerful offensive spells.”

33 Peaky (ピーキー) is wasei-eigo for something that looks like a sharp \wedge (on a graph, for example). We think that this is implying that as “tending towards extremes” (e.g. it is VERY powerful, but has VERY high requirements and long reload times).

“I don’t really know much about magic in ALO....., but something like that, I guess.”

“It would be much simpler if we could soar through the skies, huh.....”

Fukaziroh said honestly, as everyone could fly in ALO,

“Oh fairy missy. This is a world of human folk.”

LLENN answered in an old man’s tone.

“Well, whatcha gonna do! A’righty then, I’ll fire from the rear, so I leave the role of a vanguard *attacker* to you, LLENN!”

“Gotcha! It sure is reassuring that you became so strong, Fuka. Oh, and while we’re at it, there’s a strategy that I want to try out—”

“Oh, what is it?”

* * *

Karen and Miyu continued *diving* into GGO during their spring break.

They had to train themselves, and their *team*, as much as possible until SJ2 on the 4th of April. Luckily, university spring break was entirely *free time*.

Even so, Karen’s time was limited to about 6 hours a day.

If she spent any more time on it, she would always feel awfully, mentally exhausted. She had never played this long until now. Hence, she had problems sleeping at night, and occasionally had headaches.

There were a lot of, even excessive, safety devices built into the *AmuSphere*, to prevent something like the *NerveGear* from the SAO incident from being conceived, and to prevent that horrible incident from being repeated.

The user's sensations were constantly *monitored*, and if an abnormality was detected, the forced *shutdown* feature would activate, and the *player* would be returned to the real world.

As it would be intolerable for such a thing to happen during the tournament, she paid attention to managing her physical condition as well.

She had to defeat Pitohui during SJ2. This might be a game, but it's not something that you play. The lives of two people were at stake.

Even so, Karen stayed in the world of GGO as much as her time and physical condition allowed, hence her elder sister living above,

"You don't even call us by phone, what's wrong? You're holed up in your room, right? Are you really concentrating that much on reading? Could it be..... Karen, are you depressed that you can't make friends? You even cut your hair all of a sudden, did something happen? If something's worrying you, I could give you counsel, keeping it a secret from our parents, you know?"

Ended up telling her such things. It was awfully hard for Karen, but she continued deceiving her.

On the other hand, Miyu's case was just the opposite.

As expected for a hopeless *net game* addict—, no, a hardcore VRMMO *gamer*.

There wasn't a time when LLENN *dived* into GGO and could not find Fukaziroh already there. Once LLENN got to *Glocken*, Fukaziroh would be notified of this, as they were *squadron* mates. As such, LLENN would soon receive a *message* from her telling her where to meet up.

After they reunited, Fukaziroh would raise her thumb, baring her white teeth.

“Alrighty! Let's go farming! Or go kill someone!”

And so, the *fields* they went to were essentially not at a difficulty befitting beginners like Fukaziroh, but just as LLENN had predicted, there was no need to worry about that.

Fukaziroh never did anything unreasonable, and completely understood LLENN's role in attacking, thus she quickly deduced *monster* attack *patterns*, and *supported* her with powerful *grenades* from afar.

‘We can't lose like this!’

Blazing with fighting spirit, LLENN made more and more bold attacks than she used to, accepting the *risks* involved, in order to further train herself.

She tried moves that she had never attempted before, and did not mind even if she failed right away. She continued her practice, running, running, shooting, reloading her *magazine* and then shooting again.

‘Speed is my shield! Attacking is my defence!’

‘Don't stop! You'll die if you stop! Fire away!’

The second generation P-chan, as if speaking for LLENN's fighting spirit, created harmonic gunshots.

LLENN's goal was but one. To defeat Pitohui.

To kill her—

And save her.

While LLENN and Fukaziroh spent all their time practicing like the main characters of a shounen-manga,

“Once more! Rosa, shoot longer and pin your opponent down without giving them breathing room! Anna, work on getting your reloads done as fast as possible! Your sniping skill is excellent, so just have confidence in yourself! Tanya and I need to work on matching our attack *timing*! When firing, don't rely solely on the *Bullet Circle*! The time till the *circle* appears is precious! If you think you're going to hit, fire! We can do it!”

There were other *players* who similarly trained without sparing any effort.

It was the rhythmic gymnastics club *team*, led by Saki, no, Boss-Eva. With their high school end-of-year *tests* now over, they had more days when they only had classes in the morning.

The girls spent at least 2 hours a day, though usually more, *diving*.

Of course, they did have club activities, but they came to the *game* world under the pretext that “it was necessary to build up the group's sense of unity” .

In GGO, ammunition was not distributed freely; all of it had to be either picked up or bought by themselves.

Aside from *monster* farming, which rewarded experience and *items*, as well as *credits*, simple shooting practice would result in a decrease in funds, proportional to the intensity of the training. However, the girls did not mind, and continued having intensive, live-ammunition shooting training.

It was important to raise experience points and *skills* to “improve the abilities of the *character*”, but being quite engaged in *sports*, the girls knew well that improving their *player*, in other words, their own skills— prompt decision making skills and reaction speed, was absolutely important.

The *snipers* Anna and Tohma could spot a distant target hundreds of *metres* away, and shoot them, and so, they were training to increase their manageable distance.

And, they were also practicing how to quickly defeat an enemy that suddenly appeared in their vicinity.

The *sniper’s* role did not always involve defeating enemies at long range. Even at mid-short distances, it was an important job to deliver an instant-kill blow to the vitals that other soldiers could not do.

In contrast, the Bizon *submachine gun*-equipped Tanya polished her fighting style that relied on Agility, just like LLENN. She repeatedly continued exercises that involved navigating labyrinth-like *fields* filled with obstacles, running as fast as she could, and defeating enemies that she encountered as quickly as possible, without caring about making mistakes or crashing into something.

Once that was over, she had even more extreme exercises.

She had to run in a large *field* with an approximately 2 *metre*-long string attached to her back, pulling along a koinobori³⁴ -like “wind sock” as she ran.

Meanwhile, her mates would fire at that windsock from afar. It was an exercise for hitting *characters* like LLENN that ran at high-speed. Of course, if they hit Tanya, they would deal mercilessly high *damage*. It demanded concentration.

Boss and Tanya also had another exercise with their 9 *mm* «Strizhi» pistols.

First, the remaining four members stood holding wooden targets that looked just like a person’s head.

“*Ready— fire!*”

And then, starting from a stance where they held their Vintorez and Bizon, they would throw them away, and quickly draw out their pistols. This was a practice meant to prepare for a situation when their *main weapons* broke down or ran out of bullets. If their aim was off, they would strike the faces of their mates with 9 *mm* bullets.

Players, who happened to come across this scene of asceticism in the wilderness, took a quick look at it from afar with their binoculars, and then,

“Those girls sure are scary..... They don't seem to have noticed us, and I don't want them to catch sight of us, so let's not get involved with them.”

“Roger. We are on our way back from farming, so we can't risk getting hurt now.”

34 Koinobori (鯉のぼり, carp streamer) are carp-shaped wind socks traditionally flown in Japan to celebrate Children's Day on the 5th of May.

“Though, those are some tough women, huh..... I’m sure that even their real selves are old ladies with 30 years of *online game* experience.....”

The group humbly turned down the *chance* to attack them.

The sun was setting in the GGO world that was *linked* with real world time.

After their life-endangering practice, it was about time to return to *RL*,

“Everyone, I have something to say. Something important.”

Boss said.

To her five comrades, who formed a line and stood at attention to listen to her, although she did not really order them to do so,

“We have become much stronger. If we can demonstrate all our abilities, I believe we have a decent chance of winning SJ2. But——”

Stating this, *Boss*’s expression became sharper. Even though her usual expression was quite intense to begin with. Enough to instantly make children cry.

“There will be a strong enemy. M, the giant who fought with LLENN the previous time. It’s not certain yet, but I am very sure that he’ll come. He is a terrifyingly famous *sniper*, and moreover, as we saw in the video, he has a powerful shield.”

All of them nodded.

M’s shield.

It was a gun shield made out of a plate of the outer wall of a spaceship that could be expended into a fan-shape. A menacing *shield* that could deflect 7.62 *mm* bullets, in other words, the most powerful bullets they had, at point-blank range.

Used in an open place, and coupled with M's M14 EBR sniping, it could wipe them all out.

That was because M had developed the *high-technique* "being able to snipe without showing a *Bullet Line* even if his position is known".

This actually did not mean that he was cheating, it's just that he simply avoided touching the trigger until right before firing. Naturally, the *Bullet Circle system assist* was not activated either, thus he had to fire by deducing where he was aiming through the *scope* on his own.

When sniping, the bullet would drop in proportion to the distance to the target, and it would be pushed away in proportion to the wind. And if the target was moving, it was necessary to anticipate their moves.

Sniping was a technique that required precise calculations and experience, thus not everyone could do it that easily without the *Bullet Circle*.

However, M came along. With his experience of real shooting from abroad, and his GGO abilities.

In order to win, they had to take any measure necessary to defeat an opponent that could snipe them, without giving them a chance to dodge, from behind his impregnable wall. The M14 EBR's effective range was about 800 *metres*. Even a *grenade launcher* could not reach him from that distance.

“We need a way to smash through that shield head-on! A stronger weapon! That’s why——”

‘That’s why?’

As her mates watched on with bated breath, *Boss* declared loudly.

“Tomorrow, we’re going to get one!”

* * *

March 2026 passed by quietly.

And so, as the deadline drew near, the number of *teams* declaring their participation in SJ2 gradually increased. If the *list* went over the thirty participant limit, preliminaries were planned to be held the day before the main tournament.

There were two names at the top of the *list*.

《S H I N C》 — the rhythmic gymnastics club’s *team*, led by Saki, who were the previous runner-ups.

《M M T M》 — the team of men with skull *emblems* that took the third place then.

These two alone had their *team* names displayed in a different colour. All the other names were in white, but they alone were displayed in a golden shade. Making it clear to everyone that these teams were *seeded*.

And so, on Sunday, the 25th of March. At around 12:00.

Just when the list was filled with thirty participants, a new *team* name was added.

The name 《L F》, which normally should have been displayed as the thirty first entry—

Was actually displayed topmost, shining in a vivid golden shade.

4 minutes later, a telephone rang somewhere in Tokyo.

『What? Goushi-kun. I'll be having a business meeting with the other director very soon. Make it brief.』

『Then, I shall only convey the essentials. The aforementioned *team*, has entered. Just now.』

『Director?』

『Thanks for the report. I'm looking forward to it.』

『Okay. But—』

『I know. I've got the 4th of April all planned out. See you.』

40 minutes later, on a road in a narrow and dark valley in the world of GGO, five men talked as they looked at their *window* screens.

“Hey look at this! It's here it's here it's here! That *pink* chibi!”

“Who? —Oh, you're right..... The fellow who avoided all of our bullets!”

“They've finally registered, huh. Though the highly-skilled guys who killed us from behind don't seem to have *entered* yet.”

“They might not come. Looking at the video, they looked like professionals, right? Based on their moves and *hand signs*, there are rumours that they’re part of the ASDF³⁵’s “base garrison” . Maybe their superiors got mad that they went out to play or something?”

“It doesn’t matter where! It doesn’t matter who! We, the 《Zen-Nihon *Machine Gun Lovers*》 , will defeat any enemy we find!”

‘Yeah!’, the five psyched machine gun-wielding guys—

Were ripped into shreds 3 seconds later by a leopard-like *monster* that crept up on them while they cheered.

1 hour later,

“Boss! Karen-san— I mean, LLENN has *entered!*”

“What did you say!”

At the entrance of a certain *dungeon* in GGO, a certain six-member *party* was surprised.

“You’re, right…… This…… is getting more and more interesting!”

“I wonder why Karen-san had a change of heart……?”

“Who knows! Not asking that is the principle of soldiers! From now on, we won’t make any contact with her even in *RL*! Until the tournament is concluded— she’s an enemy!”

“Ro~ger”

35 ASDF stands for Air Self-Defence Force, a branch of the Self Defence Force. The abbreviation should technically be written as JASDF (Japan Air Self Defence Force), but Japanese don’t really specify the obvious that they’re referring to Japan. Anyway, I used an abbreviation here because it was abbreviated in the raw (空自 instead of the full 航空自衛隊)

“Let’s hear her out over sweets after it’s done.”

“I want to eat some *marshmallows*. And Hokkaido sweets too.”

“The black tea was tasty too! Those tea leaves were really expensive, probably!”

“Alright, ladies! Enough chatter! Now, let’s try it again today too! Let’s advance farther than yesterday! Follow me!”

At *Boss*’s words,

“Uraaa!”

The five who gave a war cry moved forward through the *tunnel* that went underground.

* * *

The 1st of April, noon.

The *entry* to the *Second Squad Jam* was closed.

The number of *teams* that declared their participation jumped greatly just before the deadline, reaching a total of forty-nine. Amongst them, three were *seeded*.

This was also influenced by the fact that that the prizes were finally announced on the 28th, right before the deadline. Because, surprisingly, they were extravagant.

The winning *team* would receive an assorted *set* of 20 *assault rifles*. The runner-ups would receive a *set* of 10 *submachine guns*. For the third-ranked, a *set* of 10 pistols. And everyone would receive hundreds of bullets and spare magazines.

These could either be used or sold, and either way would result in a profit. The *sponsor* for this tournament, unlike the novelist, seemed to be quite rich.

After all, the prize for the previous tournament was a 《*signed set of twenty books written by the novelist sponsor*》, a truly “cheap” prize.

There was nothing stylish to it, like “choosing a reward from the *catalogue*”, as was the case with the BoB; first she got a message to tell them her address, and, after she answered reluctantly, a heavy cardboard box soon arrived at Karen’s room.

It came with a *message* 『Congratulations on winning! That was a splendid battle!』 — alongside twenty *gun action* novels that she probably wouldn’t read.

“What am I going to do. This.....”

Karen was at a loss.

As it wouldn’t be nice to just sell them at a second-hand bookstore, she just left them alone.

But as for SJ2, whose prizes were no longer disappointing—

Excluding the *seeded* teams, naturally, only twenty seven of the forty six teams could participate in the main tournament.

Therefore, the day before the tournament, at 20:00 on the 3rd of April, preliminaries would be held. The *rules* for it were sent via *message*.

The preliminaries would be a confrontation between randomly paired *teams*.

The preliminaries would be settled in a single round, which had a 20 minute time limit. Out of consideration for *members* that could not *dive* at the specified time due to work, teams were allowed to participate if at least two of their registered members were present.

As for the battlefield, a 1 *km* x 300 *metre* rectangular and flat *field*, dotted with numerous barricades was specially-designed to allow teams to engage one another immediately, and to prevent running around. All *battles* would be held simultaneously under the same conditions.

No matter how many members there were in an opposing *team*, wiping them all out would of course result in victory.

In case of a time-out, the side with fewer casualties would win.

Or if that was a tie, the side which received less *damage* would win.

If even that was a tie (for example, in the case where nobody received *damage*), the side which spent fewer bullets would win.

If even that was a tie (for example, in the case where both sides ran away from the battle without firing a shot), the management company would throw a *coin* to decide the victor.

The winners would naturally get the right to participate in the main tournament. By this method, twenty three *teams* would be decided, but four *teams* among the losers would be repechaged³⁶.

This would be based on the fewest casualties. In the case of them being identical, based on longest survival time. Followed by *damage* and fired bullets.

³⁶ Repechage is a practice in series competitions that allows participants who failed to meet qualifying standards by a small margin to continue to the next round.

Incidentally, *teams* that lost by *coin toss* would not be given repechage.

The state of the preliminaries would not be broadcast at all. Therefore, aside from the losing teams that were repechaged, nobody would know what kind of *teams* would become their enemy until they ran into them during the main tournament.

Looking at the *entry list* and *rule book*,

“Well, we have it easy.”

“The *seeding* really is helpful. Participating as just two people might work in our favour during SJ, but it is a super handicap in the preliminary *battles*.”

Fukaziroh and LLENN had a confidential conversation in a private room of a *restaurant* in GGO.

Whether they liked it or not, SJ2 would take place in 3 days. The two chose a private room in a safe *restaurant* where no other eyes or ears could reach them, rather than the *fields* that they had gone to till now, to look over the *rules* again.

Karen could have just had a normal chat with Miyu, who was currently in Hokkaido, over a visual phone, but they chose this to set the mood.

“Have you read the rules?”

“I looked through it. But, you want to double-check, right? LLENN.”

Miyu was a bit irresponsible, thus LLENN wanted to pay additional attention to it just in case.

LLENN gave a slight nod,

“It’s nice to be on the safe side.”

And Fukaziroh answered, then used her left hand to operate a *window* and ordered beverages. For herself, she got *lemon squash* that she absolutely had to try in GGO, and for LLENN, her favourite *iced tea*.

And without a moment’s notice, the two drinks came out of the hole in the middle of the *table* as if they jumped out of it. Incidentally, fried pastries and *beef jerky* were included as snacks. LLENN smiled broadly.

“You’re a big snack lover as always, huh, LLENN. Eat as much as you want.”

“I suppose. Itadakimasu³⁷, thanks! Now then——”

With snacks and *straws* in their mouths from time to time, the two began double-checking the *rules*.

The general things were the same as last time.

It was a *battle royale*, composed of thirty *teams* with a maximum of six members each, that took place in a specially set up, 10 *km*-long rectangular *field*. All other *teams* were enemies, but, of course, there was nothing against forming unions.

“We won’t know what the *field* is going to be like until we get there, right?”

LLENN nodded at Fukaziroh’s question.

³⁷ Itadakimasu (いただきます) is a set phrase to express gratitude before a meal or just when something is received. There’s another word for thanks right next to it, so I decided to leave this for less redundancy.

The specially set up *field*'s terrain would probably be unnaturally rich in *variety*.

It would probably have narrow streets, dense forests, and open wildernesses. Moreover, the *start* point would be completely *random* as well, so it was necessary to prepare for battle in any location.

“My wardrobe’s plain, but yours is *pink*, eh LLENN? Aside from wildernesses and deserts, you’ll be super conspicuous, right?”

“Yeah. So, I prepared camouflage *ponchos*. I learnt that in SJ too.”

Last time, having started in an unfavourable forest, LLENN used a camouflage *poncho* borrowed from M to conceal herself. If she had not had it, she probably would have been spotted by the *machine gun team* before the *scan*.

LLENN prepared an identical green camouflage *poncho*, and, taking the possibility of a snowy terrain into consideration, she got a bright white *poncho* as well. She had another one for Fukaziroh as well.

“Ooh, way to be prepared! This will be useful”

At *game start*, every *team* would be at least 1 *km* apart from each other. Afterwards, they would relocate, find an enemy, and attack.

However, to ensure that no *teams* remained hiding throughout the event, 《*satellite scans*》 would be performed. It’s a *system*, passing itself off as a scan from an artificial satellite, that informed everyone about the whereabouts of the other teams every 10 minutes.

“An *item* called the 《*Satellite Scan Terminal*》 will be given right before the tournament starts. We can use it to bring up the map on the screen like using a *smartphone*, or as a three-dimensional projection in the air.”

During the scan, the position of the *team leaders* would be displayed. If they were still alive - as dazzlingly white dots. If the team was wiped out - as dark grey dots.

Having heard the explanation, Fukaziroh,

“I see. So you can only hide in the same spot for 10 minutes max, huh. And, since only the *team leader* is displayed, it also means that you can set up decoys to draw in enemies, just like your team did last time, LLENN. Well, splitting the team’s manpower in a *party* with only six members isn’t really a wise thing to do. If the *team leader* is done in, the rank will be passed down, right. You’re fine being first, right?”

LLENN nodded. And then,

“And now for the SJ2 changes to the *rules*—”

After giving such a preface, she opened a part of the *rule book* on the *window* screen and magnified it.

『During the first tournament, the *team*’s name was not displayed on the map at all, but during the second tournament, the *team*’s name will be displayed upon touching the dots with one’s finger.』

It started using the same *system* as the BoB.

“In other words, we’ll be able to tell which *team* is where 10 minutes after the start, huh.”

LLENN raised her index finger at Fukaziroh's comment.

“Right! And this change is really useful to us! Because of it, we'll be able to know where Pito-san and the rest are! Their *team* name is 《P M 4》, remember it!”

LLENN imparted Pitohui's *team* name, which she learnt via a secret *email* from Goushi, to Fukaziroh.

They were the enemies that should be attacked first in SJ2.

Unfortunately for the *teams* that were participating seriously, LLENN had no qualms ignoring them all. Instead, they would have to keep running around to avoid being found and avoid battles as much as possible.

“P M 4, huh. Roger. So, “Pitohui and M's death³⁸? What a great name.”

“I was dumbfounded when I realised that as well.....”

“Well, it could just be “4 P.M.³⁸. A slightly late *time* for snacks.”

“I hope so..... Also, SHINC is a group of girls from our attached high school's rhythmic gymnastics club that I had fought in the previous tournament as my *last* battle. They're quite strong, so we're going to avoid clashing with them. We're going to run away at full-speed. They did say 『Let's have another fight if a second tournament is held』, but we'll have to make an exception this time. Of course, if we defeat Pito-san, we can fight that team seriously.”

“Eh, why don't we beat up all the remaining teams rather than just them? Shouldn't we aim for a second consecutive win?”

38 The number 4 (四) is read as “shi” in Japanese. The word “death” (死) is also read as “shi” in Japanese.

“Ahaha, that would be nice. The *team* named MMTM is also strong, so be extra careful around them. Also, I’ve seen the names of some of the other *teams* that participated last time..... but, their names weren’t shown even in the videos, so we won’t know anything about their weapons or skills until encounter them..... So..... be wary of everyone.”

Having said thus far, LLENN’s expression became downcast.

Fu. In response to LLENN’s sigh,

“Somethin’ wrong? Need to go to the *toilet*? Can ya make it alone? Or shud I come with?”

“Not that!”

In a VR world, there was absolutely no need to use the lavatory. Of course, Fukaziroh knew that as well, and LLENN understood what she was asking.

“It’s just, can I really bring down Pito-san?..... Is a person really going to die if I fail.....?”

In response to LLENN, who looked like she was about to cry, the blonde witch's apprentice gave a broad smile.

“You won’t change anything by worrying about it here, right? Worry about it if you fail. Looks like you need another drink?”

Fukaziroh moved her left hand, and what immediately sprang up from the middle of the *table* was a second helping of *iced tea*.

“Here, drink up. My treat.”

“Thanks..... Hey, Fuka. No, Miyu. I’m really grateful.”

“What’s wrong? The *iced tea* made you that happy?”

“Not that! Thanks for accompanying me this far, giving ALO that you loved playing so much a break to come to GGO, and participate in SJ2.”

In response to LLENN bowing her head,

“Oi oi. Girl friends need no words, right? You’re probs feeling a bit embarrassed now.”

Fukaziroh said bluntly. And then,

“Oh come now, I’ll have you pay back this debt.”

“Gotcha! I’ll do anything that I can!”

“Well then, maybe I’ll have you pay it back by taking me to Kanzaki Elsa’s *live* concert, and in the best seats.”

“Ugh! That’s going to be most difficult.....”



The Beginning of the Tournament

SECT.5

The Beginning of the Tournament

4th of April, 2026. Saturday.

As the clock approached 1200, the number of people diving into the Japanese GGO server from all over Japan continued to increase.

In a room of a certain tower apartment complex in a rather open area of Tokyo, whose residents were currently enjoying warm weather,

“Alright....., ready!”

Having closed the curtains to keep out the light coming from the clear sky, changed into her pale yellow pyjamas before adjusting the AC and humidifier,

“Now— time for the battle! And thus— I, am going to save, that person!”

And having carefully put the AmuSphere on her head, Kohiruimaki Karen lay down on her bed.

In the dining room of a certain detached house in Hokkaido, where snow fluttered about.

“Oopsie, it’s already this late, huh. Not good not good.”

Miyu, who had been eating instant yakisoba, shovelled what remained into her mouth in a hurry, and finished eating the soup in the cup.

She then shoved tea from a PET bottle down her throat in several gulps with great force.

Miyu noisily went to the toilet, then entered her room and, without changing her indoor clothes, flopped down on her bed.

“Welp, time to go wild.”

And so, she extended her arms, and grasped her aged AmuSphere.

“But, before that, maybe I’ll get some ice cream for dessert!”

Miyu put down her AmuSphere, left her room, and headed towards the refrigerator.

A number of high school girls put on their AmuSpheres in their respective homes.

A number of men, and a few women, throughout Japan put on their AmuSpheres.

And—

In a certain metropolitan, high-class apartment complex room with closed curtains,

“Ah, this is so heart-pounding!”

A young woman said in breathless excitement.

She was standing nude in a very dim room. To her side was a huge, close to 3 metre-long, cocoon-like mass.

“Now then.”

After the woman held out her hands, a part of the huge cocoon opened up. Inside, where red LEDs were shining, was a gooey, 40 cm-deep liquid.

This was a machine called an 《Isolation tank》 — or a 《Floatation tank》 .

In which one's body was suspended in a liquid, highly concentrated with salts and warmed to body temperature, and once the tank closed and the lights were turned off, it became a world where one could no longer feel sound, light, smell, touch, nor even gravity.

It was a machine used for ultimate relaxation by cutting off all five human senses to rest a tired body and mind, but, naturally, it was also used for FullDive technology.

A normal AmuSphere cuts off almost all sensations too, but a wee bit of noise was still transmitted.

By entering this isolation tank, the user could come close to almost complete isolation. Thus, it was only natural for serious players who wanted to be entirely in the game to desire a device like this.

Such isolation tanks were installed in relaxation establishments and net cafes as rentals, but the cheapest one would cost as much as a Kei-car³⁹, while expensive ones cost as much as a luxury car.

It was impossible for a player to install one at home unless they were highly affluent.

“Well then, I wonder if I'll get out of this alive.....?”

39 A Kei car (軽自動車, keijidousha, lit. light automobile) is a Japanese category of small vehicles, including passenger cars, microvans, and pickup trucks (up to 660cc and 64bhp).

Having muttered this in joy just now, the nude woman entered the tank.

Next to this tank was another, completely identical, tank.

And, a hasp was welded on the cover—

A massive padlock was hung on it to prevent the possibility of the tank being opened from the inside.

The headquarters for the SJ2 tournament was the same large bar in SBC Glocken that had been used for the previous tournament.

The participating players, aiming to arrive at 12:40, gathered and waited until they were all simultaneously transferred to the standby area at 12:50.

10 minutes were given to prepare one's weapons and equipment. And then, at exactly 13:00, SJ2 would start. Everyone would be transferred simultaneously to some part of the field.

As of that moment, the merciless killing fest would begin, and last until there was only one team left standing.

A broadcast of the battle would be provided by the management. Numerous markers indicating the position of cameras would fly around in the sky, searching for cool angles.

The spectators who wished to watch the live broadcast, and the participants who dropped out after being killed could enjoy themselves watching the broadcast of the battle in the bar, while eating, drinking, and saying whatever they wanted.

The previous tournament had concluded in 1 hours and 28 minutes, but there were twenty-three teams that participated without any preliminaries. This time, a full thirty teams would participate, so would it take longer or, instead, become a fiercer battle and end quicker? It was anyone's guess.

