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クソゲーオンライン
運営は全員逃げたけどなんの問題もないわ！
つちせ八十八
イラスト：にろ・東雲太郎
MF文庫J

Kusoge Online (BETA)

Volume 1

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Color Illustrations


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つちせ八十八
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「ゲームマスターは、プレイヤーの二万倍楽しい！」
アリス
「βテスト時代は『告死天使』として名を馳せていたわ！」
アズラエル
「あ、ササラキくん。ちょっと切腹してみない？」
リズナ
「運営はやっぱり頭おかしいよ、うん」
フュリー
サササラキ

From right to left:

Fury

Sasaraki

"The devs really are funny in the head, yep."

Lizna

"Ah, Sasaraki-kun. Would you mind trying to cut your stomach open a bit?"

Azrael

"During the beta test I was widely known as 'Deathbringer Angel!'"

Alice

"Being a gamemaster's ten thousand times more fun than being a player!"

「なんだか、ドキドキしちゃうような秘密ができちゃうような……」
「ヴェスペーネさまがサンドラさまの無事をよろこんでいらっしゃいましたよ」

From right to left:

"H-Hey, Alice, this pose is a bit embarrassing..."

"The spirit of fan service is an important aspect as a game master, you know?"

THE JUNK! Kuso Game Online

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Prologue

プロローグ

THE
JUNK!
Kuso Game Online

—People died easily in this virtual world.

The fire demon Balrog's, this dungeon's lord, huge figure crumbled to Sasaraki's feet. His large build emitted a sparkling, minute light. Like sun rays reflected on a lake surface. An effect, exclusive to dungeon lords.

"...W... We did it..."

Sasaraki mumbled in amazement.

One of their party members had died and the rest of them were on the brink.

Driven into a corner, his ally had unleashed an attack and pierced the boss's vitals.

"Eh... Ah, I-I... critted...?"

The girl gave forth a shaking voice. Long, black hair, jet-black cloak, dark-purple dress, big breasts. Her name was Azrael. A member of Sasaraki's guild. She gazed at her sword that had brought the boss to his knees with a look of disbelief.

Looking at her figure, Sasaraki's emotions finally welled up.

We— won!

"We did it... we did it, Azrael! We cleared the dungeon!"

Sasaraki spread out his arms widely and shouted.

Azrael turned around. She blinked with her big eyes.

"...Ah..."

Her childish face changed its expression from bewilderment to a smile and both swords fell to the ground with a clang. Tears welled up in the corners of her round eyes. She spread out her both hands, turned to Sasaraki, and jumped into his—

"Wait, NOT HAPPENING—!"

—She stopped in the nick of time. Azrael hugged herself as if to hide her breasts.

"W-W-W-what's with pose?! How filthy!"

"Eh… Ah, s-sorry. I didn't give it much thought."

It certainly was a posture screaming 'hug me.'

"Liar! You were staring at my breasts! Filthy!"

"No, that's just because you were about to leap into—"

Azrael's breasts were big. Really big.

So he usually endeavored to not become aware of them too much.

"Hmph. This isn't the time to cheer, anyway! Lizna died, you know?!"

"Ah, yeah, isn't that right…"

Lizna was another one of their members, she was a healer.

She had passed right before they'd struggled on to the boss.

"Jeez, you lack sentiment."

Azrael muttered and picked up her both swords from the ground.

"Lizna… please rest at ease…"

She formed a cross with her swords and shut her eyes.

It looked as if she was praying for Lizna's peace of soul.

"Ah, that's pretty cool!"

Those were his honest feelings, but Azrael glared at Sasaraki.

"…Hmph—"

Turning the other way, she shut her eyes again. In his heart, Sasaraki heaved a sigh.

…She really does still hate me, huh…?

A month ago, Sasaraki had joined Azrael and Lizna's guild. Lizna had been nice to him since the beginning, but Azrael had bluntly treated him like a nuisance. In all honesty, it was a bit— no, it was very sad.

It had been Sasaraki's dream to experience fantasy. And seeing Azrael making a cross with her swords and praying to God in front of his eyes— that was very fantasy. She was a two-swords-wielding dame.

Sasaraki looked at Azrael once more.

Her blades reflected the kill effect and were illuminating her face.

She had well-ordered features. Her body was great, too. Just looking at her made one's heart pound.

Wait, those aren't my intentions, I said!

He shook his head to clear his mind.

The more I think those things, the more I'll be hated.

—And then...

"Huh?"

He felt something was off.

"The sword's— floating?"

Azrael's sword wasn't in her grip.

It was about 20 cm displaced.

"Could this be... 'Lag'?"

It was phenomenon he'd been told of by Lizna before they had entered the dungeon.

"Don't move until the boss's death effect's over. Definitely, definitely don't, okay?"

When he asked for the reason, it appeared that probably for the sake of producing the boss's death effect, the vicinity was put into slow motion. That

slow motion was quite tricky, even though objects would be slowed, players wouldn't. And if you wonder how that'd work out—

"Wait, Azrael, if you move now—!"

He panicked and warned her, but it was too late.

"Ragnarok, return to your scabbard."

Azrael returned her beloved sword Ragnarok (naming by Azrael).

The tip of the blade which was 20 cm displaced due to lag...

Easily pierced Azrael's abdomen.

"Eh... Huh—?"

Finally noticing by the sound, Azrael looked at her abdomen in puzzlement.

Yet, she felt no pain. There was no pain in this world within virtual reality. Instead, you could hear sounds that seemed to hurt. Even so, the human brain is mysterious, and through sound alone it felt like you really took damage.

That aside, the damage count popped up above Azrael's abdomen.

300. By the way, Azrael's total HP were 105.

"Hagufuu—?!"

She fell over with a plonk.

"AZRAEL—?!"

He screamed, but there was no reply. It seemed like she'd become a mere corpse.

When Sasaraki'd gotten speechless, Azrael's body started to emit a white light. It was excessively gaudy player death effect. Above her corpse it said, [Arc Sword Azrael rests here]

And then a vivid sfx echoed. A rectangled message window popped up in front of Sasaraki's eyes.

[Do you wish to play back the message from your friend Lizna? YES/NO]

When he pushed the yes button without a word, her voice was played back.

[To Sasaraki-kun. It's me, Lizna. Azrael-san died, right? She's already resurrected, so we'll head for the lowest floor together now. By the way, did something happen? Azrael-san won't tell me a thing and just keeps crying, 'Just go and die, devs!']

After listening to it, Sasaraki sat down on the floor and sighed deeply.

People died easily in this virtual world.

—Mostly due to bugs.



STATUS

Name
アズラエル
Azrael

Level
レベルドレイン前は97(自称)

Job 職業
(自称)告死天使

Personality 性格
ほこりたかい(自称)

Skill 能力

<告死の一撃>
あらゆる生命に《死》を告げる鋭い斬撃です。(自称)

<天ノ断章・六百六十六>
一瞬のうちに666回も敵を切りつける連続剣技です。(自称)

<死天使再臨>
死天使の力で剣に《死》という概念を収束するとかそんな感じ。(自称)

ア

Status

Name

Azrael

Level

(Before level drain) 97 (allegedly)

Job

Deathbringer Angel (allegedly)

Personality

Proud (allegedly)

Skills

Killing Blade: Brings death to all life. A quick slashing attack. (allegedly)

Heaven's Literarity 666: A sword combo which hits the enemy 666 times within seconds. (allegedly)

Death Angel's Second Coming: The Death Angel's powers lets her focus the concept of death in her sword or something like that, you know what I mean. (allegedly)

Chapter 1:

End of Service Notice

第一章

サービス終了の
お知らせ

THE
JUNK!
Kuso Game Online

—Games are the greatest pastime.

Sword & Magic Online.

The first ever VRMMO made possible by utilizing 'Neuro Connect', a technology which lets you dive into virtual reality. Equipping the headgear, it intercepted your brain waves and let you experience an adventure in a world of swords and magic. A world from a formerly famous science fiction novel had suddenly become reality.

Imitating that sci fi novel, the game was a classical RPG. It wanted you to conquer the 255-floor-tall tower that soared high in the sky to free the 'Goddess of Creation' held captive at the top. At its peak, the number of simultaneously logged in players was about 50000, the size of its floors - judging by the first one - was about the size of land enframed by the Yamanote line.

Its catchphrase was, "The world's first, biggest, and best VRMMO."

All the maniacs had raided the beta test application. However, the developer argued that, 'There'd be too much of an advantage between beta testers and ordinary players,' and limited the number of participants to an utmost minimum. That secrecy fanned the hype even more and the players' expectations shot through the roof.

And thus, 'Sword & Magic Online' got released.

It'd been three months since.

The impressions of the players who had logged in brimming with enthusiasm could only be summarized with these words—



Illustration: "ISN'T THIS GAME WAY TOO SHITTY FOR ITS OWN GOOOOOOOOOOD?!"

Azrael shouted with a beet-red head after she had returned.

"Why?! Why would there be lag in a VRMMO?! Aren't the devs' brain cells the thing that's bugged?! Hamsters could've progged this game better! Like, seriously, just go and die in a hole, you shitty devs—!"

She kept venting her anger by stabbing the floor.

And each time the game kept returning, [Indestructible Object], [Indestructible Object].

"This game hasn't changed since the beta test at all—!"

Azrael was one of the longest-term players. It appeared she'd used some connections to get into the closed beta. Considering that, her level was low, she had few friends— few players on her friend list, but— according to her, "My level got drained by a bug!"

"Umm, Azrael-san?"

Lizna had raised her voice, one of her few friends. 15 years old. She had fluffy, medium-long hair and wore a robe with a high exposure like a mini skirt. On her back, she carried a giant mace contradicting her childish appearance.

"In other words, you died by 'seppuku,' right?"

"Hnng. T-That's right, but... don't makes it sound like I'm some dishonored soldier."

"Hmm, I see..."

Lizna mumbled and took the mace in a backhand grip for some reason.

She shoved it against her exposed abdomen and muttered, "Hmm, a mace won't do, huh...?"

"Hmm... Ah, Sasaraki-kun. Would you mind trying to cut your stomach open a bit?"

"Why—?! I won't, okay?!"

"I'd reeeally like to see a seppuku, you know...?"

It troubled him to be told that with such a broad smile.

"R-Rather, here, chests! 'Legendary' chests!"

Sasaraki pointed at two enshrined treasure chests emitting a golden shine. It was the reward for clearing a dungeon which had been beyond their level. You could only obtain rare items from these legendary chests. There was also a bug (or a feature according to the devs) which made it harder to get rare items the higher your level was, but that's a different story.

"Errr... Before we open it, let's get the needs straight."

"If it's a magic sword, it's mine. If not, you two can have it, sounds good?"

Magical swords were a separate sword category and solely useable by Azrael's job, 'Arc Sword.' They had names like 'Gram' or 'Laevateinn' and were probably just Azrael's taste. 'Probably' because since they had shown the swords in the preview video just before the game went on sale, nobody had seen the real thing.

"Isn't there something wrong with the loot table?"

...the rumors wondered— Anyways, Azrael was longing for a magical sword.

After all, the sword illustrated in the manual was so cool.

"...That'd be really unfair to you, wouldn't it?"

Chances for a magical sword to turn up were almost zero, after all.

However, Azrael laughed proudly.

"Sasaraki, you don't get it."

Azrael clenched her fist and said,

"The power of faith— overcomes chance—!"

"T-That so?"

"That's so—!"

He could do nothing but nod after seeing Azrael's shining eyes.

"Ah, please wait a second!"

Lizna said. She sneaked something out of her pocket. It was a colorful, 1 cm big cube. An 'Item Cube'. A magical container which allowed you to store large items. Basically, this was how you carried items with you.

The downside was that you could carry only ten of them. Ten and ten only.

Because of that, it was of utmost importance to the player to do proper item selection.

"It's the 'Fluffy-Fluffy Bunny Tail', please use it!"

He remembered that name. It was a good luck charm that a bunny had dropped some time ago, Lizna had told him proudly. If you carried it with you, it increased the chances for a rare item drop. According to its description there was also a 1% chance that the item would break every time you opened a chest.

"Eh... Y-You sure? It might break, you know?"

Azrael glanced at the cube and asked.

"If it happens, it happens!"

"No, I mean, you can't repair it, you know..."

"You don't want your magical sword?"

"Uh~"

"Ehehe~ It's fine, chances it'll break are only 1%."

"T-That's right, huh?! Just 1%!"

Azrael accepted the cube and smiled happily.

"Alright, time to open it! C'mon, Magical Sword Gram—!"

Azrael put her hands on the chest.

...Must be nice...

Looking at the two enjoying themselves, he thought that the game had its good sides, after all.

Even in this bug-infested world, you could have fun as long as you were with your teammates.

If possible, I'd like to be in that circle too—

Right after he wished for that...

A blazing light covered the room.

In front of Azrael, a sword was hovering above the chest.

It was a longsword, about 80 cm. Its edge emitted a purplish-red aura.

The item window popped up beside the sword.

[*"Forged by the Demons"* Magical Sword Gram

Item level: 88 Special Attributes: Critical Chance +50%]

"Eh...E-Eh? F-For real—?!"

Azrael's expression changed from surprise to joy.

Lizna was brimming like a ray of sunshine.

Sasaraki broke into a smile, too. They did it. The real deal magical sword.

Lizna's good luck charm had done its job!

"WE DID IT, AZRAEL, LIZ—"

Sasaraki tried to shout and right after...

[Player Azrael carries the maximum number of possession cubes.]

The robotic system voice announced.

['Magical Sword Gram' couldn't be transformed into a cube. Cancelling the event.]

"Eh—?"

Crack.

The magical sword was smashed in an instant.

Azrael's mouth still maintained its shape from saying 'Eh.'

"Maximum—? Oh, ah! The possession cube limit!"

If you reached the maximum number of possession cubes, new items would be scrapped without a warning. A really rotten bug— I mean, 'feature;' according to the devs.

To avoid that bug from happening, you usually would adjust the number of possession cubes you carried with you before a boss fight, of course.

However, Azrael was now carrying ten cubes. Because of Lizna's good luck charm.

The next instant...

[Rolling... Fumble. 'Fluffy-Fluffy Bunny Tail' broke.]

Snap. The cube quickly cracked apart and dissolved into light.

It seemed like they had hit the 1% chance.

"The power of faith— overcomes chance—!"

Azrael's words from earlier revolved in Sasaraki's head.

Wait. What is this? What's with this— absurd combo?

"I— I'm sorry—!"

Lizna shouted. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Just because I gave you that good luck cube, the cube limit... It's my fault—!"

Azrael suddenly came back from her daze.

"It's not your fault—! Rather, I should be sorry for breaking your cube!"

"I'm really sorry, I'll commit seppuku to redeem myself—!"

"Just how much do you wanna commit seppuku?!"

"I-It's fine, you two! There's still one chest left—!"

He stopped Azrael and Lizna in a snap.

"...So what?"

"Errr, I just thought it might be a magical sword..."

"What are you blabbering, that's impossible. We're talking magical sword, *magical sword*!"

It certainly was an item so rare, that no one had gotten their hands on it since the day the service had started.

Two of them showing up in a row was nothing short a miracle. And yet—

"We'll never know... if we don't try."

Sasaraki said and squatted down in front of the chest. From behind he could hear her grieve, "It's impossible, I tell you," and Lizna taking a deep breath. Sasaraki, too, took a deep breath and prepared himself.

They'd never know if they didn't try— that had been a lie.

In truth, he knew.

Actually, the magical sword—

Would definitely drop.

I didn't... wanna have to rely on this.

No matter what kind of excuses he made, it was an exploit and nothing else.

He was even likely to receive a permaban— and get permanently expelled from the game.

But—

Sasaraki turned around and looked at the two. Azrael looked resigned with a few tears in her eyes, mumbling, "O-Of course it won't drop, that's just..." Next to her Lizna watched over Sasaraki anxiously.

If the magical sword does drop, those two will surely be overjoyed.

And making my hands dirty... can make it possible.

So— What am I hesitating for?

"Execute Skill 'Adventurer.'"

Sasaraki said. 'Adventurer' raised the chance for a chest drop from monsters by 30 percent. It was Sasaraki's special skill. In short, it was useless right now. The reason he executed it anyway was the golden twinkle that covered his hand.

That golden effect was the same they used for boss defeats.

And the same kinda 'Lag' came with it.

And Sasaraki knew just the underhanded trick to use it for.

Alright, I can do this.

Sasaraki lifted up the chest. And shook it several times. When he repeated that a bunch of times— something slightly stuck out from a gap in the chest. It was the tip of a sword, but in split seconds it changed into the laces of some boots, then into the bottleneck of a potion.

It were the chest's contents.

The two objects' locations had gotten out of sync and the contents could be seen.

In this game, the loot was definite when opening the chest.

And before you opened it, the loot changed in fixed intervals. That shifting stopped the second you opened the chest. In this arrangement, if combined with the content peek 'feature'— he could go for any rare item.

"Now—!"

The moment he had spotted a dark-red sword tip, Sasaraki opened the chest vigorously.

Gently, the silhouette of a sword hovered in the air.

""EEEEEEEEEEEEEEH—?!""

As if chaining right onto their voices, the system voice echoed throughout the labyrinth.

[Player Sasaraki acquired 'Magical Sword Gram.' Commencing cube transformation.]

* * *

After they had left the dungeon, the three returned to town. In this world, there was only one town. Situated in the heart of the first floor, it was the first town, called 'Start.' Azrael always grumbled towards this hopeless naming sense, 'May your heads explode, devs!'

Be that as it may, the three of them had gathered in front of Start's castle gate.

"For the time being... umm..."

Azrael glanced at 'Magical Sword Gram' which dangled at her hips.

She seemed to be hesitant about something, when finally...

"...T-Thanks... for your efforts today."

Lizna chuckled besides her.

"Sasaraki-kun, she actually wants to say, 'Thank you, I appreciate it!'"

"Wha—?! Don't interpret my words however you want! It's totally not like that, okay—?!"

"You made a huge jump in Azrael Points!"

"What are those meaningless points?!"

"If you collect 100 of them, Azrael-san will marry you."

"Those points will be at zero for all eternity, alright?! A-Anyways—!"

Azrael cleared her throat with a cough.

And holding up 'Magical Sword Gram' together with its scabbard, she glared at Sasaraki.

"Sasaraki. I'll definitely return the favor."

"Eh... No, don't worry about it."

He'd only gotten it by using an exploit and they'd promised to give magical swords to Azrael, to begin with.

If she'd be grateful, it'd rather worry him.

"My Deathannouncer Angel pride won't allow that."

Azrael said and put her hand to her chin.

"But we're talking about a magical sword here... What could hold a candle to that...?"

She started to ponder. In this game, all business came down to item trading. There was a currency, but the economy had broken down completely— thanks to a widely known gold dupe— and so valuable items couldn't be bought with money.

"—Hmm, can't be helped. Sasaraki. Come here for a bit."

She signalled him to come over with her hand. For now, he went. Right then, in a flowing motion Azrael untied the big brooch that held her cloak together. Lizna raised her voice with a, "Wah—!"

"A-Azrael-san, you're going that far?!"

"It really is a waste if it's Sasaraki, but I made up my mind."

"You're that determined—?! But that'll violate the Youth Protection Code, you know?!"

The Youth Protection Code. A system which held up the game's morals and prevented physical and psychological intimity between boys and girls. The penalties were absurdly grave; if you kissed, you'd splatter across the floor and on top of that there were players whose names had even been put on the bad words filter.

"—Eh—?!"

And so an act that could violate that code would be— Her face lit up.

"Wai—! W-W-W-W-What do you think I'm doing—?!"

"You're stripping right now! Seductively!"

"It isn't seductive—! I'm just handing over the brooch—!"

"It *is* seductive! Am I right, Sasaraki-san?!"

"Uh..."

Seeing Azrael with a face red like that really had raised his awareness of the situation.

"Anyways, Sasaraki! Back to topic!"

After she had cleared her throat with a cough, she presented the brooch.

"Accept it. It's the 'Tear of the Goddess.'"

Azrael smiled haughtily.

"It's item level 80 and a quest item needed to communicate with the goddess on floor 255!"

"Why do you have something like that?"

"I found it in town in a back alley the other day."

"...Yeah, right, I see."

An item of the last floor's quality falling down to the first floor's town.

He didn't know about other games, but it seemed quite possible to happen here.

"But I can't accept it, it's way too valuable."

"Why?"

"Because I want Azrael Points, not that."

"Please don't mimic my voice, okay, Lizna?! The reason is..."

All I did was using an exploit— he couldn't bring himself to say that.

Azrael'd be dejected if she knew that he simply exploited a bug to get it.

"Errr, look, you need it for a quest."

"So?"

"So when the time comes and you don't have it with you, you know, that'd be bad, right?"

But she only cocked her head in puzzlement with a, "Hah?"

"That doesn't really matter, right?"

Azrael put a fist to her hips and pointed at Sasaraki with the other hand.

She then mumbled.

"It's enough as long as one of the party members has the item."

He thought about it for a few seconds.

It certainly was true that only one party member needed to have the quest item with them for everyone to benefit. So as long as Azrael and Sasaraki were in a party, both of them could do the quest just fine. Yeah, there was no problem at all.

And yet, why— was his heart throbbing?

"W-W-Wah—!"

Lizna rejoiced.

"Azrael-san! That was so beautiful just now—!"

"Hah? What was?"

"You see..."

Lizna clenched her fist close to her heart, her cheeks blushed slightly.

"'Until the last boss we'll always be together'— is what you mean, right?!"

Three seconds. Four. Five went by when Azrael's cheeks finally flared up. Like a goldfish she opened and closed her mouth a few times, but nothing came out. Sasaraki was the same. Something hot was welling up within his heart and he couldn't breath.

"Wha— That's no— I didn't mean it like— Wai— Sasaraki! What are you blushing for, you're not misunderstanding something, are you?! It's definitely, completely, not a shred like that, alright—?!"

Azrael's frantic voice echoed to the skies, and faded.

* * *

Sasaraki had split up with the two girls and was walking around town by himself.

Lizna and Azrael had been forced to log out since their 'Youth Health Login Time' had been up. The 'Youth Health Login Time' was a time limit that had been

decided by the parliament because of VR familiarization and was determined by a brain waves test called 'Reality Control Measurement.' Azrael and Lizna had four hours, Sasaraki six.

"A lot... has happened today, huh...?"

He was at 'Teleport Plata' in the center of Start. Paved with marble, it had - as you'd guess from its cheap name - eighty magic squares on it in grid-shape, which served as teleporters. This should've been the place to travel for players.

I say should've been because due to a certain 'feature,' nobody used the teleporters.

Hence, there was little traffic and it was a good place to think.

Taking to himself, Sasaraki continued walking around.

He took out the brooch from his pocket.

The 'Tear of the Goddess' twinkled in the sunlight.

He recalled their words from when they had parted just now.

"Sasaraki-kun, let us answer Azrael's feelings, okay~?!"

"How many times do I have to tell you that I didn't mean it like that—?!"

His cheeks blushed. Of course it was just like Azrael had said, she shouldn't have meant it in a romantic way. But— although she had rigorously denied everything Lizna said, she didn't demand the brooch back.

Maybe she had acknowledged him as a member?

If so— he'd be happy, and his heart hurt from throbbing.

"I really did use an exploit, huh...?"

It had already been a while by now, but he really did take advantage of a system flaw and exploited it. Even if it was to make the both of them happy, and moreover to make up for the bug that had put them in a spot to begin with, had

his action really been just? He had turned this question over in his mind several times already, with no definite answer.

On the other hand, he couldn't tell them the truth.

Azrael's eyes had sparkled when she received her magical sword.

Turning that sparkle into disappointment was something Sasaraki couldn't take.

"Yeah... I'll have to take it to my grave."

Sasaraki clenched his fists and steeled his resolve.

"But, a quest item for the last floor, huh...? Will I ever get the chance to use it?"

The last floor.

That it existed alone was the only thing people knew about it.

"Isn't it on the teleport list?"

He muttered and walked on top of a teleporter.

Together with white smoke, a dictionary-like book appeared hovering in front of Sasaraki's eyes. It had the feeling of a grimoire to it, made out of parchment and with a purple cover. The title said, 'Goddess Alice's Codex.' It appeared to be the book from which you'd pick the location to teleport to.

'Appeared to be' because he hadn't used it yet since there was a bug with the processing logic within the teleport mechanism that caused your equipment to not teleport correctly. Namely— you'd arrive naked.

Literally naked.

Thanks to that bug, a great number of female players seemed to have quit the game.

"The devs really are funny in the head, yep."

Murmuring that, Sasaraki opened 'Goddess Alice's Codex.' A two page spread saying, 'First Floor: The Place Where the World Starts,' appeared. He kept turning page after page until he finally arrived at the last one. A mostly blank page.

There was only one line at the top which stated the floor's name.

[255th Floor: Angband Depths, Goddess Alice's Eternal Prison]

"...The 255th floor, huh...?"

He gripped the 'Tear of the Goddess' he had received from Azrael.

This brooch would come in handy at the 255th floor. However, it had been three months now since the service had started and no one had even cleared the first floor yet. The content size was ridiculous. It was ought to decrease from the second floor onwards, but how many years would the road to floor 255 take?

How many adventures would await them until then?

Thinking about that— made his chest pound, after all.

This world really was amazing.

There were kinda a lot bugs and actually there weren't just 'kinda' a lot bugs and you could easily cheat rare items and you usually died to bugs thrice a day and the devs insisted they were 'features' and didn't do a thing about them and this game was so much of a kusoge at times that all you could was wonder...

But, it was an undiscovered fantasy world.

The first floor was an orthodox world of grasslands, but what would the second floor be like? Or the third? And beyond that? What kinda dungeon, whose name alone he knew, would 'Angband' be? What would Goddess Alice, waiting in its depths, look like?

He didn't know how many years it'd take, but if he kept playing the game—

"I might be able to— meet the goddess someday, won't I?!"

Right after he had clenched his fists and said that...

"How about we meet right away?"

A girls' voice echoed from the 'Tear of the Goddess.'

"...Hah?"

"I've finally found you— Debug command 1984, execute!"

Something strange happened immediately. 'Goddess Alice's Codex''s entirety emitted a pale blue light. The 255th floor's page that Sasaraki had opened turned once more— it was supposed to be the last page in the book, but something was peeling off from behind it.

Peel. Peelpeel.

Finally, it appeared. A page, painted out black, as if ink had splashed all over it.

And in the middle of it, it said in white letters...

[256th Floor: Angband Backstage, Goddess Alice's—]

Before he could read it to the end, the world distorted. It was something different than the teleport effect. The whole world warped with noise and discloakd in a hexagon matrix. His head was spinning. Obviously, this wasn't a normal teleport.

Sasaraki wore a dry smile.

He didn't exactly know what was going on, but one thing he knew for sure.

—He had been caught in a really bad bug.

* * *

Once the bugged teleport effect ended, his vision returned.

Sasaraki stood with his mouth wide-opened.

He thought he'd be teleported to some bugged place, but that wasn't the case.

It was a space battleship's bridge. At least that's what he thought it was at first. The room had a robotic feeling to it and was made out of a black metal. When he looked up, the ceiling had round openings with bluish-white light in it. And those illuminated the whole room.

In the corner of his eye the text with the area's name floated up.

[256th Floor: Angband Backstage, Goddess Alice's Debugging Room]

"Debugging Room?!"

The room where the developers would test the game and had complete control over items, completion flags, and statuses. At least that's what it was in Sasaraki's imagination. Basically, it was the developer's secret room where players weren't supposed to set their feet in.

And that's where he was in right now—

"Huh? But..."

He panicked and looked around, but there wasn't a single developer in sight.

Are all the developers away right now? He thought, when...

"You did well coming this far—"

A voice echoed within the room.

Followed by a slow, electronic sound, the wall within the room transformed into a gigantic display.

Thereafter, Sasaraki's consciousness got captivated by the girl on the screen.

"—Wah—"

It was a silver-haired angel. Wearing a thin dress colored white and light blue. Her body was clad in a transient white cape and from behind a slight halo surrounded her. That kind of girl was looking at Sasaraki and— began to smile.

"Nice to meet you, Player-san!"

"...Huh?"

What a simple-minded greeting, indeed.

"You're— Ah, it's on screen now. Sasaraki, right?"

The girl clapped, smiling again.

"Sasaraki. Yep, sounds refreshing and just like a young knight, really. A good name, isn't it?"

He was praised all of a sudden.

"Eh, ah, yeah, thank you...?"

"What's wrong? You've been looking sorta out of it."

"Well, frankly, I've no idea what's going on."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Wait a second, I'll be right there."

"Eh?"

"A player's come here, so it should work now— Main skill 'Advent,' activate!"

The girl shouted and right after, intense light and noise pierced the debugging room.

"Wah—?!"

A pillar of light appeared right next to Sasaraki.

The light particles flowed from the floor, up to the ceiling. Like a waterfall in rewind.

Within that pillar floated the girl from just now.

However, something was different about her appearance.

She didn't wear a dress. Actually, she didn't wear anything at all.

"Wai—"

"Eii—!"

The girl shouted before Sasaraki could say anything.

An even stronger light emitted and immediately, the pillar disappeared.

What's left were Sasaraki and the girl floating in the air.

Soft-footed, the girl alighted to the ground, her silver hair sunk gently.

She looked at her hands, her arms— and then smiled once again.

"Yep, perfect. Teleport successful—!"

"Wai— Y-Your clothes! They're gone, you know?!"

They really were. Not just her dress or so, her underwear was gone, too. Hence, he could see her bare skin. Her slightly protruding chest, or her long and slender legs, or that part at the root of her legs; anyway, all of this silver-haired girl lay bare before him.

Not good, I've to avert my eyes.

Even that kind of thought got absorbed by the naked body in front of his eyes.

Uwa, so that's what a girl looks like dow— Wait, what's wrong with me?!

"Hm? Clothes?"

The girl looked down at herself. She blinked.

Then she looked at Sasaraki, back at her chest, and repeated that once again.

"Huh? Shouldn't the Youth Protection Code— Oh, I see, I'm not treated as a player."

She had mumbled something. And then her eyes met with Sasaraki's.

The girl alternated her gaze between her own naked body and him.

Not good...!

Once she realizes I saw— He prepared to get slapped across the face, when...

The girl murmured with a serious expression.

"Hm. Should I be like this or wear clothes— What should it be?"

".....Hah?"

What's with this question?

"There aren't just male players, right? The boy/girl ratio's about 9:1, if I remember correctly. It's not like I'm not getting the romance behind clearing the game and as a reward getting the girl to... But hmm. I've to make it so the game comes up with something based on the individual player..."

"Wai... Wait a—!"

"Ah, that's right. Sasaraki. What about you?"

