



SWORD ART ONLINE CORDIAL CHORDS

- Short Story -

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[Gsimenas (Dreadful Decoding)]

- STORY -

Kirito decides to retire from Ordinal Scale. When he starts initializing the data, he gets a message from Yuna for his desktop mascot app. Kirito opens the message and installs the content to say goodbye to the AR idol, but she says “Kirito, help me” with strange gestures. Is this a new gimmick for the app or...?

Prologue

Gently, my fingers entwined with the chestnut hair, shining due to the early summer sunlight filtering through the trees.

A smooth sensation, as if they were streaming through my fingertips like liquid. Beads of light moved rhythmically as each piece of extremely thin hair slid down. All of this could not be completely reproduced in a VR *world*, no matter how *high-end* it was.

In older generation non-*FullDive* games, CG designers had exercised their ingenuity with methods of expressing their *character's* hair; by the beginning of the 2020s, they had already reached a *level* where everything seemed to be in place. However, the debut of the *NerveGear* brought about new challenges. In a virtual world that *supported* all five senses, hair needed not only to be beautiful to look at, but the appropriate tactile sensation needed to be felt as well.

Generating every single piece of the hundreds of thousands of hair on a real person as lines of *polygons* wasn't realistic. Even in older-generation games, hair was created in fin-shaped *parts*; it seems that this achieved a hair-like texture. However, if this method were to be used in a *FullDive* environment, it would create a big issue when hair was touched. Both the movement and sensation of the hair would be more like that of a thin *film* rather than a collection of small fibres.

Kayaba Akihiko, the creator of the *NerveGear* and SAO, handled the so-called three big hurdles of the *FullDive* environment: 《liquids》, 《food》, and 《hair》 by simply invoking *preset* sensation data, rather than using *real time rendering*. For example, if you shoved your hand into water, you'd feel the splashing, as well as the chilliness and resistance of the water, but all of it was just a combination of preset *data*; it did not completely follow the movements of the hand. The same applied to the sensation of chewing food, as well as the sensation of touching hair.

As for vision, it seems that *rendering* was used as best as possible, but, as could be expected, each piece of hair wasn't an individual object, instead, they were organised in very small, but *film-shaped parts*. So, you couldn't expect them to flow as freely as this. The same restraint was handed down to all *titles* following the current 《The Seed》 standards.

As I absent-mindedly thought about such things, my fingertips restlessly continued playing with the hair, when——

"Mm....."

A faint voice came out and the owner of the hair started moving around.

Although she had been in deep sleep with her head on my lap, it seemed that she had awoken, perhaps because of the sunlight falling on her face. After blinking several times, she focused on my face, then looked around.

At that point, perhaps having finally realised what posture she was in,

"Wawah..."

She attempted to jump up to her feet, but I lightly pushed her back down with my fingers that had been touching her hair just moments ago, now placed on around the second *button* of her blouse.

"There's still twenty minutes of lunch break left, so sleep a bit longer, Asuna."

"B-but..."

"Come on, didn't Kurahashi-sensei tell you that neuron *spine* regeneration will be faster if you get tons of sleep?"

"I believe that was referring to sleeping on my own bed at night..."

Despite muttering this, Asuna's body relaxed and her head once again leaned on my lap.

The higher vocational school in Nishitōkyō that we were attending, commonly known as the 《survivor school》, had an excessively large *campus* for the number of pupils attending it. Moreover, the campus had a strangely complicated structure and there were not so few places that were rather hard to reach if you didn't know how in advance.

This small green zone, surrounded by the clubroom building and the library building was one of them; the route to it seemed like one of those that lead to hidden *maps* in

games: after climbing up to the second floor of the clubroom building, you had to descend the exterior stairs and pass through openings in the hedge. Visiting it for a lunch break that only lasts fifty minutes incurred quite the cost in travel time, but we managed to catch the byakudan tree growing in the center of the green zone in full bloom, with loads of lovely, purplish red flowers blooming.

According to Asuna, a byakudan is an evergreen tree from India and it is apparently staggeringly rare to see such a big byakudan tree in Japan. I'm told that it's a 《hemi-parasitic plant》 and, apparently, a byakudan can't grow big unless it leeches off the roots of a neighbouring tree with its own roots about a year after it sprouts.

It seems that the byakudan tree in this school's green zone was parasitising a nearby Taiwan nemunoki⁽¹⁾, but the byakudan looked like a completely different tree. I hadn't even heard of its name until Asuna shared it with me, but when I was told that it's called 《sandalwood》 in English, I finally understood what it was. Speaking of *sandalwood*, it was one of the five S-class aromatic trees in SAO—— the other four were *cinnamon*, *benzoin*, *myrrh*, and *agarwood*—— and we had even drunk tea from *cups* made out of such a tree.

For byakudans in the real world, apparently only the heartwood of its trunk had the nice scent, while the flowers practically have no aroma. Nevertheless, seeing as Asuna was a person who loved *rare* sights of nature, this spot seemed to be quite exciting to her and she had been visiting this less than ten *metres* in all directions green zone quite frequently since we discovered it.

Today—— 7th of May, 2026, was the first day after the *Golden Week*, so perhaps because of that, I received an invitation *email* to come here the moment the lunch break started. The survivor school employed a credit-based system, but separation by school year was a thing; I was in the second year, while Asuna was in the third, thus we met up at the entrance of the clubroom building and when we absentmindedly looking up at the sky together after having lunch on the lawn in this green zone, Asuna suddenly fell asleep on my lap.

In this green zone, which Asuna dubbed as the 《secret garden》, aside from the byakudan and Taiwan nemunoki, there were various trees growing in the periphery; these trees were blocking off the view from the windows of the clubroom building and the library. There were practically no weeds growing here and the lawn was growing verdantly, thus there was undoubtedly someone taking care of it, but in the one month

since we started frequenting this garden, we had never seen anyone else here.

I've felt signs that Lisbeth, who was in the same year as Asuna, had been getting suspicious, thus we'll likely need to tell her about this place in the near future, but for just a bit longer... at least, until Asuna's wounds from the series of events have healed, I'd like treasure the spot that only we know about, and our time here.

I strongly wished for this, while stroking Asuna's hair even more sneakily than before as she once again dozed off.

The *wearable multi-device* called the 《Augma》 was distributed to all pupils at the Survivor School mid-April.

The developer/distributor of it was a rising ICT enterprise known as Kamura. The fact that a company founded in the 2000s and specialising in SNS *games* and video streaming *services* entered the manufacturing industry all of a sudden and began selling an advanced *device*, which was far smaller and lighter than RECT's *AmuSphere*, in such large quantities caused an uproar both in the industry and among the users, but the release of the AR *game* 《Ordinal Scale》^{OS} just as the *Augma* became available swept away scepticism in no time at all.

Honestly, being a person who loved *FullDive games*, I couldn't really get into an AR *game* that required using your physical body in the real world to play; nonetheless, I did have to accept the merits of OS being a thing. Additionally, OS partnered with a great number of enterprises for *tie-ups*; due to the fact that players could save up *points* from playing the *game* and use them in exchange for discounts and complimentary *services* from the game's partners, it was only natural that it attained tremendous popularity upon *release*.

Even in *Alfheim Online*, the number of *active users* diminished by the day; even my friends, such as Liz, Silica, and Klein, migrated to OS—— though, that way of wording it feels weird, as it isn't a VR *world*—— and tried to drag me in (or drag out) at every opportunity, but the sense of unease I had just wouldn't disappear.

This was because the degree of the *Augma*'s perfection was awfully high.

The fact that its CPU efficiency, *storage* capacity, and *battery* capacity was higher than that of the *AmuSphere*'s wasn't strange, considering that it came more than two years later, but it's said that the only company capable of producing an EF *matrix panel* that is essential to *FullDive* tech is RECT, who have inherited the tech and expertise from Kayaba Akihiko; the fact that an enterprise that had just entered the industry was capable of developing equivalent tech seemed quite unbelievable even to a first year at highschool such as myself.

Of course, the *Augma* can only send visual, auditory, and limited tactile signals into the

brain, thus, compared to the *AmuSphere*, which is capable of *fully supporting* all five senses, it had fewer technical hurdles. On the other hand, the *Augma* has to maintain a *link* with the *user's* brain while they're awake and moving around, hence the *tuning* required for that should have colossal *costs* both financially and time-wise.

Just when I, harbouring misgivings about who on earth the person spearheading the development could be, asked Yui, and Kikuoka Seijirou from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, to help me investigate this, it was announced.

That the developer of the *Augma* was Professor Shigemura Tetsuhiro from the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering at Touto Institute of Technology. That is, the person who served as the academic advisor for Kayaba Akihiko and Sugou Nobuyuki.

If that were the case, it probably wouldn't be strange for the guy to be capable of developing a *panel* on the same level as the one for the *NerveGear*, yet this did not alleviate my anxiety.

For better or worse, the man named Kayaba Akihiko greatly influenced the people around him; he had the kind of aura that could derail the lives of people. Having brought forth not one, but two major criminals of the century——though, in Sugou's case, the *scale* was much smaller than Kayaba's—— from his laboratory, Professor Shigemura couldn't be spotless himself.

Regardless of my inability to guess what Shigemura's intentions were with his release of the *Augma* and *Ordinal Scale* a year and a half after the end of the SAO Incident, OS was sweeping society with impressive momentum. While SAO did cause enough of an uproar to create huge queues to stores at the time it went on sale, unlike SAO's limited ten thousand copy release, OS was an *app* that you only needed to *download*. Right as the game *launched*, its *active user* count exceeded hundreds of thousands; the momentum was so great that if it weren't for the shortage of *Augmas*, it would be only natural to have double or triple the user base.

What surprised me a little was the fact that even Asuna began *playing* it quite enthusiastically without my notice. I figured that she was invited by Liz and the others and just couldn't refuse, but her *ranking number topped* that of the others in the group in no time, so I could only admire how the 《Demon of Clearing》 of the Knights of the Blood was alive and well.

While *Ordinal Scale* branded itself as an ARMMO-RPG, its *system* was simplified to the extreme. Rather than assigning numerical *stats* like HP and STR to *players*, the only numbers displayed were the total of *points* acquired, the current *point* balance, and the *ranking number*, which was calculated based on your *point* total.

As the *title*, which meant «measure of numerical order», implied, the *player's* strength was regulated by their *ranking number*. While there would be barely any difference in your capabilities if you were a *player* at *rank* 1000 and fought against one at rank 999, there would be an obvious difference in your ability to take a hit and your offensive capabilities if you were pitted against a player at rank 900 instead, and you practically wouldn't have a chance against one at rank 500.

In that case, it would seem that once someone beat you in *ranking*, there would never be a chance to turn the tables again, but that's where the ARMMO came in; in PvP, the *player's* own endurance and reflexes were a huge *factor*. No matter how great your offensive ability was, it was meaningless if your sword couldn't land a hit, while *players* specialising in running could just run around till their enemy eventually runs out of breath. If you continued winning in PvP through stamina, your *ranking* would also go up rapidly.

However, if that's all there was to it, young and sporty *players* would have too much of an advantage——though, seeing as it's an AR *game*, that would essentially be the case no matter what you did——thus, there were other means of earning *points* steadily, such as by defeating *monsters* and picking up *items* in town. Asuna herself went up the *ranking* to the 3,000s in two weeks through only *monster* battles and *item* collection, basically avoiding PvP altogether, so all I could say was 'that's just like her'.

