

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY abec

018

SWORD ART Online Alicization LASTING

SWORD ART ONLINE
ソードアート・オンライン



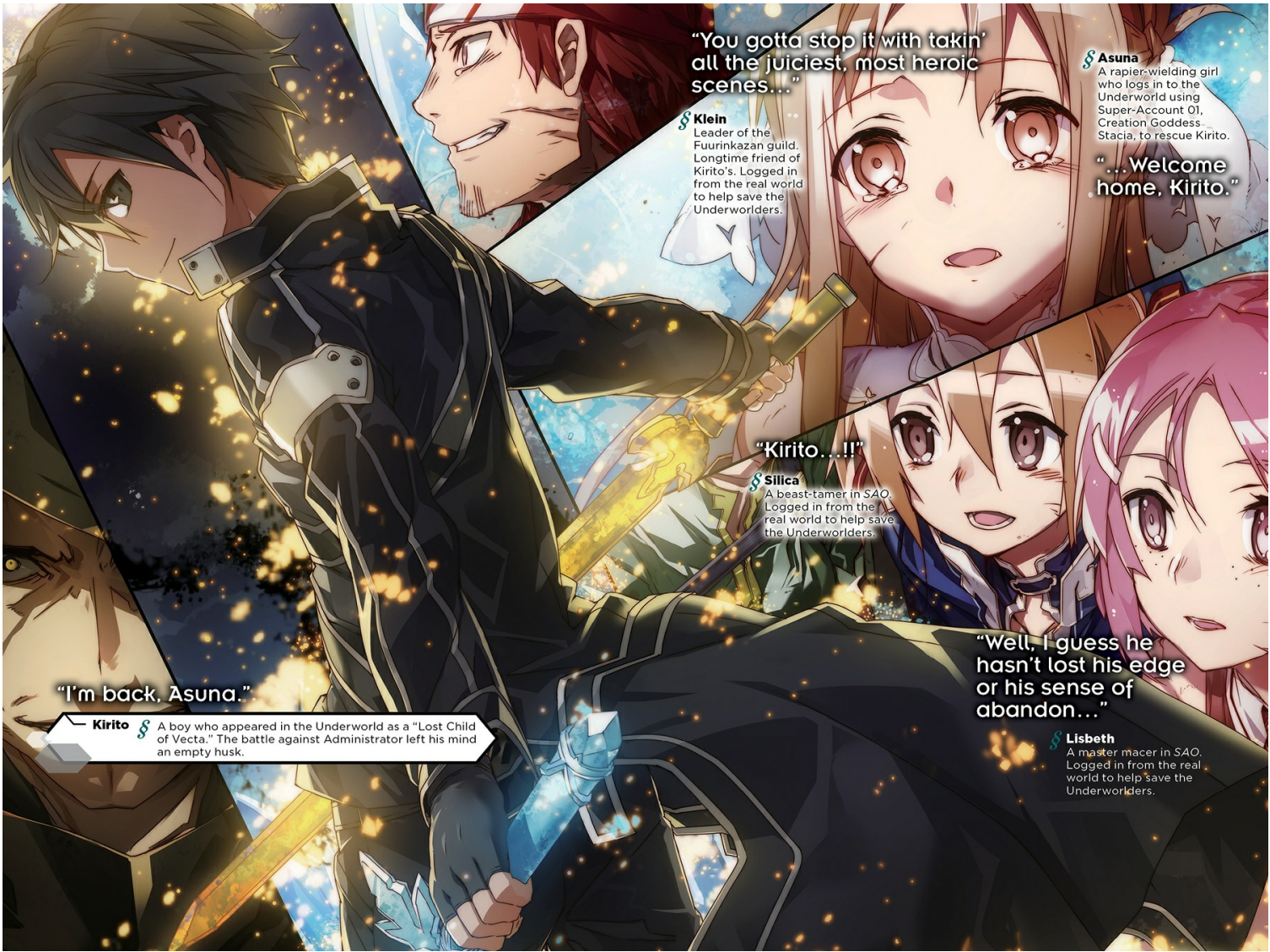
018

REKI KAWAHARA ABEC BEE-PEE

SWORD ART ONLINE

Alicization Lasting





"You gotta stop it with takin' all the juiciest, most heroic scenes..."

Klein
Leader of the Fuurinkazan guild. Longtime friend of Kirito's. Logged in from the real world to help save the Underworlders.

Asuna
A rapier-wielding girl who logs in to the Underworld using Super-Account 01, Creation Goddess Stacia, to rescue Kirito.

"...Welcome home, Kirito."

"Kirito...!!"

Silica
A beast-tamer in SAO. Logged in from the real world to help save the Underworlders.

"I'm back, Asuna."

Kirito
A boy who appeared in the Underworld as a "Lost Child of Vecta." The battle against Administrator left his mind an empty husk.

"Well, I guess he hasn't lost his edge or his sense of abandon..."

Lisbeth
A master macer in SAO. Logged in from the real world to help save the Underworlders.

Seizing actual defensive power. Arming the *Ocean Turtle* with the lightcube-bearing unmanned fighter drones that the nation was already developing, so that it could go independent as its own nation.

For now, that was just a pipe dream. How would the *Ocean Turtle* get the UAVs? How would they fund basic functions and be self-sufficient? How many months—if not years—would it take for Underworlders to transition from flying their dragons to properly operating supersonic jets? There were just too many challenges to overcome.

In either case, one absolute requirement for continued existence would be a high-capacity wireless connection aside from government-owned communication satellites. Only then could the Underworlders dive into the brand-new world of The Seed Nexus and allow people of the real world to understand them. Whether this would be possible depended entirely on the IP address written down on the paper in my pocket.

I finished changing, left the room, and held the memo out to Dr. Rinko. She hesitated for a moment, then lifted her hand and took the piece of paper.

“...I’m guessing *he* has something to do with this,” she murmured. I gave her a little nod.

I didn’t know how he knew about the names of the various floors of Central Cathedral. But there was only one man who could have set up a secret connection to the Internet from the *Ocean Turtle*.

Akihiko Kayaba...Heathcliff.

In a sense, my battle couldn’t end without a direct confrontation between him and me. Heathcliff had passed very close by the STL where I slumbered, then vanished back into the darkness of the network. He would show himself again, though. He would gather all the fragments born of that floating steel fortress to one place and bring a conclusion to it all.