The naked girl drew one step closer.

She inclined her head and asked with a carefree expression.

"Like this? Or clothes? What's better?"



"W-What's better—?!"

Sasaraki shot a fleeting glance downwards— and turned his eyes right back up as fast as he could.

"I-I think you should wear clothes—!"

"That so? Considering that, you look awfully happy, though."

"Wha— T-That's not true at all—!"

"Hmm? Well then..."

The girl flicked her fingers.

In an instant, the same clothes from before reappeared.

"Is this okay with you?"

Seizing his chest, Sasaraki nodded a few times.

His heart hadn't stopped throbbing yet.

On one hand, due to the impact of her naked body just now— On the other hand... could this girl be—?

"Let's start with introductions... Then again, that might be unnecessary, right?"

She winked.

"Maybe you know who I am?"

Sasaraki swallowed hard.

A girl whose main skill was 'Advent' and who - going by her looks - could be mistaken for an angel.

She looked much younger than he'd expected, but— there was no mistaking it.

"—You're Goddess Alice, right?"

"Beeeeehb. Wrong."

"Eh—"

She smiled mischievously.

"Well, I *am* Alice, but— I'm not really a goddess."

Alice put her hand to her ear and undid the earring.

After a closer look, it actually was a ten-sided dice. Juggling that with her hand, Alice said...

"Gods don't roll dices. I do."

She raised her left hand and opened her palm. A bulky book appeared together with the smoke effect from a teleport and floated above her. The cover said, 'Sword & Magic Online Rulebook.'

"Gods let people suffer, I let people have fun."

After her last line, she spun around and assumed a pose.

"Which is why you should call me like this!"

And then, with a smile as dazzling as the sun, she announced...

"'Genius Gamemaster Alice-sama!'"

* * *

Gamemaster.

Something like the god of a VRMMO, or maybe even above that.

Especially in 'Sword & Magic Online' their power was tremendous. The world got changed frequently due to the gamemasters' intervention. For instance, they had made a bank to deposit items in, or prohibited love.

Their goal was but one thing.

To let the players, who had come to this world, have fun—

"Which means a gamemaster is much greater than a goddess. Got it?"

Alice slammed her hand against the whiteboard which said, 'What's a Gamemaster?!'

Sasaraki had been told to sit down on a pipe chair. In front of him was Alice. She smiled at Sasaraki while standing on top of a big 'Ehime Mandarins' cardboard for some reason. She really seemed to enjoy herself.

"...Why a whiteboard?"

"Because I'm most accustomed to it. When it comes to explaining something, whiteboards are best."

Alice slapped her hand against the whiteboard a few times, smiling. It felt like he'd lose the moment he started to care.

"Once again: My name's Alice, I'm this world's gamemaster."

"A developer, so to say, right?"

"You could say that, huh?"

But no matter how you looked at her, she was definitely younger than Sasaraki. Due to the infamous 'Virtual Reality Harmonization Law,' a VR game character couldn't diverge from the player's real gender, age, and appearance too much, so everyone in this world was supposed to look pretty much like they did in real life—

"Alice, how old are you?"

"I had twelve birthday parties so far."

So she was three years younger than Sasaraki, 12 years old. Way too young.

"Why are you a gamemaster with 12?"

"Because I'm a genius."

"This isn't a matter of being a genius or not, you know?!"

"It is!"

All Sasaraki could do was be silent.

"Errr... Then why did you call me?"

"Because I was locked up."

Alice explained it. Her initial job was 'The Creator,' but due to some peculiar settings, her first spawn had been in prison and unable to get out, she was in a bind. So she had used the 'Tear of the Goddess' to seek help.

"Waitwaitwait?!"

There were way too many things to tsukkomi on.

"Isn't the 'Tear of the Goddess' supposed to be used on the last floor?"

"Floor flags actually become dysfunctional when you stand on a teleporter."

"EEEEEEEH—?!"

He'd come to know yet another worthless bug.

"Also, isn't it bad when the goddess arbitrarily breaks out of prison?"

This girl was basically the game's goal.

If the imprisoned goddess would just walk around freely, the story would come to nothing.

"Even goddesses want to take a stroll, you know?"

"Yeah, but you could've asked another gamemaster to help you."

"I would have done that, if I could."

"What's wrong? Are you on bad terms?"

"Hmm, that's not it— Let's not talk about it."

Alice expressed a refreshing smile.

"Rather, I want to know more about *you*, Sasaraki."

"I'm just an ordinary player, you know?"

"Exactly because you're an ordinary player."

Alice chuckled enjoying herself.

"Isn't it obvious? Hearing the story of a player who's visited my world..."

Linking her hands behind her back, she slightly bent over her body.

"...is the most enjoyable thing there is?!"

Alice said with a genuinely happy expression.

"I-Is that so...?"

He didn't really get it, but maybe gamemasters just were like that.

In any case, it didn't feel bad to be told that with a smile. Sasaraki began telling his story bit by bit. How he had first logged in a month ago, how he had two comrades here, how he had successfully cleared his first dungeons with them earlier.

When he told Alice that, she suddenly broke into a smile.

"Really?! Congratulations on your first clear—!"

She grabbed Sasaraki's hand and shook it.

Appearingly, she was as delighted as if it'd been her own feat. It was somewhat embarrassing.

"T-Thank you?"

"Hey, wanna watch the play record?"

The play record was an automatic album feature which saved adventures in video format. After Sasaraki nodded, it started playing on the screen. She fast-forwarded it to the 'Balrog' boss kill.

"You did good winning at that level. It was hard, wasn't it?"

"Well... it's thanks to Azrael's efforts."

He pointed at Azrael on screen as she was wielding both her swords making a serious face.

At that moment, Alice's expression grew serious too, leaking a, "Mumu?!"

"That's Azrael, something wrong?"

"Sasaraki... this girl's..."

Alice faced him with a stern face and said...

"...boobs are *big*, aren't they?"

"Guha—?!"

Alice chuckled.

"A good comrade, isn't she? You should treasure her."

"That advice doesn't seem as nice after that comment just now, you know?!"

"Ehehehehe~"

It's hopeless, she's totally pulling my leg.

Meanwhile, the video had reached Azrael's seppuku scene.

"Aah, that one— The ticket's flagged red in the database, if I remember correctly."

"Flagged red?"

"That's one category on our bug tracker. Red means it has an influence on game progression, a critical bug."

"So you *do* have bug management, more or less..."

Considering that, there hadn't been a single bug fix yet, though.

"It's ticket #60035, 'Positional desync accompanied by lag,' isn't it?"

"Wait, what's with that number?"

"It's the ticket entry number, something wrong?"

"There are 60000 other critical bugs?!"

This game was way too outrageous.

"Hmm, I always want to watch the players, but there's just no time to— Hm?"

Forwarding the video, Alice's hands suddenly stopped.

When Sasaraki took a look, it was the scene where he had looted 'Magical Sword Gram.'

"Hm. This is an unknown bug— I think?"

"Ah..."

The scene where he used an exploit to get his hands on a rare item.

It probably spelled trouble if a developer like Alice saw that.

"Mhm, mhm, I see."

Alice talked to herself with a pokerface. Finally, she turned to Sasaraki.

Should I apologize? He thought, but Alice was the first to ask...

"Sasaraki, did you discover that bug?"

"Eh...? Yeah, but..."

"Then why did you use it for such a weak item?"

"Eh—?"

"You could take whatever rare item you want, right?"

She said in a tone that bore genuine curiosity.

"Why, huh...? It'd just be boring if I did that."

"Is that so? I think it'd be fun. Everyone'd call you hero. That pink-haired girl and the big-boobed one and everyone else too, all would come and pamper the hero."

"That's—"

When he first discovered the bug, that thought really had crossed his mind for a second.

But the reason he didn't do that was—

"—It wouldn't be exciting."

To experience adventures in an unknown world of swords and magic.

That was the reason why Sasaraki had logged into this game.

If he used that exploit, he'd come to know all the items.

And that'd render it meaningless.

"Hmmm?"

Starestarestare. She kept licking all over him with her gaze.

"Then one more question. Why did you give the sword to that girl?"

"Eh—?"

"Could it be something bad? Did you want her to be grateful? Did you want her to fall for you?"

She stared at him from directly up front. He couldn't lie.

"Azrael and Lizna were sad and so I... wanted to make them happy."

"So it's fine to break the rules if it's to make your friends happy?"

Sasaraki didn't answer. He couldn't answer.

"Hmm. Hmm. Hee?"

Alice crossed her arms and shut her eyes.

Would she be angry with him for abusing a bug?

Sweat oozed out of Sasaraki's clenched hand.

However— Alice suddenly smiled.

"You're just what I've been looking for—!"

"Heh?"

She looked really happy for some reason.

"Hey, Sasaraki! I've high hopes and want to ask something of you!"

"E-Eh—?"

"This game has three problems right now, you know, and I need your help."

Alice briskly walked next to the whiteboard.

"Earlier you said that I could've asked another gamemaster to help me, right?"

"Y-Yeah. Another one of the developers could—"

"There is no one else."

"Hah?"

Alice ran the pen across the whiteboard.

"Three problems— And here's problem one!"

Alice slammed her hand against the whiteboard.

Written on it was...

'All the Gamemasters (Except for Alice) Ran Away'

Sasaraki blinked a few times.

But the letters didn't vanish. Nor did Alice.

So it appeared— that this wasn't an illusion.

"Wai... You're kidding, right?!"

"Sadly, I'm not. There came this new company that said, 'Let's make a VRMMO,' you know, and all of the developers got headhunted. The management,

programmers, designer, everyone. I'm the only one left. Such a cruel story, isn't it?"

Alice said while sitting on the mandarin box and letting her feet dangle.

"Waitwaitwaitwait!"

Impossible. The dev team didn't just diminish in size, it got exterminated?!

"It's something that happens quite often to medium-sized studios."

"No, that's, what's the company's president doing?!"

"Hospitalized after a nervous breakdown."

He was lost for words. What kinda situation was this?

"On to the next problem!"

"There's more?!"

"Didn't I tell you in the beginning that there are three?"

Alice nimbly ran the pen over the whiteboard.

'I Have No Debugging Permission'

"By the way, debugging permission is the permission to make new dungeons, maps, fix bugs— basically, changing the state of the game. You need an item called 'Immortal Pendant,' but... due to certain circumstances, I can't put my hands on it.

"...In other words?"

"There's no one who can fix bugs."

"Aren't we doomed?!"

With no way to cope with more than 60000 critical bugs aka. features...

"And the third problem— It'll be quicker to simply show you the hard evidence."

A document appeared on the big wall screen.

"That's the document which is set for user distribution in four weeks."

[Sword & Magic Online End of Service Notice

We'd like to thank you for enjoying our game.

Due to various circumstances, the 'Sword & Magic Online' service will be discontinued three days from now at __ in the morning. All data will be erased. We won't answer questions regarding this case. We apologize for any inconvenience.

Please look forward to other EastEnd Games releases.

EastEnd Games Corp. President Watarai Kirine]

Ignoring the still speechless Sasaraki, Alice ran the pen.

"Hence— the last problem!"

'End of Service Plans'

After quite some time had passed, Sasaraki suddenly inhaled deeply.

And shouted...

"WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO ABOUT THIS?!"

"That's where you come into play, Hero Sasaraki!"

Alice pointed the pen at him.

"One of the Goddess's skills lets her grant the player who clears this game a reward. An item they want, a specific job, and so on. There's no restriction to what kind of job they can wish for, so anything goes— for instance, becoming a gamemaster."

"You mean... Eh, you wouldn't..."

"I sure will. Lend me your ears for a moment, Sasaraki..."

Standing on top of the mandarin box, Alice quickly put out her hand.

Alice said with the smile of a child who is enjoying themselves.

"Let's both be gamemasters!"

* * *

[Sword & Magic Online Glossary

'Gamemaster'

Abilities	Attack Power:	EX (Exceeding Standard Values)
	Ranged Attack Power:	EX
	Spell Power:	EX
	Crafting:	EX

A gamemaster works behind the scenes. His main fields of work are:
'Debugging,' fixing bugs; 'Mediation,' negotiating between disputing parties;

'Event Planning,' designing all sorts of quests; and lastly 'Development,' further developing game features.

They hold the power to change this world, but are human beings like you and I.

When you see someone wearing a suspicious white robe, please don't be mean to them.

If they weren't here, this world would be in ruins—

*Players can't pick this job.

If you're able to pick it nonetheless, it's a bug, so please don't, okay? ☆]

The day after he had met Alice.

".....End of service, huh...?"

Sasaraki was at their guild's, 'Light and Darkness Revolution''s, house. It was a fine two-story brick house built in the corner of the residential area. He heaved a sigh in the garden and let his upper body spread across the top of a wooden table; he was in thought.

The gamemasters had run away. The game couldn't be changed.

And the end of service was in preparation.

If the service ended, he wouldn't be able to log into this world anymore. He wouldn't be able to meet Lizna or Azrael anymore either. Worse yet, the data would be erased right away. All of their memories would come to nothing.

For example, the guild house. This two-storied house, Lizna and Azrael had gotten their hands on in the sweat of their brows, but couldn't enter it. Due to the 'Second Massive Item Loss' the housing permission had been gone. Nobody could enter a house with no permissions. It had turned into something like a

forbidden mansion and a great amount of personal belongings within it was lost, too.

Even though it was that kinda house— it was the house they had made memories with nonetheless.

To protect that—

"Let's both be gamemasters!"

He recalled Alice's words.

According to Alice, the reason for the end of service was that the developers didn't support the game which lead the active player count to drop. She said that they'd probably be able to slow down the decline if there were proper gamemasters.

For which she wanted Sasaraki's help.

He needed to give her his reply today.

But he hadn't been able to give her an answer on the spot.

After all, while he didn't think that a beginner like him would be of any help, there was something else—

"A gamemaster— knows all about the game, huh...?"

According to Alice's explanation, a gamemaster was working behind the world's scenes. It was a given that they had to know all about it. What was awaiting them on the second floor. Who the last boss was. How story quests evolved. Like that, he'd knew everything about it.

It wouldn't be an undiscovered fantasy world anymore.

"And—"

If he were to become a gamemaster, he couldn't go on adventures with Lizna and Azrael anymore either.

He was reluctant.

It had been a month since Sasaraki first logged in.

The first three minutes he had died five times. Reason being the ridiculous deployment of monsters at the spawn point. It was probably a bug. You got killed right after the login, the respawn was that exact spot, hence you'd get killed for all eternity.

What's with this ultra kusoge— was the most natural thing to come to mind.

But he had been saved by Lizna.

"Are you okay, beginner?"

She had hit the monsters to a sky-high home run with her mace and smiled at him.

"What's your name?"

"S-Sasaraki..."

"Sasaraki-kun. A refreshing, good name, isn't it—?"

She smiled and pointed at him.

"Sasaraki-kun, you're available right now, aren't you? If so—"

—Won't you join me travelling to a good spot?

"—That made me really happy, you know?"

Thinking about it now, he got the feeling that the invitation had been more than fishy, but that aside Lizna had truly been Sasaraki's savior. She had invited the lonely him. If it weren't for her, he would've quit playing the game a long time ago.

And with that kind of girl— he wouldn't be able to play anymore.

"What should I do...?"

"About what?"

"Waah—?!"

He panicked and turned around, it was the girl with the fluffy, medium-long hair.

Just like back then, Lizna carried her shining black mace in her hand.

It seemed like he hadn't noticed her in his absence of mind.

"Hey there, Sasaraki-kun."

Sasaraki seized his throbbing heart. Her timing had been way too perfect.

"What are you worrying about?"

"Errr— About nothing at all?"

Alice had forbidden him to tell anything, 'You have to keep this a secret from other players, okay?'

"There's something."

"Eh?"

"When you're worrying about something, you always put two fingers to your forehead like this."

"I-Is that so?"

"That's so."

Lizna chuckled. It appeared she'd seen through him entirely.

"Should I guess what you're worrying about? I'm quite confident that I can, you know?"

Lizna raised her index finger and winked.

Then she claimed...

"You're lovesick because of Azrael-san, right?!"

"..."

Let me correct myself, she hadn't seen through him at all.

"That's the only thing Sasaraki-kun worries about, right?"

"What kind of gigolo do you take me for?! To begin with, love's impossible, anyway!"

In 'Sword & Magic Online,' love was prohibited server-side. Acts of love— namely acts between men and women including kisses, led to death the moment you attempted them. Sasaraki had experienced it first hand due to unforeseen circumstances.

"Forbidden love's really exciting, right?!"

It was pointless, no matter what he said.

"You know, I'm not really interested in love, anyway."

"Which is totally untrue, right?!"

Being told that kind of conclusion with a smile troubled him.

"'Cause, you see, Sasaraki-kun, you're always watching Azrael-san, right?"

"That's—"

"It's been like that ever since you've joined our guild."

He certainly was watching.

To put it very simply— she was Sasaraki's aspiration.

—The good spot Lizna had been talking about was on top of the castle walls which surrounded the town.

"Wait, why are we climbing up the wall?!"

Sasaraki shouted while doing some sort of mountain climbing.

"'Cause the ladders been stolen due to a bug. It's just five more meters, keep it up, keep it up!"

Lizna cheered him on from diagonally above.

"We'll definitely die if we fall from here, right...?"

"Ah, it's fine. Even if we do, the respawn's not far off."

"How's that fine?!"

Sasaraki kept disputing with her while climbing the castle wall.

"Finally there— Eh...?"

The moment he had climbed up, his eyes got captivated.

On top of the stony castle wall he had climbed, he saw the back of a lonely girl. She was gazing at the snowy mountains in the distance of the grassfields. The wind blew incessantly, letting her long hair and short skirt flutter in the breeze.

—*Beautiful*, he had thought.

"—Hm? Lizna, are you done shopping?"

At that moment, the girl turned around. She looked down at Sasaraki who had just been done mountain climbing. Their eyes met, she blinked. Her face was angelically beautiful, too. And her breasts big. Looking up at her in her short skirt, he'd probably be able to have a peek at the inside— and she seemed aware of that.

"KYA— S-STOP—!"

The girl shouted while holding the seam of her skirt down.

When he was about to apologize, a blew struck his head.

[You Died. Reason: Youth Protection Code Violation (Your account will be banned after 2 more time(s))]

—That was how Azrael and Sasaraki had met.

"Such a romantic encounter, wasn't it?!"

"Nonono..."

Thinking about it now, it had been the worst encounter possible.

"You did join the guild with Azrael on your mind, didn't you?"

"I didn't! I just wanted to go on adventures with you two!"

"Boys at *that* age aren't honest at all, huh? Ah, right!"

Lizna took an 'Item Cube' out of her pocket.

"EII—!"

And threw it on the desk. White smoke rose up and the cube changed into a book.

Its title was 'Azrael's Photo Album ~Azu-Azu's Secrets~.'

What's with that title? Azu-Azu?

"Here, here, how do you like these combat pictures?"

Taking a closer look, it were pictures of Azrael facing off a 'Bunny Fighter.' She had raised both her swords high above her head and her breasts were pushed together densely - and as visible as possible thanks to the camera angle.

"And? Amazing, right?"

"Uh—"

It was an eyecatcher for sure. Azrael's body was astonishing, indeed.

"I should also have one where she's changing and her underwear's—"

"I-It's enough already!"

Sasaraki shouted and slammed the album shut.

Close one. That got my heart racing a bit.

Looking at Sasaraki acting like that, Lizna chuckled.

"I'll give the album to you once it's done, okay?"

"Uh... I don't want it. Azrael would kill me, you know?"

"Killed by the person you like, how romantic!"

"I don't want that romance, alright?!"

"You didn't deny the 'person you like' part, though."

"I just can't keep up with the tsukkomis!"

Lizna chuckled seemingly enjoying herself. *Hopeless, I'm no match for this woman.*

"Lizna-oneesan sees through it all, you know?"

"Onee-san? You're 15 like me, aren't you?"

"I'm two months older, so I'm the onee-san!"

With a 'Ehen,' Lizna puffed her small chest out in pride.

"Ah, speaking of age, next month is Azrael-san's birthday, you know?"

"Really?"

"Wouldn't it be nice if you had a present for her? A ring or so!"

"I told you to step from the gas! ...Wait, next month?"

Sasaraki froze in place.

"Hm? What's wrong?"

He couldn't reply to Lizna's question.

Next month— this service would cease to be.

"————————"

He wouldn't be able to meet neither Lizna nor Azrael anymore.

He wouldn't be able to talk with them light-heartedly like this anymore either.

"Sasaraki-kun, what's wrong? You look sad."

"Eh—?"

"Did you want to have a more thorough look at Azrael's pictures?"

That wasn't the problem at all. But those words calmed him down, more or less.

Sasaraki cleared his throat with a cough.

"You know... Lizna. Speaking hypothetically..."

"What is it?"

"If... you'd become unable to log into this game, what would you do?"

Lizna blinked a few times and gazed at Sasaraki.

She appeared to be guessing his intentions.

Finally, Lizna's brows bent up in unease and she mumbled...

"Sasaraki-kun, are you going to quit?"

GADSHIN.

He felt like his heart being eagle gripped.

"Nonono! Why would you think that?!"

"Is that what's been worrying you? Is it due to circumstances at school or home?"

"I said that's not it, I plan on playing this forever!"

It wasn't a lie. Sasaraki was planning to play it forever.

But— the game was the one quitting, that's it.

"Hmm.....?"

Lizna examined Sasaraki's expression staringly.

"You... really are telling the truth, hm?"

"I won't leave the two of you behind and quit on my own!"

"That's right, huh? Azrael-san's here after all."

Lizna returned to her smile after saying that.

Seems like she believes me for now. Thank God. Well, the reason is nothing to thank for, but anyway, thank God.

"...But..."

Lizna said and looked deeply into Sasaraki's eyes.

"If perhaps there are circumstances, you don't have to hold back because of us, just quit, okay?"

"Eh?"

Lizna sunk deeply into her chair.

Looking up at their two-storied guild house, she continued...

"You know, at the time we were building this house, there've been five of us."

"Eh...? It wasn't just the two of you?"

"It wasn't."

She chuckled amusedly.

"Before Sasaraki-kun joined, everyone left saying stuff like they couldn't bear this kusoge anymore. And eventually, it was just the two of us left."

I had no idea. But yeah, this guild house is too big for just two.

"Which is why there's no need for you to push yourself, you know?"

Lizna smiled carefreely.

"Things would just be back to the way they were before, we'd be fine."

Although she was ought to be the same age he was, her expression seemed much more mature.

It was surely because she'd met and parted with much more people than Sasaraki.

"Just— I'd be happy if you would return one day."

Lizna's speech ended there and she looked up in the sky.

It was a clear sky, spreading as far as the eye could see.

"It's so pretty, isn't it?"

"...Yeah."

"Why's there a sky on the bottom floor of a tower?"

That was something all players had tsukkomi'd on after their first login.

"Maybe they decided to make it a tower after they'd created this floor..."

"This really is some kusoge, isn't it?"

Lizna chuckled.

"But— I love this world nonetheless."

Her expression abruptly changed into a serious one.

"It's an unreasonable world full of bugs, where the devs don't do a thing, and the house you went to great pains to buy just turns into a pile of junk, but— it has a lot of enjoyable sides to it, too."

Lizna caressed Azrael's photo album affectionately.

"I think— I'll keep logging into this world, until it ends, always."



A gentle breeze carrying a green fragment blew between the two of them.

Sasaraki swallowed down the words that had been close to leaving his throat.

He didn't have the courage to speak them out loud. After all, they would've destroyed this girl's smile.

The day this world would end.

Was drawing close quicklier than anyone imagined.

* * *

The debugging room, two hours later.

"Welcome back, Sasaraki. So what about becoming a gamemaster?"

Alice had slumped deeply into her big commander-like chair in the middle of the room. With her legs crossed, she was assuming a self-important posture, indeed. So was her expression. She rested her chin on her arms and looked down on Sasaraki, smirking.

"...Did you talk to the president?"

Alice had told him that she'd talk to the company president on how to prevent the service from ending.

"Fufufu, rest assured. It's a big success."

"Really—?!"

Then Lizna and everyone else won't have to feel down.

Alice might look like a kid, but she probably really knows what she's doing.

"Here, have a look."

She held out an A4 paper.

It looked like a printed out e-mail.

While it did seem kind of weird to print out documents in a virtual world— for now, he just read it.

[Regarding the Service Discontinuance

To Alice. It's me, Kirine. I want to take the opportunity to apologize.

Even though I knew about everything, I was scared and couldn't do a thing.

I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. Should we meet again, I'll prostrate myself before you.

I should rather kill myself as redemption, but I'll live on as you told me to.]

What's with this self-development-seminar-participant-like company president...? He thought and kept reading.

[Anyway, thank you for consulting me.

I will now report our game's current state of affairs.

There are 10562 active players. We're losing about 20 players per day. As you know, consequent upon our contract with the 'Neo Virtual World Funding Organization,' our servers will be foreclosed and our service end once the player count goes below 10000.

Counting backwards, we have about four weeks left.

After that, we'll have no more money.

Really no money at all.

After this month's server rent, there were 30 yen (0.26 euro, 0.29 dollars) left on the account. 30 yen. Really. What kind of amount is that? Allowance for a kindergartner? My age in yen? Ehehe, laughing's all I can do. Kirine, 30 years old!

...I'm sorry, you probably don't find this funny.

Anyway, I entrust it all to you, Alice.

If there's anything I can do, please let me know.

I will do my best, the very best I can.

So please, Alice, save that world by all means necessary.]

Sasaraki let out the breath he had held.

And then he turned back to Alice. His eyes were probably empty.

"...Is this really fine?"

"What is?"

"For now, this person's mental state."

"I hospitalized her with no visitors allowed, so it'll be okay."

Doesn't sound okay to me at all.

"Well, so that's how things are. We've to stop the player depletion no matter what."

Alice reached her hand out to Sasaraki and smiled.

"Sasaraki, let me ask you once again: Will you become a gamemaster?"

He closed his eyes.

If he were to become a gamemaster, he couldn't go on adventures with Lizna and Azrael anymore.

He'd lose the excitement of exploring an undiscovered world which he had seeked in games.

But—

Sasaraki recalled Lizna's words.

"I think— I'll keep logging into this world, until it ends, always."

"—I will."

He said, opening his eyes again.

There was a girl in this world who innocently believed that this world would continue on forever.

And a girl who enjoyed adventures in this world with all its rough edges.

Both of them were precious friends to him.

Which was why—

"I can't let this game end."

There was no reason for him to not help out.

"Yeah, thank you—!"

Alice grabbed his hand. It felt really warm.

"Having you by my side makes me ten times stronger! Like rhino armor an assault knight!"

She froliced while shaking his arm.

He didn't get the comparison, but he understood that she was happy.

"But are you really fine with me? I'm just a beginner, you know?"

"It's okay! You've got the most important thing as a gamemaster."

"Which is?"

"The spirit of an entertainer."

She raised her index finger and pointed at Sasaraki's chest.

"Sasaraki. You did what you could to make those two players enjoy themselves. That mindset is what's most important. Enjoying yourself to let others enjoy themselves. It's really important to have people with such a mindset in an MMO, you know?"

"Is— Is that so?"

"That's so!"

It felt kinda far-fetched, but after all it didn't feel bad to be told that.

"Now that you understand— Sasaraki, would you bow for me?"

"...Hah?"

Why, all of a sudden?

He thought while Alice scratched her head.

She seemed embarrassed.

"Hmm. It's more or less necessary to become a gamemaster."

"I've no idea why bowing would be necessary for that, but... will this do?"

"A bit deeper or it won't reach."

"I get it less and less."

Sasaraki said but lowered his head anyway.

Her face was right in front of his. Looking at her perfect white skin from that close kinda made his heart race. *What am I thinking? She's 12!* He railed against

himself when Alice came standing on tiptoe. She seized his cheeks with her hands.

"I'll apologize in advance— Sorry, Azrael."

"Hah?"

Why would she apologize to Azrael— He thought, when...

"Mh..."

—*Chu*.



"————————!"

He felt a soft and warm sensation on his lips.

Something pushed inside.

Finally, he noticed that it were Alice's lips and tongue.

"————————————?!"

"—Puhah—!"

Their lips separated at last. Sasaraki retreated right away.

"W-W-W-W-Wha—?!"

Eh? Why did she kiss me?!

So a girl's lips are this soft, huh? This warm?

No, more importantly, I've no idea why she would kiss me—

Then...

[Player Sasaraki has cleared the game.]

The system voice echoed.

"Eh—?!"

"The reward for rescuing the imprisoned princess— is a kiss."

Alice's cheeks blushed slightly while she laughed with an, 'Ehehe.'

"If you put it into practice, it's pretty embarrassing, isn't it?"

Around the time she had said those words, a pillar of light shot up from beneath Sasaraki's feet.

"Wah—?!"

His equipment and vision turned completely white.

"Don't worry. It's just a job change."

"Job change?"

"The reward for clearing the game."

A few seconds later, the light stopped.

Sasaraki's clothes had changed.

He was now wearing a loose, transient white cloak, the same design as Alice's.

From his neck dangled a blue pendant— after closer inspection it had the shape of a dice.

"It's the 'Immortal Pendant,' proof that you're a gamemaster, you know?"

"Proof?"

"Yeah. Try gripping it."

When he grasped it as he had been told, A window popped up and hovered in front of him with a golden shine. It was as big as Sasaraki tall with a huge number of commands being listed within. On top it said, [Skills], [Items], [Logout], etc.; commands he'd already been used to see.

But there was more beneath them.

[Spawn Object] [Spawn Monster] [Contact Player]

[Collect Data] [Commence Creation Mode] [Commence Monitoring]

"This is the all-purpose tool exclusive to gamemasters, the 'Master Screen.'"

Alice said.

"Try starting the monitoring mode."

"Err... like this?"

He tried tapping the respective field.

The debugging room's floor changed and divided into small grids.

"That's the gamemaster view."

It were a few thousand screens, on each one of them the silhouette of a player. A knight swinging their sparkling blade at a demon. Next to that one two girls he knew all too well, Lizna and Azrael. They seemed to be checking items at the town square.

And he was probably already unable to be beside them.

"Ah, those are your friends, right? Should we call them here?"

"Eh— Wai— Don't do that!"

"Why?"

"Why? I don't want them to be dragged into this dev thing."

"Okay, why?"

Alice asked in genuine wonder.

"'Cause if they were to become gamemasters, they wouldn't be able to enjoy the game anymore, right?"

"Hm?"

Alice tilted her head, "Hmmm?"

"Oh. Sasaraki. Don't you have it wrong?"

"Wrong?"

"Yeah. Listen and listen real good."

Alice pointed her finger at Sasaraki with a swoosh and expressed a smile full of confidence.