On the other hand, I was still loitering in the 100,000s even at the end of April. I was prepared to stay like this until the *boom* cooled off, when I—— no, Asuna and I were struck by that incident.

Floor Bosses from Old Aincrad that began to appear in *Ordinal Scale's* limited time *event battles*.

Eiji, the *rank 2 player*, appearing before us.

Asuna's and Klein's memory loss, and the final battle at the New National Stadium——

Professor Shigemura Tetsuhiro's goal was to revive Yuuna, his only daughter, who had lost her life in SAO, as a *digital ghost*. Using the *Augma* to *scan* the memories regarding Yuuna from the survivors of SAO, he was attempting to create an AI with the memories and personality of Yuuna based on that enormous *lifelog*.

The plan was almost successful; the professor succeeded in creating an AI with his daughter's personality and limited memories. This AI that we dubbed as 《White Yuna》, however, due to being bestowed a virtuous personality, attempted to stop the final stage of the plan that could kill a large number of SAO survivors.

Surprisingly, *Ordinal Scale* was operating on the old SAO *server* that was left behind beneath *Argus's* office, while White Yuna was running based on the language *engine* of Aincrad's hundredth floor *boss*——the final *boss* that was supposed to appear in the original SAO before Kayaba Akihiko took over.

My friends and I defeated the final *boss* with Yuna's help, stopping Professor Shigemura's fearsome plan. However, as the final *boss's* language *engine* was reset, White Yuna also vanished into nothingness.

The memories stolen from Asuna and Klein were recovering bit by bit as their *scanned* ^{spines} *neuron* dendrites regenerated, seemingly putting an end to the incident.

But even now, eight days since that battle, there were two small thorns still gnawing at my mind.

The first was Shigemura Yuuna's childhood friend, the person who was with Yuuna when she died in Aincrad and thus helped with the professor's plan - Eiji.

The other was the AR *idol* and *image character* of *Ordinal Scale* that had the exact same face as White Yuna, but had an entirely different personality - 《Black Yuna》——

Using an *exosuit* that greatly strengthened his movement capabilities, Eiji, aka Nochizawa Eiji, sent all the *members* of Klein's *guild*, Fuurinkazan, to hospital. Actually hitting and kicking other players in an AR *game* PvP was clearly a crime of inflicting bodily injury. Two days after our battle at the New National Stadium, he turned himself in to a police officer at Yoyogi and is still being detained as of this moment, six days later. Klein and the others weren't going to file a report "about something in-*game*", thus it was quite questionable whether he was going to be prosecuted.

As for ^{Kuroi Yuna}Black Yuna——these days, we shorten it a bit to 《Kuro Yuna》 —— she was still working as an AR *idol* even now.

Although she was also an AI, that didn't mean she possessed a super high-grade language *engine*, unlike White Yuna. As her personality *program* and desires were both *simple*, it was unlikely for her to commit anything bad of her own accord, yet for this very reason, when I happen to see her singing innocently, I feel a little sting inside my chest.

I was unlikely to meet either Eiji or Kuro Yuna anymore.

However, I still feel that the thorns stuck inside me won't be removed so easily.

Notes

1. ^ The Japanese name for *Albizia procera*, a species of silk trees.

Travelling from Seibuyagisawa Station, the closest station to my school, to my home near Hon-Kawagoe Station along the Seibu Shinjuku Line took forty-five minutes. It also took five minutes to travel to the station from school on foot, and ten more minutes to travel home from the station by bike, so a one-way school commute took me around an hour.

Asuna's home in Miyasaka, Setagaya Ward was much closer if we were to look at linear distances; however, she had to use an extremely complicated *route*: first, she had to take a *bus* from school to Kichijoji Station, then travel to Meidaimae Station via the Keiō Inokashira Line, then switch over to the Keiō Line to travel to Shimo-takaido Station, where she needed to switch over to the Tōkyū Setagaya Line, before finally arriving at the Miyanosaka Station near her home; hence, her *door-to-door* travel took up an hour and a half.

I believe a brisk ride by motor*bike* through Kanpachi Street and Ome Highway would be better as it would only take a bit over thirty minutes, but I couldn't really say "Ya shud get a license" to Asuna, the daughter of a company's director. On the other hand, perhaps due to all the training she had in her *rehab* after being released from ALO, she didn't seem to mind the long commute as she thought of them as good exercise.

From my perspective, it was painful that the time we could spend together after school would surely grow shorter, but, now that I think about it, the very fact that I could meet with Asuna in the virtual world and go to the same school as her in the real world was a miracle in itself. And we could meet up as much as we wanted in ALfheim after she returned home, thus asking for more would be demanding luxury.

After arriving in front of my home by bike and engaging the *wirelock*, I opened the sliding door.

At that moment, Suguha, who usually returned home later than me, stuck her head out from the corner of the corridor.

"Onii-chan, welcome home."

"I'm home. You sure are early today; what about your club work?"

When I asked this question while taking off my shoes, Suguha answered while still leaning out from the corner for some reason.

"We had a joint practice yesterday, so we have the day off today~"

"That so... good work then."

Having entered a prestigious girls' school in Saitama City under the *sports* referral from her kendo club, Suguha, now a second-year student, was leading a *life* with increasingly *hard* club work; on the nineteenth last month, individual match preliminaries of the Kanto Tournament were held, followed by the team preliminaries the week after, and she managed to clear both of them.

Since she only needed one stop down the Kawagoe Line to the Ōmiya Station close to her school, I heard her commutes to school take around thirty-five minutes, but she returned home later than me practically every day. You'd think that she wouldn't have the energy left for playing games with a lifestyle like that, but she would always find at least a little bit of time to *log in* each day before going to bed, and she's apparently enjoying tackling large-scale *quests* with her mates on her days off.

Additionally, Suguha had a strange method of concentrating; the night before a match, she'd always *duel* with me in ALO until we fell. Both I and Leafa were *speed*-types, thus our battle would always turn into a show of vehement speed, but, strangely, she's apparently able to fight calmly in her match the next day.

Someone who loved ALO as much as Suguha couldn't possibly have no interest in *Ordinal Scale*—— there was no way to question the fact that her kendo techniques were many times more effective in AR *battles* than in VR—— and using her mother's *connections*, she finally acquired an *Augma*, but she had departed to the faraway Shimane prefecture for a kendo club training camp around the time SAO *bosses* began to appear. However, she was able to take part in the final battle against the hundredth floor's *boss* at the spur of the moment from Shimane and had been a great help to us in that very unfavourable situation, so I feel quite indebted to her.

She said that the next Kanto Tournament would be in early June, so I should go to cheer her on then... with such thoughts, I stepped into the corridor and saw that Suguha, aside from her head and right shoulder, was still hiding behind the wall.

Having caught on to what was up, I pretended to head for the washroom before

suddenly breaking into a *dash*, thus catching Suguha by the nape of her T-*shirt* just as she tried to escape.

"Gueh."

As my sister gave such a moan, I discovered her holding 1 *little cup* of economical *vanilla ice* cream in its entirety in her left arm, with a *spoon* dipped into it. Apparently, she was eating directly from the *cup*.

"Come on now, mom will be mad at you for this."

When I said this to her while letting go of her nape, Suguha turned around and stuck out her tongue.

"But if I use a plate, we'd have more dishes to wash. I'm thinking *eco*; *eco*, you hear."

"That's definitely not how it works... I'll keep quiet about this, so give me some too."

Offering a backroom deal, I was about to extend my hand towards the *spoon*, but Suguha grasped it a moment sooner. Just when I thought that my deal had been rejected, she scooped out a heap of the *vanilla* and shoved it into my mouth.

"Hnn!"

"Hnn, hey... that's too much..."

With these words, I unwillingly got my cheeks stuffed with a mouthful of vanilla ice cream and then felt my temple aching from the cold. Seeing my frown, Suguha cackled.

When I opened the *door* to my room after washing my hands and face, the light of the setting sun coming from the window in the south-western *corner* dyed the room a deep red.

It seems like I have developed a weakness for the red sunset after two years of living in Aincrad, as I was taken aback by the sight despite a year and a half having passed since I returned from the game. Only after staring at the *orange* sky for twenty seconds did I hastily get changed.

Just as I began wondering whether I should sit down on the chair and start on my homework, or take a peek at the land of fairies for a bit, a lavish *device* placed at a corner of my *work desk* caught my eyes.

This *headset*-like device with a white *plastic frame* was the *Augma*. The details of the incident were left entirely unreported; instead, the rampaging *boss monsters* at Black Yuna's concert venue were explained away as just a *surprise* for the *event*, thus, unlike the *NerveGear*, this device wasn't confiscated.

Even now, if you take a stroll around town, you could easily find people who still wear an *Augma*, but I've become even less interested in it than before. Kikuoka has said that performing a *scan* with the kind of output that could inflict damage to the brain required *wireless* charging from special large *drones*, and that the latest *firmware* created by Professor Shigemura would have killed the memory *scan* function of the device, yet that kind of experience couldn't just be cleared away through reasoning like that. Even I had such sentiments, so Asuna, who had her memories stolen, albeit temporarily, would have all the more reason to think like that.

As I thought, I'll stop using the *Augma*.

Having made this decision, I took the *device* into my hands in order to format it. There were plenty of handy AR *apps* other than *Ordinal Scale* on it, but it wasn't like they couldn't be substituted by traditional portable devices.

When I equipped it by placing it on my left ear, the device automatically booted up and the *Augma's logo* was displayed in the middle of my vision. This *logo* was directly projected into my eye through the *projection lens* at the tip of its thin *arm*, but, at that same moment, the *matrix panel* installed in the device's *support arm* that reached for the back of my head initiated a *link* with my brain. This ability to use both retinal projections and cerebral *links* at the same time could be considered the *Augma's* greatest feature.

Once the *logo* disappeared, my vision was filled to the brim with a large number of *icons* and *widgets*.

When I first experienced this 《virtual *desktop*》, I thought, 'This is so messy that it's making me dizzy!', but I got used to it in no time. Thinking about it, if you were to expand the various *holo-windows* in ALO, you'd find that the density of information

would be about the same. And, when I got used to it, I had to accept that it was so handy that it even got on my nerves.

Though, this would be the last time I looked at this virtual *desktop*——

As I looked around the weather forecast and *news widgets* with such deep emotions, I noticed a character string *scrolling* through the upper left side of my view, and frowned.

Ordinal Scale was a well-made game, but the thing about it I hated most was that you couldn't turn off the *push* notifications. The entire string of characters was a so-called «announcement from the administrators» .

Through the strenuous effort I had invested in order to bring back Asuna's memories, I defeated several old SAO *bosses*, which offered a large number of *bonus points*, one after another, then won against Eiji, the 2nd-ranked player, and, in the end, I crushed the final *boss*, thus I quickly rose from the 100,000s rank to *rank* 1. It was no longer realistic for anyone to exceed the number of *points* I had accumulated if they only got their points through *item* collection and *monster* farming, thus I believe that *players* who wanted to reach *rank* 1 would need to beat me in PvP several times to achieve their goal, but I wonder how this will turn out when I retire from *Ordinal Scale* today——

Nah, someone else can worry about that.

In order to begin formatting, I was about to reach for the *system settings icon* with my left hand, when I stopped it midair.

That was because a new *message* was displayed on the annoying *push* notifications I mentioned earlier. Noticing that it had the characters «Yuna» , I *tapped* it by reflex.

Written on the *window* that opened up wasn't a notice for an *event* or a new song, but an announcement on the release of a new *desktop mascot app*.

“...A Yuna *mascot*...?”