I faced away from Dr. Koujiro, who was setting up for the dive, and booted my smartphone. “Yui, have you figured out anything about that address?”

Her cute little face shook side to side on the screen. “*The location of the server is in Iceland, but I think it’s only a relay point. Its defenses are very strong,*

and I can't search for any route beyond that."

"I see...Thanks. Were you able to trace the source of the message to Alice?"

"Well...I spotted traces that resembled it on Node 304 of The Seed Nexus, but I lost the signal there, too," she said, drooping her shoulders.

I rubbed the touch screen with a fingertip. "No, you've done enough. If it's in the three hundreds, that would be the United States...You don't need to search any further. Even for you, making direct contact would be dangerous. He's essentially the same kind of being as you now."

"Well, I'm better!" she protested, puffing out her cheeks.

I smirked and poked her. "At any rate, I'm going now. This time it's not going to involve all these dangers...I think."

"If anything happens, I'll come to help you at once!"

"And I'm counting on that. So long."

She held up a tiny hand on-screen, and I brushed it with a finger, then turned off the device's power. Alice and Asuna were just emerging from the women's changing room at that moment. Fortunately, they seemed to have forged a second cease-fire; their faces were shining with expectation.

I shared a look with each of them in turn and said, "Remember, two hundred years have passed. We can't begin to guess what the human and dark realms look like at this point. That's shorter than the three centuries Administrator ruled over things, of course, so it probably won't be *dramatically* different, but..."

Alice's head bobbed. "At the very least, it seems certain that Central Cathedral will still be standing. So I think we can assume that the Human Empire will be the same."

Asuna brushed Alice's arm and grinned. "And we have to go and wake up Selka first thing."

"That's right!"

We shared a moment of firm resolution—then headed over to the two STLs and one reclining seat. I lay back against the chilly gel bed. Dr. Rinko operated

the control that lowered the large headblock down over the top of my head.

“All right...here we go,” she said.

The three of us replied in unison. “Right!”

The enormous machine began to hum. My fluctlight—the light quantum network that constituted my very consciousness—split off from my flesh, removing me from my bodily senses and gravity.

My mind was translated into electronic signals and thrown into a vast network without boundaries.

I flew at ultra-high speed down a high-capacity optical line, soaring toward another familiar world I considered home.

Into a new adventure.

Into the next story.

First, I saw a light.

A tiny little speck of white that stretched and grew into rainbow gradient, until it covered my entire vision—and beyond.

Within it a space of pure dark appeared.

I dived straight through the tunnel of light toward the darkness.

But it was not, in fact, total darkness.

Black was only the background, with a frightening number of colored dots that quietly flickered against it.

They were stars. A night sky.....

But not quite. No, because...

“...Aaaaah!!”

I screamed when I looked down at my feet.

Because there was no ground beneath them.

I flailed and swung my legs, but the bottoms of my boots touched nothing. The boundless starry sky continued in every direction—sides, top, bottom. Stars, stars, stars.

“Eeeeeek!!”

“Wh...what is this?!” said other voices to my sides.

Other hands grabbed my outstretched ones. On my right floated Asuna, dressed in the clothing of the goddess Stacia: pearl-white half armor and skirt and a beautiful rapier.

On my left, Alice was in her golden breastplate and long white skirt, with a white whip and a golden-yellow longsword at her sides.

Both of them were in a panic, gazing wide-eyed at the endless sky of stars before us.

But in truth...this was not even a sky.

“...Outer space...?” I mumbled, hardly daring to say it.

Suddenly, I was aware of a ferocious chill. Alice and Asuna both sneezed spectacularly. The temperature was so low here that I could easily feel the rapid decline of my life value by the moment.

The fact that I could hear their voices meant that we weren’t in the actual vacuum of space, but it must have been very close. And we were simply floating there, without protection.

I focused hard, generating a defensive wall of light elements in a sphere large enough to surround all three of us. Once the thin shining layer was enveloping us, that piercing chill finally began to subside.

Once the immediate danger was behind us, I looked around at the stunning sight before me again. A tight belt of stars ran from the upper right of my field of view to the lower left. It was like the Milky Way—but no matter how I tried to connect the brightest stars, I couldn’t find a single familiar constellation.

This *was* the Underworld.

But in that case, where was the land...and where was the sky over it?

I felt a terrible chill steal over me and shivered.

It couldn’t have...vanished, could it?

After two hundred years, had the very earth that made up the human realm

and the Dark Territory simply run out of its own life? Had the tens of thousands of people who lived on it all ceased to exist when it happened...?

“No way...It can’t be...,” I murmured in a trembling voice.

Suddenly, Alice squeezed my hand so hard it creaked. “Kirito...look there.”

I turned to my left. The golden knight had turned herself around to look behind us. Her arm was outstretched, gesturing toward a single point.

Breathlessly and oh so slowly, I turned to see.

There was a star.

Not a true stellar star, like those twinkling in the great distance—but a planet, vast and close, taking up a large part of our view.

The upper half of the sphere was sunk into thick darkness. But around the middle, the black transitioned to navy, then to ultramarine and azure. And on the lower half of the sphere, right at its lip, the planet shone bright blue.

The blue was steadily growing brighter and brighter. A white orb bulged from the center of the curve, spraying rays of light in a straight line.

It was dawn.

The sun—Solus—hiding on the far side of the planet was coming into view.

I shielded my eyes from its brilliance and examined the surface of the planet again. The parts of the curve that had been deep navy blue before were transitioning into brighter hues already.

Through scraps and trails of white cloud, I could see the outline of a continent.

It was shaped like an inverted triangle, wider across than it was from top to bottom.

At the upper right of the continent was a concentrated mass of lights. At the top left, an even larger spread of light.

This was a clear sign of civilization. And upon further examination, there were several glowing lines extending from those two central sources, grids stretching farther downward.

From the locations of the cities on the continent, I instantly knew exactly what I was looking at.

The city on the right was Obsidia, capital of the dark world.

The city on the left was Centoria, capital of the human realm.

That continent—the planet it was on—was the Underworld where I'd lived and fought for so long.

I tore my eyes from the planet and looked over at Alice. The only thing I saw in her face was deep shock and profound awe.

Then her eyes bulged. She let go of my hand and rummaged in the small pouch attached to her sword belt, then drew out two eggs small enough to fit in the palm of her hand.