"Being a gamemaster's ten thousand times more fun than being a player!"

"……Heh?"

She continued smiling.

"It's fun being a gamemaster. You know, if the players have fun, you have fun. And there are about 10000 active players in this game— In other words, instead of having the fun of a single player— you're having the fun of 10000 players—!"

"I-Is that so?"

It felt like her reasoning had been a bit weird. However, Alice was brimming with confidence.

"Seeing is believing. Strain your ears and try listening to the players' voices."

"Their voices—?"

He concentrated on his ears as he had been told to.

Thereupon, maybe due to a special ability gamemasters held, he began hearing their voices—

"Why's there an Elder Gold Dragon in town?!"

"Another dupe glitch?! The devs are really retarded."

"Hey, wanna quit and just play mahjong? This dungeon's boring."

"Why isn't this magical sword classified as magical sword?! Isn't this game too shitty for its own goooooood—?!"

"They'll surely fix this soon! Maybe! Surely!"

"...They keep saying this game's crap..."

In a certain way, it was amazing. It was a vortex of voices full of hatred and suffering.

Azrael was crying while cursing the developers.

Just hearing it made him depressed.

"Yeah, it's worth doing, isn't it?"

Alice was full of confidence nonetheless.

"We'll turn their hatred into cheers of joy— sounds fun, doesn't it?"

"...I wonder whether that's possible."

"It is."

She said without hesitation and flicked her fingers. Thereupon, two doors appeared and flung open on the wall behind her. Beyond them, A blue sky spread as far as the eye could see. It seemed like the debugging room was floating in the sky. And at the other end of the sky, he could see a tower.

Soaring above the grassfields, a gigantic, stony tower.

Sasaraki knew this scenery from the login menu.

It was— 'Sword & Magic Online''s stage.

"Sasaraki. You and I."

With the world behind her back, Alice smiled at him.

"We will turn this world into the most enjoyable VRMMO ever!"

Sword & Magic Online.

Four weeks left until the estimated end of service.



STATUS

Name
ササラキ
Sasaraki

Level
999 ← ~~7~~

Job 職業
ゲームマスター ← ~~剣士~~

Personality 性格
こころやさしい

Skill 能力

<無敵バリア>
あらゆるダメージを受けません。
オンオフ切替可。

<任意オブジェクト生成>
どんなアイテムも
好きなだけ生成できます。
悪用禁止。

<天地創造>
この仮想世界のルールを変更します。
だいたいバグります。

サ

Status

Name

Sasaraki

Level

~~7~~ → 999

Job

~~Swordsman~~ → Gamemaster

Personality

Kind

Skills

Invincible Barrier: Protects from any damage. Can be switched on and off.

Spawn Object: Able to spawn any item at will. Abuse prohibited.

Creation: Able to alter this virtual world. Mostly bugged.

Chapter 2:

The Simple Job of Insisting, "It's Not a Bug, It's a Feature"

第二章

バグではありません
仕様です
と言い張るだけの
簡単なお仕事

THE
JUNK!
Kuso Game Online

Sasaraki was flying in the sky.

It was the sky above the tower's first floor, 'The Place Where the World Starts.'

Beneath his feet, the grasslands spread as far as the eye could see.

They were dotted with blue and red dots indicating players and monsters.

"...It's really just like being a god."

In this game, players couldn't fly just as in many other MMOs. However, gamemasters could, by using their exclusive item, 'Master Wing.'

But that wasn't all. Just by thinking, 'I wanna go there,' you could instantly move anywhere, ignoring obstacles, gravity, and borders.

The power of a god, indeed.

It kinda exhilarated his heart— but he soon remembered.

"This is big responsibility, isn't it...?"

Sasaraki swallowed hard.

After becoming a gamemaster, he understood that this job was really nothing but foul play. It wasn't just the 'Master Warp.' A gamemaster held a whole array of abilities which were nothing more than cheats, like 'Learn All Skills,' 'Recover From All Statuses,' and 'Invincible Barrier.'

And if you used the 'Master Screen,' you could alter the word itself.

What was he supposed to do with all these abilities?

"I should make this world a better place— but..."

"Let's make a VRMMO," he had been told by Alice, but this game was already released and running. What she meant was probably not to 'make' one but to 'fix' this one.

But how would he fix this game?

When he asked Alice about it, she replied...

"I'll tell you later— but for now, think about it by yourself and try out the commands."

She had pointed at Sasaraki with a refreshing smile and said...

"The 100 Rules of Being a Gamemaster, rule number 1! 'Use your own head!'"

Like that, Alice had shut herself away in the debugging room to check the current state of affairs.

They had scheduled their strategy meeting in an hour.

"Use your head, huh?"

What could he do to put an end to the player decline?

He'd decided to just try out a bunch of things for now.

So he manipulated the 'Master Screen' before him. When he chose 'Data Collection,' yet another bunch of entries showed up. However, all of them said, 'Unnamed.' It appeared that even the gamemaster tools were affected by this game's kusoge-ness.

He tried selecting the topmost entry nonetheless.

Thereupon, user bug reports appeared.

[I can't open the door to my house. It keeps saying 'wrong key.' But it's *my* key!]

[The radius of enemy fireballs is 300 meters. What kind of mini nukes are these?!]

[I can't throw away the washbowl I picked up and I'm getting close to the item limit.]

Cruel, in many ways.

"Wait, first of all there are way too many bugs."

The first one was a bug Sasaraki had already stumbled across. This game assigned a private room to each player with a lock on its door. However, if you locked it once, you wouldn't be able to open it again. They key wouldn't fit. The solution was to burst the door open.

And if you did, the door would disappear.

Therefore, there weren't any doors in most player houses, their interiors in plain sight.

"They didn't touch this bug at all, huh...?"

However, looking at the status row behind this kind of reports, all were flagged as 'solved.' And the answer to all of them was: [It's a feature. You can't use keys in this world or you'll be cursed by the key-loathing demon king☆]

"WHAT KINDA DEMON KING IS THAT?!"

He tsukkomi'd before he knew it. They were screwing around. How was that a solution?

"For the time being, we've to do something about this kinda bug."

Sasaraki thought and clenched his fists, when... bingbing...

In the grasslands right beneath him, he could see a small, flashing red light.

"Eh...? Could this be an SOS signal?"

If you were in a pinch, you could send out an SOS signal to ask other players to come to your aid. However, it was rarely used. On top of a cut-down in XP and item drop chance, other players couldn't see the signal, to begin with. It was a bug.

It appeared as if gamemasters, however, could.

"Wait, what's the point if the players are the ones who can't see it?!"

This world really was retarded.

"A-Anyways— 'Monitoring Mode.'"

He whispered and yet another screen came floating in the air. It showed a blonde girl. She was ought to be the one who put out the SOS signal. Wearing a blue robe and a frantic expression on her face, she was swinging her mace at a bunny.

It was the weakest monster in this game, the 'Bunny Fighter.' Which probably meant she was a beginner. After all, she had a hard time with the bunny, used the pointless SOS command, and, more than anything, was wearing a witch robe.

"...I really wanna help her."

As a gamemaster, it probably wasn't good to back a specific player, but he had been incredibly happy when he was saved by Azrael and Lizna, which had led him to continue the game.

Sasaraki concentrated on that specific spot in the grasslands.

Then he mumbled, 'Master Warp.'

Right away, the scenery before him changed without any effect whatsoever. The girl swinging her mace was in front of him. His feet stood firmly on grassland. It was totally insipid, but the teleport seemed to have been successful.

"You okay? Should I help you out?"

After he had addressed her, the girl turned around. She was 15, maybe 16 years old.

Seeing Sasaraki, she showed a bright smile.

"Really? Please do, I've been beating it for five minutes, but it just won't give up!"

He nodded and drew his sword. Then he aimed for the 'Bunny Fighter''s heart and thrusted at it. It easily connected; for 80 damage. The bunny lost all of its HP, disassembled, and faded.

The girl's expression turned into a surprised one with a, "Eeeh—?!"

"With one hit?! And it's been such a tough enemy..."

"Yeah, well— it's the difference in jobs, you know?"

"Umm— actually..."

She scratched her head not knowing how to put it.

"I'm Rigel. I've chosen the 'Witch' job, but to be honest, I don't know how to use magic. It isn't in the manual and I haven't met other players yet. Hey, if you're okay with it, could you explain how to use magic to me?"

Sweat ran down Sasaraki's cheeks.

He wanted to explain to her whatever he could, but there was a reason he couldn't.

No one could. To begin with—

"Ah, sorry, you're a knight so you wouldn't know, right? I'll try asking someone else then."

"No, that's not it..."

Sasaraki gulped deeply.

She'd find out anyway. All he could do was telling her upfront.

"There's none."

"Heh?"

"There's no magic."

Fffffffffuuuuuuuu.

A cold wind blew through the virtual grasslands.

"Eh...? Ah, I get it, you're joking, right? Hahaha, you're funny. So how do you use it?"

"It's no joke, there's no magic. It hasn't been implemented."

Rigel's blue robe fluttered in the wind.

"Wait a second."

"I'm waiting a second."

"This game's called 'Sword & Magic,' right?"

"Players can only use swords, but monsters do use magic."

It was the truth and yet merely a fraud. Rigel stood with her mouth wide open.

"So, it's probably better if you rerolled for a melee class."

You could change your job two hours within your first login.

Magicians and the kind could more or less use swords too, but their initial total HP were low, which put them at a disadvantage compared to knights and so on. Seeing how she had a hard time fighting the bunny earlier, she had probably skilled INT; there was no magic, so INT was a dead stat; she better ought to to reroll.

"Hahaan." Rigel laughed proudly.

"You're making fun of me, right? Since I'm a newbie and all!"

"Sorry, I'm dead serious."

"Yeah, right. It's fine, I'm gonna call a gamemaster."

No, I *am* a gamemaster— is what he couldn't tell her.

"That's what the game manual actually explained how to do. Let's see, 'Please help me, Fairy-san!'"

PUFF—!

"You called for Fury-chan, right—?☆"


CALL
お願いします

A fairy appeared out of pink smoke.

30 cm tall, wearing a frilly, green dress; a fairy, indeed.

She was a system fairy. An AI serving as a player advisor.

However, there were few players relying on her. If you asked why—

"Your Fury-chan will disperse all your worries☆ Please ask me anything☆"

"How reliable! You see, could you explain to me how to use magic?"

"There is no magic☆"

Rigel's smile froze in place.

"Magic consists of the symbols for 'demon' and 'method,' so only demons can use it☆ It's not a bug, it's a feature☆"

Well… I dunno what I expected…

If you asked her about malfunctions, she'd call them 'features.' She utilized all and every hair-splitting technique to turn a bug into a feature, an awe-inspiringly advanced AI.

Fury picked up her skirt with both her hands and bowed elegantly.

"Has Fury-chan answered all of your questions satisfactorily?"

"Answered what?! Then why can I even choose to be a witch?!"

"In this world we strongly believe that everyone's free to become whatever they want to be☆"

"Wha—?!"

"I'm deeply moved that I could be helpful☆ Until next time☆"

Fury fluttered with her wings and disappeared to the other side of the sky.

Rigel was left behind and shaking.

"And here I had pretty… no, *such* high hopes when I logged in…!"

She clenched her fists. Tears welled up in the corner of her eyes.

Not good, the already small player count will shrink even further if I don't do something!

"Well, but, you know, this game has its amazing sides too!"

"Like what?"

"Try opening the main screen."

Albeit reluctantly, Riegel started fiddling around. The skill names showed up in the window. Four of them were lined up. You could execute them just by saying their names out loud, but first of all you had to know what they were called.

"This? Wait, the description says, 'This is a sample text.'"

"Ah, yeah, that happens quite often. The descriptions haven't been implemented yet."

"Just how many corners are they cutting?!"

"A-Anyways, try saying the skill in silver characters at the top."

"What the heck...? Umm, main skill 'Summon Dragon Lord'... KYA—!"

That instant, the earth trembled. A thunderous roar pierced their ears.

"Eh? W-Wha—?!"

Rigel was gaping with her mouth.

At the end of her gaze, on top of the grasslands, was a dragon. A huge one, too. It was probably over ten meters long, had red scales, and leisurely swung its wings and tail. Rigel looked up at the dragon in amazement.

"Eh— W-W-What is this—?!"

"It's your own special skill."

"Special? It's not related to my job?"

"No, it differs from player to player. There are tens of thousands of different kinds implemented."

Rigel opened her mouth wide. He knew how she felt. Sasaraki had been astonished at first, too.

Was it even possible to put so much work into something to implement a few ten thousand skills?

On top of that, these main skills were the one thing completely implemented and not bugging. With everyone having their own specific skills, the players could come up with strategies to synergize them. Basically because of their sheer number and variety, skills were this game's, more or less, sole strong point.

"Wai— if they're able to put that much effort into something, then why's this such a kusoge?!"

"Well, errr... beats me?"

"It's weird, right?! Put that kinda effort into debugging, alright?!"

Sasaraki totally agreed.

This game needed a word consisting of nine characters, and it was 'debugging.'

Rigel put a hand to her forehead and mumbled in sheer amazement...

"What kind of idiots are these devs? I'd really like to see the stupid faces of those gamemasters."

"...Haha..."

Sasaraki smiled wryly.

This comes a bit late but I'm a gamemaster, he probably shouldn't say that.

* * *

Debugging. The task of fixing bugs; a word hardly related to this game.

"But I have to do something!"

Anyways, there were too many bugs in this game. He was determined to, first of all, do something about them.

After he'd made his decision, Sasaraki returned to the debugging room and found a book. 'Sword & Magic Online Development Guide,' it was thicker than a dictionary. Sasaraki fired himself up and threw the book open.

At last, he mumbled...

"Alice."

"What is it?"

"I don't get any of this."

Once more, this time more grandly, he sighed.

In Sword & Magic Online all development commenced from within its virtual space.

"Virtual space costs no rent, you know?"

"That reasoning really lets me feel how tough of a place the world is..."

While saying that, Sasaraki directed his gaze forward. In front of him, like projectors in a planetarium, three gigantic black spheres were hovering in the air. Countless fine lines intertwined within the spheres. They appeared to be the blueprints of 'Sword & Magic Online.'

Or such he was explained, but he was totally clueless.

"There's a successor memo from one of the former programmers."

The memo got displayed on Sasaraki's 'Master Screen.'

[SOS Command Implementation Defect Memo

As the result of my investigations, the implementation of the SOS call leads to the inversion of the gravity variable, leading the players to fall into the sky. Perhaps, the SOS's and gravity's variable names overlap. Who'd do such stupid crap? Anyways, there's no fixing this retarded code. I entrust this to whoever's reading this now. Farewell!]

"Don't just farewell on me—?!"

"By the way, if I remember correctly, that's the guy who ran away three days after he had started."

"I kinda want to run away too..."

But for Lizna and Azrael's sake, there was no escaping.

"Alice, you can't write code, can you?"

"Hmm..."

Alice put her hand to her chin for some reason, showing a thinker's gesture.

A couple of seconds passed then she suddenly bowed.

"Sorry, I can't read a single line of the source code."

The source code was the text which described the program's course of action.

"I seeeee..."

There seemed to be no other way but to leave the programming to the professionals.

"But even if we can't read the source code, we can still debug, you know?"

"Eh...?"

Alice whispered, "World Record open." Thereupon, four 3D columns appeared on the main display at the wall. Each of them captioned with either, 'Job,' 'Item,' 'Skill,' or 'Monster.'

"Those are this game's main databases. Do you know what we're going to do from here on?"

"Errr... we're gonna change the data instead of the logic?"

"Bingbingbing."

Alice chuckled amusedly.

"First of all, we're gonna revise the item and job descriptions to make them easier to understand."

"I see. Sounds good!"

It was far off from a fundamental solution, but they should've been able to prevent a tragedy like Rigel's earlier by just writing something like, 'Not implemented yet, please don't pick,' into the witch job description. Plus, if it was just data alteration, Sasaraki was probably able to help, too.

"By the way, I've already prepared the descriptions."

Alice took something out of her robe. It was a quadratic package.

It did look like the 'Item Cube' he was familiar with, but inside it was a slowly rotating disc.

"It's a 'Data Cube.' Well, you'd call these things storage media in the real world, right?"

Sasaraki accepted the cube. It was basically weightless. Like a balloon.

"For now, I changed all item descriptions yesterday."

"Yesterday...? Eh...?"

He blinked in surprise.

"Wait, how many items are there?"

"If we're only counting those you can put into cubes, about 300000."

"And you revised the descriptions of all of them?"

"Yeah. As you might think, that amount took an evening."

"An evening?!"

Revising 300000 items...

No matter how you look at it, that seems physically impossible, doesn't it?

"Actually, Alice, did you do an all-nighter?"

"So?"

Taking a break, Alice showed a refreshing smile.

"It's to make the players happy. It was— really fun, you know?"

It didn't sound like she was lying. Sasaraki gulped. Somehow, it made him happy. Alice was genuinely trying to make this kusoge better. If it was together with her, it'd surely be possible.

"So how can we replace the data?"

"By using the 'Data Editing' panel, but before that we need a certain item. We're going to turn the encryption key that we need to access the encrypted database into an in-game item called 'Key of the World.'"

"Isn't it problematic to have such an important thing as an in-game item?"

If, by chance, a player would get their hands on it, it'd be mayhem.

"Of course it is, highly so, but is there a single feature in this game that isn't problematic?"

Alice asked in surprise.

"I'll leave the item spawn to you."

Sasaraki nodded. Item Spawn was one of the gamemaster commands and he had been trying it out in the grasslands moments ago. The window popped up

and he specified the spawn coordinates to be right in front of him. "Item number '000002,'" he said via voice input— then a buzzer sounded.

A warning in red letters hovered before him.

[ERROR: Spawning the corresponding item is prohibited.]

""—Heh?""

Alice and Sasaraki raised their voices simultaneously.

"What's the meaning of this?"

He tried to input the command once more, but it kept returning the same error.

"Spawning prohibited...? Eh? Why?"

"This is thanks to me☆"

He heard a cutesy voice. When he turned around, the system fairy, Fury, was hovering besides Alice. She had a careless smile on her face. Passing by the puzzled Alice, she came flying next to Sasaraki and bowed.

"Master, thanks for your hard work earlier☆"

"Master?"

"I'm system fairy Fury-chan. So you are my master☆"

Fury softly handed something over to him. It was a small, golden bell.

"If you ring that, Fury-chan will come visit you☆"

"Sasaraki. Be cautious when talking to her."

Alice said flatly.

"She holds intelligence that rivals a human being's."

"A human being's—? Wait, isn't that prohibited by law?"

If I'm not mistaken, the progressiveness of an AI has been restricted as there've been unsolvable human rights problems.

"There was this rotten programmer who ignored laws and ethics, you know? He was like, 'I'll create my beloved Fury-chan, I don't care about the law, I AM, no, FURY-CHAN IS THE LAAAAAAAAAAAW!' and after his rampage, she'd been born— you hear stuff like that happening quite often, right?"

"I'd be worried if I did?!"

This game's abyss is deep.

"So why do I have to be cautious?"

"'Cause she's evil."

"Evil—?!"

"Originally, she was supposed to be a counselor who'd comfort depressed players, but... it seems like she's been badly influenced by the players' complaints and verbal abuse too much. I'm telling you, she's evil, watch out when she's telling you something."

"How exactly is she evil?"

"Like exploding a player in the middle of an adventure and making him think it was a bug."

"She's evil!"

"I'm just offering thrills☆"

"...Wait, wouldn't it be better to lock her away if she's that evil?"

"She may be evil but she doesn't tell lies. She has her uses."

"Fury-chan tells nothing but the truth☆"

"A very warped truth."

She seemed to have been programmed that way.

"Back to topic— Fury-chan, what do you mean it's your doing?"

"Like I said, I prohibited the spawning☆"

Fffffuuuuuu. A cold wind blew through the debugging room.

"Wai— How exactly did you do that?!"

"Master, should I answer?"

"Eh...? Ah, yeah, go ahead."

Fury began explaining with a theatrical expression...

"With the 'Key of the World,' you could freely add and remove NPCs, right☆ And actually, Fury-chan is a system-side NPC☆ I don't want to die, so I threw the 'Key of the World' into the data shredder to live forever☆"

Fury spun in a circle and at last assumed a pose, pointing at herself.

"And now Fury-chan's eternal! Ehehe, whoopsie☆"

"NONONONONO?! DON'T DO WHOOPSIES, OKAY?!"

Sasaraki shouted. This fairy was really evil!

Blingbling, the button on Fury's chest flashed.

"Ah, it's another gamemaster call☆ I'll have to excuse myself☆"

Fury raised her arms above her head and vanished in an instant.

The two of them were left behind. Alice directed her gaze at the cube at hand.

The 'Data Cube' she'd spent the whole night on.

At last, she folded her arms and closed her eyes.

"...Fu—"

Alice leaked a small laughter.

"Fufu— Don't make such a miserable face, Sasaraki."

"Eh—?"

She brushed up her silver hair and smiled with an expression full of confidence. Could she have a plan? Maybe a backup of the 'Key of the World?'

"Remember this: The 100 Rules of Being a Gamemaster, rule number 2!"

Alice smiled brightly and thrusted her finger at Sasaraki.

"If in trouble, laugh brazenly!"

...This world might be doomed, after all.

* * *

"So, what are we gonna do now?"

"Wait here for a bit!"

Apparently, something had come to Alice's mind, so she had brought a bunch of drawing paper. She spread the papers, about twice as big as she was, out on the floor. They even had measure squares on it. And on them were quite the detailed drawings.

"What are these?"

"Dungeon maps."

Alice replied with a smile.

"So why are they on paper in a virtual world?"

"'Cause I like them better this way!"

She replied in a childish tone and smiled.

"We're gonna do level design now. We can do that without the key."

"Level design?"

"Basically, it's creating towns, fields, dungeons, you name it."

Alice explained while slapping away at the drawing papers.

"We're gonna show the users that the devs have turned over a new leaf."

"For that reason we're gonna add a new dungeon?"

"Yeah. A tutorial dungeon that will teach beginners this game's 101."

"I see, sounds good!"

"This should be even better than changing descriptions!"

"...T-That's right, huh?!"

I get the feeling she said that as a distraction, but I'll brush it off as just my imagination. Well, from a practical standpoint, there should be demand for a tutorial. It could keep beginners like Rigel from quitting the game.

"Hence— open up the tools, Sasaraki!"

Sasaraki nodded and operated the 'Master Screen.' He chose 'Design Level' from within the 'Creation' menu. The screen grew huge and a wire frame model appeared on the floor next to the drawing papers.

"Now first of all open the map processor."

Now you're acting like a teacher... Sasaraki thought and tapped at the icon.

At his feet appeared a cardboard saying 'Ehime Mandarin.'

"That's the map processor. All parts you can use have been put in there."

"That's fine and all, but... why Ehime mandarins?"

Alice had also used it as a chair substitute before.

There was a whole bunch of mandarin boxes scattered throughout the debugging room.

"'Cause mandarins are yummy, right?"

Alice smiled refreshingly.

"Dungeon implementation's honest work, so I came up with an UI that'd make it even just a bit more fun."

"Your way of coming up with things kinda strikes me as weird, you know?"

Alice trotted over to Sasaraki, put her buttocks on the floor in front of him, and hugged her knees. With a smile, she gazed at him. It appeared as if she intended to watch over him while he worked.

"Should we start, then?"

The tutorial they were creating was an orthodox, single layer dungeon.

Within the box were 3D models of paths, rooms, and so on. You built the dungeon by simply connecting the parts like you'd do with toy blocks.

"Hee..."

It was a bit like shop classes.

Certainly much simpler than he had imagined.

"But you can't make more complex stuff like this, right?"

"Fufufu, you think so?"

Alice grinned broadly.

"For example— Right. Try setting up a trap on that path over there."

"How?"

"By making a wish to the fairy."

"...Hah?"

"Look, open your mouth and try wishing for it."

Alice urged him on in a cheerful tone.

"Err... 'Fairy-san, please place a trap.'"

Thereupon, the model changed in an instant, a pitfall had been placed on the floor.

"Wait, what the heck?!"

"A fairy lives in the map processor, or rather, an AI. She'll grant the gamemaster's wishes."

She said proudly.

"Eeeeeh...?"

Today's AIs are incredible, just like Fury earlier.

Looks like they're gifted with perception not much different from a human's.

Thinking that, he kept building while he used Alice's blueprint as reference.

"Alice. This room's empty, you know?"

Each room had memos from Alice regarding its events.

However, one room close to the entrance was still blank.

When he pointed at it, Alice laughed with a, "Fufufu."

"You come up with something. It's fun, you know?"

"Eh—? But it's better if you do it."

After all, Sasaraki was a beginner. He had no sense for development.

It was probably better if the experienced Alice did the important things regarding a dungeon, like setting up traps and the like.

"That's a no-go."

Alice formed a big X with her arms.

"We promised, right? That I'd show you the fun in being a gamemaster."

After she shot up, Alice suddenly spread out her arms hands as if to indicate the size of the whole world.

On her face was an innocent smile, just like a child's.

"Making dungeon's one of the most fun things to do as a gamemaster, you know?"

"Well, but... how do I come up with events?"

"It's simple. I'll tell you."

With the smile still on her face, Alice trotted over to Sasaraki.

"First of all, imagine the friends you have in this game."

Friends?

Lizna and Azrael came to mind right away.

Those were the two friends Sasaraki had here. Suddenly, he could hear a sound beneath him. At his feed, small figures had appeared. One of a girl wearing a black cloak, the other of a girl in a white robe. Those figures looked very alike those two.

"Mhm, looks like you did it."

"...And this is...?"

"Your imagined players. As I thought, it's those two girls, isn't it?"

Alice smiled cheerfully.

She continued while tapping at the deployed map processor.

"What kind of traps would let those two enjoy themselves—? This is where your creative skill comes to light."

"Eh, but... if I do that, my friends will be the only ones enjoying themselves, won't they?"

"That'd be fair enough, you know?"

Alice announced in a strong tone.

"When you're thinking up gimmicks for a dungeon, it's very important to have the players you want to enjoy it on your mind, okay? Exactly because you got

those whom you make it for on your mind, you can give it your best shot. After all, people can do everything if it's for someone else's sake."

Alice pointed at Sasaraki sharply.

"For the sake of your beloved ones— breath life into this dungeon!"

Sasaraki gulped.

Then he tried to put some thought into it.

He closed his eyes to concentrate.

What would it look like if those two tackled this dungeon? Azrael would probably be careless and open the chest without a second thought and die. After that— she'd probably be cautious to not fall for it again.

If I could reward that cautiousness...

Azrael'd surely grin proudly.

"—How this?"

Telling her his train of thoughts, Alice nodded deeply with a, "Mhm, mhm."

She gave him a thumbs up and smiled.

"Sounds awesome! Let's make it happen right away!"

Sasaraki smiled broadly. She really had praised him for his idea.

Making a dungeon together with the goddess was a lot more fun than he had thought.

After having passed the time doing this and that, Sasaraki heaved a deep breath.

A half-transparent 'Data Cube' hovered in front of his eyes.

Inside was the complete dungeon data.

In other words— they were done.

"Good job, Sasaraki."

Alice patted him on the back.

Then, a popup showed up on his screen.

It was a message from Lizna.

[Are you free? We're going to grind some levels, Azrael's here too, you know?]

Normally, he'd readily accept the invitation.

But he couldn't anymore. It hurt his heart. He'd probably be unable to go on adventures with them for all eternity. After all, he'd decided to become this world's gamemaster— someone behind the stages.

"Errr... how should I refuse...?"

"Hm? Why refuse, Sasaraki? Isn't this just perfect?"

"Heh?"

Their gazes met.

"What's perfect?"

"We got a new dungeon here, right?"

Alice poked the 'Data Cube.'

"Eh—? You wouldn't..."

"Remember this, Sasaraki. It's one of the greatest joys as a gamemaster."

Alice raised her right hand and mumbled something. Thereupon, her attire changed from her white robe to some leather garment that looked easy to move in. She winked and put her up-pointing index finger in front of Sasaraki's eyes, saying...

"You're the first who gets to clear all the dungeons!"

* * *

They placed the tutorial dungeon within the center of 'Start,' 'Teleport Plaza.' At the other side of a sign which said, 'Construction Work, Do Not Enter' - something which shouldn't be found in a VRMMO - stairs lead underground.

In front of the stairs stood Alice in her adventure clothes and Sasaraki.

And standing before them were Lizna and Azrael.

Both of them with their mouths wide open, staring at Alice.

"I'm Alice, Sasaraki invited me. Let's get along, you two."

Alice smiled and bowed elegantly.

—Sasaraki had accepted Lizna's invitation, after all.

He had tried to hide the fact that he was a gamemaster and said, *"I've found a new dungeon!"*

Although he'd been hesitating to drag those two in this mess, Alice's sound argument was, *"It's essential to hear the players' opinion when test-playing, right?"*— But more than anything, he wanted Azrael and Lizna to try out the dungeon he had made.

After all, he'd made this dungeon with them in mind.

He wanted to hear their impression.

"Y-Yeah, let's get along... Huh? Huh...?"

Lizna gazed at Alice.

"Hey, Sasaraki-kun."

"What is it?"

Lizna whispered in his ear with an anxious expression.

"So you're a lolicon?"

"THAT'S NOT TRUE AT ALL?!"

He shouted on the spot.

"Could she be the reason why you still haven't confessed to Azrael-san?"

"Why would you assume that I'll confess?! Wait, you're completely wrong! She's just an acquaintance!"

"But for Sasaraki-kun to bring along a girl... I thought you were a loner with zero communication skills..."

"You're surprisingly cruel, aren't you, Lizna?!"

She stared at him even more intensely.

Not good, what if she finds out that Alice and I kissed?

I've to be double careful to not let them find out that I'm a gamemaster.

"Muu—"

Azrael glared at Alice, growling.

"Azrael, what's wrong?"

Upon being called, she moved next to Sasaraki.

For some reason with a bit of an unhappy expression, she said...

"...Who's this kid?"

"I told you, she's a friend. A pal. I came to know each other when I leveled up blacksmithing."

They'd decided to go with this kind of setting.

"H-Heeeh? A friend. A friend, huh? So you had friends beside us..."

Azrael mumbled to herself.

"Ah, o-of course I've friends, too! Not in my friend list, but in RL I've a hundred, no, 300! So you've some friends too, huh? Yeah, I-I'm relieved that our guildy isn't a loner!"

She rattled on in a panic for some reason.

"Uuuh... there's gotta be a hitch... Ah—!"

Something seemed to have come to her mind.

"Hey, Sasaraki, isn't she setting you up for a badger game?"

"...Sorry, come again?"

"Badger game."

He really did hear her right the first time.