Muttering this, I read the details. Apparently, it was a traditional *widget* that only served to tell you the weather forecast and your *schedule*, but it seems that the mascot could grow to some extent through conversation. Of course, I had Yui with me, so I had

no need for such a *mascot*, but I suddenly felt the need to say my goodbyes and thus tapped on the *link* in the *message*.

The *window* transitioned to an *app store*; the *download* and *install* was finished in no time. When I returned to the *home* screen and tapped on the *icon* with a 'new' *mark*, a familiar terms of service *window* came up.

'This doesn't look like a good idea'... with this thought, I quickly skimmed through it and *touched* the agree *button*. The window disappeared and a small *ring* of light appeared on the surface of the desk that I had been using for many years.

That *ring*, having turned into a *progress meter*, spinned around once and disappeared, creating a humanoid *avatar* with a soft sound effect.

It was somewhat smaller than the *PET bottle* of carbonated water that was placed nearby, thus the avatar's height should be around twenty centimetres. Long, pure white hair coupled with a mainly black *costume*. When the closed eyelids suddenly opened up, I saw the avatar's ruby-like red eyes——

As a smile adorned her beautiful, *coquettish* face, the *avatar* turned to me and waved her hands.

"Nice to meet you! I am Yuna. T-h-a-n-k-s for the *download*!"

She greeted me in a bittersweet voice and right afterwards blew a *kiss*. The behaviour of this *avatar* could apparently be customised through conversation with the *user*, but the *default* version seemed to be quite impish.

——Hmm, perhaps it should be called a nice reproduction of the *original's* personality.

The small Yuna took a brisk walk atop the *desk* and leaned against the *PET bottle*. I see, so it's a literal *desktop mascot*. It tilted its small head and looked at me at an *angle*.

"Say, what is your name?"

It was a *sequence* to confirm the pronunciation of the user's name that frequently took place the first time you log into a VRMMO, but it was quite unnerving when this happened in the real world. Taking care to make my pronunciation clear——

"Kirito."

"Kirito, is that right?"

Hearing the same voice as that in my memories, I nodded in silence, after which I answered again, 'Yep'. Yuna once again smiled, as she said, 'Delighted to make your acquaintance, Kirito!'

The only thing this *mascot* had in common with the White Yuna that saved us was its face, while it's probably not sharing its *data* with Black Yuna either. Nevertheless, feeling that this would pass some sort of message along somewhere, I was about to say 'Thanks' and 'Goodbye' to the Yuna before me.

Yet, a moment before I could open my mouth.

Something abnormal happened to Yuna, leaning on the *PET bottle*.

Zaza, with such a jarring sound, an electronic *noise* affected various parts of the *avatar*. The avatar stood upright in a way that felt like an unnatural drop-frame⁽¹⁾, as if it was resisting this phenomenon, and then, looking straight at me——

"Kirito."

It once again called out my name. However, the alluring tone from just moments ago was nowhere to be found in this voice; instead, it sounded rather serious.

"Kirito, save me."

Upon whispering this, the *mascot* once again returned to its original place as if by *warping*. With no more *noise* affecting her body, she began rocking and humming a tune.

After gazing dumbfounded at this scene for over ten seconds, I timidly called out.

"Yuna...?"

"What is it, Kirito? If you want me to sing, I need a *mic* and *costume*!"

"Ah... U-uh huh..."

Perhaps judging my unintelligible response as a positive answer, the small Yuna suddenly waved her right hand. The newly displayed *window* was an *item shop* filled with *mics* and *dresses* of various design, among other *accessories*. Apparently, when you collect an entire set, the corresponding repertoire of songs will be available to the mascot.

Points from *Ordinal Scale* could be used in place of *real money*, thus, if I felt like it, I could purchase all the *items* in the store with no significant change to my enormous *point* balance, but now wasn't the time for something like that.

"...Hmm, I'll leave it for later."

When I pronounced it clearly this time, Yuna responded, 'That so?', without any sign of dissatisfaction, after which the *window* disappeared. After a stroll atop my desk, Yuna sat down on the *mouse* for my PC and once again began humming something to herself.

For a *desktop mascot*, there was nothing unnatural in her actions. But, in that case, what was with those words just moments ago? "Save me"— I certainly heard these words after the Little Yuna called out my name.

What if that was a *message* sent by someone on the *Net*, borrowing the mouth of the *mascot* to do it?

There was only one person like that that I could think of. The White Yuna that should have disappeared in the New National Stadium—— the *digital ghost* of Shigemura Yuuna.

To Professor Shigemura, the *original* Black Yuna that continued her AR *idol* role appeared to be but a *tool* for resurrecting his daughter. The reason why the idol had the same face as his daughter was to make SAO Survivors recall the memories of Yuuna they had held sealed deep in their mind; perhaps for this very reason the professor was so cold towards Black Yuna, said Kikuoka. In fact, the professor *shut down* the *workstation* that was controlling Black Yuna just before his attempt at a simultaneous memory *scan* at the New National Stadium began.

Afterwards, it's said that the control of Black Yuna was transferred to Kamura, though

I've heard that her *data* was *reset* at the time. So, her recognising me and using the *mascot* to request help was unthinkable.

Assuming that White Yuna's consciousness still remained somewhere... the only conceivable place was the old SAO *server*. However, even I didn't know what became of that machine after the incident.

Should I try to contact Professor Shigemura again, I wonder.

Just as I had that thought, I recalled the time I visited the Toto Institute of Technology to question the man, and thus I frowned. When I straight up asked him, "Aren't you performing memory *scans* on SAO survivors with the *Augma*", I figured that, knowing his position, the professor would only deny the allegation, yet the blunt answer he gave me really ate away at me. Even if I gave him another nonchalant visit to tell him that "the Black Yuna *mascot* asked for help", I don't think I'd get a proper answer from him. In the first place, I don't even know where the professor currently is, and Kikuoka wouldn't tell me about that either.

In that case, there was but one other person I could go to for a talk about this case.

First, I looked up the instructions for the *desktop mascot* and called out to the still humming Yuna to say, "See you later." Then, Yuna quickly stood up, "Okay, later, Kirito!", and waved her hand, before being engulfed by light and disappearing. There appeared to be a way to turn off the app without the need to call out to it, but since the avatar was similar to Yui in appearance and size, it would have felt awkward to make her disappear with my fingertip without saying a thing.

Once the *mascot* disappeared, the words I heard from her felt more and more like a dream or illusion, but I wouldn't have got myself involved in all those incidents if I was actually capable of pretending that something like this never happened. Preparing for the worst, I opened my mouth once again.

"*Command*, call Kikuoka Seijirou."

At that moment, the *Augma*'s voice call *app* started up and began ringing. I felt like I wouldn't be able to return to using portable phones if I got used to this, but it'll just be for today... no, until I figure out the intention of that *message*... as I made this decision, I waited.

The twenty-second ring was suddenly interrupted and I heard a slightly flustered voice.

『You know, Kirito-kun, today is a Thursday and it's not even six yet. As great as I am, even I could be unable to answer a sudden call like that.』

"My bad, I figured a government worker would have finished up by five."

At my sincere apology, the *elite* bureaucrat riddled with mysteries, 'Fuga', let out some strange sound, after which he answered in a resigned voice.

『... So, what brings you to me?』

"There's something I want you to look up for me."

Next, I raised two questions. He told me he'd call me back in five minutes, so I quietly hung up and activated a *timer app*.

I can't say I didn't expect it, but I heard the ringtone again when the *timer* reached four minutes and fifty eight seconds.

After writing down the info he looked up for me on a note *app*, I gave my sincere thanks, before hanging up.

The date and time handwritten on the note was the 8th of May, Friday, sixteen hundred hours. Meaning, tomorrow. Was this nice *timing* a coincidence or intentional?

The answer should be clear if I got to meet with her once again.

Just as I saved the note, I heard a *knock* on the door. After looking around the *desktop* reflexively, I realised that it came from the real world.

"Onii-chan, it's about time to make lunch."

Having heard Suguha's voice from across the *door*, I replied, "Okay", while taking off the *Augma*.

1. ^ Drop frame (コマ落ち) refers to a phenomenon when, during the playback of a video, the sound and/or image stops for a moment when a part of the frames aren't played for some reason

Having taken several of his personal belongings stored in a large manila envelope and *signed* umpteen documents, Nochizawa Eiji stepped out through the front door of the Yoyogi police station.

It had already been seven days since he turned himself in on the 1st of May. Actually, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was only seven days.

Eiji had testified the truth about everything, apart from his motives, regarding how he attacked and injured the *members* of the Fuurinkazan *guild* in Akihabara and at the Yoyogi Stadium. During the investigation, he claimed that he "held a grudge over some *trouble in-game*", though that wasn't a complete lie.

He figured that there would be no chance of being released on bail as he had sent as many as six people to the hospital, while not having anyone to vouch for his behaviour upon release; however, today he was suddenly informed that he would be released without indictment. It seemed that the Fuurinkazan guys either hadn't filed a report or withdrew it, but Eiji didn't feel indebted to them for that. After all, just because he was released didn't mean he had any place to go to.

Conventionally, he had no other option but to return to his *apartment* in the Meguro ward. He did want to get changed, take a bath and, most of all, sleep soundly in a familiar *bed*.

However, at the same time, he also felt that he absolutely didn't want to do that.

He didn't want to return to his normal life. He never ever wanted to return to those days when he could only wait for his regrets and despair to eat him up bit by bit.

Ever since he was released from the *death game* in the autumn two years ago... no, to be accurate, an additional year before that, since 18th of October 2023, the day Yuna— Yuuna died in Aincrad, Eiji lived in a world with no light to be found.

Having left the Knights of the Blood, he secluded himself in the inn on the First Floor where he had been living with Yuuna, recalling Yuuna's final moments time after time each day. His head was filled with nothing but thoughts such as 'At that time, if only I had done this or that.'

At first, he only blamed himself. 'If only I had been stronger. If only I had noticed the *gimmick* for that *trap zone*. If only I hadn't gone out to help those trapped players'—
—

However, about half a year after the incident, he noticed that he wasn't the only one at fault for Yuuna's death.

'If only those reckless *players* didn't fall for that painfully obvious *trap*.'

'If only they had actually read the strategy guide and all had a 《Cough *Potion*》, an item that was indispensable for the fortieth floor.'

'If only the *players* that came to the rescue with us didn't prioritise crushing that *boss monster* and instead helped save Yuuna from her plight... '

At that moment, Eiji had desperately pleaded the main *players* of the rescue party—
— the two *members* of the Clearing *guild* named 《Fuurinkazan》. 'I'm begging you, please go save Yuna', he begged.

However, those two answered that they would all be wiped out if the *boss* wasn't defeated properly and thus didn't even try to leave their posts.

Before he knew it, Eiji became possessed by the thought that Yuuna was killed not by the *monsters* or SAO itself, but by those two guys. As progress was made on clearing the *floors* and Eiji began seeing the name Fuurinkazan in the info broker's newspaper, the focus of his hatred expanded to include the other *members* and even the *guild leader*.

'They were the ones who killed Yuuna. They wanted to hog the *boss's drop items*, so they didn't come to Yuuna's aid.'

In a corner of his mind, he realised that this was an absurd grudge that was based on what was practically a false accusation. However, Eiji had no other way to continue living in that world apart from being fixated on that idea.

Of course, he had deliberated suicide many times. If he jumped off the peripheral *terrace* in the Town of Beginnings into the sea of clouds, he would be able to die without leaving for the Outer Field.

