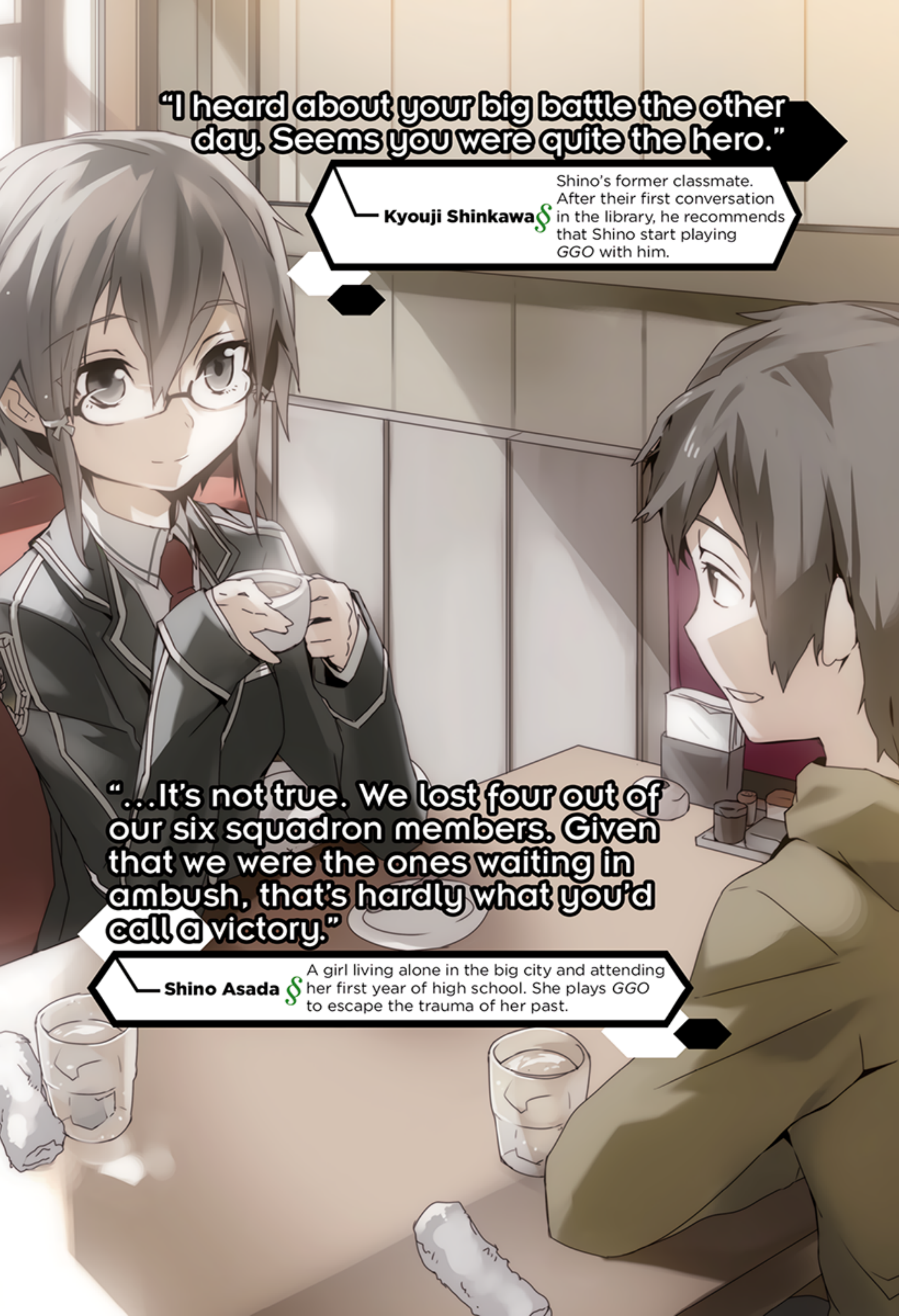
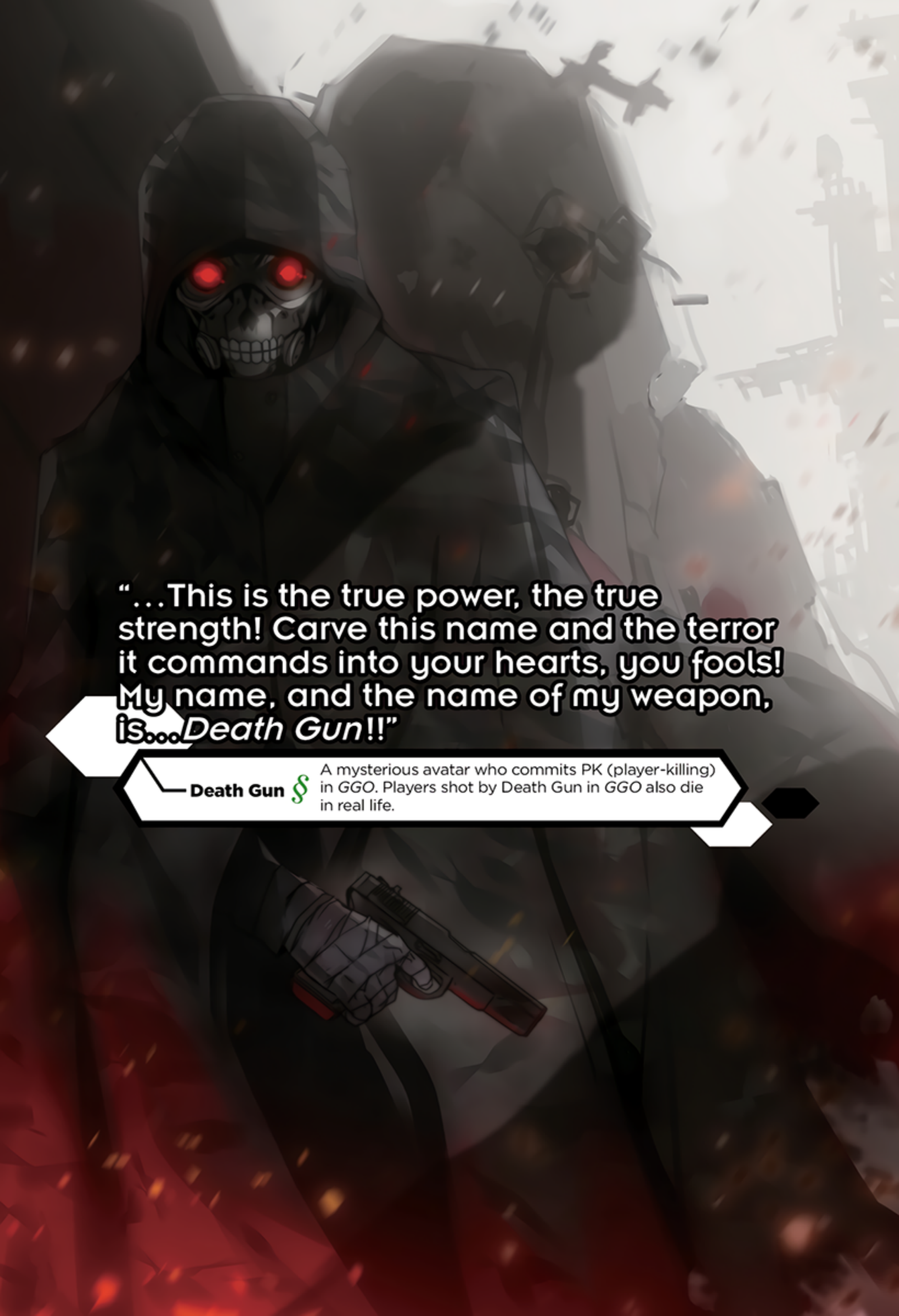


"I heard about your big battle the other day. Seems you were quite the hero."

Kyouji Shinkawa § Shino's former classmate. After their first conversation in the library, he recommends that Shino start playing *GGO* with him.

"…It's not true. We lost four out of our six squadron members. Given that we were the ones waiting in ambush, that's hardly what you'd call a victory."

Shino Asada § A girl living alone in the big city and attending her first year of high school. She plays *GGO* to escape the trauma of her past.



"…This is the true power, the true strength! Carve this name and the terror it commands into your hearts, you fools! My name, and the name of my weapon, is…*Death Gun*!!"

Death Gun § A mysterious avatar who commits PK (player-killing) in *GGO*. Players shot by Death Gun in *GGO* also die in real life.

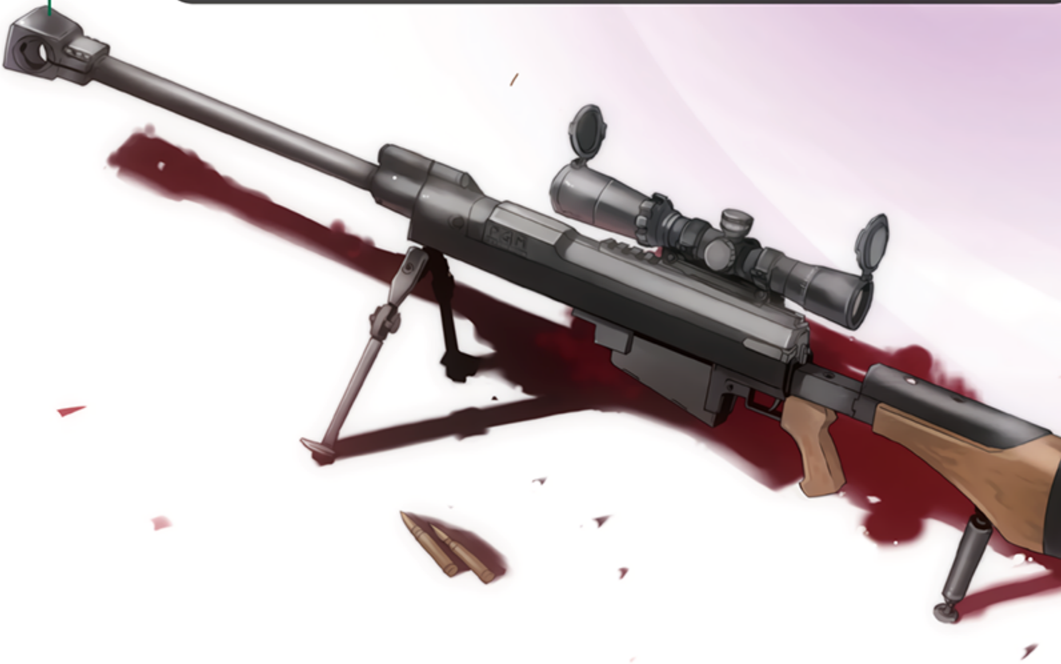
GUN GALE ONLINE

Abbreviated to *GGO*. In a world ruled by firearms and steel, players strive to be the greatest gunner of them all. PKing is encouraged, and the game system rewards defeating other players in the same way it does defeating AI-controlled monsters. The weapons of *GGO* are classified as either live-ammo or optical guns, and the currently held theory is that live-ammo guns are best against players while optics are best against monsters. There are major differences between the two aside from their stats—optical guns all have fictional names and hand-designed appearances, while the live-ammo guns are modeled and named after actual existing guns. For this reason, the majority of *GGO* players are gun fanatics.

PGM ULTIMA RATIO HECATE II

This gun is 138 centimeters (4.5 feet) long, weighing 13.8 kilograms (30.4 pounds). It fires enormous .50-caliber rounds (12.7 by 99 millimeters, or 0.5 inches wide). In the real world, this would be categorized as an antimateriel sniper rifle meant for piercing military vehicles or structures—its overwhelming power makes it forbidden to use against human targets. The name “Hecate” was taken from the Greek goddess of the underworld.