After 12:20, the number of people in the bar grew considerably.

The participating players gathered in groups of twos and threes. 'Good luck', 'You can't lose', 'Blow them all away' and various other phrases were thrown around.

Speaking of SJ2, as was the case for the previous tournament, there were no sports gambling events like those which were held for the BoB. This was because the management lacked the resources to check for cheating — so-called unfair actions, as severely as they did for the BoB.

Instead, the 『Predict how many bullets will be fired till the end of the tournament』 gambles were once again held, and once again spread excitement. Everyone resolutely entered larger numbers than for the previous tournament.

Among this commotion—

There were a few teams that caused the tumult to abate in a wave when they entered the bar.

The first was the team that took third place last time and was seeded, MMTM.

The name was abbreviated for display purposes, but their official team name was 《Memento Mori》 .

It was Latin for “Don’t forget that you will die one day.” It was an idiomatic phrase for ‘People eventually die no matter how hard they struggle, so enjoy the moment and live your life without regret’.

The six-man team, who used death as their motif and had skull emblems with knives in their mouths on their shoulders, moved through the bar.

Last time, every one of them wore their favourite gear as individuals, but this time, they wore perfectly matching uniforms to psyche themselves up.

Their garments were the camouflage uniforms used by Sweden’s army in Scandinavia. It was a rather stylish design that consisted of a simplistic mix of various shades of green, with barely any other colours.

Like others characters, they were dressed solely in camouflage from top to bottom aside from their boots. Their weapons and equipment were all left in their storage instead of being materialised, but those who had seen footage of the previous tournament knew what they were.

Their weapons were an 《HK21》 7.62 mm machine gun as their main source of firepower, and 5 European high-powered assault rifles. Of course, that is, if they had not changed their arsenal in 2 months.

They were undoubtedly one of the favourites for this tournament.

“If there were any bets, I’d put my money on those guys.”

“Well, that is a safe bet. Their team coordination is the best.”

Such opinions could be heard around the bar.

The six women that entered shortly after them also gave off enough pressure to cause the once again bustling bar to quiet down.

Wearing camouflage with countless, small, green dots—

Was a group of six amazons, each having a unique look: a braided gorilla, a blonde, sunglasses-wearing beauty, a very short and stout dwarf, a downtown lady, a silver-haired fox-eye, and a *cool* noirette.

While it's true that they were rare female characters in GGO,

“Hey hey, girls!”

There was not a single person in the audience who gave such a vulgar jeer.

These women from SHINC took second place in the previous tournament, and were the best team in terms of players slaughtered. A lot of the characters in the bar were probably killed by them at some point.

MMTM's leader had the skill to take part in the BoB, and was a handsome character. He abruptly parted from his circle of friends just as they were about to raise a toast, and stepped up to the gorilla woman who had the constitution of a pro-wrestler, Boss.

And then,

“Yo, ladies. We didn't get to meet last time, but I look forward to having an audience with you in battle this time. Don't die until then, okay?”

He gave her these words with a brazen smile.

Boss grinned, and with an expression that was more fierce than bewitching,

“Of course. You misters be sure to give your names before you are killed. Otherwise, we might not notice you.”

Responded in a feminine tone with words that could be regarded as nothing but provocation.

This immediately caused the bar to get excited, and even his MMTM mates, who should have felt that their leader was made a fool off, accepted it well. The five surrounding their table laughed as they clapped their hands.

Even the leader wasn't an intolerant man who would be angered by this,

“This one's interesting! I'm really glad they're participating!”

He waved two of his fingers with a smile, and returned to his mates.

Around 2 minutes after the amazon group disappeared into a private bar room—

“Oi, it's him.....”

A mountain-sized giant suddenly entered the bar.

It was a nearly 2 metre tall man with a chest as bulky as a breakwater, arms as thick as an earthen pipe, a foreign body builder-like figure, and brown, wavy hair.

He was wearing gaudy green camouflage pants that looked like they would be ripped apart by his thighs, and a T-shirt that clearly showed off his muscles.

To those who had seen the previous SJ, there was no need to explain who he was.

His name was M.

He was the man who teamed up with the pink chibi and entered the tournament as part of a merely two-man party, and although they did not have many battles, they were able to pull through every crucial part of the tournament and deal with the amazon group during the final battle. He was a highly skilled M14 EBR sniper with a powerful shield that could deflect 7 mm-class bullets.

He was also the man who aimed his pistol at his chibi companion mid-way during the battle, and fired, but missed and had the tables turned on him, then went off on his own for a bit.

Various guesses about the reason for the abrupt fallout came from the audience.

Some thought that there was simply a disagreement about their future plans, but there was even a conspiracy theory that it was an elaborate plan to invite the negligence of the amazon group by spreading false information to them via the audience.

In the end, it remained a mystery, and there was no one who had the courage to ask the person himself.

The man joined the battle at the very last moment, and supported the chibi, who was putting up a hard fight alone, with his high-precision sniping. He took down three of the amazon group's members, and pulled off a marvellous win.

Having seen M in the distance, members of MMTM, who were wiped out by him and the chibi during the lake battle,

“So he did come..... The Line-less man.....”

“Revenge time. We’re doing things as planned if we encounter him.”

Had such a conversation.

Five of them were taken out by M’s special skill, sniping without Bullet Lines. They should have quite the grudge against him.

People who were probably his team members entered after M.

They were four men.

All of them were dressed in the same camouflage.

The camouflage pattern had an eerie design that was reminiscent of a reptile’s skin, with a gradient of brown and green that looked highly effective in both wildernesses and among greenery.

“What... the?”

What surprised the audience was the fact that all four of them had their heads and faces entirely covered by camouflage masks. Additionally, they had even equipped coloured goggles. With this, it was impossible to tell who was who.

‘It would be understandable to wear camouflage masks and goggles in battle, but was there really a need to wear them now?’

Everyone in the bar had the same idea.

The only way to distinguish between the four members was by their figures, which were greatly rich in variety.

One of them was short— in terms of men in GGO, so he was still at least 165 cm tall.

One had a large build— not to the extent of M's, but he still had a muscular, large build and was over 180 cm tall.

One was slender— about 170 cm tall, but had limbs as long and thin as poles.

One was fat— and had the silhouette of a stout, pot-bellied, ranked sumo wrestler.

Without saying a word and while facing forward, the four men followed M.

Although they were in a VR game that created fake sensations, the aura that their demeanour brought about was still conveyed.

The large number of characters in the bar,

“They look... tough.”

“Yeah..... They might be hiding their faces because we know their mugs and names.”

“Could they be a group cut out to take part in the BoB?”

Felt that these four men were probably equally talented.

What kind of battle style would M, a member of the winning team from the previous tournament, and the ominous guys that he teamed up with show? This team became more and more interesting.

Under this tension,

“Yahoo! Thanks for waiting everyone!”

A laidback woman’s voice came in.

Everyone who had been following M’s party with their eyes looked over at the entrance, and saw a female character who had entered a bit late.

She was an approximately 175 cm-tall woman who had her hair tied into a ponytail at a high place. Her garments consisted of dark blue overalls, clearly showing off the lines of her body.

She had a brown complexion. Far from being fat or stout, her body was so firm that it looked like she had nothing but muscles on her.

She was a beauty with a sharp and well-featured face, but the geometrical-patterned, brick-coloured tattoo on her cheeks brought about a rather eerie vibe.

“Hey hey hey! Thanks for waiting, gentlemen! You’ve come to see me shine, right! Great! Look forward to it, okay!”

The woman smiled at everybody in this excessively high-tension situation,

“

But all the bar patrons opened their mouths flabbergasted, not knowing how to react.

She was the sixth one including M to come in, so she was definitely a member of his team.

But, compared to the other five, her tensionless vibe was out of place.

“Thanks! I’ve kept you waiting! Thanks for your cheers!”

With a sociable nature that begged the retort ‘Are you running for elections!’, the woman moved through the bar, restlessly looking around and waving her hand.

Everyone spoke, not caring about the person herself hearing their conversation.

“Who... is that? Is she another one of M’s team members?”

“I guess so. But..... that one alone is completely out of place, right?”

“So is she the hime-sama to be protected by her knights?”

“There was the term ‘Otasā no hime’ for it 10 or more years ago.”

“Never heard of that obsolete phrase. Is it related to arasā⁴⁰?”

“No. ‘An otaku circle’s hime-sama’. The sole woman in a female-less group. It means ‘a hime-sama no matter what kind of girl she is’, as she’s pampered.”

“Could it be that you are quite elderly?”

“Hey, quit using keigo all of a sudden.”

40 Abbreviation of the English words “around thirty”. A Japanese-made pseudo-English word for “a woman around 30 years old”.

“So those men..... those other four guys, are they hime-sama’s escorts? So you have no intention of going after her seriously? It’s a shame if that’s the case.....”

“Miss, you look great. If you didn’t have that tattoo on your face, you’d really be my type. Have you just started? I could teach you, in great detail, how to shoot.....”

“You perv.”

“So, you’re saying that you’d let a good-looking girl like that walk right past you? Are you a geezer in RL?”

“Only brats ask about RL.”

“Whatcha say?”

“Stop it, you’re being indecent. There’s no proof that the woman is of the same age in RL.....”

While the men kept spouting whatever was on their mind, the woman disappeared into the private room that M had entered.

“That’s..... Pitohui, huh..... Does that amateur..... still hate GGO.....”

In response to the man who muttered this,

“You know her? Leader.”

The HK21 machine gunner Jake asked with an expression of surprise. And then, the othermembers of MMTM tilted their heads as well.

‘It’s rare for our leader to know the name of a female character.’

They all shared the same thought.

Because, he was stoically immersed in the game, and intentionally ignored women. The amazons from before were an exception among exceptions.

The leader answered the question of his mates with a not-really-happy expression.

“Shortly after GGO had begun, that would already make it a year ago..... for a very short time, I had formed a squadron. At the time, she didn’t have that tattoo, her hair was short to be more suitable for battle, and she wore different garments.”

“Oh. First time I've heard of it.”

Said Jake.

“Because I've never told anyone about it. At the time, all players were still fresh meat, but even so, grasping cheap and weak guns, everyone worked hard to become the strongest. It was a nice period.....”

“ Leader, you sound like an old man.”

“But, like, why didn’t you fight together with her afterwards? Was it... because that woman was weak?”

‘You got it wrong’, the leader said, drinking up the alcohol— that, however, would not get him drunk, in his cup.

“That woman, was strong. Her moves were fluid, to say the least. I don’t know the details, but she should have been proportionately immersed in FullDive games by then.”

“Then, you could have just maintained contact with her?”

“It was impossible.”

“Why?”

“Because that woman didn’t think of her comrades as comrades. Whenever she was about to die, she’d gladly use her allies as shields, and, without hesitation, she’d throw grenades when we were in the same room as a monster. As a result, her allies died, and she’d give a smile; that’s the kind of woman she was. Even when she died herself. I couldn’t bear playing with someone so “eager to die”. I lived under the principle “don’t forget about death”, but that woman seemed to be leading a “I want to forget about living” lifestyle.”

“That sounds dangerous……. I’d get the heck out of that.”

“I’ve heard that she’d leave one squadron and join another, only to repeat the same thing over again. Eventually, nobody wanted to let her in, and she stopped trying to find one to enter as well. Among the veterans who know of this, the name Pitohui is a taboo.”

At his words, some of MMTM’s members were surprised, some were amazed and shrugged their shoulders. One of them said,

“Then, why is she participating together with M this time?”

“I don’t know……. I don’t know, but don’t let your guard down. We will, of course, exact our revenge, but brace yourselves. They’re the kind of group that you don’t know what to expect from, in my opinion.”

The five nodded at the leader’s excessively serious expression in silence.

Lastly, the leader asked as if he suddenly thought of it.

“Does anyone know the origin of the name ‘Pitohui’?”

“Nope, I can’t come up with any ideas.”

“None at all.”

“Like he said.”

“Only that it sounds cute.”

“A fairy?”

After hearing the five replies, the leader gave the answer.

“It’s the name of a bird. If I recall correctly, it’s a bird only found in New Guinea.”

“Oh. That’s cute.”

Jake’s impression escaped his mouth, and the leader’s eyes narrowed.

“Cute he says. A pitohui is a bird with a neurotoxin so deadly that it can kill any man who touches it. It suits her perfectly.”

At the table that went quiet,

“Don’t let your guard down.”

The leader’s short phrase resounded.

Although groups of five or six players that entered the bar were typically participants, none of them stood out enough to draw the attention of the bar. They were simply ignored.

It was easy to imagine,

“Heh, their opinion of us will change by the time this is over!”

That they had such a thought. That they thought ‘I’m gonna be the next hero/heroine’.

Among them, there was a team that consisted of four men and one woman. When the men came into the bar, they had expressions of happiness on them,

“

While in contrast, the woman had a very sullen expression of great displeasure.

Based on the appearance of her avatar, she was in the latter half of her twenties. Her face was that of a tidy beauty.

Her pretty bob cut hair was vivid green like fresh leaves. It was not a very common sight in RL, but it wasn’t entirely unnatural in the SF world of GGO. There were people with anime character hair colours that stood out more.

As for her garments, just like her four group members, she wore brown cargo pants and boots. And for her top, she wore a simple, black T-shirt. The bulging of her large chest was eye-catching, even if this was not her desire.

There was quite the number of male characters who were fascinated by her appearance, but no one dared to strike up a conversation with her due to her excessively sour look.

And so time passed, until there were only a few moments until the start of the second Squad Jam.

The men, and very few women, who seemed to be participating finished up their virtual food and drinks one by one. Naturally, tension could be felt in the air.

In this bar swirling with fighting spirit—

A single question came to everyone’s mind soon enough, and people began noisily talking about it.

They unanimously said.

“Still not here? She’s still not here yet?”

“The winner of the previous tournament, the pink chibi... is still not here?”

The time was 12:45. If she did not enter the bar within 5 minutes, she would be disqualified due to being late.

“Oi oi, she’s still not here.....”

Slightly opening the curtain of their private room, and sticking her head out, the very short-haired Tanya muttered in worry,

“Keep calm.

And was chided by Mother Courage Rosa sitting next to her.

“.....”

Boss stood like a rock without the slightest quiver on her rough face.

Soon, 2 minutes passed, then 3—

‘Is she really going to be late.’ At 12:48, just when people thought

“The champion of the previous tournament is going to drop out of the game just like this?”

“We ma~de it!”

“Whew! That was clo~se!”

Giving high-pitched screams, two characters entered the bar.

Both of them were hiding their bodies and faces beneath brown robes, but everyone could tell who they were based on their height and female voices. It was definitely that chibi. The previous victor of the tournament that rampaged to oblivion.

She came in with another female who was also rather chibi-sized. It seemed that this girl was her current partner.

As they avoided the blockheaded way of dropping-out, commotion and cheers arose in the bar.

“She’s here! The previous champion! LLENN-chan!”

“She’s gonna participate as part of a two-person-only team again? She sure is confident.....”

“So she’s going for two highly-skilled members rather than six useless ones?”

“I’m expecting more slaughter than last time!”

“That other one seems to be a girl as well underneath the robe. I can tell by her smell.”

“I see, you’re a perv, huh.”

The men exchanged whatever thoughts that came to their minds again.

LLENN and Fukaziroh did not have the time to care that they were showered with attention,

“Do we have time to drink something? LLENN.”

“You still want a drink? It’s not like you’re going to get thirsty, so who cares!”

“It’s for the mood, for the mood. Let’s have a drink! To celebrate our upcoming victory!”

“By mood..... you mean that you still have diarrhea?”

“Geez, I got what I needed out of my system, so no problem!”

The truth is that both LLENN and Fukaziroh should have been here 20 minutes ago. They planned to meet up in an easy-to-find place, and go to the bar with LLENN leading the way.

However, the moment they started walking together, Fukaziroh’s AmuSphere’s safety device activated, and forced a shutdown. She suddenly disappeared right in front of LLENN as if she was spirited away.

And so, after waiting for minutes and not seeing Fukaziroh coming back, LLENN sent her a message in fear, and received this answer from Miyu’s smartphone.

『Crap. I ate some ice cream in a hurry and now my stomach is growling.』

“Whaaaaaaaaa?”

LLENN thought that this excessive shock would have forced her own shutdown.

Afterwards,

『Done yet?』

『It's still growling.』

『Done no~w?』

『I'm wiping my behind. Uwa, out of paper!』

『Just get over here alreadyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!』

And so, they regrouped, and rushed to the dash with a full-speed dash, and barely made it.

“Aah.....”

LLENN felt as if she had already fought in a battle.

Without the energy to go into a private room, she found an empty table close to the entrance, and dropped down on the sofa surrounding it.

Fukaziroh followed, and immediately ordered lemon squash and iced tea. Which popped out of the table.

There was not even a minute left. LLENN feebly looked up, and,

“Yo! LLENN-chan!”

She was called by a familiar voice,

“.....”

And she faced the owner of the voice.

The Pitohui that she saw for the first time in a while was still the same Pitohui. She felt both nostalgia and fear.

“Congratulations on your previous win!”

Seeing her familiar, carefree smile,

“Thanks!”

LLENN forgot everything for a moment, and answered.

At that moment, the announcement, made 30 seconds before the SJ2 participants were transported to the standby area, was streamed,

“Whoopsie, seems like we don’t have the time for a carefree talk.”

Pitohui narrowed her eyes above her tattoos, seemingly feeling disappointment deep down.

“Pito-san——”

LLENN stood up with a glass of iced tea in her hands.

“Hm?”

“I am going to do my best, so please have your expectations high. Please don’t forget— your “promise.”

Pitohui’s eyes blinked.

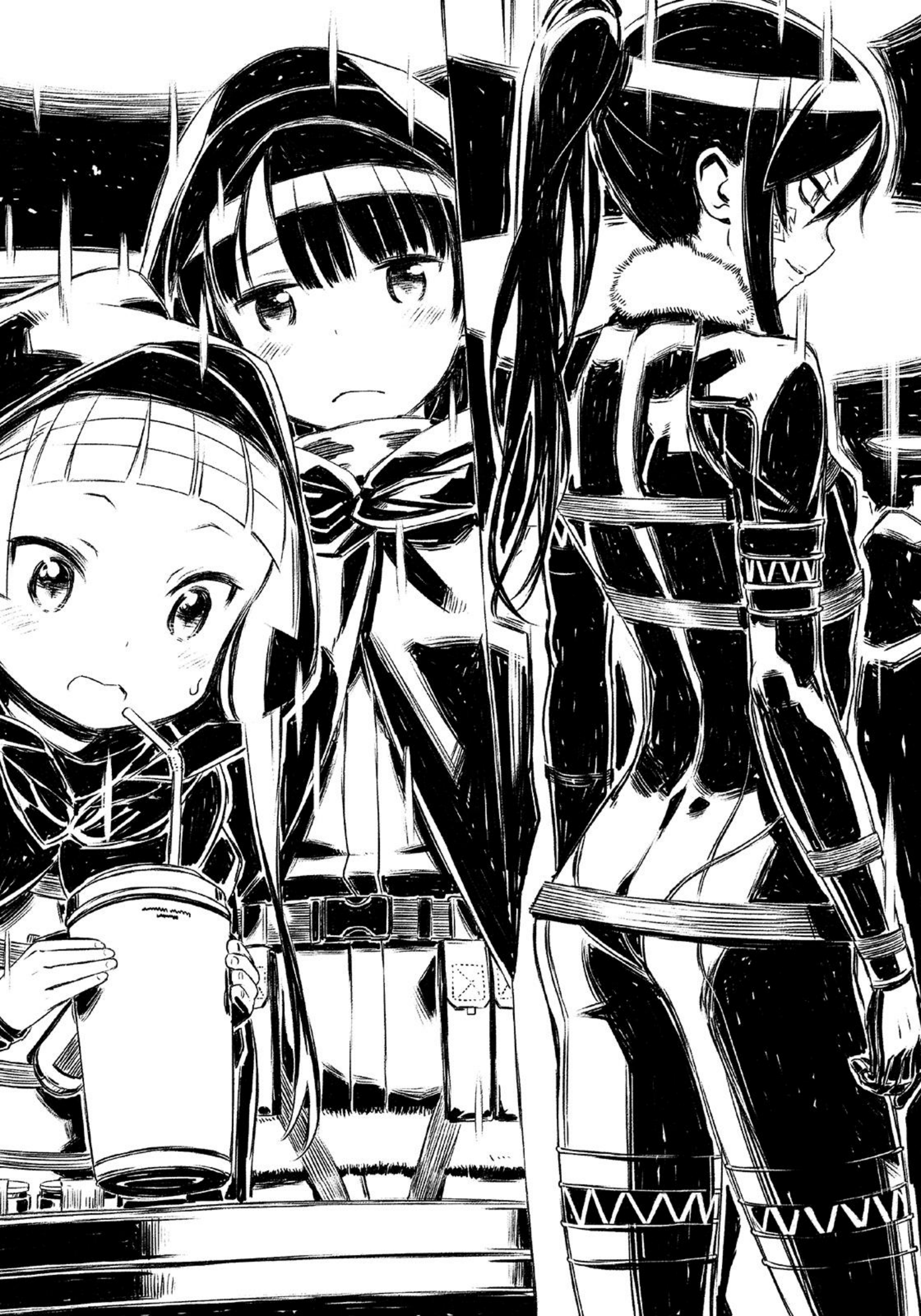
“Hm? I don’t really get it— well, I do. Oh, and keigo is a no-no! There’s not much time, anything else you wanna say?”

LLENN was asked by Pitohui,

“I’m definitely... going to kill you.”

LLENN replied immediately.

“Aha!”



After Pitohui left with a carefree smile, LLENN sipped up all her iced tea with her straw in an instant, and faced the sitting Fukaziroh,

“Let’s go, partner.”

“Right!”

At that moment, the transfer began.

The grim-faced LLENN,

“Hey, I wanna drink a bit mo—”

And the panicking Fukaziroh, who held a straw in her mouth, became particles of light and disappeared.

Each character used the 10 minutes in dim standby areas to materialise their weapons and equipment.

LLENN taught Fukaziroh how to use the satellite scan terminal, and being quick-witted, she quickly understood it.

This smartphone-like device would be SJ2’s lifeline. It could not be destroyed, but the possibility of losing it was not zero, thus it was necessary to be careful not to drop it.

As LLENN had expected, it was politely announced that this time, it would not have the 《indestructible object》 status. It would exist as an object, but every kind of attack, including bullets, would pass through it.

In front of the two in the dark room with nothing in it,

『Standby Time 04:33』

Was a large numeral that was counting down 1 second at a time. LLENN stored her full set of equipment, became a pink soldier, and waited for the countdown to finish.

Her garments were exactly the same as the previous time.

Her uniform was a given, but she was pink from her boots and the tips of her gloves to the knit hat on her head. And there was a pink bandana on her neck.

Her armament was a P90. She hung the second generation P-chan on her shoulder by its sling.

In her pouches on the left and right of her thighs, she had a total of six spare magazines to allow for quick reloading. Any more would have made movement difficult, thus she chose a number that she was used to.

However, there were another nine, three times more than last time, stocked in her storage. A P90 boasted 50 bullets per magazine, so the total of sixteen magazines held 800 bullets.

This time, she had an optional part for her P90, but it was still in her storage.

Like a true sport, she did not bring a single plasma grenade, a throwable weapon.

There was the possibility that one hanging on the waist could be shot, explode, and result in instant death, so she exchanged them for an equivalent weight of more spare magazines.

And, as the last of her last weapons, she had a 30 cm-long black combat knife equipped on the back of her waist so that she could draw it out with her right hand.

The sole hit point recovery item used during SJ2, a cylindrical injector called a 《first-aid kit》 was automatically distributed to everyone's storage. Each could restore 30 percent of the user's lost hit points, but it took 180 seconds for it to finish, thus it could not be used mid-battle.

Nevertheless, LLENN fully used all three of her kits during the last SJ. If she had not had their help, she would have died. Although she hoped that she would not need them, she hung them in an easy-to-reach place on the front of her body.

Although she wanted to keep her gear as light as possible, she had judged that a monocle with a rangefinder was absolutely necessary, thus she placed one in a pouch at the back of her waist.

Just like the knife, she had borrowed one from M the previous time. This time, she bought one for herself using the credits earned during training.

She, of course, had not forgotten to place several camouflage ponchos, suited for the various terrain, into her storage for disguise. They were light, thus it was no big loss to have them.

“Still not time yet?”

Fukaziroh, waiting beside LLENN for the countdown to finish, had finished her preparations for slaughter as well.

On top of her head with her blonde hair tied up was a large helmet. She was wearing a green vest with a bullet-proof plate and extra MultiCam-wear.

As for her weapons, she had an MGL-140 on her right and left shoulders each.

Incidentally, Fukaziroh named the MGL-140 in her right hand 《Yuuta》 and the other 《Sako》.⁴¹

The sling for the one in her right-hand was placed on her left side, and the one for her left-hand was placed on the opposite, but the slings could have their fittings switched with one touch.

“They look exactly the same, so can you tell which one is Yuuta and which one is Sako when you take off the slings?”

When LLENN once asked this,

“That’s totes simple! Of the 2, the one in my right hand is Yuuta, ya know”

Fukaziroh replied. In other words, it seems it did not matter which one was which.

The backpack that Fukaziroh wore on her back was filled entirely with grenades.

There was a partition inside it to pull out a grenade from either side by extending either of her hands to her back.

Even her storage was crammed full, just barely a step from going overweight and suffering the movement penalty.

An M&P pistol on her right thigh. Three spare magazines, making up four x 17 bullets in total. And of course, the first-aid kits.

Fukaziroh asked LLENN a question.

“What equipment are the others going to come with, I wonder?”

⁴¹ The names in Japanese are 右太 and 左子 respectively. 右 literally means right and 左 literally means left. 太 is a common character to use for boy names and 子 is a common character to use for girl names.

“I don’t know. Though, M-san is probably going to use the same gun and shield as last time, I think.”

“And Pito-san?”

“I truly don’t know about that. Because that person has used a different gun every time we met. But, she does have quite high Strength, so I believe she’s able to equip a lot of suitably strong guns. I believe she has considerable firepower, so we have no choice but to deal with it.”

“What about the other four?”

“No info at all.....”

Answering the question, LLENN felt belatedly uneasy.

From this moment on would be the beginning of the game tournament, but to Pito-hui and M, it would be a battle with their lives on the line.

‘Can I, whose life is not at stake, actually stop that? Wouldn’t I lose in zeal?’

LLENN’s face became gloomy.

Bashin, Fukaziroh struck her back.

“Now, now. There’s also the possibility that Pito-san’s team will end up winning, aight?”

“True.....”

It’s not like she could rely on that hope and do nothing.

The most certain thing is that she had to quickly take down

Pitohui. That... was the reason why she was here now.

Of course, if their and Pitohui's teams ended up being the last two standing, she could just resign at that point, but she believed that the killing route was proper manners as a gamer.

“Eei!”

LLENN slapped her cheeks.

‘Don’t waver anymore!’

‘Fight!’

And—

‘Kill!’

The minute counter for the waiting time had reached zero, and now, only the second counter— 43, 42, 41, 40, 39—mercilessly counted down.