Yet, while no one voiced this out loud, deep in their hearts, everyone clung to a certain idea——'Could the *players* who died in Aincrad not actually be dead? Perhaps they had been teleported to some other place, where they're waiting for the *game* to be *cleared*?', this faint hope stopped Eiji from committing suicide.

On the 7th of November 2024, SAO was finally *cleared* and Eiji returned to the real world.

In the hospital that he had been admitted to, he discovered several things.

The fact that Eiji's parents had divorced merely a month after he became trapped in the *death game*. The fact that the house they had been living in had already been sold off, his parents had both moved out, and that the one taking care of Eiji was Yuuna's father, Professor Shigemura.

And also, the fact that the proclamation made by Kayaba Akihiko, the mastermind of the *death game* as well as Professor Shigemura's disciple, was true, word for word——

The exact same day and moment Yuna died on the fortieth floor of Aincrad, Yuuna had of course died. In the presence of the professor, who informed the boy of this truth quietly, Eiji began weeping.

Having received a call from the hospital, his parents arrived to meet him several days later, yet it seemed that neither of the two wanted to take their son in. At that moment, for the first time in his life, Eiji^二 discovered the reason why the character^二 two was in his name, despite him being an only child. His father and mother were in a second marriage, while Eiji was a child from his mother's previous marriage, and thus he had no blood relationship with his father. Apparently, his mother's former husband had taken custody of his elder brother whose name Eiji did not even know.

When Eiji announced that he wanted to live alone, his parents, having already begun a new life, returned to their respective homes with an expression of relief.

Even so, they did give him a minimal allowance, thus Eiji rented a cheap *apartment*

and, making use of the SAO Incident Victim Relief *Programme*, received a high school diploma by completing a correspondence course. He had absolutely no desire to go to the survivor school where there was a chance the guys who had let Yuuna die studied at.

Despite qualifying to take an entrance exam, Eiji had no desire to study at university or anything, thus, as before, he remained drowning in despair from losing Yuuna. An end to his dreary days of darkness finally came in autumn the following year—— the moment Professor Shigemura requested his help for a 《project to restore Yuuna》 .

Ever since that day, the chance to meet Yuuna again was the only pillar supporting Eiji's will to live. He once again began studying for the entrance exam and even joined Shigemura's lab as an auditing student.

He understood that the *digital ghost* they recreated from the memories of SAO *players* wasn't the real Yuuna. Despite this, Eiji couldn't help but cling to that faint hope. This attempt at creating an artificial intelligence from human memories was the first of its kind in the world. In that case, it wouldn't be strange for some miracle to take place within it.

Yes... a miracle did in fact take place.

By combining the memories *scanned* from tens of survivors, an AI that made use of the language *engine* developed by Kayaba Akihiko successfully reproduced Yuuna's personality. Following this, if the final stage of their plan - to steal a large quantity of memories from over a thousand survivors gathered at the New National Stadium and integrate these memories into the AI - succeeded, Yuuna was sure to be revived completely.

However, the AI Yuuna's personality was too much like Yuuna's.

She once again decided to do the exact same thing.

Just like how she sacrificed herself in an attempt to save other *players* on the fortieth floor of Aincrad, this time too she decided to assist a *player* from the Clearers... the 《Black Swordsman》 who had *cleared* SAO, to stop the professor's plan, knowing that this would lead to her disappearing.

In the stadium's underground parking lot, Eiji fought the Black Swordsman and lost,

despite exploiting his *exosuit* to its very limits. And at that point, he was betrayed by Professor Shigemura, whom he had trusted deeply.

The professor attempted to steal even Eiji's memories of Yuuna.

He did not recall whether this memory *scan* had been actually conducted or not. When Eiji entered the concert venue upon regaining consciousness in the underground parking lot, everything had already ended.

Yes... anything and everything had come to an end.

While he was released with his personal belongings, Eiji had no idea where to go now.

If he returned to his *apartment*, it would only lead to those gray days of monotony again. Nevertheless, he had no intention of contacting Professor Shigemura. The home he was born in had already been taken up by another family. He was so hungry that it felt like his stomach was twisting, yet he didn't feel like going to a restaurant to get something to eat.

When he directed his gaze at the upper-right corner of his vision in an attempt to look at the time, he noticed that nothing was there. That was only natural; after all, he did not have his *Augma* equipped.

As Eiji's *Augma* was *customised* to control his *exosuit*, it was confiscated along with his broken *suit*. Assuming he'd get it back, it would probably only happen after it was confirmed that he would not face prosecution, but it was unclear how likely that would happen.

Regardless, if he continued standing on police grounds indefinitely, he'd probably be told to go someplace else by the officer on watch. In that case, perhaps he should continue walking without a care until he became unable to move from exhaustion?

While deliberating this idea, Eiji came out onto the sidewalk in front of the police station and before him...

Idly stood the person that he least wanted to see.

As I saw signs of sharp antagonism on Nochizawa Eiji's——*Eiji's* face the moment he recognised me, I thought, "That's to be expected, I guess."

If our places were to be reversed, I would be just as cautious. Not only did I obstruct their plan to restore Shigemura Yuuna, I was also one of the *players* from the Clearers that he ought to despise.

Following the end of the incident, I had Agil, a man well up in the news, look up some things for me, thus, by now, I too knew the reason *Eiji* despised Fuurinkazan and the Clearers, and I've also heard about the circumstances regarding how Yuuna lost her life in Aincrad to some extent.

It's only natural to be despised... is what I don't feel. At least, not when it's to the extent where he felt the need to send Klein and the others to hospital.

However, on the other hand, I am able to somewhat understand——though this could just be my arbitrary assumption——*Eiji's* feelings. After the devastation of the 《Moonlit Black Cats》 *guild*, I too tried to find something other than myself to blame for the incident. And I had even taken a cold attitude towards Klein and Asuna, who worried about me. If there had been other *players* in the room where Sachi, Tetsuo, and the others died, I could have grown to vehemently detest them as well.

As I thought over such conjectures in the corner of my mind, I considered how I should greet *Eiji*.

Yet, before I could say a thing, *Eiji* opened his mouth.

"...What do you want."

His tone was harsh, but it was better than if "Get out of my sight" were the first words to leave his mouth. I coughed and pointed to the left with my eyes.

"Before I answer that, can we go somewhere else? Just moments ago, that officer over there asked me what I was doing here."

"....."

An even more suspicious look appeared on *Eiji's* face, but he still turned in silence. As he began walking at a quick pace, I hurried after him.

"Ehm... There's a *family restaurant* where you can pay in OS *points* a bit further up. I've got tons of *points* saved up, so my treat."

Just as I spoke out to him from the side, the clearest tongue click I've ever heard in my life came in response.

"I don't need to be treated by you, even I have some po..."

After spitting this out hatefully, his expression changed as if he had just realised something. While I had an *Augma* in my *bag*, *Eiji* did not have one on his head. It was most likely confiscated as evidence for the incident. And, of course, *Ordinal Scale points* couldn't be used without an *Augma*.

While *Eiji* did become unable to say a thing, he did not resist when we arrived at the *family restaurant* and I attempted to lead him through the door. Luckily, the inside of the restaurant was practically empty, so I had *Eiji* follow me to a four-seat *table* far in the back. Here, our conversation was unlikely to be overheard by others.

Sitting across the table, *Eiji* once again said "What do you want" in a low voice. As he said this, I placed the *menu*, picked up from the *stand*, in front of him.

"Let's talk about that after placing our orders. Pick anything you like."

Just then came another tongue click. Still, *Eiji* quickly glanced through the *menu* and pressed the *call button* after a mere ten seconds. Not having decided what to order yet, I also hurriedly opened my *menu*.

The *waitress* who showed up was wearing an *Augma* instead of using a *wireless* portable device.

"*Beef rib roast stake, C set.*"

As *Eiji* showed absolutely no restraint with his *orders*, the *waitress* wrote it down on a *holo-window* that only she could see. And I'll have the same thing... is what I'd like to

say, but I had a promise to make dinner with Suguha today, so I decided to only order a *cheesecake* and something from the *drink bar*.

Once the *waitress* left, *Eiji* sent me a sharp look. For the third time, I was asked "What do you want"—is what I thought would happen, but the question was different this time.

"...Is that a survivor school uniform?"

"Huh?"

Looking at my *blazer* with slightly conspicuous *piping* embellishments⁽¹⁾, I nodded.

"Ah, yeah... that's right."

"Hmph."

He gave a short snort, but he didn't seem to be planning to say anything else. 'What's up with that, sheesh'... I thought, but it's not like I came here to speak about school, thus I took out my *tablet* from my *messenger bag*. I displayed the *page* that I had *bookmarked* and presented it to *Eiji*.

"Know anything about this?"

"....."

Having picked it up in silence, *Eiji* glanced through the screen and, at that very moment, a noticeably stern expression appeared on his face.

"A Yuna... *desktop mascot*?"

He quickly followed the *link* and said in a hoarse voice.

"For a price, you can change her clothes... and have her sing to the *user*, it says? No... I don't know; not about something like this. Did the professor approve the creation of such an *app*...?"

"The *management* rights for Black Yuna... I mean, *Idol* Yuna were apparently taken away from Professor Shigemura's hands."

When I revealed this piece of info that I discovered with Yui's help, *Eiji*'s suddenly had his breath taken away for a moment.

"Currently, Yuna is being independently operated by an entertainment company named 《*Ario Room*》, as well as Kamura."

"...*Ario Room* is the company that the professor put in charge of Yuna's *management*. Though, Yuna's appearance *schedule* was effectively decided by the professor and me. She... the one you call Black Yuna is a being that was created in order to assemble SAO *survivors*, after all..."

As *Eiji* muttered this, it seemed like a faint aura of pity appeared on his face. However, it disappeared right away, replaced by a tone of resignation.

"...If that's what the professor decided to do, there's nothing I can do about it. I no longer have the right to say anything about how Black Yuna should be used."

'Are you sure you're actually okay with that?', were words that I swallowed down. It seems that Professor Shigemura ceding the rights to Black Yuna was done to take responsibility for the havoc caused during her *first live* concert nine days ago. And the one who thwarted the Yuna restoration plan that the professor and *Eiji* had staked everything on... was me... albeit, there would have been a lot of casualties if I hadn't done so.

Having raised his eyes off the *tablet*, *Eiji* once again formed a stern expression as he looked at me.

"...And so? Did you really go out of your way to see me to tell me about this? Hold on... how did you know that I was going to be released to-..."

However, *Eiji* closed his mouth as the *waitress* approached us at that moment.

She lined up the sizzling *steak* with a round bun as part of the *set*, as well as a plate with a piece of *cheesecake* on the *table*. 'Would that be all?', 'Yes.', after this short exchange, the *waitress* left a paper bill before leaving, after which *Eiji* shot a glance at me.

"Ah, go ahead, feel free to dig in first. I'm gonna go get a drink, want some?..."

At that point, with an expression that seemed to scream 'Why are you doing this?', *Eiji* bluntly said "Oolong tea, hold back on the ice."

At the *drink bar corner*, I poured some *iced* oolong tea, as well as some *hot coffee* for myself, and returned to my seat, where I found that *Eiji* had already finished off half of the *steak* and bun. Was he that hungry or was he just trying to get things over with quickly?—— most likely both.