The Hecate II within the world of *GGO* is an antimateriel sniper rifle, of which there are only ten on the entire server. It is one of the rarest of the excavated weapons, which are not available for purchase in shops. It trades at the very high price of 20 million credits, which is about 200,000 yen in real money.



SWORD ART ONLINE
phantom bullet

VOLUME 5

Reki Kawahara

abec

bee-pee

YEN ON
NEW YORK

"THIS MIGHT BE A GAME, BUT IT'S NOT SOMETHING YOU PLAY."

—Akihiko Kayaba, *Sword Art Online* programmer

SWORD ART ONLINE

phantom bullet

Reki Kawahara

abec

bee-pee

汚い海賊

ñIôm telling you, the theory that AGI is the One True Stat is total nonsense,ò screeched a high-pitched male voice, echoing off the walls of the spacious pub. ñSure, Agilityôs an important stat. Having an extremely high firing speed and evasion were enough to make you one of the bestð until now.ò

The owner of the cocky voice was a player in a four-sided holo-panel, floating high in the middle of the dimly lit establishment.

The panel was playing a popular program called *This Weekôs Winners* on the Net channel MMO Stream. You could watch their videos on real TVs or computers, but given that they also streamed into the inns and pubs of countless VRMMO worlds, most players preferred to watch it in-game.

Especially when the segmentôs guest happened to be from *their* world.

ñBut thatôs all in the past now. Iôve got one simple message for all my friends who wasted their lives raising AGI for the past eight months: Rest in peace.ò

His obnoxious taunt was met with boos and jeers from the large pub, and a few glass bottles and mugs flew across the room, smashing against the wall into little polygonal shards.

But one man did not join the raucous shouting. He waited on the sofa in the back, curled up into a ball. He eyed the rest of the pub with a cold stare from between the low ghillie suit hood and the thick cloth that covered the lower half of his face.

The gloating man on the program was bad enough, but the slack-faced idiots gazing at the holo-TV were even worse. They all booed and shouted, but it was almost more of a game to them than a serious protest.

He couldn’t understand what made them act so empty-headed. The man on the program had seized the mantle of the game’s best player through sheer coincidence and was now its greatest exploiter as well. He was taking a share of the subscription fee that every player in the game paid, reveling in his pro gamer status.

Everyone must have felt the same jealousy and hatred of the gloating champion. If that dark emotion was ugly, then hiding it and pretending to laugh it off was both ugly *and* farcical.

The man felt his entire body tense beneath the suit. A breath hissed between his clenched teeth. It wasn’t time yet. He would pull the trigger a little later.

Back on the holo-panel, the camera zoomed out to show the program’s host sitting to the right of the champion, as well as another guest on his left.

The host, a girl dressed in technopop fashion, bubbled, “Those are some pretty powerful words, but I guess I should expect that from the top player in *Gun Gale Online*, the most hardcore of all the VRMMOs.”

“Well, I figured I’d only get one chance to be on MMO Stream, so I gotta say my piece while I can.”

“Oh, but you’ll be competing in the next Bullet of Bullets, won’t you?”

“Of course. And I’m in it to win it,” he declared directly at the camera, brushing back his long, blue-silver hair. The pub erupted in boos again.

MMO Stream was not produced exclusively for *Gun Gale Online* (GGO), but the guests and host were all in avatar form. *This Week’s Winners* was an interview program that hosted the best players from various virtual reality massive multiplayer games, and the current guests were the champion and runner-up of the Bullet of Bullets, the battle-royale tournament held last month in GGO.

ñThe thing is, Zexceed,ò the runner-up interrupted, clearly tired of hearing the silver-haired man preen, ñisnôt BoB all about solo encounters? Thereôs no guarantee youôll have the same results a second time, so itôs rather silly to act like this victory was guaranteed by your playerôs build, if you ask me.ò

ñNo way. This result was a manifestation of a general trend in GGO. I realize that you donôt want to admit this, Yamikaze, as youôre playing an agility build,ò the champion Zexceed retorted. ñItôs true that until now, pumping up your AGI so you could rapid-fire live-ammo weapons was the prevailing style. Youôd earn a bonus to evasion that way, too, which helps make up for the weak durability rating. But unlike a single-player game, the balance of an MMO changes over time. When youôre dealing with level-based systems, you canôt rearrange your stats freely, so you have to allocate those points with an eye toward the future. The best style in one level zone might not be the best in the next. You understand that, right? The guns weôll see next will have higher and higher strength and accuracy requirements to equip. This idea that you can just dodge out of harmôs way in every encounter is going the way of the dodo. The battle between me and Yamikaze was that process in a microcosm. Most of your gunôs power was neutralized by my bulletproof armor, and yet 70 percent of my shots landed. Iôll say it right now: Weôre entering the age of the STR-VIT build.ò

The man named Yamikaze grimaced with displeasure.

ñButé thatôs only because you succeeded in getting a rare gun whose strength requirement was just within your grasp, right before the tournament started. How much did you pay for that?ò ñNuh-uh, that was a drop, fair and square. But if you want to put it that way, the greatest stat of all is your real-life luck. Ha-ha-ha!ò

The man on the sofa moved his right hand, staring at the laughing, silver-haired Zexceed on the holo-panel with utter loathing. He found the grip sticking out of his waist holster and squeezed the cool metal. Very soon. It would happen very soon. He checked the time readout in the corner of his vision. One minute, twenty seconds.

At the table nearest to him, two players nursed their mugs and muttered to themselves.

ñ*Keh!* Listen to him prattle on. Who do you think started the whole AGI build movement in the first place? It was Zexceed!ò

ñNow it looks like that was all a trap to draw the player population down the wrong directioné And we fell for it, hook, line, and sinkeré ò

ñThink that means his new Strength and Vitality fad is another bluff?ò

ñMakes you wonder whatôll come next. Boosting Luck?ò

ñYou should try it.ò

ñHell no.ò

They both cackled. The sound only made the manôs anger hotter. How could they laugh like that, knowing theyôd been fooled? It made no sense.

But those stupid chuckles will freeze on their tongues very soon. Once they see true powerð who the real champion is.

It was time.

He stood without a sound. He strode between the tables, step after step. No one paid him any attention.

ñFoolsé You will know terror,ò he muttered, and came to a stop directly beneath the holo-panel in the center of the pub. He pulled a crude handgun from the holster on the waist of his ghillie suit.

It gleamed black and metallic, like pure, compressed darkness. Even the grip was metal, and in the center of the vertical serrations on the handle was a star-shaped brand. By any standard, it looked like any old automatic pistol, nothing special.

But this gun had *true power*.

He clicked the slide back, loading a fresh round, then slowly, easily held the gun directly upward at the huge holo-panel. Right at the forehead of the cocky, laughing Zexceed.

He held the gun in place for a few moments, until uneasy murmuring broke out around him. Although PKing was essentially unlimited in GGO, the exception was in town, where attacking others was impossible. He could fire the gun, but not only would it not harm any players, it wouldnôt even affect the environment.

His pointless display caused a few stifled giggles to arise around him, but he kept the black gun trained perfectly still, using an isosceles stance. In the midst of the holo-panel, Zexceed was still taunting.

Somewhere in the real world, Zexceedôs actual body was lying down, wearing an AmuSphere on his head, while he was logged in to the MMO Stream virtual studio. Naturally, he would have no way of knowing that there was a player pointing a gun at his image on TV in a certain pub in the business quarter of SBC

Glocken, capital city of the world of *Gun Gale Online*.

Despite this, the man opened his mouth and shouted for all to hear.

ñZexceed! False victor! Taste the judgment of true power!!ò

With the shocked stares of the entire room upon him, he raised his left arm, tracing a cross with his fingertips from forehead to chest, then left shoulder to right.

As he lowered his left hand, he pulled the trigger with his right. The slide blew back, producing the yellow flash of gunfire. There was a sharp, dry pop.

Beneath the dim lights of the pub, the metal bullet flew directly into the holo-panel and created brief little splintering effects.

That was it. Zexceed was still glibly chattering away on the program.

Actual laughter broke out now. Some of the crowd groaned and muttered about how embarrassing the whole display was. Meanwhile, Zexceedôs voice was audible above the murmurs.

ñð donôt you see, even if you include stats and skill selection, the ultimate factor is the playerôs skið ò

He stopped midsentence. The pub focused on the holo-panel again.

Zexceed was frozen in place, his eyes wide and mouth open. His hand slowly, slowly rose to clutch at his chest.

The next moment, he disappeared, leaving only a 3D-modeled chair behind. The host quickly spoke up.

ñUh-oh, looks like he lost connection. Donôt change that channel, folks, Iôm sure heôll be right back with usé ò

But no one in the pub heard her. In dead silence, they were all looking at the man again.

He lowered the gun and held it vertically, then slowly turned, his eyes lingering upon the various denizens of the room. Once he had completed a full rotation, the man held the black gun high and shouted again.

ñé This is the true power, the true strength! Carve this name and the terror it commands into your hearts, you fools!ò

He sucked in a deep breath.

ñMy name, and the name of my weapon, isé *Death Gun!!*ò

He returned the firearm to his holster and swiped the menu open with his left hand.

As he hit the log-out button, he felt a tremendous sense of triumph, and with it, an even stronger, burning hunger.

1

ñWelcome. Party of one?ò

The waiter bowed graciously. I told him I was waiting for someone, and then looked around the spacious caf®. A loud, carefree voice broke the calm, from a table near a window in the back.

ñHey, Kirito, over here!ò

The hushed, refined chatter that had flowed atop the classical background music fell silent, replaced by disapproving stares. I hunched my shoulders and rushed over to the source of the shout. With my faded leather flight jacket and distressed jeans, I was firmly out of place next to the middle-aged, manicured women of wealth on their shopping trips, who filled the room. Their irritation at the party responsible for summoning me here was growing by the moment.

If my partner had been a lovely young lady, that would be one thing, but it was a man in a suit who waved me over. I plopped into the seat across from him, not bothering to hide my dissatisfaction.

The waiter instantly swooped in and offered me a glass of water and a fresh hand towel, along with a menu. I grabbed it, noting the leather finish, and the fellow across the table piped up.

ñThis is on me, so order whatever you like.ò

ñI figured as much,ò I replied as I looked over the menu, only to discover the cheapest item on it was the chou ¨ la cr¯me at

1,200 yen. I quickly made to order a simple cup of coffee, but it occurred to me that this man was a highly paid official and would just expense the meal, putting it on the taxpayers’ tab. Feeling like an idiot, I ordered a string of items, trying to act natural.

“Erm… I’ll have the parfait au chocolat… the mille-feuille framboise… and a hazelnut coffee,” I said, somehow managing to avoid tripping over my tongue. The total came out to 3,900 yen. I almost felt like finishing with a hamburger and a shake and demanding the change. Incidentally, those items were chosen randomly off the menu, and I had no idea what I was actually getting.

“They’ll be right up.”

The waiter departed smoothly and I looked up with a sigh.

The man across the table chowing down on a giant serving of pudding piled high with cream was Seijirou Kikuoka. He featured thick black-rimmed glasses, an utterly plain haircut, and narrow, fussy features that brought a Japanese language teacher to mind — but despite all of this, he was actually an ambitious fast riser within the government. He worked for the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ Telecommunications Bureau, Advanced Network Division, Second Office: known within the ministry as the Virtual Network Management Division, aka “Virtual Division.”

