

Highest Minister Administrator

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Chapter 12

Highest Minister Administrator

5th Month of Human World Calendar 380

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The Blue Rose Sword Eugeo held and the black sword I held drew out vivid streaks of pale-green in the dimly-lit space.

The trajectories were utterly symmetrical. Identical first steps and techniques—that might have been only natural as we had both invoked the dashing-type sword skill, «Sonic Leap», but our timing were completely identical: the time the sword points passed through the peak of their trajectories, the time the gleam grew strongest to signal that the strength was at its maximum, and the time the silver and jet-black blades rushed into each other.

I wasn't mindlessly using the skill. The methodology in kicking-off, the orientation of my body, and the motion of my arm accelerated the sword skill threefold.

Despite that, Eugeo's «Sonic Leap» didn't lag behind mine by even a tenth of a second. In other words, he had accelerated the skill to its limits as well. And I hadn't even taught him everything about the technique yet.

Eugeo must have been steadily and stubbornly swinging his sword without my notice. Hundreds and hundreds of times, day after day. Until he could hear the «voice» of his beloved sword.

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“.....How.”

I forced a low voice out as the crossed swords struggled fiercely.

“How could you lose to something like the «Synthesis Ritual». Wasn't all that sword training... didn't you set out from Rulid and target Central Centoria to take back your precious childhood friend, Alice?”

“.....”

Receiving my sword without surrendering even a single step back, Eugeo kept to his previous words, “I have nothing more to say to you”, making no attempt to move his sealed lips. I thought I saw a faint, lambent light deep in his green eyes the moment he heard Alice's name, but a dense darkness instantly consumed it. Or perhaps that, too, was an illusion brought forth by the pale-green glint the two blades continued exuding.

If this balanced situation continued, a super-high speed battle at close range would probably begin upon the end of «Sonic Leap» in several seconds. There would be no further allowance to be lost in thought. I had to put my all into thinking with the meager time I had left.

Integrity knights are created through what is known as the «Synthesis Ritual», effectively the direct manipulation of a soul. To be specific, the fragment of memories most important to the target would be extracted and a «piety module», a false loyalty, would be buried in its place.

Integrity Knight Eldrie had his mental state disturbed the instant he heard his mother's name and the piety module in question almost fell out from his brow. That essentially meant that the highest minister, Administrator, had stolen the memories concerning his mother to make him an integrity knight.

The other integrity knights should have had their important memories robbed in the same manner.

It was probably memories of his wife in the past for Deusolbert. I had nothing to base a guess on for Deputy Commander Fanatio and Knight Commander Bercouli, but I suppose the chances of it being family or a loved one were high.

In that case, who was in the memories stolen from Alice... the golden integrity knight watching over the one-to-one combat between Eugeo and myself?

The most likely seemed to be her actual little sister, Selka, who should be now living in Rulid Village. Alice

showed an intense reaction the instant a mention of Selka slipped out from me during our intermission on the terrace built against the cathedral's outer walls. Her tears fell when she found out about her little sister and that even led to her determination in opposing the Axiom Church.

However, Alice's piety module showed no sign of unrest even when she heard Selka's name. I still lacked the information to know whether that was due to her six years of being an integrity knight or if those stolen memories weren't of Selka.

Anyway, supposing all of those conjectures were true.

Who was in those memories the highest minister, Administrator, stole from Eugeo?

The circular elevating disk, used by Chief Elder Chudelkin to escape above and called back down by me, stayed immobile a short distance from us as we crossed swords. That left a hole of one meter straight above in the ceiling. I believe the highest minister's room should be beyond that, but I couldn't see through the pitch-black darkness blocking it off. Even if Administrator were to lie beyond that hole, I couldn't sense her presence.

However, Eugeo was «synthesized» by the highest minister just an hour ago there—in other words, he had the memories of the one most precious to him stolen. Who was in there?

Only one answer came to mind. It couldn't be any other than the girl taken away by Knight Deusolbert before him, whose traces he had always been chasing after since eight years ago, Alice Schuberg—now known as Alice Synthesis Thirty.

But in that case, why would Knight Eugeo, engaged in a sword fight with me this instant, not show any reaction at all even after seeing Alice a mere ten meters away?

Eldrie had his piety module nearly removed from simply hearing his mother's name. If that instability arose from the shortness of time he had spent as a knight, it wouldn't had been strange if Eugeo, for whom it had only been an hour since, exhibited more severe «symptoms» than Eldrie had, at the sight of Alice.

And yet, Eugeo's heart remained completely shut away before my eyes. If it wasn't the memories of Alice that were pilfered, just who or what had Administrator removed from his—

The sword skills' luster vanished from the two crossed swords the moment I thought that far.

Losing the momentum from the system assist, the white and black blades firmly rebounded from the recoil.

Both Eugeo, with his facial expression still static, and I, with my teeth clenched tight, raised our swords high while the orange sparks still lingered.

“Ooohh!”

“...!”

Our battle cries, both loud and silent, surged forth as we swung our swords diagonally down from the right in an utterly identical motion. Clashing, the repelled blades were next drawn into horizontal slashes from the right. Sliding the blade away when they entwined, I swung it diagonally down from the left. This, too, was met with firm resistance.

Surprise overwhelmed me yet again even as we proceeded onto our second confrontation.

The swords were of the same grade, but the wielders weren't of the same condition. In contrast to the light clothing I wore, top and bottom, Eugeo was in thick plate armor. Despite being clad in equipment weighing several times mine, his slashes weren't even a tenth of a second slower. Did becoming an integrity knight improve his strength or was it that «incarnation» thing at work, that which Alice spoke of right before the fight?

I am aware a system, unexplainable by the logic within the numerous VRMMO worlds I had experienced thus far, exists in this world. The power of incarnation, the power to image; that unseen power could even bring about phenomena beyond the capabilities of high ranking at times.

Despite how Eugeo should have his memories and emotions completely sealed away upon becoming an integrity knight, his willpower had been sharpened to an icy edge. That much was clear with how he had moved the Blue Rose Sword I carried into his own hands at the start of the battle, with what seemed like telekinesis—though Alice had called that an «incarnation arm».

What remained within Eugeo's mind now? Was his strong determination to retrieve Alice from the church the driving force behind him becoming an integrity knight, but in turn, caused some sort of will to lodge itself within the humongous void left behind after those memories were stolen?

I don't believe that was a loyalty towards the Axiom Church and the highest minister who forcibly overwrote his

soul, neither do I want to believe so. The Blue Rose Sword receiving my black sword without even the slightest quiver couldn't possibly be supported by such a false will.

In his eyes, frigid as ice, there was still something burning fiercely on. I believe so.

And speaking of methods to awaken that, there would be only one—

“...Eugeo.”

Pushing the sword back with all the strength I could muster, I whispered.

“You might not recall as you are right now... but we hadn't ever had a serious fight yet, have we?”

“.....”

His eyes that once shone a brilliant green appeared navy blue without a light residing in them. Focusing hard into their depths, I continued.

“I thought about it many, many times while we travelled to Centoria from Rulid or even after we entered the capital's academy. If we were to cross swords for real, who would win? ...Honestly speaking, you'll surpass me in time, that's what I thought.”

Eugeo took my gaze on without blinking even once—no, he was shutting me off. In his eyes right now, I was nothing more than an intruder he had to get rid of. He would cut me the instant he spots the slightest opening. However, I believed my words would reach his shut heart, even if only a single fragment that made the trip, and I pitched the end of my words.

“...But it's not time yet. You can't beat me as you are now, after forgetting about me, about Alice, about Tieze and Ronye, and about Cardinal too. I'll prove that to you right now.”

I held my breath the moment my words finished and set the strength gathered from over my entire body onto my sword.

Faint wrinkles settled in Eugeo's brow as he attempted to repel my sword.

I immediately pulled my sword back in a single motion then.

Gyarin! The blades slid and gave birth to a streak of sparks in the dim darkness. I was pushed backwards while

Eugeo pitched forward.

If I held my ground here, Eugeo would get a strike in after a short pause to recover his posture. I fell over onto the ground, back first, without fighting the momentum. I saw Knight Alice's right arm reach towards her left waist in the corner of my vision. I guess she must have judged that I had lost and intended to draw her Fragrant Olive Sword, interrupting the duel.

But that verdict was roughly three seconds too early. The result will be decided by the outcome of my scheme—or by Eugeo's level of familiarity with the Aincrad style.

I sharply raised my right foot right before my back slammed into the ground. A dazzling radiance shone from the tip of my boot and illuminated Eugeo's face from below.

“Ooohh!”

Letting out a short roar, I drew my body in as I spun. Aincrad-style «Martial Arts», the backflip kick technique, «».

This skill that could be activated even while falling backwards had saved my life on numerous occasions in the old SAO days. Though I hadn't used it at all after being inserted into the Underworld, be it for actual fights or practice, the motion was ingrained in my body. And most importantly, Eugeo hadn't seen this skill before.

But on the other hand, I had taught him «martial arts» involving the fists and shoulders. Eugeo had shown talent in those as well, being able to achieve even the third hit of the advanced «Meteor Break» skill that included tackles and slashing attacks, let alone the simple thrusting skill, «».

My «Gengetsu» would probably be dodged if he had found out about kicking techniques through his own research or if he had guessed that they might exist. And the opening left after this kicking technique was tremendous if dodged. I couldn't avoid getting cut if I missed.

—It's on, Eugeo!

Yelling internally, I swung my right foot towards my partner's gorget.

Eugeo's two eyes remained filled with a torrid chill even in this situation. Twisting his upper body with that unchanging expression, he tried to dodge my kick. However, he was still falling forward from our previous clash. His unguarded lower jaw drew in the tip of my boot, enveloped in a light effect.

“-h...!”

A sharp cry came from Eugeo’s mouth.

The Blue Rose Sword gripped in his right arm growled as it moved sideways. But no slash could hope to rival my kick’s speed. If I just ignore that and focus on my.....

No.

Eugeo wasn’t aiming to counterattack. He wanted to intercept my right foot, not my body, with the sword’s pommel rather than its blade.

Hitting with the grip, backhanded. A practical technique that shouldn’t exist in the Underworld where swordsmanship emphasized beauty and gallantry. Even in my old SAO days, only those used to fighting humans would use this technique.

«Gengetsu» would have its trajectory diverted if he hit my kicking foot from the side.

So, what should I attempt?

“—!”

Grinding my teeth, I desperately tried to draw back my right foot as it shot out. But the skill would be fumbled if I pulled back too far here. Slowing it down by what felt like half of a half-second, I let Eugeo’s right hand take the lead.

—Now!

Gashiin!!

A booming impact roared out.