LLENN pulled and released the P90 loading handle, and the first bullet was loaded into the chamber along with a dry metallic sound.



Booby Trap

SECT.6

Booby Trap

At exactly 13:00, they were enveloped in white light, and when they once again regained their vision,

“So this is..... a town, huh.....”

LLENN found herself standing on a road in a town.

She looked around her surroundings at once. Fukaziroh was about 2 *metres* away, and, of course, was likewise looking around restlessly.

The *start* point was at least 1 *km* away from every other *team*, thus there was no possibility of a face-to-face encounter right away.

However, if their enemies had a powerful sniper that used 338 *lapua magnum* bullets, or an anti-materiel *rifle* that used 12.7 *mm* bullets, 1000 *metres* was still well within their effective range. So, if they were in a clear area, they would have had to drop to the ground immediately.

Confirming that they were surrounded by houses,

“For now, we’re safe!”

LLENN sent her instructions to Fukaziroh.

“Roger.”

Thanks to the convenient communication *item* that automatically adjusted the volume, the user's voice, be it a whisper or a shout, would reach their partners' ears being neither too silent nor too loud.

Although the mechanisms for it were unknown, this *item* did not have any limit to its connectivity range and could be used to communicate anywhere within SJ, even when inside a building or underground.

After confirming the safety of their surroundings, the next step was to confirm one's whereabouts.

LENN's location was a foreign town.

Most of the buildings were unfamiliar, single-storeyed, though some were two-storeyed, low-class residences, with simplistic *designs* and lined up emotionlessly. She had once seen such a residential area in a *Hollywood* movie.

The street-facing portion of each house was closed off with *shutters* like private stores. Further along the road were residences.

The lawns of each house were not very wide, as all the buildings were packed tightly together.

Of course, the stage was Earth after the last war, thus it was a *ghost town* with absolutely no signs of life.

The roofs and walls of the houses were damaged, and some of their *glass* windows were broken. There were several slanted utility poles with dangling cables, and the grass growing in the chasms on the rough pavement had withered.

LENN looked up to the sky and saw that it was cloudy.

The gray, tinged slightly red by the characteristic sky of the world of GGO, was an eerie colour.

On rather clear days— under the eternal setting sun-like mad-red sky, LLENN's *pink* was quite effective.

“Hmm.....”

It seemed that the effectiveness of her camouflage was negligible here. She probably could not carry out an ambush.

And, this time, the wind was blowing. On the ground, it felt like a light breeze, though sometimes stronger, but the clouds in the sky were flowing and at quite a high speed. ‘Couldn't it have been clear during the tournament’, LLENN thought.

The temperature felt in VR *games* could be adjusted to some extent to be able to enjoy the *game* in any outfit. Hence, she did not feel freezing cold, but judging by the dreary sky and withered plants, it appeared that the setting for the season was winter. It seemed like snow would start falling at any moment.

“LLENN, come over here and look!”

Doing as Fukaziroh asked, LLENN came out from the side of a house,

“Oh? Ooh.....”

There was an unfamiliar object there.

A wall.

Several hundred *metres* away from her position, she could see a towering rampart through the house roofs and openings.

It was around the height of a twenty-storey building, perhaps a little over 60 metres. She could not tell its width from her position.

It was cold gray, probably made out of *concrete*. Height-wise, the *buildings* in Tokyo were far taller, but the fact that the wall stretched out endlessly to both sides gave it a considerably intimidating aura.

“It looks like a *dam*.”

LLENN said,

“I see, so there’s water on the other side? We’d drown if it broke, huh.”

And Fukaziroh shared her impression.

Imagining a muddy stream descending on her mercilessly, LLENN said,

“Fuka..... don’t shoot *grenades* at that, okay.”

“*Okay*. But, I could knock it down with 1 *punch*, ya know?”

The rampart stretched straight ahead, then turned ninety degrees, and ran straight ahead again. The rest of it was blurry, so she could not make it out. It seemed to continue on for quite some distance.

The slightly strange thing was the design of the rampart. With the bend as the boundary, the left side consisted of vertical stripes. Conversely, the *concrete* on the right side was patterned with horizontal stripes.

“I get it..... that’s the *field* boundary.”

LLENN realised.

Both the BoB and SJ used special, 10-*km*-in-every-direction sized *fields*, and the management had put in great effort to mark the boundaries.

For example, during the third BoB, the *field* was an island. In the previous SJ, mysterious chasms and mountains restricted the *players'* movements.

“I see. So, absolutely no one could possibly cross that, huh. The people of this world can't fly, huh.”

Fukaziroh understood as well.

“The rampart probably encloses the field into a square, I think. And that's one of its corners.”

“So..... we are at a corner of the *map*, huh. But, which one?”

All the *maps* in GGO so far had been set in the northern hemisphere, and this area was probably not an exception.

Knowing that it was currently 13:00, it would be possible to make a general assumption as to which directions were east, west, south and north by looking at the sun, but the thick clouds obstructed it.

‘Based on the angle, could it be the northeast of the map? Or southeast? Or the opposite?’

“I'll confirm that now.”

LLENN took out a *satellite scan* terminal from her breast *pocket*, and pressed on one of the two *switches*.

Instantly, a map, with the terrain and structures reproduced as three-dimensional images, rose in front of them.

The special *field* for this tournament really was a space surrounded by a square rampart.

Assuming that the top was north according to the *rules* of maps—

First, about 3 *km*-wide on the left side was a town. Mapwise, the town was vertically spacious as it continued from north to south.

The road, at times wide, at times narrow, systematically extended in all directions, dividing the town into a grid-shape. The town looked like Karen and Miyu's hometown.

A railway ran from south to north roughly at the centre of the town. Slightly to the north of the central part of the town was a small station with two roofless platforms.

There was a rather spacious *rotary* in front of the station, but there was not a single multi-storeyed *building* there. Pretty much all of the buildings were single-storeyed.

Compared to the town from the previous tournament which was dotted with skyscraper ruins extending to the sky like a comb, this town felt quite different. It seems this town did not really get to prosper.

“GGO has vehicles, right? Can we ride the choo-choo train?”

Fukaziroh asked this question, not quite making it clear whether she was joking or being serious.

The previous SJ had *trucks* and *hovercrafts*, thus it wasn't wrong to assume that there would be some this time as well, but LLENN did not know how to operate railroad vehicles.

Even if she did,

“So, where do we go?”

“To a bigger town..... Yeah, let's go shopping for clo.....”

“We can do that after we kill Pito-san.”

At a point near the very north-west of both the map and town was a single shining dot. This dot, displayed on the map for only the first minute, denoted their own positions.

SJ used an unfriendly design in that one's own position could only be checked during the *scan*. This *system* was tough on those who had no sense of direction.

We are currently here. In other words..... We're at the edge of the northwestern part of the *map*.”

LLENN pointed at the three-dimensional image as she said that. Fukaziroh nodded.

“Hoh, I see. So— that means the vertical stripes are for the western wall and the horizontal stripes are for the north wall.”

“Right. Vertical is west! You got it! Also, there's no one further to the north or west than us!”

“*Okay okay!* That means the enemies are either south or east! Alrighty! Which way do we go?”

“Wait wait wait.”

She had not looked over the rest of the map well. Calming down Fukaziroh, who was full of vigour, LLENN stared at the map.

After this, battles would be severe, and they might not even have the time to look at the terminal during *scan* time. So, she had to grasp the general terrain while she had the time.

The centre of the northern part of the map was a lightly hilly area.

This too was a common sight in her hometown of Hokkaido, an open land with one hill extending after another.

There were no *graphics* of trees, thus it was probably mostly a grassland. It seemed suitable for sheep and other such animals.

And it was certainly a place offering a good field of vision.

Standing at the top of a hill, one could probably see the valley and opposite slope clearly. The opposite was also true. It was a place where it was easy to find enemies, and be found by enemies.

“An *area* where you really need to keep an eye out for *snipers*..... We should avoid going there if possible.”

“Roger. They’d hit us from several hundred metres away, right? Yeesh.”

There was no one as hated as *snipers* in both the real world and GGO.

They were gods of death that could unleash their one-hit-certain-kill bullets at their enemies from a faraway place where weapons used by regular soldiers or *players* could not reach. And also, they had the terrifying ability to not create *Bullet Lines* if their positions were unknown.

The experience from the previous tournament of being sniped by Tohma, a *Dragunov* sniper rifle user and that *team's* highly skilled *sniper*, had indelibly ingrained fear into LLENN's body.

And M possessed enough skill to surpass Tohma, a player like that.

'Please let Pito-san not be here not be here not be here.....'

Reciting this in her mind, LLENN looked further down.

Below the hilly area on the map, in other words, to the south,

"What's this? LLENN, do you know?"

"Nope....."

There was a round *dome*-shaped building.

"A baseball stadium, perhaps?"

"A baseball stadium, it seems."

Fukaziroh's and LLENN's opinions were identical. Its appearance looked very much like the *domed* baseball stadium in Sapporo. However—

"But... were baseball stadiums always this big?"

As LLENN said, it was excessively oversized. The circle taking up pretty much the centre of the *field* was at least 2 *km* in diameter. Wouldn't it be hundreds of *metres* high as well?

"Since it's Earth in the future, I guess it's okay for it to be this big? Baseball had a *scale up* too."

Fukaziroh gave a completely senseless reason, but... well, deciding that it did not matter at the moment, LLENN stopped worrying.

They would not know what was inside without going there in person. Such a large *area* was probably not entirely closed off.

Under the *dome*, south from the centre of the map, the colours of greenery and soil stretched out. It seemed like a field⁴² or forest that fell to ruin. It seemed mostly flat, thus it was also a place to be wary of *snipers*, even if the field of vision there was probably worse than that of the hilly areas.

And lastly the east side; where stretching from the north to the south, was a range of mountains.

Based on the *graphics*, the mountains at upper-right corner of the map, in other words, the northeast, were probably not so rugged. As they were depicted as being white, it seemed that they were gently-sloping snowy mountains. It was reminiscent of a *skiing* area.

“We can probably slide from here, huh. LLENN, have any tickets for the *lift*?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“So we have no choice but to climb, huh.....”

Fukaziroh said, probably joking like always, but LLENN seriously considered the possibility of there being *skis* for six hidden there. No, maybe *snowmobiles*.

42 In this case, the word “field” (畑) refers to a cultivated land used for agriculture. Not to be confused with the English “field” (フィールド) which is used in the sense of “battlefield” or a “game map”. Since the latter is English, it will be italicised in the text, while the former will not.

On the other hand, the mountains in the bottom-right part of the map, in other words, the south-eastern sector, were all steep.

It seemed to be a rugged, rocky mountain range with plenty of trees, thus it was coloured in a blend of grey rocks and green trees. It probably wasn't unclimbable, but it did seem like an *area* which would be difficult to navigate on foot.

A slanted highway ran from mountain to mountain, in other words, above the valley. There was a bridge about 2 *km* in length depicted on the map. It was a rather gigantic bridge. It might also be at least 100 *metres* above the valley

Judging from its appearance, it did not seem like a suspension bridge, but an *arch* bridge with a bow-like structure underneath. It seemed impossible to support such a bridge for 2 *km* without piers, but this was a future Earth, and even more importantly, it was a *game*.

The highway itself turned into a *tunnel* once it reached the mountain, but the exit could not be seen on the opposite side, thus it was probably outside the *field*. Naturally, this *tunnel* should not be traversable. There was probably a barrier around the entrance.

“This bridge is crossable. But, we should avoid it.”

LLENN said as she pointed at it,

“Gotcha. Waste of money.”

Fukaziroh answered with a serious look.

On the right side, in other words, to the east of the *dome* in the middle of the map, there was a valley that gradually became narrower in-between the mountains.

There was a single large building there. The details couldn't be identified from the map, but it was a rather large building.

And its surroundings were rich in green and blue. Based on the map, it was impossible to tell why this was the only area abundant with green while its surroundings consisted of gloomy wastelands.

Additionally, there were spots of blue among the greenery of the plants. Blue was a colour that denoted water, thus it seemed to be an area dotted with brooks, marshes, and ponds.

Rivers, wetlands and other such wet areas could be traversed normally if they were shallow, but if they were deep, it was necessary to put one's *items* into one's *storage* and swim through it.

Moreover, ones *hit points* slowly but continuously decreased just by going underwater, as if all the water in this world was poisonous. Thus, the *theory* in GGO is to avoid touching water as much as possible.

“What could this be.....? Based on the greenery and water, it looks like a park..... Could that kinda large building over there be..... a school?”

LLENN whispered her thoughts.

Having finished looking over the whole map for the time being,

“Alright.”

LLENN raised her head.

“I can’t memorise the entirety of such complex and mysterious terrain! In ALO, we flew in the sky! There was no need for maps!”

Fukaziroh complained.

“Don’t worry. I did.”

After her lost child-like experience in the residential area during the previous tournament, the importance of a geographical sense had sunk into LLENN more than sufficiently. She did not neglect practicing to learn maps upon seeing them in both GGO and *RL*.

As a result of this, she had such a good grasp on the terrain that she could even *dash* at full speed without looking at a map and she still would not get lost.

This time, M wasn’t an ally. She had to manage on her own somehow.

If she hadn’t played GGO and SJ, she probably wouldn’t have acquired this ability. But with this, nobody could tell her that “women can’t read maps” .

“Besides, we can always just look at the map itself, so no worries. Just don’t lose sight of where you currently are. If you get lost by yourself, call me without going anywhere.

“Uugh, roger.”

LLENN looked at the wristwatch on the inner side of her left wrist, and saw the *digital* numerals 13:03.

The first thing they had to do was to find a place where they could safely check the first *satellite scan* at 13:10.

Until then, there was no need to go unreasonably far. The possibility of the *team* they would end up clashing with being Pitohui's was, simply put, one out of twenty-nine. No, considering M's prudence, the possibility should be much much lower.

'We'd start by finding out Pitohui's position via the first *scan*. If it's close, great. If they're right next to us, awesome. Either way, we'd go kill them with all we had.'

'If they were far away, our goal would be to reach that place through any means necessary.'

'I want to avoid making contact with other enemies as much as possible, but it would be counterproductive if this ended up coming back to bite us, thus we'll bring down the enemies that we have to.'

"Alright! For now, let's hide beside a large house. Follow me."

Just like LLENN's group, the participating *players* all around the *field* were looking for a place to safely check the first *scan*.

Everyone remembered well that there were two *teams* in the previous SJ that recklessly charged out just as the tournament started, and ended up clashing with each other.

This occurred in the northern forest that was also LLENN's *start point*.

The two *teams* immediately engaged in battle and ended up losing half of their *members*, then, as a consequence of the resulting stubborn stare down between the remaining halves, they were attacked by MMTM from the side and were wiped out.

“Make sure you don’t do anything reckless during the first 10 minutes, ——— this was the established tactic in SJ.

Only a single man among the participating *players* realised something.

He called his mates to a halt,

“Hey! Could it be..... that we can climb that somewhere?”

Said this, and aimed for the oblique-patterned rampart.

* * *

13:09:30.

Small wristwatches on LLENN’s and Fukaziroh’s left wrists vibrated. This was the work of an *alarm* function that was set to go off 30 seconds before each *scan*.

Their current position was at the side of a house facing the large road.

LLENN was lying in the shadow of an upside down *truck* that had lost all of its *tyres*, while Fukaziroh was doing the same alongside the wall of a house about 10 *metres* away while keeping a lookout on the opposite side of the road.

It was a position that allowed them to easily notice anyone who nonchalantly tried to travel along it, but as could be expected, there were no such blockheaded *teams*.

LLENN took her eye away from the monocle that she had been using to keep a lookout on her environment, and,

“No signs of enemies here.”

“None here either. Boring.”

“Well then, look at the *scan* via the terminal screen. As planned, if anyone’s too close, we’re running away at full speed.”

“Roger. I only need to touch every single dot to see the names. Leave it to me. The *alphabet* is easy enough.”

The *satellite scan* was literally a surface scan from an artificial satellite.

Until the satellite flew away, surviving *team leader* positions would be indicated on the map as white dots, and the last position of the *teams* that were wiped out or had resigned would be indicated as gray dots.

The problematic part about it was that the direction the satellite would take, and the altitude of its orbit, in other words, the time until it flew away, was different each time.

If a slow *scan* came from the opposite side of the map, they would have the advantage of being able to find their opponents first, and vice versa. This was entirely up to luck, thus it was impossible to tell how it would work out until the scan began.

As it was necessary to confirm the opponent’s name by touching the light dot, it would probably be hectic if it was a fast *scan*.

LLENN and Fukaziroh turned the terminal’s *switch* to the *on* position. A map appeared on its screen.

And then, as the clock struck 13:10, the first *satellite scan* began.

It began from the north.

It was a teasingly slow *scan* from the map's top to bottom and from the left to the right. Since this was the first scan, perhaps it was slow out of concern not to make the *players* rush?

'Alright.....'

LLENN touched every single dot that lit up. Looking for the PM4 tag.

The dot at the top-left corner was definitely them. LF. And, there were no other dots in the near vicinity.

LLENN sighed in relief. At least there was little chance for them to be attacked during the *scan*.

Out of the noteworthy *teams*, she saw that MMTM was located in the top-right corner, in other words, the north-east. They were directly to the east on the opposite side of the map from LLENN, in the snowy mountains near the north-eastern rampart corner.

And, as the *scan* steadily continued south, more and more dots lit up, but no matter which she touched, it was not PM4. She could not find them.

Finally, 30 dots lit up.

'Where are they? Where where where?'

Feeling impatient, LLENN continued touching the dots, and found SHINC in the south-western corner. Due south from their current position.

As she continued touching every single dot to the right of it,

"There!"

At the last moment, she finally found PM4. Fukaziroh seemed to have found them at almost simultaneously,

“ “4 P.M., found ‘em! The one farthest to the bottom-right!”

As she heard her saying this.

“Wha..... What the hell.....”

It was understandable for LLENN to mutter this.

Pitohui’s team was in the south-eastern corner of the map.

In other words, the farthest place from LLENN’s team.

“Craaaaaaaaaaap!”

The moment when LLENN yelled so loudly that it felt like it would be heard throughout the *field*,

“What a shame. LLENN-chan’s team is the farthest away.”

Pitohui, who was sitting on one of the rocks dotting the slope, muttered care-freely.

Behind her,

“.....”

M silently glared at the terminal.

At the same time,

“LLENN’s team is at the north-western end. At least 8 *km* to the north.”

Boss said with a complicated expression. The girls were on alert in a corner of the residential district.

“What do we do?”

Asked Rosa, who was a prone position with her PKM and could not see the *scan* as she was keeping watch over the wide road,

“Unfortunately, it seems we’ll have to go for a closer fight. For now, we’ll strike the closest *team* to the north-east.”

Boss instantly made the decision to postpone their match with LLENN.

At the same time,

“Looks like they intentionally scattered the favourites to the four corners of the map.”

MMTM’s *leader*, who had been looking at the terminal screen, realised the sponsor’s goal.

They were looking at the terminal in the shelter of the large trees sparsely growing on the gentle slope of a *ski* area-like snowy mountain.

A *cross-patterned* rampart ran along the mountain’s slope, like the Great Wall of China, behind them.

13:11.

“Why..... Aaaagh!”

‘Is there no God or Buddha in the world of GGO? Were they all destroyed along with the beautiful blue sky during the last war? Or did they abandon a world like this and move out?’

In response to LLENN, who lamented as she looked up at the cloudy sky,

“Young lassie....., life does not just, go as ye pleases, like that.”⁴³

Fukaziroh addressed her ineloquently.

“And yet ye have cometh this far, haven’t ye.....? I’ve been watching, ye know? Am I wrong?”

“That’s right..... You’re right.”

‘In that case, there’s only one thing to do!’

LLENN forcibly put her feelings behind her, put away her terminal into her breast *pocket*, and rushed over to Fukaziroh at superhuman speed.

“Our goal is the south-east! Crush anyone who gets in the way of our charge one by one!”

LLENN and Fukaziroh ran through the town.

The closest *team* confirmed by the *scan* was about 1500 *metres* along the road to the south.

Luckily, it seemed that all the other *teams* went to the centre of the *map* from their *starting* points, thus this group was the only one on their *route*.

⁴³ Fukaziroh starts speaking like a stereotypical old man here. And she’s making intentional breaks in this sentence.

‘These guys are in the way! We’ll wipe them all out before the next *scan*. And then, we’re getting out of the town at once and heading for the *dome*!’

LLENN dashed.

Although in ruins, it was still a highway. It provided the perfect footing for LLENN’s sprint.

First, LLENN ran about 200 *metres* in an extreme *dash*, then crouched behind some cover.

“Alright, *clear*.”

And then gave instructions to Fukaziroh behind her.

She lowered her MGL-140s, keeping them at her sides so they would not get in the way, and ran after LLENN.

And once she caught up, LLENN once again made an extreme *dash*.

If LLENN encountered an enemy along the way, she would— not attack immediately.

There was no need for that. She would lie prone, roll into the shadow of a cover, and avoid being shot.

At that moment, if LLENN had not been discovered by the enemy, they would be in the palms of her team's hands. She would quietly call over Fukaziroh, and make the first move by attacking simultaneously.

Even if they were found, it wouldn’t change anything as long as they did not get hit. She would quickly retreat, reevaluate the situation, and still make an assault with Fukaziroh.

At any rate, “not knowing where your opponents are” was the scary, and most tense part of a battle.

Of course, the same applied to the other party.

The tension felt while awaiting contact with the enemy was completely different from tension felt during a gun battle. Since one could fire their guns at the enemy during battle, it actually felt good.

To make things worse, their current location was the downtown area which offered plenty of spots to hide.

‘Could they be hiding in the shade of that house? Could it be that they were being targeted from the window of that house?’
Once one began having such doubts, there would be no end to them. And, it would result in being unable to move forward any further.

‘Hey hey where are you? I’ll find you!’

Concealing her fear with confidence, LLENN continued advancing, relying on her eyes and speed.

As time, which felt like walking on a tightrope over pincushions, continued ticking, and she had travelled about half the distance to the target, about 800 *metres*, it happened.

“There!”

Luck was on LLENN’s side.

Just as she stopped at the corner of a crossroad to look around, and peeked around it, she found the enemy *team* 150 *metres* away.

They had taken up position at the crossroad. The four people that she could see were lying on the ground behind broken vehicles and garbage cans, with their *assault rifles* ready, and were trying to ambush anyone that came into the alley.

At the current moment when there were still plenty of *teams* remaining, such defensive behaviour was reasonable. Bringing down an enemy caught in their web rather than carelessly moving around.

Actually, if LLENN had crossed the road, she would have been discovered and attacked. Whether she would have been hit is a different question.

“Found them. Come here slowly.”

Reporting this, LLENN retreated slowly. Of course, in a posture that allowed her to immediately return fire with her P90 if she saw anything moving.

She regrouped with Fukaziroh— they kept a safe distance of 10 *metres* so as not to be seen by them from their ambush spot and avoid a wipe-out by *grenades* and *full-auto* rapid-fire as they gradually approached their enemies.

The time was nearly 13:16. She wanted to wipe them out before the next *scan*.

Not even 4 minutes remained, but it was normal for gun battles to be quick to start and quick to end, thus they would probably make it if things went according to plan.

Pointing at a one-storey house across a narrow road, LLENN,

“That house over there! Turn left at the road behind it, and you’ll find the enemy camp at the intersection of the wide road about 50 *metres* away.”

“Roger. Hohho~, this is exciting. The *grenade* fairy will beat the crud out of those ambush fairy bastards.”

LLENN heard Fukaziroh’s excited voice.

At this point, she did not need to explain the plan.

LLENN stealthily approached the target from the other side of the house, and Fukaziroh prepared to fire from a somewhat safe spot. Upon LLENN’s order, she would hit them hard with her *grenades*. It was a *combination* that they had used many times over against *monsters*.

It would be impossible to drastically miss the targets at this range, thus the 6 *grenades* fired in succession should explode in their surroundings. Taking advantage of the chaos, LLENN would snipe them with her P90, as tens of *metres* was a good distance for her to be sufficiently accurate.

If the number of enemies decreased, or they started running away, she would assault them and bring them down.

Of course, there was the danger of being shot by desperate opponents. If a random bullet managed to hit her brain stem or spinal cord, she could suffer instant death due to the heavy *damage*.

But, one could not win a gunfight by avoiding it because of the danger. It wasn’t wise to confuse recklessness and boldness, but there was no chance of winning without attacking.

“*Okay*, leave it to me.”

Keeping an eye on her surroundings, LLENN waited in the back for Fukaziroh to slowly approach the house and reach a firing *position* at the street corner. This was in consideration of the small possibility that the enemy *team* had split up or another *team* had arrived at lightning speed.

However, that was not the case,

“Just a bit more.”

Fukaziroh continued tiptoeing along the wall, and just as she was about to reach the perfect spot,

“Hm?”

And the moment LLENN raised her head at the curious sound, a grenade exploded at Fukaziroh’s feet.

Hearing the muffled sound of an explosion,

“Hehyah?”

As well as Fukaziroh’s hysteric voice, LLENN saw.

How Fukaziroh, who had been advancing along the wall, toppled backwards as if she had tripped over something.

The reason for that was obvious to LLENN.

A trap.

A thin wire was stretched across the corner of the house, and if someone carelessly crossed it, it would activate a trap that rigged a small grenade to explode.

It was a simple but effective *technique* that she herself had used time and time again during *monster* hunts.

The *team* that had taken a defensive position had of course considered the possibility of being attacked from the other side of the buildings, and thus they had set up traps close to the intersection.

“.....Aagh!”

Realising her *mistake*, LLENN cursed herself.

She had forgotten to tell Fukaziroh something that M had once told her.

To be on the lookout for *grenade booby traps*.

“Uhya!”

Fukaziroh, who had fallen on the ground with her *backpack*, was missing the legs below her shins.

A red hit *effect* gleamed dazzlingly below her her black *tights*. Due to the power of the explosion, both of her feet had been torn off.

LLENN could see the *hit point gauge* that belong to her, and another than belonged to her partner, in the upper-left corner of her vision.

LLENN’s was of course still in *green*, but Fukaziroh’s decreased with a *gūn* sound, and stopped after dropping by three quarters.

Although she had lost her legs, LLENN was impressed at Fukaziroh’s sturdiness, as she survived such a degree of *damage*, but she had no time to be immersed in her feelings.

“So~rry!”

LLENN went into an extreme *dash* to the apologising Fukaziroh.

She had two options.

One was to leave Fukaziroh, who was unable to move, behind, run away at full speed, and continue SJ2 all by herself.

The other was to do everything she could to save the girl who wielded excellent supporting firepower.

LLENN chose the latter. There was no hesitation.

In VR games, a *character's* state of having their fingers or limbs torn off wasn't a permanent status. After about 2 minutes, they would return to normal. If it wasn't like that, it would become entirely impossible to play after losing one's legs due to bad luck.

However, the enemy team, about 50 *metres* away on the other side,

“Woow! The trap sprung!”

Who cheered like that, would definitely not continue with their ambush for 2 minutes or more.

They should be taking the opportunity to come out of their encampment and head to where they had confirmed a threat, although it was possible that not every one of them would come.