"For what would she try to seduce me? To begin with, Alice is twelve."

"She's surely a spy from a rivaling guild! It's standard procedure for a spy to be a kid!"

"You know that our guild's got no rivals..."

To begin with, our guild's more of a dungeon-clearing PvE kinda guild rather than PvP, and it's just us three. Who'd gain anything by pulling that sort of stunt on us?

"She's a mysterious, silver-haired girl, you know? There's gotta be some sorta secret behind her!"

"Nonono..."

She does *have a secret, but it's got nothing to do with espionage at all.*

"Anyways, Alice, was it? Don't trust her. My sixth sense is tingling!"

"I think your sixth sense is something that goes in the trash bin..."

What's wrong with her? Clear enough that she can't possibly know about her being a gamemaster.

"Azrael-san, is something wrong?"

Alice drew closer to her with a refreshing smile.

Azrael's expression grew grim and she shrunk together while shouting...

"YOU'RE NOT GOING TO DECEIVE ME—!"

"Hah?"

I whispered the state of affairs into Alice's ear.

"I see. Her thinking's really fantasy-ish, isn't it?"

"Please don't tell *her* that, alright...?"

"That's a compliment, you know? She's fun and all— Anyways, I get it."

Alice trotted in front of Azrael.

Azrael drew her body back in caution.

"Waah—!"

Alice pointed at Azrael's hips.

"Could that at your waist be 'Magical Sword Gram?!'"

"Eh? Ah, y-yeah, that's right..."

"Amazing! It's my first time seeing it!"

Azrael broke into a slight smile.

"I'm not that well-informed, but could you be *that* famous player?"

"Yeah— o-of course! During the beta test I was widely known as 'Deathbringer Angel!'"

"Eh...? Beta test?"

Alice inclined her head.

"Yeah. It was a closed beta, so there are hardly any players who knew about it at the time!"

Alice stared at Azrael.

Then Saraki thought, *Speaking of which, she's a developer. Alice should know about the super secret closed beta and Azrael's part in it. Perhaps she knows her from before already?*

"...Yeah, I see!"

After having given it some thought, Alice smiled innocently.

"So you're a beta tester! You really feel like one—!"

"Well, there's no beauty who feels like one as much as I do, huh?!"

Azrael averted her gaze, seemingly embarrassed and happy.

"I'm a beginner! So please teach me if you would!"

"Of course I will!"

Azrael replied proudly.

Sasaraki stared blankly while Alice returned to him.

"Sasaraki, she's as cute and naive as a puppy—!"

She looks really happy, doesn't she? Well, as long as they get along... yeah.

"Should we get a move on and clear the dungeon, then?"

The three girls nodded upon Sasaraki's words.

Azrael entered the dungeon as the vanguard.

Passing through a stony corridor that led to the first room, they arrived at the blue chest Sasaraki had placed earlier. Azrael rejoiced that, "We're in luck, aren't we?!," opened the chest, triggered the boulder trap, got buried beneath the boulder, and died. It was a seamless death procedure.

Lizna enjoyed it, "That's a new one!"

Alice also assumed a triumphant pose and smiled.

"Alright. This is going just fine!"

"How's this fine?!"

Three minutes later, Azrael revived and came back.

She was smiling, but for some reason sweat ran down her cheeks.

"I... I wasn't serious right now—! I was just kidding, alright?!"

Being told that with such a flustered face rather worried him.

In any case, they continued to the next room. They passed through a limestone cave from whose ceiling water was dropping down and arrived in a room looking just like the first one. Again, it harbored a blue chest Sasaraki had set up. According to their calculations when they had implemented it, Azrael was supposed to notice the trap this time.

She was staring at the chest intensely.

"Huh...? Isn't that the trap from before?"

Nailed it!

Sasaraki assumed a triumphant pose in his mind.

Would she try to open it from afar now or how would she deal—

"Or it might be a feint and a different trap entirely."

"Eh...? No, the color and shape are the same, so it should be the same from before, right?"

Azrael laughed proudly with a, "Fufun."

"Sasaraki, you don't get it. You have to *read* how the developers are thinking."

I am the developer... is what he couldn't say.

"The room, chest color, and everything else being the same; it's obvious, *too* obvious."

"Wouldn't it be better to not overthink this...?"

"Well, just be quiet and watch. I've got a good plan."

A good plan was something Azrael haven't had so far.

She quickly faced the chest. Lizna shouted, "Give it your best, Azrael-san! I'll be watching over you!," from a safe distance, three meters away. Azrael opened the chest. A *clonk*-like gimmicky sound echoed, and the boulder fell.

And so— just when he thought he'd be waiting for her revival...

"I've seen through you—! Killing Blade!"

Swoooooosh! Azrael ran strikes upon the boulder with 'Magical Sword Gram.' The huge boulder blew off like a ping-pong ball and crashed into something, which left behind an unharmed Azrael, laughing proudly.

"Fu—"

Hoisting her sword, she turned around to Sasaraki.

"They didn't use the same trap twice during the beta."

After a short while...

"...Haha..."

It had been different from how he planned it out, but yeah, this hadn't been bad either.

Beside him, Alice was applauding with a smile, too.

Lizna should've been smiling too— but she was nowhere to be seen.

On a closer look, she had been flattened by the boulder.

"Aaah—?!"

Azrael shouted. The death and ascension effect was glittering away. She ran besides it and right after, the boulder rolled away. Flattened by Azrael, she had died for 800 damage.

"...Uwaah..."

"These two know how to have fun, don't they?"

Alice chuckled again.

"Hey, Alice... could it be that we're the worst kind?"

They had been luring those two unsuspecting girls into traps and killed them.

Weren't they just like the evil masterminds you'd find in games, novels, and the like?

"Oh my, you're realizing that *now*?"

Alice smiled brightly.

"Try looking at your job name."

"Eh?"

He opened the status screen for now and it had turned into 'Great Devil King' (read as: 'The Gamemaster').

"Great Devil King?!"

"Gamemasters are evil masterminds, after all."

"I'm feeling awfully guilty now, though?!"

Maybe I should've let them know that this was a test-play? No, if I said that, it'd be the same as telling them that I'm a gamemaster. I don't want that. I want them to enjoy the game without knowing anything about all that.

If they can't do that— then there's no meaning in me having become a gamemaster.

"Fufu. Rest assured, those two are having fun in their own way."

"...I wonder..."

After half an hour of clearing the dungeon, they had done it. It took a total of seven deaths (breakdown: Lizna two times, Azrael five times) before they reached the final room. It had a solemn feeling about it and was made out of marble. Observing the inside of the room from within the passage, they spotted a gigantic monster they hadn't seen before.

Azrael and Lizna gazed at it with their mouths wide open.

"Alice, what's with that dragon in there?"

A dragon with its scales glittering in red.

Its total length was about ten meters, its wings spread across the whole room.

"That's a unique top-class monster called 'Rainbow-Eating Elder Dragon King,' recommended level should be 450."

"Didn't we place a 'Great Goblin' with a recommended level of 3 in here?"

"Seems like something went wrong with the actual placement. That bug happens quite often."

"...Uwah..."

Then Azrael laughed with a, "Fufufu..."

"I get it! Lizna, that's surely just an illusion to make us panic!"

"I see! As expected from Azrael-san!"

The two of them readied their weapons with a smile. "Sasaraki, onwards!" Azrael shouted and charged into the boss room. Right after, they got enveloped in the dragon's seven-colored blaze and took about 40000 damage. Both of them dissolved into thin air without a grain of dust of them left; the overkill effect.

"They died, didn't they?"

"They sure did, didn't they?"

"What are we gonna do about this?"

"It'd be good for the test play to see the dungeon cleared, right? —Well, can't be helped, then."

Alice undid her earring and handed it to Sasaraki.

"Here, take it."

"...What is it?"

"A weapon."

No matter how you looked at it, it was just a simple ten-sided dice.

"Try throwing it at the dragon."

"Won't it kill me if I attack it?"

"Fufufu, it'll be fine. Try it."

Alice said with strange confidence.

Sasaraki did as he was told and lightly threw the dice at the dragon. It touched 'Rainbow-Eating Elder Dragon King''s tail. Right after, DOGAGAGAGAGAGAGAGAGAGA, the dragon's body bounced from wall to wall around 300 times like a pinball.

The damage displayed, 800,000,000.

Eighthundredmillion.

"GUOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUUU....."

An apparently sorrowful roar later, 'Rainbow-Eating Elder Dragon King' collapsed.

The sparkly death effect rose from its entire body.

"...I think I just read a very strange number..."

A hundred million. Eight of those.

"It's my favorite weapon— The 'Dice of the Goddess,' you know?"

Alice raised her hand and the dice rose from the floor and flew towards her.

She caught it and smiled proudly.

"It deals a hundred million damage per pip on the side that hits. It hit with the 'eight' side, so it's eight hundred million."

"This is way too out of our league! Actually, how's a dice a weapon?!"

"It's always been my childhood dream to beat up monsters with a dice."

They kept talking like this when Lizna and Azrael returned.

"That's just weird! What's the meaning of this?! 40000 damage?!"

"We set a new overkill record, didn't we?! Yay—!"

"I don't wanna set records like that—! Aah, what are we gonna do about this guy?!"

"It's fine, Sasaraki took care of it just now."

""He?""

Azrael and Lizna peeked into the room.

It was exactly the moment when the dragon's gigantic body glittered red and vanished.

Both of them gaped with their mouths. As did Sasaraki.

"By pure chance, I happened to have a skill that nullifies the dragon's blaze. Sasaraki charged at the dragon with my divine protection and then it was just amazing! He dodged its sharp fangs and tail attack and slashed at it, suddenly the dragon got knocked down and all that was left was Sasaraki's gallant figure!"

Alice narrated brightly. The other three were still left with their mouths gaping.

"I'd really like to show you too... We should totally call him Hero of the Goddess now, right?"

"Wai— Alice, what nonsense are you spouting?!"

He whispered to her in a panic.

"Hey, we've to hide the whole gamemaster thing, don't we?"

"Amazing, Sasaraki-kun!"

Lizna's eyes sparkled. *Ohoh, they totally believe it!*

"Sasaraki-kun's a man who can get things done if he tries, isn't he?!"

"No, I didn'—"

"So he's not just a loser and weak-minded lolicon, is he?!"

"Wait, you thought I was?!"

"Wait a sec! No matter how you look at it, this can't logically be true—?!"

Azrael cut in. Yeah, it really couldn't be.

"Even if you defend against the blaze, Sasaraki couldn't pierce its scales at his lev—"

"Your deaths flared up Sasaraki's sword, you know?"

Alice started telling yet some other utter nonsense.

"Watching his treasured companions fall, Sasaraki-san shed tears of blood and as the result of his emotions pushed to their limit, he awoke his EX Skill 'Immortal Soul.' His sword acquired the strength to cut up his arch enemy— the strength to instant kill the dragon—!"

Why would she tell such an obvious lie?

"I... Immortal Soul?"

Azrael mumbled in puzzlement.

Aaand she noticed— he thought, when...

"Unfair—!"

"Hah?"

For some reason, Azrael flared up at him with tears in her eyes.

"What's with that cool skill?! It's unfair if only you get to have one—!"

"Wai— Too close! You're too close, Azrael!"

She was close enough for her breasts to almost touch him.

And she didn't notice herself, she had probably gotten too excited to.

"Sasaraki-san's a hero, right? Amazing!"

Lizna looked at him with sparkling eyes.

Sasaraki wanted to hold his head. *Why did things turn out like this?*

"I'm really jealous of how well you all get along."

Alice chuckled beside him.

* * *

Five minutes later, Azrael had come back to.

"D-Don't misunderstand! It's not like I was jealous or something!"

"No, see, just listen to what—"

"It just surprised me a bit!"

"Listen to—"

"I swear! I totally, absolutely swear!"

Azrael hadn't listened to him at all.

Things kept going on like that until they'd dissolved the party.

The debugging room, one day later.

He heaved a huge sigh while sitting down on the ground.

After all, he had just relived yesterday's happenings in his head.

"Gamemasters really are evil masterminds, aren't they...?"

Placing monsters and traps, luring players into them...

No matter how you looked at it, it were a devil king's deeds.

"But it was fun, right?"

"Uh—"

He had nothing to return to Alice's words.

Certainly, it had loosened his lips when he saw those two move about in the confusion his traps caused.

When he had been a player, it seemed unthinkable.

"Then it's all fine."

"...Is it, I wonder..."

That didn't help vanquish the guilt he felt, at all.

"Anyways, we've finished the tutorial, right?"

"Well, we fixed that 'Rainbow-Eating Elder Dragon King' and all, didn't we...?"

After they had parted with Azrael and Lizna, they addressed the issue and did another run. The dungeon was supposed to work correctly now. Also, they'd placed a well-visible signpost at town, since it was supposed to guide beginners.

"Ah, right, right. I made sure to tell Fury to have an eye on the signpost, okay?"

"Why that?"

"'Cause those signs are ordinary objects."

Ordinary objects were one kind of object which existed in the fields. Mainly furniture, like shop doors or tables, came under it. All objects in this game were freely movable by players. So they got stolen, destroyed, and/or burnt quite often.

And they didn't go back the way they were supposed to be by themselves.

Previously, they did, but the steal → sell loop was an easy way to make money, so they made them unstealable— well, they wanted to but seemingly couldn't, hence they fixed it by making them not reappear. Thanks to that, all NPC houses in 'Start' were as empty as if they'd done a moonlight flit.

"If it breaks, we've to make Fury put up another one."

"We're really just all over the place, aren't we...?"

Sasaraki said and took the bell out of his pocket. The golden bell Fury had handed to him. Ringing it would summon her to Sasaraki's side. *"I'm Tinkerbell, you know? Tinkerbell!,"* she had said herself.

Anyhow, he rang it.

"You called for Fury-chan, right, Master?☆"

A fairy appeared out of a small pillar of light while fluttering with her wings like a butterfly.

"I'd like to ask something of you—"

"Before that, I've an urgent report to make—☆"

"Eh? What kind of?"

"The guild 'Pursue the Brilliance of the Stars' has discovered the first floor's final dungeon☆"

He had heard that guild name before. It was the guild which seriously tried to clear this kusoge. They had an extremely well reputation among the players. He had to meet them yet, but they were sure to be an assembly of super serious players. So their hard efforts had been rewarded, how joyous, indeed!

"It looks like they're recruiting players and headed to clear the dungeon as we speak☆"

Fury said, *"Look, look!,"* and displayed the current state of affairs in town on the main display. In front of the square's water fountain, a man clad in plate armor held a speech to a few dozens of people. He appeared to be the guildmaster of 'Pursue the Brilliance of the Stars.'

"Heeh... Huh? Azrael's there, too."

She seemed somewhat fidgety.

"My level's too low, but... No, I'll surely manage now."

It were modest words different from her usual self.

She caressed the scabbard of 'Magical Sword Gram.'

"E-Even Sasaraki acquired an EX Skill on his own..."

No, I acquired nothing— but the words wouldn't reach her even if he said them out loud.

"Yep, I should join. I just didn't try yet, but if I try, I can do it!"

Azrael clenched her fists and somewhat steeled her resolve.

"I feel reeeally guilty right now..."

"That's a gamemaster's fate, you know?"

Alice chuckled.

"B-But they sure get fired up, right? Isn't that a good thing?"

Close to a hundred players listened to his speech and seemed like they'd join. Considering there were more than 10000 players, it was only one percent, but it probably wasn't bad to have an event unfold— or so you'd think.

"So, what are we going to do about it?☆"

"Huh? Why would we need to do something about it?"

"Are you drowsy, Master?☆ Let's butt in there☆"

"...Hah? Why?"

"Fury-chan recommends to let her tear that guildmaster to pieces☆"

"Nonono, you mustn't do that. We're not going to do anything bad, alright?"

"Attempting to clear this tower is a sin already, you know?☆"

"Like, why?!"

"Care to make a guess?☆"

She answered his question with a question.

Why, huh? I've no idea why clearing this game'd be worrisome.

"My! My master has the purest of hearts, hasn't he? But...☆"

Fury spun around to Alice.

"If it's our tainted Alice— she should know what this means, right?☆"

Alice folded her arms with a poker face. She seemed to ponder about something.

"Alice, what's the meaning of this? Why's it bad if they clear it?"

"—Sasaraki."

She said in a surprisingly serious tone.

"I said it to you before, 'Let's make a VRMMO,' right?"

"Eh...? Ah, yeah. It felt kinda off."

"How so?"

"You know, the game's already done and all."

A few moments of silence went by.

Beside her was Fury, blocking her mouth to hold back her giggling.

"Unfortunately, 'make' was the right word to use."

Alice mumbled at last.

"Because it's far from done."

"Eh—?"

What do you mean— before he could even ask that, Fury cut into the conversation.

"Time for a national debut☆ This is 'Sword & Magic Online''s true form—☆"

Fury pushed a button.

He saw the tower soaring high in the sky at the main display.

The tower's outer stone walls grew more and more transparent until he could see its inside.

It was empty.

"—Eh?"

From the tower's top to its bottom, the vast majority of it was hollow.

At the bottom, grasslands labelled 'First Floor' spread afar. At the top was a cube-shaped floor, labelled 'Floor 255.' That's all there was, the rest— everything from floor 2 to floor 254, just wasn't there.

Fffffffffuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu.

For some reason, a cold wind blew in the debugging room.

It was probably just an illusion, but Sasaraki could feel it for sure.

"Wait a moment."

"I'll be waiting until the end of service☆"

"What's the meaning of all this?"

"I love my slow master☆ To put it in other words—"

Her shoulders bounced cheerfully, Furi seemed to enjoy herself.

"There's no such thing as a second floor☆"

"N—NONONONO! WHAT THE HECK?!"

He shouted out of reflex.

"This game's about clearing 255 floors, right?!"

"And everything from the second floor upwards hasn't been implemented, Maste~r☆"

"WHY?!"

"It's nothing unusual☆ Our first floor is designed to take at least a month, so there was no need to implement all floors already to begin with and it's no problem at all if you develop one floor per month☆"

"But it's become a problem now, hasn't it?!"

This game's selling point had been to brave 255 floors of undiscovered adventures. How could there be 254 floors, 99% of the game, unimplemented? It was like a fraud. Actually, it was a fraud.

If these serious players knew about that, there'd be a riot for sure.

Which was why her former master tried to interfere with the game clearance, too.

"No, like, what are we gonna do?!"

"It's fine, Master☆ Leave it all to Fury-chan☆"

"Leave it to you, huh...? What are you intending to do?"

Fury put on a fairy tale-ish smile.

Then the main display changed back to the guild speech.

"Isn't it obvious?☆"

She pushed the button with the skull and crossbones on it.

BOOOM!

"UOOOOH?! YUTANGA-SAN EXPLODED?!"

"AGAIN?!"

"That makes the fifth time in three days, doesn't it?"

The onlookers at the plaza started to get noisy.

"Wha—?! W-What are you doing, Fury?!"

"Didn't I say already? With this Fury-chan-exclusive 'Unreasonable Button,' all of the players getting close to the last dungeon..."

She presented the button with her hands like an offering and expressed the brightest of smiles.

"...will be torn to pieces by Fury-chan—☆"

This fairy's pure evil!

"Stop talking nonsense and stop that, Fury."

Alice interfered and picked up Fury's button.

"That's right! They're players who're clearing the game, you can't just—"

"We can't leave this important task to the likes of you."

"See? Alice is also saying that— Hah?"

When he turned around, Alice was smiling.

"Sasaraki, remember this! The 100 Rules of Being a Gamemaster, rule number 3!"

She spun around and pointed at Sasaraki, then said...

"Even if players die, you shall let them have fun doing so!"

* * *

Frost Mountain.

A snow area at the edge of the first floor harboring a mountain in its northern-most part. About 1500 meters above sea level. Ignoring the derp how

there could be something like that within a tower, this solemnly soaring mountain seemed to hold the last dungeon of the first floor.

"...There they are, right? The raid group..."

"There they are, aren't they? Slowly closing in."

Sasaraki and the other two had come to the mountainside. Behind them was a snow dragon nest. Beneath their cliff was a big plaza, and numerous players assembled on it. The rock surface covered in snow that served as the plaza was gaping unnaturally.

According to Fury, that hole was the dungeon's entrance.

Standing in front of the entrance was the guildmaster who had exploded before.

"Hm. We've 85 people who didn't desert... Quite the number."

He could hear someone say. Probably a guild member of 'See the Brilliance of the Stars.' Counting the players who'd come, he seemed to assign them into groups. When he strained his ears even more, he could hear the voices of other players, too.

"Good job finding this, isn't it? That there'd be an entrance on a hidden path within the rock surface without any hint whatsoever..."

"Word on the street is that they just checked the whole map meter by meter like in super old RPGs."

"For real?! Why would they be so serious with this kinda kusoge?!"

"The developers may be funny in the head, but those guys aren't much better either."

"Saying that I'm funny in the head..."

"It's a compliment, isn't it?☆"

Fury clapped her hands.

"Actually, those people don't seem all too motivated, do they? Won't they screw this up even if we leave 'em be?"

"They may be a mere mob for the most part, but there are super motivated people in there too, you know?☆"

"Look, look!" Fury pointed.

On top of a big rock in the center of the plaza stood one man.

Zooming in on him, the man wore a gigantic sword on his back and a grim expression on his face.

"Ladies and gentlemen!"

The guildmaster's commanding voice cut through the crowd. The friendly chatter stopped instantly.

"You did well braving the overly frequent bugs to come here! I, Yutanga, give you my thanks! Thanks to our ten days long investigation, we have found the last dungeon by coincidence within these mountains! Having done the painful job of searching for hidden doors by knocking at rocks 30000 times over, I want to testament my deepest gratitude towards my companion, Tiolis!"

The girl standing behind him, wearing short, black hair, light armor, and an epee, was applauded.

Tiolis lowered her head seemingly embarrassed.

"And here Fury-chan went out of her way to hide it as good as she could, their efforts are so uncalled for, right?☆"

Sorry, Yutanga-san. The perpetrator of this hide-and-seek's right here.

"Well then, let's discuss the fight. According to our scout reports, players who die within the dungeon, won't be able to reenter it for at least a week. Our guess is that it's due to the boss's 'Soul Leech' curse!"

The crowd stirred.

"Fury, care to explain?"

"Most certainly! My former master ordered me to do a delay maneuver☆"

"Uwaah..."

Sorry, Yutanga-san. It was this evil fairy who cursed you, not the boss.

"Well then, Tiolis. As we discussed before, I ask you to speak a few words."

He called the girl, Tiolis, and with her cheeks blushing, she stepped on top of the rock.

She folded her hands in front of her chest as if in prayer and gave forth her clear voice.

"I merely want to say one thing— let us believe in this world."

Tiolis gulped and continued.

"When we couldn't find the last dungeon, couldn't find the road that'd lead us to the next floor no matter how hard we looked for it, a lot of people turned their backs on this game. It's surely not implemented, they said. I bet this kusoge ends with floor one already, they said. But now, here we stand, knowing that it's not true!"

Tiolis said while smiling in tears. Sasaraki wanted to cry, too - for a different reason.

He wanted to apologize, telling her it's not their fault. In truth, it really was not implemented.

"Once we have made it through this last dungeon, 'The Cave of the End of Start'— surely, a new world will await us. Let us believe, this world is no kusoge. Even if it has a few seams coming apart— it still has lots of dreams and romance awaiting us!"

UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! The crowd raised their voices.

Sasaraki wanted to hold his head.

Tiolis spread her both hands and absorbed the cheers directed at her.

Still smiling in tears, somehow. Thank you, thank you, she kept saying.

"—Sasaraki, listen, and listen good."

Alice said solemnly.

"We will kill every single one of them."

"Your words are way too disturbed, you know—?!"

"Even if I glossed it over, it'd be the same, you knooow?"

Alice stood there with her fists resting on her hips.

"Hey, Alice. Can't we just tell them upfront?"

"That won't do."

She replied in a serious tone.

"The 100 Rules of Being a Gamemaster, rule number 4! 'You mustn't unravel the secrets of the game!'"

Alice continued while looking closely at Sasaraki.

"If they knew that the second floor awaiting them was just a vacant land, they'd know the secrets— the limits of our virtual world. The already low sense of reality in here would completely crumble and they'd start feeling that the ground they're standing on is nothing but a game. We must prevent that at all costs."

"...That's... certainly true."

Still, he was reluctant.

"What are you gonna do? Stop? I won't force you."

He seemed to grow hesitant for a moment, but then he recalled Lizna's words.

"I think— I'll keep logging into this world, until it ends, always."

He had sworn to himself that he'd make this world go on for those two.

"—No, I'm fine. I'll do it."

"You sure?"

"I won't go back on my word, you know...? Wah—?!"

Alice grabbed Sasaraki's hand.

"Thank you, Sasaraki. You're a really good partner, you know?"

"Eh? Well, yeah, thanks..."

He blushed being told those words filled with emotion upfront.

"Then let's talk about our concrete strategy. We won't just interfere, we'll interfere and let them have fun doing while doing so, alright?"

"Interfere— and let them have fun?"

"We'll create interesting difficulties which will inflame their fighting spirit and hit 'em with those. Difficulties they could brave if they all joined forces. If we do that, even if they wipe, they should feel satisfied after."

Alice said with a proud expression.

"It's not the result that's most important in games, it's the way getting there, you know?"

"Is it like that...?"

"It's like that!"

She declared full of confidence.

"The 100 Rules of Being a Gamemaster, rule number 5!"

Alice pointed at herself with a smile still brimming with confidence.

"A gamemaster, you know, has the duty to let the players enjoy themselves. Even if it's—"

"Even if it's...?"

"A total kusoge!"

* * *

Inside the dungeon was a sea of brightly burning lava. In contrast to its fairy-tale-ish name, the walls, floor, and ceiling in 'The Cave of the End of Start' were covered in blood-red stone; a dungeon that with the atmosphere of hell.

Sasaraki and Alice (and Fury) were viewing the cave scenery from inside a small room. It had a full-blown cyber feeling to it with all its monitors and buttons. The display was divided into numerous smaller ones which showed the figures of all the players in the dungeon.

It appeared to be the dungeon's control room.

If you asked what this room was here for, then according to Fury, *"It's for the gamemaster to beat those pitiful players to death and make them enjoy themselves, you kno~w?☆"* This kinda room really did appear often within death game style manga and novels.

"I wonder whether we'll get executed by the righteous players some day..."

"It'd be great if we would, right?"

Alice chuckled.

"Alright then, Sasaraki. Are you ready?"

He gulped.

Nervosity had gotten to him, after all. Now he'd be killing players he didn't know anything about. To conceal the fact that the second floor hadn't been implemented. He knew that it was a necessity to ensure the continuation of this game.

He did understand that, but— would he be able to manage such a devilish deed?

Although, he had no choice.

"Look, Sasaraki, players in-fight over there."

Alice was pointing towards a plaza that was noticeably big on the map even. Six players had gathered there. One marker in there was red. Red indicated the player was in-fight.

Sasaraki manipulated the 'Master Screen' and the battle showed up. It was a pond with burning lava, almost as big as a park. Soaring above the lava was a about five meter big rock, like a stepping stone. It seemed like going over the rock was the way to get to the other side.

Hanging at the edge of said rock was a girl, about to fall.

She seemed familiar. It was Tiolis, who had given a speech at the dungeon entrance. A spear-wielding orc was kicking at her hands. It was called 'Pigman Fighter.' You wouldn't expect by its uber-cheap naming, but it was a brutal monster and Sasaraki had gotten killed by it many times over.

"Kuu... I-I won't lose to you—..."

Her expression expressed anguish, but her eyes were burning with aspiration.

How to put it— yeah, she was really brimming with hope.

"Don't give up, Tiolis! We're coming to save you!"

"As if we'd let an orc do whatever it wants to our Tiolis!"

"Endure a bit longer, Tiolis-chan—! We're gonna take care of it!"

Sasaraki's head got giddy.

What was with these glitter adventurers?

"Killing those player will be worthwhile, right?"

"You're being way too evil already..."

"Fufufu. Well then, Great Devil King Sasaraki, I'll leave it in your hands."

It was definite that it'd be done. There was no choice but to get it done.

Half desperate, Sasaraki operated the 'Master Screen.'

The eyes of the orc who was treating on Tiolis' hands lit up silver.

"UOOOOOOOH! Get your feet off Tiolis—!"

A young man tried leaping at the orc close to Tiolis.

"NOW!"

Sasaraki ordered the orc with a yell.

And the orc showed a magnificent reaction. He turned around towards the leaping warrior and fought back with its spear. The sword and man flew off. As soon as he fell and his feet touched the lava, smoke rose up and the damage taken got displayed, 1280.

His body turned into smoke and Sasaraki could see the death effect.

"AAAAAAAAAARS?!"

Tiolis screamed in sorrow.

"Errr, I should put up a speech flag here. Some idiotic villain line..."

The 'Master Screen' had even that kind of request at hand.

According to Fury, the fairy inside was giving it her best.

"Gu-fu-fu-fu... the ho-stage plan to-tally worked!"

"H-How dare you! How dare you do this to Ars—! I won't forgive you—!"

Tiolis said angrily with tears in her eyes.

"Oooh—!"

Alice raised her voice in excitement.

"Good job, Sasaraki!"

"I really did it..."

"Congrats on your first time!"

Alice clapped with her hands while smiling carelessly.

"Must be nice, I wanna try, too—"

"Then I'll hand the Master Screen to you, okay?"

"I can't use it. I told you that I don't have debugging privileges, right?"

Alice said a bit lonely. However, her smile soon returned.

"And so— you have to do your best in my stead, okay?"

"...Yeah, well, I'll try."

Even if she said to do his best, it was a raid group genocide.

"So? How is it? What do you think so far?"

He went on manipulating the monsters and bringing the players to their knees.

If he had to put it into words...

"...It's... a bit fun, I guess."

It hurt his heart to see the players run in circles panicking.

But at the same time— it felt puppeteering.

"Fufufu, you've awoken too, huh?"

"Well, but, is all this violence really fine...?"

"It is. A romantic death beats a boring life. Look at the guy who died earlier."

She said, and then the respawn point at the dungeon entrance got displayed. The young warrior who had died earlier had sent a message saying, *[Tiolis! Let my death be the only one! I believe in you!]*, and a few seconds later, he had a loose grin on his face.

"Alright. That should make Tiolis remember me. Maybe she'll take my hand or something later."

The warrior said with a grin that laid his ulterior motives bare.

I just heard something I shouldn't have...

"See, see? Aren't they having fu~n?"

Alice froliced like a child and seemed to have quit the fun herself.

"Ah, must be so nice~ I wanna too~"

"Eh, then why don't you?"

He thought that she was obviously much more suited for this than he himself.