In other words, this man was a government agent — or scapegoat — in charge of monitoring the chaotic and lawless VR world. He often lamented that he’d been sequestered in this position, and I believed that was probably the case.

Misfortunate Mr. Kikuoka carried the last blissful bite of pudding to his mouth and looked up with a mischievous grin.

“Hi there, Kirito. Sorry for forcing you to make the trip out here.”

ñIf you were really sorry, you wouldnôt ask me to come to Ginza.ò

I wiped my hands with the faintly citrus-smelling hand towel, then added, ñPlus, I donôt know why you think you should call me Kirito.ò

ñOh, donôt be mean. Wasnôt I the first person who rushed to your bedside when you woke up in the hospital a year ago?ò

Sadly, that was true. The very first person to visit me after my awakening from that game of death was Kikuoka, whoôd been a government agent working for the task force on that case.

At the time, I used polite speech with him, but as time went on and I realized that he was not contacting me solely out of altruistic concern, I gradually got more snarky and sarcastic. Or perhaps he was manipulating me into that attitudeðbut I was probably overthinking it.

I glanced at Kikuoka, who seemed to be seriously considering another order for himself, and warned myself not to let him manipulate me.

ñI heard they found some huge rare-earth deposit in Sagami Bay, and all the senior officials from the appropriate ministries were dancing a jig to óTurkey in the Straw.ô Yet here you are, wondering if you should pony up for another cream puff,ò I jabbed.

Kikuoka looked up, blinked several times, then beamed.

ñDoesnôt matter, because none of the profit they make excavating that will go to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. I think Iôll hold off, for the benefit of the national budget.ò

He snapped the menu shut and I gave him another sigh.

ñCan we get to the business at hand, then? I can already guess what it is: another virtual crime needing hands-on research?ò

ñI love how quick you are on the uptake, Kirito,ò Kikuoka replied without missing a step. He pulled out a super-thin tablet computer from the briefcase on the seat next to him.

Thatôs rightó heôs using me, a survivor of the Sword Art Online *Incident, the worst online crime in Japanôs history, as a provider of information.*

According to what Iôd read, the regular police called their informants ñcooperatorsò or ñmonitors,ò and the act of periodically handing out rewards in exchange for information was called ñmanaging contacts.ò If that was the case, you could say that that Kikuoka was ñmanagingò me with the occasional piece of cake.

That wasnôt exactly a good feeling, but I owed him for breaking the rules and telling me which hospital Asuna was being kept in. If I hadnôt had that info, I wouldnôt have been able to find Asuna Yuuki so quickly again in the real world. That meant I wouldnôt have learned about Nobuyuki Sugouôs diabolical scheme, nor would I have been able to prevent him from taking Asuna as his own.

So for the time being, I was content to be Kikuokaôs monitor. I just wasnôt going to bother kissing his ass, or holding back from ordering the most expensive cake on the menu.

Meanwhile, my benevolent manager, totally unaware of what was running through my head, traced a finger along the tablet and slowly muttered, ñSee, the thing is, the number of virtual-space crimes are on the rise againé ò

ñOh? Break it down for me.ò

ñWellé weôve got over a hundred claims of virtual asset theft or damage just for November alone. On top of that, thirteen cases of real-life assault stemming from trouble within VR games. One of which led to deathé Youôve probably already heard about that one, since it was all over the mediað the one with the replica Western-style sword that was honed to an edge, then swung around at Shinjuku Station, killing two. Four feet long and eight pounds, yikes! I donôt know how you swing something like that around.ò

ñApparently he was hallucinating because of the drugs he took to keep him going through all those play sessions. It sounds horrifying when you look at that one case, but while I donôt want to minimize it, if thatôs all there is, compared to the big pictureé ò

ñYes, exactly. Itôs just a tiny fraction of the total number of assault cases nationwide, and it would be silly to suggest a short-sighted conclusion, like VRMMOs are brewing social unrest. But I remember what you said earlieré ò

ñThat VRMMO games lower the mental barriers to causing others physical harm in the real world. Yes, Iôll admit that,ò I said. The waiter appeared without a sound and placed two plates and a cup in front of me.

ñWill that be all for today?ò

I nodded, and he placed the receipt on the corner of the table facedown, so as not to display the shocking total price. I took a sip of the nutty, fragrant coffee and continued.

ñPKing is becoming more and more customary in certain games, and you could see that as a training exercise for real murder. The ones who are really pushing the boundaries even have realistic blood spray for severed veins, and guts that spill out of your stomach. The people who get really obsessed with those even commit suicide as a means of logging out.ò

I heard a cough, and looked over my shoulder to see two high-class ladies glaring at me, aghast. I ducked my head and lowered my voice.

ñItôs not hard to imagine someone who does that every day in their spare time deciding to try it out in real life. I agree that some kind of measures need to be taken. But outlawing it wonôt work.ò

ñNo go?ò

ñNo go.ò

I carefully scooped up some of the many-layered cake of fine sponge and pink cream with the golden spoon, and lifted it to my mouth. It occurred to me that a single spoonful of this dessert probably cost a hundred yen. The cake practically melted on my tongue.

ñYouôd have to completely isolate them on the Net. In terms of the actual bandwidth consumed, VRMMOs are actually fairly lightweight. If you try to crack down domestically, the users and developers will just go overseas.ò

ñHmmé ò

Kikuoka looked down at the table, silent for several seconds.

ñé That mille-feuille looks really good. Can I have a bite?ò

ñé ò

I sighed for the third time and pushed the plate over to him. The dignified government employee gleefully tore off about 280 yen of cake and shoved it into his mouth.

ñWell, hereôs what I wonder, Kiritoé Why do they want to kill each other, rather than get along? Seems like that would be more fun.ò

ñé Youôve played a bit of *ALfheim Online*, so you should understand. Even in the days before full-dive technology came along, MMORPGs have always been about competition. When you have an online game with no set end point, what keeps the players motivated? When you get down to ité they want that instinctual feeling of superiority, of being the best.ò

ñOh?ò

He raised an eyebrow as he chewed, seeking elaboration. I wondered why I had to explain all of this, then vindictively decided to give him what he wanted.

ñItôs not just about video games. Isnôt the desire to be praised and be better than others the cornerstone of our society? You must know that from personal experience. You see other bureaucrats in the ministry who came from better schools, and youôre jealous of their more rapid career success. Meanwhile, it feels good to mingle with those not on the career fast track, and see how much better you have it. You can only stuff yourself with that cake because youôve found an equilibrium between superiority and inferiority.ò

Kikuoka swallowed the mille-feuille and smiled awkwardly.

ñWow, you donôt hold back, do you? What about you, Kirito? Have you gotten that equilibrium?ò

ñé ò

I had a mountain of an inferiority complex, but I wasnôt going to admit that to him. Instead, I kept a straight face.

ñé Well, I do have a girlfriend.ò

ñAnd in that one sense, I am exceedingly jealous of you, Kirito. Mind introducing me to a girl in *ALO* sometime? I wouldnôt mind getting to know that sylph leader.ò

ñJust to warn you, if you try to hit on her by saying youôre a high-ranking bureaucrat, sheôll cut you in two.ò

ñAt her hands, I wouldnôt mind. So?ò

ñSo, itôs extremely difficult to gain that kind of superiority in the real world. Itôs the kind of thing that doesnôt come without a ton of work. Work to get good grades, work to get better at sports, work to be handsome, or prettyé They all take an incredible amount of time and energy, and they donôt guarantee you any success.ò

ñI see. Like how I nearly studied myself to death for college entrance exams, and I didnôt get into Tokyo University,ò he said, grinning for some reason. I decided not to crack on him, and got straight to the point instead.

ñBut in a massive multiplayer online role-playing game, if you spend your time there at the expense of real life, youôre guaranteed to get stronger. Youôll get rare loot. Sure, it takes effort, but itôs all a game. Itôs way more fun than studying or lifting weights. When you walk down the main street of town in your expensive gear and that high-level indicator next to your name, you can feel the jealous stares of the characters weaker than youé or at least, you feel like you do. If you go out to hunt monsters, you can destroy them in one hit with your overwhelming power and save parties in need. Then they thank you and look up to youð ò

ñOr at least, it feels that way?ò

ñé Itôs a one-dimensional view, I admit. There are other facets to MMOs. There have been online games for the purpose of communication above all else for years and years, but theyôve never been a hit the way MMORPGs have.ò

ñI see what youôre saying. Because you donôt feel the satisfaction of superiority in those games?ò

ñExactly. Then VRMMOs came along. Now you can actually feel those stares as you walk down the street. You donôt have to imagine them coming through the monitor.ò

ñUh-huh. Iôve seen the jealous looks that you and Asuna get when you stroll through Ygg City.ò

ñéWow, you donôt hold back, do you? At any rate, anyone playing a VRMMO can enjoy that superiority if they sink the time into it. And itôs a kind of superiority thatôs simpler, more primitive, and more instinctual than what you get for good grades, or being good at soccer.ò

ñMeaningé?ò

ñMeaning *strength*. Physical, muscular strength. The power to destroy your opponent with your own hands. Itôs like a drug.ò

ñéStrengthé The greatest power of all,ò Kikuoka murmured nostalgically. ñEvery boy dreams of having that kind of strength somedayé You read a fighting manga, then imagine going through the same training. But once you realize it doesnôt come that easy, you switch dreams to something thatôs a little more realisticé Youôre saying that in the VRMMO world, you can experience that dream again?ò

I nodded and, after my lengthy speech, quenched my dry throat with a sip of coffee.

ñThatôs right. One of the heavy martial arts simulation games is so focused on reality, they formed partnerships with actual martial arts schools.ò ñOh? Meaning?ò

ñMeaning that if you raise your in-game character to a certain level, you can actually be a registered expert in Whatchamacallit Karate, or So-and-So Kung Fu. They set the game in a realistically modeled Shinjuku and Shibuya, and you get to dole out justice to a bunch of unruly thugs. The problem is, it doesnôt teach you the proper mind-set of a martial artist. So anyone who gets completely sucked into that kind of game only goes through the motions, if you willé and sadly, I canôt deny the possibility that some of them will be curious to try out the moves they learned in the real world.ò

ñI seeé So youôre worried about the presence of strength in a VRMMO bleeding over into reality. Say, Kirito,ò Kikuoka said, looking directly into my eyes, ñdo you really think thatôs just a mental thing?ò

ñéWhat do you mean?ò

ñDo you think itôs not just lowering the mental hurdles to violence and teaching the player the knowledge and skill to fighté but that it could also be having some kind of physical effect on the bodies of the players?ò

Now it was my turn to stop and think it over.

ñAre you asking if that guy swinging an eight-pound sword in Shinjuku might have earned his arm strength through a game somehow?ò

ñYes, exactly.ò

ñHmmé Well, I hear that theyôve only just begun studying the long-term effect of the full-dive system on human nerves. I mean, your actual bodyôs just lying down, so your core strength would obviously fall, but maybe thereôs some effect on our ability to tap that subconscious panic strengthé Wouldnôt you know that better than me, though?ò

ñI did an interview with what they call a cerebro-physiologist, but I didnôt understand a word of it. Now, I know it was a very roundabout way to get to the point, but this is what I wanted to talk to you about. Look at this.ò

Kikuoka tapped at the tablet and showed it to me. I examined the screen and saw a head shot of an unfamiliar man along with a profile containing an address and other details. He had long, unkempt hair, silver-rimmed glasses, and heavy fat around his cheeks and neck.