Watching out for other *traps*, LLENN rushed over to Fukaziroh, and pulled open the *door* the to the entranceway of a nearby house.

Having looked inside and confirmed that there were no *traps* in there,

“Sorryyyyy!”

She grabbed the apologetic Fukaziroh’s *backpack* with her hands,

“Taah!”

And dragged her body into the house using all her strength, while shouting. And then, she closed the *door* with the highest level of agility.

During that very short moment, she noticed that red *markers*, indicating the position of *cameras* that were prowling for battle to broadcast, had been overlooking them.

As the *curtains* were closed, it was dark in the house, and all she could confirm was that there seemed to be a *kitchen* and *living* room inside.

Even so, LLENN continued forcibly dragging Fukaziroh until they reached the centre of the room. The *cameras* did not follow them inside.

And several seconds later, she heard numerous footsteps. They came from outside, and there was no need to question who they belonged to.

Based on the frequency of the footsteps, there were at least three people there, though it seemed there were more.

“I’m sorry! Leave me and run away!”

Fukaziroh, sitting with her footless legs thrown out in front, said with a twisted expression, but,

“If you die.”

LLENN only gave such a reply.

Soon,

“Not here! They’re not dead!”

“So they ran away?”

She could even hear the tense voices of the men while indoors. It seemed that the house was a cheap structure. Because of that, it was considerably helpful to LLENN.

“No, they should have completely fallen for the *trap*! There’s no way they can walk!”

She could not see them, but she understood. That the men had surrounded the house a short distance away. With their guns at the ready and aiming their weapons in the same direction as their glances.

“Did they carry their mate across the street and run away?”

“Nope, didn’t see them!”

“Like they’d have the time for that!”

“Well then——”

“Yeah, can’t think of anything else!”

‘So they’ve realised it, huh.’

Strangely feeling calm, LLENN thought.

“They’re inside the house!”

“LLENN, go go. I’ll manage somehow.”

Fukaziroh said in a whisper, but it was probably impossible. In her current state of being unable to stand and walk, even if she said she would manage somehow, all she could do was to shoot from here.

However, grenades launched by Fukaziroh’s *grenade launcher* would not explode if they had not flown at least 20 *metres* after being fired, to prevent the shooter and his comrades from being hurt. And the inside of this house wasn’t even 10 *metres* long.

‘What if she shot outside?’ The *glass* window might be smashed, but she could not aim then.

‘Then what if she fought with her *sidearm* pistol?’, the odds were not zero, but they were quite low for someone who could not move.

“Fuka..... stay here. Keep your head down as much as you can.”

LLENN said, putting more force into the hand holding her P90.

“As I’ll be going to kill off the guys in the vicinity.

“Huuh?”

In response to Fukaziroh, whom she could not see as it was dark, but assumed was giving a blank stare, LLENN said,

“I’ll show them a glimpse of the strength of the champion of SJ.”

There was quite some excitement in the bar.

The situation was perfectly clear to the audience watching the broadcast.

The *team* that included the previous champion LLENN had been thoroughly caught in a simple *booby trap*, and were confined in a small house.

The *cameras* commanding a view of the house from the sky were relaying the desperate situation the two were in.

A single worn-out house. Surrounding it were six men that had rushed there from their ambush position.

Their weapons were 4 matching 5.56 *mm* 《M16A3》 *assault rifles*.

An 《UZI》 *submachine gun* that used 9 *mm* pistol bullets.

And, a 12-*gauge pump-action shotgun* 《Ithaca M37》 .

“Oi oi, the favourite is going to lose here? No way!”

Someone shouted at the broadcast screen. He spoke on behalf of the entire audience.

The six men were about 3 *metres* apart from each other, and surrounded the house in a fan shape. They did not deploy any of their team to the other side. Because there was the possibility that *glass-* and *wall-piercing* bullets could hit their allies.

“Those guys aren’t dumb. Were they one of those debuting repechaged *teams*? It’d be such an upset victory⁴⁴ if they succeed here.”

“Battles are heartless. There’s a fundamental limit to what two people can do. If they were a six-man *team*, the other four would now be shooting at them.”

“So they’re done for already.....”

“No, there’s no way my LLENN-chan would lose like this, don’t you think?”

“Uh huh, since when has she been yours?”

It was hard to tell whether or not the audience was tense, but on the large *monitor* screen in front of them—

The six men readied their guns. And completed the preparations for firing a volley.

The man who seemed like the *leader* and wielded the UZI, raised his left arm high. And, the moment that he swung it down, fire spouted from the six muzzles, and the gunfire resounded through the *speakers*,

“Aah!”

Quelling the scream-like commotion in the audience.

They saw.

How before the bullets could tear through the glass, it burst open from inside, and a pink object jumped out from it.

⁴⁴ In the original text, the expression “daikinboshi” (大金星) is used. It’s apparently a sumo term for when a rank-and-file wrestler wins against the truly great grand champion.



LLENN, who had used the entire length of the room for her approach run, used her speed to jump, and slam through the curtains. While using her P90 to protect her face.

Smashing the glass and tearing the curtain, LLENN came out to the bright outside world. And while still in the air, searched for the prey she had picked while inside,

“There.”

And first targeted the man firing an UZI to her lower left.

On screen, the pink lump turned into a human figure. And then, it extended its right hand, and the pink object held in it spouted fire.

The mid-air discharge hit the head of the man who had been pounding away with his UZI held at his waist, and created numerous red hit effects.

The man’s face and head got hit by 5 5.7 mm bullets, and collapsed to the right.

He continued firing even while falling, but soon stopped as he ran out of bullets, and a 【D e a d】 marker lit up over his body with a *pikon* sound.

‘Next!’

Just as she landed, LLENN quickly went into a forward ukemi⁴⁵, and did not lose any of her speed. After making three rolls, she stood up, and saw a man with an M16A3 1 metre ahead who was just about to turn towards her.

45 Ukemi (受け身, lit. “receiving body”) is a defensive posture in martial arts to reduce fall damage.

‘No need for that.’

LLENN extended her right arm that held her P90, and pressed the P90’s hot muzzle into the profile of the man as he was turning.

“That’s two!”

A count had begun in the bar.

The pink chibi, no, the previous champion LLENN, was rampaging at a speed that could barely be caught by the eyes of humans.

After slaughtering the second man with her shooting that was barely different from stabbing, she immediately fixed her aim on the man in her immediate vicinity, and discharged while using the second man’s body as cover.

After about 0.5 seconds of firing, hit effects began shining from the man’s chest, face and head.

“That’s three!”

The fourth target was right behind the third one that she had just killed.

The tall man panicked as he attempted to point his long M16A3 gun barrel at her.

‘I don’t need to shoot when I’m this close, huh.’

With this thought, LLENN closed the 3 metre distance in an instant.

The players in the bar,

“Huh?” “Wha?” “Oh?”

Saw that LLENN did not shoot.

The pink chibi closed the distance so quickly that it could be called godspeed, then slid on her legs. She slipped under the man’s muzzle, and then between his legs, to the opposite side.

‘Why didn’t she shoot? Is she going to shoot now?’

The audience’s doubt was cleared up right away.

Because the M16A3 separated from its owner’s hands, and fell down.

The tall man made an expression that was similar to the one made by the person in 『Munch’s Scream』⁴⁶, however, rather than covering his ears, he covered his groin instead.

“Huh?” “Uugh” “Geh!”

The bar’s audience finally understood what had happened after the view quickly zoomed up.

Wasn’t that a bright red hit effect shining on his groin under his hands?’

And then, the camera went slightly down, and there they saw LLENN supporting herself with her P90 in her left hand, and a black knife held in a backhand grip in her right hand.

LLENN had pulled out her knife as she passed through, and using that force, she made a vertical cut.

46 The famous composition by Edvard Munch featuring a screaming man

The moment they realised what the exceedingly fast action that they could not see was,

“

All the men in the bar had their eyes opened wide in terror and the chills went down their spine. There were even some who covered their groins.

No matter how far GGO went, it was still a VR game, so although it had some sensations, they were all fake. Naturally, the pain was quite different from the real world equivalent.

For example, even if the player was shot, they would only feel that spot becoming numb. It was often compared to the pain felt when an acupuncture point was pressed by needles or fingers.

However—

There probably were no practitioners in either world who would tap a man's most vital area with fingers or needles

Nobody knew what the tall man on the screen was feeling now.

There was a safety device in the AmuSphere, thus it should not be unendurably painful, but even so, it should be uncharted territory.

Based on his expression, he was probably experiencing such a sensation for the first time in his life. No, being forced to experience it.

LENN sprung up behind the man who was pressing on his shining groin with his hands, and thrust her knife at his defenceless nape.

The knife with a 20 cm-long blade pierced through the man's neck, and its tip peeked out on the other side.

She immediately pulled it out, and returned it behind her waist, then took the P90 that was hanging by its sling into her right hand—

Finishing all of this in a moment as if the video was on fast-forward, LLENN broke into a dash towards her next target.

After LLENN disappeared off-screen, the man collapsed forward. As he fell down like a pole, he hit his head, but he probably did not feel pain. As the 【D e a d】 marker lit up,

“That's... four.”

Someone in the now-quiet bar somehow managed to utter this.

‘Two more!’

LLENN ran along the wall of the house. The tattered wall on the left side of her field of vision was flowing at a terrifying speed.

She could no longer see any enemies in her vicinity. Thus, they should be on the other side of the upcoming turn.

Just as she worried whether to jump out or stop—

‘Ah, good.’

He came to her himself.

As she saw solely the muzzle of an M16A3 sticking out of the corner of the house, LLENN

“No matter the place, don’t end up having solely your muzzle sticking out, LLENN-chan.”

Had a flashback to Pitohui’s words in her mind.

Pulling the emergency brake, LLENN extended her left hand which was not grasping her P90.

The man had gone through the trouble of readying his weapon on his left shoulder again, but sticking his muzzle out from the corner of the house was an absolute mistake. This was quite clear to the audience in the bar based on the point of view of the video.

As if being dragged into hell, his muzzle was seized, and he was pulled, breaking his posture,

“So that’s five.....”

And in front of him was the muzzle of the P90.

Barara, dry rapid fire sounds resounded. It was impossible to tell whether the man saw that light, or closed his eyes in terror, from the screen.

Knocking down the man with a 【D e a d】 marker who had been shot throughout his face, the pink slaughter machine jumped out.

The next moment, a heavy gunshot resounded, and several bullets bounced away from the surface of the paved road in front of the house.

The last man’s weapon was an M37 shotgun.

The bullets it used, called 《double O-buck》, were buckshots for deer hunting, and the gun could simultaneously fire 9 lead balls, each 8 mm in diameter. These, as well as large 《slugs》, were standard practice for shotguns in battles against people.

As he used buckshots, the gun scattered a group of shots, but the first group all ended up missing LLENN.

The M37-wielding man, *jako!*, made a pumping action, shooting a shotshell downward, and loading the next round. He turned towards the pink chibi rushing away to the side and fixed his aim on her—

But the moment he shot, she was no longer there.

Having crossed the approximately 5 metre wide road in an instant, LLENN hid away in the shadow of a house on the other side. At a speed that could even be called a warp. The buckshots that were fired tore open numerous holes in the wall of the house.

Jako!

Another pumping sound.

Kon, *korokorokoro*

And the dry sound of a shotshell falling and rolling on the ground.

“That shotgun guy..... ain’t half bad.”

Said someone among the audience in the bar. Some people in the surrounding area nodded in agreement.

A shotgun was a considerably powerful gun at short range in both RL and GGO.

The reason for that goes without saying; it was because it launched multiple shots that spread out.

A shotgun's Bullet Circle looked like a collection of small circles that were spread out in a large circle, just like a magic square. Conversely, the Bullet Line looked like multiple lines that assailed the target simultaneously.

The damage dealt by one pellet was identical to the damage of a pistol bullet, and although they were not large, the trait of " hitting at almost the same time, " was the terrifying part. A person struck by them would suffer pressure throughout their body at the same time, greatly breaking their posture.

If they continued to be struck by a rain of buckshots one after another while taken aback, it was possible that they would die without being able to make any counterattack.

The effective range of the pellets was poor; it depended on the type, but it was generally a short range of about 50 metres. However, the man was confronting LLENN at a much shorter distance.

The man's M37 was the type that had a tube-shaped magazine below the barrel extending to the muzzle. If it was fully loaded, it should be able to fire 8 rounds. He had shot once at the house, so he had 5 left.

Furthermore, the M37 allowed rapid fire by "repeating the pumping action with the trigger pulled, " . In the sense of a merciless hail of bullets, it did not lose to LLENN's P90. He still had a chance of winning.

The man probably understood that as well. That is why he continued aiming towards the place where LLENN had hidden without bothering to hide himself.

As he wielded the M37 with its stock close to his cheek, an expression of the dread and tension of a real match, as well as an expression of happiness and having fun, showed on his face.

“This is..... interesting.”

“Which is it gonna be? Which one will win?”

The several second-long frenzy that had been going on until just now had instantly turned into a quiet confrontation. The audience in the bar watched attentively, gulping down their saliva.

‘Will the pink chibi jump out, and slaughter the last member of the team?’

‘Or will this shotgun-wielder retaliate and pull off a totally unexpected result?’

1 second after another that felt painfully long passed—

Bogon

As a strange sound could be heard, the angle of the man’s neck suddenly changed. And, the M37 fired towards the sky, and fell out of his right hand due to its recoil.

The man tottered, *boten*, and collapsed sideways.

At the same moment, LLENN appeared from the other side of the house, and approached the man in a half-run—

Busari

And thrust her knife violently into his nape while crouching, which turned him into a corpse.

It was a carefree and light move, as if she was raising the flag on an Okosama Lunch⁴⁷.

Returning her knife to the back of her waist, and saying something, LLEN gave a smile—and the cameras changed their focus to where she smiled to.

There, through the slightly opened window on the wall, Fukaziroh's smile and an atrocious, 40mm in diameter muzzle peeked out.

“So..... what happened?”

As if in consideration of the audience that did not understand the circumstances, the screen showed a replay.

Footage from a different angle was shown, and everyone understood what had happened well.

Fukaziroh, who had crawled up to the window, had fired a grenade just after she silently and slowly opened the window.

The distance was merely 5 metres or so.

As it was too close, the 40 mm grenade did not explode, but the kinetic energy that was employed by the grenade's weight knocked into the shotgun-wielder's head diagonally from behind. The grenade fell at the man's feet, and rolled around.

“That's nasty.....”

Someone's words spoke for the audience.

⁴⁷ Okosama lunch (お子様ランチ, kid's lunch) is a kid's menu invented in 1930 by a chief manager of Mitsukoshi food department, Andou Tarou, that involves a nicely decorated plate of kids' favourite foods. The plate usually has molded rice with a flag of a country thrust on top.

Being shot by a gun or stabbed with a blade should definitely be more brutal, but, strangely, “being struck by something heavy” was what looked more painful.

LLENN went into the house, thus the scene changed to a different battle, but the excitement in the bar was focused on LLENN’s group.

“Awesome! They really are the favourites! If there was a betting pool, I definitely would’ve bet on her!”

“That partner girl of hers…… has nice guts! That was exciting!”

“That casualness of LLENN’s moves as she stabbed the guy’s neck sure was scary. Even more so when she looks like a girl!”

“You saw that! That’s the power of my LLENN-chan and her partner!”

“Yeah, that was awesome. —But neither of them are yours.”



Guilds-in-Action

SECT.7

Guilds-in-Action

Turning the clocks back a bit.

Around the time LLENN noticed the ambush—

Various battles between *teams*, who had chosen their *targets* during the first *scan*, occurred simultaneously in various parts of the *field*.

It was the beginning of a fireworks display.

A battle had begun in the hilly area north of the centre of the *map*, beyond a gently-sloping valley that was about 400 *metres* in width.

However, it did not turn into a gunfight. It was a one-sided gun down.

On one side was a *team* dressed completely in black and wielding only *submachine* guns, the effective range of which was but 200 *metres*. They were a group of men who gave the impression of being members of the police special force, the original SWAT, and looked quite strong “if they were in an indoor battle”.

On the other side, was a *team* with 3 members, all armed with 7.62 *mm* calibre *machine* guns that boasted an effective range of 800 *metres*.

“Get theeeeem!”

“Hyahaaaaaaa!”

The three members of the Zen-nihon *Machine Gun Lovers*, whose name tag/abbreviation was 《ZEMAL》, sat firmly on a slope and did not miss a chance to pound away.

Their weapons were an 《FN MAG》 and an 《M240B》 — the two models were mostly the same, the latter being an improved version of the former, thus the guns were like sisters. And the last one was an 《M60E3》. All of them were 7.62 *mm* calibre.

They were guns that, right after SJ began, showered LLENN in bullets, but did not land a single one on her in the end.

“Machine guns! They are so fu~n!”

Their refreshing smiles as they pounded away, and the large number of empty shells expelled from their guns, shone under the cloudy sky.

As expected, they were not the kind of idiots to “raise their Strength to carry two *machine guns* in their hands”, like they had discussed on the phone after the previous SJ.

They accumulated experience points within their capacity, and did their best within their capacity. Thanks to that, even their accuracy improved.

Furthermore, they also learnt a new phrase called “team play”.

“Alright, a bit to the right! —About that much.”

Two of the group’s members, whose favourite guns were 5.56 *mm*-calibre and thus had slightly insufficient range, took on the role of being observers. Using binoculars, they kept track of where the bullets hit and the tracer bullets, and gave instructions to their shooting comrades.

“Alrighty, leave it to me!”

They aimed their relentless *full-auto* fire where they were instructed.

Honestly, there was no need to shoot that much in order to simply bring down non-resisting enemies, but it seems that the words “bullet conservation” had not yet reached their heads. Incidentally, that also applied to “samurai’s compassion” .

The bullets became a horizontal rain of steel, and one by one pierced the black-suited group running high and low in the valley in an attempt to escape.

“As if we can win this!”

Their plan to escape from the terrain that was disadvantageous to them as soon as possible, by recklessly taking the shortest route, backfired on them.

In this state, the pitiable all-black-team *members* who were at their wits’ end,

“Craap! We definitely wouldn’t have lost if we were indoors!”

Had no chance of showing off their skills in their situation, thus the one-sided shutdown continued; *pikon pikon*, 【D e a d】 *markers* lit up, until eventually, all of them turned to corpses.

At the same time—

A certain *team* fought in the north-eastern snowy mountains.

The *team* tag was 《ZAT》 .

This was an abbreviation for “^{Z a n g i r i A t a m a n o T o m o}Cropped Headed-Friends”, which had nothing to do with the Earth Defence Organisation from a certain tokusatsu.⁴⁸ Nor did it have any relationship with the Meiji Restoration.⁴⁹

“The enemy! We encountered the enemy while climbing the slope! According to the name shown during the *scan*, they’re MMTM, the previous third most powerful *team*.”

A member of ZAT, lying buried in the snow on a gentle slope, shouted in monologue.

The man wearing a green camouflage uniform, as well as a *helmet* on his head, had *button* battery-sized, ultra-small *video cameras* attached to the front and back of his helmet.

The gun, completely buried under snow due to lying on the ground, was an *assault rifle* used by the Self-Defence Force, a 《Howa Type 89》. Additionally, it was a foldable-stock version that the Ground Self-Defence Force airborne troops and tankmen were supplied with.

This, and the 《Howa Type 64》 series, were the only Japan-made *assault rifle* varieties in GGO. Setting aside the Type 64 which had a bad reputation⁵⁰, the Type 89 was a highly valuable gun.

These guns had the merit of having very insignificant recoil, giving them a powerful *semi-autofire*, and their accuracy was quite good too. Even though they had the drawback of having a high price, there were plenty of people who favoured it.

48 Tokusatsu (特撮, lit. special filming/special effects) is a Japanese term that refers to any live-action film or television drama that usually features superheroes and makes considerable use of special effects. According to an anonymous reader, this is most likely referencing Zariba of All Territory from Ultraman.

49 Cropped hair was a popular hairstyle in the Meiji period (1868-1912).

50 Due to its mechanical complexities, the Type 64 has a false yet pervasive reputation that it sheds parts during field use.

Of course, *players* on Japanese *server* should also have the “It’s our motherland’s gun!\n attachment as well.

“Attempting to return fire! Doryaa!”

Shouting thus, the man raised just his Type 89 with one hand, and fired 3 shots towards the top of the slope in semi-auto mode. Blowing off the snow that had gathered around the muzzle, several bullets rushed away.

There were more small *cameras* attached at the sides and front of the barrel of the Type 89, as well as one facing himself.

“Did I hit them.....? I can’t tell at all! Battles against people really are scary! I’m about to wet myself!”

The man’s speech was picked up by the *mike* equipped on his throat.

The earnestly-speaking man was a *player* hosting a 《Let’s Play》 .

This was the act of broadcasting, or recording, editing, and then distributing the footage of, one’s state in the *game*. Such a video was called a ‘Let’s Play video’.

There were people who would just broadcast the *scene* as is, but eloquent people would add an amusing voice-over or subtitles during the *game* or editing to please the viewers.

Until now, the man, and his comrades from ZAT that did not mind him doing on-the-scene coverage, had only been hunting *monsters* in GGO.

The man who had taken the role of *cameraman* and commentator recorded their situation as they all worked together to defeat super-giant SF *monsters* in GGO, as well as commenting on it and compiling it together to broadcast on a video sharing *site*.

There were plenty of people who did similar things, but his charming videos had quite the popularity.

On the other hand, this was a battle against people—

Until now, nobody had done a Let's Play video like this.

It was impossible to tell when a player versus player battle would occur in GGO. It was a different story if an arrangement was made for a duel.

But, even if such a thing occurred, it would be an infringement of "avatar privacy" to *upload* the video without the permission of the *players* recorded.

However, the story was different for SJ2.

Since an official broadcast video was available, there were no *privacy* concerns. Moreover, the *cameras* recorded scenes from the skies, and mostly did not record player remarks. On the other hand, his video was taken from first-person perspective, and included fun remarks.

He could not make a live broadcast, but nobody forbade recordings. Thus, wanting to try out recording an intense player versus player battle, he *entered* SJ2 with his comrades—

"I wonder if I can move out from here..... Let's try it!"

Byun

“Uhyaa!”

As he raised his head, a *Bullet Line* ran just above it, and was immediately replaced by the flight of a bullet,

“I can’t!”

Still prone, the man became unable to take a single step.

As he was lying with the side of his face on the snow, he could only see the sky and snow. It was great that this was a game. He would have definitely got frostbite if this was *RL*.

As the man had to do his on-the-scene coverage, well, it really wasn’t an obligation, but he wanted to do it for his video—he did not have a communication *item* equipped. Therefore, he could not communicate with his comrades, whom he had lost sight of during the abrupt attack.

Tatatatan *Tatatatatan*.

Again and again, gunshots that seemed like someone hitting a snare drum resounded in his surroundings, the snowy mountain. The sounds were absorbed by the snow, thus there was barely any echo, and disappeared towards the reddish-gray sky.

MMTM did not waste a single bullet. As proof of this, *gūn*, the *hit point gauges* of his comrades in the upper-left corner of his vision decreased and turned zero.

“Ah! One of my mates has just died! Benjamin! He was a good guy! Me and him have been close since high school *IRL* and have always been playing *games* together! Ben!”

Tatatan, *tatatatatan*.

“Aah! That damn Casa is down!”

Tan, *tan*, *tan*, *tan*.

“Koenig! Craap!”

Tatatan.

“Even Frost.....!”

Tan

“Yamada!”

As he reported the deaths of his comrades, he eventually became the last one alive, and the leader *mark* transferred to him.

“I-I have to get out of here no matter what or I’m going to join the rest of them—:

The moment he raised his head just a little as he reported, a *line* ran 3 *cm* above him, and, *byun*, a bullet passed through.

“Uhi!”

The man once again lay down with such force that it was as if he was head-butting the snow.

“Aah.....”

He could no longer move. Absolutely unable to tell where was he being targeted from, the man ended up being immobile, unable to catch even 1 *mm* of his enemy on camera.

The man began talking.

“To all the people..... watching this video right now..... I am no longer able to move. All of my comrades have been killed. I’m probably done for too. I’ll probably get hit by a bullet and die. I’ll probably freeze in the snow. The fact that the *ice* cream I bought on my way home from primary school is what comes to mind at a time like this..... is ironic. It was tasty..... But, I haven’t been hit a single time yet.....”

After he said all that in a solemn tone,

“So, could it be! That I might not get hit this time either!”

As he stood up shouting, and was about to fire his Type 89 that he raised sideways—

Tan—, *Bishi*

Just a single, well-aimed bullet hit his forehead, and he collapsed on the spot.

Without making much sound.

Because he hit the snow.

“Alright, he’s down. I think that’s all of them, but Lax and Bolt, go confirm it. The rest, keep a watch on your vicinity.”

The *leader* of MMTM, who was hiding behind a snowy tree, gave out instructions to his comrades.

He was wearing a white *parka*, with green conifer leaf patterns, on top of his camouflage. It was a camouflage for snowy fields that he had put in his *storage* ahead of time, taking into account the possibility that this might happen.

He reloaded his beloved *assault rifle*, the 《Ste^{Suteā}yr STM-556》.

It was a “clone” of, in other words, basically identical to, the AR-15, which was manufactured by a long-standing European small arms maker, 《Ste^{Shutaiyā}yr-Mannlicher (typically called Suteā in Japanese)》.

The AR-15 was a gun based on the M16 and M4A1. There were a whole lot of people who used these, both among the military and civilians, thus they had a large market scale, and even clones of them were sold by various companies.

Of course, they did not just *copy* them; each company ruthlessly competed to make them easier to use, reforming the parts that were unfit for the times.

One of the AR *clones*, the STM-556 had a feature that none of the others had. It was the advantage of “being able to switch gun barrels with a single press of a button, without the need to dismantle anything”.

A long barrel increased precision. However, it was hard to handle in a narrow place.

On the other hand, a short barrel made it overwhelmingly easy to maneuver indoors. However, it wasn’t suited for sniping. Its effective range was also short.

Hence, shooters had to pick one of the two options or go for a compromise when choosing the barrel length, but there was no need to do so for the STM-556. One could carry both a long and a short barrel, and just keep the unused one in a bag.

The leader’s STM-556 was currently equipped with a long barrel suited for sniping.

The magnification of the small *scope* on the gun was set to high, *set up* as a mid-range sniper rifle. This was why he was able to so accurately hit the commentating *player's* vitals from such a distance.

Just in case they ended up in a battle indoors, he materialised a short barrel from his *storage* and exchanged it. Also, he disabled the magnification of the *scope*, in other words, made it a simple tube which guaranteed a wide field of vision.

Additionally, there was a large tube attached under the *leader's* STM-556's barrel. This was a grenade launcher, a so-called *weapon attachment* that could be used along with the rifle. Of course, it was possible to remove it just by loosening the screws.

Unlike Fukaziroh's MGL-140, it could only fire 1 grenade at a time, but even so, it drastically increased the weapon's firepower.

The *grenade launcher* was an object that he had spent a large sum of money to buy for SJ2. He had also practiced shooting a *grenade* effectively while firing with his *rifle*.