"No can do. I told you, I've no debugging privileges."

Alice extended her hand towards the 'Master Screen,' but it went right through.

She mumbled a bit sadly, "Well, can't be helped."

"And so, Sasaraki, put your back into it for me too, I'll leave it to you, okay?"

"Yeah..."

"Kill all of them within the next 30 minutes!"

"If somebody heard that, they'd think terribly of you, you know—?!"

* * *

The killing job went on.

"You should be able to kill off the party on the top right!"

He looked at the display Alice was pointing at.

There were four taurus-like monsters, 'Oxhead Kings.'

He could hear the two girls surrounded by them talk.

"What should we do?! We're in trouble, Seshiriko-chan!"

"Please calm down, Sarapi. I thought of a foolproof plan."

"You did?! As expected of the pointlessly INTelligent Seshiriko-chan!"

"Sarapi attracts those four monsters while I escape."

"I see, a fabulous plan, my smart Seshiriko-chan— Wait, AS IF I'M GONNA FALL FOR THAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT!"

The two quarrelled. They seemed to be called Seshiriko and Sarapi.

"Errr... how about... you four oxhead kings, focus Sarapi."

Sasaraki ordered, and the monsters directed their weapons at Sarapi.

"As expected of Sarapi. Take their blows for me. Peace out!"

"YOU TRAITOOOR! WAAAIT! SAVE MEEE!"

Seshiriko ran off. She turned her back on the monsters.

"Alright. Now backstab Seshiriko."

One oxhead kings turned around at the speed of light and chased after Seshiriko.

The backstab connected, an attack from behind did twice the damage.

"Haguau..."

Seshiriko collapsed to the ground and died.

"Ha-ha-ha, you saw thaaat? That's the death of a traitooor—!"

"Y o u a r e n e x t ."

"...Ha—"

Sarapi died five seconds later from their focused attacks.

"Splendid performance, Sasaraki!"

Alice gave him a thumbs up and smiled refreshingly.

"The 100 Rules of Being a Gamemaster, rule number 6! Give a player's death meaning!"

"Aren't there way too many rules related to players dying among those 100?"

And so on went their exchange while they kept killing players in a 'romantic' fashion.

30 minutes later.

"Ten are left, should we get ready to move on to the boss fight?"

"But they aren't entering the boss room, you know?"

Looking at the screen, eight people were frozen in front of the boss room's door.

The remaining two seemed to have strayed off somewhere.

"Are they preparing, I wonder?"

He operated the display to get a better view of the scene. Within the walls, made out of black bricks and illuminated by candles emitting blue light, the eight people had formed a circle with Yutanga as the leader. Behind Yutanga was the door to the boss room, bearing the same demonic carving as seen at the cave entrance.

He could hear their discussion—

"Yutanga, how was it over there?"

"No good. There's neither a hidden door nor a hidden switch."

Yutanga knocked on the door with the back of his hand, frowning.

"Hey, couldn't the door just be bugged shut?"

"...That possibility's terrifyingly high, huh?"

Sasaraki and Alice looked at Fury.

She put both of her hands to her cheeks and wriggled, acting all embarrassed.

"Oh, stop it, will you☆ It's not a bug, it's a feature☆ You need the magic word☆"

"What magic word?"

"The one my former master set. It's '857'☆"

"What's the meaning of those numbers? Are there any hints for them?"

"Those are the three sizes of Fury-chan's nice body☆"

"No logical connections whatsoever, right—?!"

Alice sighed and said to Sasaraki...

"Let's teleport there. They can't possibly know the magic word, we've to open the door."

"Hmm... but wouldn't it be better if we left things as they are?"

If they couldn't open the boss room, they wouldn't be able to clear the floor.

Sasaraki and Alice's objective was to get in their way of beating the boss. He felt that it was fine to leave things the way they were.

However, Alice shook her head.

"We can't do that. Wouldn't we be the same as Fury? We've to properly reward the ten people who managed to clear the dungeon."

Alice raised her index finger.

"As gamemasters, we mustn't make light of the players' efforts!"

She directed an affectionate gaze at Yutanga and company at the other side of the screen.

"I want to let those who go through the trouble of clearing our game meet the boss."

And then she smiled.

"Let's exterminate them with his overwhelming power!"

"...You sure are having fun, aren't you, Alice?"

"Being a gamemaster's fun all around!"

Alice announced full of confidence, she really did seem to enjoy herself.

* * *

The demon stood in the middle of a hall as big as a gymnasium and its walls glittering with lava.

Floor one's boss (more like, this game's final boss) was different from the usual 30 monster types and their varying colors, and really looked the part.

Anyway, he was huge.

About three times bigger than the 'Balrog' Sasaraki had defeated before. He was 'Balrog Rev./Level 35 Boss HP x10.' The naming might've been half-assed, but he was big, red, and strong.

That's the kinda boss he was, but— the players put up a good fight.

"Yutanga! Ten more seconds until his CD's over!"

"Got it! Everyone, disperse!"

The warriors moved away from Yutanga.

A few seconds later, the boss released a red shockwave.

Thanks to their adjournment, Yutana was the only one struck by it.

"Alright, gather together again! We'll win this in five more minutes—!"

As Yutanga had said, the demon's HP were declining steadily.

It really did seem like he'd lose like this— talking from the boss's perspective.

"Alice, what should we do?"

They had added a special skill 'Flame Blaze' to the boss earlier, sped it up, boosted his attack power when his HP gauge dropped below half - basically

they'd strengthened him a bunch. However, Yutanga-san had thought up a counter for all of those and reacted accordingly.

He really knew his stuff.

To an extent that only the master of a guild which seriously strived to clear this game could.

Alice folded her arms and laughed, "Fufufu, not bad. Not bad at all."

"Should we heal him up?"

"Hmm, that'd be too cheap and disillusion them."

Sasaraki and Alice certainly wouldn't achieve their original goal like that.

"We want to let them enjoy themselves. So it's a no-no to give the boss groundless power-ups."

"But it'll be beaten if things go on like this..."

'Balrog Rev./Level 35 Boss HP x10''s HP were already about to drop below 30%. If things kept up, he probably wouldn't even hold out for another two minutes.

"Think something up. A last moment befitting of these wonderful players."

"A last moment...?"

Sasaraki gazed at the fight. They were moving around in perfect formation.

Their leader coordinated all of it, he certainly was amazing. It appeared he had recruited players so that they'd clear the dungeon filled with death traps for them while his party would tackle the boss battle unscathed.

He was someone coming up and executing systematic strategies even in this kind of kusoge.

What was a befitting last moment for someone like him?

"ALRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGHT! ONE LAST PUSH—!"

Yutanga's roar echoed.

"WE'RE ALSO WINNING THIS FOR THE SAKE OF TIOLIS AND THE OTHERS WHO HAVE DIED FOR OUR SAKES—!"

His comrades' yells resounded in agreement.

That instant, something occurred to Sasaraki.

For the sake of Tiolis and the others who had died for them— those words had something about them.

"Alice, how about this...?"

He whispered the plan he'd thought up just now into her ear.

Alice nodded repeatedly like a small animal and then flicked her fingers.

"That really does feel right, huh?! Let's kill 'em that way!"

Sasaraki had a stiff smile on his face.

We really are devils, aren't we...?

However, there was no going back now. Sasaraki operated the 'Master Screen' and started up 'NPC Data Revising.' He added a special skill to 'Balrog Rev./Level 35 Boss HP x10.' Then, in silence, he wished for a speech that'd stir as much hatred as possible.

"I understand."

A willing reply came from the boss.

It appeared he'd understood with that much already. What an amazing yet pointless technology.

In any case, 'Balrog Rev./Level 35 Boss HP x10' flapped his giant wings and rose into the air. When he had gained enough distance from Yutanga and company, he landed with a bang. Then he rose his fangs over his head and shouted.

"Gunuhahaha...You fools have committed a grave mistake!"

It was the message Sasaraki had asked him to say. The AI had incredible acting skills, indeed.

"Mistake—?!"

"I shall now devour their souls— as the essence of 'Hell Plague!'"

A black aura was released from the tips of the demon's fangs. Soon, the aura concentrated in one place and turned into an orb; a black orb with the diameter of almost one meter. You could see a glitter in it.

"I shall explain it to you. This magic gains in power with every player who has fallen in my dungeon!"

It was awfully kind of the boss to explain it.

"What—?! You were hiding that kind of trump card—?!"

No, he wasn't hiding anything. I just set that skill up seconds ago. Sasaraki had recalled Tiolis and the others from earlier, which had triggered the idea. Yutanga and his group had been able to struggle onto the boss by sacrificing the other players— and Sasaraki wanted to try and turn it against him.

It appeared they weren't suspecting anything.

"Dammit, our strategy backfired—?!"

"DIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIE!"

BOOM! The spacious room got thoroughly baked with his black flames. A few seconds later, the boss was the last man standing, with the dead players scattered at his feet, all of them displaying the demise effect consisting of them rising as sparkling spectral bodies. The world's processing load grew heavier.

Sasaraki and Alice went down to the room. Thanks to their gamemaster abilities, they both were 'Invincible' and 'Invisible,' so 'Balrog Rev./Level 35 Boss HP x10' didn't target them.

Surveying their surroundings, Alice smiled.

"Mh, they're all exterminated, right? Mission complete—!"

"We did it, Alice!"

They gave each other a high five.

"Wait, why the heck would we be cheering when we just annihilated a whole group...?"

He mumbled while looking at the dead bodies of Yutanga and his group at his feet.

Now he really felt it. Gamemasters were, in two words, super villains.

"It's fine, I tell you. You'll start to feel good about it eventually."

"You know, the way you're putting it really is weird... Let's go back for now."

"Yep—"

Sasaraki operated the 'Master Screen' to prepare the teleport.

When suddenly...

"Puaaah, we finally made it... Wait, Sasaraki—?! Why are you here?!"

He heard a voice from behind.

Turning around reflexively, two faces he knew all too well were standing on the path.

One girl with her two aura-emitting magical swords, and one girl with pink hair.

"Eh—? Azrael—?! Lizna, too?! You didn't desert?!"

"That's our line, why would you—?! Sasaraki! Behind you—!"

Azrael's expression changed, she came dashing towards him.

The boss slashed at Azrael. She stopped it with her magical sword.

"Wai...! Alice and I will be fine! You two run!"

Thanks to the current settings, Sasaraki and Alice couldn't be targeted now. If those two weren't here, the boss's attacks were ought to cease. However...

"WHA—?! D-DON'T BELITTLE ME, ALRIGHT—?!"

Azrael shouted in discontent. Her eyes were slightly teared up.

"Eh?"

While 'Magical Sword Gram' kept jostling with the boss's sword, she shouted...

"IF ALICE WOULD BE FINE, I'LL BE FINE, TOO!"

...Could she be pouting?

"No, errr, that's not what I meant with run..."

"Then what *did* you mean?!"

If I could just say that, there wouldn't be any trouble to begin with.

"That's enough with your lover's quarrel, Sasaraki-kun!"

Lizna cut in. She swept her giant mace sideways and forced the boss back.

"Now it's time for us four to join forces and bring the boss down!"

No, it'd be troubling if we did.

"Let's retreat already! We can't win this!"

"His HP are below 10%! We can do it—!"

"Errr, ah, r-right! It's got a blaze, so it's dangerous!"

"Alice is here, she can protect us against the blaze with her skill!"

Crap, we really did say she has that kinda skill before!

While they were arguing, Azrael and Lizna kept attacking the boss. However, they were at a disadvantage as you'd expect, and with their attacks hardly reaching, the boss's HP bar didn't budge. Their levels were too low. Like this, they'd be destroyed before long.

"Sasaraki, what are we going to do?"

Alice whispered to him. They had two options: Save them, or watch them die. And he was reluctant to pick either. Would they beat the boss, the second floor'd open. On the other hand, would he watch them die, Azrael wouldn't ever forgive him.

In that case—

Sasaraki had worked things through in his head at a speed like never before and shouted...

"—GEEEEEEEH—!"

He kicked the ground and attacked the boss with a war cry.

"Azrael! Attack from the front! Lizna, Alice, and I will take its attacks!"

"Eh—?"

"His weak spot's the abdomen! You should be able to penetrate its armor with 'Magical Sword Gram!'"

Azrael froze for a moment, but soon she expressed the smile of a child.

"F-Fufu—! Sasaraki, you seem to have understood at last!"

Azrael took Magical Sword Gram in both her hands and held it up high.

"O Gram, answer my calls! 'INVOKE!'"

A violet aura gushed from its blade. Now it would have a critical hit chance +50%.

"Let's go, everyone! We'll defeat him—!"

Sasaraki nodded and ran in first.

It had already been decided how this'd end. Sasaraki and the others would attack the boss but be exterminated in the blink of an eye. He'd die with them. It wasn't out of compassion or anything, it was to hide his gamemaster status and— because this way would be much more fun for them.

Then Alice shouted...

"Ah, SASARAKI, WAIT!"

"Sorry, Alice! Please just play along!"

"That's not the point, I know what you're trying to do, but first—"

She said something, but there was no time to listen.

"I'm over here, 'Balrog Rev./Level 35 Boss HP x10!'"

Sasaraki attacked and hence could be targeted too now. 'Balrog Rev./Level 35 Boss HP x10' swung his sword down splendidly. He stopped it. It was awfully heavy.

"KOOOOOOOOOH—!"

A weird sound echoed from overhead. He prepared his flame blaze. Even Yutanga and the other high level players had lost half their HP when it hit them, Sasaraki and the others would probably die instantly. They'd be killed by this blaze— but before that.

"Azrael! Now—!"

He had bent his body back for the blaze, which laid bare his weak spot, the abdomen.

It was the ideal moment for Azrael to attack.

"Got it— GOOOOOOO—!"

She roared from behind with fighting spirit.

Alright. This should do. Sasaraki would shield her and Azrael would land a hit. But the boss wouldn't die— he was absorbing player souls to recover— in the end, the four of them would be totally annihilated. That was the scenario Sasaraki had thought up.

That moment...

"Eh...? W-What is this—?!"

Azrael's movement turned into slow motion.

What now? An omen of death perhaps? No, there's nothing like that in this game. However— the pile of dead players over where Azrael was, was emitting the vanishing effect exactly now. It was really beautiful. Too beautiful. It lagged.

And so, objects started to dislocate.

Magical Sword Gram, originally targeted at the demon, now went astray and pointed at Sasaraki. The moment the sword was about to reach his head, a golden barrier appeared around Sasaraki, the magical sword got repelled.

"Eh—? Wai— SASARAKI—?!"

Azrael shouted in surprise. Her gaze shifted above the barrier, towards the words which had appeared.

[Immortal Object]

""—Hah?!""

Azrael and Lizna said in surprise.

The instant Sasaraki panicked and tried to cancel it, the boss's mouth opened.

GOOOOOOOOH! He released his black blaze.

The black flames released in the form of a cone burned everyone in seconds, with the exception of Sasaraki. Which left only him standing. Looking to his left, Lizna had gotten killed; looking to his right, Azrael had gotten killed, and the demise effect had just started.

Sasaraki aside, it was total annihilation.

The boss kept swinging his sword.

And each time it got repelled by Sasaraki's Invincible Barrier.

"That's why I told you to turn off your invincibility..."

Alice said with a sigh. Sasaraki had nothing to return.

"Could I have... screwed up?"

"You screwed up big time, huh?"

About ten seconds later, he heard a system notice.

[You have received messages from players Azrael and Lizna.]

Heavy-hearted, he pressed the play button.

"Wait a sec, Sasaraki! What the heck does Immortal Object mean?!"

"Azrael-san, I've heard of it before!"

"You know about this, Lizna?!"

"Yes, gamemasters appear to have an Invincible Barrier when testing!"

"Gamemasters— Tha— Wait! Why would he—?!"

".....Uwah..."

His voice leaked without thinking.

"Sorry, my warning was too late."

Well, it wasn't Alice's fault. Sasaraki had been the one to forget to deactivate the Invincible Barrier.

In the silence, 'Balrog Rev./Level 35 Boss HP x10' kept banging away at Sasaraki's barrier. Without a word, Sasaraki turned on his 'Invisibility.' The boss's attacks stopped dead. When he turned around, he locked eyes with the boss.

His pupil-less eyes seemed to say, *"S o , w h a t y o u g o n n a d o n o w ?"*

No kidding— what am I gonna do now?



* * *

The four of them were standing at the respawn point at the entrance of 'The Cave of the End of Start' amid a snowstorm.

Sasaraki's heart felt incredibly chilly, too. Or rather, the gazes that were piercing him did.

Lizna aside, Azrael's gaze was virtually freezing.

"Umm, in other words..."

Lizna pointed at Sasaraki sharply.

"Sasaraki-kun's a gamemaster."

He nodded. In the end, their investigations had revealed Sasaraki and Lizna's secrets. That the developers had run away, that the end of service was nigh, that he had been invited by Alice to become a gamemaster— and that he'd been the evil mastermind who killed all the players in the dungeon this time around.

Sasaraki surveyed the three girls. Alice had her eyes still closed and her arms folded. Earlier she had said, *"I'll leave what we're going to do up to you."* She had probably wanted him to 'use his own head' as a gamemaster.

What to do— no matter how hard you thought about it, there was only one thing.

Apologize. If he explained the circumstances, they'd surely understand.

And right after he had determined himself to...

"Sasaraki-kun, we're sorry."

"Heh?"

Instead of Sasaraki, Lizna was the one to bow her head.

"Eh...? No, why are *you* apologizing, Lizna?"

"Because we misunderstood you, Sasaraki-kun."

"Misunderstood me?"

"In reality, you really weren't a cheating lolicon who wouldn't even try to save us."

"That's what you misunderstood?!"

With a serious expression Lizna nodded deeply.

"But— you're different. You're just Alice-san's disciple but when it comes to the girl you like, you're totally devoted to Azrael-san after all, right? Men really do love big boobs, my strategy was on spot, right?!"

"What *is* your strategy?! Actually, that's not the issue here, is it—?!"

"Eh? Then what is?"

Lizna inclined her head.

"Alice-san, there's a problem?"

"Of course there's no problem at all."

Alice smiled with her arms still folded.

"Nonono! I deceived and killed you two, right?"

"So?"

"So...?! You're not angry?"

In a VRMMO a character was, so to speak, you yourself. Killing that character in cruel ways was normally be something you'd be angry about. Explaining that, Lizna put her finger to her chin and sunk into thought.

"Mh... I see... Mhhh, so..."

Lizna clapped her hands together and smiled.

"Sasaraki-kun, would you release that barrier from before?"

"Why?"

"It'd be in the way."

He didn't really understand, but Lizna smiled at him sweetly.

For now, Sasaraki gripped his 'Immortal Pendant.'

"Immortal Barrier, off."

He mumbled, and right after, for an instant the golden barrier flashed up around him and then dissolved into air with a mechanical sound. As soon as the barrier had completely vanished, Lizna held her mace aloft with an ominous sound.

"Eh?"

"TAAAAH—!"

The mace came flying down at him, and split his head open. Of course, there was no pain. Instead, a sound as if a frog had been crushed echoed. In front of him it said '285 Damage,' his vision shook, then the world turned gray.

His vision got crammed with big letters.

[You Died. Reason: Player Lizna (Weapon: Death Avenger)]

His mind still not catching up, the scene in front of his eyes changed.

Sasaraki was standing at the respawn point. In other words, right where he was before. Immediately next to him, there were the three people from just now. Lizna was smiling from ear to ear. Alice was smiling sweetly as always.

"Now we're even, okay~?"

Lizna laughed a seemingly embarrassed, "Ehehe~"

Blood dropped from her mace, the snow was soaked red.

The proof of a player kill.

"But Sasaraki-kun, I think you're misunderstanding something."

Lizna chuckled at the still speechless Sasaraki.

"It's usual to die in this game, so— there's no one who'd get angry if they're killed, you know?"

Lizna laughed carefreely.

Well, I think that's just you being very *special—*

"Look, Azrael-san's feeling the same, right?"

"Eh—?"

When he turned towards Azrael, she seemed to be talking about something with Alice.

"You want to see my status? Sure, take a look."

Alice nodded and flicked her fingers, the profile window appeared in the air. Her name said Alice. Her job 'The Creator.' Her level was some weird thing like 'FFFFFFFF' for some reason.

"What's this?"

"My level's about 4300000000, so the display's bugging, doesn't it?"

"Four-dot-three-billion—?!"

Azrael gulped hard.

"Incred... You're really a game... The creator of this world, its absolute ruler...!"

"Well, err... Azrael?"

When he called out to her, Azrael turned around to him vigorously.

"Sasaraki!"

"Waah—! S-Sorry!"

"D-Don't you have something you wanna say to me?"

Azrael bent her body forward with her arms folded. She seemed to vent something on him.

"Errr, ah, yeah. I'm really sorry, I deceived and killed you."

"Not that!"

"Heh?"

What then?

"C'mon, there's something else you should say, right?!"

"Errr... sorry to have lied to you?"

Azrael gulped something down.

"That's true too, but... right now, there's trouble 'cause all the devs ran off, right?"

"Big trouble, yeah."

"So, look, you know, you need more help, right?"

"We do."

"Especially the help of knowledgeable players that were in the beta test!"

"It'd be great if we could."

Another few moments of silence went by.

Azrael bit her lips and glared at Sasaraki, leaking a "Gununu—"

"Sasaraki-kun doesn't understand a maiden's heart."

"A devilish act, indeed, huh?"

"Lizna and Alice, too?!"

I've really no idea what's going on.

"In other words..."

Lizna took a step forward pointing at herself while smiling sweetly.

"You're going to let us help out as gamemasters too, right?"

Chapter 3:

Happiness All Around in the Debugging Room

第三章

デバッグルームの
ゆかいな面々

THE
JUNK!
Kuso Game Online

The Second Sword & Magic Online Development Strategy Meeting

Chairman: Genius Gamemaster Alice

"Well the~n, let us start the meeting~!"

Alice stood on top of a mandarin box in the middle of the debugging room and slapped onto the whiteboard in a super lively manner. Sasaraki was in front of her, at his right and left Azrael and Lizna. The two of them were gazing at the whiteboard with a super serious expression.

—In the end, Sasaraki had accepted Lizna and Azrael's request.

He still felt some reluctance against dragging the two of them into this mess, but they had persuaded him strongly with Lizna tear-choking and asking, *"Aren't we... friends...?,"* while Azrael grew exasperated claiming, *"Unfair! It's unfair that only you get to do it—!"*

That's how much both of them had wanted to do this.

Out of options, Sasaraki tried asking Alice about it, who immediately replied...

"With pleasure, of course—!"

Sasaraki seemed to have been the only one seriously worrying about it.

Now the 'Immortal Pendant (Imitation)' was sparkling on both Azrael and Lizna's necks. They were copies made by Fury which allowed them to use a restricted version of the 'Master Screen.'

"Now, we still have to explain our critical situation— Fury, if you would."

"Aye-aaaye☆ Explanation of our critical situation underway☆"

Behind Alice, Fury flapped with her wings and took out a board you'd find in Japanese TV programs. In fancy characters it said, [What Could the Critical Situation be?!], beneath that, [#1], [#2], and [#3].

The answers were hidden beneath stickers, such that you'd also find on Japanese TV programs.

"Sasaraki, what's the meaning of doing it like this?"

Azrael whispered into his ear from next to him, looking a bit underwhelmed.

"Might be just Alice's taste... I've no idea what the point is."

"It's surely to loosen up the atmosphere! As expected of Alice-san!"

Recently, Lizna's head has been working in curious ways...

"Here we go! Critical situation number 1!"

She fiddled the sticker off.

[There's no second floor.]

"—Hah?"

Azrael gaped with her mouth.

"Eh? Wai— What do you mean?"

"Thaaat's, you kno~w☆"

Fury repeated the same cheerful explanation she had also told Sasaraki before.

Azrael remained speechless for a while.

"Are we really going to turn a blind eye to something this retarded?! That's deception, isn't it?!"

"Ahaha, isn't the very existence of VRMMOs themselves a deception already?☆"

"Wha—?!"

She grew speechless again upon Fury's reckless remark.

"So what are you going to do?☆ Abandon this empty world?☆"

Azrael had nothing to reply to that.

However, she looked at Lizna— and at Sasaraki next to her.

"—I-I'm not gonna abandon it, of course..."

She said a bit mortified.

"Mhhh..."

Next to her, Lizna stared in puzzlement.

"Azrael, what are you so shocked about?"

"You're pretty calm, aren't you, Lizna?"

Sasaraki asked, and Lizna inclined her head in wonder.

"Eh? Well, this world's a kusoge, so this much's a given, no?"

"No, I don't think it is, you know?"

"It isn't?"

Her common sense must've really gone awry at some point.

"You see, I haven't played any other games before... Mhhh, but I don't think it's that big of a deal."

Then Lizna put her fingers to her temples with a bump and groaned.

"Although, if others will be disappointed by that, we should implement it or things will be bad, won't they?"

"Pretty bad."

Alice said.

"How long would it take to implement the second floor?"

"If I had to do a rough guess, I'd say about two weeks, huh?"

Two more weeks. So we have to do that (the raid group genocide) two more times, don't we...?

"Wait, is implementing that even something you can do in two weeks?"

This game's first floor was already the size of the Yamate rail line's area. Apparently, the game could create fields automatically, but what would they do about the content? A simple tutorial dungeon had taken them three hours already.

"It's fine, I've a plan. Rest assured."

Alice smiled sweetly. Did she really have one?

"We'll save the explanation for later, okay? And next, critical situation number 2!"

Leaving the dumbfounded Sasaraki behind, Fury fiddled off the sticker.

[There are too many critical bugs, called features.]

"Eh~?☆ They *are* features, with much thought behind them☆"

Fury protested with a smile.

"As far as you're concerned, every bug's a feature, isn't it...?"

"I'm merely faithfully protecting my former master's issue fixing flow☆"

"What kinda flow is that?"

"Problems you can fix are bugs☆ Problems you can't fix are features☆"

That fixing flow was so useless that it already felt refreshing instead.

"Which means that with no programmer at hand right now, all problems are features☆"

"That's horrible!"

"It is horrible, isn't it?☆"

"Ehehe," Fury acted embarrassed for some reason.

"We've to maintain the program asap, don't we? Now, the last one *peelpeel*"

[Three weeks until the end of service.]

"Huh? Weren't it four weeks?"

"We've received a mail from Kirine."

Alice materialized an A4 sized paper at her hands and gave it to Sasaraki.

He had no idea why she'd go out of her way to turn it into paper form, but he just started to read it for the time being.

[I'm sorry, it were three weeks.

It's Kirine.

I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.

It actually weren't four but three weeks until the end of service.

The data on the total amount of active players was outdated.

It weren't 10562 but 10420.

It's all due to my carelessness.

I'm really sorry.

It's only natural that I should die to atone for my sins, but if I were to die in the hospital, I'd be a bother to the doctors, so I'll live on until I'm discharged.

That's all, that's my report.

P.S.: Should I just die now, after all?]

"Please don't die, okay?!"

"It's fine, I got her a skilled therapist."

Nothing's fine!

"Anyways, which means— Lizna, Azrael..."

Alice turned around. Both of them nodded.

"The service will be discontinued once the player count goes below 10000, right?"

Lizna raised her hand and said that.

"Yeah. The funds from the Neo Virtual World Funding Organization will end and our servers with them."

"Couldn't we make a backup at least?"

Lizna asked. She appeared to dislike the thought of our memories to disappear.

"A sound suggestion, but there's one problem."

Alice raised her index finger.

"We've no programer so we can't code a backup program."

"Our end is nigh, huh...?"

"It'd be great if a master programmer could just fall from the sky or something."

"Of course something that convenient won't—"

"We have one, you know?"

Lizna interrupted. All of their gazes concentrated on her.

"—Eh? Lizna, you can write code?"

"No. It's not me, it's Azrael-san."

"Heh—?!"

The person mentioned, Azrael herself, stared in puzzlement.

"Look, you said so before, didn't you? 'Why I've been called for the beta test? Fufu, actually I'm infamous for being a middle-schooler super hacker beauty at certain places. The developers themselves came and asked for *my* help specifically!,' was it?"

Sweat ran down Azrael's cheeks when she heard Lizna's imitation of her own voice.

"Huh? Am I wrong?"

"……O…"

Azrael put her hand to her cheek and puffed her big chest out in pride.

"O-Of course! Just like you said! Leave it to me—!"

"Nonono…"

That's obviously a lie.

"Heeeh? Can we count on you, then?"

Alice smiled sweetly, I hurried to her side.

"Alice, that's not a good idea, she's definitely lying."

"I know. There was no beta test, to begin with."

"—Hah?"

What did she just say?

"We didn't do any beta tests. We only did them on paper, you know?"

"Nonono!"

Impossible. This was supposed to be the first ever VRMMO.

They couldn't have just started the service without any testing by players.

"There are three reasons for that."

"Three?"

"We had neither the time nor the money nor the human resources."

Hopeless reasons, indeed.

"Huh? But Azrael called herself a beta tester?"

"You're really kind-hearted to not put the pieces together, aren't you?"

"...Uwaah..."

He had realized yet another thing he shouldn't have.

"But it's a fact that we need a programmer, you know? I did tell Kirine to hire someone, but of course there's no capable personnel with experience in programming that we could employ for cheap— so the plan is to give her the manual as reference and see how it goes for now. We've nothing to lose, you know?"

"We're really with our backs to the wall!"

And five minutes later...

Azrael sat in front of the console, frozen, as expected.

Cold sweat glistened on her cheeks.

Her eyes grew terribly small, about the size of toy bricks. That in front of her seemed to be the code that told the program what to do, but—

"How is it, Azrael-san?! Will you be able to do something about it?!"

Lizna asked with her eyes sparkling.

Almost 10 seconds later, Azrael's neck rattled towards her.

"It... It'll just... take a bit, but... I can—!"

She's really bluffing hard, he thought.

"So all that's left is Lizna, right?"

With Azrael, who was battling it out with the source code, in the corner of their vision, the other three started their discussion. In their center was a low dining table, and a teacup plus mandarin for everyone. They seemed to be the objects Fury's former master had prepared as his pastime. There was no taste simulation, so they were nothing but luxuries you could touch.

This game was really only devoted to useless stuff.

"What should I do?"

"Let me ask instead: What do you want to do?"

"Eh—?"

Lizna blinked in surprise.

"Going by what we could do right now, there's enhancing tutorials for beginners, debugging, normalizing gold value, adding dungeons, doing gamemaster-initiated events, creating the second floor... a lot, you see."

Alice continued while munching away on potato chips.

"We're lacking just about everything, so you could just do whatever you want, you know?"

"We're really in a grim pinch, aren't we...?"

And yet, Alice was striving to peel a mandarin like a kid.