One was faint green, while the other shone blue. The light they gave off pulsed stronger and weaker in two-second cycles. Like breathing. Like a heartbeat.

Alice clutched the two eggs to her chest and closed her eyes. Tears ran silently down her cheeks and fell free, floating as little droplets.

I could feel tears coming to my own eyes. I looked over to the person still holding my right hand and saw that Asuna's eyes were damp, too.

As the two of us watched, Alice took one step forward across the sea of stars. She held the two eggs in her left hand and reached toward the vast planet with her right.

Her eyes the same color as the dawning star and sparkling with unlimited brilliance, the golden Integrity Knight called out in a voice pure and crisp and regal, "Hear me, land!! Underworld where I was born and land that I love!! Is my voice reaching you?!"

The stars in the endless universe trembled, and the blue planet below briefly shone brighter, as though taking a breath.

I closed my eyes and listened well.

I listened to the words that ushered in a new era, carving them into my memory for all eternity.

“I have returned to you!I am here!!”

PROLOGUE III

STELLAR YEAR 582

“This is *Blue Rose 73*. I have confirmed atmospheric escape. Transitioning to interstellar cruising speed,” said Integrity Pilot Stica Schtrinen into the voice transmitter near her mouth, pushing the control rod forward with her left hand.

The dragoncraft’s silvery form shuddered. Its widespread wings began to shine a faint blue. It was collecting the scarce resources of the vacuum of space and transferring them to the drive mechanism.

The eternal-heat elements locked in the core of the mechanism screamed in response, sending white flames from the primary thrust apertures on either side of the craft’s long tail. She felt her body being pressed back against the pilot seat. The sensation of powerful acceleration was something she couldn’t experience within the planet’s atmosphere, and it put a smile on her face.

“Blue Rose 74, *affirmative*,” came a brief response from the transmitter. She looked at the auxiliary visual board on the right. Her number two was following to her side, jets burning bright.

The pilot of the second craft had been Stica’s partner since they’d been ordained together, Integrity Pilot Laurannei Arabel. She was silent most of the time, and when piloting her dragoncraft, she was even less chatty.

But even Stica’s addiction to speed paled in comparison to hers. Stica grimaced and warned her, “You’re going too fast, Laura.”

“You’re too slow, Sti.”

Oh yeah?

The rules of the Underworld Space Force were absolute, but even their drill instructor couldn’t see them out beyond the atmosphere. And it was a whole three-hour journey to reach the companion star of Admina. That meant there was room for a little error.

Stica gave the control rod another push, pulling away from the second craft

just a tiny bit. She leaned back in her seat, grinning.

When her eyes drifted upward, she caught sight of the detailed art relief on the canopy of the cramped pilot's chamber.

Two vertical swords, white and black. Blue roses and golden osmanthus flowers entwined around them. The insignia of the Star King, a figure now turning into legend.

Thirty years had passed since the Star King and Queen left their palace of Central Cathedral on the main star, Cardina.

Stica and Laurannei were only fifteen years old, and four years into their service as Integrity Pilots, so they never had the chance for a royal audience. But they'd grown up on the stories their mothers, also pilots, had told them about the royal couple. And those mothers had heard plenty of stories from theirs, and so on.

The Schtrinen and Arabel families had served as Royal Pilots—originally called “knights”—for all two hundred years of the Star King's long reign. Seven generations ago, the knights Tiese Schtrinen and Ronie Arabel protected the Star King before he was king, and they achieved great deeds in the battle against the four emperors who sought power on Cardina's First Continent. The imperial families and higher nobles' corrupt and abusive power was stripped from them, and the common people enslaved on their private property were freed.

After that, the king developed the first dragoncraft and used it to fly over the Wall at the End of the World, which surrounded the continent and rose all the way to the edge of the atmosphere.

In the uncharted lands he found there, the king patiently negotiated with the ancient god-beasts and occasionally defeated them in singular battle, taking and developing their fertile lands, then giving them over to the goblins and orcs, who had suffered prejudices under the label of “demi-humans,” so that they could have their own nations.

Once the king had traveled all of Cardina, he set his sights on the endless universe above.

The dragoncraft were improved again and again, until they were capable of leaving the atmosphere altogether. He found the companion planet that orbited Solus with Cardina, and he named it Admina.

Then he created large interstellar dragoncraft capable of undertaking regular routes, established the first colony city on Admina, and was urged to take on the role of the Underworld's first Star King.

Under the rule of the king and queen, who possessed eternal life without aging, the two stars prospered—and would do so for eternity, all thought. But one day, the two of them left behind a prophecy and entered a long sleep. Thirty years ago, without ever returning to face their people, they vanished from the world.

Since then, governing had been conducted by a council of representatives from the military and civilians. With no enemy to fight at this point, the ground force and the space force were shrinking, but in accordance with the king's prophecy, pilots underwent the same fierce training they always had since ancient days.

This was the king's last message:

One day, the gate to the real world will open again. When it does, a great upheaval will come to both worlds.

Stica couldn't grasp this event in practical terms, but it was said that when the gate to the other world was opened, it would usher in a time when the continued existence of the Underworld itself would come into flux. They could not just hope for coexistence and brotherly love. They would have to prove their strength in order to maintain their pride and independence. Otherwise, the five human races of man, giant, goblin, orc, and ogre would suffer a tragedy even greater than the Otherworld War of two centuries past.

But Stica was not afraid.

No matter what world she might visit and what age might arrive, she would fight valiantly as long as she had the wings of her dragoncraft.

I'm a member of the proud Integrity Pilots, maintainers of a tradition stretching back to the days of creation, she thought, looking up at the insignia

on the roof again.

Without warning, red blazed on the bottom of the main visual board. Both a written message and an alarm indicated the detection of an element agglomeration of abnormal scale.

“Wh-what?!” she yelped, sitting up again.

Over the voice transmitter, she heard Laurannei say nervously, “Blue Rose 74, *detecting the approach of an ultra-life-form of darkness! Element density... twenty-seven thousand?!*”

“It’s the mythic spacebeast...the Abyssal Horror...”

Even as she spoke its name in the sacred tongue, an empty darkness covered the right edge of the main visual board, like a pot of ink had been dropped there.

Of all the known spacebeasts, the Abyssal Horror was the most dangerous. It was over two hundred mels at its largest, with its twelve huge tentacles fully extended from its spherical body. That was twenty times the size of a single-seat fighter dragon.