ñéWhoôs this?ò

Kikuoka took the tablet back and traced it with his fingers.

ñLetôs see, it was last monthé November fourteenth. At an apartment building in the Nakano Ward of Tokyo, the landlord was cleaning and noticed a funny smell. He narrowed it down to one unit, but there was no response to the intercom or the phone. Yet the lights were on in the apartment. So he undid the electronic lock and entered the apartment to findé Tamotsu Shigemura, age twenty-six, dead. They determined he was dead for five and a half days. The room was cluttered, but not ransacked, and the body was lying on the bed. Around his head wasé ò

ñAn AmuSphere,ò I finished, envisioning the full-dive headgear unit made of two metal rings, one of which was in my own room. Kikuoka nodded.

ñThatôs right. They contacted the family at once, and had an autopsy performed. The cause of death was sudden cardiac arrest.ò

ñCardiac arrest? Meaning that his heart just stopped working?

Why did it stop?ò

ñWe donôt know.ò

ñéò

ñToo much time passed after his death, and the likelihood of criminal involvement was low, so they didnôt bother with a detailed autopsy. The one thing we know is that he hadnôt eaten anything in about two days, and was still logged in.ò

I furrowed my brow again. It wasnôt all that rare to hear stories like this. Eating ñfoodò in the virtual world caused a false sense of fulfillment that lasted several hours, even if the user hadnôt eaten anything in the real world. The ultra-hardcore gamers found that this cut down on food costs and gave them more time to play, so it wasnôt rare to hear about players who only ate one meal every two days.

Naturally, if that pattern continued, there would be ill effects on the body. Malnutrition was an obvious outcome, and if you had a seizure while living alone, unable to care for yourselfé the natural outcome was much like this case. It happened from time to time.

I closed my eyes for a moment and said a silent prayer for Shigemura, then opened my mouth.

ñIt is very sad, buté ò

ñExactly. Itôs sad, but common nowadays. This kind of death isnôt news anymore, and itôs hard to get a tally because families donôt want people to know about them dying while in a game. In a way, this is also a case of VRMMOs contributing to the death numberséò

ñBut you didnôt bring me out here just to talk about ordinary cases, did you? What really happened here?ò

Kikuoka took another glance at the tablet before answering.

ñThere was only one VR game installed on Shigemuraôs AmuSphereð *Gun Gale Online*. Have you heard of it?ò

ñWell, of course. Itôs the only MMO in Japan that has pro players. Iôve never tried it myself.ò

ñHe was apparently the very top player in *Gun Gale Online*, which they abbreviate to GGO. He won a tournament they held to determine the very best back in October. Player name: Zexceed.ò

ñSoé was he logged in to GGO when he died?ò

ñActually, he wasnôt. He was in character as Zexceed while appearing on the MMO Stream online channel.ò

ñOhé on *This Weekôs Winners*, then. Now that you mention it, I seem to recall a story about a time they had to cancel an episode because the guest dropped out partwayé ò

ñThatôs probably the one. He had the heart attack in the middle of the program. We know the time down to the second, thanks to the recorded log. Now, as far as what we havenôt been able to confirm yet, thereôs a very strange blog post someone put up about an event that happened in GGO right at the same time.ò

ñStrange?ò

ñYou know how MMO Stream plays even within the world of GGO?ò

ñYeah, they air it in pubs and places like that.ò

ñWell, it was being streamed in a bar within SBC Glocken, the capital city in the world of GGO. And at exactly the time in question, they reported that a player was acting very strangely.ò

ñéò

ñSeems he fired his gun at the image of Zexceed on the TV, shouting about judgment and that he needed to die and so on. One of the other players at the scene just happened to be in the process of a sound recording, and he uploaded it to a video site. The file had a Japan Standard Time readout on it, and according to that, he fired at the TV at preciselyé eleven thirty PM and two seconds, November ninth. And Shigemura suddenly disappeared from the program at eleven thirty and fifteen seconds.ò

ñéGotta be a coincidence,ò I said, pulling the other plate in front of me.

I split the brown, circular object with my spoon and took a bite. The chill of the dessert caught me by surprise; Iôd thought it was a cake, but it was some kind of ice cream. My mouth was filled with a rich chocolate flavor with only the barest level of sweetness, the bitterness only amplifying the unpleasant nature of Kikuokaôs story.

Once Iôd tucked away about a third of the dish, I continued.

ñThe jealousy and hate the best player in GGO gets has to be far and away worse than any other MMO. It would take some guts to fire a gun at him directly, but it doesnôt seem that crazy that someone would shoot a TV.ò

ñRight, but thereôs another one.ò

ñéWhat?ò

The spoon stopped halfway to my mouth. Kikuoka still wore his excellent poker face.

ñThis one happened about ten days ago, on November twenty-eighth. Another body found in a two-floor apartment building, this time in Omiya Ward of the city of Saitama. A door-to-door newspaper salesman got angry that there was no response despite the lights being on, and thought the resident was ignoring him, so he turned the knob and found that it was unlocked. Inside he saw another person on their bed, AmuSphere in place, with a decomposing smellé ò

A very intentional cough interrupted our conversation, and Kikuoka and I looked over to see the same two ladies staring at us with the power of floating beholders. Kikuoka had nerves of steel, though, and gave them a slight bow before continuing his story.

ñé Putting aside the state of the body, it was once again determined to be heart failure. This one wasé well, the name doesnõt matter. Male, age thirty-one. Another influential player in *GGO*. His character name wasé Usujio Tarako? óLightly Salted Cod Roeõ? Is that right?ò

ñThere was a guy in *SAO* named Hokkai Ikura, meaning óNorth Sea Salmon Roe,ô so maybe he was a relative. And was this Tarako on TV as well?ò

ñNo, this one was actually in the game. Based on the AmuSphereõs log, the signal died about three days before the body was found, at exactly ten oõclock and four seconds PM, November twenty-fifth. That about lines up with the estimated time of death. At the time he was at a meeting with his squadronð thatõs what they call guilds, apparentlyð in the central square of Glocken. As he was delivering a fiery speech on the pulpit, a player invaded the meeting and shot at him. You donõt take damage in town, from what I understand, but when he turned to yell at the intruder, he just dropped offline. Of course, this information comes from a message board, so itõs hard to get an accurate pictureé ò ñWas the player who came up firing the same one as with Zexceed?ò

ñI think we can assume so. Said something about judgment and power, and dropped the same name as the previous time.ò

ñéWhich was?ò

Kikuoka looked at the tablet and squinted.

ñLooks likeé Death Gun.ò

ñDeathé Gunéò

I put the spoon down on the empty plate and let the name echo inside my head. A characterôs name, no matter how goofy it might sound, was a huge part of the first impression you gave to others. The name Death Gun suggested the coldness of black metal to me.

ñAnd youôre certain that it was cardiac arrest that both Zexceed and Usujio Tarako died of?ò

ñMeaning?ò

ñThere wasnôt anyé damage to their brains?ò

The instant I said it, Kikuoka grinned in understanding.

ñI wondered about that myself, and I asked the doctors who performed the autopsies, but they didnôt find any bleeding or blockage in the brain that suggested any kind of abnormality.ò

ñéò

ñBesides, with the NerveGearðer, do you mind if I bring that up?ò ñItôs fine.ò

ñWith the NerveGear, when it killed its user, it sent a flash of microwave power that was so powerful it burned out the emitters and destroyed a part of the brain. But the AmuSphere was built so that it couldnôt emit waves that strong. The developers swear that it only sends exceedingly low-level information signals to the sensory center of the brain.ò

ñSo youôve even checked with the manufacturer. Quite a lot of legwork youôve put into a conclusion provided by coincidence and rumors, isnôt it, Mr. Kikuoka?ò

I stared at the narrow eyes beyond the glasses. For an instant, his face went blank, then he chuckled.

ñBeing stuck in a dead-end position leaves you with plenty of time on your hands.ò

ñYou should help us advance the front line in Aincrad sometime, then. Eugene says youôve got a lot of talent as a mage.ò

As a matter of fact, I didnôt take this man for the bumbling paper pusher he appeared to be. The reason heôd made his own character in *ALO* was not out of interest in playing the game, but as a means of gathering information and experience on the virtual world for the sake of his job. The business card he gave me on our first meeting said Ministry of Internal Affairs, sure enough, but even that was suspicious to me. He seemed like he could belong to some other departmentð more secret, aligned with national safety.

But regardless of that, back when the Virtual Division was still the *SAO* Incident Rescue Task Force, it was through his efforts that the government was able to enact a system to hospitalize all the players afflicted. Because of that, and his help with Asuna, I usually treated him with 60 percent respect and 40 percent suspicion.

Kikuoka scratched the back of his head and smiled shyly.

ñMemorizing those spell words isnôt the hard partð itôs actually saying them. Iôve never been good with tongue twisters. But at any rate, I think this whole thing is 90 percent coincidence or hearsay, like you. So this is all just theoretical. Kirito, do you think itôs possible? Could someone stop another playerôs heart by shooting them in the game?ò

His words caused a scene to play out inside my head. I frowned.

A shooteré dressed in black, face unseen, pulling the trigger while pointing into empty space. A black, illusionary bullet leaving the barrel, tearing through the virtual wall and into the actual network, as packets of information fly in every direction. From router to router, server to server, the bullet makes hard right angles and charges on its way. Eventually it reaches an apartment, where it emerges from the LAN router on the wall as a real bullet, and into the heart of the man lying on the bedé

I shook my head to clear the image and raised a finger.

ñI donôt think itôs completely impossibleé but letôs say this Death Gun fellow was able to send some kind of signal to the AmuSpheres of Zexceed and Usujio Tarakoé ò

ñWell, letôs start with that. Is it even possible?ò

ñHmmé First of all, it would have to be just a normal signal, not some kind of mysterious, fatality-causing power. Do you remember the panic around the Imagenerator virus?ò

Imagenerator was a privately developed mail program from the AmuSphere. The user dove into a virtual space generated by the software and delivered a message into a camera, which the program compressed into a mailable format. When the other party accepted the e-mail, the senderôs virtual body appeared before them to speak the message. As new features like video, sound, and even texture were added, the program turned into a huge hit.

But soon security holes in the program were discovered, and virus mails began to take advantage of them. The moment the mail arrived, if the user was already middive, the program started a forced preview, startling the user with shocking images and sound, usually something sexual and/or grotesque.

They patched it immediately and prevented further damage, naturally, buté

ñNearly every person with an AmuSphere has installed Imagenerator by now. If there was some undiscovered back door, and you knew your targetôs mail or IP addresséò

ñI seeé Then you could set the send timer ahead of time, thus enabling you to have the desired signal arrive at the same time you shoot them in the game,ò Kikuoka replied, folding his bony fingers and resting his chin on top. ñLetôs assume that hurdle has been cleared. But you canôt send some kind of fatal cursed bullet, only an ordinary stimulation signal within the bounds of the device.ò

ñMeaning a sensation powerful enough to stop the hearté or a flavor, scenté sight, soundé Letôs think about the senses in order. First is touchð the sense of the skin.ò

I traced my left palm with my index finger. I recalled the shock I felt earlier, when I found out the chocolate cake was actually ice cream.