Giving up on continuing our conversation while eating, I took a piece of the smallish *cheesecake* with the *fork* and carried it to my mouth. The taste reproduction *engine* in ALO was constantly being *updated*, yet to the brain itself, rather than to the tongue, it just couldn't induce the kind of sense of fullness that real food could. Speaking of which, virtual *desserts* didn't have the issue of making you feel guilty about the sugar and *calories* involved either.

In the end, it wasn't like Kamura and Professor Shigemura developed the *Augma* independently from scratch; it was just a product that re-used Kayaba's *FullDive* tech——of course, it was remarkable that they managed to downsize it to that extent—— but with its *FullDive* featured sealed away, so, if someone felt like it, it should be possible to reproduce the sense of taste in an AR environment as well. I wonder if the reason why no one had done so is because of a *marketing* strategy decision, or because they were holding back due to Kayaba.

As such observations crossed my mind, I put my *fork* to work, putting an end to the *cake* in no time. Meanwhile, *Eiji* finished eating his *steak* at practically the same moment, and drank his oolong tea in one gulp.

I was honestly curious about the kind of meals you'd get in a police cell, but even someone with a *skill* of reading the mood as low as mine could tell that this wasn't the best time to ask about such a thing. Making use of the opportunity provided by *Eiji* taking in a breath, I suddenly brought out the main subject at hand.

"Yesterday, I installed that *desktop mascot* into my *Augma*."

At that very moment, *Eiji*'s stern expression returned as he said, 'And?'

"...And, at first, that *mascot* Yuna did nothing that you wouldn't expect from such a program, but... once I told her my name, she suddenly started acting as if she was

affected by some abnormal load, and..."

As I explained all of that, I started having less and less faith in whether that actually happened, but if I just said "Actually, nevermind." now, the whole thing would just end with me going all the way to Yoyogi, a place that required me to take a route that was in the opposite direction than the one I needed to go back home, after school and treating *Eiji* to some *steak*; all for nothing. Resolving myself, I finished the sentence.

"...She said, 'Kirito, save me.'"

"....."

As *Eiji* remained silent, his upturned gaze was fifty *percent* 《Is this guy okay?》 and 《Do you think I'd fall for that》 each.

...No, that wasn't all. 《Don't tell me... 》 and 《Could it be》 were gaining presence bit by bit, exceeding his initial misgivings.

"...'Save', that all?"

At his question, raised in a whisper, I quickly nodded.

"Yeah. That's all she said before another drop-frame affected her... afterwards, she didn't say anything that was unbecoming of a *mascot*."

"...So, based solely on that, you went so far as to look up when I'd be released and came to see me?"

This time, I couldn't give an answer so easily. Because, 'Why did I go so far?'... is not the kind of question that I avoided asking myself.

However.

"Perhaps, if any other word were used instead, I would have just assumed that I misheard it or there was some bug with the *program*, and would have forgotten all about it right away... but, when a word such as 'save' was used, I kinda..."

After drinking up the now cold *coffee* that remained at the bottom of my *cup*, the bitterness making me frown, I spoke about the conjectures that crossed my mind

yesterday.

"If someone used the *mascot* to send a *message*, there's only two people who could have done that. It was either White Yuna... the *digital ghost* of Professor Shigemura's daughter who should have disappeared at the *stadium*, or Black Yuna the *idol* operated by *Ario Room*. Though, I'm guessing you didn't make Black Yuna's character that complicated, right?"

Eiji didn't answer my question right away and instead, after several seconds, muttered.

"Two, huh."

"Huh...?"

"...Nothing. ——Indeed, Black Yuna... though the professor and I call her Y U N A, written in the western *alphabet*; she has only one impetus - «a desire to sing in front of a large crowd». She didn't even understand what our plan entailed. Even if the right to manage her was transferred from the professor to *Ario Room*, it has no impact on Black Yuna's role as an AR *idol*. If so, there's no way she'd voice any displeasure... I think..."

His explanation suddenly *faded out*, thus I looked into *Eiji*'s face. Noticing my gaze, he quickly shook his head.

"Well... There were several occasions when she did something that she wasn't programmed to do, like showing eagerness in reading an irrelevant book, or interest in the memory *data* that we had materialised into *objects*. Though, I can't really imagine that the foundation for her personality has changed. If it's really one of the Yunas that sent you a *message*, it would be..."

At that moment, *Eiji* once again shut his mouth. Staring at a single point on the *table*, he did not move a single muscle.

Thinking about it reasonably, it couldn't have been Black Yuna that sent the *message*. Nevertheless, he was probably reluctant to take a leap in logic and infer that White Yuna was still out there somewhere. Bearing a hope only for it to be crushed right afterwards... As someone who tried to acquire a revival *item* to bring back Sachi, I could understand his pain.

Nevertheless, now having explained all that had happened, I had to bring up the core question. Asking that very question is why I came to see *Eiji*.

I exhaled deeply, then once again breathed in—— but then stopped at that point. After hesitating for about two seconds, I asked something different from what I had planned.

"Umm... I wonder, how should I call you? We can't go on with 《^{socchi}you》 and 《^{omae}you》 forever now, after all... *Eiji*? Nautilus? Nochizawa-kun?"

Just then, I got an intense stare from beyond the gently wavy forelocks of his.

"The third one is a definite no-go. Second one is a no-go too... Just use *Eiji*."

"G-gotcha... Then call me Kirito..."

"Hmph."

Placing my trust in the assumption that that answer was an 'okay', I moved forward with the topic.

"So... *Eiji*, the reason why I came to see you was because I wanted you to tell me what's become of the old SAO *server* that White Yuna ran on.

"The old SAO *server*... you say?"

After parroting my words in a mutter, *Eiji* frowned.

"Well, naturally, the professor *shut* it *down* and sealed it away again..... No, wait. You said that Black Yuna is running not only as a *desktop mascot*, but as the real thing too?"

"Ah... Yeah. Umm..."

I picked up my *tablet* from the table and went to the official *site* that I had *bookmarked*.

"...Look, she's having a *mini* concert in Akihabara and Osaka today. Also, a new song is being released at the end of the month, it seems."

"In that case, the SAO *server* is still running."

I took several seconds to digest *Eiji's* words.

With 'It can't be' and 'I knew it' sentiments mixed in, I unconsciously gave a sigh.

"...So that's it... Meaning, Black Yuna is also an AI based on SAO, huh..."

"Yep. Regardless of how simple her impetus is, it's impossible for Professor Shigemura to have created an AI that could speak as naturally as her when it's not even his field of expertise."

Upon asserting this, *Eiji* extended his hand towards his *glass*. But noticing that only water from the melted ice remained, he stood up.

"This time, I'll go get your share. What do you want?"

Thinking that this was the first time I've ever been asked about getting a beverage from the *drink bar* in such an edged tone, I answered, "In that case, some *ginger ale*."

"Hmph."

As I've already grown used to that response, I waited quietly at the table and *Eiji* returned in no time. Having placed a *glass* and *straw* in front of me, before sitting down on his chair and taking a sip of his *cappuccino*, he continued his explanation.

"Black Yuna wasn't the only one running on the SAO *server*. *Ordinal Scale* itself is running on another *system* that was hidden on the SAO *server*."

"Another... *system*?"

"Have you ever heard of the name '*Cardinal System*'?"

At this question, I nodded reflexively.

"Ah... yeah, I have. It's an autonomous *system* that controlled SAO and made *maintenance* unnecessary... It swiftly dealt with any *bugs* or *glitches*, controlled *inflation* and *deflation*, and even automatically generated *quests*."

"Hmph... That's right. Apparently, the name for the *Cardinal System* comes from 《cardinal^{kisuu} numbers》, *cardinal numbers*. Do I need to explain what a cardinal number is?"

"Err... It's a number that denotes quantity and number, if I recall correctly? Like 'one', 'two', 'three'..."

"Well, that'll do. That means that the *Cardinal System* is a *system* that controls the *game* based on cardinal numbers. *Player* and *monster stats* like HP and STR, weapon and armour *specs*, various correction and resistance values - everything and anything was managed and processed through cardinal numbers... Well, it's an awfully ordinary thing in RPGs though."

"I see..."

Predicting where this was going, I shoved my *straw* into the *ginger ale*. *Eiji* took another sip of his *cappuccino*, his gaze roaming through the air.

"...However, Kayaba Akihiko created a prototype for another *system* that was based on the exact opposite principal. Not cardinal numbers, but 《ordinal^{josuu} numbers》... it managed *players* through *ordinal numbers*."

"Ordinal numbers... numbers that denoted sequence and number in a series...?"

"That's correct. The *Ordinal System*, the opposite side of the coin of the *Cardinal System*... Being a outside-the-company board member of *Argus*, Professor Shigemura discovered the *system* that, in the end, Kayaba never made use of while examining the *SAO server*. The professor *copied* and recycled it for *Ordinal Scale*. The *main server* for OS is located in Kamura's subsidiary, but it has a direct connection through a private line to the *SAO server* in *Argus*'s headquarters. In order to have Black Yuna and White Yuna in OS, you see..."

"...That means that *Ordinal Scale*, in a sense, was *SAO* itself... is that it? Even the old Aincrad *bosses* that appeared during the *event battles* weren't just lookalike remakes..."

"We just reused the *original data* as is. Have you noticed that the locations where the

bosses appeared were lined up with the coordinates of the Aincrad Labyrinths?"

"Yeah... Though, only after several battles."

As I nodded, *Eiji* glimpsed through the eastern window—— towards the Yoyogi Gymnasium that should lie beyond it.

"That was because we couldn't change the location where the *bosses* would appear. Though luckily, the *Ordinal System* automatically tailored the nearby parks and plazas... Supposing Kayaba had made use of the *Ordinal System*, rather than the *Cardinal System*, SAO *players* would have also been managed based on *ranking numbers*.

"If that were the case, it wouldn't have been possible to avoid having *rankings* specified, so there would have been more PK victims..."

"Though, there would have been fewer reckless idiots who'd take on *monsters* that were obviously out of their league."

Having said this in a low voice, *Eiji* grasped his *coffee cup* with both hands. Some bones became clearly visible on the back of his hands.

But after several seconds, he breathed out and took his hands off the *cup*, before continuing the explanation.

"...There was another *merit* to reusing the *Ordinal System*. The language *engine* developed by Kayaba for SAO had three *levels*. The least advanced one was an *engine* for ordinary NPCs. This was followed by an *engine* for *event* NPCs and *care support* AI. And the most sophisticated one was an *engine* for *last bosses*... As a container for White Yuna, no, Yuuna, the professor naturally chose the *last boss* language *engine*. However, a problem lay there. Under the *Cardinal System*, the *last bosses* were formidable but not immortal. If attacked by tens of *high-level players*, it was possible for them to be defeated."

"And if it were defeated, the language *engine* that provided Yuna's personality after all that effort put into it would be reset..."

As I muttered this, *Eiji's* lips became faintly distorted.

This wasn't something hypothetical, but what actually occurred. My battle against *Eiji* in the New National Stadium, as well as the defeat of the *last boss* together with Asuna and our comrades, took place merely nine days ago.

But *Eiji* only gave another side, before confirming my words.

"That's how it goes... Yet, this wouldn't be the case with the *Ordinal System*. I still don't know why, but Kayaba set it so that the *top-ranked* under the *Ordinal System* would be granted immortality. Whether it's because he planned to be that person... or perhaps..."

Without finishing that line, he drank up his *cappuccino*. It was my turn to head to the *drink bar* this time, but I couldn't stand up due to all that shock I had from the words I just heard.

"He-hey, hold on. Im... Immortality? You mean the *top-ranked* would be... invincible?"

"That's how it is."