The reason for all of this was but one.

To bring down the *pink* chibi that was constantly running around and the giant man hiding behind a shield, the duo who had given them a hard time and made them taste lake water.

He, who dreamt of taking part in GGO's most prominent battle, the 《Bullet of Bullets》, and managed to make that dream a reality after decent training—

Did not imagine taking part in a *mini* tournament that was held in the outskirts without proper notice, even in his wildest dreams.

And so, he of course felt excited.

And, honestly speaking, he planned to “have a good time” while also simply trying out his abilities and getting in some *training* with his teammates.

But, he had to thank the *pink* chibi and the giant for making his blood seethe this much.

‘I’m counting on you.’

As the *leader* overlooked his beloved gun and his mouth moved without making a sound,

“Six bodies confirmed. Wipe out.”

“No sign of enemies in the area.”

He heard his teammates reporting.

The *leader* raised his eyes.

Under the cloudy sky, the snow field and the battlefield beyond it stretched out. He could faintly see the mysterious dome, the town beyond it, and the rampart that became an enclosure.

‘Now, let’s fight.’

‘Trust your comrades, trust yourself, and trust your gun.’

“Alright. We’ll wait for the next *scan* and descend the mountain along the northern rampart. Be vigilant while on standby. Get your spare *magazines* out.”

At the same time—

In the south-western section of the *map*,

“Machine gun! Keep the pressure on! Let’s do it as always!”

Boss’s team, SHINC, were having a battle.

Their location was the southern part of the town. They were away from the station, thus there were fewer houses, and instead were in a conspicuous place with vacant land and parking lots. A rampart towered to their immediate south and west, and with it as the background, a railroad track extended straight on.

Atop the gray gravel, there were four wide *rails* in total. A double track section for trains to pass by one another. About 50 metres across this flat space,

“Eat this and this!”

The Mother Courage *machine gunner* Rosa,

Dokadokadokadoka *Dokadoka*, *Dokadokadokadoka*

Made stirring, heavy bass sounds with her PKM.

Lying on the roof of an overturned freight car, she aimed at an enemy *team* hiding in the private houses dotting the land on the other side of the *track*.

There was a female *dwarf* behind Rosa. She was holding a spare ammunition case, ready to act when Rosa ran out of ammo.

The scene of their shootout was caught on *camera* and broadcast to the bar,

“Huuh?”

And a man with a *beer* stein in one hand who was watching it tilted his head. His friend, nibbling on *beef jerky* snacks next to him, asked, ‘What is it?’

“That *amazon machine gunner*, no, the very short and stout one who’s currently not shooting— if I recall correctly, she had been shooting with a PKM last time too, right?”

“Ah? Yeah.”

“But now she’s unarmed?”

Even now, Rosa was the only one loudly shooting on the screen.

On the other hand, Sophie the *support* was unarmed, in other words, had no weapons at all.

They thought that she might have left her *machine gun* nearby, considering it to be in the way, but the video showed enough to check on that theory, and it was clear that this was not the case.

“She hasn’t materialised it yet. She’s keeping it in her storage?”

The *jerky* man replied, unable to imagine any other conclusion,

“What for? Why would she go out of her way to do something that would put her at a disadvantage?”

And the *beer* man asked a question from the bottom of his heart, but—

There was not a single person in the bar who knew the answer.

Rosa’s cluster of bullets splendidly pierced right through the wall denoting the boundary of the house—

“Huh? Wai-, no way—”

And were soaked up by the bodies and heads of the *characters* hiding behind it.

The red *Bullet Lines* eerily passed through that wall beforehand, but they had let their guard down and overlooked them. *Lines* were thoroughly shown through objects that bullets could penetrate without losing power, such as thin plates and grass.

“Crap!”

Having had his teammates killed right in front of him, the man grasped his beloved bolt-action sniper rifle, the 《SSG69》, tightly, and began running away. They had moved in at full speed to flank their enemies, but seeing as their position was exposed, this place was also dangerous now.

The man was a sniper, thus he wore a green camouflage uniform and a *cover* that consisted of a net and a piece of cloth for disguise on his head and shoulders. This was an *item* called an 《assault ghillie》.

The full-body-covering clothing called the 《ghillie suit》 had extraordinary camouflage capability, but it had the downside of making it hard to move quickly.

Aside from those *snipers* who only moved very slowly, *assault ghillies* were easier to use and were effective enough. Even more so in SJ where they could not choose the *field*.

The man, who even had green camouflage makeup on his face, began running at full speed behind the wall, spooked by the *Bullet Lines* whose attack he could not predict, as well as the *machine gun* bullets that followed suit.

Based on the *hit point gauge* in the top-left corner of his vision, he knew that three teammates were dead, but two were still unscathed. The man shouted to them over his communication *item*.

“Two down! I’m alone! They found out that we were behind the wall! Watch out, those guys have eyes even in the sky! —Let’s gather up and regroup! Where are you?”

“B-beside the *truck!*”

“Alright! I’ll be coming out from the west side in a moment, so don’t shoot!”

“Roger! —Sh~it! Those *amazons* sure are tough! The *sniper’s Line* is sca~ry! Don’t stick your head out! The Dragunov is one of my favourite guns, but now I’m growing to hate it!”

The first of them said, and the second who should be right next to him,

“Let’s get out of here! We can’t do it with just the three of us!”

Added such a weak-kneed proposal.

“Stop complaining! We came here knowing that there would be formidable opponents! It’s a *battle royale*, so we were bound to encounter them!”

“But—”

One of the voices stopped midway unnaturally.

And the other,

“Huh? Wha, whe——”

As expected, stopped midway as well.

“

Earnestly wishing that his worst fears had not come true, the man kept running for 3 seconds with his head lowered, and arrived beside a house.

He could not see anyone yet. With a quick move, the man left his SSG69 hanging by its sling, and drew out a 9 *mm* calibre automatic 《Beretta Px4》 pistol from the *holster* at his right waist. Cocking the *hammer* with his thumb, and wielding it with both hands,

“

He slowly moved out from the shadow of the house.

And so, he saw his teammates lying senseless behind a large *truck* that had fallen over sideways, and **【 D e a d 】** *markers* flashing above their bodies. Although it was obvious enough already, he looked up at the top-left corner of his view, and saw that he was the sole survivor.

He also happened to know the reason the two were killed without the slightest hint of a gunshot even though they were this close. It was the work of that gun that had went on a rampage during the previous SJ.

“Crap! So it was that *gorilla* woman.....”

As the man swore in a whisper, he heard,

“Yep, that’s right. You’re the only one left, huh.”
A woman’s voice all of a sudden.

“Wha—”

The man swung the muzzle of his Px4. First directly behind him, then left and right.

However, there was no one alive in his surroundings. But even so, he heard a voice. There was but one possibility.

“Don’t tell me…… you’re using our communication *items*?”

The man sent a question to the unseen enemy, and received a courteous answer.

“Yep. We used you to try out a theory. Whether something stolen from an enemy’s corpse could be used. Since guns and *grenades* could be used regularly until the end of the tournament, we wondered if the same applied to “phones.”

That is to say, they stole it from the first man they had killed, and all his orders and conversations went through to them— and because of that, they easily flanked and killed his teammates, and were about to do the same to him in a moment—

“That’s so unfair, oi.”

Without a sound, a bullet flew towards that man who muttered this while laughing at himself.

It hit the right eye of his smiling face, and pierced through him.

Boss, who shot with her silent sniper rifle 《Vintorez》 from the window of a house about 50metres away, took her eyes off the *scope*,

“I guess so, sorry.”

And replied to the killed man.

About the same time as *Boss's* group's merciless battle—

There was a strange battle unfolding between two teams on the gigantic bridge east of the centre of the *field*.

Both teams consisted of six members armed with 5.56 *mm* assault rifles, but they ended up having their battlefield on the highway atop the bridge.

The road was straight. And the distance was about 2 *km*.

Atop the four-lane road, there wasn't a single car left behind. It was clean and orderly. And it was 100 *metres* above the bottom of the valley.

In other words, it was a merely 40 *metre-wide field* shaped like a straight line, which had neither shelter to hide from view, nor cover defend against bullets, and no way to escape to the left or right.

Two *teams* that decided to cross the valley from the north and south respectively found out during the *scan* that there was an enemy ahead of them. They could have just returned, but, desiring to fight enemies, they spotted each other at the centre of the bridge, and began a gunfight about 500 *metres* away from each other.

However, GGO had Bullet Lines. It was possible to tell where the bullets would fly, thus it was possible avoid them by lying down, jumping, twisting one's body, and so on, if one wanted to do so.

Even more so if one knew that the enemy's position was right in front of them, and that they were far away.

It was impossible to attack by just dodging, thus right after the *Lines* disappeared, they would ready their weapons and aim at the enemy, but even if they shot, the other side would only dodge them the same way.

And, as for turning back and escaping, in this case, they would be unable to see the *Lines* and thus get shot in the back. If they retreated while facing forward, their opponent could just pressure them as they pleased.

'In that case, we'll make them eat lead as we advance, even if only a little at a time!'

The stubbornness of both *teams* clashed with each other. Even though they could have just stopped.

And so, the gunfight continued; repeatedly switching between dance-like moves and stillness while shooting, it turned into a game of "Red light, green light, .

This scene was broadcast on one of the *monitors* in the bar, but,

"Sigh. Those guys are crossing the bridge without thinking it over....."

"Even idiots like us know. That those guys are idiots."

The attention it drew was minimal.

Naturally, they had no chance of winning against the fights of LLENN's or *Boss's* teams in ratings, but there was no one in front of that *monitor*, and the people watching it in private rooms changed the *channel*.

While the two *teams* were playing around on the bridge—

There was someone about to die to the south of the centre of the *map*, in a place where a grassless field stretched out, with plots of leafless forests scattered about.

The man, realising that he had been struck by bullets in the chest and face, used the time while his *hit points* decreased to zero,

“I can't see I can't see! I can't see the *Bullet Li*—”

Desperately shouting to his teammates, but he could not finish his sentence. He collapsed face-down onto the dry ground, and stopped moving as a 【D e a d】 marker *lit* up.

Aside from him, there were two more corpses lying on the wide field. As well as three people who were still alive hiding along the now dried-up waterway.

They were all using dated military uniforms and equipment.

One was dressed as a member of the US Delta Force *Green Berets* from the Vietnam War, another as a member of the Soviet Union Airborne Troops from the War in Afghanistan, another as a mercenary from the Rhodesian Bush War, another as a soldier of the West German Army from the Cold War, even as old as an English infantryman from the Second World War and an officer from the old Japanese army.

As for their guns, they, naturally, did not use anything but those that perfectly conformed to research into those periods. Among them were even antiques that made them say ‘There’re guns like these in GGO!’ in astonishment.

They were military history-loving *players*. A *nostalgic squadron* that fought in the future world of GGO with equipment that was depicted as accurately as possible.

Head-canon wise,

『We’re people who appeared to have died on various battlefields, but were sent to the future by some mysterious power, where we met and fought together, dreaming of returning some day.』

They went for such a setting.

Their *squadron* name, tinged with irony, was 《New Soldiers》. This was abbreviated, as was usual with names in SJ2, to “NSS”.

They, who were first-time participants of SJ, had their *start point* in a forest south of the centre of the field.

Based on the 13:10 *scan*, they knew that there were a lot of enemy teams in the area, but particularly that the previous runner-ups, SHINC, were on the west side.

Simply because they did not wish to face them as opponents, the men set their course to the north, where they chose a *team* named “KKHC” that should have been there as their first opponents. They had no idea what kind of *team* this was, but they thought that it was at least better than facing the *amazons*.

It was very *risky* to go through a flat field, but they had no choice.

Carefully watching their front, they advanced by stepping firmly on the dry soil.

‘If someone is sniped, the rest will immediately drop to the ground. The sniper’s position is unknown for the first shot, thus the *Bullet Line* will not be shown, and there is no way to avoid it’

They thought, and were abruptly sniped just as they had predicted.

The 《G3A3ZF》-wielding West German soldier, and the 《Lee-Enfield No. 4 Mk I (T)》-wielding English infantryman were shot in both the chest and face and instantly died at almost the same moment. The sounds of them collapsing and dry gunshots resounded in the vicinity.

The remaining four hid in the dried-out waterway and confirmed the position of their opponents.

They saw a flashing muzzle, thus they identified the enemy’s position. They were, based on their range finder, 438 *metres* away, in a narrow, 20 square *metre*-sized forest.

Their deaths, especially since they were *snipers*, were a heavy blow to the team, but there was no revival magic in GGO, thus they could no longer do anything about it. The enemy *team*, too, probably realised that their *snipers* posed a threat, and so they shot them. In exchange, they gave away their position to the enemy.

The enemy in the forest should not be moving out from there anymore. Because if they did, they would expose themselves on the field.

So, all they had to do now was approach them bit by bit while relying on the *Bullet Lines* to avoid the bullets, and then attack.

Luckily, the still surviving USSR soldier's 《AKS-74》 was equipped with a *grenade* launcher under the barrel. If they could get within its maximum effective range of 400 *metres*, they could one-sidedly drive a *grenade* into the forest while prone and hiding.

The distance remaining for that goal was merely 40 *metres*. If they could reach the next waterway, their win would be in sight.

The *Green Beret* man, who was the *team leader* and the most nimble of them,

“I’m going in. Cover me. But don’t waste bullets. —Now!”

Gallantly jumped out with his beloved 《XM177E2》 *assault rifle* in one hand.

His comrades, expecting to run through while splendidly dodging the *Bullet Lines*, only stuck out their heads to watch over him.

3 seconds later, he was shot and died.

“I can’t see I can’t see! I can’t see the *Bullet Li*—”

Leaving this *dying message* behind.

The remaining three were engulfed in panic.

Drawing their heads back into the dried-out waterway like turtles, they began quarrelling through their communication items.

“Wh-whwh— why! Why couldn’t he see them? A *system error*?”

Said the 《FAL》 assault rifle-wielding Rhodesian mercenary,

“No, that can’t be possible……. I’ve never heard of something like that. Besides, even we, who were close, couldn’t see it.”

The USSR soldier denied resolutely.

“But! The *leader* couldn’t have overlooked it! He was sober!”

The *leader* had *logged in drunk* several times and caused trouble for the *squadron*, but he was sober today. Because the West German soldier, who was also an *IRL* associate, had been watching over him since last night and made him abstain from drinking.

“Then…… there’s only one possibility that I can think of.”

The 《Type 100 submachine gun》-wielding ex-Japanese army officer said in a calm tone.

“What is it?”

“The enemy *character* is relying on their knowledge and skill to snipe; it’s the so-called “Line-less shooting”. It’s possible by not putting one’s finger on the trigger until the last moment. It’s not really a *cheat*.”

“Well, that’s true……. So, they aimed all this way without the *system* assist, and hit the head on their first shot?”

“That’s just how skilled they are. Which means——”

‘Which means?’, the other two awaited the answer.

“It means that we’re no match for them in our current state. We can’t go any further. Let’s change course toward the east.”

He said. The words ‘change course’ sounded nice, but ultimately meant ‘retreat’.

In response to the proposition to run away with the enemy right in front of them, and half their teammates down,

“You’re right.”

“Agreed.”

The two nodded. And so, leaving behind three corpses, they,

“Kuwabara kuwabara.”⁵¹

Began crawling away.

Their buttocks were caught on *camera* in silence.

Voices of merry men could be heard,

“Hooray! Our “first fruits of battle” !”

“Hyahho!”

“That went well!”

“We can manage this!”

From the *team* in the forest who sniped down three enemies. They were tensionless, and looked as if they had shot down a box of *caramels* in a festival shooting game.

They were lying firmly on the ground beside tree shrubs. Only the tips of their long boots, and the tips of their *rifles* could be seen.

All 4 long and narrow barrels were sticking out, and could hit at that range, thus they all had to be sniper rifles.

51 A Japanese charm to ward off lightning and misfortune.

“Shirley, you know, you could have shot them too?”

One of the men said.

“No thanks. You guys can have all the fun.”

The short response definitely belonged to a woman.

“Hey, look. Those guys have a high chance of getting away.”

The woman called Shirley said, and immediately began making a rustling sound,

“Oi oi, you’ll be shot you know?”

A nearby man who could not be seen informed her in panic.
However,

“I’ll think about that when the time comes.”

She made light of it, and started wriggling out of the shrubbery.
Rather than crawling forward, she crawled backwards.

Leaving her gun in the thicket, Shirley crawled out of it feet-first.

Like the men, she was wearing long boots and brown *cargo* pants.
She had a largish *magazine pouch* on her right waist and a dagger-like *knife* called a ken’nata on her left waist, hanging on a *belt*.

As for her upper body, she was wearing a *jacket* that used a camouflage pattern called 《Real Tree pattern》, which precisely depicted actual withered tree leaves. On her head, she was wearing a camouflaged baseball cap, the brim of which was turned back so as to not get in the way of the scope.

This pattern was extraordinarily effective here, and thus the upper half of her body alone looked like it belonged to an invisible man.

The upper half of her body vanished in the thicket, but her fair-skinned face, and the hair slightly jutting out from her *cap*, were very conspicuous. It was vivid, with a new leaf-like greenness.

Shirley's expression was the very picture of displeasure.

She would be a beauty if she smiled, but right now, it was a look sour enough to scare any man away. Even though her mates had earned the fruits of battle, and were so happy.

Shirley completely stood up, and hid beside a tree. And then, she brought the small binoculars hanging on her shoulder to her eyes, and gazed at the soaring rampart and the wide field for about 5 seconds,

"The remaining three are running away to the mountains. I can only see their headgear fluttering. They're already far. Can't see anyone else."

Before indifferently reporting what she saw. Her *teammates*,

"What..... That was fast!"

"So they got scared and ran away! Our first battle was a complete success!"

"Easy win!"

"But I wanted to shoot them more!"

Responded with such carefree words.

“Haah.....”

Shirley sighed.



“With our skill, we can reach a rather high rank, right?”

“That’s right. A bloodbath.”

“Just as we thought, you have to shoot *IRL* too!”

Having heard this much, Shirley put her hand on her ear, and set the communication *item switch* to *off*.

And then, turning her back to her mates, she, in a whisper that no one could hear,

“Is shooting people with a gun that fun? You guys are crazy. You could all just be shot already. If you did, this tournament would end.”

Muttered provocatively.

* * *

There were a lot of *teams* that were not on broadcast, in other words, *teams* that were not in a battle, and one among them,

“Boooring!”

Was Pitohui, screaming her heart out.

She was currently in the mountains with rocks and forests, in the south-eastern sector of the *field*, sitting on a fallen tree.

Clad in a *mantle* that reached her left knee and her right foot directly beside it, and giving a dare devilish expression, she looked like the military commander of some belligerent country.

She had no weapons in her hands. Not even a pistol, let alone a *rifle*.

In the vicinity, M, and four other subordinates, were keeping watch on the area. Mixed with the sound of treetops being swayed by the wind, gunshots from far, truly far away could be faintly heard.

They were among mountains with steep slopes. With thick trees and rugged rocks stretching out, it was a position with a really poor field of vision.

M had his M14 EBR placed beside him, and was peeking below the slope through the gaps of the trees.

He was holding his large *backpack*, with the shield used during the previous tournament stuffed inside, in front of his stomach.

The four subordinates whose faces could not be seen were materialising their equipment. Like M, they wore *vests* with bulletproof *plates* on the upper half of their bodies.

The small, tall, and fat men were scattered in the forest, thus only their bodies could be seen. It was impossible to tell what equipment and weapons they had.

The last one, a slender man, was right behind Pitohui. He had only a 《Glock 21》 45 caliber pistol hanging on his right waist, while both of his hands were empty.

“Hey, M. Why are we loafing at a place like this? Everyone’s shooting at their enemies, ya know? There’s a lot of them below, so can’t we just quickly descend the mountain?”

In a zero-tension tone, Pitohui spoke through the communication *item*. M replied.

“No.”

“Why? M, could it be..... that you don’t want to fight, hmm? Are you gonna be a *chicken* like last time?”

M was unrattled even at her ridicule.

“It’s part of the plan.”

“Oh really. What do you guys think?”

Her voice should have reached the other four men as well, but there was no immediate response, until finally,

“We’ll follow the *leader’s* plan. As per our contract.”

One of them said in a raspy voice, and one by one, she could only hear the others’ agreement.

“Oh, really.”

With a frown, Pitohui said only this in response. He used keigo, but she did not say anything about it.

M said unconcerned.

“Getting into the initial, stupid melee is... pointless. Do you want to die so much? Is that your wish?”

“Huh! No, but it’s lame. Ain’t it boring?”

“Put up with it for now. As I said before, it’s part of the plan, Pito. You entrusted me to be the *team leader*, so obey my orders.”

“Tsk! Well, can’t be helped. When you die, M, I’ll get the *leader’s mark*, and do as I please.”

Pitohui exaggeratedly pointed her hands to the sky and shrugged.

There were no *cameras* there.

“Don’t worry, the surviving formidable enemies baring their fangs will be all yours, Pito.”

“Who, for example?”

“For example, someone like LLENN. That *pink* rabbit’s fangs are awfully sharp.”

“Aha!”

The ferocious smile that Pitohui gave was, luckily, not broadcast.



Their Respective Strategies

SECT.8

Their Respective Strategies

Between 13:10 and 13:19—

Eighteen out of thirty *teams* engaged in battle.

And of them, seven *teams* were wiped out or, believing themselves unable to continue, resigned. Even the *teams* that were playing around on the bridge disappeared from sight on cordial terms. The number of *teams* able to see the second *scan* was twenty-three.

But then, some of the surviving *teams* had lost several *members*, and thus suffered a drastic decrease in their power. Such groups had to seriously consider what to do next.

As for the sole *team* among the participants that started out with merely two people,

“Yippee, my feet grew back! Yippee!”

Fukaziroh had regained her freedom of movement.

This happened in a house, slightly away from the house that they had taken refuge in. A place far enough away to cause LLENN to wonder whether her back had started hurting after dragging Fukaziroh all the way here.

Some time had passed since she had lost her feet, thus the part that was glowing started growing, and her feet grew back as if by magic. That’s a *game* for you.

Her blown off *tights* and *boots* returned to normal as well.

She had used a first aid *kit* while waiting, thus her *hit points* were slowly returning to *max*.

“Hyahhou! My feet! I’m so glad, so glad!”

Fukaziroh hopped around inside the room.

“Alright!”

LLENN, who had been clinging to the window frame and keeping a watch on the surroundings, looked at her wristwatch in the dark room.

The *digital* numbers that automatically adjusted to the brightness,

“I guess we’ll look at the next *scan* here.”

Informed her that it was 13:19:20. They no longer had the time to move out.

“Gotcha! I won’t make such a blunder again! I’ll take advantage of it! And, 『Honey, you look rather tired』 , provoke them like this!”

“Yeah. But, watch out, since *trap wires* could be set at waist or head level too. Oh, and if you try stepping across one, it might be set at a height for you to end up touching it. If you try to dismantle it, another *trap* might activate.”

“Ugeh. That’s dirty.”

In response to Fukaziroh’s grimace, LLENN smiled.

“That’s what GGO battles are like. You’ll get used to it eventually. You might end up watching out for *wires* over an entrance even *IRL*.”

“You’ve really become strong..... I’m glad.”

And so, the second *scan* began.

This time, the artificial satellite came from the south at a rather quick pace.

Naturally, the *scan* was also quick, thus LLENN and Fukaziroh were forced to *check* it frantically. And so, they discovered that annihilated/resigned teams numbered seven, and moreover,

“Alright!”

“They’re still he~re.”

They also found out that Pitohui’s *team* was safe. They had practically not moved from their *starting point*, and there were no annihilated/resigned *teams* in their vicinity. In other words, it seemed that they had not taken part in battle.

“I’m glad, but..... that’s a long way to go.....”

LLENN put her mixed feelings into words.

The opponents they had to defeat were still very far from the city they were currently in. And there were many dots of light shining in-between.

At the moment, the closest to them was the *team* in the station that was just over 1 *km* away.

Magnifying the map, she saw that they were right in the centre of the station, on the platform. She could not magnify it further, so she could not make out the details.

She could tell that they were not moving, but one's movement and course would be clearly seen by enemies during a *scan*, thus it should be avoided as much as possible.

Of course, it could not be helped if one was being pursued, but there was a high-grade *technique* to “go the opposite direction from one's actual intention during the *scan*” .

LLENN took several seconds to consider why they were in the station. She made use of the knowledge that she had obtained from Pitohui and M.

And then she gave the answer.

“There's a railway running straight to the north and south, and there's a *rotary* to the east and west of the station; for a place within the town, I believe it has quite the good view. If the platform is made of *concrete*, bullets won't be able to pierce it no matter how strong they are. They should have taken position on the platform and set up an ambush.”

Hearing her words,

“More campers! Why those bunch of *chickens*! Let's run them over with a train!”

Fukaziroh was angry.

However, just like their previous opponents, this was a splendid strategy, so nothing could be done about it. It was just like an intentional walk in baseball.

Especially since the abilities of the previous champion, LLENN—her quick-wittedness, shortness, and mercilessness, should be well known to the participants due to the videos. It was obvious that lying in wait in a place with a good view was better than recklessly going into a melee.

As for Fukaziroh’s plan of “running them over”, LLENN thought that using the train would not be a bad idea, but they did not know how to operate it.

On the map, they saw that *Boss*’s SHINC had also survived.

Based on their position during the previous *scan*, they were moving northeast, straddling the railway. There was one gray dot along their route. They were undoubtedly massacred by the girls.

“.....”

‘Damn.’

LLENN made a sour face, as if she had consumed a bitter bug.

If *Boss*’s group continued to advance like that, they would meet up in the vicinity of the *dome* at the centre of the map, or before the mountains in the southeast. ‘You could have just come north’, she thought, but could not change the situation.

‘Hey! Don’t go soft now! You’ll lose if you do!’

LLENN shouted in her mind. She had made a decision. To eliminate any nuisance in their way.

The *scan* ended in less than 30 seconds. LLENN immediately put away the terminal, and gave instructions to her partner.

“The station *team* is in the way, so we’re striking them! We’ll approach them by moving along the walls of the houses.”

And then, Fukaziroh grinned.

It should have been an honest smile, but due to the dimness of the room coupled with her impish appearance, it could only be regarded as sinister.

“Hey, LLENN, I apologised for my blunder, but allow me to play an active role for a bit.”

“Sure, you have a plan?”

“Yeah. I’ll wipe out that station *team* without LLENN getting to shoot a single bullet.”

Other *teams* looking at the 13:20 *scan*—

Confirmed their respective situations and formulated drafts of their plans.

SHINC, led by *Boss*, was at the edge of the town and about to enter the field *area*. They advanced on foot, keeping watch on their rapidly growing field of vision.

The *snipers* Anna and Tohma kept a watchful eye on the surroundings with their binoculars, but based on the results of the *scan*, there were no *teams* that they could immediately engage, in other words, make contact with, within 10 minutes. Of course, the possibility of them using the *leader* as a decoy while the others were lying in wait was not zero, but...

“So they ran away.....”

Boss muttered.

The girls were also a *team* whose abilities were well known, thus all the people in the vicinity had scattered away in all directions like baby spiders.