ñWhat if you sent a full-body chill, as cold as it can go? Like jumping into a giant ice bath. Could that cause the heart to stop?ò

ñHmmé I thought that jumping into freezing water and causing the heart to stop was because the temperature difference makes all the veins contract, placing extra strain on the hearté right?ò

ñOkay, then that means this idea is out. The brain registering virtual cold wouldnôt have an effect on the capillaries in your limbs, after allé ò

ñThen how about this?ò Kikuoka asked, rubbing his hands together. He almost seemed to be gleeful. ñYouôve got tiny insectsé not beetles, more of the wormy kind, like caterpillars and millipedes. Someone creates the sensation of being packed into a hole squirming with these things. With visual, to boot. Brr, just imagining it is giving me goose bumps.ò

ñé ò

Against my will, I imagined the sensation.

Walking across a textured terrain, when suddenly the ground beneath my feet disappears, and I fall into a deep hole. Countless long, thin creatures squirm and wriggle, crawling against my skin and into the openings of my sleeves and collarsé

ñYeahé thatôs pretty gross,ò I said, rubbing my arms, ñbut thatôs the kind of prank that happened during the Imagenerator virus. People got giant caterpillars and jellyfish dumped on their heads. But nobodyôs heart stoppedé I think. Besides, when youôre in a VRMMO, your subconscious is prepared for sudden events. Depending on your location, you can get surprised by a boss at any time. You canôt play the game if your heart stops because of that stuff.ò

ñThatôs a good point,ò Kikuoka said, shoulders drooping. He picked up his cup and swirled it.

ñNext would be taste and smell. Letôs say that your mouth was suddenly full of a terrible stenché like the taste of kiviak. Anyone who suffers that is going to try to vomit it out. Perhaps that gag reflex will affect their physical bodyéò

ñWouldnôt that mean they died suffocating on vomit, rather than from cardiac arrest? And whatôs kiviak?ò

I immediately regretted asking when I saw the sparkle in his eye. He loved talking about tasteless subjects. I suspected this was why he didnôt have a girlfriend, despite his prestigious position.

ñOh, youôve never heard of kiviak? Itôs an Inuit food. In early summer they catch these little birds called auks and stuff them inside of a hollowed-out seal. They leave the seal in a freezing location for several months. Eventually the sealôs fat seeps into the auks and helps them ripenð well, rot. Once itôs good and ready, they take the birds out and eat their innards, which have melted into a chocolaty substance. Apparently itôs even smellier than the infamous surstrºmming, but once you get used to the taste, itôs addictiveéò

Thump! Our eyes were drawn to the side, where the two madams were on their feet, rushing away with their hands over their mouths. I sighed and interrupted Kikuoka.

ñIôll be sure to try it the next time Iôm in Greenland. Oh, and I donôt need an explanation of what that sur-something is.ò

ñOh. Are you sure?ò

ñDonôt look so disappointed. And I donôt think even the smelliest food is going to cause someoneôs heart to stop. Letôs go to the next sense: sight.ò

I took a hearty whiff of the coffee's fragrance to cleanse Kikuoka's tale of stench before continuing.

"Same as with the insect idea, I think stopping the heart with a meaningful image won't cut it, no matter how frightening or cruel the imagery is. Maybe if you dredged up some terrible trauma of the target's past, but I don't see how they could figure out what that would be."

"Hmm. You said 'meaningful.'"

"Yes. I remember reading about some incident that happened long before I was born, where a bunch of kids who were watching a cartoon on TV all passed out at the same time around the nation."

"Oh, that. I was in kindergarten at the time, so I saw it all happen," he said, thinking back fondly. "It was a scene where they alternated flashing blue and red lights, and it caused seizures."

"That's probably what I'm thinking of. You send a similar video with all kinds of extreme, exploding lights. Most people will shut their eyes on instinct, but you can't do that if the imagery is being pumped straight into the brain. Maybe that could cause some kind of shock to the system."

"Yes, you've got a point." Kikuoka nodded, then shook his head. "But that very problem was raised during the development of the AmuSphere. In the end, as a safety measure, they limited the output of the device. The AmuSphere can't generate visual output over a certain amplitude."

"All right, pal."

I glared directly at Kikuoka, my suspicion leveled up to a pure 100 percent.

ñAre you really telling me you didnôt already go over all of these possibilities before this? Why would you come to little old me after all the elite big shots in the Ministry of Internal Affairs put their heads together? What the hell is going on here?ò

ñNo, no, itôs not like that at all. Your ideas are very stimulating; theyôll be a huge help to the process. Besides, I enjoy these conversations.ò

ñWell, I donôt. As for hearing, Iôm guessing they have hard-coded limits on that, too. So that ends our talk. In conclusion: causing a playerôs heart to stop through in-game means is impossible. Death Gunôs shooting and the two heart attacks are a simple coincidence. Now Iôm leaving. Thanks for the food.ò

I had a feeling that allowing this conversation to continue would only lead to bad things, so I made to stand up and leave. But as I suspected, Kikuoka panicked and stopped me.

ñWhoa, whoa, wait! Iôm getting to the important part. You can order another slice of cake, just hang on for another minute.ò

ñéò

ñAnyway, Iôm relieved that you arrived at that conclusion. I agree with you. Their deaths are not related to the in-game shooting. So hereôs my requestéò

I knew I shouldnôt have come, I told myself, waiting for what came next.

ñCan you log in to *Gun Gale Online* and make contact with this Death Gun fellow?ò

He grinned, as innocently and benignly as possible. I gave him my very coldest tone of voice in response.

ñóMake contactô? Letôs be honest, Mr. Kikuoka. You want me to go and get shot by this Death Gun.ò

ñHa-ha-ha, well, when you put it that wayé ò

ñNo! What if something happens to me? Why donôt *you* get shot? See how you like having your heart stopped.ò

I tried to stand up again, but his arm shot out and caught my sleeve.

ñDidnôt we just come to the logical conclusion that it was impossible for that to happen? Besides, it seems that this Death Gun has an extremely rigid process in choosing his targets.ò

ñé Process?ò I asked, sitting down.

ñYes. Death Gunôs two targets in the game, Zexceed and Usujio Tarako, were both well-known for their skills. In other words, I donôt think heôll shoot you unless youôre one of the best. I could spend years and never get to that point. But the man that even Akihiko Kayaba admitted was the bestéò

ñI canôt do it, either! *GGO* isnôt that easy of a game. There are tons of pros playing it.ò

ñAnd what do you mean by that? You mentioned pros earlier, too.ò

I knew that I was falling right into his trap, but I explained anyway.

ñIt means exactly what it sounds like: people who earn a living playing the game. Of all the VRMMOs out there, *Gun Gale Online* is the only one with a game coin conversion system.ò

ñé Oh?ò

Even elite agent Kikuoka was not up on the full breadth of gaming lingo, and I could tell his confusion was not feigned this time.

ñBasically, itôs set up so that the cash you earn within the game can be withdrawn as actual money. Itôs an electronic currency, not actual yen, but it might as well be, since you can use it to buy anything you want already.ò

ñButé how do they function as a business? I mean, I assume theyôre turning a profit on the game.ò

ñOf course. Not all the players are actually earning money. Itôs like slots or horse racing. The monthly fee to play is three thousand yen, which is very high for a VRMMO. And the amount that an average player earns is maybe 10 percent of thaté just a few hundred yen. But thereôs a high similarity to gambling in the gameôs systemð every once in a while, someone gets a rare drop thatôs worth a ton of money. They sell that in the auction house and convert the earnings to electronic moneyð it can fetch them tens, even hundreds of thousands of yen. Anyone who hears that thinksé *Hey, that could be me.* Thereôs even a giant casino inside the game.ò

ñAhh, I seeé ò

ñThe pros in GGO are the ones who earn a constant amount every month. The best players earn around two to three hundred thousand a month, which isnôt that much in real-life termsé but itôs enough for a frugal living. Basically, theyôre earning a kind of salary from the membership fees of the majority of the player base. Thatôs what I meant when I said that the best in GGO get more hate and jealousy than in other games. Theyôre like government employees scarfing down expensive cakes on the taxpayersô dime.ò ñHeh, you do have a way with words, Kirito. But thatôs what I like about you.ò

I ignored him and tried to steer the conversation to a conclusion.

ñFor that reason, high-level players in GGO put way more time and enthusiasm into the game than those in other MMOs. If I waltz in there without any knowledge of the game, Iôm not going to get anywhere. Besides, as the name says, itôs a gun-based gameé and Iôm not good at shooting systems. Youôll need to find someone else.ò

ñHang on, hang on! I donôt have any other options. In all honesty, youôre the only VRMMO player I can actually contact in real life. Plusé if itôs too difficult for you to take on the pros, why donôt you turn it into a job as well?ò

ñéHuh?ò

ñI can pay you a stipend for research assistance. Letôs sayé the same amount one of those GGO pros makes in a month. This much.ò

He held up three fingers. I felt a lurch in my gut. That was enough to put together a new machine with a twenty-four-core CPU and have change to spare. But it also raised more questions.

ñSomethingôs not right, Mr. Kikuoka. Why are you so fixated on this case? First of all, Iôm positive that this is just one of those weird occult stories that takes on a life of its own. Two people suffered heart failure and stopped showing up in-game, so the rest of the community made up a legend to explain it,ò I said flatly.

Kikuoka straightened his glasses with slender fingers, hiding his expression from me. He was clearly considering how much of the truth to reveal, and how much to keep hidden. A shrewd man, exactly as I thought.

ñAs a matter of fact, the bosses *are* worried about it.ò The bureaucrat was back to his usual smile. ñThe real-world influences of full-dive technology are under more scrutiny from a variety of fields than anything else. The social and cultural impact is undeniable, but the biological impact is hotly debated as well. They want to know how the human condition is changed by the virtual world. If itôs determined that there is proper danger, itôs possible that a move to regulate will be in the works again. As a matter of fact, there was almost proposed legislation on the matter right after the *SAO* Incident. But I, and the rest of the Virtual Division, feel that it would be wrong to hold back the tide nowð for the sake of your generation, the ones enjoying these VRMMOs. I want to find the truth behind this odd series of events before it gets used for political purposes by those who want to crack down on the technology. If it turns out to be total nonsense, thatôs the best outcome. I want to be sure of that. What do you think?ò

ñGiven your understanding of young people playing VR games, Iôll choose to interpret your position as being altruistic. But if youôre really that worried about it, why not go through the actual companies involved? Consulting their logs should tell you who shot Zexceed and Tarako. Even if the registration data within the game is nonsense, you could get an IP address and contact the provider to learn the real name and address.ò

ñIôve got a long reach, but not long enough to cross the Pacific.ò

Kikuokaôs bitter expression didnôt look feigned this time.

ñThe developer of *Gun Gale Online* is a company called Zaskaré Actually, I donôt even know if theyôre a proper company, but at any rate, the servers are based in America. Theyôve got excellent customer support in-game, but their actual office location, phone number, and e-mail address are all private. I swear, ever since The Seed was unveiled, these VR worlds pop up like bamboo shoots.ò

ñéOh, really.ò

I looked disappointed, but kept my cards close to my chestð only Agil and I knew the origin of the VRMMO development suite known as The Seed. As far as the rest of the world knew, the replica of Aincrad that appeared in the new *ALfheim Online* was simply left behind on the old *SAO* server that the late RCT Progress inherited.

ñSo basically, if we want to get down to the truth of the matter, weôve got to make direct contact in-game. Of course, weôll take every precaution we can in the name of safety. Youôll dive from a room weôve prepared for you, with a full-time monitor that will automatically disconnect the AmuSphere if its output does anything funny. Iôm not asking you to get shot; I just want you to react based on what you see and how you feel. Soé are you in?ò

I realized that the noose was completely around my neck. There was no getting out of this one.