Rather than its initial target, Eugeo’s throat, «Gengetsu» got the back of his right hand that held onto the sword. I couldn’t hope for much damage to his fist when it was equipped with a gauntlet as tough as the other integrity knights’. However, that impact sufficed for my plan.

Eugeo’s right hand shot up and the Blue Rose Sword in his hand was went flying as well, revolving as it soared,

stabbing itself into the marble ceiling.

Catching that sight in the corner of my darting vision, I tightened the grip on my black sword in preparation for pursuit upon landing from the backflip.

My right sole, with traces of the light effect still trailing after it, touched down onto the floor. Bending my knees, I absorbed the impact and kicked off with all I had, without any concern for restoring my posture. Digging my left foot in with all my might, I targeted the unarmed Eugeo's breastplate, letting out a «Slant», a one-hit sword skill that cuts up towards the right from the left—

“—!?”

What I saw, when I tried to recover my posture on the verge of falling forward while activating a sword skill, was Eugeo's left hand thrust out towards me and the points of green light gleaming on those five fingers.

It happened immediately before my sword dug into that glittering breastplate.

“*Burst element.*”

The quiet invocation left Eugeo's lips. The points of light—the five «aerial elements» detonated simultaneously, bringing about an explosive gale that swallowed me. The wind pressure released caused no damage on its own, but I completely lost my footing, flung away like a rag.

“Guohh...!”

Groaning, I spread my arms wide and desperately tried to regain my stance. Slamming my head into the wall at this momentum would probably take over a tenth of my Life. Somehow stopping my body from spinning as I was tossed about by the tempest, I turned my two feet towards the imminent wall.

A brutal shock shot up through me the instant I landed, piercing through the top of my head, and I withstood the numbness in my entire body as I momentarily stayed glued onto the wall before falling on the floor. Upon jerking my face up, I saw Eugeo had been also pushed close to the opposite wall by the wind, expected as it was, but it appeared the weight of his armor might have been what allowed him to stay on the ground. Calmly standing upright from a squat, his face still maintained that maddening lack of emotion.

A soft voice reached me from the right upon getting up after him.

“...Is that truly Eugeo, your partner?”

The one who asked was Alice who watched over the battle from the wall at my request. I glanced at the female knight clad in gold for a moment, then replied in a whisper as well.

“What do you mean? Weren't you the one who said he was synthesized?”

“That certainly is true... I can't find the correct words, but...”

What Alice said after that rare mumble betrayed my expectations.

“That person is far too used to battles for one that just made it as, no, for one that was just made into an integrity knight. Even if we were to put aside the display of that «incarnation arm» before the battle and that aerial elemental art he had just used, I can hardly believe he is a novice.”

“...You don't just get skills like that by becoming an integrity knight?”

I only wanted to confirm, but a harsh rebuke immediately flew over from the side as expected, and instinctively made me cower despite the current situation.

“The skills of a knight are not so easily acquired! We grasped the key to secret moves and sacred arts only through a lengthy period of self-improvement, let alone the incarnation techniques and the armament full control art!”

“R-Right. ...But, then, what was that earlier...? Eugeo shouldn't have been able to generate five elements on a single hand yet at his...”

“That is why I had turned the question to you. Is that truly Eugeo?”

“.....”

I pursed my lips and stared at the knight of bluish-silver who had started casually walking towards me.

Living on the hundredth floor of the Central Cathedral straight above this one, the highest minister, Administrator, was a preeminent sacred arts user on par with Cardinal, the sage in the Great Library Room. Someone capable of those terrifying arts to manipulate human memories like her might even be able to prepare an imposter utterly identical to the original in looks. But—

“...He’s Eugeo.”

I muttered hoarsely.

Even without the light in his eyes, even without the blood coursing through his cheeks, even without that smile on his lips, that integrity knight was definitely my partner and bosom friend, Eugeo of Rulid. I had made many mistakes since arriving in this world, but I could say that with confidence.

I did not understand how he could use techniques that surprised even Alice, the one ranked third in terms of ability, immediately after being made into a knight. And in the first place, I didn’t even know why did the forced synthesis that should have taken three days and night end in less than an hour.

But regardless of how peculiar the situation was, I have only one task to do now that it had come to pass.

To stake all of myself onto my sword and attack. That was all.

Taking in a deep breath and expelling it, I tightened the grip on my black sword. Perhaps he sensed my fighting spirit, but Eugeo stood still in the middle of the hall and silently raised his right hand. The unseen «incarnation arm» drew out the long sword stabbed in the ceiling and returned it to its owner’s grasp.

Yes—that proud Blue Rose Sword would never submit to an imposter.

Eugeo spun the extremely heavy sacred tool without much effort, and then settled into a proper middle-level posture. Upon seeing his posture, lacking any sort of opening, Alice whispered softly.

“Shall I serve as his opponent?”

“Don’t be silly.”

After an immediate rejection, I held my beloved sword forward as well. Even if they had both lost their memories of one another, Eugeo and Alice were still childhood friends raised in Rulid Village. I couldn’t possibly let those two fight, and more importantly, waking Eugeo up was my role.

Despite how she had gotten so incensed over me calling her an “idiot” while we hung off the cathedral’s outer wall, Alice simply took a step back in silence this time and folded her arms before her chest. In reply to this display of knightly consideration, to not act even at the risk of me getting slashed, I spoke.

“...Thanks.”

I shifted my thoughts after that short muttered response.

Forget everything unnecessary for this battle. Become one with the sword and go forth, expending all of your abilities. You couldn't possibly defeat Integrity Knight Eugeo otherwise, neither could you reach your best friend's heart beyond that thick armor.

The point of my black sword quivered audibly. It was as if the traces of that thunder roaring in the far-off skies on the day we set off two years ago had crossed time to arrive at this moment.

—I'm counting on you, partner.

—I'll be sure to give you a name when the battles are all over... so lend me your strength.

Praying to my beloved sword in my right hand, I took in another deep breath and jolted to a stop.

The noise, the environment, and even the heat and cold disappeared off in the distance. Nothing existed in this world aside from my black sword and me, the Blue Rose Sword and Eugeo. I had dreaded, and awaited this instant in the depths of my heart since two years before.

—Let's go, Eugeo!!

I violently kicked off the ground, screaming without a sound.

Eugeo kept still with his middle-level posture and awaited my assault.

Petty tricks wouldn't work on Eugeo as he was now, capable of freely bending the Aincrad-style swordsmanship and high ranking sacred arts to his will.

Dashing fifteen meters in an instant, I let loose an downwards slash from the right with the momentum from all of the speed in my charge.

In turn, Eugeo let out an upwards slash from the right with both hands after a step forward that very nearly cracked the floor.

The blades of black and silver clashed, emitting a dazzling flash in return. Judging that it wouldn't turn into a match between sword skills at this range, I shifted my left hand onto the pommel as well. Giving myself to the

heavy sword's moment of inertia, I took the shortest path to draw it into an overhead stance.

“Ooohh!”

I swung down, expelling what remained of my breath into a yell.

If the swords' specifications and the swordsmen's capabilities were on the same level, a fully powered vertical slash couldn't be completely parried with a side or diagonal slash. He could only choose from two possible options: to strike it back with the same technique, or to escape from the sword's reach.

However, Eugeo's sword had veered right from the earlier strike and couldn't be raised yet. In addition, his body's weight was inclined towards the right, so he couldn't leap back immediately. This time, I'll be sure to—!

Abandoning all hesitation that could dull the deed, I swung my sword.

The black sword tip took the top of Eugeo's shoulder, protected by the bluish-silver armor.

No matter how high a priority they possessed, the integrity knights' armor weren't tough enough to repel a strike from a divine instrument without damage.

The sword ate into the armor with a shrill, metallic noise, swinging straight down, leaving behind only a moment of resistance. Light streaked straight through Eugeo, from his left shoulder to his chest.

A crash, like glass shattering, echoed out immediately after and the thick armor broke apart.

The small metal pieces scattered through the air were accompanied by a crimson mist. It didn't feel deep judging from the resistance, but my sword had cut into Eugeo's body at last.

I felt like I had been cut myself, in the same spot, the instant I realized that I had hurt my friend. My face warped, wanting to avert my sight, but I couldn't possibly stay my hand here. Flipping my wrist the moment the vertical slash reached the floor, I used the elastic energy from my entire body to follow up with an upward slash—

The black sword was flicked straight towards the side with a dull clunk.

Eugeo had kicked away my sword with his right greave, with nary a wince from the pain inflicted by that fresh injury from his left shoulder to his chest.

Realizing that motion would lead into a counterattack, I desperately leaned away my shuddering body. While the

Blue Rose Sword whizzed closer from the left.

I staked everything on avoiding a direct hit on my neck, but it still tore straight through my left shoulder. Feeling a frigid chill rather than pain, my right foot kicked off the floor with all of my strength and I tackled Eugeo who had just swung his sword with my injured left shoulder.

The blinding, vicious pain that was previously absent surged through me this time as a spray of fresh blood whirled into the air.

Eugeo stood firm on his left foot beyond the red mist, refusing to fall.

An immediate counterattack would be impossible from that posture. I raised my beloved sword towards the right with a one-handed grip once again. A vivid radiance of pale blue enveloped the black blade.

Sword skill, single diagonal slash, «Slant». If this landed a hit on his right shoulder, Eugeo wouldn't be able to swing his sword, like he had thus far, with both shoulders hurt.

“Ra... aahh!”

It happened when I yelled as the attack initialized.

A scarlet flash shone from beyond Eugeo.

It was the light from a sword skill. But there weren't any in the Aincrad style that could hit while his right shoulder and back were open to me.

Even with my eyes opened wide with fright, I activated «Slant», no longer able to stop my sword.

Eugeo's body savagely spun anticlockwise a moment later. A horizontal slash approached from the left, leaving a red light in its track.

This sword skill... is a one-hit technique for two-handed swords, «Back Rush». A countering technique to spin around when an opponent had your back.

But I had never taught Eugeo such a technique.

The heavy impact blew those thoughts away in pieces. Eugeo's Back Rush and my Slant clashed and our swords

were flung back once more.

The fresh blood from our left shoulders drew intermittent lines as Eugeo and I swung our swords straight up in the exact same motion as though we were drawn there together.

Deep blue light ran through the two blades.

The one-hit overhead vertical slash, «Vertical».

That said, the skill wasn't that strictly vertical. Vertical would usually incline by around ten degrees depending on the master hand's orientation and as such, the trajectories of the two facing off would cross if they activated it simultaneously, pushing both of them away upon clashing.

That occurred this time as well, but only half of it. The black sword and the Blue Rose Sword collided at around a third from their ends and let out dazzling sparks.