Its vast body was made entirely of high-density darkness elements, meaning that it shrugged off essentially all types of attacks. The reason it was so dangerous was something else, however.

Unlike many of the other god-beasts, the Abyssal Horror refused to engage in any communication with humans. It seemed to run solely on the impulse to destroy and slaughter. When it spotted any dragoncraft on an interstellar journey, it would pursue them directly until it devoured them.

The Star King was said to have treated all the god-beasts with respect—but when he heard reports of the large passenger dragoncraft destroyed on the way to Admina, he attempted to destroy this particular creature. But even the king, whose powers were greater than an entire army’s, could not completely destroy the Abyssal Horror.

Through careful observation, they learned that the spacebeast orbited between the two planets on a fixed speed and trajectory. The best they could do to minimize its threat was to restrict interstellar flight so that they could

safely avoid its path.

Naturally, Stica and Laurannei had taken off from Cardina at a time that the spacebeast would have been on the far side of Admina. It didn't make sense.

"Why...? It's appearing too early...," Stica murmured, hands trembling on the control rod. She recovered her spirit quickly, however, and shouted into the transmitter, "Left turn, one-eighty degrees, then withdraw at full speed! Retreating to Cardina's atmosphere!"

"Affirmative!!" Laurannei replied, a spike of nerves in her voice.

Stica steered the craft left and pulled the rod as far back as she could. White flames shot from the stabilizing thrust apertures, pressing her body so heavily into the seat that she could barely breathe. The stars in the visual boards blurred from points into lines toward the bottom right.

When the turn was complete, the main visual board featured the blue shine of the planet Cardina, which she'd left less than an hour before. It felt close enough that she could reach out and grab it yet devastatingly far away.

She put on maximum acceleration, praying. The eternal-heat elements screamed and roared.

But the speedometer's needle came to a stop five whole pips short of its maximum value. The Abyssal Horror was taking resources from such a vast range that the resource-collection tanks in the dragoncraft's wings couldn't reach their maximum potential.

The rear view on the auxiliary vision board made it clear that the spacebeast's black form was much larger than before. She could even see its writhing tentacled appendages already.

Soon the ends of two especially long arms began to glow a faint bluish purple.

"Sti, it's going into attack position!" advised her second.

She acted instantly. "I see it, too! Deploying rear light shield!!"

She hit one of the buttons on the control board to her left. The craft's pelvic armor opened with a series of clunks. Stica took a deep breath and focused.

"System Call! Generate Luminous Element!!"

Through the conducting channels within the control rod in her hands, ten light elements were shot out of the craft's wings into space. They followed Stica's mental command, transforming into a circular defensive wall.

Right then, the spacebeast's arms hurtled past the bright, purplish light they were harboring. With a shriek like tearing metal, the blasts of darkness roared through empty space.

Just three seconds later, they made contact with the light walls.

"Aaaah!!" screamed Stica when the dragoncraft shuddered with the impact. She could hear Laurannei screaming through the voice transmitter, too.

The two blasts broke through the light shield Stica had deployed as though it were paper, tearing deep into the rear side armor of the craft. Instantly, her instruments glowed red. Something went wrong with the resource conducting channels, and her speed slowed noticeably.

Through the auxiliary vision board, she sensed the Abyssal Horror, which was no more than an amorphous blot of darkness, somehow leer at her.

On the auxiliary vision board, the second craft was missing a wing and rapidly dropping in speed. "Laura! Laura!!" she shouted, and she was relieved to hear a response.

"...It's all right. I'm fine. But...she won't fly anymore..."

"We won't have any choice but to eject out of the crafts. We'll have to find a way to get back to Cardina with just the thrusters on our pilot suits..."

"I can't! I mean...I won't! I can't leave her behind!!" shouted Laurannei. Stica couldn't tell her anything to the contrary.

A dragoncraft was not just a steel construction the pilot sat inside. It was your one and only partner, a piece of your heart. Just like the flying dragons that the Integrity Knights of the distant past were said to ride.

"...No. No, I suppose not," Stica murmured, carefully squeezing her control rod. She took a deep breath, smiled, and said, "Then let's fight to the end. Make another turn, then fire main cannons at maximum power. Will that suffice, Laura?"

“...Affirmative.”

Her last transmission was short and brusque, just like she always was.

Still smiling, Stica pulled back on the rod, leading her wounded dragon into another one-eighty turn. The main visual board displayed the massive oncoming beast. Eight of its writhing tentacles were glowing with its next round of blasts now.

Oooooooooohng, the Abyssal Horror roared. Or perhaps it was laughing.

At least let me give it a good stinging as I die. Anything to prolong the time until it attacks this route again, Stica thought, pushing the red button on top of the rod halfway in.

The main cannon on the tip of the dragoncraft clanked into position. Normally she would generate whatever the most effective element was for the target, but since the Abyssal Horror’s bodily form was thin at best, even its opposite element of light would do very little damage.

Instead, she decided to go with a frost-element attack, her best type.

The dragoncraft’s jaws glowed a clear blue. She glanced over at the other craft—its cannon was glowing red. Laurannei had chosen heat elements.

The spacebeast was just a thousand mels away now. It stretched out its eight tentacles, preparing to attack.

Stica inhaled, ready to give the command to fire. But instead...

“W-wait, Sti!! What’s that...?!” Laurannei gasped into her right ear.

What could it possibly be now? she wondered.

But then Stica saw it, too.

A shooting star.

Just above the main visual board, a shining white light was approaching at incredible speed.

For an instant, she thought it was a dragoncraft. But she ruled that out right away. It was much too small. It was less than two mels, only the size of a human being...

In fact, it *was* a human being.

What she'd thought was a star was the shine of a spherical wall of light elements. On the inside, she could clearly make out a black shadow in the shape of a person.

The figure came to a stop about a hundred mels in front of the two dragoncraft. At nearly the same moment, the Abyssal Horror bellowed and unleashed eight light blasts.

Before she could even grasp the shock of seeing an unprotected person in the freezing chill of outer space, Stica was shouting at them. "What are you doing?! Hurry—get away!!"

But the person did not budge at all.

The end of their long coat flapped violently as they remained stationary, arms crossed boldly. That thin defensive wall was going to be less useful than wet paper against the Abyssal Horror's blasts. Stica could already imagine the figure transforming into a spray of blood and flesh as soon as it made contact with the roaring purple blasts.