Regretting my decision to come, I also couldnôt deny that my interest was getting piqued. The power to affect the real world from the virtual worldé If such a thing existed, could that be the beginning of the world-changing power that Akihiko Kayaba sought? Was the incident that began on a cold winter day three years ago still ongoingé?

If that was the case, maybe I did have a responsibility to see this unfold.

I shut my eyes, let out a deep breath, and said, ñAll right. I donôt like being railroaded into this, but Iôll do it. But I canôt make any guarantees Iôll be able to find this Death Gun guy. We donôt even know if heôs real.ò

ñAh, yesé about that.ò Kikuoka smiled, all innocence. ñDidnôt I tell you? One of the players present at the first shooting got an audio log of the room. He brought a compressed version of it to us. Itôs Death Gunôs voice. Have a listen.ò

He extended a wireless earbud to me. *I hope your heart stops next*, I thought as I eyed him suspiciously.

ñéHow considerate of youð thanks,ò I said instead.

I stuck the bud in my ear and watched Kikuoka tap at the screen. A low buzz of excitement sounded in my ears. Suddenly, the murmuring stopped. A piercing statement cut through the tense silence.

ñThis is the true power, the true strength! Carve this name and the terror it commands into your hearts, you fools! My name, and the name of my weapon, isé *Death Gun*!!ò

The voice was strangely metallic and inhuman. And yet I vividly felt the flesh-and-blood human presence beyond that shout. It was the voice of someone not role-playing, but channeling a true impulse to slaughter.

2

Get off at Exit C-10 of the Chiyoda Line, in Otemachi Station. Glance at watch, on left hand.

Five minutes left until three in the afternoon. Asuna Yuuki was about to lower her hand when she caught the date in the little windows in the watch face.

Sunday, December 7, 2025.

It was not a special date or anniversary. But something meaningful and emotional filled Asunaôs chest. She raised her head and began walking down Eitai Street in the direction of the Imperial Palace and thought to herself:

Very soon, itôll be a yearé

She didnôt bother to include the other part of that sentence: *é since I came back to this world*.

Asuna had gone from the iron fortress of *SAO* to the birdcage of *ALO* before she was finally freed into reality in the middle of January. What happened to her in the virtual world was slowly shifting from recent experience to more distant memory, but there were moments like this when she was filled with wonder that she was actually in the real world.

The orderly placement of paving stones in the wide street. The rustling of the trees as the chill wind brushed them. The passing crowds, faces tucked into coat lapels or scarves. And Asuna herself, as she passed through this flow.

These were not 3D objects modeled with digital code, but real minerals, plants, animals.

But what did *real* mean, anyway? If it meant ñclusters of atoms and molecules,ò then they were no different from those virtual polygons. The polygons were real, they just existed in the memory banks of a server somewhere. The only difference was the type of particles they were.

Was it just a matter of reversibility? Everything in the real world, organic or not, could not be restored to its previous state if destroyed. But objects in the virtual world could be replicated from the same information down to the very last byte.

éNo.

That was not necessarily the case. In Aincrad, there had been loss, unrecoverable and permanent. The things that Asuna had touched, felt, gained, and lost in those two years in the virtual castle were undoubtedly real.

But if that was the caseé

ñéWhat is the difference between the real worldé and the virtual worldé?ò she mumbled to herself.

ñOnly the amount of information,ò came the answer from right next to her. She jumped up with a start.

ñWh-wha?!ò

She turned to see a boy, blinking in surprise.

Longish bangs in front. Slender, fine features with just a hint of sharpness. A plain black shirt with a black leather jacket and faded black jeans.

It was so close to the look of his old avatar that it seemed strange not to see sword pommels over his shoulders. Asuna took a deep breath to sooth the sweet, lonely pain in her breast, and beamed.

ñé Oh, you startled me. You came out of nowhere! Did you use a teleport crystal or something?ò

Kazuto Kirigaya smiled wryly.

ñI didnôt come out of nowhere. I made it to the meeting place just in the nick of time.ò

ñHuhé?ò

She looked around and realized he was right.

The gentle afternoon sun warmed the street and glittered off the surface of the moat. The bridge just ahead led to a heavily guarded gate. They were just before the gate to the Imperial Palace, as Kazuto had suggested. Sheôd been lost in thought as she walked, and came upon their meeting place without even realizing it.

Asunaôs grin turned shy and she shrugged.

ñHa-ha, I guess I was on autopilot. So, umé hello, Kirito.ò

ñBetter watch out, thereôs no nav function in real life. Hey, Asuna.ò

Their greetings exchanged, Kazuto suddenly narrowed his eyes and stared at her.

ñWh-whatôs up?ò she asked, arms crossed in front of her.

Kazuto hastily shook his head and mumbled, ñEr, umé wellé just thinking, that outfit looks good on you. Makes me rememberéò

ñHuhé?ò

She looked down at her clothes, and in two seconds, Asuna understood what he meant.

She was wearing a coat for the first time this winter: white tweed, with an ivory white knit sweater and a red skirt that sported an argyle pattern.

In other words, she had dressed herself in the colors of the old Knights of the Blood guild. It occurred to her that sheôd probably worn that white-and-red knightôs uniform nearly every day in Aincrad. No doubt Kazuto was reminded of those times by her outfit today.

She ran her left hand up and down her waist and grinned again.

ñé Youôre right. I donôt have the rapier, though. And I canôt help but notice youôve chosen black for yourself, Kirito.ò

He smiled bashfully. ñI donôt have the dual blades, though. I usually do a better job of avoiding an all-black outfit, but Sugu washed all of my clothes this morning, so this was all I had to wear.ò

ñThatôs what happens when you let your laundry pile up,ò she noted, jabbing him disapprovingly on the shoulder, then slipping her hand around his arm.

ñSo it just so happens that weôre both in our old colors today. What are the odds?ò she asked, looking up just slightly so she could see into his eyes. He coughed gently and answered without much emotion.

ñWell, if we keep meeting up regularly for a year, such things will happen eventually.ò

ñOh, come on! Youôre supposed to say, óI know, right?ô not get all logical on me!ò She pursed her lips and tugged on his jacket sleeve. ñCômon, letôs not just stand around here all day. Itôs going to get dark soon.ò

ñUm, yeah.ò

She sidled up next to him and started crossing the bridge over the waterway.

The imperial gate, white and traditional, was lit by the already reddish western sun, throwing black shadows over the bridge. Though it was a Sunday, the cold weather kept the tourist crowds away.

They passed a police officer in a heavy coat and went through the gate to a little checkpoint, where they took plastic entrance tickets. After the silver fence they were in the midst of a tiny woods so peaceful, it was hard to believe they were smack in the center of Tokyo.

It was Asunaôs idea to go somewhere on Sunday, but it was Kazutoôs suggestion that they meet outside the Imperial Palace gate.

The palace itself was off-limits, of course, but the northeast section of the East Garden, which was within the moatôs ring, was actually open to the public on Sundaysð a fact that Asuna didnôt know until today. Naturally, it was her first time visiting. As they made their way along the wide path, she was struck by a sudden curiosity, and turned to the boy at her right.

ñWhy did you choose the palace as our date spot, anyway? Are you actually a history buff?ò ñUm, not really. The main reason wasé well, because I was just busy with an errand nearby before thisé ò

He snorted briefly, remembering something, then returned to his ordinary gentle smile.

ñIôll tell you more about that later, but for now, donôt you think the Imperial Palace is kind of a fascinating place?ô

ñé Fascinating? How so?ò she wondered. He reached out with his right hand and pointed at the thick trees surrounding them.

ñItôs about one and a quarter miles north to south, and just under a mile east to west. If you add in Kitanomaru Park and the outer gardens, the total area is about 1.3 square miles, which is twenty percent of Chiyoda Ward all on its own. Itôs way larger than the Vatican or Buckingham Palace, though not as big as Versailles. Itôs not just the size, thoughð there are no subways or tunnels underneath it, and a no-fly zone over it. Basically, this is like one giant vertical area of no-entry smack in the middle of Tokyo.ò

A map of Tokyo materialized in Asunaôs mind. She spun her finger around in the air absently as she thought, then nodded in understanding.

ñNow that I think about it, the major highways around the center of the city are either circular routes or radial routes stretching outward. I guess this must be the center around which they all stretché ò

ñExactly. Tokyo isnôt a grid pattern like Kyoto, itôs a city built in concentric circles. And the very center of it is completely shut off from the rest, not just physically, but also insofar as information. In a way, itôs like the World Tree in the old *ALO*é oops. Didnôt mean to drudge up bad memories.ò

ñItôs okay, Iôm fine.ò

Asuna had been trapped for many months atop the giant tree at the center of that world. She shook her head to show that it was all right and asked, ñI understand that itôs physically off-limitsé but what do you mean, informationally?ò

ñOh, wellé ò

Kazuto looked around the woods, and briefly pointed out a few spots.

ñSee the security cameras there, there, and over there? Thatôs a completely stand-alone security system. Thereôs a closed network here with zero connections to the outside.ò

ñOhhé And theyôre rather strangely shaped cameras, too, arenôt they?ò

Kazutoôs finger was pointing to a pole, atop which sat a black sphere. If he hadnôt pointed it out, she would have assumed it was just a light pole.

ñIôve heard theyôre testing out next-gen security tech hereé At any rate, itôs smack in the middle of Tokyo, but itôs also its own little isolated world. Thatôs a fancy way of putting it, though.ò

ñHa-ha, just a bit.ò

As they talked, the path wound around an enormous stone wall and rose up a sudden hill. They walked in silence for a few moments and the view opened up before them. Over the wall was an enormous grassy field so large it was hazy. The grass was dried and dead in the midwinter cold, and the trees around it had lost all of their leaves, but it was sure to be a splendid sight in the spring.

ñThis is where the old Edo Castle used to be. The great hall that you see in all those historical dramas was apparently on the northern end of that grass field.ò

ñLetôs go see!ò

Asuna squeezed Kazutoôs hand and picked up her pace. There were still very few other visitors, and nearly all of them were foreign tourists. On the way, they were stopped by a couple with two adorable blonde daughters, asking for a picture to be taken, so Kazuto politely obliged. The wife offered to take a picture of them in exchange, so they bashfully lined up for a photo of their own.

Once the photo file was sent to their phones, they waved goodbye to the little girls. As the family walked away into the orange setting sun, Asuna heaved a heavy sigh.

ñéYou tired?ò Kazuto asked. She shot him a dirty look.

ñAb-so-lute-ly not! I was just thinking about us being like that in the futé ermé Oh, forget it!ò

Her cheeks burned when she realized what she was about to say, and raced ahead.

ñH-hey, wait up!ò

She and Kazuto raced a short distance until they reached the little path that split the field into north and south. They found a bench near a fork in the path, and plopped down.

She still had her head turned away from him in a huff. Eventually, he found something to say.

ñWell, umé Iôm sure Yui would be happy to have a little sister.ò

Despite the fresh rush of blood to her face at such a direct acknowledgment, Asuna couldnôt help but chuckle.

ñY-yeah, right.ò

ñWhat? Why would you laugh? Thatôs meané ò

ñHa-ha, sorry, sorry. Itôs really a shame that we canôt live with Yui over here, tooé ò

Yui was the name of a girl theyôd met on the old *SAO* server. In reality, she was just a mental health counseling program ð an AI ð but she accepted Asuna as her mother and Kazuto as her father. As Aincrad was collapsing around them, Kazuto managed to sneak her core program out in his NerveGear so that she didnôt get deleted with everything else. Now she ñlivedò in a desktop PC Kazuto had prepared just for her in his room.