However, unlike back in SAO, there were occasions when that rebound didn't happen when sword skills clashed in the Underworld. It was likely due to the will to fight from both of us—what could be said to be the ability to image; incarnation—restraining the repulsive force.

The two swords, crossed as though they were devouring each other, let out countless orange sparks and blue beams of light. Eugeo and I started our third struggle, our swords and right arms creaking as we tried to complete our respective sword skills while facing towards each other at close range.

Staring into Eugeo's eyes beyond the scattered sparks, I asked through my clenched teeth.

“...Does that skill earlier have a name?”

Eugeo muttered with his facial expression calm, like a frozen water surface.

“...Baltoh style, «Head Sea».”

I couldn't immediately recall where have I heard of that style. I frowned, then finally realized.

The Baltoh style. That was the style belonging to the elite swordsman-in-training, Gorgolosso Baltoh, who Eugeo had served under as a valet trainee until the third month of this year at North Centoria Sword Mastery Academy.

The students of high class noble birth looked down on it as it was an uncouth skill structure without aesthetic

sense, like the Serlut style of Sortiliena-senpai who I served, when compared to the Norkia and High Norkia styles.

But turning that around, that could mean it was practical in actual combat. Eugeo must have learnt the basic skills from Gorgolosso-senpai in the one year he served as his valet.

If that was the case, that revealed yet another conspicuous mystery.

“Eugeo... do you remember who taught you that skill?”

I asked again even while mustering all of my strength into the intercepted sword.

The expected reply came after a short pause.

“I don’t know, and I don’t care either.”

Despite how he should have been expending all of his power on it as well, both his voice and expression stayed frozen and barren.

“I don’t need to know anyone aside from that person. I hold my sword for that person, and I live on only to eliminate that person’s enemies...”

“.....”

As expected, it seemed he had forgotten about not just Alice and me, but Gorgolosso-senpai as well. On the other hand, he remembered the skill’s name and how to use it.

If those turning into integrity knights were to have all of their memories reset, they would lose all of the sword skills they had trained, along with the sacred arts they had learnt. Hence, the highest minister, Administrator, developed that complicated method of handling it, the «Synthesis Ritual».

To block the target’s stream of memories, rather than erasing them all. I am unsure of the specific logic behind it, but it could be said to resemble retrograde amnesia, that so-called loss of memory, in the real world, where one loses memories of oneself and of the other people around, but maintains the aptitude for language and day-to-day life.

What served as the obstacle that cut off the stream of memories would be the piety module inserted into Eugeo’s

soul—his fluct light. Who previously occupied the space that the module was now stuck in? If only I knew that, I might actually have a chance at pulling Eugeo's eyes open.....

No.

Words alone would definitely not suffice to break Administrator's sorcery.

I had conversed with many people through our crossed swords since the day I became trapped in the floating castle of steel, Aincrad. Asuna, Suguha, Sinon, Absolute Sword. Even after coming to this world, there were Sortiliena-senpai, Head Elite Swordsman-in-training Uolo, and the knights, Eldrie, Deusolbert, and Fanatio. And Alice who looked on at this battle from behind.

Swords in virtual worlds possessed more meaning than being mere polygon objects. As one's life rested on the sword, what resided within the blade had what it took to reach the opponent's spirit. A sword free from hatred could transmit feelings exceeding what words could convey at times. I believe that.

The virtual blue light covering the two intersecting swords dimmed as it begun to lapse.

I had to muster every last drop of my remaining strength here and now.

To project all of myself to my friend's heart.

“Eu... geo---!!”

I swung my sword with a scream the instant the sword skill ended.

A strike with all my might. Repelled. Eugeo's slash. Repel it with the sword's base. Our feet stayed still as we continued swinging our swords at the shortest range possible. The sword fight gave birth to a continuous stream of clashes and sparks, filling our surroundings with noise and light.

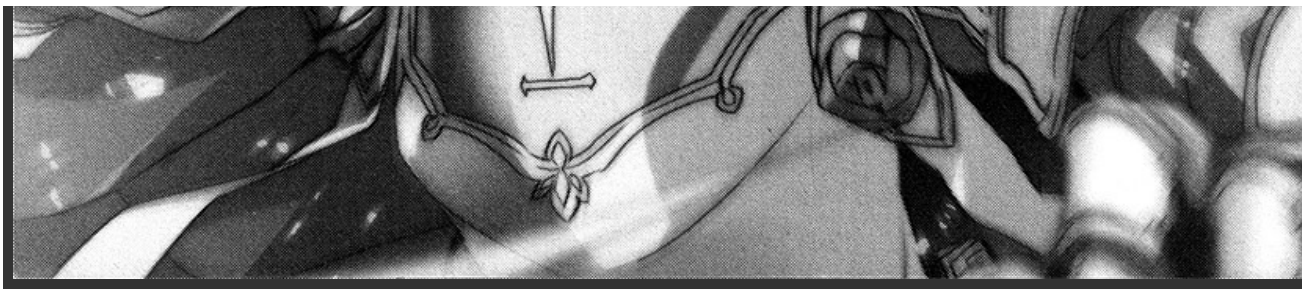
“O...oooo---!!”

I roared.

“Se... aaaa---!!”







Eugeo, too, let out a cry for the first time.

Quicker. Accelerate quicker.

Eugeo accompanied me in the unceasing, instinctual exchange of attacks, lacking all style, all skill, all tactics, without missing a beat.

I could feel an unseen shell breaking apart each time we crossed swords.

My lips formed into a rough smile without my notice. Yes, Eugeo and I must have fought, no, played with swords in a reckless way like this, long ago. It wasn't in the training arena at the Sword Mastery Academy. It wasn't during the trip towards the capital either. Right, it was at the grasslands and forests near Rulid Village... with homemade wooden swords that had what looked like fur growing on them as our toys... where we single-mindedly attacked each other, calling it sword-fighting practice, like children would...

Had Eugeo and I done such a thing after our first encounter slightly more than a couple of years ago?

What was breaking apart... was my memories.....?

Gakii--inn! An intense metallic noise rang out and broke me out of my momentary trance.

Meeting at a miraculous angle, the black sword and the Blue Rose Sword repressed each other's might and quietened down as they crossed against each other yet again.

".....Eugeo...?"

In response to the whisper that escaped my mouth.

Eugeo's lips replied with the faintest motion.

I couldn't hear his voice, but I understood. The integrity knight with green eyes had murmured my name.

Defined wrinkles were carved into his white, smooth brow. His teeth clenched tight beyond his barely opened mouth, grains of faint light blinked in those eyes sunk in darkness.

Those eyes caught sight of Knight Alice standing by the wall behind me from over my shoulder.

His lips quivered once again. Uttering Alice's name soundlessly.

"Eugeo... do you remember now, Eugeo!?"

I cried out in a daze. My sword slipped from the momentum and I was pushed backwards, unable to hold up against the Blue Rose Sword's pressure.

I should have been full of openings as I tried to regain my footing to avoid falling over, with my posture mostly crumbled. But Eugeo stood still with his sword raised midway instead of pursuing me.

Finally coming to a stop after retreating near Alice, I took in a deep breath of air and called out my close friend's name as loud as I could.

"Eugeo—!!"

The knight shook with a startle and slowly lifted his face that was turned down.

His complexion was unchangingly pallid, but it certainly possessed what qualified as emotion. Confusion, unease, regret, and longing... a faint smile, like the multitude of emotions frozen by the art had made the thick shell of ice quiver by even the slightest bit.

".....Kirito."

After a short pause.

"Alice....."

My ears couldn't have been lying this time. Eugeo's voice had called out our names.

It reached. My sword had reached his heart.

"Eugeo....."

I called out again and the color in his lips that formed that smile deepened.

He spun the Blue Rose Sword held in his right hand into a backhand grip. Lowering his arm, he stabbed its tip into the marble floor. The bluish-white blade wrapped in a faint mist sank around two centimeters into the floor with a distinct clink.

Taking that as a proclamation to end the battle, I lowered my black sword as well. Letting out the breath stuck in my throat, I took a step forward with my right foot.

However.

A series of unexpected incidents happened in next moment.

“Kiritoo!”

Alice was the one who screeched out my name from behind. I didn’t know when she got so close, but she wrapped her left arm around me from behind and lifted my body up high.

More words flowed out from Eugeo’s mouth in that same instant.

“...«*Release recollection*».

That incantation.

The true essence behind the Underworld’s mightiest combat technique, the «Armament Full Control Art» that could awaken a weapon’s memories and reveal its paranormal power—«releasing its memories».

The Blue Rose Sword emitted dazzling flashes of blue and white light.

I could neither dodge nor defend. The absolute chill spreading out with the sword as its epicenter instantaneously plunged the entire wide hall in ice. The opening to the stairs going down in the corner of the floor and the elevating disk that could ascend to the hundredth floor were covered in thick ice along with Alice and I both, up to our chests, rendering us utterly immobile. If it wasn’t for Alice bringing my body up, my head would have likely been devoured by the ice as well.

We had encountered Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One frozen up to his neck like this at the large bath on the ninety-fifth floor of the cathedral.

I didn't look down on Eugeo's Release Recollection art after it froze that bath, humongous enough to be mistaken as a pool, filled with hot water at a speed that even the strongest and oldest knight couldn't escape from. But there was no water at all to freeze here on the ninety-ninth floor. I could still understand if there were numerous cryogenic elements around, but just where was all of this ice from?

No, that wasn't what I should be surprised at.

Why would Eugeo do this? He should have regained his memories, so why would he have to bind Alice and I in ice?

Enduring the chill coursing through my whole body, I desperately forced my voice out.

"Eugeo... why....."

Slowly picking himself up around fifteen meters away, Eugeo shortly whispered with a melancholic smile on.

"...Sorry, Kirito... and Alice. Please, don't come after me ..."

And the young man who was my closest friend and Alice's childhood friend drew the Blue Rose Sword from the floor and walked towards the elevating disk in the middle of the hall.

The marble disk was thickly covered in ice like the stairs going down and us, but it began its ascent, spilling fragments of ice as it went, after the knight atop lightly nudged it with the tip of his sword.

The smile formed by Eugeo's lips, seemingly repressing many things, remained until the hole that opened in the ceiling swallowed it up.

".....Eu... geo-!!"

My desperate call was drowned out by the dull noise made as the elevating disk was assimilated into the ceiling.

2

Remove core protection.

Eugeo understood in that moment he finished reciting that incantation he had never heard of before, consisting of merely three words. He understood that he had unlocked a door that should have never been opened.

It was an hour before that confrontation with Kirito, one he could have never even thought of.