"Run awaaaaay!!"

"Watch out!!" she and Laurannei shouted together.

Eight bursts of purple light roared closer, each one nearly three mels in size.

They stopped in the middle of nothing, as if colliding with an invisible wall and bouncing off in random directions.

Space shook.

Before Stica's stunned eyes, the stars seemed to waver, like the surface of a pond struck to produce ripples. The shock wave reached her dragoncraft, rumbling and vibrating it. Speechless, she glanced at the little gauge on the right end of the main visual board. It had instantly shot all the way to its top.

"No way...Th-that's impossible..."

Stica had never seen the Incarnameter swing as much as 20 percent at a time. With fear in her voice, Laurannei said, "I don't believe it...Such incredible Incarnate strength...As though the entire universe is shaking..."

But there was no denying what was happening before them. The small, unprotected human being, without an elemental wall, used his Incarnate power—the greatest technique of the Integrity Knights of yore—to deflect the spacebeast’s attack.

Ooooooooooooooh..., roared the Abyssal Horror in the distance. But was it in anger or in fear?

The beast seemed to sense that its remote darkness blasts would not work, so it began to charge, thrusting its multitude of appendages forward.

The small figure reached his arms behind his back and pulled loose the two longswords that were equipped there.

“He’s not going to fight it...with *swords*, is he?!” Stica gasped, leaning forward and placing her hands on the vision board.

The Abyssal Horror was over two hundred mels in size. And its body was an amalgamation of darkness without form. No little sliver of metal less than a mel long could do anything to a monster like that.

But the mysterious swordsman calmly, easily pointed the white sword in his left hand toward the mammoth creature.

He shouted something.

Through the vacuum of space and the thick armor of the dragoncraft, Stica somehow heard his voice loud and clear.

“Release Recollection!!”

A bright light flashed, covering her main vision board. When she could see again a moment later, there were many beams of light shooting from the swordsman’s blade toward the monster.

They looked as tiny as threads compared to the huge spacebeast, but as they pierced through and tangled around its shadowy form, the creature clearly began to lose speed. The twelve appendages writhing on their own stiffened—as though they were freezing solid.

But that wasn’t possible. The Abyssal Horror was designed to thrive in the ultra-cold region of outer space. There couldn’t possibly be any chill colder than

that.

Stica's shock didn't last long, however; Laurannei's voice in her ear obliterated it.

"That technique...isn't that a Perfect Weapon Control art...? No, a Memory Release art...?"

"What...? Only Supreme Integrity Pilots should be able to use that!"

"But...I can't see how it could be anything else..."

A third roar from the spacebeast cut them off.

Awooooooooooh!!

Its tied-up body trembled, and three new tentacle arms appeared. They became like great spears of night, bearing down on the mysterious swordsman.

But the man remained calm and composed, drawing his right-hand sword this time.

Again, he shouted, *"Release Recollection!!"*

The blade erupted with dense darkness, deeper and heavier than that of the spacebeast's arms. A preposterously huge blade over fifty meters long met the three appendages. When the two sides made contact, there was another shock wave, which seemed powerful enough to bend space itself. The dragoncraft rocked, and purplish lights crawled about in empty space, lighting up the vision boards.

Stica could no longer put her shock into words.

There were only seven Supreme Integrity Pilots, and this man was using their greatest power—multiple times at once. Not even a fleet of destroyer craft could handle the Abyssal Horror's full power, and he was handling it all—just a single man.

Even her own parents back in Centoria wouldn't believe her if she told them about this swordsman.

But the true shock was yet to come.

"Sti!! There's a...another person!!"

Stica looked around until she saw, coming from the same direction that the mysterious dual swordsman had come from, another human figure arriving.

This one was smaller. Through the defensive layer of light elements, she could see long hair and a skirt. In her right hand was an incredibly delicate-looking rapier.

The swordswoman raised her arm—then swung it down to point forward.

A rainbow aurora appeared in the blackness of space, flickering and wavering in beautiful fashion. There was also a very strange sound that accompanied it, like a chorus of countless voices singing at once.

Laaaaaaaaaaaaa!

The needle on the Incarnameter rattled and vibrated at its upper end.

A star appeared.

More accurately, a truly massive meteor came out of nowhere, passing just overhead with fire wreathing its surface.

Any dwarf planets that had existed between Cardina and Admina had been obliterated decades ago. But the sense of gravity that shook the entire dragoncraft could not possibly be an illusion.

The Abyssal Horror roared, sensing the huge rock plummeting toward it. It generated two more new appendages, holding them out to catch the satellite.

The impact was silent.

The tip of the burning meteor instantly obliterated the spacebeast's arms and sank easily into the center of its enormous body.

The beast that was an agglomeration of condensed darkness turned to dust in a single blow.

Oooooooooooooo.....

Its death scream overlapped with the explosion of the meteor; the combination rattled across the universe. Stica's eyes stung at the sight of resources exploding outward, from white to red to purple.

"D...did they beat...that monster.....?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

But...

“Oh...no! Not yet!!”

Her second craft pilot always seemed to keep her cool and spot things a moment before Stica did.

The fragments of the Abyssal Horror, which had appeared to be obliterated and burned into nothing by the explosion, were now moving. Each one was only a portion of a single mel in size, tiny pieces of the original whole. They wriggled and wandered away like a swarm of flies.

According to the records, the Star King had pushed the beast to this point, too.

But he was unable to eradicate all the thousands of pieces of the Abyssal Horror as they escaped. So the beast fled to the ends of the universe to escape until it could heal its wounds and attack the stellar route again.

This was only going to be a repeat of that legend.

“No...you can’t let it get away!! You have to burn all those things!!” Stica found herself shouting.

But the dual swordsman and the fencer did not seem capable of moving yet. And no wonder, after the tremendous exhibition of Incarnation they’d just managed.

The shards of the Abyssal Horror squirmed away, seemingly mocking the humans.

And yet—suddenly the swarm of flies scattered. They buzzed and fled, disjointed, all in a panic.

Stica held her breath and touched the main vision board, magnifying its image.

She saw golden light.

Something was there, shining bright and pure like a tiny Solus. She magnified it further.

“.....A person.....”

Yet another swordswoman.

Hair like flowing gold. Armor of the same color. A brilliant-white skirt. And eyes that stared down her foes with the color of the blue sky.

.....I know her.