But the only way they could interact with her directly was within a full dive ð in other words, within *ALO*. They could contact her in the real world using their cell phones, but that was limited by battery power, and wasnôt the same as being ñwithò her.

No matter how much Asuna loved Yui as a daughter, and no matter how much Yui loved Asuna as a mother, there was always a wall between them ð the wall that separated the real world and the virtual world.

Kazuto suddenly squeezed her hand.

ñItôs all right. Weôll be able to live with her someday, once full-dive tech evolves more, and augmented reality functions are commonplace.ò

ñYeahé Iôm é Iôm sure youôre right.ò

ñAs time goes on, the distinction between reality and the virtual world will get even more blurry. The only major wall between us right now is the amount of informationé ò

She savored Kazutoôs words and squeezed his hand firmly, then looked up.

ñYou mentioned that earlier, Kirito. Something about the difference between the real world and virtual world being the amount of information. What does that mean?ò

ñWellé ò

His eyes wandered for a moment, then glanced down at their hands, intertwined atop the bench.

ñThereôs still a difference between holding our hands like this in reality, and doing the exact same thing in *ALO*, you know?ò

Asuna concentrated on the sensation of her left hand.

The pressure of the palm pressing against hers. The warmth that kept away the winter chill. Those sensations still existed between the fairy avatars of *ALfheim Online*. But even the most advanced full-dive technology couldnôt replicate the adhesion that seemed to suck the skin together, the friction of the fingerprints, and the faint pulse of blood flowing through the veins.

ñYeah, youôre rightéYou still feel more with your real hands. So thatôs what you mean by óthe amount of informationô?ò

ñYes. But as the AmuSphere evolves and becomes able to emulate skin sensations and pulsing, what then? Will you be able to tell the difference between a real hand and an avatarôs hand just by touch?ò

ñI will,ò Asuna said instantly. Kazuto blinked in surprise. She stared directly at him as she added, ñIôll be able to recognize your hand, at least. Probably not other peopleôs.ò

In that moment, the temperature of Kazutoôs hand rose slightly, and its pulse quickened. She grinned in satisfaction.

ñThereõs still more information you get in reality from all the senses, not just touch: sights, sounds, flavors, and smells. Soé even if the current AmuSphere gets AR functionalityé ò

ñI know. The instant you see or touch something, youõll know if itõs real or not.ò

AR, or augmented reality, was a feature that would use the AmuSphere to combine digital information with the userõs real vision and hearing. If that became possible, there would be no need for desktop PCs or cell phones anymore. You could display a virtual desktop in front of your eyes, browse the web and send e-mail, even navigate roads and attach info tags to people or objects. The possibilities were endless.

For the moment, RCT and the other major IT manufacturers were hard at work, but there were still major barriers to usability ð the electron pulses went out of focus with the movement of the body, extra batteries were required, and so on.

ñSadly, there are people who think constant AR will never be applicable with the current headgear model. But Iõm sure that if thereõs a breakthrough on the technical end, and we can get massive sensory data here in the real worldé we might be able to experience an instant full dive without lying in bed while plugged into a wall.ò

Asuna nodded and continued where he left off.

ñThen we can cross the wall between worlds and be with Yui all the time. Iõm sure that day will come.ò

ñYeah, it will.ò

Oddly enough, the words they exchanged were nearly the same as what they said after leaving Yui behind on the twenty-second floor of Aincrad. When Asuna realized this, something warm flooded into her heart, and she rested her head on Kazutoôs shoulder.

The promise of that reunion was fulfilled just months later.

So what they said just now was sure to come true as well.

As close as they were to the winter solstice, the sun plummeted behind the trees to the west as if it had been dropped. Birds flocked against the brilliant red sky as they returned to their nests.

Centuries ago, the people living in the castle here atop this vast grassy field must have looked up at the same sunset. Centuries later, freed from the flow of time, would someone look upon the same red skyé ?

ñAhhhé ò

Asuna murmured, feeling a nostalgic, melancholic urge escaping her breast. Kazuto looked over at her. Their eyes met, and she smiled.

ñI think I understand why you brought me here.ò

ñUhé y-you do?ò

ñYes. If the world is built from the axis of time and the plane of space, then the center of Tokyo, the real world where we live now, is this place right here. And the central axis of the virtual world, which is even now expanding thanks to The Seed, was that old castle. Thatôs why the color of this sunset feels so nostalgicé ò

Kazuto blinked a few times, then beamed widely.

ñI seeé Yeah, good point. Actually, I hadnôt thought about it that hard. Buté what you just said did help me realize one thing.ò

ñWhatôs that?ò

ñThe shape of Aincrad. Maybe that spherical cone shape was meant to be a symbol of the axis of time and plane of space.ò

Asuna thought it over and eventually agreed.

ñYesé maybe youôre right. But if thatôs the case, the world that our guild leader sought to create eventually tapers down to a point and disappears. At least, until a certain someone blew the entire thing up.ò

ñG-geez, Iôm sorryé Vice Commander.ò

They shared a silent chuckle. A few seconds later, Kazuto sucked in a deep breath and stood up from the bench, still holding her hand.

ñWell, time to get going. This place closes at five.ò

ñOkay. We should bring Liz and Leafa next time. I bet it would be fun to have a picnic on the grass.ò

ñYeah. Maybe in the spring.ò

Using his grip to get to her feet, Asuna took one last look at the sunset in all directions.

She wanted to go home. Not to the Yuuki household, in the Miyasaka neighborhood of Setagaya Ward. To their little forest cottage that had temporarily existed on the twenty-second floor of the old Aincrad.

The little log cabin was obliterated in the destruction of the floating castle, but Asuna had a secret plan percolating in her heart. Until that plan came to fruition, the room they rented in Yggdrasil City atop the World Tree in *Alfheim* was home to her, Kirito, and Yui.

As they walked toward Hirakawa Gate on the north end, Asuna turned to Kazuto and asked, ñCan you log in tonight? I want to tell Yui about what we just talked about.ò

ñYeah, sure. Is ten oôclock okay?ò he answered with a smile. It was soon wiped away.

ñWhatôs wrong? Do you have something else to do?ò

ñNo, itôs not that. Iôm pretty sure I can do it tonight, butéactually, Asunaéò

It was rare for him to be at a loss for words like that. He mumbled for a few seconds, but what he said next froze Asunaôs heart with fear.

ñéPretty soon, I might be converting my *ALO* Kirito to a different gameéò

ñéWh-what?!ò she screamed. Startled, a few birds took off from a nearby branch.

3

Dusk.

The low-hanging clouds were painted yellow by the tilt of the setting sun.

The shadows of the ruined high-rise buildings, remnants of the former age, steadily grew across the wasteland of rock and sand. If she was going to be on standby for another hour, sheôd have to think about switching to her nighttime loadout.

Sinon didnôt like fighting with night-vision goggles, because it diminished the tension of that kill-or-be-killed mentality. She sighed atop the shadowed concrete, wishing the party that was her target would show up before the sunlight disappeared. The other five people in the depressing ambush with Sinon had to be thinking the same thing.

As if to give voice to the entire party, an attacker, with his small-caliber submachine gun at his waist, grumbled, ñDamn, how long are we gonna be waiting hereé? Hey, Dyne, you sure theyôre coming? The lead wasnôt a bust, was it?ò

Dyne, the craggy, burly leader of the squadron, shook his head. The large assault rifle hanging from his shoulder clattered.

ñTheyôve been hunting the same route, same time, nearly every day for three weeks. Iôve confirmed it all myself. Theyôre a little late on the return today, but itôs probably just because the mob spawn rateôs a little higher than usual, and theyôre cleaning up more of ôem. Weôll get better rewards for it, so donôt complain.ò ñYeah, but,ò the man in front pouted, ñtodayôs target is the same group we attacked last week, right? Wonôt be they be on guard and change their routeé?ò

ñItôs been six days since our last ambush. And theyôve been visiting the exact same hunting ground every time. Their squadronôs built for mob huntingéò

Dyneôs lips curled into a mocking smile.

ñNo matter how many times they get attacked and lose their earnings, theyôll just keep trying to make it up by hunting more. The perfect prey for a manhunting squadron like us. We can pull this off another two or three times; youôll see.ò

ñI dunno if I can believe that. Anyoneôs going to put together a plan after they get attacked the first time.ò

ñMaybe theyôd be on the lookout the day after, but theyôll forget soon enough. Field mob algorithms are the same every day. After a while, they get to be just as robotic and automatic as the monsters they kill. Weak losersðno pride at all.ò

Sinon buried her face deeper into her muffler, disgusted by the conversation. The presence of emotions only dulled oneôs trigger finger, yet she couldnôt prevent her irritation at Dyneôs boastful gloating.

Apparently Dyne felt that parties who hunted mobs on a routine were lower than him, a PvPer, yet lying in wait to ambush the same party over and over had no effect whatsoever on his pride. If they were going to spend hours in wait here on neutral ground, they could have earned a lot more fighting another high-level squadron in the underground ruins.

Naturally, that increased the chance that theyôd die and respawn in town without their equipment. But that was battle.

Only trial by fire truly disciplined the soul.

Sheôd been working with Dyneôs squadron for the last two weeks. She regretted the decision to join almost immediately. Despite their proud claims of fighting only other players, they were a safety-first party, only setting their sights on inferior opponents and disengaging at the very first sign of danger.

But Sinon raised no complaints about the focus of the squadron. She followed Dyneôs orders and pulled the trigger when she was supposed to. She wasnôt trying to make a name for herself through loyalty. She wanted to be sure that when she faced off against Dyne as an enemy, she had as much data and knowledge as possible to land the perfect head shot.

While she had nothing good to say about his personality, Dyneôs eighteenth-place finish in the last Bullet of Bullets and the rare SIG SG 550 assault rifle that sprayed 5.56 mm rounds were the real deal. So she shut her mouth, kept her eyes bright, and absorbed all of the information he carelessly dispersed.

Dyne blathered on.

ñé The thing is, theyôve all got optical guns for hunting mobs, so they canôt arrange for live-ammo guns for the entire group on a whim. At best, they might have one for covering fire, but no more. And Sinonôs got her sniper rifle to help take out whoever uses that one. Thereôs absolutely no flaw in our plan. Right, Sinon?ò

Sinon barely nodded with her face still stuffed in the muffler, suddenly the unwanted focus of the conversation. She did not speak up, hoping that would indicate she didnôt want any part of it.

Dyne snorted in annoyance, while the attacker grinned at her and said, ñYeah, that makes sense. With Sinonôs long-distance fire, weôve still got the advantage. By the way, Sinocchié ò

He crawled over toward her, never leaving the shade of their cover, the lazy smile still plastered on his face.

“You got any time later? I was hoping to raise my Sniping skill and I could use a few pointers. Feel like getting a cup of tea?”

Sinon glanced quickly at the weapon on his waist. His main weapon was an H&K UMP, a live-ammo submachine gun. He played an Agility-first build, so his evasion in a head-on battle was notable, but level-wise and equipment-wise, he was not worth remembering. She wracked her brains to recall his name and dipped her head.