Asserting this, *Eiji* looked at me with a scornful expression.

"No, h... hold on. It's not like I was planning on going on OS to wipe out people left and right."

"Nobody said anything of the sort."

"I-I'll have you know, I'm planning on retiring from OS, you hear."

"Hmph, do as you please."

With that blunt declaration, *Eiji* reclined on the *sofa*. The rays from the setting sun coming through the *window blinds* behind him drew red *lines* on his face.

I also finished my *ginger ale* and muttered this, recalling my memories of that day.

"...So that's why White Yuna had us *Dive* into Aincrad and fight the *last boss* under the *Cardinal System's rules*. On the other hand... if the *last boss* were to be summoned to the real world to fight us under the *Ordinal System rules*, we would've had no chance of winning..."

"Yuna... Yuuna was that kind of person. Always calm, intelligent, and kind to everyone..."

Having whispered this in such a low volume that even I, sitting right in front of him, could barely hear it, *Eiji* suddenly opened his eyes wide, before lowering his head.

I think he was one or two years older than me, but with the sharp look gone from his face, it suddenly gave off a childish impression. However, this only lasted for a few seconds, before *Eiji* glared at me with his brow once again creased.

"...And so? What of it if the SAO *server* is still running?"

"Ain't it obvious."

After glimpsing at the time displayed on my *tablet*, I said.

"Tell me how to *access* the SAO *server*. I want to *Dive* into Aincrad once more."

Notes

1. ^ In sewing, piping is a type of trim or embellishment consisting of a strip of folded fabric so as to form a "pipe" inserted into a seam to define the edges or style lines of a garment or other textile object.

Minato Ward, Motoakasaka, Block One⁽¹⁾.

The eight-storey *building* slightly to the north of Aoyama Street was once the headquarters of *Argus*.

Having ridden the subway Chiyoda Line and Ginza Line to arrive here from Yoyogi, *Eiji* and I——we hadn't spoken to each other at all on the train——looked up at the black-tiled *building* without windows in silence for a few moments. I've laid my eyes on this building through pictures and videos numerous times, but I've never visited it directly till today.

The reason why *Argus*, a company that had been called a puny *maker* till the 2010s, grew so much that it was able to build an office for themselves in such a super prime district, was because they had the superhuman genius that was Kayaba Akihiko with them. The *game titles* for the *consoles* and PC that he developed sold over twenty million copies worldwide in total, earning *Argus* an enormous profit. Using those funds, Kayaba developed the *NerveGear* and SAO, which led to the incident that plunged the company in its entirety to the bottom of hell.

There were no lights in the pitch black *building*, while some *grill shutters* were lowered on the front *entrance*. There was a side entrance on the left side, but there were placards on the *glass* and it seemed unlikely that the door could be used.

“...Hey, ya know.”

I called out in a whisper to *Eiji*, standing at the boundary of the sidewalk and the *building* grounds.

"What I wanted to know is the means to *access* the server; that doesn't mean I wanted you to accompany me to the *server* itself..."

"Hmph, we've come here specifically because there are no such means. I thought I told you that the OS *server* is connected to the SAO *server* through a private line."

"B-but, well, how about the lab at the institute or something?..."

As I persisted, *Eiji* went silent for a moment, before quickly shaking his head.

"Indeed, the lab at Touto Tech has a terminal for controlling White Yuna and Black Yuna. But it's impossible to access the SAO *server* through that *machine*. You need to open up a *gate* for *FullDive* use from the *server* side."

"But I..."

'Dived into the SAO *server* from the New National Stadium', I attempted to say but stopped midway. In that instance, there was no doubt that White Yuna opened up the *gate* for us from inside the *server*. And she was no longer with us.

Having given me a sharp glance as I sank into silence, Eiji took out a portable device from the *pocket* of his blue *track jacket*. He launched some sort of *app*, before muttering.

"I think I should be able to open the side entrance and *server room doors* with my ID. However, there are remote surveillance *cameras* inside. If they spot something, the guard will be after us in no time."

"...I see..."

Nodding, I took out the *Augma* from my *bag*. The reason I had once again taken it off after using it to pay using *points* at the *family restaurant* was because I suspected that I'd have the urge to launch OS and go *item* hunting.

The moment the virtual *desktop* booted up, "Yui, you there?", I called out. In no time, white light gathered in the centre of my vision, forming a small fairy.

Being based on the 《SAO *care support AI*》 that *Eiji* spoke of a while ago, Yui spent each day persistently improving her abilities; right now, I am unable to even imagine where her limits lay.

This *super AI*, 'Fuwawaa', gave a big yawn before looking up at me, a cheerful smile appearing on her face.

『Good morning, Papa!』

Turning my back to *Eiji* as he gave me a suspicious expression, I greeted her in a

whisper.

"M-morning, Yui. Though it's already evening..."

『In the business world, 《Good morning》 is a greeting used all day long!』

I was curious about what business she had in mind, but I didn't have the time to get sidetracked right now.

"Hey, Yui. I'd like to infiltrate, I mean, pay a visit to that *building* right now, so I was wondering if you could do something about the surveillance *cameras* for a bit..."

Seemingly having understood my extremely vague, roundabout phrasing in an instant, Yui looked up at the black *building*.

"Okay, piece of cake!... Though, oh my, isn't that *building* the former main office for *Argus*."

"Yeah, umm, it is."

"And what about the person behind you, Papa..."

As Yui tilted her head, I considered how I should explain this, but this would by no means end with just a word or two.

Also, the *Augma* doesn't have any *cameras* and instead makes use of an advanced tech that converts data in *real time* from the *user's eyeball sensor*, that is, the view that the user's eyeballs perceive, into visuals that can be processed by the *system*. Meaning that Yui should only be able to see what I myself am looking at, so how is she able to perceive *Eiji*'s standing behind me?

Deciding to ask her about this secret after we got back home, I limited the explanation to the bare minimum.

"Well, we kinda went with the flow and decided to enter this *building* together... he has an ID that grants access to it."

『There is no danger involved, right?』

"Sure, nothing dangerous either legally or physically... or so I expect. Can you do something about the *cameras*?

『Yes, I have already done something about them.』

"Wha?"

『I have ensured that all the surveillance *cameras* in the *building* will play a five minute-long *looped* recording. But the sun is setting, thus someone could notice that the angle of the sun remains unchanged.』

"E... eh, isn't that a bit too much to ask of a person... Thanks, Yui, I'll be sure to properly explain this in detail later on."

『That is a promise! Also, no keeping secrets from Mama, you hear!』

"Of course, I'll inform Asuna about this too."

Having finished the conversation in whispers, I quickly turned around. *Eiji's* expression was full of suspicion, but as someone who had been working with Black Yuna, he should be able to deduce something as trivial as the fact that I was speaking to an AI.

"*Eiji*, seems like we'll be able to get around the *cameras*. I'll leave the *door* to you."

"...I've just been released, you know, so I'll run away without you if a guard comes."

For a second, I hesitated whether I should say something like, "While I won't be abandoning you", in response, but gave a short answer in the end.

"Gotcha... Let's go."

Having given each other a slight nod, we looked to the left and right of the road, before stepping onto the *building* grounds. Here and there, some passers-by could be seen, but it didn't seem like they were paying any attention to us.

Having approached the side entrance, *Eiji* held his device over the verification system. Without giving me any time to feel worried, I heard the system making a 'pipi' sound,

followed by a clank as the door unlocked, thus we promptly opened the *glass* door and entered.

At that moment, the surveillance *camera* on the ceiling of the dark passage suddenly looked down at us. Its red *indicator* seemed to be staring at us.

Turning around, *Eiji*,

"Oi, are you sure we're okay here?"

The moment he whispered that, Yui, who was standing on my shoulder, seemingly took offense and *jumped* to face him.

『Please inform this person that we are a hundrecent okay!』

"...We're a hundrecent okay."

It wasn't clear how much *Eiji* trusted my response, but there was no turning back after coming this far. Pushing him by the back of his *track jacket*, I made him go forward.

At the end of the short passage lay the *entrance hall*; the room was dyed purple by the remaining rays of sunlight coming through the front *grill shutters*. We'd be visible from the road in front of the building, thus we quickly crossed the room and plunged into the *elevator hall*.

Among the three of them, only one was still powered. Upon *Eiji* pressing the 'down' *button*, the door instantly opened.

What surprised me was the fact that the elevator had *buttons* for six underground floors in addition to eight above-ground floors. *Eiji* didn't hesitate to press the *button* for the fifth underground floor. According to the information *plate* on the wall, B1 through B3 were the parking lot, B4 was the *data centre*, B5 was the *server room*, and B6 was the machinery room.

"...Wouldn't you normally put the *data centre* and *server rooms* on the upper floors? It would be bad if they got flooded due to a downpour."

As I asked this, to my surprise, *Eiji* didn't give his typical "Hmph", but instead formed a faint smile. However, this shred of a smile vanished instantly, as he responded

bluntly.

"When I came here for the first time, I asked the professor the exact same question. I'm told there's an underground water cooling *system* on the fourth and fifth underground floors that is cooling down the *server*. Also, while the underground floors are susceptible to flooding, they're resistant to earthquakes."

"..... I see..."

It was unclear whether it was Kayaba Akihiko's *idea* to set up the *server* underground, but come to think of it, Aincrad's *system console* was also located beneath the Town of Beginnings. Yui, who was about to be deleted at that location, was now sitting on my left shoulder, swaying her feet to and fro.

Upon leaving the *elevator*, I saw a passageway lit only by emergency lights stretching on straight forward. It was so dark that I couldn't see the floor, but *Eiji* proceeded without any hesitation.

There was a verification system beside the *sliding door* at the end of the passageway as well; this time, when *Eiji* held his portable device out, it took a bit of time before it opened. The inside was completely pitch dark, while a chilly and dry air flowed out of it.

As I felt an indescribable pressure causing me to hesitate stepping forward, this time it was *Eiji*'s turn to push me in the back.

"Hurry up and get inside."

"Ah... yeah."

When I somehow managed to step forward, the *sliding door* closed behind me.

Pitch darkness. But in the depths of the room, multiple red and blue lights continued blinking. I could faintly hear the roar of an exhaust *fan*.

The moment I took one step closer as if drawn in, a white light dispelled the darkness. *Eiji* had pressed the light *switch*.

My eyes, half-closed for a moment, opened wide.

Inside the approximately ten jō-sized space, there was another room with *glass* walls. Enshrined in the middle of it was a jet black *mainframe* that was far bigger than me.

Inside the two *front panels* with sculpture-like figures, numerous *indicators* switched on and off restlessly. On the silver *plate*, attached to the *panel* on the right, were three characters: SAO.

"So this... is the SAO *server*..."

When I muttered this, Yui, sitting on my shoulder, spoke out in an unsurprisingly nervous voice.

『Inside, Aincrad still exists even now, I see... 』

Nodding in silence, I turned around and looked at *Eiji*.

"Now that we're here... we can *log in* to SAO, right?"

"Yeah... There's an *access point* that you can only use in this *server room*. No other signals reach here, so you should be able to pick it up automatically."

Once he gave this answer, *Eiji* took out a worn-out *AmuSphere* from the boxes piled up in a disorderly manner beside the *glass partition*. Before I could say a thing, he quickly equipped it on his head.

"Naturally, I'm going too."

Now that he declared that, I couldn't just ask him to wait here. Besides, if he's using an *AmuSphere*, at least there shouldn't be any danger to his real body.

"...Gotcha."