‘Let’s have some other *team* fight with the previous runners-up to exhaust them.’ Every single one of them had the same idea in mind.

“Hey you gu~ys! Is every one of you frickin’ ball-less?”

Boss yelled at the enemies she could not see, her braid swaying,

“Oh dear, are we using vulgar words now?”

And was rebuked from behind by Sophie. *Boss* turned around,

“Huh, it’s all fine in-*game*, right? It’s called *role-playing*.”

And immediately reverted to being a high school girl.

“It’s fine, but it’ll come out *IRL* too if you overdo it, you know? Like when we were riding the subway!”

“Ugeh! That is..... troublesome.”

“Right. So, say it again, more elegantly this time. Like a lady!”

“Gotcha.”

Boss nodded, turned around again, and, gazing at the wide field and enemies she could not see, addressed them gently.

“People, have you no testicles?”

Team MMTM looked at the *scan* in the snowy fields close to the northern rampart.

They were still wearing white *parkas*, lurking without stirring a muscle and with the lower halves of their bodies hiding in the snow, thus the effectiveness of their camouflage was outstanding. Even if you were told that they were there, it would be impossible to pinpoint them.

Looking at the *scan*, the *leader* considered his plan.

LF and SHINC were still alive. Well, he did not believe they would kick the bucket so easily. And PM4, who had practically not moved since last time, was alive too.

From the bottom of his heart, he wanted to head straight on towards either of those formidable opponents and enjoy the head-on battle, but they were all, regretfully, too far away.

Although the organisers set up the tournament to have a longer climax, they caused unnecessary issues for his team.

“Can’t be helped. We’ll advance to the west.”

The *leader* gave his instructions.

While every team was formulating their own plans—

There was one *team* with a completely different idea in mind.

They were positioned at the foot of the mountain where Pitohui continued to lurk, and looked up at the rocks and forests boasting magnificence.

Discovering that there were a lot of *teams* that could be engaged in the field *area* as a result of the *scan*,

“Alright, perfect timing. We’re going as planned!”

The man, who wore gaudy *protectors* reminiscent of an SF world all over his body, asked his comrades a question.

“Lastly, I want to confirm one last time. This is a plan that can’t be stopped once it’s in motion. Are there any objections?”

He heard only voices of approval responding to him.

“Alright! Prepare the white flag! We’re executing 《Plan *Platoon*》.”

* * *

13:25.

Having dashed through the *ghost town* at full speed, LLENN and Fukaziroh arrived in the vicinity of the station.

Of course, they moved taking into account the possibility that the *team* in the station had anticipated their arrival and would engage them midway, but—

“Alright, coast clear.”

As expected, the *team* seemed to be waiting in ambush and did not engage them in battle.

Under the cloudy sky, Fukaziroh squatted down in the shadow of a general variety store approximately 300 *metres* to the northwest of the station.

On the store window hung a sign with the English words “Bargain sale before the world falls to ruin! Do your life's final shopping in this store!” .

“Nice. This will do.”

Ahead were several similar small stores, lined up before the *rotary* in front of the station.

If they advanced further, they would end up in the field of fire of the ambushing *team*, and receive a merciless rain of bullets from them.

A field of fire was literally the *area* where shooting was possible. The range was dependent on the ability of the gun, but taking into consideration the usual 5.56 *mm assault rifle*, advancing further was dangerous.

“LLENN, tell me the direction.”

“Roger.”

LLENN moved nimbly to the end of the house, and stealthily stuck just her eyes out. She confirmed the position of the railway and *rotary*, and the station from there, and returned again.

Using her left hand, she gave instructions to Fukaziroh,

“This way. Approximately 300 *metres*.”

“*Okay okay*. Roger. It's all good.”

Fukaziroh dropped 1 of her 2 MGL-140s to the ground, and sat down, throwing her legs out forward. Slightly lowering the upper half of her body, she used her *backpack* as a backrest to support her.

And then, she placed her MGL-140 between her thighs and supported it as she aimed it towards the sky.

“Alright, LENN, I’m counting on you.”

Fukaziroh said with a broad grin,

“Alright, Fuka, I’m counting on you.”

LENN patted Fukaziroh on the shoulder, and started running away.

In the old days, this was an important method of public transportation for the people living in this now-deserted town—

The station with such a setting still stood even now, when there were no more people living here.

The sign indicating the station’s name, written horizontally, was crooked and had become so dirty that it was unreadable. The tracks had become red from all the rust, while the railway sleepers had become so rotten that they had split from their edges.

The station building, which was as simple as a small house, stood only on the east side. And, as if its central pillar had been broken, it had collapsed from the centre.

The platform was made of sturdy *concrete*, thus it had survived. Its length was about 100 *metres*. The two platforms had two tracks (in other words, four *rails*) on either side.

The platform and tracks had become an encampment.

The height of the platform was about 60 *cm*, shorter than those of Japan's railroads. There, six *players* were lurking.

All of them were men and their garments were all dissimilar. There were obviously men wearing camouflage, but there were also people wearing GGO-like futuristic combat uniforms, as well as people in casual wear consisting of *jeans* and *jerseys*, as if they were in the middle of shopping.

And also, they had a certain trait that no other *team* had.

This was the fact that their arms were all optical guns. SF weapons that fired beams of energy and had fictitious appearances.

They had picked optical guns, which were considered unfit for player versus player battles as their power was diminished by Anti-Beam Defense Fields, and brought them to SJ2.

The greatest motive for this was the fact that there was little worry that they would run out of ammo.

Optical guns, which used *battery*-like energy *packs* rather than *magazines* crammed with ammunition, were far superior to live-ammunition guns in terms of how much they could be fired.

The fact that they were lightweight was also a *merit*, thus the men had brought a large number of them.

2 *machine gun*-types, which were large in size and had large energy *pack* capacities and thus could fire continuously for a long time, and 1 sniper rifle-type with a *scope*. 4 classified as *assault rifles*. And also, 3 *submachine guns* suited for close-ranged battles and 6 *pistol*-types.

That was an amazing number of muzzles, suited for whatever situation they might end up in.

And, having discovered the position of the previous champion LF during the *scan* and deciding that they should lie in wait for them, the men set up a defensive encampment in the station.

13:28.

Pon.

Suddenly hearing a soft sound far away,

“What, was that? Did someone fart?”

A *jersey*-wearing man with a sniper rifle-*type* gun said, and the other five burst into laughter.

And a *grenade* came down near the station that the six were hiding in.

The *grenade* that landed in the centre of the *rotary*, 30 *metres* away from the six men, made a loud sound and scattered metal fragments in all directions.

Several of the fragments that had lost their power hit the man who was peeking through his binoculars. Naturally, the man did not suffer any *damage* at all, but, even so, he went into a panic and shouted while pulling his head back.

“Uhya! That’s a *grenade*! This is bad!”

“Calm down. It’s really far away. They just saw the results of the *scan* and are shooting randomly. Just like the *amazons* firing their *machine guns* in the videos of the previous tournament. They’re trying to bring us out into the open. Don’t panic. A separate, detached force should be approaching us. Do not dare to shoot until you see the enemy. We’re currently in an overwhelmingly advantageous position. There’s no need to go out ourselves.”

The *leader*-like, camouflage-wearing man said in a calm tone while holding a *machine gun-type* gun in a prone position.

“O-oh.....”

“Relax. We won’t lose at a place like this. Believe in yourself. Believe in your comrades. Believe in victory. Believe that we will survive the fight in this decayed world and bring glo—”

Thanks to the passionate speech, and the fact that everyone had their eyes on the surroundings, none of them noticed.

That a curved *Bullet Line* was aiming right towards them.

Pon

A dry sound was made.

And as the *Line* disappeared, the incoming *grenade* exploded right behind one of them.

“Bullseye.”

Seeing a man without his bottom half being blown away in the field of vision of her monocle,

“Two people to the north, 5 *metres* towards you.”

LENN gave instructions through her communication *item*.

LENN was currently at a position about 200 *metres* away from the station.

She was lying on the roof of a house there, having fixed her monocle in place by pressing it to the corrugated iron roof, and was keeping an eye on the station.

She made use of the inclination and chimney, thus only the lense of her monocle stuck out. Its magnification was set to max, and was used to observe the situation on the platform. In its circular field of vision, a *digital* number, indicating the distance to the target, was shown.

“Roger.”

Came Fukaziroh’s reply and, several seconds later, a *grenade* exploded at the indicated location.

One of the two panicking men had his body torn by the fragments, and hit *effects* were produced throughout his body.

After seeing this scene, the sound of the explosion reached her ears, late by a beat. It was as if she were watching a far away fireworks display.

Fukaziroh’s proposed plan was *simple*.

‘I’ll settle in here and use curved *grenade* attacks on the enemy in the station.’

‘There are plenty of houses in the way, so neither I nor they can see each other at all.’

‘Instead, LLENN, you go view the station from a safe place, and give me “bombardment” instructions.’

‘I’ll fire an initial grenade, so just tell me how far away it is from the target.’

“Can you..... hit them... like this?”

In response to the somewhat dubious LLENN,

“Hahhaa, how much overtime do ya think I spent practicing this?”

“A lot.....”

“*Battles* aren’t all about facing an enemy head-on. I realised that such a tactic was better for my weapon. So, I undertook practice to guess the distance based on intuition. Right now, I can fire away *grenades* with my eyes closed if only I know the distance, ya know? But, only if I have accurate guidance.”

“Alright..... Let’s do it. But, Fuka, won’t you be defenseless and unable to move?”

“Just like how I had died last time. Don’t worry about a *zombie!*”

“Guys lying 18 *metres* towards you. Two of them.”

“Aye. Then, I’m firing 2.”

Several seconds later, two *grenades* made impact in succession. They exploded 3 *metres* to the left and right of the men, who attempted to take shelter while lifting their optical guns, and threw the two men out of SJ2.”

“Go back 50 *metres* along the track. The guy there is running away.”

“Alright, I’m going for him then. Firing 2.”

A *grenade* exploded right in front of the man desperately trying to escape and, although hit by a few fragments, he dropped to the ground without any serious wounds.

The second *grenade* came down right on his back. And split his body into at least 10 *parts*. The hit *effects* shined like a red fog.

“Bullseye. One to go. He’s crossing the platform and running away to the east. We could let him go, but I want to bring him down if possible.”

“Well then, I’m firing all out!”

Ponponponponponpon.

6 sounds of discharge reverberated in succession. Proof of the fact that Fukaziroh had switched to her second MGL-140.

The last man was running desperately.

As if having the lead part in a tokusatsu *hero* programme, he continued running through the explosions taking place to the left and right in succession on the *rotary* at the east side of the station.

He ran and ran, until he leapt beside a broken car and disappeared from the field of vision of LLENN’s monocle.

The next moment, the sixth *grenade* exploded beyond the car.

LLENN only saw his torn-off hand flying towards the sky. That hand was still firmly grasping the optical gun to the very end.

She saw his upper half with a 【D e a d】 *marker*, half hidden behind the car.

“Alright..... Fuka, you wiped them out! Splendid! Awesome! Magnificent! Impressive!”

LLENN sent her extremely high praise from the bottom of her heart.

“I suppose. I expected as much!”

“Let’s link up now!”

LLENN put her monocle into her waist *pouch*, and slid down the roof. And as she arrived at the edge, she continued on to fall down.

She landed on the roof of a *truck* there and, after quickly taking a forward ukemi stance, she leapt again. She easily got down onto the road. This was the opposite of how she climbed up.

Having survived SJ2’s “second battle” unscathed, LLENN looked at her wristwatch and noticed that the battle did not even take a minute.

LLENN *dashed* at superhuman speed, which would have probably broken the world record for the fastest short-distance sprint were it recorded, returned to Fukaziroh, who was reloading her *grenades*, and then,

“We’re going into the station! We’ll look at the *scan* there, and then aim for the *dome* next!”

Continued her advance towards Pitohui.

* * *

13:30.

The third *scan* began from the northwest.

LENN and Fukaziroh looked at their terminal screens while surrounded by four speechless, in other words, dead enemies on the platform that was the defensive position of the enemy *team* just moments ago.

Boss and the other SHINC members had entered a forest in the wide field *area* and had taken up a defensive position to completely observe their surroundings. Only *Boss* was looking at the terminal screen.

Beyond the trees towered a huge and mysterious white *dome*, giving off a sense of intimidation.

M, surrounded by his teammates among the rocks and trees, looked at his terminal screen.

Behind him, Pitohui had found an area with soft soil and was lying there in complete rest *mode*.

“Tell me if you see anything peculiar.”

And said only this.

The third *scan* began from the northwest.

The eye in space conveyed information equally to all the surviving *characters*.

Speaking of the *teams* that had recently died, one was, of course, blown away by Fukaziroh, so a dot was displayed on the station.

As for the others, there were two more in the hilly area in the northern sector of the map.

The name of the surviving *team* in the area was MMTM. They were genuinely strong, thus, looking at it honestly, they must have annihilated the two *teams* in 10 minutes.

Three annihilated *teams* were shown in the eastern section of the city, where various houses were lined up.

It seemed that the *teams* that had run away from *Boss's* group, as well as the *teams* that began SJ2 from the centre of the town, had all unfortunately swarmed up there.

The downtown had small alleys, so they certainly had to end up in a fierce, short-ranged battle. No survivor could be seen in the vicinity, thus it was highly likely that the battle ended with them wiping each other out.

And so, the *scan* reached the south-eastern sector, the vicinity of the mountains where *M's* group was lurking.

As they looked at the screen, LLENN, *Boss*, MMTM's *leader* and M—

“Hmm?”

“Ohh!”

“What the hell.”

“Mmm.....”

Exclaimed at exactly the same moment.

The approximately 2 *km* rectangle-sized steep mountain in the southeastern section of the map.

At the moment, that was where PM4, in other words, Pitohui's team, had taken up position ever since the tournament started. All the other *teams* ran away.

However, for some reason, seven white dots had gathered in the field at the west foot of the mountain.

The distance between them... was practically zero.

They were so close that only when the map was magnified to the max did the dots finally not overlap.

“What's up with this? LLENN. There's seven of them at the same place? Ain't that impossible?”

Fukaziroh enquired,

“Son of a.....”

The moment LLENN understood the situation, she made a more grim expression than she ever had.

“Onyah? This is interesting.”

The Bizon-wielding, silver-haired Tanya shared her impression with the other SHINC members. This was done through the communication *item*, thus her face could not be seen, but everyone knew based on her voice that she was grinning broadly.

And these words followed.

“We definitely wouldn't join a plan like that though.”

MMTM's *leader's* reaction was but one phrase.

“Hah!”

He gave a disdainful laugh.

M,

“Pito, even if you're lying down, you can still look at the terminal. Take a look. There's something awfully peculiar there.”

Told Pitohui in his usual calm tone.



The *scan* ended.

Teams that were annihilated/dropped out in the last 10 minutes numbered six. The survivors - seventeen.

After the terminal was returned to her pocket,

“What’s going on? LLENN. If you get it, I look forward to your explanation.”

Fukaziroh asked as she lifted her MGL-140.

“I’ll explain while we run! Follow me!”

The moment that LLENN said this, she broke into a run with her P90 in her right hand. She was still giving a grim expression.

“Roger.”

Fukaziroh followed after LLENN, and agilely jumped over the platform.

There were no enemies that seemed to be in the way along LLENN’s *route* to the *dome*.

There were two *teams* in the *dome*, but it seemed that LLENN could ignore them for now, thus she continued running.

Just like before, LLENN first dashed at full speed into the shadow of a cover. Then, while keeping a watch on her surroundings, she waited for Fukaziroh and, once she caught up, began running again.

While doing so, she explained the grave situation that they had discovered during the *scan*.

“Those seven *teams*! They’re conspiring!”

“Ha? What do you mean?”

“That is to say, they’ve formed a temporary truce! That was probably the *leaders* gathered up and discussing! I believe some eloquent guy is holding negotiations and trying to persuade the *teams* in the vicinity. It seems he’s planning to group up with them and drive away M’s group, who are secluding themselves in the mountains!”

“Aah! —The mystery has been solved!”

“How unsightly.”

At the golden-haired *sniper* Anna’s words,

“Those wretched bastards.....”

Boss muttered provokingly.

Even though she only muttered this, her words reached all of her teammates via the communication *item*, and Rosa, who was keeping a watch on their surroundings with her PKM *machine gun*,

“So they think they can win against M by sitting silently?”

“I wonder. Well, there is the phrase “to be outnumbered”. No matter how superior M is, and even if he has that shield, he can’t possibly defend if he’s shot from above or behind.”

Boss answered uninterestedly and shrugged her stern shoulders.

“At any rate, all we can do is wait for the results.”

“Well, speaking of strategies, this is a strategy too, I guess.....
What nerve to wheedle them.”

Expressing some understanding, MMTM’s *leader*,

“They should have brought this to us.”

Uttered these words. The HK21 *machine gun*-wielding Jake,

“Wha? So you would have joined them? *Leader*.”

Replied with complete surprise,

“Of course not.”

And the *leader* answered immediately.

“I would have pretended to be listening, and massacred them at the first opportunity. This is a *battle royale*, you know? There’s no such thing as allied *teams* here.”

As for KKHC, the *team* that the green-haired Shirley belonged to, the four men, having seen the *scan* and arriving at the same conclusion, were all excited.

Invisible, as they were hiding in the vegetation as usual, the men held a conversation through their communication *items*.

“Isn’t this a “makigari”⁵²?..... If only we could have participated as well!”

“Too late. Seeing as that group has already linked up, it would be impossible to get there in time.”

52 A makigari (巻き狩り) is a type of hunt where the hunting area is surrounded on four sides by hunters

“Indeed..... So, what are we gonna do? *Leader*, what’s the plan?”

“A plan you say..... For now, I want to see how that fight turns out. Until then, let’s hide or run from one spot to another.”

Hearing this, the lone woman Shirley peeking through her binoculars beside some trees,

“.....”

Did not join the conversation, and snorted, seemingly very bored.

LLENN, swiftly running through the plains towards the *dome*,

“Uwah!”

Fell over. She tripped on an iron *pipe*.

It was not like she had not seen it.

Although it was in the way, she thought she could just kick it away as the *pipe* was lying on the ground, but to her surprise, it was firmly fixed in place. It was probably the remains of a water pipe for a house that used to stand here or something.

It was a too-simple, but honest mistake. Seeing LLENN’s small body rolling on the ground from behind,

“Oi oi, calm down. You really are in too big of a hurry.”

Fukaziroh started running after saying this,

“Fugyuu.....”

And caught up with LLENN, who dirtied her whole *pink* uniform with dust, and whose eyes were now spinning. After taking a good 360 degree look around, she extended her hand and pulled her up.

“Thanks.....”

“Ya won’t get anything done bein’ in such a hurry.”

“But! No matter how strong Pito-san and M-san are, they can’t take on that many!”

“So, you think you’ll make it if you keep running?”

“.....”

Even if she *dashed* over there by herself at full speed, it would be pointless.

While keeping a watch on their surroundings, Fukaziroh offered LLENN her gentle words.

“If they’re such a skilled *team*, they’ll get out of there if they assess that they have no chance of winning. Don’t worry.”

“I-I hope so.....”

LLENN prayed for Pitohui and M’s safety, and looked to the southeast where they were.

She could not see the mountains over the huge *dome* in the way.

* * *

Slightly turning back the clock.

What happened between 13:20 and 13:30 was just as LLENN and the others predicted.

All the members of the *team* led by a *leader* wearing *protectors* were standing in a conspicuous spot of the field, hoisting a huge white flag that they had taken out of *storage*.

It was a flag several *metres* in length and width, conspicuous even from afar.

On the flag, “Don’t shoot, we have a proposal! We won’t shoot either, so send someone over!” , was written.

This surprised the *teams* in the area. Because, when they thought that they would attack an enemy since they were close, the enemy sent them a *message*.

At first, they wondered ‘What the hell is going on’, but they recalled that PM4 was in the mountains behind them, and figured it out.

Each *team* dispatched one or two messengers. And, they discovered that their prediction was correct.

In other words, the proposal was “Let’s band together and take down tough enemies.” . ‘First off, let’s kick PM4, who are lying on their backs in the mountains and which includes one of the previous champions, out of SJ2.’

‘Afterwards, we will go for MMTM or the *amazons*. Of course, if we are able to dispose of those two, we will also target LLENN’s LF.’

‘After disposing of them all, we will immediately part ways, and continue the *battle royale* from there.’

‘This way, the “puny teams” can enjoy SJ2 longer, and have a better chance at winning and getting the top prizes.’

The man who brought this up had also devised a plan for taking down the tough opponents.

Which was the “using *leaders* as decoys plan” that had been very successful for the previous champion *team*. To gather and leave all the *team leaders* in a safe place, while the rest attacked.

‘Only the *leader’s* position is revealed during a *scan*. In that case, let’s take advantage of that and intentionally gather up the *leaders*.’

‘Even if the enemy used the *scan* to find out our positions, they will be unable to tell where the squad which has detached from the *leaders* is. A plan to force the enemy to rely solely on their eyes.’

‘On the other hand we’ll give out instructions to our teammates using the communication *items* that almost all *teams* have.’

He polished up their strategy with the *leaders* while looking at the map, and gave orders like “My people will attack from here. Have your people attack from the opposite side” .

This satisfied the requirements for making use of a large number of people while guaranteeing freedom of action.

There were *teams* who immediately said “Magnificent!” in agreement, and there were *teams* who were worried for a bit after hearing the proposal and plan.

And as more people gathered, the negotiations restarted and the number of *teams* participating kept increasing.

Even the *teams* that worried went “If you can't beat 'em, join 'em”, and decided to participate as the number of participants continued to increase.

And so, by 13:30, the number of *teams* gathered, including the one that brought up the idea, was seven.

They included *teams* like the history lovers who were down to three people, and *teams* who had suffered damage in battle, so the total number of men was thirty-six.

With so many people gathering, it was no longer a squad, but a platoon.

Therefore, the name given to it was— Plan *Platoon*.

“With so much fighting power, we can win against any enemy, no matter how big or small they are with our numbers!”

The *characters* who decided to participate snickered.

And so, leaving the *leaders* behind as planned, the armed group of twenty nine soldiers began their assault on the mountain.

To massacre M and his *team*.



Ten Minute Massacre - The First

SECT.9

Ten Minute Massacre – The First

“Pito, even if you’re lying down, you can still look at the terminal. Take a look. There’s something awfully peculiar here.”

These words from M, Pitohui got up from her nap. While removing the dead leaves from her *mantle*. And then moved her eyes to the terminal.

Her face, engraved with a geometrical-patterned, brick-coloured *tattoo*,

“Ahaha. Just as I thought! Ahahaha!”

Expressed nothing but a smile.

“So seven *teams* formed a clique and are coming at us! This is wonderful!”

Pitohui very cheerfully thrust her hands towards the sky, but the paleness of the masked men behind her gave away how they felt.

The small man’s words, meant for M, reached everyone.

“M-san, what are we planning to do? If they come at us with all those men, and without the *leaders*, won’t it be awfully difficult? Are we going to pull out?”

It seemed that all four of them felt the same way, and awaited an answer from the silent M.

The one to answer was Pitohui.

“Oh you, we’re obviously going to ambush and massacre all of them!”

‘How?’

The men’s wordless *message* was conveyed,

“M is going to tell you right now.”

And Pitohui answered without delay.

Even in the bar where footage of the battle was streamed, the conspirators had become the main topic.

There were people who called them ‘pitiable’, others stated that ‘it isn’t against the *rules*, but it is against *manners*’, and others cheered them on, calling it an ‘outstanding plan’.

Opinions about the strategy were very divided, however,

“But, this battle seems like it’s gonna be interesting..... Twenty-nine against six huh.....”

Everyone had to agree with the words that that person said.

PM4 was a powerful *team* that included one of the previous winners. They had not yet fired a single bullet in SJ2, so the viewers could only wait and see how they would fight against an overwhelming enemy.

Everyone already knew that the man named M was strong. And everyone knew that the four masked men gave off a serious vibe.

And as for the last one,

“I hope that hime-sama won’t get in the way.....”

“Indeed. She’s the biggest concern.....”

“Yeesh? I don’t want her to go all 『Noo, sca~ry』 during the men’s heated *battle*.”

As of 13:30, the broadcast *camera* had constantly stayed on the twenty-nine *players* climbing the mountain.

It was probably picked as the most intense *scene* as there were no other battles.

Thanks to that, the audience in the bar could clearly see the state in the mountains.

The mountain’s slope was steep, but not enough to be called a cliff. The footing was moderately damp soil and its *grip* was not bad. The twenty-nine men pushed upwards.

However, there were rocks larger than men all around out in the open, so they had to be avoided. Also, tall and thick trees impeded mobility and field of vision. The men probably could not see even 50 *metres* ahead.

Rivers were flowing in several places; the small streams made murmuring sounds, while the rapids of the thick streams made boisterous noises.

The twenty-nine people were part of a combined *team*, thus, naturally, their equipment was quite dissimilar.

Even so, for now, all the *teams* were moving in an orderly fashion.

The seven groups spread out to occupy a 10 *metre*-wide area; the keen and nimble *characters* worked as the *point men* in the vanguard, advancing while keeping watch to ensure there were no enemies. And then, the travelled distance was reported to the *leaders*.

The *cameras* were also recording the *leaders'* group, which was located in the plains at the foot of the mountain.

A map of the mountain was drawn on the dry ground with a stick, and when there were reports from their comrades, the leaders would slowly move the pieces used as symbols to indicate “they are here, .

They had no special pieces prepared, thus they used spare *magazines*, *grenades*, and so on. The place looked like their operation headquarters, or a stronghold.

M's PM4's position was confirmed during the 13:30 *scan*. The position was roughly 1.5 *km* away from the base of the mountain.

The twenty-nine men were currently heading there. It was still unclear whether their enemy remained in the same spot, but even if they were no longer there, they could follow them via their tracks.

The broadcast did not display M's *team*. Therefore, the audience did not know where they currently were, but,

“No matter what, they must have noticed the conspiracy. And honestly, would the best plan be to run away in this case?”

Said the man who had drunk who knows how many cups of *beer*,

“And where would they run to? Descend the mountain to the north and go to the valley? At some point, they’ll be caught up to, ya know? No matter how much they struggle, their position will be revealed during the :40 *scan*.”

Answered the man who was nibbling his dozenth *jerky*.

“So..... it would be better to set up an ambush?”

“If they had equal forces, they would have the advantage by ambushing them from above the slope..... but with this difference in force, I wonder.”

The screen was showing the men steadily climbing up.

Each of them was armed with their best small arms, thus they had quite the firepower. There were also *machine guns* and sniper rifles among them.

“Still hopeless, huh.....”

The man shook his head, and then finished his *beer*.

The men in the mountains were advancing triumphantly.

Their legs would feel tired due to the tough climbing, but as they understood that it was merely a false sensation, it was no big deal.

More importantly,

“Just a bit more and we’ll probably be able to take down a tough enemy.”

This stimulus outweighed it, and their pace quickened.

In their field of view, the men saw their comrades nearby. And slightly further, *characters* that were enemies mere moments ago.