"Those who are gamemasters shall have leisure whatever the time may be."

She chuckled.

"Sasaraki, you take it easy too, okay? Even if this game ends, you aren't the ones who will die or something."

"...We aren't the ones?"

It was a strange way to put it.

"Eh? Someone dies when this game's over?"

"Mh..."

Alice ceased her movements.

A few seconds later.

"—Yeah."

She showed them a refreshing and lovely smile.

"Kirine will hang by the neck, but she reaps what she sowed, so no problem."

"There's an obvious problem with that, you know?!"

"Well, even if it comes to that, it's not your fault, you know?"

Alice clapped her hands together as if to say, 'Let's stop that topic.'

This is bad. I've to give it my all for Kirine-san (Although I haven't even met her yet)!

"So, Lizna, do you fancy one of the tasks?"

"Umm..."

Lizna put her hand to her lips and looked up at the ceiling, "Mhh—"

Then her face suddenly broke into a bright smile.

"Then I'd like to try those 'gamemaster-initiated events!'"

"Heeh, do you have some sort of plan?"

"Yes! I want to hold a magnificent wedding ceremony!"

She wanted to show everyone the bond of love that had grown between two players here and as such make everyone understand the beauty in this game. Once Lizna was done with her energetic explanation, Alice applauded. She seemed to like the idea.

"A good idea, isn't it? So do you know a bride and groom?"

"Of course!"

"...I've got a feeling, but who is it?"

"Sasaraki-kun and Azrael-san!"

"I thought that much!"

"You all really get along well, ri~ght?"

Alice smiled heartwarmingly while peeling away on the mandarin.

* * *

The wedding had been cancelled insistently (especially by Azrael).

And so Lizna had been assigned to creating dungeons.

To begin with, this world featured a technology which generated dungeons - apart from the last one - automatically on a daily basis. Their interiors, trap setups, and chests changed every time someone cleared them, allowing for infinite adventures— or so they advertized it, but in truth there were only four different patterns.

Infinite dungeons (four of them).

"A really retarded feature, isn't it?"

"Sasaraki, you're thinking the wrong way."

"The wrong way?"

"With four different kinds of them— we'll be increasing the dungeon variety by 20% if we add one!"

Alice's extremely positive way of thinking was impressive at times.

In any case, Alice taught Lizna how to make dungeons for that matter. In the meantime, Sasaraki tended to floor 2. Azrael was busy having steam rising from her head while reading a mysterious reference book called 'Alice's Programming Manual.'

When he thought that things'd take a while—

"I'm done!"

"Way too fast—!"

After about 30 minutes, Lizna had completed a dungeon prototype.

When Sasaraki had done that before, it'd taken him three hours to think up an interesting design.

"No way—?!"

Taking a glimpse from behind, Azrael had turned around in surprise, too.

Her black bangs were gracing her face.

"Y-You created it properly, right?"

"Ah, Sasaraki-kun, you're doubting me?"

"Fufufu—," Lizna laughed mischievously.

Alice folded her arms satisfiedly beside her.

"It's true, you know? Let's do some test-playing right away!"

As instructed by Alice, Sasaraki operated the Master Screen and teleported the four of them to a grass field about five minutes away from 'Start.' It was an area players were prohibited from entering. Even if I say prohibited from entering, it was just a place enclosed by a rope with a sign hanging on it saying, 'Do not enter, we're testing.'

"And I thought that was just a joke... Why don't you put the map into an independent instance?"

"There was no budget for that, Master☆"

That's this game in a nutshell.

"I'll put up the dungeon then, okay? Eii—!"

Lizna threw the cube on the grassfield. You could hear some strange 'boun'-ish sound effect, and right after, the grasslands were thickly covered in white smoke. Once the smoke finally lifted, a stronghold-like dungeon was standing in front of Sasaraki and company.

The entrance consisted of a door made out of rotten wood.

"Ooh... Feels like a genuine dungeon, doesn't it?"

"Fufufu. It's Lizna's masterpiece, a masterpiece, I tell you!"

"So you had this kinda talent, huh, Lizna...?"

Lizna stared in puzzlement.

"I'm nothing compared to Azrael-san!"

"Eh—?"

"I don't understand a thing about programming and all this!"

"Eh—? Ah, y-yeah, well, that's right, huh—? I'm the amazing one here, huh?!"

Could Lizna know it all and say this stuff on purpose?

"C'mon, c'mon, let's get in there already!"

Lizna said and pushed Sasaraki's back.

When he turned around, he could see Lizna's excited smile.

For a moment, he had a bad feeling about this.

After all, it was the same smile she had worn when she beat Sasaraki to death before.

He felt that this dungeon was going to be plenty dangerous—

"What are you doing, Sasaraki? I'm going ahead."

Azrael said and put her hand on the doorknob, the next instant the door exploded and sent her flying into the sky. She hit the invisible ceiling (the world's border) and came crashing into the ground magnificently; 2850 damage.

The sparkly demise effect arose from the instantly dead Azrael.

Exactly five seconds later.

"What was this?"

"A funny trap!"

A funny trap (player dies).

Sasaraki sighed about three times. Then he shouted...

"WHY WOULD THE ENTRANCE EXPLODE?!"

"Eh? No specific reason."

"No specific reason?!"

"But it's surprising, isn't it?"

"It is! But... you know?!"

Azrael revived and came looking at Lizna dumbfoundedly.

Only Alice was folding her arms and seemed to be in deep thought about something.

"So, Azrael-san, how was it?"

".....I died..."

"So you died, huh?! Then I did it, didn't I?!"

"...Rather, I was done in..."

What was with that conversation?

"The interior wouldn't be stuffed with such death traps, would it...?"

"Ah, it's fine! Only the beginning's an explosion!"

"I-Is that so?"

Azrael regained her smile.

"T-That's right, huh? It was just a joke, after all!"

While she expressed some wishful thinking, they exchanged nods. *I get it, so that's the kind of joke Lizna makes. Or maybe a warning that if we treat carelessly, death will be waiting for us. It's not a hobby of hers or something.*

Harboring that hope in his heart, Sasaraki stepped through the doorway whose door had been wrecked just now.

And the second he stepped into the dungeon, he could hear an ominous rumbling.

Blue flames shot up from the path, enveloping Sasaraki and the others entirely.

[You Died. Reason: Hellfire Trap]

It said in front of his eyes.

After five more dumbfounded seconds, he revived at the respawn.

To his right he saw Azrael. She seemed to have been swallowed up by it too. She wore a poker face.

To his left he could see Alice. Almost unscathed. Come to think of it, she had about 40300000000 HP.

In front of him was Lizna. She asked with a smile brimming on her whole face...

"How was it—?!"

Ten seconds passed.

Finally, Sasaraki replied in a monotonous voice...

".....I died..."

"So you died, huh?! Then I did it, didn't I?!"

"Rather, I was done in..."

What was with this conversation (twice within three minutes)?

"Lizna, didn't you say only the entrance would explode?"

"It is only the entrance that will *explode*. The traps after that are all different."

An awkward silence filled the air for a while. Nobody said a word.

Sasaraki turned his gaze to Azrael. *[You go tell her, you're close friends, you two've been together far longer than she and I]*, he signaled with his eyes. *[I-I can't say such a heartless thing to a close friend now, can I?!]* she returned.

"Lizna."

While our matter of life or death still went on, Alice smiled sweetly.

"You're banned from using death traps from now on, okay?"

"EEEEEEH—?!"

* * *

Their Youth Health Login Time was over and both of the girls had logged out.

A nostalgic insect chirping resounded in the debugging room. Alice had spread out a drawing paper across the low dining table. She drew something on it with a pencil. Sasaraki sat opposite of her. Listening to the pleasant sound— Sasaraki suddenly mumbled...

"Why the chirping in a virtual world?"

A clearly weird configuration.

"My former master commanded this, you know?☆"

Fury said.

"There's been a lot of staff lamenting, 'I wanna leave this labor camp already and go back to the countryside.' so he reproduced an atmosphere like in the

countryside to try and keep them in check☆ The results have been outstanding and everyone turned into zombies who did their work without a word of complaint☆"

"The reason *and* result are plain wrong!"

Sasaraki fell prostrate on the low dining table.

Was it even possible to do support for this game?

He honestly didn't even know where to begin.

"Well, games were not built in a day— And here..."

Alice replied while not stopping to doodle on the drawing paper.

"Alice, what have you been drawing since earlier?"

"A map for the second floor."

"Eh?"

"I want to start making it from tomorrow on."

Alice smiled sweetly. Her hands didn't stop moving nonetheless. Taking a look at it, what she was drawing on the paper really did resemble a map. The circles and crosses seemed to indicate locations and events, and it was stuffed with detailed comments.

"This time we're not doing a dungeon, but a field, an area. Fufufu, what should I come up with this time, I wonder~"

Alice let the pencil run across the drawing paper. She still looked pretty energetic.

Where did that small body of hers take all the verve from?

"By the way, Alice, you still fine with the login time limit?"

"It's okay. Japanese law doesn't apply to me."

"Doesn't seem okay to me at all, though..."

Does that mean she holds no fundamental human rights?

Or is she logging in from overseas?

"Rather, Sasaraki, would you mind checking Fury's report?"

"Report?"

"The tally of GM calls— all the complaints and requests she gets from players."

He did as he was asked and requested it from Fury. She nodded.

"Here comes today's Fury-chan report☆"

She produced a binder with a, "Here you go."

[☆Fury-chan's Perfect Report☆

Today, there was a total of 585 GM calls. Their breakdown is as follows☆

1) **Bug Reports** **0**
2) **Questions About Features** **230**
3) **Complaints Towards Fury-chan** **0**
4) **Love Calls Towards Fury-chan☆** **355**

In other words, there are no problems at all, everything's perfect☆ End of report.]

A report with nothing but things to tsukkomi on.

To put it differently, there had been 230 bug reports and 355 complaints towards the devs.

"This is confusing, so I'd like to change the definition of bug."

"No can do☆"

She replied immediately.

"Ehehe, it's embarrassing if you stare at me like that, you kno~w☆"

"...Didn't you say my orders are absolute?"

Yesterday, she had readily replied 'Understood☆' when he had ordered her to guide beginners through the tutorial dungeon.

"Even if you control my body, you can't control my heart☆"

"What's with that logic?!"

"I don't want to do it, so I won't do i~t☆"

Fury put both her fists to her chin and voiced a meaningless sound effect, "Kyaruun☆"

"Seems like you can't overwrite her former master's orders, huh?"

Alice sighed.

"Well, please bear with it for now. After all, she's an AI intelligent enough to be able to communicate on her own— she seems to record things 'related to features,' so once I sorted them out, the players' opinions should come in handy."

"You'll find no fairy as useful as Fury-chan, you know?☆"

Fury puffed up her chest with a, "Ehen."

"So we got— 585 cases, I'll organize them for a bit."

"I'll help, too."

"We can't have that. You should go sleep already, Sasaraki."

Alice stood up with while hugging the binder.

"You're an ordinary human being. It's not good to push yourself."

"You're talking as if you aren't..."

"Of course I'm not. I'm a genius gamemaster."

"That doesn't answer anything!"

"Fufufu— Well, seriously, don't push yourself, okay?"

Alice smiled sweetly.

"If it weren't for you, I couldn't do anything. I'm really grateful."

"Eh—? Y-You're welcome."

To be told that with such a carefree smile felt embarrassing for some reason.

"I've to reward you once work quiets down, right?"

"It's fine, you've no money to begin with, do you?"

"Of course not, but— hm. At times like these, there's only one thing I can give you, huh?"

Alice chuckled.

Then she extended her hand to the hem of her skirt. She lifted it up.

Exposing the root of her already white thighs, she— WAIT A SEC?!

"WHA—?! Alice, what are you doing?!"

"Isn't it the royal road to 'pay with your body' at times like these?"

"If we implement that royal road, this game'll turn R18, alright—?!"

"Ara, looks like you're still composed enough to tsukkomi, aren't you~?"

Alice let go of her skirt. Sasaraki calmed down.

Even though three years younger than him, seeing a girl's bare skin really did make his heart pound.

"But I truly am grateful. If you want to do something, tell me, okay?"

She said and flicked with her fingers.

The scene on the Main Screen changed. It showed a space covered in white mist. The fine mist sparkled. That certainly was— the place he had seen when he first met Alice— rather, the place where she had been shut away to.

"It's the 255th floor. That's where I'll be working."

"Why that?"

"Time flows slower there, just the right place to get work done."

"—Hah?"

"You often find rooms in games where time flows slower, right?"

"Stuff like that happens, yeah— Wai— Isn't that weird?!"

"Were there things in this game that aren't weird?"

He couldn't return anything to that.

However— was it really okay for such a technology to exist?

Feels like a discovery that'd boost work efficiency manyfold and revolutionize the—

"You lose the second you start to think about it, Sasaraki."

Alice raised and waved a hand, saying "Bye-bye."

"See you tomorrow then, okay~? Main skill, [Return]!"

Right after, Alice was enveloped in a pillar of light.

A few seconds later, the light disappeared.

"Really... what is Alice?"

Sasaraki mumbled to himself while looking at the place Alice had been standing on.

The self-proclaimed 12-year-old genius gamemaster.

She was just as full of mysteries as this bug-infested game.

Like, who *is she?*

"You're making the face of a programmer surrounded by bugs, Master☆"

A voice said from the side. When he turned around, Fury had been right next to him before he realized it.

"Well... frankly, I'd like to ask a whole bunch of questions about Alice."

"Should Fury-chan answer them, then?☆"

"Eh—?"

Fury and his eyes met. This fairy certainly was ought to have a lot of knowledge.

Problem was, would she answer properly or not—?

"But I've one condition☆"

"...I'm good, after all."

It'd be a ridiculous condition anyway.

"So cruel☆ At least hear Fury-chan's modest request o~ut☆"

Sobsobsob. The fairy-tale-ish fairy sent him an entreating look.

"Fury-chan is going to cry, you know?☆"

"No, even if you do... Well, let's hear it at least."

"Wow☆ As expected of my new master—☆"

It felt like Fury's super bright smile had grown even brighter.

"My former master, in other words, my creator, was this virtual world's lead programmer☆"

Hugging her own body closely, Fury continued.

"Master loved me☆"

"Seems so."

"He worshipped my three sizes, 8 5 7, as a sacred combination☆"

"It's just gotten a bit weird."

"So much that he turned a body pillow with my face on it into an item and slept together with it every day☆"

"Waitwaitwait."

That's far from 'a bit.' Why even have a body pillow in a virtual world?

"I'll try to make a guess, okay? It was fine for him to materialize the beauty of his dreams, Fury-chan, in a virtual world, but being the pure otaku and the picture of self-hatred he was, he lacked the guts to touch me. And so he had no choice but to sleep with a body pillow☆"

"Uwaah..."

What a shy pervert, indeed...

"Plus, he hated the thought that other men could touch me, so he banished love from this game altogether☆"

"So that's why romance is prohibited?!"

The shock of hearing the truth hit him truly right now.

"But even that pervert master left this virtual world behind☆"

"He left it behind even though he loved you?"

"His chronic disease grew stronger after he had lived a degenerated live for too long, and he had to be hospitalized☆"

"A story with neither dreams nor hope!"

"And on the last night, Master gave me one last thing."

Fury closed her eyes. She folded her hands as if in prayer and narrated...

"Fury. I'm sorry, but I'm at my limit. I have to leave this world behind."

"Hurry up and get your drip-feed at a real hospital, fatty☆"

"I've been developing this patch until the end, I'll leave it in your hands."

"I'd rather have you tell me that you love me and hug me tightly, though ☆"

".....I'll explain it now."

"Wah ☆ Fury-chan's once in a lifetime confession got super ignored by Master ☆"

"This patch will turn this virtual world into a true paradise."

"That doesn't explain anything ☆ Also, die ☆"

"However, it's a double-edged sword. There are a lot of side effects that come with it. Think wisely before you use it."

"Talk with me ☆ At least show guts in the end ☆"

"My beloved Fury, I pray for your happiness—"

"I told you to talk with me, you ota... Ah, he logged out, snuffle ☆"

"—It was this kind of tear-jerking parting☆ It's really moving, isn't it?☆"

"I wanna cry, alright! For a different reason!"

I certainly do understand that her former master loved her, but, c'mon.

"So... your request would be that 'true paradise' thing?"

Fury nodded.

"I want to know what my former master left behind☆"

"I don't..."

It was a name that sent shivers down his spine for some reason. And there seemed to be a lot of sacrifices coming with it. He pictured what had happened a lot in science fiction novels from back in the day: Dying in the game would kill you in real life too, a so-called 'Death Game.'

"I'll consult with Alice for now."

"That won't do☆ Alice super hates my former master☆"

"That so?"

"Yes. My former master is the perpetrator who turned this world into a kusoge when Alice wasn't around☆ By all means, please don't tell her☆ Worst case, she deletes it all, including me☆"

"I'm also starting to think it'd be better if you were deleted, though..."

"My, my, please don't say such things☆"

Fury said and flew past Sasaraki. She headed to a wall, put her hand on it and shouted, "EIGHT, FIVE, SEVEN!" The wall's tiles shifted— and then...

"Wah—!"

A massive amount of dices gushed out from inside the wall.

No, those weren't dices. Those were 'Data Cubes.'

Miscellaneous lines of code were on the cubes made out of dice-ish material.

"These are the patches my former master left behind☆ That earlier was the secret passphrase☆"

Fury said and picked up one of the 'Data Cubes.' In it hovered an object which looked like a pulsating ♡. Looking at it with a complacent smile, Fury flapped her wings again and returned to Sasaraki's side.

"This is the cube which contains the 'True Paradise' data☆"

She said and threw it into the middle console's screen.

A plop sound echoed and the cube appeared to melt into the display.

[Expanding Data]

It said on the screen.

"Please, Master, press the 'Apply' button once the data has been expanded☆"

"I've nothing but bad premonitions here— can I just cancel it, after all?"

"Eh—? Master, so cruel☆"

Fury still displayed a smile while inflating her cheeks.

"Don't you want to know about Alice?☆ Let's check the contents at least☆"

"The patch's name is way too ominous."

"Master."

Suddenly Fury's smile vanished.

"My former master may have been a fubar mega perv, but— he was earnest when it came to games."

She looked Sasaraki straight in the eyes and continued.

"I'm begging you. I wish to know what my former master left behind for me."

Bow.

"Please..."

Fury lowered her head and her small body.

It was a meek posture from her he hadn't seen before.

Certainly— you'd want to know what the thing one's own creator had left behind was.

Sasaraki closed his eyes and thought about it. It wasn't certain that the patch would be like *that*. Rather, thinking about it rationally, it was out of question. The icon was a heart, it was probably full of heart-warming feelings—

[Expanding Data Complete]

The system voice echoed.

Right— it shouldn't be that.

He opened his eyes, heart full of hope, and looked at the dialogue on the screen.

[Patch Version: PTD-37564

Codename: DEATH GAME

Apply / Cancel]

He hit cancel as fast as he could.

The screen returned to its generic icon.

Sasaraki looked at Fury with dead eyes.

Fury's big, round eyes looked back at him.

An awkward silence continued for about ten seconds.

Finally, Fury mumbled...

"You won't press Apply?"

"No, I won't?!"

Codename DEATH GAME! So it's that*, after all!*

"Hmm, that's a pity~ Ah, a GM call☆ I'll have to excuse myse~lf☆"

Fury chuckled and disappeared.

"T-That was close...!"

Right after, he could hear the screen behind him change.

"Hey, Sasaraki, you still haven't logged out— wait, what's that [Data Cube]?"

He turned around and saw Alice on the main screen.

"Could you have been teased by Fury?"

Bullseye. He smiled wryly, and Alice came out of the display.

"That seems to be a patch Fury's former master left behind."

"I don't know too much about it, but you mustn't apply it."

Alice mumbled while picking up the 'Data Cube.'

"After all, you can't cancel a 'Data Cube' you don't know the cancel code for."

"Worst case!"

"But you can more or less force quit it by logging out while it's being applied."

"Sounds dangerous nonetheless..."

He had almost committed murder. That fairy was pure evil.

"Hey, wouldn't it be better if we shut Fury away, after all?"

"Well, she can't touch the program and all..."

"But she's really smart and... she might start a revolt of the machines."

"It's fine. The 'Immortal Pendant' comes with a protection."

"Protection?"

Sasaraki looked at the pendant dangling from his neck. It held the ability to switch the Invincible Barrier on or off, or to decypher the source code. Lizna and Azrael were holding the same thing and Alice had said it was proof of being a gamemaster.

"If an AI uses the pendant, the AI will be erased automatically."

"Will be erased...?"

"It'll die."

It appeared to be a measure of prevention regarding a revolt of the machines.

Then, well, as long as I'm not getting lured into anything, it should be fine.

"Only human beings can alter this program, which is why I'm having high hopes for Azrael."

"She *does* seem to give it her best, but, you know...?"

When she had logged out today too, sweat had been running down her cheeks.

He couldn't see that as proof for anything but her being out of escape routes.

Will she really be okay, I wonder...?

Actually, to begin with...

It really was a bit unreasonable for three beginners to act as gamemasters. Lizna's dungeon templates paid too much tribute to her own tastes and were consequently stuffed with death traps, and Sasaraki, too, was taught by Alice and just tried to imitate her when making dungeons.

Azrael couldn't alter the program either (as of now).

Could they really improve this kusoge like this?

"Hey—"

The second he tried to ask Alice that.

"Ah. Wait a moment, I got a mail from Kirine."

"Eh?"

The aforementioned company president whose mental state was subject to tremendous worry.

Alice put her hand to her chin and nodded.

"Hmmm. I see. That's interesting."

"Interesting?"

"Yeah. A funny notification, really. I'll forward it to you."

Alice slided with her fingers and the mail got displayed on the main screen.

The second he read the mail's title, Sasaraki gaped with his mouth widely.

[FWD: New VRMMO 'Ultimate World Online' - Release Notice

Alice, what should we do? I want to die.]

* * *

Ultimate World Online.

The world's second ever VRMMO.

Presented with a concept of ultimate reality, the game became popular together with 'Sword & Magic Online,' but due to its lack of further details, it had gotten calmer and calmer around it. The gamers skit upon it as it being nothing more than a contextless junk of information—

Until yesterday, when this news did the rounds...

[The top secret closed beta has concluded. We'll start the service in three days!]

The price was 98000 yen (~830 euro/~880 dollar) including the VR headgear, plus a monthly subscription fee of 8000 yen (~70 euro/~70 dollar).

According to the announcement, the game consisted of 500 clearable dungeon floors. They also promoted two other redeeming features. You could really use magic and there'd be no bugs. Obviously, their goal was to snatch away Sword & Magic Online's users.

The reaction of everyone in the debugging room after having received that shocking announcement, was—

"T-T-That's no big deal at all, right?!"

Total panic.

Mainly Azrael. Actually, only Azrael.

Right now, he was alone with her. For the sake of test-playing Lizna's dungeon, she was in her usual black cloak and had her two swords equipped. Alice was in the debugging room to sort out user requests, Lizna was in the debugging room, too, but watched over their test-play.

"...I understand that you're worried, but Alice said it's actually convenient."

She didn't tell him why, though. Just said, *"Use your head,"* and smile sweetly.

It hadn't been a... groundless smile.

"I told you that I'm not worried at all!"

Azrael forced a smile while sweat dropped down from her cheeks. An obvious lie. As another proof of her extreme panic, she had ran and fallen into an obvious pit trap earlier and died.

While he thought about all that, Azrael stared at him intensely.

"But you look calm, huh...? Ah—! I'm calm too, of course!"

"Yeah, kinda."

I don't get the reason why it's convenient, but...

If that genius says it's fine, then it probably is.

"Uuh, why..... Ah—!"

Azrael suddenly made her body bounce.

"You couldn't—!"

Out of the blue, she grabbed him by the collar.

Her face was pale for some reason.

"Sasaraki! You traitor—!"

"Hah?"

"You're planning to move on to *that* game on your own, right?! Leaving us behind!"

After he stood there dumbfounded for a while, he finally understood that she was blaming him.

"Eh... Eh?! Wai— Why would you think that?!"

"'Cause you're the only one being that awfully calm! It's suspicious!"

What's with that absurd logic?

"I won't go anywhere! After all, I'm in Lizna's debt—"

She had called out to Sasaraki on the day of his first login, when he was on his own with no idea what to do, and she had invited him to join their guild. Plus, Azrael had acknowledged him as a friend too, and given him the 'Tear of the Goddess.' If they'd be the ones left behind, there was no way he could leave this game.

And more than anything—

"I think— I'll keep logging into this world, until it ends, always."

He recalled the words Lizna had said numerous days ago.

I can't— abandon the world we made so many memories in.

Even if it's this much of a kusoge.

"So I'll stay, until the end.

"...Uh..."

Azrael slowly let go.

"B-But..."

Her shaking fingers buried themselves into the cloth of her mini skirt, she continued...

"Even if you stay... if the other players leave, it'll be the end of service..."

Aren't you super worried, after all?

"Uuh... As a proud beta tester I have to do something...!"

Though the beta test's a lie too, right?

But he couldn't say it out loud. Azrael was already close to tears as things were.

Her body grew smaller and her gaze fell.

"—Aaalright—!"

And suddenly she turned around.

"Sasaraki, I'll go back to debugging!"

"Eh?"

"I want to make a bit of progress. Please test the dungeon on your own this time!"

She said in a peremptorily, strong tone.

"No, that's fine with me, but..."

"Later, then—!"

"Ah—"

There's the pit trap we went past earlier— he tried to say but it was already too late. The moment Azrael made her step, the floor opened up and Azrael vanished. A second later you could hear an anime-ish sound like, 'dogosuun.'

When Sasaraki grew speechless, the sparkling of the demise effect rose up from the ground.

Azrael returned thirty seconds later.

Her eyes were filled with tears. Yet she puffed up her chest.

"T-T-That was on purpose right now, alright—?!"

Not knowing how else to react, Sasaraki simply nodded for now.

* * *

And hence the debugging commenced.

"Uuuh... the guy who did this was definitely funny in the head—!"

An irritated voice echoed through the debugging room. Azrael sat in front of the coding console and held her head. In the console you could see a few hundred lines of text. Azrael's memo was displayed at both of her sides on screens which floated in the air.

Coding was a tough fight, it seemed.

...That much's to be expected, huh...?

Azrael was without doubt a beginner in game development.

You couldn't decipher a VRMMO program in a few days that even professionals had their fair share of trouble with.

But even if you told her, the person herself would grow stubborn and insist it was *"All good!"* Worrisome, indeed.

"I've a clue, you know?!"

Said clue was a memo she'd found in the debugging room.

[Month X, Day X

Lag Bug Fix, Day 4. I was able to find the reason. The mapping processing during object removal uses too much calculation ressources. It seems to

enter a loop at some point, but attempting to fix it influences too many other things, so we'll just say it's not a bug, it's a feature.

Tanaka]

Don't do that.

But tsukkomis wouldn't bring Tanaka-san, who wrote that diary, back.

"...Hey, Azrael."

"You found something?!"

Azrael turned around and shouted.

Her eyes were sparkling. She seemed awfully happy.

"Nope, sorry... I just wanted to ask whether you'd like to take a little break."

"Ah... I-Is that so...?"

Azrael let her head hang. She seemed really uncomfortable.

"It's better to take a break rather than keeping at it when you're this tired."

She glared at Sasaraki. Her eyes were a bit teary.

"...I don't need a break."

"Why?"

"Alice is doing things all the time without any rest, right?"

"I think it's better to not take after her."

She's a bit— No, not a bit, she's very *special.*

It might even be better to not think of her as a human being altogether.

"I'm Deathbringer Angel Azrael, you know?!"

"That's got something to do with it?"

"It does!"

Azrael insisted while getting worked up.

"A-Anyways, if you wanna rest, then just do as you please!"

I can't just do that, of course.

About 30 minutes later.

"Aaaah—! Found it—!"

"Look, look!" Azrael pointed.

She explained the situation to Sasaraki excitedly. It was a problem of judgement during object removal regarding whether a light source would be redrawn or not. Originally, that wasn't supposed to happen with small objects, but do to a mistake in a conditional branch, all objects were affected every time. Honestly, even after being explained how it worked he didn't get a thing.

In short, there seemed to be a bug within the graphic processing.

"But... is it really something you can easily fix?"

He felt that if it was a bug Azrael as a beginner could find, then Tanaka-san, who had written those notes, should've been able to fix it right away.

"Fufun. You don't get it, do you, Sasaraki?"

Azrael had suddenly recovered her vigor and pointed at him sharply.

"I'm just a genius!"

"I wonder..."

Azrael turned towards the screen and screamed, "CUBE TRANSFORMATION, ON!"

Puff—!

With a light sound, a 'Data Cube' sunk into Azrael's hands.

It contained the altered program.

Azrael held it aloft and threw it into the 'Master Screen.' That was how you applied a new program. Once she pushed the 'Apply' button, a system notice appeared.

[Installing patch. Changes will go live in the testing area in three minutes, changes will go live in all areas in 60 minutes.]

"Fufufu."

Azrael turned around with a triumphant look on her face.

She puffed up her big chest and put her hands to her thighs looking self-importantly.

"How do you like that, Sasaraki? Discovered a new side of me?"

"I did discover that you've got guts."

"Guts?!"

A dingdong sound echoed in the debugging room while they were having their exchange.

It seemed the patch had gone live.

"Alright, testing time. C'mon, Sasaraki, let's do some lag testing."

"Ah, yeah."

He nodded and invoked his main skill 'Adventurer.'

The light sparkled.

"Aaalright— let's do this!"

Azrael pulled out 'Magical Sword Gram' and another sword from the floor where she had left them. When she formed a cross with the two swords, her cloak and mini skirt were flattering and shaking intensely. But it seemed there was no lag.

"TAAH—!"

Together with a yell, Azrael swung her two swords downward.

That instant, Sasaraki was about to lose his breath.

"See, I fixed the lag, right?!"

"——————————————"

He couldn't reply.

His gaze was fixated on Azrael's body, especially around her chest.

He could definitely not take his gaze and heart off of there.

After he had been staring for a while, Azrael inclined her head in puzzlement.

"Hey, what are you freezing up for?"

She took a step towards him. It shook; Azrael's chest did.

He could feel his cheeks flaming up. *Ohoh, this ain't good.*

Once she'd realize, he'd be dead. More precisely, he'd be killed.

"I'm ho~me! We're back~!"

That moment, he could hear a voice from behind. It were Lizna and Alice.

"—Wait, Azrael-san?! Why are you naked?!"

"Heh?"

Azrael stared down at her body. She *was* naked. Her cloak, dress, and underwear, everything was disassembling in rectangles. In other words, that what was ought to keep her from being naked wasn't keeping anything and hence— her bulging skin was completely exposed.