"I...I know this swordswoman...I mean, this knight," Stica whispered. She heard Laurannei whisper back, "*Me too.*"

The golden knight looked exactly as she was painted in the huge portrait hung in the throne room on the fiftieth floor of Central Cathedral. She was one of the greatest Integrity Knights in history, who'd achieved great feats in the ancient Otherworld War and disappeared in the midst of the fighting. In fact, her name was...

"...Alice...?"

The knight's hand moved, almost in recognition that her name had been called. She drew a longsword from her side with a smooth motion.

The yellow blade reflected the light of Solus to an almost blinding degree. In their fear, the minute fragments of the spacebeast lost whatever controlling force they might have had, fizzling away in random directions.

The knight held the sword before her body. She called out in a voice like wind that blew through space. The dragoncraft's Incarnameter burst right off its mount.

"Release Recollection!!"

The sword blazed even brighter. Its body made a sound like scraping metal and fragmented into a million tiny pieces.

The hilt was still in the knight's hand, however, and she swung it easily. The fragments spilled forth into the void, spreading like flower petals on a light breeze.

It turned into a golden meteor shower.

Each and every little bit of light exhibited frighteningly precise aim, piercing the fleeing scraps of the dark beast. Each bit of darkness, once shot through, was burned away into nothing by the brilliance of the golden line.

“.....Incredible...”

It was all that Stica could find the words to say. You could line up every last craft in the Integrity Pilothood, fire all their main cannons at once, and not hope to exhibit this much precision and power.

When the last little scrap of the Abyssal Horror, the deadliest spacebeast in all of the Underworld, succumbed to a golden arrow, it let out a scream that put all its others to shame.

Gyeeeiieeooooo.....

And with that, the creature was finally, truly gone.

Stica watched, dumbfounded, as the golden swarm of shooting stars gathered at the knight's hand and returned to being a whole sword again.

But if the golden knight really was the very Integrity Knight Alice of old, then who were the other two people? On the vision board, the knight returned the sword to her sheath and flew through space toward the warriors in black and pearly white.

The three had a brief discussion, then turned to face Stica and Laurannei.

They were too far away for Stica to see their faces clearly. But she could tell that all three of them were smiling.

Then the swordsman with the white and black swords put them behind his back again and waved to the pilots.

In that moment, Stica felt some tremendous emotion she couldn't describe piercing her heart deep, deep inside its core. A kind of lonely pain that took her breath away.

“Ah...ahhh...,” she murmured.

Quietly, Laurannei murmured, *“Sti, I know him. I know who that is.”*

“Yes, Laura. So do I...so do I.”

She nodded again and again.

It wasn't something she knew because she'd seen his portrait in the throne room. It was something else.

Her heart. Her fingers. Her soul knew him.

She felt the scent of honey pie, sweet and fragrant, tickling her nostrils.

A calming breeze blowing across the field. The warm light of the gentle sun.

Faint laughter in the distance.

In a daze, Stica put on her airtight helmet and pulled a handle on the right side of the pilot's seat. The temperature-controlled air squeaked and escaped. The layer of armor protecting the dragoncraft's control seat moved away, revealing the sea of stars overhead. Her second was opening her own cockpit as well.

Stica stood up in her seat, staring at the three warriors standing thirty mels away, waving at her.

But in fact...

...there was another.

Stica's maple-red eyes beheld the figure of a fourth person flickering into existence.

He stood just to the left of the one in black, smiling gently. He was wavering like heat haze, translucent and fragile, like he might vanish if she took her eyes off him for an instant.

The flaxen-haired young man looked at Stica and nodded firmly, just for her.

She felt tears burst from her eyes.

The warm liquid trickled down her cheeks, spilling into her airtight helmet.

In time, the sight of the young man melted away into the light of Solus as it appeared around the edge of Cardina.

At that moment, the young Integrity Pilot understood: This instant, *right now*, was the starting of the new age that the Star King had prophesied.

They were messengers, appearing from the past to open the door to the future.

Starting from here, the world was going to change.

The door to the other world would open, and the tide of a new age would rush through it.

That would not be the arrival of an age of paradise. This would be a time of revolution and turbulence in the Underworld, an age that none of them could imagine.

But Stica was not afraid.

She couldn't be—not when her heart was leaping with joy.

This encounter was something her soul had been dying to experience.



She blinked the tears away and stared straight ahead.

From a standing position, she reached to tilt the control rod forward.

The damaged dragoncraft wing took on a blue glow.

The eternal flame elements breathed, putting a tiny bit of life into the craft.

She looked over to Laurannei, and the two of them shared a knowing glance.

The girl of the Underworld, Integrity Pilot Stica Schtrinen, gently flew her dragon along.

Onward toward the unfamiliar strangers waving at her.

Toward the door to the new era.

Toward the future.