“I’m sorry, Ginrou. I’ve got something to do IRL later…”

Her voice was high-pitched, clear and adorable, not at all like her real voice. Sinon felt sick to her stomach; this was why she hated talking. Despite the fact that she’d just turned him down, Ginrou’s leering smile did not vanish from his lips. A subsection of the male players in the game seemed to feel some kind of pleasure from hearing her voice. The skin of her back crawled at the thought.

The first time she dove into the VRMMORPG *Gun Gale Online*, she chose a bland, crude male body for her avatar. When the game made it immediately known that switching genders from player to character was not allowed, she wanted to pick as tall, muscular, and soldierlike a body as possible.

Instead, the randomly generated body was that of a petite, fragile, doll-like little girl. When she made to delete her account and build a new character, the friend who had invited her to try the game said it would be “such a waste” to get rid of it right away, and eventually she leveled the character up to the point that it really *would* have been a waste to start over.

Because of that, she had to deal with the occasional unwanted offer like this. Sinon played to fight, not to deal with this nonsense.

ñOh, right, youôre a student in real life, arenôt you, Sinocchi? College? Got a report to write?ò

ñéYeah, sureéò

It felt like after sheôd accidentally admitted something about school when logging off one day, the come-ons had gotten much more insistent. She could never admit that she was actually in high school.

The other two front-line players, who had been fiddling with their menus through all of this, finally approached to keep Ginrou away. One of them, a man with green bangs that hung over his smoke-styled goggles, said, ñGinrou, canôt you see youôre bothering her? Donôt bring up RL.ò

ñYeah. Just because youôve been playing solo here and in real life for years doesnôt mean you have to bug her,ò said the other man, who had a camouflage helmet tilted at a rakish angle. Ginrou knuckled both of their heads.

ñLike either of you have had a girlfriend in years!ò

The three of them cackled and Sinon scrunched up even smaller in disbelief.

If you played GGO to battle against other players, there were much better ways to spend your downtimeðmaintaining focus, checking equipment, and the like. If you were trying to earn enough in-game money to cash out, you were better off in a mob-hunting squadron. And if you wanted to meet people, even among the gender-fixed games, there were much more fantastical worlds with a better gender ratio than this miserable, blasted ruin of a landscape. What did these people think they were doing here?

She buried her face back in the muffler and traced her fingers along the massive rifle barrel, propped up on its bipod.

Someday, I will destroy your avatars with this gun. Will you still be laughing and bothering me then?

Her foul mood was absorbed by the chill of the barrel, and slowly subsided.

“Here they come.”

The last member of the party, spying with binoculars through a hole in the collapsed concrete wall, announced the presence of their target a full twenty minutes later.

The three attackers and Dyne stopped chatting at once, and the mood in the air turned serious.

Sinon glanced up at the sky. The yellow clouds were taking on a tiny bit of red, but there was plenty of light left.

“Finally decided to show up,” Dyne growled softly. He leaned forward and took the binoculars from the scout at the wall. He peered through the same hole, checking the status of the enemy for himself.

“…Yep, that’s them. Seven… that’s one more than last week. Four in front with optical blasters. One with a large-bore laser rifle. Plus… ooh, one with a Minimi. That one had an optic last week, so they must’ve switched over to live ammo in response. If you’re gonna snipe anyone, that’s the one. Last one’s… wearing a cloak, so I can’t see a weapon… ”

Sinon lay flat and pressed her face to her rifle’s high-power scope. Their group of six was lying in wait in a ruined building from the old civilization; the building sat on a hill with some vantage over the surrounding terrain. The ragged concrete walls and steel rebar skeletons made for good cover, and the view made it perfect for surveying the wasteland ahead.

She looked up to the sky again to ensure that the virtual sun would not reflect in her lens, then flipped up the scope covers, front and rear.

With her right eye pressed to the lens and the scope set to the lowest magnification, she could see small dots moving across the landscape. She tweaked the magnification dial with her fingertips. With each click of the dial, the little black sesame-seed dots grew until she saw seven players.

As Dyne said, four of them had optical assault guns, two of which were constantly checking their surroundings with binoculars of their own. But unless the group had nearly mastered the Search skill, they would not find Sinonôs squadron lying in wait.

In the middle of the pack were two players with large guns on their shoulders. One had a semiautomatic optical laser rifle, while the other had a live-ammo light machine gun, the FN Minimi. In real life, that was an excellent squad infantry support weaponð even the Japanese Self-Defense Force used it. Indeed, because over half the power of the optical gun attacks would be neutralized by their defensive field, it was the Minimi that posed the most threat by far.

There were two main types of weapons in *Gun Gale Online*: live-ammo guns and optical guns. Live ammo delivered plenty of damage per round and could penetrate defensive fields. But they also required the user to lug around heavy ammo clips, and bullet trajectories were susceptible to the effects of wind and humidity.

Meanwhile, optical guns were much lighter to carry, and featured longer range and higher precision. The energy packs that served as clips were much more compact as well, but the strength of the guns was diminished by the defensive fields that players wore as armor.

Therefore, it was common wisdom that optical guns were better against monsters, while live-ammo guns were better suited for human players. But there was another feature that distinguished the two categories.

All the optical guns were designed from scratch with fictional names, but the live-ammo guns were based directly on actual, existing firearms. Therefore all the gun fanaticsð such as Dyne and Ginrouð who made up a significant portion of the GGO player base happily preferred to carry around live-ammunition guns, only switching to optics when hunting monsters.

The rifle Sinon had her cheek pressed against was also a live-ammo gun. But before sheôd come to this game, Sinon couldnôt have told you a single gun manufacturer. She learned their names as items within the game, but she had not developed even the slightest bit of interest in learning more about their real-life counterparts. To her, the unlimited number of guns in the world of GGO were nothing more than 3D-modeled objects, and she didnôt even like the thought of seeing a real gun in the regular world.

All she did was destroy her virtual enemies with virtual bullets in this land of slaughterð until her heart turned hard as stone, and her blood cold as ice.

Sinon would pull the trigger again today to keep that process in motion.

She swept aside any unnecessary thoughts and budged the rifle slightly. At the back of the enemy formation was a player wearing enormous face-covering goggles and a large camouflage cloak. As Dyne had said, the playerôs equipment was hidden.

He was extremely large. There must have been a hefty backpack slung over his shoulders, because the cloak bulged alarmingly over his back. The hands peeking out of his sleeves were empty. Whatever weapon hung from his waist, it couldnôt be any larger than a submachine gun.

ñCanôt see his face because of the cloak?ò Ginrouôs voice floated up from behind. He spoke in a joking tone, but there was no hiding the note of tension. ñThink itôs him? You knowé Death Gun.ò

ñHah! Like he exists,ò Dyne snorted. ñBesides, didnôt they say that guy was short, and wearing a ghillie suit? This oneôs huge. Six feet at a minimum. Iôm thinking he must be a Strength-build hauler. Heôs carrying their loot haul, ammo, and energy packs in that bag. Probably doesnôt have anything decent to shoot with. Ignore him in combat.ò

Sinon watched the man through her scope.

The heavy goggles hid his expression. Only his mouth was exposed. The lips were tightly shut and absolutely still. The other members, though on guard, seemed to be chattingðshe caught the occasional flash of white teethðbut the large man in the back was completely silent. There was no wavering in his silent march.

Half a year of experience in *GGO* taught Sinonôs instincts that this man was the true threat, much more than the one with the Minimi. But aside from the backpack, there were no other obvious bulges in his cloak. Perhaps he was hiding a small but high-powered elite weapon. But anything that good and that small would have to be an optical gun, and not powerful enough to make the difference in PvP. Perhaps the pressure she felt emanating from him was her imaginationé

After some hesitation, Sinon spoke up in a soft voice.

ñI get a bad feeling from him. I want to snipe the guy in the cloak first.ò

Dyne pulled the binoculars away and looked at her, eyebrow cocked.

ñWhy? Heôs barely got any gear on.ò

ñé I have no proof. I just donôt like him being such an uncertain variable.ò

ñIf thatôs the case, shouldnôt the Minimi be the obvious variable to worry about? If the blasters sneak up on us while youôre still getting rid of that one, weôll have trouble on our hands.ò

While protection fields were effective against optical guns, their benefit lessened as the distance between gun and target shrank. At very close range, it was quite possible for a laser blaster with its much larger magazine to overpower the alternative. Sinon had no leg to stand on, so she withdrew her opinion.

ñé All right. First target is the Minimi. If possible, Iôll take the cloak with my next shot.ò

The problem was that when it came to sniping, the only truly effective shot came before the target knew it was under attack. Once the enemy knew where she was firing from, evasion was as simple as staying out of her line of fire.

ñHey, no more time to talk. Distance of 2,500,ò said the recon man, who had taken the binoculars back from Dyne. The leader nodded and turned to the three attackers behind him.

ñAll right. Weôre going to follow the plan, move up to the shadow of the building ahead, and wait for them. Sinon, once weôre on the move, we wonôt be able to see them, so you need to alert us if anything changes. Iôll give you the signal to snipe.ò

ñRoger.ò

Sinon put her eye back to the rifle scope. Nothing had changed in the party. They still marched across the wasteland, their pace slow and easy.

As the scout had said, two and a half kilometers separated Sinonôs squadron from the enemy. Just slightly closer than halfway in between, an even larger ruined building loomed over the landscape. Dyne and the rest were going to use that as cover and ambush their prey as they approached.

ñAll right, move out,ò Dyne commanded. Aside from Sinon, the others muttered quick acknowledgments. Their boots scraped on the gravelly sand as they slid down the backside of the sloping hill. Sinon waited for the whistling evening wind to drown out their footsteps, then pulled out a small headset from below her muffler and affixed it to her left ear.

For the next few minutes, Sinon would be fighting the sniperôs lonely battle against pressure. The next bullet she fired would have an enormous influence on the fight that ensued. The only things she could rely on were her trigger finger and the silent gun. She rubbed the massive barrel with her left hand. The black metal answered her with chilly silence.

More than anything else, it was this gun that had cemented Sinonôs infamy in this world as a very rare type of sniper. It was called a PGM Ultima Ratio Hecate II. At four and a half feet long and just over thirty pounds, it fired enormous .50-caliber (12.7 mm) rounds.

In the real world, from what she'd heard, it was categorized as an antimateriel sniper rifle, meant for piercing military vehicles or structures. It was so powerful that some fancy-named treaty prohibited it from being used against human targets. There was no such law here.

She'd earned it three months ago, around the time she was experienced enough to be considered a veteran of GGO. On a whim, she'd been playing solo in a massive ruined dungeon beneath the capital city SBC Glocken when she fell into a chute trap.

Gun Gale Online took place after a massive war in the distant past caused civilization to collapse, and the players were the descendants of space colonies who had returned to Earth. Glocken itself was the giant ship they'd used to reach the planet, and beneath the ship was the ruin of one of the giant cities that had been wiped out in the war. The city's ruins were crawling with automatic fighter drones and genetically modified creatures that greeted the adventurers, who dreamed of unearthing ancient treasures. Sinon fell right into the bottom level of that dungeon, its most deadly region.

It was not the kind of place a solo player should be able to handle. Soon she had resigned herself to dying in the very first encounter and spawning back at the save point in town. Eventually, she ended up in a huge, stadium like round space, which featured an extremely grotesque creature.

Based on the size and name, it appeared to be a boss monster, but she had never seen it on any of the news sites or wikis. Upon this realization, what little of a gamer's soul Sinon had was stimulated into action. If she was going to die, she'd die fighting this thing. She hid in the exhaust vents over the stadium and trained her rifle on the beast.

The battle did not turn out as she expected. The boss had a