They would definitely have to exchange gunfire once the favourites were defeated, but that was a matter for the future. Right now, they, too, were “comrades” .

The mountainside was dim, and their field of view was poor due to the rocks and trees; there was no telling when or where they would be under fire.

But, once they fired even a single bullet, their position would immediately be revealed. And when that happened, they would suffer a volley from more than twenty people.

‘Just come at shoot us! Come on!’

Provoking their enemy in their thoughts, the men advanced up the slope.

As they spent more and more time in an advantageous situation, the men’s tension loosened as well.

Around the moment the clock’s needle indicated that 13:37 had passed,

“I kinda feel bad for their opponents.”

“Indeed.”

Or,

“Will there be a prize for the ones who defeat M?”

“If you like, how about we make a bet? Grenades or *magazines*?”

And other such obvious jokes were murmured by some.

It was nothing but a nuisance to those *characters* who had braced themselves and were trying their best not to overlook any sounds that their opponents might be making.

Eventually, a man wearing a reddish-brown *jacket*,

“Quiet! Our plan was not to talk except for reports!”

Scolded another *team*, wearing pale brown desert camouflage and cackling nearby.

The *teammate* who was talking to the scolded man stopped there, but the desert camouflage man clicked his tongue in blatant displeasure, and,

“What are you..... Trying to be the force’s *leader*?”

Was obviously belligerent. The reddish-brown *jacket*-wearing man, who also seemed to be annoyed by this,

“No you idiot. I’m just gracefully educating a man who’s negligent. You should thank me, ya know?”

Gave him a splendid tit for tat.

The two then stopped and glared at each other from a 10 *metre* distance, in a serious *mood*.

They of course had at least a slight sense of reason and did not aim their muzzles at each other, but,

“Once all of this is over..... I am definitely gonna kill you.”

“What a coincidence. I had the same idea. I won’t forget that mug of yours or your camouflage uniform.”

They made such a promise to each other.

Not long afterwards,

“Everyone stop where you are. Prepare for the *scan*.”

The same order from the stronghold, in other words the seven *leaders*, reached everyone’s ears.

The men slowly squatted,

“Half of you be on the lookout. The other half look at your terminals.”

And then followed this order.

13:39 passed the 40 second mark, then the 50 second—

“The *scan* is beginning.”

The fourth *scan* in SJ2 began.

“Now then, how will this turn out.....?”

The *scan* results were displayed on-screen in the bar as well, thus the audience watched on with bated breath.

The *scan* began from the north, thus MMTM’s survival was confirmed first. This was no surprise to anyone.

Then, LF who had arrived at the west side of the *dome*, SHINC who had arrived at the south, and three more *teams* inside the dome were indicated.

Although the *dome*, where a fierce battle should break out, looked very interesting, the south-eastern mountain district was the current centre of attention.

‘Where is PM4?’

‘Did they read our moves and descended the mountain to the south? Or did they move further to the east?’

What the *scan* displayed was—

“They’re close! About 150 to 200 *metres* to the north-east from the group!”

The seven *leaders* gave their instructions in surprised voices. PM4’s position was right beside the slope where their comrades were located.

Of course, the *characters* who were looking at their terminal screens at the site noticed this too, and were surprised.

Did they move just a bit to the north from their position during the last *scan*? PM4 seemed to have decided to fight on this mountain to the bitter end.

Since their field of view was poor, they could not confirm the position of their opponents, but 200 *metres* was already within fighting range. It wouldn’t be strange for bullets to come at them through the gaps between trees at any moment. Some of the men pointed their muzzles towards the unseen enemy in a hurry.

However, the fact that no one shot them meant,

“Those guys haven’t noticed us yet.....”

Seeing as this many people were on the move, it was hard to think of any other possible explanation for their reaction, thus the men reported this outcome to each of their *leaders*.

The seven *leaders* made their decision immediately. There was nothing to be concerned about anymore. Which meant,

“Everyone, head to the *scan*’s position! And wipe the floor with them in a swift attack!”

The *leaders* moved the piece in front of them, indicating the enemy’s position on the map, in accordance with the *satellite scan* that would be useless for the next 10 minutes.

“Everyone, head to the *scan*’s position! And wipe the floor with them at once!”

Ferocious smiles appeared on the faces of the twenty-nine men who received this instruction.

Since they knew the whereabouts of their opponent, there was only one thing to do. To go there. Wanting to spearhead the attack, every one of them quickened their pace at once.

They all received point-by-point instructions from their *leaders* on where they should head for. The men crossed about 100 *metres* in a formation that encircled their target in a fan-shape, when,

“Wha—? Cra~p.....”

The man standing in the vanguard said in a bitter voice. And then, he reported the scenery in front of him.

“*leader*. We hit the widest stream thus far. Its width is..... about 30 *metres*. It’s running east-west.”

The men who came up behind him also stopped. The large stream was 30 *metres* in width, about 10 *metres* deep, and was gouging out the surface of the mountain.

Huge, man-sized rocks rolled down along it as the water streamed with huge force.

“Requesting instructions. The target is upstream?”

The instruction from the *leaders* came immediately. ‘Yes.’

“In that case, we can’t move in on the target unless we go down to the valley. What should we do?”

The *leaders’* answer took a few moments.

The seven *leaders* had to make a prompt decision.

If they took their time pondering over it, PM4, whose position they had finally grasped, might escape.

Knowing this, they made a decision after a short talk.

“Leave one team to the left and right of the valley each, to be on the look out for attacks from above. The rest, move down to the valley.”

A four-man and a five-man *team* scattered to the left and right, while the remaining twenty men began walking to the valley.

The scattered man-sized rocks and the water spraying all around only made crossing the stream difficult.

Despite this, knowing that the enemy was ahead, everyone felt excited. But thinking about it again, these rocks could serve as cover to protect them from bullets.

Focusing so that they would have no problem even if they ended up under fire at any time, the men gradually advanced from rock to rock.

And then, when there were only 50 to 100 *metres* to their target,

“What... is that?”

They saw the scene.

Some men could see the scene, which the men on the spot could see, diagonally from behind on video. They were the audience of the bar. The *cameras* in the sky above the valley projected the backs of the men in the valley.

“A waterfall.....”

There was a large, at least 15 *metre* tall waterfall ahead of the valley’s slope.

The body of water was about 5 *metres* deep. Creating a heavy bass noise, the waterfall dropped a large quantity of water onto the ground without even a second’s worth of delay.

Naturally, the valley ended there. The narrow valley, about 20 *metres* wide, bordered a 15 *metre* tall cliff.

Aside from *characters* with the Climbing *skill*, it was probably impossible to climb it bare-handed. For the rest of them to climb, they needed firm *ropes*.

One of the men on the scene,

“It’s a waterfall. With quite the size. About the size of a four-storey two-family house with a store.”

Used these words to report to the *leaders*,

“That spoiled the mood.”

Another person could not hold back whispering this quietly enough to not be heard.

“Is this really the place that came up on the *scan*? On the waterfall? —Roger.”

Seemingly having received an answer right away, the man shouted to his comrades in the area. He had no choice but to do so to surpass the noise of the waterfall.

“Their position during the *scan* was over there. Around the whereabouts of the waterfall!”

“So they’re above? —What about the *teams* above? Can they see anything?”

The answer came from a *leader*, in other words, the stronghold.

“They can’t! There’s only a river connected to the waterfall above it!”

At this point, at least 3 minutes had passed since the *scan*.

Someone who looked at his wristwatch,

“Did they move out? Don’t tell me we let them escape?”

And then,

“Possibly..... We came out empty-handed.”

Words of regret came from one of his comrades.

At that moment, a man from another *team* who happened to be close by spoke up to the two while shaking his head,

“No..... That might not be it.....”

“Why?”

“How do you figure that?”

“I just realised..... Isn’t there something big protruding above the waterfall?”

‘Above?’ The two stuck their heads out from the rock that they were hiding behind, and it was indeed as he said.

The upper section of the waterfall had quite a few rocks sticking out, but the *curtain* of water began from a spot that stuck out quite a bit.

It was possible to go behind the *curtain* of water by climbing along the rocky wall beside it.

“There could be a person hiding there.....”

Having heard the report, the *leaders* understood it all.

That those guys were hiding behind the waterfall and planning to let their troops pass by.

If their troops passed by, they could go the other way and descend the mountain immediately. While the twenty-nine men wandered around aimlessly looking for them, they planned to escape to another *field* quickly.

‘Like hell we’re letting you get away.’

The *leaders* made a prompt decision.

And passed on instructions to their respective *members*.

“The possibility of the enemy hiding behind the waterfall is... considerably high. Everyone, give them the biggest volley of fire you can—”

All twenty men in the valley aimed their muzzles one after another.

The *snipers* and *machine gunners* mounted their beloved guns on *bipods* atop the rocks. The *submachine gun-* and *assault rifle-*wielding men lay down as if they were hugging the rocks.

Their target was the waterfall *curtain* tens of *metres* ahead. It was a narrow valley, thus the twenty men could not lie down to form a horizontal line.

“Guys in the front, make sure you don’t raise your heads! Otherwise, you’ll be shot in the backs of your heads!”

A man that mounted a machine gun on a rock behind them shouted loudly.

He lay down as low as the people in front and raised his muzzle as high as the people in the rear, as if he were taking a commemorative photo.

Having finished his preparations, the man voiced a simple question.

“I wonder if the bullets are going to go through that waterfall?”

“Who knows. We’ll find out when we try, I guess?”

“Indeed.”

The order from their five *leaders* reached them simultaneously.

“Fire!”

In the narrow valley, a volley of 20 guns began.

The moment right after the guns began to roar, a strange thing happened with the *curtain* of water.

The column of water rose sideways. It stretched out diagonally downwards, matching the speed of the waterfall’s flow, and disappeared.

The bullets, although perhaps not all of them, went through the waterfall.

As definite proof of this, the machine gun tracer rounds hit the rock wall on the other side of the waterfall, and ricocheted out from the side.

“We can do this! Fire fire fire away!”

“Yeah!”

They were no longer holding back.

If the six were hiding behind it, they would be massacred—in other words “slaughtered”.

The 20 continued to rain fire, and their noise did not halt for a moment.

Furthermore, the noise remained longer than usual because of the echo in the valley, thus forming one big racket that nobody had ever heard before. If the volume was not automatically adjusted in the world of GGO, everyone would have probably gone deaf immediately.

The firing continued.

The *machine gunner* placed a new ammunition *belt*. The other shooters reloaded their *magazines* many times over.

Ejected empty shells disappearing after several seconds was a characteristic feature of GGO, and the resulting flashy *effects* when a shell disappeared were pretty. The way the tens of empty shells disappeared on the stones and water one after another was a wondrous sight.

The smoke emitted from the twenty barrels spread out and gradually covered the surroundings completely.

“That looks! Awesome!”

“Yeah. First time I’ve seen so many people firing with all they have in GGO.....”

The nine men located to the left, right and above the valley had forgotten their original duty to guard the surroundings—

And gazed at the flashy “*drama* concert” from their special seats.

“I kinda wish we were down there. We drew the old maid, huh?”

And so, after about 50 seconds of frenzy,

“Cease fire! That should be enough!”

An *order* came from the *leaders*, and, in groups of twos and threes, the men stopped firing.

Disregarding the order,

“Doryaa!”

The sole man who continued to shoot excitedly to the very end with his 《M40A3》 sniper rifle had his head nudged by his teammates,

“Oh? Ooh?”

“You’re the only one left shooting, ya know?”

“Oh, sorry. I have just 1 bullet left. With this, I’ll empty my magazine.”

He returned the *bolt* to the front, aimed at the waterfall and fired 1 bullet.

After the sound of the gun’s discharge echoed many times over, the sound of the waterfall returned to the valley.

It should have been quite loud, but it was really quiet now.

There were no visual changes to the waterfall.

“Alright..... Can someone nimble go check behind the waterfall?”

At his words, the *team* with four dissimilar members immediately volunteered. They were all *submachine gun* wielders who excelled at Agility.

“We’re counting on you! If you find the 【D e a d】 *markers*, then your job is done. If they’re still alive, finish them off.”

“Roger! Leave it to us!”

“Don’t fall into the basin..... You’ll probably suffer quite the *damage* if you do.”

“Yeah!”

“We’ll provide covering fire, so if it looks bad, duck.”

“Gotcha, thanks!”

They had a frank conversation.

Although they were essentially enemies, just the fact that they were aiming their muzzles and firing in the same direction together seemed to have resulted in a mysterious sense of unity. The formerly disordered squads had now become a splendid platoon.

The four men divided into teams of two, and began climbing towards the waterfall. The remaining “twenty-five men” observed the situation while aiming at the waterfall.

“They hit me a bit.”

Hearing M’s words, Pitohui cheerfully replied.

“So did you die?”

“Unfortunately, I’m fine.”

“Awww. And here I thought I’d get revenge for you.”

“Don’t worry about me. The preparations are done. As for the rest..... do as you please.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. Well then, I’m awaiting the signal!”

Making use of their Agility to hop from one rock to another, the four men got closer to the waterfall.

When 10 *metres* remained, the man leading the right-side team readied his 《Mini UZI》 *submachine gun* in front of him. The man leading the left-side team aimed the muzzle of his 《MP7A1》 , which was of course a *submachine gun*, forward.

“Right now, the four guys are approaching the back of the waterfall..... Still can’t see anything.”

A member reported to the *leaders*.

5 *metres* remaining. The man in the lead was already soaked.

4 *metres* remaining. The man put his finger on the trigger. And then, he extended the fingers of his left hand while looking at his two mates on the opposite side.

He then flexed his fingers one at a time. That was the *countdown* for the assault.

4, 3, 2—

On 1, the men were blown away.

A bluish-white flame sprang forth to the left and right of the waterfall, and mercilessly blew away the four men.

Both men in the lead were blown 5 *metres* away and crashed into the side of the valley. The other two lost their *balance*, as if they were pushed by the two men who were blown away, and tumbled down to the basin from the rock wall.

“*Plasma grenades!*” They’re alive! Enemy behind the waterfall!
Fire fire fire!”

Another roar came from the valley.

As if that was a signal, something rose up in the mountain.

It was the group of masked men.

The three men, who were lying down in a hole while wearing camouflage *ponchos* with dirt and withered grass applied on top for disguise, simultaneously stood up in their respective locations.

Their location was the mountain slope about 5 *metres* to the north of the valley.

The three were lurking truly right behind the men who had just recently been guarding the top of the valley. In a place where it wouldn’t have been strange for them to be stepped on.

The moment the three of them stood up and simultaneously raised their beloved guns, they began firing at the enemies who had their backs turned on them.

The short man had a *shotgun*.

The 《UTS-15》, a *pump-action shotgun* that could fire “14 consecutive shots”. With its squarish appearance that made it look like an optical gun, and two *tube* magazines, it was a rather unique shotgun.

By repeating the high-speed *pump-action*, the man could fire 3 times per target. Its ammo was the *double 0 buck*.

The storm of shots that were fired from behind his rock hit the four men, overlooking the waterfall from the edge of the valley, throughout their bodies in succession.

The large man was a *machine gunner*.

He was holding a German 《MG3》 *machine gun*. Its calibre was *7.62 mm*.

It was historical gun that was basically just a different calibre of the Nazi Germany-used, masterpiece machine gun 《MG42》, but the gun also had a *sound suppressor* of the latest style.

As the cylinder did not nullify noise as well as a ^{s i l e n c e r} sound erasing device, it was more accurately called a ^{s u p p r e s s o r} inhibitory device, and it was attached to the muzzle.

The man held his long and heavy MG3 against his waist, and grasped the sideways-turned *bipod* with his left hand.

While his teammate shot down the people in front of him, he ran up a large rock using only his feet. And then, at its peak, he began pounding away in *full auto*.

Jaakakakakakakakakan

The suppressed gunshots created a strange roar. The ammunition *belt* hanging down the left side of the gun was taken in, and its bullets flew out forward one after another. The empty shells flew out directly below the gun, and bounced back, making brisk *kinkin* sounds as they hit the rock.

While pounding away, the man swung his muzzle sideways.

The hail of bullets that stretched sideways passed through the top of the valley, and, one by one, pierced the five men overlooking it. With multiple hit *effects* beginning to shine on various parts of their bodies, the men collapsed on the spot.

The sole man who had yet to die shouted while raising his beloved «Galil» *assault rifle* as he collapsed.

“En—”

‘Enemy!’, he was unable to finish even one word.

A bullet hit the man’s right arm. It passed through his body and hit his head, causing instant death.

Right behind his two mates, the masked, fat man pulled the *bolt* of his gun, and ejected a large, golden, empty shell.

The *sniper* man, who had the constitution of a sumo wrestler, held a large sniper rifle. It was the gun responsible for piercing the target’s arm and head just now.

Its full length was about 120 *cm*. The name of the sniper rifle that had an independent *pistol-style grip* and fish tail fin-like *stock* was, «*Savage 110BA*» .

The bullets it used were the powerful 338 *Lapua Magnum*. It was quite a *rare*, and powerful, gun in GGO.

The incident that took a mere 3 seconds resulted in the deaths of nine people above the valley.

And the eighteen men in the valley had yet to notice this.

Since their own guns were too loud, they covered the gunshots that resulted in the slaughter of their comrades, and thus the gunshots were not heard.

Furthermore, they were divided into teams, thus they could not even check the *hit point gauges* at the upper-left corner of their view.

The ones who noticed the change immediately were the two *leaders* in the stronghold.

Seeing the display at the upper-left corner of their view informing them that their teammates were wiped out, they at first thought that it was some sort of mistake. However, seeing that they were not the only ones with a change in complexion, the two,

“My teammates died!”

“Mine too! They were wiped out!”

Informed the stronghold of this.

Knowing that both reports were from the *teams* stationed at the top of the valley, the other five immediately understood the situation. And relayed this to their teammates in the valley.

“Enemy above! Support *teams* wiped out! Watch out for attacks from above! Did you hear me?”

No reply reached the ears of the *leaders*.

“Why?”

The ones who understood the situation the best were the audience members in the bar.

There was another battle taking place at another location, thus the bar was completely divided in two. From the moment that the *plasma grenades* exploded to the left and right of the waterfall, the *characters* watching this broadcast,

“Oooh!”

“They’re here!”

Had their eyes glued to the screen.

Thanks to the multiple screens, they could clearly see the masked men who came out of the ground. The *cameras* fixed their view on them from directly behind.

The moment they aimed their muzzles at the men who were solely focused on what was happening below in the valley,

Behind you! Behind you!”

It was impossible for them to hear this, thus the moment when someone made fun of them, the guns discharged.

As they were brought down like target practice dummies with the *shotgun, machine gun* and sniper rifle,

“Aaah”

“That’s what they get for letting their guard down……”

The audience gazed on in pain.

And then, the masked men who had killed all nine enemies—

“If they continue firing from above like this, they can murder all those guys in the valley, right?”

Did not follow this idea.

Without even looking at the valley, they squatted on the spot and stopped moving.

“Why?”

The moment everyone in the audience had this question in mind, the scene once again changed.

A sole woman’s back was displayed.

“It’s that woman!”

Based on the dark blue jumpsuit and the *ponytail*, it was easy to tell who she was. There were no doubts about it.

She was the woman who was with M and the masked men.

The woman slowly climbed the valley, and approached the men, who were still firing at the waterfall, from behind.

Representing everyone in the audience who was watching this,

“Why... is that woman——”

Someone said.

“Not holding any weapons?”

On the video, the woman was not holding anything in her hands, nor did she have any *holsters* or grenades or *knives* on the equipment *belt* on her waist.

She could have placed them into her *storage*, but at the present situation, she was completely unarmed.

“Is she..... going to negotiate? Is she going to come up to those guys and say “So, how’s about it; wanna team up?„ or something?”

But someone else,

“Then why did those masked guys shoot those guys above the valley?”

Easily rebutted that theory.

‘What the heck is that woman trying to do?’

As everyone continued to wonder, the woman agilely moved from rock to rock, and finally arrived at the place where the men were standing.

Everyone was still pounding away at the waterfall incessantly, thus nobody noticed her. Even though an enemy came up right behind them.

The scene was awfully *surreal* and eerie.

The *camera* rotated and focused on a man pounding away with his Russian-made 《RPD light machine gun》, fixed on a rock, at the back of one of the groups, and the woman, with *tattoos* engraved on her cheeks, 4 *metres* behind him.

The sharp-faced woman said something with a smile, but her voice did not reach the audience.

“I’m doing it. You can keep your support to a minimum.”

13:46.

This time was displayed in the upper-left corner of the screen.

And then the audience saw.

Having approached the man pounding away with his RPD light machine gun and now standing right behind him, the woman grasped the nape of his uniform with her right hand and pulled it.

It seemed that she pulled him lightly, but she probably had a considerably high Strength stat. The well-built man was easily pulled away from his gun and stopped firing.

And then, the woman transferred her right hand from his nape to the back of his head—

And with vehement force, she smashed the man's face into the rock.

Damage was registered on the first attack. Hit *effects* appeared from his nose, and the red *polygon* fragments scattered like blood.

Two times, three times, four times— the woman continued hitting the man's face against the rock, and the man who initially tried squirming now had his limbs dangling loosely.

And then, a 【D e a d】 *marker* lit up over the man.

Seeing her moves, which were without the slightest pause, the men in the bar momentarily fell silent. And then,

“T-that woman just beat the crap out of him unarmed!”

“It's possible.....”

“You can die from fall, so physical strikes would also register *damage*, but..... is it normal to do that?”

They could not hold back voicing their impressions simultaneously.

At that moment, the woman nonchalantly threw away the corpse, and lifted up the man's RPD. She held the heavy machine gun against her shoulder as if it were a *rifle*.

And then, she fired.

At the “backs” of the men dotting the valley.

She did not bother aiming, and simply fired away.

Amusingly, despite this, she was able to hit her targets, who were about 3 to 20 *metres* away. Interestingly, she got direct hits on the vitals of three unlucky men, forcing them out of SJ2 without them realizing why they had died.

The men who, luckily, were not shot, turned around in surprise that they were under fire from behind,

‘Idiot! Stop shooting your allies!’

They opened their mouths intending to say this, but at that moment, they froze up.

A man, making a truly amusing expression in disbelief of what he saw, got shot in his now wide-opened eyes and died immediately.

The others dropped down behind the rocks and were somehow able to escape the web of gunfire.

The machine gun’s ammo reserve, which was already low from the start, turned to zero in about 3 seconds worth of shooting. The woman immediately dropped the now silent gun, ran up to the rocks, and jumped. Towards the man squatting nearby with a blank expression.

The woman’s knee *protectors* hit the man’s face.

The woman gave the man, who had fallen into the water streaming between rocks, a strong kick with the heels of her *boots*. At the same time, she snatched the man’s 《AKM》, and began firing at the other enemies with it.

While shooting, the woman violently trampled on the nape of the man, who had collapsed into the water, with her right leg.

Having lost the ability to stick his head out of the water, the man struggled with his hands and feet in distress, but joined the *list* of casualties, due to suffocating, right after the woman used his gun to kill three of his comrades.

“It’s the enemy!”

“Shoot that woman!”

The counterattack finally began, and their bullets made holes in the rock that the woman hid behind.

A moment later, a figure jumped out from the rock shade, and all the gunfire focused on it.

The *character* was hit by dozens of bullets, but did not die because of them. He was already dead.

Having thrown the corpse as a decoy, the woman slithered along the rock shade like a snake. And arrived beside a man who was desperately inserting shots into his automatic *shotgun* *《Remington Versa Max Tactical》* .

“Hiya!”

“Huh?”

The woman hit the eyes of the man, who raised his face, with the *stock* of the AKM that had run out of ammo. Her aim was unwavering.

The woman dropped the AKM and snatched the *Versa Max* from the arms of the man, who was taken aback. She quickly aimed it downwards and fired at the man’s face as he collapsed.

The man, who was hit in the face by shots from his own gun and had excessively flashy hit *effects* shining on his face, was no longer able to see above his nose. Of course, he had died.

The woman placed her thumb on the Versa Max's magazine loading port. Doing so, she sensed how many rounds remained in the magazine *tube*. Nodding in satisfaction, she brought the new weapon into her hands.

There were only eight survivors left. With more people in the valley deceased than alive, there was no organised counterattack left anymore, as everyone just hid in their own spots.

In this situation, the woman cheerfully ran about the valley. She lost in speed to LLENN, who had greatly trained her Agility, but her light movements were still like those of a ninja.

Having found a man hiding in the shade of a rock, she pressed the large muzzle of the *shotgun* on the man's nape with a sweet smile, and fired.

The first shot half-tore the man's head, thus she quickly pulled the trigger again and fired another round. The man's head was separated from the torso and the woman strongly grasped his hair and threw his head away.

The *camera* changed its location and caught how the severed head fell in front of the man hiding behind a rock.

His scream was not picked up by the *mike*, but the way the man sprang up after succumbing to fear from the bottom of his heart was caught on camera.

The man crawled out of the rocky area to escape, crossed the shoal while splashing, and just when he stuck his head out from the rocks, he saw the legs of the woman who came after him.

The shots assailed the back of his head all together, and the number of casualties increased by one.

Noticing that there were three *plasma grenades* on the corpse's waist, the woman nonchalantly helped herself to them, and threw two of them in succession.

Her target was the waterfall basin about 10 *metres* away. The location of the two men who were blown away by M and were finally crawling out of it.

Dobon *dobon*, just as they landed on the water, they caused the water to rise in succession, producing two mountains.

A large quantity of water fluttered in the air, along with body fragments. The basin soon overflowed with water pouring from the waterfall, and the two corpses surfaced.

The men above the valley did not fire a single bullet.

Due to their altitude advantage, they were able to clearly see the enemies squatting, lying, and hiding in rock shades, and they were all ready to fire as soon as they saw that their teammate would be shot, but—

But there was no need to take action at all.

As Pitohui massacred the enemies in the valley while gleefully running around,

“

They watched on in silence.

On screen, the people saw four men hiding by clinging to four rocks.

And the figure of the woman looking for them.

The woman, who was on the other side of a stream, swiped a 9 *mm* calibre 《Beretta 92FS》 automatic pistol from a corpse and, holding it in her right hand, she cheerfully continued walking. Like the oni in “hide and seek”⁵³, she continued looking behind rocks to see if anyone was there.

The reaction of the audience as she found new targets continued to change.

The audience, who at first were taken aback by the devilish fighting style and overcome by surprise, had now,

“Get them! Four more!”

“Hey you guys above! Don’t you dare shoot! You should definitely read the room here!”

“She’s definitely gonna get the “*max kill award*” !”

“Nee-chan! You’re amazing!”

“I’m truly sorry for calling you an “*otasā no hime*” !”

“I wouldn’t mind getting killed if it’s by you!”

Taken a hundred and eighty degree turn.

“What’s going on! Did something happen?”

53 In Hide-and-seek and other children games, “oni” (demon/ogre) is the equivalent of “it” in English children games.

The *leader* stronghold was in a state of complete panic.

Because, just as they began to worry that they received no replies, the *hit points* of their comrades decreased one by one as they screamed, and the number of casualties continued to grow rapidly.

The death reports from each *leader* continued to pile up quickly until it was no longer possible to keep track.