Upon bringing the fight against the integrity knight commander, Bercouli, and his terrifying ability to «sever the future» to a hard-fought draw by freezing them both with the Blue Rose Sword's Release Recollection art, the unconscious Eugeo was brought to the Central Cathedral's hundredth floor by the small, eerie man who called himself the chief elder, Chudelkin.

There, Eugeo met a girl possessing hair and eyes of pure silver, and a beauty beyond the potential of humans—the highest minister, Administrator. The girl spoke to Eugeo whose consciousness remained hazy.

—You are a potted flower, deprived from the water of love from one and all.

—But I am different. I will grant you my love, all of it for you.

—All you have to do, is to love me in turn.

The girl's words bound his mind as well as an art would. Absorbed, Eugeo voiced out those three spell words as requested.

That was likely the forbidden art to unseal the door guarding what truly mattered to humans... one's memories, thoughts, and soul.

With a pure smile, Administrator stared into and groped about Eugeo's mind, deeply thrusting in «something» chillier than even ice.

And once again, his consciousness cut.

Eugeo then regained his sight, his eyes opening as though dragged out from a pit of darkness by the cries from someone far away.

There were dazzling sparks and a silver blade. And a young man with black hair engaged in a fierce sword fight with himself.

Eugeo understood in that instant. He understood that he, clad in an integrity knight's armor, was pointing his

sword towards the companion he trusted over all other and the childhood friend he cared for over all other.

Even then, the frigid thorn stabbed into the core of his mind did not disappear. That thorn relentlessly demanded that he cut down the enemy before his eyes for the esteemed Highest Minister and shackled his thoughts.

Unwillingly, Eugeo activated the Blue Rose Sword's Recollection Release art and confined the pair precious to him in ice. That was all he could do to bring the battle to a close as he struggled against the thorn.

...I had lost to Administrator's temptations and broke down what should have never been broken.

...But there is still something I can do... something I have to do.

“...Sorry, Kirito... and Alice.”

After giving his all to force those words out, Eugeo stepped upon the automatic elevating disk. To return to Administrator's room on the cathedral's hundredth floor.

The elevating disk came to a solemn silence as the moonlight from a gigantic window shone against Eugeo's armor and the sword in his right hand, scattering specks of dim, white light.

It was roughly two o'clock, after midnight, on the twenty-fifth day of the fifth month.

Up until three days ago, he would have been long asleep at such a time in his bed in the expert swordsmen-in-training's dormitory. He would have been deep in slumber from the classes and training of each day, impossible to wake until the bell to rise from bed rang.

Come to think of it, he was in the academy's discipline chamber for the twenty-second's night and the church's underground jail on the twenty-third; hardly conducive for a good night's sleep. Despite how he should have reached his limit with the fatigue accumulated from the consecutive battles after escaping from the jail on the twenty-fourth's morning, and how the mere thought of that weighted down on his body, the icy thorn still stuck in his mind throbbed as it kept away his drowsiness as much as he would have liked to embrace it.

Present all of yourself to the esteemed Highest Minister. Fight to protect the Axiom Church.

The order conveyed each time the thorn—likely the same as the violet crystal prism stuck in Eldrie's forehead—

throbbed was as strict as a steel whip and as sweet as the finest honey. It would probably be impossible to retrieve his sense of self after tasting a lick of that honey once more.

The only reason he could remain himself now must be thanks to being wakened up by Kirito's desperate cries and that sword fight he fought with all his might.

And he could only return to this room without suffering any great injury thanks to how Alice had watched over their battle without interrupting.

Integrity Knight Alice's swordsmanship and her armament full control art that could change her sacred instrument, the Fragrant Olive Sword, into a storm of golden flowers still concealed enough might to suppress Eugeo in his current state. If Alice had drawn her blade and fought alongside Kirito, Eugeo would have probably been cut down without given the time to regain his sense of self.

He did not understand the exact reason why Alice had decided to oppose the Axiom Church despite being a knight. Kirito's persuasion might have succeeded like he imagined while climbing the cathedral's stairs, or perhaps something even more dramatic had happened.

Alice's right eye was wrapped by a bandage that seemed to have been made from cloth torn from Kirito's clothes. The same as what had happened to Eugeo when he pointed his sword towards Humbert Zizek at the Sword Mastery Academy must have occurred. Her right eye must have ruptured upon being burdened by the serious crime of opposing the church. The one who gave Alice, who appeared utterly aloof when she arrested them at the academy and faced them again on the eightieth floor's «Cloutop Garden», that determination was not Eugeo, but Kirito...

—But I have no right to speak about that now.

—After all, I had lost myself in Administrator's sweet words and thrown open the door to my mind. That was an act of betrayal towards Kirito and Alice. It was an act of betrayal towards Tieze, Ronye, Frenica, Gorgolosso-senpai and Sortiliena-senpai, Azurika-sensei the dormitory supervisor, Sadore-san the craftsman, everyone from Wolde farm, Selka, Garitta-san, and Chief Gasupht from Rulid, and the small sage from the Great Library Room, Cardinal, too.

Tightly grasping the sword grip in his right hand, Eugeo endured the icy throbbing as it gradually grew.

There should not be much time left for him to remain truly conscious. He had to amend for his crimes before he disappeared.

There was no other way.

Raising his face, Eugeo slowly looked around.

Perhaps the ninety-ninth and hundredth floor had their center at different positions, but the elevating disk Eugeo was aboard ceased movement at the south end of the floor. Stars filled all of the entire sky visible beyond the glass windows surrounding the room. The aligned pillars fitted with huge, decorative swords glittered as the light from the moon and stars shone upon them.

And—

Eugeo turned his gaze up as though someone had called out to him.

The illustrated story of the gods was depicted on the pure white ceiling over ten mel above just as before. Small crystals were inlaid on the gods, gigantic dragons, and humans, unblemished as they emitted light.

...What called out to me were those lights...?

It was when Eugeo focused on one of those crystals.

An actual voice came from a different direction this time. He quickly turned his face towards the front.

A circular bed, likely above ten mel in diameter, was set in the middle of the wide room. Its insides could not be seen through the hanging curtains thoroughly surrounding it. But he could hear a faint voice passing through the thin, pure white fabric. Its saccharine reverberations seemed to be of song or murmur.

It was Administrator's voice, the highest minister's.

It seemed she was chanting an art, but it lacked the vicious rhythm of an offensive art. If that was one needed as a sort of scheduled ritual, this would be a good chance.

Sheathing the Blue Rose Sword in its scabbard, Eugeo laid it on the ground, then took off the silver armor broken during the battle with Kirito. Upon stripping off the gauntlets, body armor, and mantle, he returned to his previous shirt-and-trousers outfit and softly touched his chest, affirming **its** presence.

He took a step towards the curtains, and then another.

A small shadow tottered out from the bed with unsteady steps. Accompanied by an unpleasant laughter.

“Hohi, hohihi... I thought you did a good job, scraping through for five or ten minutes, but to think you would return alivee. Looks like I have a winner on my hands heree.”

Eugeo's breath stopped the moment he saw the person whom the moonlight fell upon. He desperately held his expression back from stiffening.

Ill-fitted clothes, deep red on his right and deep blue on his left. With the middle of his chest, swelling out like a balloon, misshapenly patched together.

Eyes as thin as thread and a mouth pulled into a great smile on a round, pale, and blank face. His bald head lacked that golden hat, but there was no mistaking this bizarre appearance.

The chief elder, Chudelkin. The man who appeared just as the battle between Eugeo and Knight Commander Bercouli was about to conclude, the one who turned the knight commander into a lump of stone with that «*Deep Freeze*» art and likely brought Eugeo up to the hundredth floor here after he lost consciousness.

Despite his short and comical appearance, he was likely the arts user possessing power second to only the highest minister among all in the Axiom Church, the one who presides over trials with utmost cruelty. Finding out about his memories returning, even if it was only temporary, would likely prompt him to instantly use that terrifying petrification art. He could only struggle through this without drawing suspicion if he were to fulfil his final role.

Chudelkin gave the armor Eugeo had taken off, lined up on the floor, a glance before exaggeratedly raising his two eyebrows consisting only of mere strands.

“Oh myy, you sure have done a number on this armor Her Eminence had bestowed upon youu. You... haven't just ran back here after getting beaten to a pulp by those traitors, have you, number thirty twoo?”

Her Eminence likely refer to Administrator, and the traitors would be Kirito and Alice, while that number thirty two would be Eugeo's «number» as an integrity knight. Anything he said in this situation would only serve to increase his suspicion, but he had no choice but to answer when asked.

Steeling his determination, Eugeo opened his mouth, giving his all to keep his expression still.

“I had confined the two traitors in ice, Your Excellency, Chief Elder.”

In response, Chudelkin’s entire face lit up with a smile while the tiny pupils within his two arching eyes emitted a cold light with absolutely no aura of mirth.

“Oh, really. Confined them in ice...? That’s all very nice, but you have finished them off, have you not, number thirty two?”

“.....”

He floundered for an adequate answer in that instant of silence.

Of course, he had not finished Kirito and Alice off. The Blue Rose Sword’s armament full control art was one constructed with the aim of sealing an enemy’s movement without harm. Even when sealed in thick ice, their Life would hardly fall as long as they kept their heads out.

Would it best to reply with an affirmative, rather than revealing the truth? But that lie would be immediately exposed if he went to check the floor below. If Kirito was here, he would definitely ad-lib an appropriate reply with his innate intuition and pluck.

–I had always been hiding behind Kirito. Depending on my partner upon encountering trouble, leaving the important decisions to others.

–But I can only think and decide for myself now. It’s not like Kirito got through all those problems with his intuition alone. He only got me this far after thinking very hard to arrive at the right choices.

–Think. Like how he would.

Forgetting even the frigid throbbing still in his mind for the moment, Eugeo thought. And his mouth opened and replied at the lowest volume he could muster.

“No, I had not finished them off, Chief Elder. I was instructed to detain the traitors by the esteemed Highest Minister’s command.”

He did not know if he actually had received such an instruction from Administrator.

However, as far as he could fuzzily recall, the chief elder was absent when he first woke up in this room. If he had

not been present when Eugeo was turned into an integrity knight, Chudelkin should not be capable of judging the contents of the command, and not to mention how he could not possibly overturn the highest minister's words.

Of course, it would be all over if the person herself, in the bed around ten mel away, heard this conversation. However, the girl seemed to be reciting some sort of art beyond those layers of curtains that could very likely muffle a whisper.

Still restraining his inner worries from showing on his face, he awaited Chudelkin's response and—

The fat lips of the small man in the jester outfit greatly distorted as they let out a voice that rang of anger.

“No good, that's no goood, number thirty two.”