Alice mumbled...

"Hm— the gear scaling is dropping hardly, isn't it? Yet another bug?"

That seemed to be the logic behind it.

Finally, after ten more seconds had passed, Azrael said something.

"No..."

Just for a heartbeat.

And then she squatted down on the floor.



"N-N-NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO—?!"

Sasaraki thought with a vague face...

What's with this— pervert-made kusoge?

* * *

Azrael was lying on the floor in fetus position.

The others weren't around. Lizna was dungeon testing as always. Sasaraki was taught by Alice while they created the second floor. You could say the two of them (from Azrael's point of view) fulfilled their roles just fine.

On the other hand, Azrael did nothing but screwing up.

"Uuuuuh..."

When she had looked in the commentary for the draw skip method that she had thought up, it said, [Applying holds the danger of a gear scale drop.] She had overlooked that. Rather, it was as Sasaraki had said, a beginner couldn't easily tamper with a program.

Changing yet another part had lead to yet another bug showing up.

A critical bug where the collision detection went ten centimeters off from the player's perspective.

On top of that, it hadn't fixed the lag either.

"I-I don't get it at all..."

Was it impossible for someone like her to debug a VRMMO?

But she couldn't tell those two, 'Sorry, can't do it after all!,' now.

Then what could she do? She had no idea.

"Uuuh..."

She stuck her head between her knees. Frankly, she wanted to cry.

She wasn't any help with developing the game.

She grasped the 'Immortal Pendant (Imitation)' at her chest tightly. Being a veteran who had always been playing lots until her login time limit since the day the game had been released, she had thought that she'd be a bit of help at least.

But like this— the game would end due to her incompetence.

She caressed the scabbard of one of her two swords dangling at her hips, 'Magical Sword Gram.'

It was Azrael's treasure.

The sword she had gotten her hands on for conquering their first dungeon (though Lizna died). At first she had thought it'd be a goner due to that bug, but Sasaraki had incredible luck getting another one and gave it to Azrael.

It had made her incredibly happy.

Although she'd only admit that over her dead body.

Since she'd been a child it had always been her dream to experience fantasy adventures with her friends like they did in anime or novels. And that dream had become reality with this virtual world. She was a loner in real high school and during summer holiday there were no friends she could play with, but even that Azrael could wield magical swords and become a real adventurer here.

And this world— would end because of her.

At that moment...

"Hello~☆"

"KYA—?!"

Azrael panicked and turned around. The fairy flapped with her wings while expressing an angelic smile.

"Fury?! D-Don't scare me like that!"

"I've a present for my worry-sick Azrael-san~☆"

"Present...? Heh?"

"I found this earlier☆"

Fury took out a transparent 'Data Cube.'

It's placement was said ten centimeters off, so it looked like it was hovering in the air.

"Won't you take a look at this?"

"Is that... a patch?"

Fury nodded and threw the cube into the screen.

Expanding Data, it said on the screen in big letters.

"What are the contents?"

Fury chuckled.

"It's a patch that'll give this world the ultimate realism☆"

"Eh—?"

"If you apply it, the users won't run off to another game anymore☆"

"Eeeh—?"

"If we say that it's Azrael-san's patch, they'll think that you're amazing, you know?☆"

"Eeeeeh—?!"

Azrael got excited.

Realism— there certainly wasn't much of that in this game.

Was it a patch that fixed those countless critical bugs? Or a new system?

In any event, if that was true, Sasaraki would be amazed, too.

She watched over it while her chest was brimming with anticipation.

The chime which signalled the finished preparations rang.

Letters appeared on the screen.

"....."

Ten seconds passed like that.

Finally, Azrael mumbled...

".....Hey..."

"What is it?"

"It says 'DEATH GAME,' right?"

"It really does, doesn't it?☆"

Azrael froze up again.

Fury peered into her face and smiled sweetly.

"Has Fury been of help to you—?☆"

"AS IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIF—?!"

Fury put her fists in front of her mouth and laughed cutely.

"I'm overjoyed that you seem to like my gift~☆ Well then☆"

"Wai— Wait a second—!"

Woosh, Fury transitioned and vanished as always.

Azrael heaved a big sigh.

"Uuuh, she pulled a fast one on me...!"

She heaved another sigh and let her body sink together.

Speaking of which, Sasaraki had told her that this fairy was pure evil.

But he hadn't told her why exactly.

"...But..."

She glanced at the screen.

The 'DEATH GAME' dialogue was sparkling frightfully.

"S-Someone really prepared this kinda thing, huh...?"

Sure, if you spoke about VRMMOs in fiction, a lot of them were death games without the possibility to log out. The ultimate parallel world. Basically, the result of the idea to 'live in an ideal fantasy world without any tidings to the real world whatsoever' was a death game.

She gulped reflexively.

If she were to press the apply button— she'd be able to life in this parallel world, wouldn't she?

"Wait, what am I thinking?! GET A GRIP, MEEEEEE—?!"

She shouted while twisting her body.

Azrael had thought of it as a bit tempting.

But just a bit. Not seriously. It was impossible, after all.

To begin with, she had died in this game many times over already. Within three months it was probably already in the four digits. No matter how much of an ideal world this was, if she died, it'd all be pointless. Well, she hadn't died much in these past three days— but that was simply thanks to her Invincible Barrier.

Huh? Then—

"Waitwaitwait!"

She shook her head. She'd been close to entering a dangerous train of thought.

Other— normal players would simply die and she'd be their murderer.

"...T-That's something that really mustn't happen, right?!"

She finished her sentence and tried to express a broad smile.

Then, it became kind of funny.

Right now, she was in a situation in which she was saving countless human lives. A hero who saved the world, so to say.

By abandoning this dangerous system— she'd secretly save the world on her own.

Surely an act worthy of Deathbringer Angel Azrael.

"A death game, huh—?"

She brandished her hand in one go and aimed for cancel.

Then— leaked a smile and pressed it.

"Absolutely— mustn't happen."

She reached the cancel button with her finger.

Thereafter...

The following letters leaped onto the screen...

[Installing patch. Changes will go live in the testing area in ten minutes, changes will go live in all areas in 60 minutes.]

"———Eh?"

For about five seconds, the world stood still.

She couldn't comprehend what was happening.

When she looked at her finger, it certainly was hitting cancel.

Why? How? What happened? Am I dreaming?

After she had asked herself that about a hundred times, she noticed the letters in the corner of the screen.

[Rollback of patch 'Lag Fix rev.4' complete.]

That was the patch Azrael had developed.

"————————Ah."

She had made that patch to fix the lag bug, but in the end it didn't fix a thing and rather brought forth a new bug, which consisted of collision being about ten centimeters off to the side. And the distance between the cancel and apply button was about ten centimeters.

"——————Ah."

Her throat dried up. She felt an army of 'no's gushing up from inside.

They had a bitter taste, a few hundred times worse than having your parents find out that you didn't do your homework.

"C—C-C-CANCEL!"

She shouted inarticulately.

"That's right! I-I-I-I-I've to cancel it—!"

Anyways, I've to calm down.

There's still time until it'll apply to all areas.

If I just enter the cancel code— Then her hands stopped.

Thinking about it, she didn't know the cancel code.

"...T-That's it! I've to log out—!"

If the one who had applied the patch logged out, it'd be cancelled, Alice had told her that.

Don't panic, me! A Deathbringer Angel is calm at all times. I've to open up the menu first—

"—Ah."

The second she looked at the opened command list, Azrael was thrown into despair.

There was a yawning void where the logout button ought to be.


STATUS
Name
リズナ
Lizna
Level
10
Job 職業
癒し手
Personality 性格
てんしんらんまん
Skill 能力
<たたきつぶす>
圧倒的パワーで敵をたたきつぶします。
<グランドバスター>
巨大なメイスを地面に叩きつけ、
敵を地割れに落とします。
<とんでけホームラン>
巨大なメイスでホームラン。
敵を世界の果てまでぶっとばします。
リ

Status

Name
Lizna

Level
10

Job
Healer

Personality
Naive

Skills
Smash Up: Smashes the enemy up with overwhelming power.

Grand Buster: Strikes the ground with her gigantic mace, enemies will fall into the fissure.

Gooo! Home Run: A home run struck with her gigantic mace. Enemies are sent flying to the end of the world.

Chapter 4:

You Should Properly Listen to What People Tell You

(Especially If They're a Gamemaster)

第四章

人の話はちゃんと
最後まで聞こう

（特にゲームマスターの話は）

THE
JUNK!
Kuso Game Online

A whole array of waves sparkled beneath him.

"...The sea, huh...?"

"Sure is."

Alice hovered next to him while her robe fluttered in the sea breeze.

There was water as far as the eye could see.

They were on the second floor, still work in progress, named 'The End of the Endless Ocean.' There was nothing but water here yet, but according to Alice's plans, she'd build 17 islands here and the players would experience adventures while travelling back and forth between the islands.

"It might be more or less a tsukkomi, but why's there a sea on the second floor of a tower?"

"'Cause it's easier to make bathing suit monsters and equipment, isn't it?"

"So?"

"We can attract male players with— sex appeal!"

"A rather refreshing bait, isn't it...?"

"You say that, but you want to see Azrael in a bikini too, right?"

"Why's it always about Azrael?!"

"I wo~nder..."

Alice chuckled like a child.

"Next'll be the islands~ Or should we maybe return and take a bit of a break?"

"Hm... No, let's keep at it a bit longer."

Azrael was probably still in the debugging room trying to fix that lag bug.

"Why? If we go back now, we might be able to see her naked."

"That's exactly why, you know?!"

He had to be careful not to come back when she was testing this time. Azrael was just a normal friend and there was no romance between them at all— even if this was a virtual world, he mustn't see her naked. After all, she had cried and seemingly disliked it herself. Lizna had laughed, though.

And he had been a bit reluctant to get his eyes off of her.

"Nonono!"

However— it was an absolute no-go. Absolutely.

"You're so cute, Sasaraki."

Alice chuckled. *She's definitely picking on me...*

"A-Anyway, let's keep going."

Sasaraki operated the 'Master Screen' and was about to boot up the 'Creation Mode'—

"Huh?"

The second he wanted to go ahead to boot it, something felt off about the command list.

There was a big empty space in there. Beneath the 'Items' and 'Skills' buttons was a blank.

"———Eh?"

Usually there's— the 'Logout' button, right?

"What's wrong, Sasaraki?"

"Somehow... there's no logout button."

What's the meaning of this? Another bug?

Sasaraki took out the bell and rang for Fury.

"Leave all your game-related worries to me! Something the matter, Master?☆"

She appeared right away and asked that with her usual smile.

"Errr, there's no logout button, why's that?"

He tried asking that for now, but had a bad feeling about it.

"That's, you kno~w☆"

Fury raised her voice as if she'd been waiting for it.

"It's not a bug, it's a feature☆"

That's more or less the response I've expected— he thought, when...

"If you wonder how that's a feature...☆"

Fury explained with the same expression as always.

"Because Azrael-san applied the 'True Paradise' patch I showed you before☆"

The atmosphere felt like a dry wind blowing through a prairie.

Sasaraki couldn't say a word. Alice appeared to be the same.

Fury alone kept on smiling the same sweet smile as always.

"Was Fury helpful to you?☆"

The wind blew once more and made her dress flutter.

Around the time her dress stopped fluttering, Sasaraki finally shouted...

"WHY WOULD SHE————————?!"

"Azrael-san's at that awkward age and has her own special problems, you know?☆"

"Nononono?! That's on a whole other level than that awkward age stuff, alright?!"

A death game. People would die.

"Isn't that basically what being a pubertaling girl is all about? Kill, be killed...?☆"

"I don't want that kind of bloodthirsty puberty to exist, okay?!"

Fury chuckled.

"Be that as it may, the patch is live. So the logout button not being there is a feature☆"

Sasaraki's pulse sped up.

Are we really going to die in this game which has an already three times higher death rate (three deaths per day)?

Not good. Way bad. This definitely mustn't happen!

"ALICE—!"

He turned around and shouted. Alice stared back at him.

"W-We've to stop Azrael right now or things'll be bad—!"

"...What'll be bad?"

"Eh?"

"I don't really get the fuss?"

Alice asked back without a change in her expression.

Sasaraki got irritated by her for the first time. Why was she so slow on the uptake right now?

"You heard it too, right?! It's a death game!"

Alice blinked. She folded her arms.

"Death game? You mean dying here kills you in real life too?"

"Yeah, that! If you die, you're dead for real!"

"Hmmm..."

Alice poked the ground with her boots for a bit while her arms were still folded.

"And you really do believe that's possible?"

"There's no logout button, you know?!"

"That's just a fea— Well, I get the gist of it."

Alice mumbled an astonished, "Oh boy..."

"By the way, Sasaraki, are you in debugging mode right now?"

"Eh? No, I was test-playing, so I switched it off— Wait, I've to turn it on right away!"

If he died now, he'd be dead for good. It was life-threatening not to make sure to have one's Invincible Barrier on.

He was about to renew it and grabbed his 'Immortal Pendant.'

...When Alice shook her head.

"Keep it that way."

"Heh?"

"I'll prove it to you. Stand still."

Alice smiled sweetly. What was she plotting?

She removed a ten-sided dice from one of her ears. He had seen that before. Wasn't that the 'Dice of the Goddess' that he used to kill 'Rainbow-Eating Elder Dragon King' which had appeared due to a bug before? Alice clenched the dice with her right hand, winded up as if she'd throw a baseball— and tossed it.

Bump.

It touched Sasaraki's forehead and, *GOOOOOOOOOOOOOH*!

"Eh—?"

With the sound of something cutting through air, Sasaraki was in mid-air. Alice's figure grew instantly distant. Finally, he hugged the invisible wall— the world's border. There was no pain. Instead, he could see the damage taken.
500,000,000.

Thereafter, his vision turned monochrome.

In big Ming-style typeface, it said...

[You Died. Reason: Goddess of Creation, Alice (Weapon: Dice of the Goddess)]

* * *

Ten seconds later, his vision changed.

It was the palm tree island they had put there for testing purposes.

Alice was standing in front of him, glaring at Sasaraki with her arms folded.

After ten more seconds had passed, Sasaraki finally grasped the situation and shouted...

"What—? YOU KILLED ME, ALICE—?!"

"You aren't really dead, though."

He stopped dead in his tracks.

"...Huh?"

"I told you, didn't I? I don't get what the fuss is all about."

Alice said with a poker face while juggling the 'Dice of the Goddess.'

"Exactly because the risk of causing brain damage throughout a virtual world dive device— which has happened in fiction a thousand times over already— has been cleared away, it's possible to use it for gaming purposes. The first prototypes from ten years ago aside, you can't kill people with the over-the-counter devices that are sold everywhere these days, of course."

Alice said full of confidence.

Sasaraki gaped widely with his mouth, but nothing came out.

Something like a death game's impossible? Then what did that patch—?

"Fury, what's going on? I've got a feeling, but—"

"Ehehehehehe~☆"

Fury smiled broadly.

"Sasaraki-san and his friends are really pure and cute, aren't they?☆"

"Pure?"

"In other words, she pulled a fast one on you."

Fury folded her hands in front of her chest and looked at Sasaraki with teary eyes.

"Uuh, how crueeel. I didn't lie or anythi~ng☆"

"Omitting crucial points to lead them to a misunderstanding is even worse."

"Omitting crucial points?"

"Fury. Show us the patch notes. You got them with you, don't you?"

"Of course I do~☆ Just nobody asked, so I didn't show them yet~☆"

Fury held up a small dice and mumbled, *"Open help document, PTD-37564."* Thereupon, white smoke rose up in front of Fury. Behind the smoke was a screen approximately the size of Fury herself.

"Help yourself, Master☆"

She rotated the screen with an arm gesture.

Sasaraki began reading its contents.

[Release Notes:

- Brought back the [Romance System] removed in version 32.

- With this, romance between players will be supported system-side; marriage, making children, philandery, alimony, family suicide, funerals, and inheritance will be possible.

Affix 1: Regarding the Codename

- This patch is called 'DEATH GAME' due to the possibility of lovers suicide.

  It also holds the double meaning, 'Marriage is the end of your life.'

- By no means is the intention to make fun of the idiot who only reads the codename and is like, 'WHAT?! A DEATH GAME?!' Thank you for your understanding.

Affix 2: Constraints

- While the patch is being applied, the logout button will disappear for developers for about an hour

  Once it's applied, it'll return. I can't explain why, but it's a feature.

  I've no intention at all of scaring the idiot who applies the patch.

  Thank you for your understanding.]

"I'VE NO UNDERSTANDING, THOUGH—?!"

He shouted with all his might.

"He totally chose that codename and feature to pull a fast one on us, right—?!"

"Oh you, Sasaraki-san☆ Let's believe in the good of people☆"

"There's no credibility if you tell me that while laughing tears and holding your stomach, you know—?!"

"Fury's just deeply mo~ved☆"

Fury extended both of her arms and jumped as if dancing.

"My master left me the best present ever☆"

"More like, the worst, right?!"

He heaved a sigh after all this shouting.

"E~h? You didn't *really* think people would die here, *did* you?☆"

"I did! It said DEATH GAME, you know?! That means a game in which people die, you know?!"

"Didn't I tell you? My master was a super pervert, super virgin, and super loser☆"

Fury smiled a bit lonely.

"Of course he wasn't someone who would just— kill people, was he~?☆"

A violent feeling of exhaustion overcame Sasaraki.

He felt like he wanted to let himself sink onto the prairie. *Jesus Christ, they totally got me—*

"C'mon, there's no time to rest yet."

"Eh? Why?"

If there was no death game, there'd no need to do anything, was there?

"We can't leave it like this, the romance system from version 32 has some serious defects."

"Defects?"

"If players hold hands for three seconds..."

Alice connected her left and right hands. She looked at Sasaraki with a serious expression.

"...they'll be married."

He was at a loss for words.

"And if they kiss, the girl will get pregnant."

After he had been frozen for ten seconds, he finally shouted...

"WHY?!"

"Master was a really pure-hearted man☆"

"That's way too pure, though?! Is he living in dreamland?!"

"He was someone who was in real love with a fairy☆"

Fury chuckled, saying, "That's why he couldn't make a move on me, right?☆"

"Right now, it's only applied to the testing area, but if this stupid system gets spread across all areas, the already small amount of female players will completely vanish in the blink of an eye. I don't know what Azrael was thinking when applying that..."

"Did she ache for romance that much...? Wait, waaait."

Did Azrael know the patch's contents to begin with?

He felt like she didn't. And she was even faster to jump to conclusions than him.

But— if she thought it was a death game patch, why would she apply it?

Something's off, he thought, when...

[A message arrived from player Azrael.]

The system voice resounded.

Did Azrael realize the truth, too? Sasaraki pressed the play button.

[Deathbringer Angel Azrael announces...]

Azrael said in a serious tone. She then paused for a second.

[Come to where I am, Sasaraki. I shall teach you the difference between gaming and playing!]

"……The heck?"

He understood that she was getting fired up severely. For now, he tried sending, [Are you talking about the death game? That's actually a misunderstanding, it seems], but no reply.

"...I've got a bad feeling about this. Sasaraki, let's cancel it at once."

"How?"

It was a patch from Fury's master. They didn't know the keycode.

They could logout to erase it, but the button was out of order too.

"We'll be fine as long as we reset Azrael's 'Immortal Pendant (Imitation).' We'll delete her gamemaster registration with your 'Master Screen.' All we need to do is getting our hands on the actual thing, so we've to return to the debugging room."

"Ah— if you're going back, please use the teleport square☆"

"Why?"

"For the dramaturgy☆"

"Dramaturgy...?"

What dramaturgy?

"It'll be Azrael-san's once-in-a-lifetime performance☆ I'm begging you☆"

Fury left with these willful words and flew towards the sky.

"Alice, what do you think?"

"I don't quite get it, but... I can tell one thing."

Alice heaved a big sigh.

"Nothing good's waiting for us in the debugging room."

* * *

The debugging room had turned into something looking like a Greek temple.

"What's going on in here?!"

The center of the room was covered with with marble tiles. From the four corners of a pedestal pillars like those you'd find in said Greek temple reached up to the ceiling, and in the middle of those was a throne. Its backrest about two meters tall. White smoke was silently rising from the floor.

After closer inspection, the smoke came out of buckets.

Seemed to be dry ice for theater.

"Why do we even have that in a virtual world...?"

"I've been awaiting you."

The voice of a girl well-known to him resounded from the throne.

Sasaraki looked up at the throne with the eyes of a dead fish. On it was, of course, Azrael. Not in her usual cloak get-up, however. Four gigantic, jet-black wings had sprout from her back. They bugged through the back of the throne and extended over two meters, they were like wings you'd see on an angel in paintings.

"The time of judgement hath come. Now, Sasaraki, let us play—"

Azrael struck her wings elegantly and arose.



She unsheathed her swords from their scabbards, directed the point of a sword at Sasaraki, and shouted...

"AS GAMEMASTERS, LET US BEGIN THE— RAGNAROK CONCERTO—!"

Five seconds passed by.

Sasaraki thought absentmindedly...

—This is going to be more of a pain in the ass than I thought.

"Sasaraki, is this some special girl joke? Where am I supposed to laugh?"

Alice asked him in a whisper.

"No... I've no idea either, but I don't think she's joking."

Something specific had worsened to its absolute worst. Namely, her chuunibyou.

What could Fury have possibly breathed into her?

"Fufufu, I know what you want to say."

Azrael expressed a smile proving that she rather didn't know.

"Why do we have to do something so unreasonable— that's what you wanna ask, right?!"

"...Yeah, that's correct in a way."

What's with this over-the-top floor, pillars, throne, wings? Why has it come to this?

Did she go out of her way to look for those in the database and implement them just for drama's sake?

"Rather, listen to me first, Azrael. The death game stuff's—"

"I shall now tell you the reason why I applied the patch."

She ain't listening.

"I did it to make a realism in mortal combat happen that this world was lacking."

Azrael stated clearly.

"Sasaraki, did you never question it? Why your comrades would come back to life just fine when they'd been roasted by a dragon blaze? Why could they return from the dead— why could they just be like death rulers as if it was nothing? Is there meaning in battles in a game where you can just come back to life?"

"Probably not, but just listen to—"

"And so I— Deathbringer Angel Azrael decided—!"

Anyways, she ain't listening.

"Defeat is going to literally be your death. I shall see this kind of perfected world created—!"

She struck her jet-black wings grandly.

A violent squall blew and Azrael's body hovered softly in the air.

When he stared at her, he could see a lonely smile on her face.

"Sasaraki... you look like you want to say that I'm wrong, right?"

"You're fundamentally wrong, alright?! So listen to—"

"BUT I'VE NO INTENTION TO FALTER—!"

The deaf Azrael shouted in a grim voice.

"O Magical Sword Gram, lend me your strength once more— [INVOKE]!"

The second she screamed that, an ominous purple aura arose from her magical sword.

Her magical sword had the effect to rise critical hit chance by 50%.

"...Ah..."

Azrael showed hesitation for some reason.

Thereupon, she alighted to the floor and slightly warped her mouth.

"I-I'm fine, I'm fine! I'm Deathbringer Angel Azrael—!"

She persuaded herself.

Shaking her head, she resumed glaring at Sasaraki.

"B... By the way, Sasaraki, let me confirm... Your Invincible Barrier's on, right?"

"Hah?"

"Answer me! It's important!"

He had no idea why that was important, but he nodded for now. After Alice had killed him, he activated his barrier again. If he died, he'd return to that spawn point, after all.

"T-Then we're set, huh?!"

She cleared her throat with a cough and made her serious face again.

Then she once again prepared her Magical Sword Gram which still emitted its ominous aura.

"Now come at me, Saraki! If you want to stop me— do it with brute force!"

"I don't really get you, but I'm invincible right now, so this wouldn't be much of... UWAH—?!"

She struck her four black wings remarkably strongly. A violent gust blew.

"HERE COMES DEATHBRINGER ANGEL AZRAEL—!"

Azrael's body flew up high. She crossed 'Magical Sword Gram' and 'Ragnarok' above her head and twisted her body to the maximum. Still in that pose, she was still vigorously rising to the debugging room's ceiling and... hit her head on it.

"KYAU—?!"

She fell and hit the ground head first next to the throne.

It appeared she didn't have her Invincible Barrier on, her HP dropped to about half.

Alice kept silent with a serious look on her face. Sasaraki remained equally silent and serious.

Finally, Azrael got back up.

She was teary-eyed. Her hands were shaking.

"I... I'm fine—!"

She put her hand to her big chest and in- and exhaled deeply.

"I'm Deathbringer Angel Azrael... I'm not s-scared of dying—!"

When she finally stood tall again, she picked up her magical sword and pointed it at Sasaraki.

"Fufu—! You had me there—!"

No, I had no one.

"This really got to be some new kind of joke, doesn't it?"

Alice mumbled with a serious expression.

"No, I think she's really serious about this."

She did *say that she was wishing for some realistic mortal combat and all. So she really thought this would become a death game and applied the patch nonetheless? Considering that, this'd be incomprehensible suicide— it* is *nothing but suicide, no matter how you look at it, and she wants a real duel like this?*

I don't get it, but— I've to stop her for now.

"Mhhh. Wouldn't it be better to just kill her off like she wants you to? Sasaraki, you need this?"

Alice mumbled and put the 'Dice of the Goddess' into her hands.

"HIIIIIIH———————?!"

JERK!

Azrael jumped up like a scared hamster.

"Ah, uuh..."

She curled her whole body up and shook while staring at Alice.

Tears were allotting in the corners of her eyes. She resembled a little bird afraid of its natural enemy.

Looking at her like that, Alice's expression warped with an, "Uuh—."

"I-I can't bring myself to...!"

"She looks like she really does think she'll die, huh?"

Then why this suicide mission?

I don't get it. Not that I usually get her, but this time it's an I-don't-get-it with quality seal.

Sasaraki was at a loss, when...

A teleport sound echoed behind them. Next...

"Sasaraki-kun, Alice-san—!"

"Lizna?!"

When they turned around, Lizna stood on top of the teleport square with an unusual expression on her face.

"I-I've heard it from Fury-san—! We mustn't die!"

No good comes from listening to that source.

"Are we all sa— Ah—?!"

She cast her gaze towards Azrael and her expression quickly changed.

"Her HP bar...?! W-W-What are you doing, Sasaraki-san—?!"

She came running and positioned herself between Azrael and Sasaraki.

"Please don't fight! You mustn't—!"

"I haven't done anything from the start, you know?! Plus, it doesn't really matter if we—"

"Then why have her HP fallen if you didn't fight—?!"

"Because she basically blew herself up when—!"

"Because I challenged him to a duel, Lizna."

Azrael interjected him in a fearless tone.

Hopeless. Those two won't listen to a word from me!

"Heh—? Heh, you're joking, right—?! If you die now, you'll really be dead for good, you know?!"

"That's exactly why."

She slashed with her both swords.

"That's what I've always been wanting— A duel to the death, befitting of Deathbringer Angel Azrael!"

A few seconds of silence later.

Alice appeared to watch the spectacle in blank amazement.

Sasaraki was trying to think up a way to put a hold to all of this, but Lizna was quicker yet again.

"Azrael-san... you're lying."

She announced calmly and took a step towards her. Azrael shook her head.

"I'm serious. I'm not afraid of dying."

"You're lying."

"I just said that I'm not lying, didn't I?!"

Another few seconds of silence passed. Finally, Lizna did something weird.

Well, everything she'd been doing since earlier was weird, but even considering that she did something particularly weird.

"Then— you won't cry if I do this?"

Lizna gripped her 'Immortal Pendant (Imitation)' and mumbled, "Invincible Barrier, off."

"EEEEI—!"

SMACK—!

They could hear the sound of an intense impact. It was, in fact, the sound of her mace's head hitting her own head.

Her HP bar appeared above her. It went down to 80%.

"Wai—?! W-W-WHAT ARE YOU DOING, LIZNA?!"

"I-I-I'M JUST DOING THE SAME YOU DO—"

Even though the sense of pain should've been alleviated by the system, tears welled up in the corners of Lizna's eyes.

"THE SAME?! BUT YOU'RE JUST KILLING YOURSELF, AREN'T YOU?!"

"DEACTIVATING THE INVINCIBLE BARRIER AND CHALLENGING SOMEONE TO A FIGHT *IS* LIKE KILLING YOURSELF—!"

Another smack.

Her HP dropped to half, the bar changed to yellow, indicating that she was about to die.

On top of that, Azrael's facial color changed faster than the HP bar - but into a shade of blue.

"A-A-ARE YOU FINE WITH THIS, AZRAEL-SAN—?!"

"STOP—!"

"BY THE WAY, I-I-I'M SCARED RIGHT NOW! R-REALLY S-S-SCARED—!"

"LIZNA, STOP IT—!"

"I WON'T! I'LL DIE, FOR REAL! WE WON'T BE ABLE TO EVER TALK AGAIN, TO EVER GO ON ADVENTURES AGAIN, TO EVER PLAY THIS GAME TOGETHER AGAIN, MY PARENTS AND FRIENDS WILL HAVE TO PUT INCENSE STICKS ON MY GRAVE ON THE FUNERAL! MY FATHER, MY MOTHER WILL C-CRY!"

"LIZ——!"

"WHAT ABOUT YOU, AZRAEL-SAN?! W-WON'T YOU CRY WHEN I'M DEAD—?!"

"S-STOP—!"

"EVEN THOUGH A FRIEND MIGHT DIE— CAN YOU STILL LAUGH—?!"

Lizna wielded her big mace yet again.

That was her limit.

"STOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOP—!"

Azrael screamed and let her both swords drop to the floor.

With a clatter, 'Magical Sword Gram' and 'Ragnarok' fell to the ground.

"Stop...!"

She crumbled to her knees.

"I lied... I-I apologize, so... please, no more, stop—!"

She said in a thin, teary voice.

"Please don't die... Lizna...!"

Sinking to the floor, Azrael weeped nonstop.

Lizna lowered her mace and breathed heavily.

"Sasaraki... what's the meaning of this?"

"Why ask me?!"

Really.

Why had it come to this?

* * *

"At first... I-I tried to commit suicide..."

Azrael explained her circumstances while sobbing uncontrollably.

Summarizing it, it was roughly like this...

She had screwed up and applied the DEATH GAME patch. Not knowing the cancel code either, everyone would have died if things had remained unchanged. In tears she had asked Fury how to stop it, who had replied, *"It's fine if the person who applied the patch disappears ☆"*

In other words—

"If... If I died... the patch would be cancelled... and no one else would have to die..."

Sasaraki tried to say something but couldn't.

However, he thought that they really should lock that fairy away.