“There’s one outrageous—”

Basun

She must have fired from extremely close by, as the *mike* picked up the gunshot that halted his words. They did not even need to take a look at the *hit point gauge* to know what had happened.

The man loaded with *protectors*, who was the one to come up with the plan, confirmed that all of his teammates were wiped out,

“Is... anyone... still alive.....?”

And asked his fellow *leaders*.

Four of them shook their heads, and only two,

“One, somehow..... But his *hit points* are yellow.”

“One here as well, but deep red.”

Answered miserably.

“M-san. I think you can come out now.”

Hearing the voice of the masked fat guy, M appeared from behind the waterfall. Holding his M14 EBR in his hands.

Red hit *effects* were glittering in six spots of the soaking wet giant's buttocks and legs. His *hit points* had decreased by about forty percent as well.

Observing the situation from above the valley, the *machine gun-wielder* enquired.

"Looks like you got hit good. Holes in your shield?"

"It's the ricochet. The bullets that hit a rock above me bounced back. I was only able to protect my spine and head."

"That's why we told you "it's dangerous". You sure like being rash."

"It was for the preparations. What else could I do. How's Pito?"

M gazed downstream and could only see about twenty **【D e a d】** *markers* shining throughout the valley. The *markers* that were close to each other in the nearby area were probably not as common further down.

"She's further downstream. Behind a large rock. She's having fun with the last two guys right now."

"?"

M inclined his neck, jumped from one rock to another with light steps that did not match his giant stature, and descended into the valley.

Having descended about 20 *metres*, he found Pitohei there.

Pitohui, who was leaning on a huge rock and holding the Beretta 92FS that she had seized,

“Hmm, what to do.”

Was looking at two enemies about 5 *metres* in front of her.

One was a man wearing desert camouflage. Most of his body was in the water and he had lost both of his legs. The red *effect* that denoted body part loss was shining beautifully under the water.

The other was a man wearing a reddish-brown *jacket*. He was holding on to a rock at the edge of the fast-streaming water and extending his right hand downstream.

The hand was grasping the nape of the desert camouflage man’s equipment *vest*. He would be washed away if the hand was released.

“Only those two remain.”

Having heard Pitohui’s report, M spoke to her.

“What’re you waiting for?”

Pitohui turned around, showing a cheerful smile of course,

“Well, you see, that guy is grasping him, but he still has a pistol on his right waist.”

M saw. That there was indeed a 45 calibre automatic pistol 《*Colt 1911A1*》, nicknamed the “*Government*”, in the refined leather *holster* on the reddish-brown *jacket* man’s right waist.

“I’m waiting for him to let go of the deadweight and quickly draw the gun to shoot me, you see. It’s kinda mentally unpleasant to shoot a man who’s not putting up a fight, right?”

When Pitohui looked up to him and asked,

“Are you joking here?”

M answered frankly. And then,

“We don’t have time to waste.”

“Oh fine. Geez.”

Pitohui raised her Beretta 92FS and casually fired a bullet.

The bullet went into the reddish-brown *jacket* man’s side,

“Gah!”

The man’s body shook. And yet, he did not release his hand.

“Huh? Persistent.”

Pitohui fired another bullet. This time it hit the man’s right upper arm. That by itself should have made it numb, and yet the man did not release his hand.

“What are you trying so hard for!”

In response to the angry Pitohui,

“Oh shut up!”

The reddish-brown *jacket* man shouted back.

“Is it fun to harass opponents that can’t fight back? Is it?”

Pitohui answered immediately.

“Is it fun to harass six people when you have thirty?”

“

“Yes! The answer is “both are fun” ! You do get the truth, right? If you were in my position, you would surely be doing the same thing!”

“

The desert camouflage guy, who was being tossed about by the current, shouted to the now completely quiet reddish-black *jacket* man.

“Oi! Enough already! Let go of my hand! That woman is right! Draw your *Government* and fire! Don’t hesitate to kick her ass!”

“

“Are you an idiot!”

“You’re a really annoying guy, but until we defeat those guys, you’re a comrade. Our *team* does not abandon comrades.”

“..... What’s the point in that if you’re going to die too!”

“We’re not wiped out yet! The *leaders* hearing this will do something about this!”

“.....Yeah, you’re right!”

As the two were disregarding her in their excitement,

“Oi, don’cha ignore me.”

Pitohui fired 2 bullets. Both hit the chest of the man in the water, but the 【D e a d】 *marker* did not light up.

“Oh, bulletproof *armour*? Or did the water decrease the power? This is why I dislike pistols. And to top it off, I’m out of ammo.”

The Beretta 92FS in her hands had its *slide* locked. Proof of having zero ammo.

Chapon, Pitohui threw away the paperweight into the stream,

“M. Lend me that EBR.”

“No way. I don’t have enough bullets for you to play around with.”

“Tsk. Then, I’ll just get something from the corpses there. What should I pick, I wonder.”

Pitohui turned away from the rock shade quickly and started her stroll around the surroundings in search of a new gun.

From his rock, M,

“You guys, pass this onto your *leaders*. ‘The rest of you resign.’

Spoke to the two.

“ ” “ ”

They did not say a word, but M continued. His persuasion in a calm tone.

“Your plan wasn’t bad. It was actually well done. And this is the result of the battle. Even if the surviving seven joined together, they still wouldn’t have any chance of winning.”

Having returned, Pitohui shouted with a serious look on her face.

“Hey stop! That’s not fun! —You guys, forget what this huge ass just said, and tell your *leaders* this! “We were horribly mocked! What disgrace! We beg of you, please avenge us! . Got it?”

“Yeah, we’ll have them kill all of you bastards!”

The reddish-brown *jacket* man,

“I hope you’re ready to die!”

And the desert camouflage man glared back at her with a smile,

“Oh yeah. That’s the face I wanted to see. —Bye now.”



Making a satisfied look, Pitohui threw the plasma grenade she had picked up with an underhand throw.

“Bastard!” “Go to hell you amateur!”

Right after the two shouted, the grenade exploded in the stream and split their bodies into tens of parts.

With that right arm holding onto the nape the whole time.

“Yiippieeee!”

“Awesome! She actually managed to kill all eighteen of them by herself!”

The hype in the bar,

“That’s the championship favourite for you!”

“That was fascinating! Awesome!”

The roaring cheers did not reach the valley.

“Now then, perhaps we should go to the next one. Everyone, let’s link up at the bottom of the valley.”

Pitohui said and quickly began walking,

“I have to recover my shield, so wait.”

But was stopped by M. With a quick pace, M ascended the stream to collect his expanded shield from behind the waterfall.

“Hurry up, okay.”

Pitohui looked up and saw the four masked men looking down at her.

In the stream, the scattered remains of the two men were being washed away by the current.

Unlike the BoB, grotesquely scattered corpses would not remain on the field in SJ, thus they would return to human form downstream before long, but— right now, it could only be called eerie.

Although she was unable to see their faces through the masks and goggles, Pitohui spoke to her four comrades, as if feeling what they wanted to say,

“They wouldn’t have deepened their friendship without all of that, right? I’m sure those two will get a tasty drink together when they return to the bar after 10 minutes!”

And told them these words with a smile.

‘How much of everything she has said and done is actually true?’

The men all had the same thought, but none of them voiced it.

“Ho..... ly cow..... Damn it!”

At the base of the mountain, in the fields 1.5 km away from the valley, the man with protectors all over his body, who had come up with the whole plan, lamented.

He knew full well what had happened based on his status screen. That his comrades had all been wiped out. The only one alive was the leader himself.

And the exact same applied to the other six leaders. They did not know what the situation on-site was, so they had no way of knowing how they died, but,

“It’s confirmed... that they’re all wiped out.....”

“Yeah..... Even though I can’t believe it.....”

All of them gave identical, grave expressions. One among them, the old Japanese Army officer,

“Well then, I’m going.”

Said this, and began walking with his Type 100 submachine gun in his hands. Towards the mountain towering in front of him.

“What are you planning to do?”

After the protector man asked, the officer turned around and answered.

“Unfortunate as it may be, this plan ended in failure. So, I’m going to have my own battle now.”

“Hey..... although what you said sounds cool, I have no idea what you’re going to do.”

“Yeah, sorry. —Right now, I’m gonna go to fight those devil-like guys living on the mountain, and die. Although I don’t think I’m a match for the enemy, I can’t show my face to my comrades who fell before me if I drop out here.”

“.....”

“The plan itself wasn’t bad. Because everyone came along knowing that, the fault is not your own.⁵⁴ The others also fought and had fun together, be it for a short time. May fortune smile on your battles.”

In the end, he gave a beautiful salute and turned back.

Seeing the officer’s back continuing to get smaller, the other six—

Took the first step at the same without saying a word.

“Oi? What’s going on here?”

The old Japanese Army officer inclined his head upon seeing the six lined up next to him.

“It goes without saying. We’re going to fight too. Everyone here is from different teams, but our goal is the same. You’re a Gun Gale man too, so you get what I’m saying, right?”

“That’s right! Like we’re letting you be all cool by yourself!”

“The other side has six. We have seven, right? We’ve got numbers on them!”

“If one guy gets one kill, someone’s going to be left empty-handed. First come, first served, right?”

“We’re going to wreak the grudge of our comrades on them. I haven’t fired a single bullet yet, so it’s perfect timing.”

“I dare say. That our SJ2 has just begun.”

⁵⁴ The character here uses an honorific (sonkeigo) word for “you”. We attempted to indicate the politeness through the sentence structure.

Hearing the consecutive replies, the officer suddenly smiled,

“In that case— Let’s all fight together. Comrades.”

The cameras caught the backs of the seven men advancing towards the devil mountain in a horizontal line.

Their garments and weapons were all disorganised. Their sole common feature was that they had lost their comrades.

The bar’s audience continued to watch the situation with mixed feelings.

“Oi oi, you’re going to fight them now! You’re definitely going to die! It would be less painful to just drop out already, ya know?”

“You can’t win this..... No matter what.”

“Well, if we get to see that Nee-chan fight, I don’t mind.”

There were those who sneered at them, convinced of Pitohui’s team’s victory,

“Those guys are real men! I’m fired up!”

“Crap, I shed a tear there for a moment..... The 『Seven Somebodies』 , huh.”

“Aww yeah, go get them! You still have a chance of winning even now!”

And there were those who sympathised with the seven and cheered them on.

Despite this, there was one thing they all felt.

Which was this feeling— ‘All right. Looks like we’ll get to see an intense battle now’.

The backs of the seven men on screen drew near the mountain.

Several hundred metres more and the fields would end, and they would enter the steep mountain region.

‘What kind of intense battle will they give us?’

The bar audience’s enthusiastic eyes saw how the seven people walking became six in a moment.

It did not mean that one ran away.

The man who was walking the furthest to the right had his torso split from the stomach, with the upper half falling backwards and the lower half falling forward.

“Wha?”

2 seconds later, they became five.

The man who was walking the furthest to the left had his body severed into top and bottom parts in the same way.

The camera changed scenes.

The screen projected the woman, holding a huge rifle, in the forest.

The ponytailed and tattoo-faced woman was lying on a flat rock, and holding a giant gun mounted on a bipod. In her surroundings, M’s shield, which was used in the previous SJ and just moments ago, was spread out.

“Oooh! The 《M107A1》 anti-materiel rifle!”

Someone in the audience exclaimed in surprise.

‘You know that?’, there was no one to ask anything like that. Considering the gun maniacs playing GGO, aside from a large number of beginners, it was common knowledge to all.

That the M107A1 was an anti-materiel rifle, made by the American company Barrett, which used 12.7 mm bullets. An improved version of the well known 《M82》 model. The points of difference included the fact that it was lighter, and it was designed with a muzzle intended to be used with a suppressor.

The M107A1 on screen had a suppressor equipped as well. It was an at least 40 cm-long accessory, equipped on the tip of a gun that was about 1.5 metres-long on its own. The woman herself was by no means short, and the weapon’s length, comparable to her height, made the gun look like a spear.

The effective range of the anti-material rifle that used bullets this large was over 1500 metres. If the user was on high ground with thin air, and if other such conditions were met, it could be aimed even further.

On screen, the woman fired a 3rd bullet.

Despite using a suppressor, it still made a loud gunshot as gas was expelled with tremendous force from the side holds of the suppressor. It was an automatic gun, thus an amazingly large 10 cm-long empty shell was expelled to the right side of the gun.

The large bullet flew towards the men, who had shortened the distance themselves but were still 1200 metres away, while making a gigantic roar.

At the end of an approximately 2 second-long trip, the bullet hit the third man. The protector man who had not realised why the two had fallen.

This SF world's protectors were quite something. Even though the man got hit by a 12.7 mm bullet that had enough power to cut a living human in two, he did not die.

Although the defence capacity of the protectors on the man's chest was exceeded and they broke like pottery—

The man's heavy body was only blown backward about 3 metres, while his hit points decreased about forty percent.

But the next moment,

“Cr..... Craap.....”

The next bullet, following the exact same course, came flying towards the stomach of the man who somehow managed to raise the upper half of his body.

The other four, being in a field with neither shelter nor cover, dropped very close to the ground.

And then,

“Enemy ahead! Don't show your face! Don't miss the Line! Get ready to dodge it immediately!”

They referred to the typical way of dealing with snipers in GGO, but the old Japanese Army officer alone,

“That won't work! Those guys are shooting without Lines! Stand and run away! Quickly, we're going into the forest!”

Said this and broke into a run. It was an extreme dash. Because, in this place with nowhere to hide, the only way to survive was to enter the forest.

The other three saw him off. But did not run after him.

They had no actual experience with fighting, so they had never felt what “Lineless sniping” was, nor did they know how terrifying it was.

“We know their position..... If we can just see the Line, the sniping.....”

Just as he said this, the Bullet Line came directly from the halfway point of the mountain. There was quite the distance between them, thus the line depicted a greatly descending parabola, as it seemed to be coming towards them, while slightly curving to the left.

The moment the line move horizontally and pointed at them,

“Hah!”

One of the men rolled to the right. He rolled and stopped around 3 metres away from the Line.

“How’s that?”

Just as the man said this triumphantly, a bullet came right at his face without even showing a Bullet Line, causing instant death.

“Nice. Another one. From the man on the left. Next time, fire.”

In the forest, Pitohui gave instructions to the fat man with a sniper rifle about 20 metres away.

“Kay.”

With his large build, he was sitting behind a Savage 110BA rifle on a tripod

Peeking through the scope, he fixed his not-so-precise aim on the lying target. Although not as powerful as Pito’s 12.7 mm, this gun also had an effective range of 1500 metres.

The fat man touched the trigger with his finger, and the Bullet Circle displayed in the scope lined up with the man lying in the fields.

Naturally, a Bullet Line was produced, thus the opponent began moving horizontally to dodge it.

The Savage 110BA fired, and the bullet, flying through the air faster than sound, gaudily raised dust away from the man.

Once the dust had disappeared without spreading—

“Gotcha.”

Pitohui fired her M107A1.

Just like M last time, her sniping did not make use of the Bullet Circle.

It was a kind of shooting where the person themselves, based on their experience and calculations, foresaw where the bullet would fly— in other words, how much it will be pulled by gravity as it falls, as well as how it would be affected by wind and the rotation of both the Earth and the bullet itself.

The distance to the target was exactly the same as before.

She knew full well that there was no wind based on the impact of her comrade's bullet.

The 45 gram or so bullet decelerated due to air resistance, but even so, the bullet flew at a 630 km per hour speed and hit the man's back. With his body completely gouged out, he of course suffered instant death.

Pitohui saw the other man, who had halted in the fields,

Wave his left hand with his face up the moment she caught him on her scope.

"Idiot! Stop!"

Ignoring her wish—

The man finished the last step of manipulating his menu before she could fire, and he resigned. Losing its strength, her left hand suddenly fell.

"But I wanted to kill you....."

"One's coming up. Lower left. 1000 metres. And closing."

Said M, who was peeking through large binoculars as the observer, nearby,

"Oops."

Pitohui changed the orientation of her M107A1, but,

"Ah great, I can't get him now. Craap!"

Large trees got in the way, thus she immediately gave up on it.

“I wanted to get all of them myself, but oh well. I’m counting on you all for the rest.”

Saying so, Pitohui quickly activated the M107A1’s safety device. And then, with her left hand, she gently tapped on its unrefined body, which looked like it had a long and narrow iron plate attached.

“Good job good job. You really are a nice girl. I wish I could bring you with me to Japan.”

Tens of seconds later—

The MG3, placed in a location suitable for shooting, made suppressed sounds as it scattered dust around the old Japanese Army officer who continued running.

Despite this, the man desperately continued running, using side steps to dodge the large number of lines coming towards him, but—

In the end, he was hit 3 consecutive times by M’s sniping with the M14 EBR, and collapsed forward, 600 metres away from the forest.

With him as the final kill, the “platoon” was defeated at 13:49.

It was a 10 minute massacre.

In the bar, rather than focusing on the seven guys who were defeated without really doing anything great,

“There’s still only 1 Barrett M107A1 in the Japanese sever, right?”

The men focused on the topic of the anti-materiel rifle that the woman was using.

“As if monster guns like that would be common.”

“There have only been— 9 anti-materiel rifles confirmed. According to rumours, there are 2 of them presently. Naturally, they’re different guns. Though, there is word that the number is increasing as recently implemented ones are found.”

“The woman ‘Sinon’ who went wild during the last BoB used an anti-materiel rifle too, huh. What was it called? The British ‘AW50’?”

“Regrettably, no. The French ‘Hecate II’. The wooden-stock version.”

“Ah, is that so.”

“You’re sure in the know. Did you go after her ass?”

“No you idiot! You see, I met her during the BoB preliminaries. And, got my head chopped off by that gun from 800 metres away!”

“Oh, you have my condolences..... It must have been hard on you.....”

“Stop using keigo all of a sudden. It makes me feel sadder.”

One of the men,

“Hey everyone, I know about the owner of the M107A1. I have heard rumours about it before—”

Began his speech with this, and gathered the attention of his surrounding players.

“Having the luck to get it after completing a difficult quest was nice, but they couldn’t waste it by bring it to the fields. If you lost such a rare gun as a random drop, you could die from shock.”

“So then..... is she with the masked guys? Like in the BoB, there’s no risk of losing one’s weapons in SJ, and a team battle is the best place for an exceedingly peaky anti-materiel rifle. Just like right now.”

“May be. Or, lamenting the fact that it was going to waste or not having the ability for it and unable to use it, it could have been sold for a large sum. I don’t know the truth.”

“That skinny guy who hasn’t shot anything yet is the team baggage carrier. He had it put into his storage.”

“And so the woman easily sniped from that distance? She’s hiding her talents way too much!”

In the hyped up bar,

“Setting aside the Barrett owner——”

Said a man with a know-it-all expression. He gave off the vibe that he would raise his glasses if he had them, but unfortunately, he was a character with unaided vision.

“Only one thing is clear here.”

He ended his speech there. It was obvious that he was putting on airs, but

“What is?”

The conversation would not continue unless someone asked, thus one person asked.

“That this team is already certain to win, don’t you think? Not only does it have the shield-wielding M, but the masked guys are pretty skilled and their weapons are great as well. And to finish it off, we have that demon-like woman. No matter what other team comes after them, they’ll just be brought down.”

‘Indeed’, while the men nodded all at once—

“O~i, you guys!”

Men who had been watching another broadcast during these 10 minutes rushed over and shouted.

“Why didn’t you watch LLENN-chan’s battle! That girl sure is awesome! At this rate, she’s definitely going to be the winner!”

(t o b e c o n t i n u e d)

Afterword

Good day, everyone, this is the author, Sigsawa Keiichi.

I truly thank you for taking this book, 『*Sword Art Online Alternative Gun Gale Online II – 2nd Squad Jam <Jou> –*』 into your hands.

I will now carry out the afterword seriously.

Because, look, I thought that it's about time I, well, you know, outgrow writing weird stuff that would trouble the readers, or writing things that would trouble people at the library on the back of the *cover*.....

Since I'll be forty-three this year (2015), I figured it's about time to settle down. Normally, it wouldn't be strange to have your children going to highschool by now. And yet, I can't do anything about my bachelorhood, since I have no luck with women,

“Hyahha! Afterword! Oh afterword, seen by no one, done by no one!”

Hitting the *keyboard* while jumping around like that does not feel quite right.

Henceforth, it will be an adult afterword, or, look, perhaps I should say mature, look. I'm not really sure, but something like that.

So, this afterword will be very normal.

There, of course, will be no spoilers as always. That much is a non-negotiable some sort of *something*.

Now then—

I was able to bring out a sequel to 『*Gun Gale Online*』 that borrows the world of 『*Sword Art Online*』.

This is solely thanks to everyone who has purchased volume I.

Since it came with a “I ♪”, I had of course considered a volume II and further sequels from the start, but whether or not that could be realised was a different question.

Although this would have been an extreme case, if not a single copy of volume I was sold, this book would not have been brought out. I am truly, truly grateful and happy.

As of this volume, the *pink* and tiny LLENN’s exploits will continue for at least a bit more with the second *Squad Jam* as the stage. Volume I’s *characters* will, naturally, make an appearance as well! Any further details sound like spoilers, thus I will restrain myself, so those who are going to read the story now, please look forward to it!

Furthermore, following volume I, the majority of this story was about firing guns in a *virtual* world.

This story will not become a sweet *love romance* between lovers, or an epic about a great war with the fate of the universe on the line, or an impactful, controversial work about boys and girls with no place to vent their anger of youth, thus please feel at ease and continue reading.

And so, the II volume is tagged as a <Jou^{1/2}> this time, implying that volume III soon to be on sale will be a <Ge^{2/2}>, thus— that’s right, the story does not end with this volume.

Truthfully, the story should have ended with one book, but the *page* count reached incredible levels, even though I was only midway through the story when I noticed, but since only I and my editor knew about the sudden change of plans, I'll keep quiet. Umm, it was planned to have three volumes from the start, okay?

What is the last scene that LLENN sees in the land of guns and gales?

Who will be the champion of the second *Squad Jam*?

What is the identity of the new, golden-haired character depicted on the *cover* of this volume? And what is her role?

What is the mystery behind Pitohui and M?

Will Sigsawa buy more *air guns* under the guise of needing them for reference?

All these mysteries are to be answered in volume III .

It will go on sale on the tenth of June. Please wait until then.

Although I'm repeating myself, I would like to once again declare my gratitude to the author of the original work, Kawahara Reki-san, for letting me use the beautiful world of 『*Sword Art Online*』

The 『*Gun Gale Online*』 *game system* is truly well done and, as I do not really play *games* regularly, there is no way I would have thought of it, as I have written before.

If the *virtual game* in the story is one day realised—

I'd get addicted to it, and I'd drop my manuscript way before the deadline, I'm afraid. Very afraid.

And then my editor's *avatar* will come attacking.

“Write your manuscriiiiiiipt!”

“I refuse! Uooooh!”

Our emotions and bullets intersecting. Right now, the curtain of the heated battle is being raised.

That is so easy to imagine, but—

Fortunately, since at the present moment of 2015 such a game does not exist, volume III will probably come out on time.

And so, let's meet at the afterword of the next volume.

Sigsawa Keiichi, 10th of March, 2015

This is Kuroboshi Kouhaku.

While looking up images as material for the equipment, I found a soldier on stand-by with his hands placed in his plate carrier from the side like this and felt all warm inside.

It's cute.

KURO



A n o t h e r S t o r y A great, special and exciting

『I stand proud as I fight! ~Ah, the roaring gunshots in the desert~』

“Dammit! I’m the *sponsor!*”

Despite his groanful cry, the cameras did not pick up his voice.

13 minutes after the start of the first Squad Jam, a sole character cried in the desert region.

He was using a male avatar with no special traits in particular, and was dressed in a combat uniform with no special traits in particular. His distinctive feature was a gun, the 5.56 mm calibre automatic sniper rifle 《SG550 Sniper》, made by SIG.

It was a sniper rifle version of the high-precision SG550 assault rifle used by the Swiss army. The grip and stock were suited for sniping, while the sturdy, large barrel increased precision. Naturally, it was equipped with a scope.

It was a considerably expensive gun in RL, but it was considerably rare in GGO as well; so much so that buying it from an in-game auction would be considerably expensive.

The man was lying in the desert alone. In the surroundings, there were of course several other men, who were probably his comrades, lying around, but— there were 【D e a d】 markers lit up above their backs, denoting that they were all dead.

“I am the sponsor! And yet! Dammit!”

Despite him giving another cry of resentment, the cameras did not pick up his voice.

A message from someone reached him. Numerous vivid, red lines lit up in his surroundings from afar. A message that, “bullets are coming here” .

“Ufuh!”

Even the man, who did nothing but complain aloud, noticed this.

“Hyaa!”

Giving a pathetic scream, the man stood up while raising his precious SG550 Sniper, and the next moment, bullets came roaring along those lines.

This was followed by the sound of their flight as they pierced through the air, the muffled sound of impact as sand columns were raised, and the sound of gunshots, which sounded like drum beating, from several metres away.

“But I’m the sponsooor! Scary! Scary, hyaa! Stop!”

While voicing his umpteenth complaint and hugging his gun to his chest, he began running. His location was an open desert, thus the fact that he was under fire meant that his opponent had moved and acquired him in their sights. He had to escape to a safer place.

However, as a machine gun’s precision was not all that good, he would probably not be hit if he ran with all he had. At the same time, the position of the opponent who was shooting him was revealed, so if he once again hid in a calm spot, he could snipe his opponent with his beloved high-precision gun.

“Just you wait and see the sponsor’s counterattack! I’ll teach you! That there’s a difference in precision between a machine gun and a sniper rifle.....”

Said the man, with a creepy smile and a bragging expression, and once the enemy’s fire momentarily stopped, he lay down on a sand hill.

And then, he aimed his SG550 Sniper to the place where he had previously seen gunfire coming from, and peeked through his scope,

“Hmph, my glorious self’s certain-kill shot will put you bastards to an eternal sleep..... I’ll give you time to say your prayers..... You better engrave the name of the man who will be your shinigami into your chests as you die..... My name is——”

Muttering this full-throttle chuunibyous⁵⁵ line that would be extremely embarrassing to one’s parents if they heard it, most likely pretending to behave like someone else with all he had, the man released his safety device, and just as he put his finger on the trigger,

“Boheh.”

His body quivered as a hit effect sprung from his head, then, *gudeh*, collapsed and became motionless. He could not finish saying his name. *Pikon*, a 【D e a d】 marker lit up.

At a place about 300 metres away, the black-haired beauty who settled the match with a single shot from her Dragunov sniper rifle,

⁵⁵ Chuunibyous (中二病, lit. middle school second year sickness) means behaving in a way characteristic of teenagers going through puberty, especially by being overly self-conscious.

“Hey, what did that guy mutter something with a smile? Do the Japanese recite an incantation before sniping?”

Asked the dwarf woman nearby who had been shooting her PKM machine gun as a diversion.

“Who knows. I’ve never heard of such a custom though.”

The dwarf woman answered frankly while inclining her head.

Thus, another character disappeared during the Squad Jam.



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Thanks!

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⁵⁶ Translation from <http://dreadfuldecoding.blogspot.de/p/gun-gale-online.html> on November 21, 2016