The index finger on his right hand shot out before Eugeo's face—

“Make sure you call me Your Excellency, Chief Elder, when you're addressing me. Your Excellency, you hear? Guess who's becoming a horsey as punishment the next time he forgets to add Your Excellencyy? I'll be on your back with you down on the ground, going yee-haw, yee-haw, hohihihii.”

Shrill laughter spilled from him before he quickly pressed his two hands to his mouth and peeked towards the bed. After confirming the highest minister's art was continuing without pause, he patted his chest in an exaggerated motion and sneered once again.

“...Now I must get going to my own orders from Her Eminence. I'll have to *deep freeze* all the rotten knights defying the church at once as Her Eminence's grand will decrees. Oh, and you shall await further orders there, number thirty two. I can't enjoy myself to the fullest with a burden weighing me down, you see, ho, hohoho.”

Forcing down the revulsion welling up from his chest, Eugeo nodded.

Chudelkin danced towards the elevating disk on the southern corner with an unsteady gait. He must be planning to humiliate Kirito and Alice before turning them to stone like what he had done to the knight commander, Bercouli.

However, there was no need to worry about the two—probably. After all, the «ice jail» brought forth by the Blue Rose Sword was utterly useless before Knight Alice's armament full control art.

Eugeo had trapped all of Alice in ice on the eightieth floor, the «Cloudtop Garden». However, the Fragrant Olive Sword she held split into countless small blades and swept out, immediately shaving through the ice.

They might have already escaped from the ice by now, and even if they had not, Alice had no need for mercy in using the might of her sword in response to Chudelkin's arrival.

Chudelkin leapt onto the elevating disk, breathing hard with that odd laughter, and headed down. Eugeo awaited with his breath silenced and an empty elevating disk soon returned, assimilating with the floor like before. The chief elder must have made the disk ascend with plans to enjoy himself in that shut space. That denied him the means of ascertaining the situation on the ninety-ninth floor.

—That's fine. Those two would never be done in by the chief elder.

Stifling his unease with a deep breath, Eugeo returned his sight towards the middle of the room.

Raising his left hand, he pressed it down onto his chest from above his shirt once more.

—I have my own role to play.

He rallied his spirits, picked up his sword, and began walking forward. He approached the bed, three mel, two mel, one mel; it happened then.

The art incantation that had continued unceasingly thus far stopped and vanished as though it had been drained elsewhere. His instincts froze his feet and Eugeo pondered.

Was the art completed or did she stop upon noticing Eugeo's approach? In the first place, what sort of art was the highest minister chanting?

He quickly scanned through the surroundings, but the room stayed as it was. Likely measuring over forty mel across, the circular room was a size wider than the ninety-ninth floor, but the furnishings were limited to the large bed, the carpet spread over the floor, and the ten-odd pillars shaped after greatswords supporting the surrounding glass windows. The golden pillars merely glittered quietly as they went against the moonlight, with no sign of anything else making an appearance.

Abandoning his investigation, Eugeo turned back towards the bed. The core of his mind throbbed sharply in that instant.

The cold pain was gradually intensifying. There must be not much time left for him to retain his own consciousness. He had to do what he had to do before he became an integrity knight in both body and soul.

The bed was within his arm's reach after a few more steps forward and he softly laid down the Blue Rose Sword gripped in his right hand after a brief hesitation. His unease and forlornness heightened the moment his beloved sword left his hand, but he could not have Administrator bear the slightest distrust towards him.

After lifting himself and taking another deep breath, he called out with a prayer for his voice to not tremble.

“...Esteemed Highest Minister.”

A silence of a few seconds, which felt like several times that, lapsed and that voice replied.

“...Welcome back, Eugeo. It appears you have taken care of that errand, haven't you.”

“...Yes.”

He replied in a monotonous murmur. Acting was never his forte, but he had lived in Rulid Village for years while stifling his emotions. He simply had to return to back then. To the self from back then, before he met that mysterious black-haired youth.

“Good boy. You deserve a reward, Eugeo. Come closer onto the bed.”

An appeal, syrupy with tenderness, came from beyond the curtains.

Touching his chest once more with his left hand, he gently pulled apart the seam between the curtains surrounding the bed. He could not see far beyond there, engulfed in a violet darkness, but a familiar, cloying scent drifted as though it was drawing him closer.

He climbed onto the smooth sheets of white silk, then crawled forward, bit by bit. It should be only five mel until the center of the bed, even if it was on the large side, but he could not see anything no matter how much he moved his limbs, neither did his fingertips came into contact with anything.

However, she would notice his cognizance if he became flustered and raised his voice here. Focusing entirely on the texture of the sheets, he advanced.

Suddenly—

A pale light came into existence without a sound from somewhere slightly above.

The pure white radiance was neither that of a candle nor a lamp. It was a luminous element generated by an art though he hardly caught its incantation. Drifting breezily, the light orb kept away nothing more than a little of the murky darkness.

Having lowered his gaze, Eugeo found a smile from «that person» two mel ahead and opened his eyes wide for an instant. Erasing his expression in the next, he gave a low bow with both hands still down.

A girl draped in a thin violet fabric with her long, silver hair streaming over that. The one who ruled over the Human World, the one who possessed transcendental beauty with eyes, like opaque mirrors, that denied access to her heart.

The highest minister, Administrator.

Slovenly sitting atop the sheets, the girl whispered while her eyes stared into Eugeo, gleaming silver from the element's light.

“Now, come closer, Eugeo. I will give you what you seek as we have promised. A «love» devoted to you and only you.”

“.....Yes.”

Responding extremely quietly, Eugeo gradually sidled towards to the girl with his body still bowed low.

He would lunge at the girl upon getting one mel away, preventing her mouth from chanting arts with his left hand and drawing «that» out from his chest to stab into her with his right hand. Everything would end in less than two seconds, but even that seemed far too long when up against Administrator.

A pain, sharper than before, ran from his forehead to the core of his mind the moment he affirmed his opposition against the highest minister once more. However, he could not show concern over that. Loosening as much strength from his entire body as he could, he slowly, slowly approached—

“...But before that...”

Administrator whispered all of a sudden with Eugeo a mere ten cen away, bringing him to a rapid stop.

“...Please let me take a good look at your face once more, Eugeo.”

Did she feel his malice? But if she had, there would be no use pouncing onto her. He could only follow her words for now.

Eugeo gently lifted his body with his expression still frigid and looked into the girl's face.

He thought to not let their eyes meet at least, but those two specular eyes had an irresistible allure that drew Eugeo in. The eyes that did not betray what lay beyond them, yet peered deep into all who looked into them, glimmered bewitchingly under the sacred art's light.

The girl moved her petite lips at the end of several seconds that felt like an eternity.

“...I did insert the module into the gap in your memories that was previously there because it was most ideal, but I suppose sloth might not have been the best idea...”

Eugeo could not immediately understand the true purpose behind her murmur, partly directed towards herself.

Previously there—in other words, that meant Eugeo had a part of his memories missing before he was brought to this room? However, Eugeo was utterly unaware of any such blanks in his own past. He might precisely not notice it himself as it was a «gap in his memories», but the sage, Cardinal, certainly did mention this.

The fragment of the target's most precious memories must be removed in order to embed the piety module. That would usually correspond to memories of the person most beloved to the target.

Recalling that brief moment in the hidden Great Library Room that seemed ages ago, Eugeo muttered in his heart.

.....The person most beloved to me. That's Alice Schuberg, taken away by an integrity knight before my eyes on that day eight years ago. I have never forgotten about Alice even once. I can remember her golden hair glittering under the sun, her azure eyes, more so than the skies in the heart of summer, and her sparkling smile just by closing my eyes.

.....And it is different from love, but I have a partner just as important as Alice now. The mysterious youth I met in the forest south of Rulid two years, two months ago. The «lost child of Vector» with black hair and black eyes like

those from the east. My closest friend, Kirito, who dragged me from the village and guided me to the Central Cathedral. I can still vividly visualize his impish smile.

.....Alice and Kirito. I might never be able to see their smiles again. But even if I were to lose my life here, I will never forget those two until my final moment.

.....I wanted to return to Rulid Village with them after Alice had taken back her memories... but I no longer have the right to wish for that. I, who had lost myself to Administrator's temptations and directed my sword towards those two, more precious than any other.

As his thoughts drifted there once more, Eugeo's eyes quivered ever so slightly.

He did not know how had Administrator interpreted that expression, but she inclined her head lightly and spoke.

"So it is a little unstable after all. I suppose there is no helping it, I will have to synthesize you once again. You can have your reward after that, Eugeo."

And she carelessly reached out with her right hand.

It might have been a good opportunity to act, but the instant her slender fingertip pointed towards his forehead, an unforeseen phenomenon assailed Eugeo. His entire body went numb with even his mouth paralyzed, let alone his limbs.

And in the next moment—

A strange sensation went through his head, from his forehead to the back.

The source of that cold throbbing, the icy thorn embedded deep in his head, was dragged out slowly but forcibly. Pain was absent, but his sight flashed white each time the thorn moved, granting him vision of a hazy scene.

Verdant branches rustling in the wind. Labile sunlight filtering through the trees.

Running through under those with smiles all around.

Golden hair glittering in the light a short distance beyond.

And jet-black hair frisking about energetically by his side.

The young Eugeo ran as he turned his sight towards the right. But his other childhood friend's smile lurked deep within a white glare—

A pronounced, intense shock dragged Eugeo back onto the dim bed.

A strange object rose from Eugeo's forehead as his numbed body greatly bent backwards. A transparent triangular prism illuminated in purple.

Integrity Knight Eldrie, too, had acted strange as a similar triangular prism protruded out from his forehead the instant he heard his mother's name in the battle in the rose garden. However, the prism from Eugeo's forehead appeared to be larger, carved in a more intricate pattern, and emitted a stronger glow.

Assailed by the astonishment behind how such a huge foreign object was embedded in his own head and the fear of Administrator's sacred arts capable of such a feat, Eugeo simply watched on in silence.

“Yes... you simply have to stay still like that...”

The silver-haired girl gently whispered and stretched her right hand further, slowly drawing out the violet triangular prism from Eugeo's head. His thoughts went white the instant the foreign object left and Eugeo slumped onto the bed as his strength left him too.

The highest minister lovingly gave the triangular prism, supported by her fingers of both hands, a glance as she spoke.

“This module is an improved variant completed just recently. I tried to include not only loyalty towards the church and me, but the circuits to strengthen your *imagination* too. You will immediately be able to use the power of incarnation the moment you are synthesized with this, even without that ineffective training. That is still restricted to the basic techniques for now, but...”

Eugeo could not understand more than half of Administrator's words.