"B... But... I was too scared..."

Azrael tightened her grip on her mini skirt.

She cast a glance at 'Magical Sword Gram' which was lying close to her knees.

"My arms didn't budge and... I-I couldn't bring myself to, no matter what I tried—"

"So you tried to get killed by Sasaraki?"

"Yeah... I thought he'd kill me if I acted like a final boss..."

That's some weird logic— is what he couldn't retort.

It had been a logic solely based on a misunderstanding, but to the people involved it was the truth.

"But..."

Moving her fist to her mouth, her arms shook.

"...I'm Sorry... i-it's the way Lizna-san said..."

She mumbled in a polite tone. Her voice grew stronger.

"It's impossible... The... shaking... it won't stop..."

Tears ran down her cheeks.

"Sorry, I'm sorry, so... I won't lie ever again, so... s-so please..."

Azrael murmured while covering her face with both of her hands to hide her tears.

"Please... someone... save me...!"

GRIP!

It felt like an eagle grip had seized his heart.

Her tears were real. She really was scared and crying.

Even if that was the result of jumping to conclusions under misunderstandings and wrong impressions—

"L-Listen, Azrael! Everything's going to be fine!"

Sasaraki shouted unable to bear it any longer. Azrael blinked incessantly.

"You didn't apply a death game patch!"

"...Eh?"

Azrael blinked in surprise.

"What are you talking about, Sasaraki? I really did—"

"The codename's just weird, in reality it implements a romance system!"

"——————"

"It's only stuff like getting married by holding hands! So all's gonna be fine!"

He talked it all down in one go and then took a deep breath.

Azrael stared in puzzlement.

Finally, she expressed a slight smile.

"...Thank you, Sasaraki. I calmed down a bit."

Her shoulders dropped right after.

"But... we shouldn't deny our new reality, you know?"

"You still don't get it—?!"

In this case, all that he could probably do was dying in front of her. But the respawn point was far away and there was no time until the patch would go live. If he killed Lizna or Azrael, they might just die from shock which scared him too, and even if they didn't, they'd probably hate him after.

"Azrael, Sasaraki's telling the truth, you know?"

Alice said in a gentle voice, taking a step forward.

Azrael gazed at Alice and— shook her head before long.

"I'm sorry, I'm making even you feel the need to console me... but this is our reality now..."

"No, just listen to—"

"People will really... lose their lives in this game...!"

Azrael lowered her head. Tears overflowed from her eyes.

Alice turned around, seemingly troubled.

"Sasaraki. Why does this kid not listen to a word we're saying?"

"Why ask me?!"

That moment...

"Ten minutes until changes go live in all areas."

The system voice echoed throughout the debugging room.

Alice sighed.

"...Can't be helped, then. We'll leave the explanation for later, for now cancelling the patch is top priority."

She faced Azrael again. Thereupon, Lizna came running.

She put herself between Alice and Azrael.

"You mustn't do this! Don't kill her—!"

"It's fine. There's no need to kill anyone to cancel the patch."

More like, you can't kill her even if you tried.

But they didn't seem to have the time anymore to explain that much even.

Azrael looked at Sasaraki, her face in puzzlement.

"No way... You don't know the cancel key either, right...?"

"Not that. Can you give me your pendant?"

"...Why?"

"It seems like if we reset it, it'll cancel the patch."

"Since your privileges are linked to your pendant."

"I see! There's that way, too—!" Lizna said in delight.

Azrael still didn't move.

She smacked her hands onto the floor, opened her mouth wide, and stared into Alice's eyes.

"But... B-But my pendant..."

"Your pendant?"

Azrael pointed at the corner of the debugging room. It was where a machine as tall as a person was installed. The 'Electron Shredder' Fury had used to destroy the 'Key of the World.'

Items thrusted into it would be absolutely sealed away and couldn't be recovered ever again.

—Wait a sec.

"Eh... ? You couldn't possible have... In there...?!"

Azrael gazed back at him, her eyes filled with tears.

Her mouth formed of a へ, looking seemingly miserable.

Sasaraki realized his guess had been on spot.

In other words— Azrael's 'Immortal Pendant (Imitation)' had already been destroyed.

"Eight minutes left."

Right after the system voice had echoed throughout the debugging room, Alice and Sasaraki shouted...

""WHY WOULD YOU DO SUCH A STUPID THING—?!""

"B-BECAUSE I HAD NO IDEA THAT RESETTING IT WOULD CANCEL THE PATCH—!"

Azrael shouted back while shaking her head firmly.

"I-If I'd seen it, I would've definitely been tempted to activate the Invincible Barrier...!"

"You destroyed it to cut off your lifeline?"

"Uh..."

Azrael hid her face with both of her hands.

Sasaraki had his mouth gaping the widest yet.

What a suicide commando, indeed.

"I'm a useless idiot, after all...!"

"Well, you certainly *were* a useless idiot! What are we gonna do now, Alice?!"

No reply. She seemed be taken aback too, as you'd expect.

Several seconds later, she appeared to come to herself at last.

"Wait a moment. We'll just duplicate the privileges and... No, we don't have enough... What else could we..."

Alice folded her arms and started to growl. It didn't look like it'd come to her anytime soon.

Sasaraki swallowed hard.

What a situation! With things like this, the world will fall into a terrible state. A world in which you'll get married just by holding hands. In other words, folk dances in which everyone joins hands will become impossible. Huh? Doesn't feel that bad a situation, though—

"Wait, it's bad, after all!"

He shook his head to get rid of the the voice inside.

If this kind of retarded feature will be implemented, a lot of players will be shocked and quit. With this, the service will end. That's the thing we've to avoid. We've to get serious here. There's no time to waste at stupid stuff.

"Five minutes left."

"……Th—!"

It was Azrael's voice. When he turned around, she was gripping her magical sword tightly.

"I've… I've to die, after all!"

"YOU CAN'T—!"

Lizna seized her arms in tears.

"Let go, Lizna! Everyone will die if things stay like this! There's no other way!"

Azrael's voice and body were shaking, she was probably scared. And yet she shook off Lizna and was about to thrust her sword at her throat. She was serious. Serious about dying. Suicide would neither really kill her nor fix anything, but— anyway, she was serious.

He wanted to save her.

Isn't there any way—? Then…

"Mh— can't be helped, huh?"

Alice turned around. She expressed a refreshing smile.

"Sasaraki. Mind lending me your 'Immortal Pendant?'"

Did she come up with something?

"I'll parse the patch program and infer the erase code. I need debugging privileges."

"Eh—? You can do that? We've only three minutes left, you know?"

"Who do you think I am?"

Alice grinned broadly.

"I'm genius gamemaster Alice, you know?"

She put her hands to her hips and puffed up her chest in pride, Alice was full of confidence.

She behaved plenty reliable, but— *Wait a second.*

"Didn't you say before that you couldn't use the pendant?"

When he'd tried to hand it over to her before, she said that due to certain circumstances she couldn't use it.

Sweat ran down Alice's cheeks. Her face stiffened.

"...That was a lie."

"A lie?"

"Or, the circumstances changed."

"What circumstances changed when?"

Alice was at a loss for words. Frankly, it was totally suspicious.

It's probably right that she can parse the patch program. If it weren't, she wouldn't say that in such a pressing situation. But it's suspicious that she can't use it due to 'certain circumstances.' What on Earth are those circumstances that won't let her use it?

Could she be—

"...Th—!"

The moment he pictured the reason, a cold shudder ran down his spine.

"Hey, Sasaraki!"

If his guess was right— he couldn't hand over the pendant to Alice under any circumstances.

But— what to do?

To cancel the patch they'd need a three digit code.

There are a thousand possible combinations. It's unlikely for me to guess it by blindly trying. Think, me! Alice told me that 'as a gamemaster, thinking by yourself comes first.' If I don't do that now, then when will I?

First of all— the cancel code's been set by Fury's former master.

Isn't that a clue? He was doting on Fury, but he loved her too much and couldn't lay his hands on her, so he even made a body pillow of her in this virtual world. And he worshipped Fury's three sizes, '8 5 7 centimeters,' as a sacred combination.

That instant.

Something unpleasant was crawling up his spine...

"...No way..."

One possibility had come to his mind.

Fury too— had set those three numbers as a password before.

"One more minute."

The robotic system voice announced.

"Sasaraki, what are you doing?! Hand it over, hurry—!"

Alice urged him on and threw her dice, but it bounced off of his Invincible Barrier.

"—Yeah, it has to be."

"Sasaraki, hurry—!"

He expressed a dry smile for some reason, turned to the throne, and walked towards it.

The window where you could enter the cancel code hovered in front of his eyes.

It's probably— No, it has to be...

Correct.

"It's fine, Alice."

Sasaraki still had that smile on his face.

This world's a kusoge.

The password, too, is worthlessly stupid.

That people could die in this kinda world— is flat-out impossible.

While strongly believing that, Sasaraki input the numbers '8 5 7.'

"Patching has been cancelled. Initiating rollback."

The system voice echoed throughout the debugging room.

When he turned around, everyone was gaping with their mouths widely.

They all seemed to have no idea what just had happened.

The first one to come back to herself was Alice.

"Sasaraki— how?"

"It were Fury's three sizes."

"Hah?"

"Look, it's been the password for that final dungeon too, right?"

The three numbers which had been extremely sacred to her former master, the programmer of this patch.

After he had explained it to Alice, she put a hand to her forehead and sighed deeply.

"Silly, isn't it...? Really..."

"I know, right...?"

It was an endlessly silly world.

But, well, this is the kind of world we're living in.

"Eh...? W-What now? Did something happen?"

Azrael looked around the room.

"You heard it, right? The patch has been cancelled."

Alice answered Azrael's question.

"...Which means..."

Azrael mumbled in a daze.

"I... don't have to... die?"

"No, you didn't have to from the begi—"

"He saved you, Azrael-san—!"

Lizna cut in. She clenched her both fists and smiled.

Hearing that voice, Azrael finally showed a change.

Her body trembled up and down in small motions. Tears allotted in the corners of her eyes.

The next moment...

"Uu... Uee..."

She tightly gripped her skirt and sobbing leaked from her mouth.

"FUEEEEEEEEEH...—"

"Azrael-san..."

"I... I was so scared....."

"It's fine, all's fine already—"

"UEH... UEEEEEH..."

Lizna sat down next to Azrael and gently patted her back. Sasaraki realized something. He had saved the two of them from their fear of death. They didn't have to be afraid anymore.

—They didn't have to be afraid from the start, though.

Nonono...

Sasaraki shook his head to get rid of the urge to tsukkomi.

Granted that they've been misunderstanding, they really have thought they'd die and were *terrified.*

So, well, I'm glad. I did something really good. Probably.

He decided to go with that kind of thinking.

Sasaraki looked at Azrael. She was still sobbing.

"Maybe we should give her a handkerchief?"

Alice said.

"We have that kind of thing?"

"If we even have body pillows, we've got to have handkerchiefs, too."

It was yet another pointless detail.

Alice produced a white handkerchief from her pocket and gave it to Sasaraki.

Apparently, she wanted *him* to hand it to her. He accepted it for now.

Then he approached Azrael.

"Azrael, are you okay?"

He asked while offering the handkerchief.

"Eh—?"

Azrael raised her head and gazed at Sasaraki.

Her eyes went back and forth between the handkerchief and him.

The second when he wondered whether she'd start to cry again...

Azrael slowly extended her hand.

Grip.

Her hand didn't wrap around the handkerchief, but around Sasaraki's own hand.

The warmth of a girl's hand got slowly transmitted through the back of his hand.

"Um..."

She averted her gaze. It appeared she wanted to say something, but couldn't. While she was shedding tears and her voice was shaking, she earnestly tried, though. He could gaze into her wettened eyes from close. It felt to him as if Azrael's intense feelings were directly conveyed through her hand.

"Um....."

Azrael raised her lowered head. Then she mumbled...

".....Thank you..."

His heart leaped.

"U... ah..."



That Azrael had just straightforwardly said her thanks.

Sasaraki's heartbeat sped up. He couldn't take his eyes off of her.

And thought— *This is bad.*

What was bad? That he didn't do anything deserving of that kind of gratitude was bad. Azrael was under the impression that he had saved her life, but that hadn't been the case. Although he didn't deceived her on purpose or anything, with the situation being like this, it'd probably look like he had pulled a trick to indebt her.

He even started to think of himself as the worst.

"A-Azrael! I've something to tell you—!"

"Eh...?"

Azrael inclined her head slightly.

"W... W-What is it?"

She sounded nervous.

Her cheeks, still showing traces of her tears, reddened.

While her face did captivate him for a second— he immediately shook his head.

He had to clear that misunderstanding up right away.

"You know, I said it a dozen times over already, but the patch from now..."

Sasaraki cleared his throat with a cough. He had to make sure that she understood this time.

She'd surely listen to his story now that she'd calmed down.

"It wasn't a death game patch—"

Right then...

"Holding of hands between players confirmed. Congratulations on your marriage."

Ding.

The toll of a bell played from the speakers.

A heart-shaped window appeared above Azrael's head.

In it was merely one line, [Marriage Complete Husband: Sasaraki].

""————————Heh?""

Sasaraki and Azrael asked simultaneously.

After Azrael had looked at him in puzzlement...

"Eh—? W-What is this?"

He couldn't reply.

It felt like no matter what said, hell'd break loose above him.

Things aren't looking too good for me. Actually, they're not not too good, they're really *bad.*

"We've told you that it's a romance patch, didn't we?"

Alice said, crushing Sasaraki's hesitation underfoot.

Right then, *PUFF!*, white smoke covered Sasaraki and Azrael's right hand.

"WAH—?!"

"KYA—?!"

The smoke lifted. What had changed especially was— No, just one thing had changed. A plain silver ring had appeared on their right ring fingers. On closer inspection, they had 'Sasaraki & Azrael' engraved in fine letters on them.

"Looks like wedding rings, doesn't it?"

Alice mumbled in a composed voice.

Azrael stared at the ring on her right hand in a daze.

"E-E-Eh...?"

She let her eyes wander between Sasaraki and Alice.

"But... I applied a death game patch earlier..."

"That was a macabre joke. There is no death game."

Alice replied flatly.

"I'll tell you once again: What you've applied was a romance patch. That wedding ring's proof."

"Eh? But, but—!"

Azrael appeared to still not comprehend it.

"Patch rollback complete. Further acts of romance are prohibited."

The system voice announced. Azrael's movements froze on the spot. She seemed to have understood at last.

A short while passed.

It felt like an eternity to Sasaraki. He thought that he'd like the world to end right now, if possible. It scared him just to think about what might happen next. However, it wasn't really an eternity, of course, and the end to it came before long.

PUFF!

"WHA—?!"

Azrael's cheeks virtually exploded in red.

"W-W-W-WHAAAA—?!"

Her arms started to shake violently.

With her cheeks already fired up to their max, her lips were writhing like a snake's.

She was obviously trembling, but not from fear this time, it was from embarrassment.

And what she was embarrassed about was— probably— her fatal misunderstanding.

A~ah.

So she finally gets it.

If only she could've understood three minutes sooner.

Sasaraki thought, and right after...

"WHAT IS THIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIS—?!"

Her shout that wouldn't undo anything echoed throughout the debugging room.


STATUS
Name
アリス
Alice
Level
4,294,967,296
ア
職業 Job
創世の女神
性格 Personality
てんさい
能力 Skill
<女神降臨>
ササラキのいるところに出現できます。
ただし全裸になります。
<女神の祝福>
彼女にキスされたプレイヤーは
ゲームをクリアしたことになります。
<?????>
なんだかいろいろ謎が多いようです。

Status

Name
Alice

Level
4,294,967,296

Job
Goddess of Creation

Personality
Genius

Skills
Advent: Able to appear wherever Sasaraki is. Although naked.

Blessing of the Goddess: Players kissed by her will have cleared the game.

?????: Somehow, there seem to be a lot of mysteries about her.

Epilogue

Thereafter.

Azrael had raged in the Debugging room.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME EARLIEEEEEEEER—?!"

It was a pretty absurd complaint from her. Sasaraki had shouted, *"I TOLD YOU IT'S A ROMANCE PATCH, BUT YOU WOULDN'T LISTEN, ALRIGHT?!,"* and as thanks 'Magical Sword Gram' had come slashing at him from diagonally above, but it bounced off of his Invincible Barrier and dug into Azrael's stomach instead, resulting in suicide.

She returned five minutes later.

Next she'd started to strike at the wedding ring with her magical swords to destroy it. After 15 times or so, her sword missed and hit her, resulting in suicide again.

"That looks funny!," Lizna had said, followed her example, and died too. Three minutes later, both of them returned.

"W-Why did things come to this...?!"

Azrael had said while weeping uncontrollably.

"Anyways, divorce! Divorce, I tell you! Right now!"

"Sorry... there doesn't seem to be a divorce system..."

To recite Fury, *"Divorce? What could that word mean?☆ Your love is eternal☆"* It appeared that in her former perv master's word pool there was no such word as 'divorce.' Once married, you'd be together until the day you die, no matter what. A way too fairy tale-ish view on marriage, indeed.

"Well, aren't you two lucky ones?! Congratulations!"

"T-There's nothing to congratulate on, you know—?!"

"Anyway, in the end everything worked out with nobody dying!"

"Nobody could die from the beginning, right?!"

Or so the two of them kept on quarrelling until they reached their login time limit.

Which leads us to now.

Sasaraki had seen those two off and returned to the debugging room, Alice looked at him and smiled.

"Welcome back, Sasaraki."

She was munching away on potato chips at the low dining table. On her face she wore a mischievous expression. Apparently, she was enjoying the current situation, too. Sasaraki expressed a light nod and sat down opposite of her. He took a potato chip out of the bag and chew on it. It had no taste but it felt like it calmed him down.

"Today was tough, wasn't it? Thanks for your hard work."

Alice chuckled.

"How was Azrael?"

"Really enraged."

"As expected, huh?"

Alice heaved a conscience-stricken sigh.

"But forgive her, okay? She was serious about all this in her own way."

"Yeah, I know."

"Let's apologize to them together later— and to Fury too, okay?"

Alice looked alongside the wall of the debugging room. The throne Azrael had been sitting in was standing there. Sitting in that throne, Azrael had seriously been willing to give her life. She had tried to sacrifice herself in order to save everyone.

Though it had been pointless. And though she'd gotten cold feet towards the end.

At least her determination alone had been the real deal.

When he recalled her words from when she'd been afraid of dying, his chest began to hurt again.

"...We mustn't... let anything happen that would make that kind of resolve necessary to anyone, right?"

Alice said in a sigh.

"Really enjoying a game where your life's on the line—"

She crunched yet another potato chip.

"—That's only something for people who're funny in the head."

Alice continued as if speaking to herself.

"People dying from this game— is absolutely impossible, you know?"

A few seconds of silence passed by.

It probably really was as Alice had said.

However— something bothered him by the way she had put it.

"Hm? Something wrong, Sasaraki?"

Alice smiled sweetly.

She was a way too insolent, silver-haired girl. Her Job was 'Goddess of Creation.' She looked like an elementary schooler but was versed in games, and no matter when he logged in, she was there. He had never seen her sleep. Obviously, she wasn't normal.

Actually, if he put the pieces together, she had to be an—

"Hey, Alice. You're lying when you say no one would die, right?"

"Lying? Oh yeah, Kirine will hang by the neck and—"

"Not that... You tried to kill yourself earlier, didn't you?"

A few seconds of silence went by.

Finally, Alice grinned broadly.

"When was 'earlier?'"

"When you tried to use the 'Immortal Pendant.'"

She had been hesitating to use the pendant to stop the patch.

And if an AI were to use the pendant, it'd be deleted. In other words, Alice was—

"You're an AI, right?"

Alice didn't respond.

She put both of her elbows on the low dining table and gazed at Sasaraki.

With that, Sasaraki was convinced.

Alice isn't human. She's a goddess living in this game's world. And earlier, she was determined to die in order to save it. What had driven her to go that far—? She really must love this world and—

"Beeeeeehb—"

Alice formed a big X with her arms.

"...Heh?"

"You're wrong, Sasaraki. You're rather romantic yourself, aren't you?"

Alice started to chuckle.

"That's a pretty lively imagination you got there. Yeah, I'll put that into a quest next time."

"Eh? No, I'm not trying to imagine things. I'm being serious here."

That moment...

"Fufufufufu—"

Alice's eyes glittered silvery.

A shodder ran down his spine. Why did she look as if— she's incredibly enjoying herself?

"Sasaraki. You're forgetting one important thing."

Alice jumped on the low dining table.

"This game's a kusoge!"

"No, I remember that."

"The goddess sacrificing herself to save the world— that kind of dream-like twist's impossible here, don't you think?"

Alice flicked her fingers.

Suddenly, an electronic sound could be heard and the main screen's display changed.

"Eh...?"

"Look. That's footage from the camera in EastEnd Games' conference room."

The footage was playing on the debugging room's main screen. There were a whiteboard and a bed on a linoleum floor. It did look like a conference room. Someone was lying in the bed. On a closer look, it was a silver-haired girl wearing a VR gear.

Actually, it was Alice.

".....Huh?"

Why's she wearing a VR gear?

"So who's an AI?"

Alice grinned at him broadly.

"Heh? No, well, errr... ah! Maybe you got a double and..."

"Should we hold an offline meeting once Kirine's been discharged?"

"EEEEEH?!"

What is this? The girl on the screen really does *look like Alice.*

"Sasaraki's naive, isn't he~?"

Alice continued her chuckle.

"This world's a lot stupider than you think and—"

She poked her finger on his forehead and smiled.

"—A lot more fun, too."

Alice expressed a refreshing smile that didn't at all let you think she could be lying.

"Got it? I'm not a goddess, I'm just a genius gamemaster, you know?"

"B-But the 'Immortal Pendant' thing...?"

It should be fact that she'd been hesitant to use it.

"You've to figure that out by yourself."

"Fufufu," Alice chuckled and Sasaraki heaved a deep sigh.

I don't really get it, but— anyway, my guess seems to have been wrong.

Well... thinking about it, it'd be weird in many ways.

To begin with, Alice is too smart to be an AI.

She has to be a real girl, yeah.

The second he thought that, Alice clapped her hands together twice.

"More importantly, let's hurry and continue with the second floor."

"Yeah... right, we should do that, shouldn't we?"

He had forgotten all about it thanks to Azrael's pointless incident, but they were in the middle of implementing the second floor, 'The End of the Endless Ocean.'

There was nothing like a goddess in this world, so they had to improve it on their own.

They needed 10000 active users.

For that sake, they had to give it their best and create the second floor first of all.

"We also have to do better than the competition, right?"

"The competition?"

Alice blinked incessantly for some reason.

Finally, she clapped her hands together as though she had just remembered.

"A~h, you're talking about Ultimate? You don't have to worry about that."

"Heh—? Why?"

"I told you, didn't I?"

Alice flicked her fingers.

An Ultimate World Online ad started playing on the screen.

Ultimate Reality, Best Game Ever, those kinds of words banged onto the screen.

"A commercial like a dream, right?"

"Well, true that."

"Which is why..."

Alice grinned broadly and announced...

"It'll definitely— be pretty stupid."

* * *

The next day.

An internet bulletin board was on the main screen within the debugging room.

Sasaraki, together with Azrael and Lizna, gazed at a collection of posts.

[It's terrifying. The color is. It's set on negative, it's like a horror movie!]

[All the time I've that feeling in my mouth as if I was gnawing on gravel! What is this?!]

[Everyone's spawning in the exact same spot, so I'm getting stabbed and killed by everyone's weapons.]

[HELP: When I'm leaving town, I fall through the ground and get stuck in a black hole.]

[Who the hell approved the release of this kusoge?!]

It were reviews of Ultimate World Online. They were a hundred times worse than what they'd been used to seeing. It appeared that the released game was the worst kusoge in history.

"—What should I say...?"

Looking to his sides, Azrael and Lizna were gaping with their mouths.

Seemed like they felt just like him.

"This game's..."

Azrael mumbled in a sigh.

"The... The far lesser evil, huh...?"

"Thank you, Azrael."

Alice replied with a smile.

"Alice, how did you know that it'll be such a kusoge?"

"That's simple."

She raised her finger.

"No good can come from an MMO that's being released without an open beta, right?"

"……Right…"

He had learned that the hard way.

"Wouldn't it have been better to release it at a later point, then?"

"An unreleased game makes no money, does it?"

Alice drew a dollar sign in the air with her finger.

"If you're serious about creating a realistic world, it'll cost you 10,000,000,000s, maybe 100,000,000,000s of yen, you know? They probably had a budget at first too, but— seems like they couldn't wait anymore and just forced the release although it's far from complete."

"Really, a story that kills all dreams…"

"That's the real world."

Alice laughed a small, "Fufufu."

"It's a gamemaster's job to let people see dreams in this hope- and dreamless world, you know?"

"Is that so?"

"That's so~ Here, take a look."

Alice flicked her fingers.

A single girl appeared on the main screen. She had black, short hair, and an epee. If he remembered correctly, she was one of the people Sasaraki had exterminated in the last dungeon, a player named Tiolis.

Apparently, she was holding a speech in front of a bunch of players at the town square.

[Our last challenge of 'The Cave of the End of Start' has failed. However, this is not the end. That challenge has merely been the beginning! We are being trialed right now!

Let us not lose to the traps of those wicked developers— we will see the second floor found without fail!]

[UOOOOOOOOOOH], shouts of cheers surrounded her.

Tiolis was deeply moved and shed tears, saying, *[Thank you! Thank you, everyone!]*

They really seemed to be having fun.

"See? Our efforts paid off, didn't they?"

"Is it really okay to call that genocide 'efforts?'"

"It is. Plus, it's not just her."

Alice flicked her fingers again and the display changed yet again. It was the tutorial dungeon Sasaraki had made; more precisely, the room with the chest, and three girls consulting about something next to it. He knew them from somewhere. Two of them from the last dungeon.

And the other one— if memory served right, was the beginner girl from before, Rigel.

[What should we do?! This chest reeks of trap, Seshiriko-chan!]

[Please calm down, Sarapi. I have a foolproof plan.]

[I've a bad feeling about this, but what's your plan, Shiriko-chan?!]

[My skillful Sarapi examines the trap while the lowly I hides in the distance and waits for the result.]

[I see, a foolproof plan, ind... wait, AS IF I'LL FALL FOR THAAAAAAAAT!]

[Um, if you already know it's a trap, couldn't we just leave it be?]

Rigel mumbled with an astonished expression, and the other two raised their voices, *[Oooh—!]*

[I didn't think of that! Our beginner here is really smart, isn't she?!]

[Smarter than I. Ohoh. I feel an identity crisis coming.]

[Y-You think so? I only stated the obvious...]

Rigel said embarrassedly but not looking as dissatisfied as she would have the others believe.

"...They seem to be having fun, right?"

Though that way it didn't really help as a tutorial.

Those girls, too, would surely be disappointed if this game were to end.

So— he mustn't give up on it.

They were still enjoying this world. Just like Lizna and Azrael before them, they were making memories here. And so— he couldn't let this world end. Even if it was a kusoge of unbelievable dimensions.

Sasaraki gazed at the main screen and nodded.

"—We've to let them have even more fun, right?"

Alice smiled sweetly.

"Okay, good reply!"

She said and jumped on top of the mandarin box. After a twirl, she flicked her fingers. The main screen now showed a sea view. It was the second floor, 'The End of the Endless Ocean.'

"Let's continue with the implementation of floor two— all for the sake of letting the players enjoy themselves!"

Sword & Magic Online.

Two more weeks until the estimated end of service.

Extra Chapter

Lizna's Simmering Drink

The sound of boiling lava could be heard at the feet of Sasaraki and company. They were in a dungeon called 'Lava River Cave.' A several meters broad magma river was blocking their path, a stone bridge leading to the other side.

At the vicinity of that bridge, a pink-haired girl was squatting down.

"Oooh~!"

The name of the girl staring at the flow of magma was Lizna.

Her job was healer. A guild member of Sasaraki's.

"Sasaraki-ku~n! That's deep-red lava, you know?! Boiling magma, you know?!"

Lizna shouted while looking at the magma with her eyes sparkling.

"Sure is magma, isn't it?"

"It looks really hot, doesn't it?!"

"'Cause it's magma, isn't it?"

"If we go in there, we'll totally die, won't we?!"

"That we will for sure, huh?"

"....."

Lizna spun around to Sasaraki.

Her cheeks blushed a bit in a shade of pink and her gaze was full of anticipation.

"U-Um, you know, Sasaraki-kun..."

"I've a bad feeling already, but what is it?"

She pointed at the lava with her gigantic mace and smiled.

"Would you go in there with me?"

".....You asking me to die together?"

"Yep."

An invitation to lovers suicide. It didn't make him happy at all.

People certainly did die easily in this virtual world.

However, Sasaraki wasn't lacking common sense enough to be eager to kill himself on purpose.

"You know, I haven't had the chance to go into magma in real life."

"Yeah, the majority of mankind lacks that kind of experience..."

"Hey? Please? Just the tips of our toes will do!"

"We'll die with the tips of our toes already! Hey, Lizna?"

Sasaraki cleared his throat with a cough.

"If we die now and end up at the respawn, someone might beat us to clearing this dungeon, you know?"

"Uuh—"

"And here we've found a normal dungeon after such a long time again."

"Uuuh—"

A normal dungeon was one that could actually be cleared. And a large number of dungeons in this game weren't 'normal.' There were entrances buried by landslides, paths cutting off halfway, mob levels being a hundred times one's own - a lot of things.

Dungeons that you could clear normally were really scarce.

And competing with the other guilds for that scarce number was harsh.

"So let's endure until we cleared it."

"Uuuuuh..."

Lizna glanced at the lava, obviously reluctant to let go.

Finally, she shook her head as if dispersing something.

"...I understand, I'll endure."

"Well, it's fine as long as you get it."

Let's move on, then— he was about to say, when...

"Let's do this..."

Lizna produced a small glass bottle from her pocket.

She fastened a rope to it and lowered it into the lava.

"This 'Magical Bottle' should be able to withstand the lava, right...? And done."

Lizna pulled up the rope. She took the 'Magical Bottle' filled with lava into her hands.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"I'll refine it into a 'Simmering Drink!' Let's drink it together later, okay?!"

"Heeh... An item like that exists? What's its effect?"

"You know, your body will get as hot as magma."

"It'll give us fire resistance or what?"

"No. About 300 damage."

A few seconds passed.

"That'll kill us!"

"It will."

Lizna expressed a sweet smile and hugged her precious 'Magical Bottle' tightly.

"You know, once we cleared the dungeon— we won't need to hold back from dying anymore, right?"

Sasaraki had no more comebacks.

Her name was Lizna the Healer. A girl who loved dying.