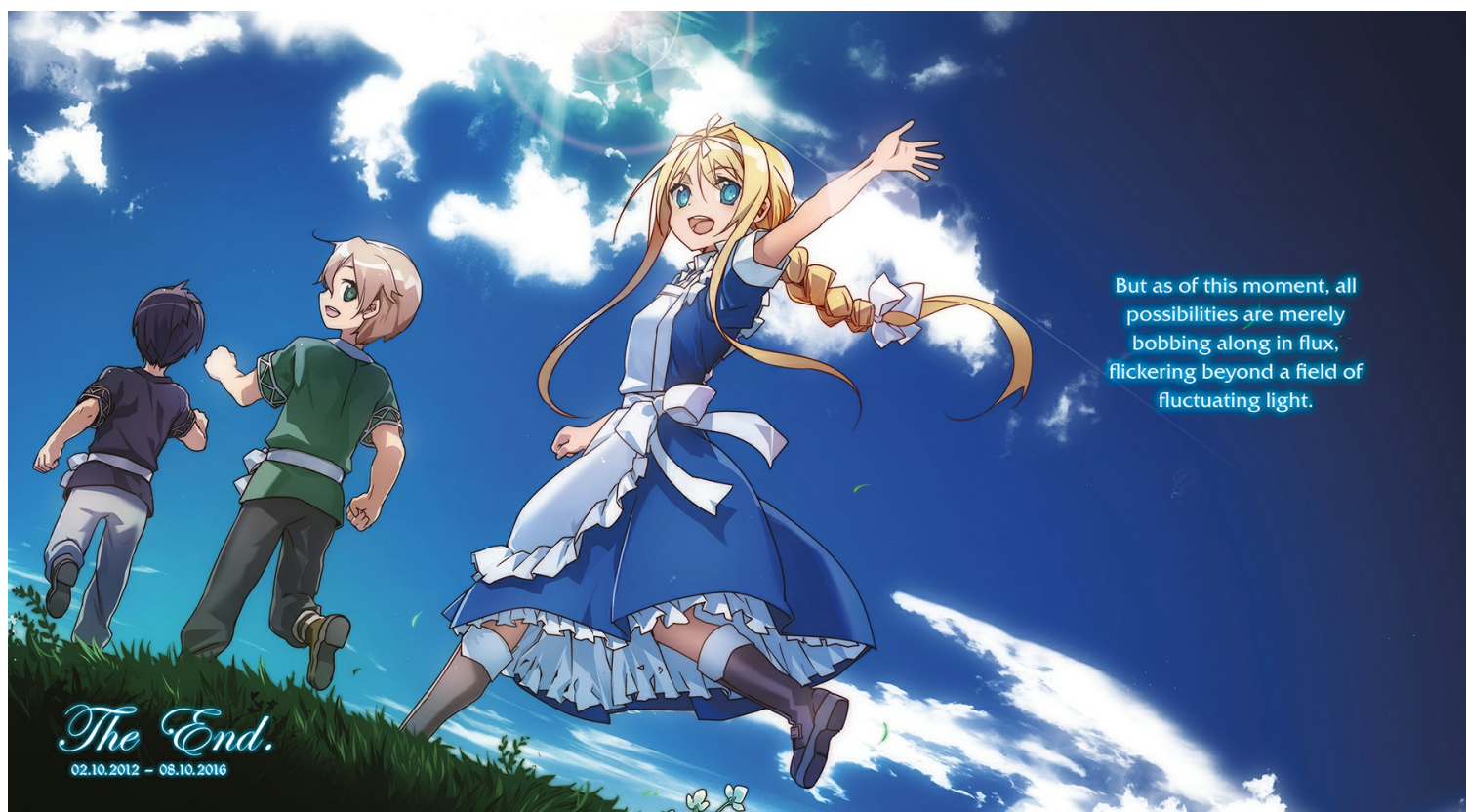
This tale ends here.

But Kirito and Asuna
and Leafa and Sinon and
others will join Alice in
battle beyond this point.

When next they gather,
swords in hand, it will be
for the final, greatest
battle of all: the
Inter-Intelligence War.

*The full story
has been told.*





But as of this moment, all possibilities are merely bobbing along in flux, flickering beyond a field of fluctuating light.

The End.

02.10.2012 - 08.10.2016

Thanks to good fortune for bringing us together...

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Neko Nekobyou
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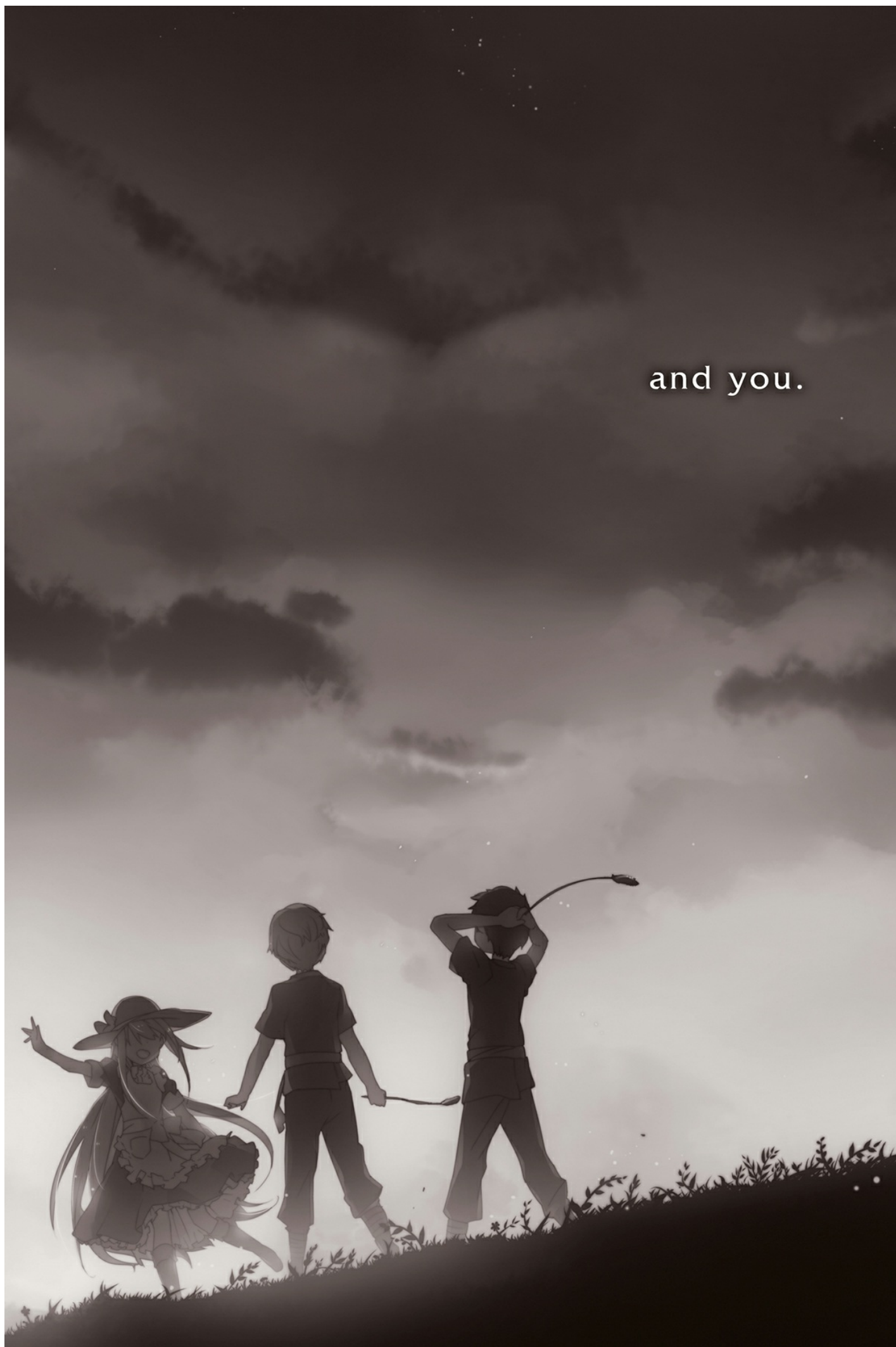
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《Game Unit》

Yosuke Futami
Yasukazu Kawai

and you.



AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Sword Art Online 18: Alicization Lasting*. And a huge, heartfelt thanks to you for following along with all ten volumes of the Alicization arc, starting with Volume 9.

To repeat something I wrote in the afterword of Volume 1, the story of *Sword Art Online* (SAO) was originally something I wrote in the fall of 2001 to submit for the Ninth Dengeki Novel Prize. I finished it by the deadline in spring of 2002 but was far over the page limit, and because I didn't know what to cut out, I gave up on submitting it.

In other words, when I started writing SAO, the only thing in my head was the Aincrad story—just the few weeks before the game was beaten on the seventy-fifth floor, in fact. But when I set up a website after that and published SAO as an online novel, I was fortunate enough to hear from many readers asking for more of the story. I wrote Fairy Dance as the second arc and Phantom Bullet as the third arc (titled Death Gun in the online version), with shorter stories sandwiched in between them. I remember starting the fourth arc, Alicization, in January 2005.

Writing this now, I cannot actually recall why I decided to leave the boundaries of VRMMOs I had been writing about to tackle concepts like bottom-up AI, drone weaponry, quantum brain theory, and simulated reality. All I can remember is writing and writing in a daze, hitting walls, and finding ways around them.

It was in July 2008 that the Alicization arc's online publication concluded.

About the same time, I was writing a story called *Chouzetsu Kasoku Burst Linker* for a novel-submission website. After six years' more experience, I

decided to try my luck with the Fifteenth Dengeki Novel Prize, and I was lucky enough to win. I changed the title from *Burst Linker* to *Accel World*, and that was my debut as a professionally published author. When I put the notice about this on my website, my editor, Kazuma Miki, saw it and sent me an e-mail saying that they wanted to read *SAO*.

I sent over all the data files I'd compiled over eight years of writing to them. Between their editing duties, they managed to read it all in a week. I still vividly remember when they said to me, "Let's publish this with Dengeki Bunko, too."

At the time, Miki said, "Let's make it our goal to get to the end of the Alicization arc." It seemed like a total pipe dream to me. If you converted the word count from the online version into a book manuscript, it would be over fifteen volumes. Even going at a pace of three books per year, it would need to capture reader interest for five whole years to get to that point.

I wasn't thinking about getting all the way to the end of the Alicization arc. I didn't think that my career as an author was going to last that long. But Miki's passion for making books, his work in recruiting abec to provide clean and powerful illustrations, and of course, the support of so many readers made it possible for the series to continue. Now, in August 2016, about seven years after Volume 1 came out, I've been able to release the final volume of the Alicization story.

As a matter of fact, there was a lot of added writing that went into the Dengeki Bunko version of *SAO*. This book is the eighteenth volume—the twenty-second if you include *Progressive*. It's the forty-fifth if you include my other series. It's been seven and a half years since my pro debut, and about fifteen years since I started writing *SAO*. It feels impossibly long, and it feels like it passed by in the blink of an eye.

Now that I've reached the end of it, what I'm left with in my chest is a vague question of *why* I wrote *SAO*, and this Alicization story in particular.

Because I liked online games and the idea of games turned deadly? That was probably all it was at the start. I don't know what would've happened if I'd turned in my Aincrad story to the Dengeki contest the way I'd planned, but I do feel it's likely I would have put just the Aincrad story on my website in

installments and called it a day. The scene I really wanted to write fifteen years ago was Kirito and Asuna sitting in the sunset, watching Aincrad collapse, then going back to the real world, where Kirito would start off in search of Asuna.

But I didn't stop there. I wrote *Fairy Dance*, *Phantom Bullet*, and *Alicization*, and perhaps the engine that kept me going was not just all the people visiting my website, but the story itself—the characters who laughed, cried, and fought together. I kept following, pacing behind Kirito and Asuna as they sought out new worlds and new adventures, until it brought me to today, I think.

If I stop typing and close my eyes right now, I feel like I can still see the backs of Kirito and his friends as they run toward the distant light. Their journey will not end, and I'm certain that many adventures still await them, in *ALO* and the rest of *The Seed Nexus*, in the sealed-off Underworld, and in the real world.

A part of me wants to follow along with those new stories, of course. But at the same time, the map of the future is so vast and uncertain, a part of me is hesitant. Before I step into the next world, I want to think about what the lengthy story of *Alicization* meant to Kirito, Asuna, Alice—and me—and soak in that feeling. That's my plan.

Over the course of the *SAO* series, I've come into the debt of a great many people.

Those who have handled the manga adaptations: Tamako Nakamura, Minamijyujisei, Tsubasa Haduki, Neko Nekobyou, Kiseki Himura, Koutarou Yamada, Shii Kiya.

Those who have taken part in the animation series: director Tomohiko Itou, character designers Shingo Adachi and Tetsuya Kawakami, action-animation director Takahiro Shikama, all the people from A-1 Pictures, producers Atsuhiro Iwakami, Nobuhiro Oosawa, Shinichirou Kashiwada, Jun Katou, Masami Niwa. Kirito's voice actor, Yoshitsugu Matsuoka; Asuna's voice actor, Haruka Tomatsu; Leafa's voice actor, Ayana Taketatsu; Sinon's voice actor, Miyuki Sawashiro; and all the other cast members. The singers for the theme songs: LiSA, Eir Aoi, Luna Haruna. Sound director Yoshikazu Iwanami, sound designer Yasuyuki Konno, composer Yuki Kajiura.

Those who made so many games: Yousuke Futami, Yasukazu Kawai. Takeshi

Washizaki, who did promotion on the radio and at events.

My editors, Kazuma Miki and Tomoyuki Tsuchiya. Tatsuya Kurusu, who drew my little maps and such. abec, who brought the story to life with such beautiful illustrations.

And lastly, to all you readers who followed along with the story to this point, my undying gratitude.

Thank you all so much. I hope you'll continue to love the *SAO* series.

Reki Kawahara—July 2016



Kirito will return.

Sword Art Online will resume
with a brand-new story.
Until next time!

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

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