However, one thing stood clear. That triangular prism, the «piety module», had taken over Eugeo's thoughts, turned him into an integrity knight, and made him point his sword at Kirito and Alice. Of course, he was the one who chose that path, but he could now play his final role without interference from that false loyalty with the module removed. Now that he thought about it, the throbbing that remained in the core of his mind and was cold

as ice had vanished as well.

However. The numbness throughout his body, that had assailed him the instant Administrator pointed her finger at him, showed no sign of fading even with the module removed. He was still unable to move his body as he desired.

If only I could move my right hand. I could grab that from my chest and swing it down on Administrator, if only I could do that—

As Eugeo desperately mustered together his strength, looking downwards with his back arched, that white right hand reached out once again.

He stared with upturned eyes and the highest minister, with her left hand holding the module, came closer until their knees almost touched. The girl pulled his head towards herself with a gentle smile and Eugeo pitched forward, unable to resist even that meager strength.

Having placed Eugeo's head, turned sideways, on her two bent legs, Administrator caressed near the borders of his hair with her fingers as she whispered.

“Let me have another look at your memories. I will definitely embed this in the place you treasure most this time. Your head will no longer hurt after that. And that is not the end... you will be forever freed from those needless distress and agony, along with your hunger and thirst too.”

The slender, pale fingers left his forehead and slowly fell lightly onto his lips. The numbness faded from his mouth alone.

Her fingers left and the girl showed a charming smile as she commanded.

“Now, recite that art I taught you earlier.”

“.....”

Eugeo's lips slightly trembled as they, and they alone, regained the ability to move.

The haze in his memories included not only the exchange of swords with Kirito as an integrity knight but the moments directly before that too, but the three words he had recited alone stood out vividly in his memories.

Remove core protection.

He could not even begin to imagine what these unfamiliar sacred words meant, but he was convinced of one thing at least. That short phrase would throw open what kept a human's heart safe, the door bestowed upon each person at their birth.

That was why Administrator could freely peek through Eugeo's memories and insert the piety module into a pre-existing gap. However, in Administrator's words, the «synthesizing» was unstable, so she intended to repeat that.

Eugeo could maintain his own consciousness at the current moment, regardless of the risks, so that door to his heart must have been closed again. He did not know whether it closed by itself as time passed, or if Administrator had shut it for some sort of reason. However, Administrator needed Eugeo to recite those three words again in order to repeat the synthesizing.

If he recited them, Eugeo's body and heart, too, would likely turn into those of an integrity knight this time, denying him his final wish of retrieving Alice's memories.

However, if he did not, Administrator would notice Eugeo's insubordination.

At this very moment. This moment with the highest minister revealing her defenseless, bare skin might be his final and greatest opportunity. He had to somehow move his right hand and stab that thing into her.

The highest minister had numbed Eugeo by merely pointing at him with her right hand. That was not all to it. He also did not hear her voice chanting the art when the luminous element floating above the bed was generated.

Eugeo had caught sight of a similar invisible power being used without reciting any words a short while ago, though of different type. Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One who he fought at the large bath downstairs. From Eugeo's point of view, the hero from ancient times, a founder of Rulid Village and his ancestor from far in the past, had drawn a sword left a distance away towards himself simply by holding out his hand.

That was not all. Now that he thought back upon it, the sage of the Great Library Room, Cardinal, had shut away the passage, brought forth a table, and accomplished other such acts with a single wave of her staff, hadn't she? Masters like them must be capable of exhibiting power equivalent to sacred arts simply by visualizing it in their minds.

Of course, for Eugeo who was still studying sacred arts at the academy mere days ago, he could not even match the ascetic apprentices serving the Axiom Church as an arts user, let alone Administrator and Cardinal.

He had to break through the numbness binding his body with the power of his mind.

Kirito had once said this. That what truly mattered in this world was putting something in one's sword. That could only imply how power born of one's mind could reside in one's sword, strengthening its attacks.

If the mind could strengthen one's sword, it could be applied to sacred arts... no, to any one of a human's actions as well.

--Move.

Separating his lips and gently taking in a breath, Eugeo wished.

--Move, please, my right hand.

--I had made many mistakes thus far in my life. I couldn't help Alice when she was taken away by that integrity knight, I didn't go and help her for countless years after that, and I lost sight of my path after I finally arrived at the final destination of my journey; I have to atone for my weaknesses.

".....Mm..."

A hoarse, low voice spilled from Eugeo's mouth.

"...Mm... ov..."

Administrator's smile faded as she looked on from straight above. Her two silver eyes narrowed as they considered Eugeo's intentions. There was no turning back. The power gathered from all about his mind concentrated upon his right hand.

However, the numbness refused to leave. Countless invisible needles pierced everywhere over his fingers and palm as through preventing him from further movement. This right hand could break apart for all he cared if only it could move for this instant. It would be fine even if he could never swing a sword again. So, just once more--

"...M, ov, e...!"

It was when he cried out in that strained voice.

A faint glow enveloped Eugeo's right hand, thrown upon the sheets. A warm, gentle radiance capable of dissolving any and all pain and anguish. It took only an instant for the ice needles stabbed into his bones and flesh to thaw.

"...You...?"

Administrator muttered and drew back.

However, Eugeo's right hand had already been freed from its numbness by then and slipped into his shirt, taking out something that dangled off a narrow chain.

A tiny dagger that gleamed in a deep shade of copper.

Held in a backhanded grip, it swung down into Administrator's pure white skin peeking out from the dipping neckline at the bosom of her flimsy garment.

It could not miss. The blade measured a mere five cen on the dagger, but a target that was practically within arm's reach could not possibly be out of its range.

However, in the very moment before its needle-like point truly pierced into Administrator's flesh, a phenomenon beyond his wildest imagination occurred.

Gagaan!! An impact resembling thunder roared out and concentric circles formed by membranes of violet light appeared with the dagger at their heart.

What made up those shining ripples were verses of sacred letters of an extremely small size. The thin membranes that seemed far too frail thwarted the sharp point of the dagger.

"Gu... uhh!!"

A powerful repelling force opposed Eugeo as he gritted his teeth and strained with all his will.

The dagger he held in his right hand was one of a pair given to them by the sage, Cardinal, with one entrusted to each of them. Though the dagger itself possessed nearly no offensive ability, Cardinal could send her sacred arts from the isolated library room to the one stabbed by it.

Eugeo's dagger was for putting Integrity Knight Alice to sleep.

And Kirito's dagger was given to him for defeating the highest minister, Administrator. However, he ended up using his dagger on Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio Synthesis Two to save her life after their battle on the fiftieth floor of the cathedral.

Cardinal's voice, conveyed through space, mentioned this at that time. [The possibility of Administrator still in her unawakened state is high at the present moment. If you reach the highest floor before that woman awakens, you could deal with her without using the dagger.] she said.

However, they were too late. With her now awake, there were no means of defeating the highest minister who possessed power equivalent to Cardinal's aside from the dagger Eugeo held.

He would retrieve Alice's memories and return to Rulid Village with her. That was Eugeo's only wish for the longest time. However, he felt he no longer had the right to hold on to that hope now that he had been deluded by the highest minister's words, put on an integrity knight's armor, and turned his sword upon Kirito—and Alice, too—even if it was only temporarily.

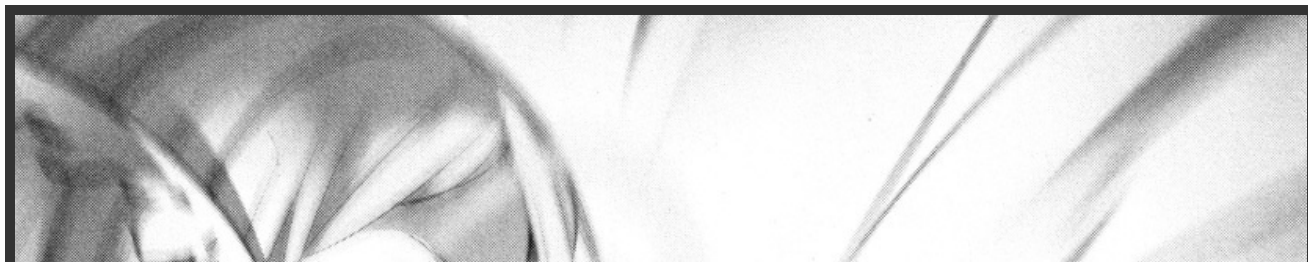
The means of redeeming for his error numbered only one.

That would be to abandon himself—to sacrifice himself for a greater good, rather than his personal desires; that was all.

At the tender age of eleven, Alice was taken from her home town and trained as a knight with her memories sealed.

Despite their unsullied records, Tieze and Ronye were humiliated through the privileges granted to nobles.

He would expend the rest of his strength to crush that twisted political system. Even if it took his death here to defeat the highest minister, the days he spent travelling to the central capital from the village and studying at the academy were not vain.







The dagger swung down with such determination, but it was still hindered by those purple membranes and failed to reach Administrator's skin. Meanwhile, the highest minister, too, had apparently failed to predict Eugeo's actions and threw her upper body back as a sharp breath escaped from her.

A light harboring indignation resided in her two silver eyes, opened wide.

Taking on that gaze, Eugeo placed his left hand against his right and tried to force in the dagger with what strength he had left.

"U... o-ooh!"

The fine, needle-like point pierced just a single millice into the intensely glowing barriers—when it happened.

The numerous sacred letters making up the barriers exuded pure white light as they exploded, blowing Eugeo and the highest minister away.

"...!!"

Even while he rapidly flew through the air, thrown off the bed in an instant, as though mowed down by a giant's palm, Eugeo still succeeded in two tasks.

He barely regained his grip on the chain with the dagger after it was flicked away from his right hand and grasped the Blue Rose Sword's scabbard, lying right beside him after his back was thrown against the floor, with his left hand.

Embracing his heavy, cherished sword had zero effect on reducing his momentum and he tumbled across the floor, coming to a stop only after slamming his back against the large window far away.

"Guhh....."

A short groan escaped from Eugeo even as he desperately brought up his face and stared towards the center of the room.

The flimsy pieces of cloth dangling from the high ceiling were all blown open, revealing the circular bed. Beyond them laid a human silhouette, silent and upright. Despite blown away by the exploding barriers like Eugeo, her long hair merely rippled gently, with no sign of injury left on her. The glimmer of the triangular prism extracted from Eugeo was visible in her left hand.

The violet, sheer fabric apparently failed to endure the blast and disintegrated as they were torn away, but Administrator lifted her right hand and fixed her ruffled, long, silver hair as though she found no need to pay any attention to her utterly unclothed body.