Once I also firmly attached my *Augma* to my head, I looked for a place suitable for a *FullDive*. However, of course, I couldn't find a *bed*, *mattress*, or anything of the sort.

On the other hand, *Eiji* sat down on the floor without any hesitation and leaned his back against the *glass* wall. I sat down in silence beside him, assuming the same posture.

Exchanging glances, we matched our *timing*. We both inhaled, gathered some air, and shouted at the same time.

""*Link start!!*""

The *Augma*, whose *FullDive* function White Yuna had *unlocked* during the *stadium* battle nine days ago, detached my consciousness from my body, making it soar through a rainbow space.

The sound of the wind.

Chilly air was stroking my cheeks. I felt the fragrance of flowers. And the sound of water flowing.

The moment I suddenly opened my eyes, a sky dyed a red as deep as blood due to the setting sun expanded as far as I could see.

The sky——

Yet, that was impossible. There was no sky in Aincrad. Lying on the stone paving, what I saw should have been the bottom of the floor above——a roof made from stone and iron. In that case, was this not Aincrad? Did I end up *Diving* into some other world...?

As my gaze remained fixated on the endless evening sky, my thoughts of disbelief were cleared away when a familiar voice suddenly reached my ears.

"Papa, please wake up!"

With that, my ability to think finally returned and I quickly sprang up. First, I looked over my body and hands, noticing a black *leather coat* with black fingerless *gloves*, as well as a metal *plate* on my chest. There was no doubt about it—— this was me in SAO, the avatar of the 《Black Swordsman》 Kirito. When I moved my hands around my back just to be sure, the hilts of my two beloved swords touched my palms as if clinging to them.

The moment I lowered my hands, stood up, and turned around, it came into my view.

Standing about two *metres* away was Yui, the girl-in-a-white-*one-piece*-dress *version*, rather than her *pixie* form from ALO. The white stone-paved pathway extended straight ahead, with flower beds filled with multicoloured flowers in full bloom to the left and right.

And, towering over the end of the pathway, stood a magnificent and dignified deep crimson palace.

"The Ruby Palace....."

Muttering, I took several steps forward, before Yui's black hair, swayed by the wind, came into my right hand. Yui raised her left hand and grasped my *coat*.

"So, this is Aincrad's hundredth floor, huh..."

When I spoke out again, Yui nodded.

Strictly speaking, this was the third time I've come here. However, in the first instance, I was led here by White Yuna in a state of not being able to tell whether I was in a dream or reality, thus my memories of that time aren't clear even now. The second time, I appeared in the sky above the palace and descended straight inside.

So, this would be the first time I got to gaze thoroughly at the Ruby Palace.

If I hadn't fought Heathcliff... Kayaba Akihiko on the seventy-fifth floor, the conquest of the floating castle would have probably continued until we reached this palace with our own feet one day. Or perhaps, we would have been defeated on some floor without being able to accomplish this goal...

"...Is the *last boss* still inside..."

In response to my half-soliloquous utterance, Yui answered in a whisper.

"No... the *server* appears to still be in the *status* where the *last boss*... 《*An Incarnation of the Radius*》 has been defeated by Papa and the others."

"That so... An MMO has no credit rolls or a second world, huh..."

In that case, at this moment and onwards, the palace would probably continue

towering on the hundredth floor without any inhabitants. Having somehow suppressed the strange, strong emotions overflowing me, I looked around my surroundings.

And so, I finally realised that *Eiji* was nowhere to be found.

"Huh... where's *Eiji*...?"

"The only ones to appear at these coordinates are Papa and me, you know?"

Yui looked up at me, her lovely eyes a faint light of surprise.

"...By any chance, did you not have a plan on regrouping prepared beforehand?"

"...N-no. I was sure we'd appear at the same place..."

I mumbled some excuse, but if you think about it, there's no way that would have happened. In MMORPGs, 《appearing at the place you logged out last time》 is part of the basics; I *logged out* right after defeating the *last boss* nine days ago, thus I appeared on the hundredth floor——but outside rather than inside the *dungeon*.

In that case, *Eiji* too should have appeared at the place he *logged out* the last time... the place he had been at when SAO was *cleared* one and a half years ago. Most likely, that place was the vast Town of Beginnings... some inn within that town.

"...As if I can find you..."

I moaned, while Yui once again gave a stunned expression; at that moment.

A tiny insight went through my consciousness.

There's no way that guy——*Eiji* would patiently wait for me at the Town of Beginnings. He was sure to go out on the search himself. Not for me, but for her... for Yuna.

"Let's go, Yui!"

Shouting this, I grasped Yui's hand and began running in the opposite direction of the Ruby Palace, towards the Teleport Gate at the southern edge.

Notes

1. ^ Japanese addresses use a block-based system, rather than a street-based system that is more common in a lot of places in the West

Running. Earnestly running.

Having rushed out of the inn located downtown in the Town of Beginnings, he ran through the streets populated by no one aside from NPCs towards the plaza in front of the Blackiron Palace. He jumped into the Teleport Gate that flickered blue, *teleporting* him to main town of «Jaileum» .

Once again running through a town devoid of *players*, he arrived at the plaza of the western gate.

He was about to run out into the *field* from the gate, but an *open cafe* facing the plaza caught his gaze.

Naturally, it had no visitors. But as his eyes were caught by one of the tables, Eiji stopped.

As he continued staring at it, two *players* appeared there like a mirage.

Sitting on one of the chairs was a boy wearing a red-on-white *mantle* with a silver *breastplate*. On the other side - a girl wearing a white *hood*. While eating *pancakes* and some *croque-monsieur*, they had a friendly chat.

When Eiji took a step forward, the two figures disappeared without a sound.

"..... Yuna....."

Muttering this, Eiji took a step closer to the *cafe*.

On the store's window *glass*, he saw the reflection of his own *avatar*. The exact same appearance as that of the illusory boy he had just seen. He was shorter than Eiji in the real world by ten centimetres, and his face looked younger too.

His other self that he never wanted to see... Nautilus.

Having grit his teeth, Eiji turned around and once again began running.

This time, he did take a step into the Outer Field through the western gate. A *field* that was as complicated as a maze due to the walls of steep boulders; to the west, to the west he ran. At times he saw the red *cursors* of *monsters* appearing, but he took detours to avoid battle and continued running.

It was a road that he had only taken once over two years ago. But strangely, he did not hesitate on which path to take.

If Yuna were asking for help from this world, there was only one place where she could be located that he could think of. The *field dungeon* at the western edge of the fortieth floor. The place where Yuna had died.

It's not like the words of Kirito, the man who thwarted their plan to bring back Yuuna, were all believable to him. But that man went out of his way to meet Eiji, a person whom, by all rights, he wouldn't ever want to even see again. Solely because Y U N A 's *desktop mascot* had told him to "save" her.

If Kirito had appeared at the same place as him, perhaps Eiji would have taken the guy to the place where Yuna had died. But he was nowhere to be found. And Eiji currently did not have the mental fortitude to just wait until they regrouped.

Running. Running.

Before long, a half-collapsed ruins-like structure appeared up ahead. Thus far, he had been able to avoid *monsters*, but this would be difficult to do in a *field dungeon* with confined passageways. While on the run, he pulled out a one-handed sword from the left of his waist.

Nautilus's *level* had not increased since the day Yuna died. This means that his *stats* were just barely suitable for fighting on the fortieth floor. Yet that didn't mean that he could just stop.

The moment he set foot in the *dungeon*, three *cursors* were displayed in his path. Their formal name was 《*Harsh Tormentors*》. They were the typical small fry *monsters* you could find on the fortieth floor, but they always operated in groups, thus you couldn't let your guard down with them.

However, Eiji shouted while readying his sword.

"Out of the way!"

Fifteen minutes later.

A huge, familiar gate appeared ahead. Raised up to the top of the high gatepost was a portcullis of sturdy-looking iron bars.

Eiji stopped and leaned against the wall, breathing erratically. He opened his *window* and *objectised* his last healing *potion*. He drank it all in one go, but it was not nearly enough to heal up completely; he had lost so much of his HP during his battles thus far that it had reached the *red zone*.

He threw away the empty bottle and approached the gate.

Beyond the gate was an oblong chamber; and beside the farthest wall imposingly sat a gigantic figure. It was the *boss* of this *field dungeon*. Once he reached a *line* past the gate, the *boss* would operate the *lever* behind it, causing iron bars to descend.

In order to have the bars rise once again, your only choices were to either defeat the *boss* or have it move away and once again operate the *lever*, but it would indeed be difficult to win against the *boss* on your own. Moreover, a large number of henchmen *monsters* would appear in this chamber.

"Yuna....."

Shouting the name of his childhood friend in a hoarse voice, Eiji stared fixedly at a single spot within the chamber.

This was the place where Yuna, having attracted all the henchmen with her 《*Chant*》 *skill* to serve as a decoy, died. He had somehow managed to arrive at this place, believing that if Yuna were still around somewhere, it would be here.

However.

Inside the chamber paved with gray stones, only a dry wind blew through, with no sign of Yuna showing herself.

'Do I have to enter and stand at the place where Yuna died?'

That moment was still etched in Eiji's mind even now. The place where Yuna fell after being surrounded by numerous *monsters* was quite a bit closer to the gate than the chamber's midway point. If it was so close, the *boss* shouldn't go on the move even if he entered the chamber.

Having come this far, there was no option to run back. Right now, even if Eiji died, his real life wouldn't be taken from him.

"Yuna."

He muttered once again, before stepping through the gate.

The *boss monster*, the 《*Feral Warder Chief*》, was still sitting on the stone throne alongside the farthest wall without moving. Eiji moved forward bit by bit towards the place where Yuna had died.

There were no traces or landmarks to follow, yet Eiji could see that very spot as if there was a faint light shining upon it. It wasn't dyed in the colour of blood by the rays of the evening sun coming from outside the farthest wall; he felt as if a pure, white light had formed there.

Five more *metres*. Three *metres*...

"Durururu....."

A grotesque roar resounded, causing Eiji to quickly move his gaze.

Deep within the chamber, a dark shadow, with light shining behind it, slowly stood up. With its left hand, it lifted the two-handed axe, which looked like the blade a guillotine, that had been set against the throne——

With its right hand, it pulled the *lever* sticking out from the wall.

".....!!"

As Eiji took in a sharp breath, the iron bars behind him fell with a fierce crash. With

this, he could no longer escape from the chamber without defeating the *boss* or raising the *lever*.

Eiji was currently using an *AmuSphere*, so his brain wouldn't be destroyed even if he died. This much was certain but——what would happen to Nautilus? There was no revival function in the *original* SAO, thus, in the worst case scenario, weren't it possible for all of his *character data* to be purged?

A purge of *data* wasn't scary. However, if he were killed by the *boss* and his data were *deleted*, he would not get a second chance to meet Yuna as Nautilus.

The *Warder Chief* stepped onto the floor, raising tremors.

Bearing its ridiculously gigantic axe on its shoulder, the *boss* took a step forward, then another. There were no signs of the henchmen appearing, but they should begin surging up one after another sooner or later once the battle begins.

As his path of retreat was cut off, he no longer had any choice but to fight. But Eiji's chances of winning against the *boss* while *solo* right now were exceedingly close to zero. Even that day, Eiji——Nautilus wouldn't have been able to fight it properly if the *members* of Fuurinkazan hadn't been there with him.

Yes... thinking back upon it now, thus far has Eiji ever once defeated a formidable opponent using only his own strength?