She softly sat down next, as if an invisible chair was present in the air, and crossed her slender legs. She silently moved through the air in that posture, stopping roughly ten mel away from Eugeo, on his hands and knees at the southern edge of the spacious room.

The highest minister placed a finger on her right hand on her chin atop the unseen throne as she stared hard at Eugeo. He stayed capable of neither movement nor speech and eventually, the silver-eyed girl showed a fleeting smile and spoke.

“I was wondering just where were you keeping such a trinket... but that is simply a ploy from that kid in the library room, isn't it? To think she would *filter* it out from my perception; so she had thought up of a thing or two in the short while she stayed out of my sight.”

She let out an unrestrained, quiet giggle.

“But what a pity. I haven't been sleeping this entire time either. That kid blundered when she thought to make that toy metallic. No metal object can hurt this skin of mine now, without exception. Be it that brutish blade of the ogres, or a marking pin from the sewing shops.”

“Wh.....”

Still prostrate on the floor, Eugeo weakly moaned.

She was invulnerable to metallic weapons.

If that proved to be true, would it not render attacks from all sorts of weapons, including the dagger from Cardinal, powerless? The violet membranes that prevented the dagger's point earlier was likely that defensive

art, but Eugeo did not have the slightest idea of what sacred art could cancel it and he doubt he even possessed the capability for it.

Administrator gently whispered to Eugeo who was able to do naught more than desperately gripping the weapon small enough to be hidden in his right hand and looking up at the nude girl sitting in mid-air.

“What a pitiful child.”

“.....”

“And I even promised you so. If you had given all of yourself to me, I would have granted you just as much love in turn. That eternal love, that eternal servitude you sought for so long would have been yours in just a little longer.”

“.....Eternal love...”

Eugeo unconsciously repeated after her in a parched voice.

“Eternal..... servitude.....”

The highest minister nodded, fiddling with the piety module she had just extracted from Eugeo’s forehead with her left hand.

“Yes, Eugeo. Entrust all of yourself to me and that thirst torturing you so will be immediately quenched. You will be freed from the relentless embrace of unease and fear. ...This is your final chance, Eugeo. Crush the toy in your right hand with the sword in your left hand. I will pardon you from your sins with my boundless love then.”

“.....”

Laid prone, Eugeo stared at the Blue Rose Sword gripped in his left hand and the reddish-copper dagger held in his right.

“Love is to dominate and to be dominated... –You’re the pitiful one here, being only able to speak of it in such a manner.”

“.....”

The highest minister’s lips then shut.

With a single wave of that slender right hand, extremely highly ranked sacred arts would rain down and instantly erase his Life. Eugeo continued his words, still, aware of that fact.

“...I’m sure you were the same. You starved for love and sought it out... but no one offered you any.”

He murmured in the depths of his chest as he spoke on.

–I might have been a child unloved by even his own parents.

–But even so, I had definitely loved many people.

Old Garitta-san, the previous generation’s woodcutter. Sister Azariya from the church. Selka the sister apprentice.

My grandfather who had told me many old tales. My sister, Sulinea-san, who used to look after me when I was still a child.

Banou-san and Toriza-san from Wolde farm. Telin and Telulu, their twins.

Gorgolosso-senpai who trained me. Azurika-sensei from the dormitory.

Tieze who granted me her smile everyday as my valet, short as it lasted. Ronye who looked after my partner.

And Kirito.

Alice.

“You’re wrong, pitiful one.”

Eugeo stared into Administrator’s eyes, exuding a mysterious iridescent light, and deliberated on each word as he spoke them out.

“Love is not to dominate. It’s not to seek for something in return, it’s not something you can receive in exchange. It’s something to be given out freely, like watering a flower... that is definitely what love truly is.”

A faint smile appeared on Administrator’s lips once again when she heard those words.

However, it lacked that saccharine sweetness from earlier.

“.....What a pity. To think my bid to pardon this boy, this great sinner who rebelled against the Axiom Church, and save his soul would end with such words spoken to me.”

Eugeo looked up, his breath taken away, as the silver-haired girl floating in mid-air transformed from a «human» to a «god» in an instant.

Nothing changed on the outside. However, an unfathomable intimidating presence—what felt like divinity, so to speak—enveloped her pale, almost transparent, skin. A manifestation of overwhelming might that seemed as though she could tear apart the most adept swordsman or arts user into fine pieces with a single wave of a finger.

“Eugeo... could you possibly be thinking... that I actually have a need for you? That I will hesitate to take your life because I desired you as a knight... or anything of that sort?”

The girl’s subdued smile expressed no emotion whatsoever. He could do nothing more than to keep a stiff, tight grip on the dagger in his right hand and to endure the sense of intimidation pressing down on him.

“Ufufu... I have no more need for a dull child like yourself. I will drain you of your Life, and perhaps grant you the honor of having your corpse converted into a tiny jewel, to be put away in a box. I could derive a meager bit of emotion whenever I see that, even after organizing my memories from today.”

Administrator spoke, her speech intermingled with laughter, and gently adjusted her legs while atop the invisible chair.

That was no empty threat. The highest minister probably could put her words into action without hesitation if she wanted to.

He could not escape now and besides, he had already lost all and any avenue of escape. It would be too late if he tried moving to the elevating disk to head downstairs. Even if he broke the glass behind him somehow, all that laid beyond that were the hundreds of miles of empty skies extending up from ground level.

Besides, Eugeo had chosen his own fate the moment he used the Blue Rose Sword’s armament full control art on Kirito and Alice on the ninety-ninth floor. He would stab the highest minister with Cardinal’s dagger even at the cost of his life.

The highest minister was protected by a barrier that prevented all metallic weapons. However, Eugeo felt that barrier was not as almighty as the girl had claimed. The barrier appeared to have self-destructed when he recklessly tried to force the dagger in earlier. He doubted that was the end of the art, but it presented the

possibility that the dagger could reach her immediately after the explosion.

“My... are you not quite done yet?”

Looking down at Eugeo who crawled on all fours, Administrator whispered.

“What a gallant boy, willing to indulge me yet again in your final moment. ...I wonder, would killing you and turning you into a jewel be too dull a choice? It might take some time, but perhaps it's better to synthesize you by force like that child...?”

Despite the precarious situation, a part of the highest minister's speech still caught Eugeo's ear and he unconsciously repeated in reply.

“...That child...?”

The silver-haired girl grinned broadly at that and nodded.

“Indeed. The one you were so infatuated with, *Thirty*-chan. That child hated reciting that art too, so I had the automated elders system spend several days to eliminate that *protection* by force. I didn't witness it because I was asleep, but it must have been truly excruciating. ...How about it? How about having a taste of it yourself...?”

“.....*Thirty*... ...Alice...”

Eugeo called out that name in a hardly discernible manner.

As usual, he could not understand over half of the words from the highest minister's mouth. However, he understood this clearly.

The young Alice struck with a rope and taken to the Central Cathedral eight years ago had undergone atrocious treatment in the process of becoming an integrity knight. She had firmly refused to voice out the «remove core protection» verse, the one Eugeo had recited when he yielded to Administrator's temptations, and had the door to her heart forced open as a result. The pain of the injuries Eugeo received through his battles thus far must have paled in comparison to the suffering she had gone through.

He really could not possibly flee here.

He would not forgive himself if he fell before landing even a single blow on Administrator in return.

“.....”

Firmly gritting down on his teeth, Eugeo lifted himself up with his trembling arms and wobbled as he stood up.

Staring back at the highest minister, whose eyes showed less amusement than before, he wrapped the dagger's chain around his right wrist and gripped the Blue Rose Sword's handle with that hand. Affirming the texture of the white leather that seemed to stick to him, he drew it out in a single motion and tossed the sheath onto the floor.

The blade gleamed bluish-silver against the moonlight flowing in from the window behind.

The girl sitting in mid-air ten meters ahead narrowed her eyes as though wary of that light and spoke in a voice colder than ever.

“I see, so that's your answer, boy. Very well... I shall spare you some mercy and kill you without any further suffering.”

Raising her right hand, she pointed nothing more than her index finger towards Eugeo.

The highest minister seemed to have no need for words in her usage of sacred arts. However, there should still be two requirements to clear before she could carry out any offensive art.

Those would be element generation and processing. Be it thermal, cryogenic, or some other element, even a master would need two seconds to generate and shape them.

As such, Eugeo had already set up a stance with his cherished sword at his right shoulder by the time the highest minister began moving her right hand.

The Blue Rose Sword's blade was enveloped in a yellow-green glow.

Light blue points of light were created on Administrator's fingertips.

“O... ohh!”

This was his last sword. His last secret technique.

Eugeo kicked off the ground, perfectly aware of that.

Aincrad-style charging technique, «Sonic Leap».

Kirito's voice replayed deep in his ears.

–Listen here, Eugeo, secret techniques move our bodies for us. But we can't just let it move us as it likes.

–You have to become one with the secret technique and speed it up with how your feet and arms move. Your sword will reach the enemy faster than the wind if you do.

How many times had he practiced? How many times had he failed and plunged face first into a clump of bushes?

And how many times have he heard Kirito's voice laughing happily–?

Eugeo's sword gleamed verdant-green as it soared into the air, passing by even the sound of the wind being cut.

The smile vanished from the highest minister's lips and she extended her right hand.

The cryogenic elements, on the verge of being launched as ice needles, burst apart upon contact with the Blue Rose Sword. And immediately after, the secret technique with all of Eugeo's strength behind it crashed into Administrator's palm–no, the violet membranes that expanded five cen from her hand.

An impact and noise far beyond earlier assailed Eugeo.

The violet barrier, capable of obstructing all metallic weapons, caught the accelerated Sonic Leap, too, but ripples spread outwards on several of the thin layers of miniscule sacred letters as they trembled violently.

The barrier should explode like a few minutes ago if he continued driving it in with all his might. He would resist that pressure somehow and stab the dagger dangling from his right wrist into Administrator for sure this time. He did not mind even if his body was torn into pieces as long as that succeeded.

“B... brr... eakk!!”

Eugeo yelled out as he put as much strength as he could muster onto the Blue Rose Sword that still retained its glow from the secret technique.

“.....!”

The highest minister remained silent, but her lips showed no sign of cheer. Iridescent light swirled deep in her narrowed eyes as she grimly bent the five fingers on her extended right hand.

She must not be attacking with her left hand because it held the piety module. The reason why she held onto it despite saying she would kill Eugeo must be either because she still desired to turn him into a knight or because she had some other method of using it.

However, there was no use pondering over that. He had to succeed in this final attack—even if it took all of his remaining vitality and strength to do so—there was nothing more.

“U... oooooohh—!!”

It was when Eugeo strained out one last scream from the bottom of his abdomen.