After becoming trapped in SAO, he devoted himself to practicing *Sword Skills* in the training grounds within the Town of Beginnings, and raised his *level* by only farming safe *monsters*. After joining the Knights of the Blood, he had only ever fought monsters as part of a group.

The same applied in *Ordinal Scale*. He climbed all the way to *rank* 2 solely thanks to the battle *assist tool* equipped on his *Augma*, as well as his *exosuit*, rather than because of Eiji's own strength. That's why once the *suit* was destroyed, he was at his wit's end and lost against Kirito.

Yet, now. At least now.

"Yuuna....."

Muttering a single word, Eiji readied his sword.

His memories from this world should have been buried so deeply within him that he couldn't even find them himself, yet his body moved on its own, starting the *motion* for the *Sword Skill* 《Sonic Leap》.

His blade shined blue. With his right foot he kicked off the floor with all his strength, the *system assist* fiercely accelerating his *avatar*.

Eiji's charging skill... was taken in by the *Warder Chief's* now sideways two-handed axe. As a metallic sound and sparks were released, the blade nearly half-sunk into the handle of the axe while trembling violently——when the *light effect* disappeared.

The *Sword Skill* ended there; during the time Eiji's body was rendered rigid mid-air, the *boss* used the butt of its axe to strike Eiji hard.

"Guah...!"

The moment he was knocked onto the ground, a pathetic sound escaped his mouth. His body *bounced* time after time again as he rolled on the ground, and when he finally stopped, his HP *bar* took a sudden dip. A terror as if the blood in his entire body had frozen still.

The *bar* stopped just as it plunged into the *red zone*. No more *potions* left. The *boss's* two-part HP *bar* was still *full*.

Yet, he couldn't give up now.

Having stood up while staggering, Eiji once again brandished his sword and attempted to step forward.

Yet, his right leg... became fixed to the ground as solid as a rock, so much so that he could even hear a thud.

He thought perhaps he had fallen into a trap, yet he saw nothing wrong with his leg when he looked down. At this point, he finally realised.

This was the same as that time... the *avatar* stiffening phenomenon that had Nautilus expelled from the First Army of the Knights of the Blood, and was also the cause of

Yuuna's death.

After being released from SAO, Eiji finally discovered the cause of this phenomenon.

FNC——*FullDive Non-Conformity*. It was a condition where a malfunction occurred in the transmission between the cerebrum and the EF *matrix panel*, limiting his actions in the virtual world.

——Move! Move move!!

Shouting the exact same words in his mind as at that time, Eiji desperately attempted to move his right leg.

The *trigger* for the FNC, in Eiji's case, was his fear of death. When trying to evade danger, his instincts overwhelmed his ability to reason, freezing his *avatar*. Professor Shigemura, who had explained this *logic* to him, had said that this was a flaw on the *device's* side, thus it was an issue that Eiji couldn't do anything about through his will and thoughts.

Yet, that man——Kirito made the impossible possible.

He defeated Eiji, who had been assisted by both *software* and *hardware*, and even crushed the final *boss*, which should have been an absolute existence even on the *Cardinal System*. Eiji was sure that Kirito himself was not endowed with any special power or anything. If forced to say, it was because of his strength of will... the mental strength to face any hurdle no matter how hopeless the situation without giving up, unlike Eiji.

The reason why Eiji became unable to move due to FNC, was because the desire to run away lurked somewhere within his heart. The professor called that desire an 'instinct', yet a man should have the capability to cast away his instincts.

In front of him, the *Warder Chief* absentmindedly turned his body, facing Eiji to head towards him. In the surroundings, three blue lights began flickering like the heat haze. The *effect* for the surging of the henchmen.

Scared.

Nothing could be done about feeling scared. Yet he was unable to avert his eyes from

that emotion and pretend not to see it. No, that wasn't true; he accepted his frightened self... his weakness, and turned it into faith in himself. He could move. He could overcome his weakness and move forward.

"————I said moooooooooove!!"

Straining his voice to its limit, Eiji shouted.

Bakin, he felt as if something broke when his right foot stepped forward.

He kicked off the floor and ran. The *Warder Chief* brandished its two-handed axe high, while the henchmen *tormentors* that had appeared raised their thorny clubs.

Even if he didn't even have a one in ten thousand chance of winning, Eiji was still alive. In that case, he would fight until the last of his final moments.

At that moment——

"*Eiji!* Use this!!"

With that shout, something glittered in the air.

Spinning as it flew towards him, shining in gold as it reflected the rays of the setting sun, was a surprisingly enormous sword. Looking more like some sort of *device* rather than a weapon, it had a strange shape.

His subconscious at work, Eiji's right hand sheathed his sword into his scabbard, while at the same time his left hand extended towards the large, golden sword. The moment he grasped the handle made of a transparent material, countless *buff icons* lit up under his HP *bar*, and his HP suddenly began to go up.

"Dyurudoraaaaah!!"

The *Warder Chief* raised a cry as its two-handed axe slashed at him with great strength.

At the same moment, Eiji also swung the large, golden sword in his hands straight down.

The moment both weapons made contact, the *Warder Chief's* axe crumbled into

countless fragments with barely any resistance. The large sword continued along its path, bisecting the large body of the *boss monster* and instantly wiping out its two-part HP *bar*.

Just as the *Warder Chief* broke into blue *particles* and disappeared, the three *tormentors* stopped moving for a moment. Not letting this opening slip, he slashed with the large sword horizontally. Having had their bodies bisected, the three little ones disappeared before they could even let a scream out.

With the golden sword having eliminated the *boss* and henchmen in merely three seconds, Eiji stared at it with dumbfounded eyes. He heard the sound of the *lever* next to the throne moving, causing the iron bars at the entrance to rise.

Rushing into the room was Kirito, with two long swords equipped on the back of his black *long coat*, as well as a young girl wearing a white *one-piece* dress.

"..... Kirito... you, how did you know that this place... ——What's this sword... who's this child.....?"

Without answering any of Eiji's three questions, Kirito asked back.

"More importantly what about Yuna!? Is she here!?"

At that point, even Eiji finally remembered what he had to do. Having pushed the large sword onto Kirito, he ran to the south-eastern corner of the chamber——the place where Yuna had died.

"Yuna..... Yuna!"

Shouting, he stepped into the place where faint light had gathered; at that moment.

The light gently focused, clumped together, and formed a single figure.

White long hair. A black *one-piece dress* and *thigh-high socks*. Her eyelids closed.

It wasn't Yuuna——White Yuna. It was Y U N A——Black Yuna, who shouldn't have existed in this world.

"Yuna...!?"

Shouting, Eiji reached out for her with his hands. Having materialised and being unable to stand straight, Black Yuna collapsed into Eiji's arms.

He kneeled to support her, but he couldn't feel any weight at all. On the contrary, her *avatar* was riddled with *blockiness* and even now it looked like it could crumble at any moment.

"Yuna... what's going on, Yuna!!"

When he shouted out to her desperately, her eyelashes trembled slightly as her red eyes slightly peeked out.

"E... Ei.....ji."

The voice, created from a *sampling* of Yuuna's voice yet having a slightly different ring than Yuuna's, called Eiji's name.

"You came... for... me....."

Having voiced just that, she closed her eyelids again.

Eiji looked up at Kirito standing beside him, and shouted feverishly.

"Kirito, what's going on...! Yuna... Yuna, what is happening...!"

The one to answer was not Kirito, but the black-haired girl standing next to him.

"Yuna-san's AI *module* has begun breaking down."

"Wh... what do you mean!? Yuna's out there in the real world as an *idol*, even now..."

"Currently, operating as an AR *idol* is a *copy* of the *original* Black Yuna-san that they have there. At minimum, it seems there are at least five of them operating simultaneously."

The girl's words were calm, yet her expression was tinged with pain. Kirito shouted in astonishment.

"C... *copy*, you said!? B-but, if you did that..."

"...Yes. All of us AI based on SAO are created on the foundation of our uniqueness. We are unable to bear the recognition that there are duplicates of us, and *errors* will thus accumulate in us."

"So... the *copy* Yunas who are working as *idols* will also one day...?"

"Yes. I fear that there are probably some *copies* of Yuna who have already collapsed. The *original* Black Yuna is also continuing to accumulate *errors*, though... another one....."

The girl closed her eyelids for a few seconds and, after frowning as if she were looking for something, she continued where she left off.

"...It seems another, higher-ranked AI *module* is performing some *error* corrections and has somehow been able to halt her decay."

"A higher-ranked... *module*."

The one to mutter that was Eiji.

The language *engine module* on the SAO *server* had three *levels*. Black Yuna should be using *level 2*, the *engine* for *care support* AI. Above that was only one *module*, *level 1*. The language *engine* for *last bosses*...

"The higher-ranked *module* is using its own *data* to halt the decay; however, it seems to be lacking a piece of information... a memory *core*. If it only had that, it seems that it could completely repair her..."

"A memory *core*... what's it like, specifically..."

At Kirito's muttering, the girl raised her small hands in a gesture as if she were holding something.

"*Data* that would symbolise the most precious memory of Black Yuna. Even I am unaware what specific shape it holds. Even the higher-ranked AI who is trying to repair Black Yuna is in the process of losing her personality and is currently unable to respond to requests."

——The most precious memory... of Black Yuna.

Eiji had no idea what that could be. Black Yuna, or Y U N A, was created with only the desire to sing. Speaking of precious memories, he figured it could be her final *stadium live* concert, but there was no way he'd know what shape that memory had taken.

In his arms, Yuna's right hand, riddled with *noise*, abruptly began to move. It moved as if she were holding something between her fingers and was holding it out towards the light.

———Have you grown to like them that much, Yuna?

Inside his ears, his own voice resounded faintly. Followed by the answer.

———Yeah, they are pretty after all.

".....!!"

Gasping, the entranced Eiji opened his *storage*. As if guided by something, he switched *tabs*, and *objectised* a single *item*.

A spherical, *glass* bottle, stuffed with multi-coloured pieces of *candy*. The sole memento that Yuna——Yuuna had thrown over to Eiji just before she died.

"Yuna....."

Calling out her name, Eiji had Black Yuna grasp the bottle.

In an instant, all the pieces of *candy* inside the bottle shone in the colour of a rainbow.

The bottle itself disappeared as if melted by the light. Yet the light didn't disappear and instead lodged itself in the broken parts of Black Yuna's *avatar*, beginning to blink gently.

And so, Eiji saw.

A white-hooded girl, kneeling beside Black Yuna and stroking her cheeks with a gentle

smile.

"..... Yuna."

As he whispered out to her, the girl raised her head, looking straight at Eiji. That smiling face, for a moment, overlapped with the face of another girl, wearing a feathered hat.

——Eh-kun, you've kept it with you all this time for me...

The voice resounded in his head, as the girl turned into countless beads of light and disappeared.

"*Eiji.....*"

Having his named called again, he turned his face down.

With all the *noise* having disappeared from her body, Black Yuna's *ruby*-coloured eyes were gazing intently at Eiji.

Atop her chest, clear drops dripped down one after another. The fact that these were his own tears... eluded Eiji's senses for a few moments.

"..... The higher-ranked AI... has completely vanished."

Muttered the black-haired girl, yet Eiji slightly shook his head as tears continued to drip down.

It wasn't like White Yuna... Yuuna had disappeared. Inside Black Yuna, as memories... as recollections, she continued to exist. She was still alive.

Firmly embracing Black Yuna, Eiji let out an unbearable sob. Indefinitely, indefinitely he continued weeping in a voice like that of a child.

(The End)



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