An unforeseen phenomenon occurred before his eyes yet again.

The Blue Rose Sword slowly began to sink into the violet barrier.

The barrier had yet to disappear. Despite that, the point of his beloved sword certainly did tear into those sacred letters that should obstruct all metal, little by little—no, it was slipping right through.

It was no illusion. The highest minister and her widening eyes served as evidence.

The state of affairs accelerated suddenly.

Having taken on Eugeo’s sword in mid-air, Administrator strongly sprang back without warning.

The barrier swiftly retreated as well and losing its support, the Blue Rose Sword swung straight down with a sharp noise as its blade sliced through the air. Several mel of the thick carpet were cut apart in a straight line the moment the blade touched down.

He understood something had happened. All he knew for sure was that he would suffer from the highest minister’s offensive arts if he stayed still. His limbs felt heavy, perhaps due to all that strength he had expended earlier, but Eugeo immediately kicked off the floor to follow up with an attack.

However, his enemy proved faster this round. The highest minister generated elements anew even while retreating and shot them towards Eugeo. The green points of light were already right before his eyes by the time he entered the stance for a secret technique.

Eugeo instinctively dropped the stance and guarded himself with the Blue Rose Sword. The aerial elements blew

up with a green flash immediately after and the extreme gales they brought forth blew Eugeo to the southern wall once again.

It was likely fortunate that the highest minister had omitted the process of converting the elements. If she had used them as wind blades and the like, instead of unleashing them as pure elements, they might have even severed a limb or two.

However, he could not be said to be entirely lucky either. Instead of a flat glass window like earlier, his back slammed into the gigantic pillar connecting two such windows this time.

A decorative greatsword was fitted onto the pillar and Eugeo crashed into its body before rolling onto the floor. If the imitation sword had its blade, rather than its flank, pointed towards him instead, he might have suffered a severe wound even if it was only an ornament. Thus, he could also actually be said to be lucky in that sense, but he was in no condition to stand up straight away with the pain threatening to deny him from breathing.

–I have to move. A real sacred art will be coming for me next.

Speaking to himself, Eugeo desperately tried to raise his upper body.

The highest minister had apparently retreated beyond the bed and he could see no more than the glimmer of her silver hair within the dark shadows. Even Sonic Leap would not reach at that distance—but naturally, it was of no difficulty for sacred arts. Crawling on all fours like he was now would guarantee his death.

“U... ghh...”

He moaned as he managed to prop up his right knee somehow. However, he still lacked the strength to use that leg. It disobeyed his commands, doing nothing more than tremble no matter how hard he tried to stand.

–Not yet. It’s not over yet. If I give up now, just what have I returned to this room for?

–No. Just what have I lived until this moment for?

“Gu... o-ohh...!”

Eugeo leaned his back against the golden imitation sword as he somehow pulled his body up, propping himself up with the Blue Rose Sword. It seemed he suffered not only bruises but gashes as well from the collision and his blood dripped ceaselessly onto the floor.

It must have taken over five seconds for him to stand up from his fall, but the highest minister had not followed up with an attack for one reason or another. Still floating about the darkness twenty mel ahead, she kept her silence.

Eventually, a quiet murmur drifted through the room; one audible only in the room filled with its absolute silence.

“.....That sword... hmm, so that’s it...”

Still confused over the meaning of her words, Eugeo glanced down at his right hand.

The Blue Rose Sword thrust into the floor. The reddish-copper dagger hanging off his wrist. Which was “that sword” Administrator spoke of?

His intuition whispered to him that this was of utmost importance, but before he arrived at an answer—

The silence that filled the highest floor of the Central Cathedral was shattered by an odd cry from neither Eugeo nor Administrator.

“Eek, eek eeeeeeeekkk!!”

He looked towards its source and saw a circle in the floor sinking four or five mel away. That was the elevating disk connected to the lower floor. A voice, louder still, rang out once again from the black gap surrounded by the carpet.

“H-Hel-Heeelp meeee, Your Eminenceee, Highest Ministeeeeeer!!”

That ear-piercing shriek could only belong to Chief Elder Chudelkin who descended towards the ninety-ninth floor slightly earlier.

Upon hearing his yells, interspersed with shrieks, Administrator stepped forward from the shadows without a sound, landing at the end of the bed, and muttered to herself.

“...How does he turn more infantile as the years pass by? I suppose it might be about time for a *reset*.”

Eugeo slowly retreated towards the western side of the room, building distance from the elevating disk, despite

the watchful eyes of the highest minister who was shaking her head gently.

The disk's sinking, but it's hardly fast. It should take tens of seconds before it reaches the lower floor and brings Chudelkin back once again.

—Or so he thought, but two pale hands gripped onto the edge of that hole just as the gap between the floor and disk became a mere twenty cen.

“Hoooooohh!!”

The strange voice echoed out for the third time, followed by a round head appearing from the gap. With his bald head dyed bright red, without even a single strand of hair, the chief elder forced his body through and tumbled onto the floor with a pop.

His clothes appeared no different from what he wore when he went down after gloating over his authority to Eugeo earlier. However, his red and blue jester costume that swelled up into a circle was torn everywhere and shriveled up.

With a glance at Chudelkin who had flopped onto the floor in a sitting posture, breathing heavily with that unique laughter.

“...What is that manner of dress?”

Administrator spoke, with a chilly voice.

On the other hand, Eugeo also felt a sort of shock. The chief elder's limbs and torso peeking through the tattered jester outfit were as slender as withered branches. With his head swelled round despite that, he looked like a stickman from a child's scribbles.

So what exactly was with his jester outfit that was inflated so much when he first saw him at the large bath? While Eugeo was engrossed in that question, Chudelkin lifted himself up without even noticing Eugeo who stood mere mel away, stood at attention, and began his defense.

“I-I must apologize for the distress I must be causing you by exposing my insignificant self in such an unseemly state before Your presence, Your Eminence, Highest Minister, but this is simply an unfortunate consequence of the fierce battle I went through in my bid to slay the traitors and protect the honorable Axiom Churchh!”

Chudelkin streamed on and on before stopping at that point and his eyes went wide, from the shape of a crescent moon to that of a full moon, possibly having noticed the highest minister's stark naked appearance. His two hands snapped over his face right after and his entire round head went red as he shouted out shrilly.

"Hauu!! Ohoooo!! Your humble servant is unworthy of beholding Your presence, Your Eminence, I shall have to smash my eyes and turn myself into stoneeee!!"

Even while talking on and on about how terribly undeserving he was, the gaps between his fingers widened as the two eyeballs beyond them gleamed brightly. It seemed even the highest minister found a need to respond to Chudelkin's reaction as she covered her breasts with her left hand. Her voice, carried on frigid air, shot towards the jester.

"State your business now, or I really will turn you into stone."

"Hooohh!! Hoaaa... aa... a-aahh..."

In the process of twisting his long and thin body while letting out that bizarre voice, Chudelkin froze still upon hearing the highest minister's words. His head, flushed red, turned increasingly pale.

Turning about without warning, the chief elder hopped like a frog towards the hole in the floor he had just exited. The elevating disk was still down on the ninety-ninth floor and yet to return.

"W-We will have to seal this up at once! That pair, those demons are-!!"

"...Were you not supposed to get rid of the rebels?"

Administrator asked and a jolt ran down Chudelkin's back.

"Y- Yo- Yo-Your humble servant had undergone an epic battle of valor and courage, resulting in this unseemly appearance, but as the traitors were far too accustomed with the ways of cowardice, trickery, and craftiness..."

Eugeo listened to the chief elder's screechy screams and devoted the other half of his consciousness to thinking.

The «traitors» Chudelkin referred to were, of course, Kirito and Alice who Eugeo had encased in ice on the ninety-ninth floor. Though the chief elder was the second best sacred arts user in the church and their movements were restricted by the ice, he doubted they even had a chance of losing and as expected, Chudelkin

had fled back after receiving a fierce counterattack.

However—that would essentially mean.

Eugeo unconsciously took a step or two away from the hole for the elevating disk.

Perhaps having heard the sound of his rustling clothes, Chudelkin switched from speaking of his incessant excuses to a glance in his direction.

His thin, drooping eyes opened wide once again. Thrusting a finger on his left hand at Eugeo, the chief elder gave a domineering shout as though he had forgotten about his own disgraceful sight.

“Hoaaa! Y-You, number thirty two! What are you standing around there foor! T- T-To think you could draw your blade in this «divine space» before Her Eminence’s presence, how could you, how could youu! Down, on your hands and knees, noooooooooowww!”

“.....”

But Chudelkin’s words hardly registered in Eugeo’s mind any longer.

What his two ears caught were the quiet vibrations coming from downstairs. The sounds the thick elevating disk made as it ascended with the power of arts.

Even the chief elder, entirely focused on showering him with curses, soon noticed those noises and firmly shut his mouth.

Spinning about, he got on all fours and quietly peeked into the hole in the floor.

“Hoaaaa—!!”

With his greatest shriek yet, he looked at Eugeo once more.

“N- N-Now, number thirty two! What are you waiting foor, hurry and head dooown! It’s all your fault in the first place, for not giving them a proper beating, none of this is my fault, Your Eminence, please, I plea you understand that fact at.....”

Chudelkin’s intense, rapid speech streamed on as his right foot moved forward in a bid to return to the bed while on all fours—

But not before a hand extended from the hole in the floor and got a strong grip on it.

“Hohiiiiieee--!!”

Screaming with his eyes wide open, Chudelkin swung about his right foot. The jester shoe with its pointy tip came off with that and his small frame tumbled away with the remaining momentum. Immediately getting onto his feet, the chief elder rushed towards the bed, turned over the dangling sheets, and snuck into the darkness in between them and the bed.

The highest minister standing on the other side of the bed silently looked down at the hole in the floor with a big smile instead, perhaps having lost her interest in the chief elder's idiocy. Eugeo felt he had to immediately slash at her if she shown any intention to attack, but for the time being, she seemed to be welcoming the new guests to her room without a word.

Upon confirming that, Eugeo returned his sight to the elevating disk.

The hand holding onto Chudelkin's shoe remained extended upright. The black sleeve slipped down, revealing an arm with muscles slender yet firm.

Just how many times had that arm pulled Eugeo up?

No, that hand had always been pulling him along until this day, this very moment. Even more so now, after Eugeo diverged from the path and pointed his sword towards the one that arm belonged to.

The elevating disk continued its ascent.

What appeared next was jet-black hair still ruffled from combat. Following that were two eyes, darker than the night sky visible beyond the glass and exuding a light stronger than those stars. And at last, lips showing a fearless grin—

“.....Kirito...”

Eugeo's voice quivered as he murmured his friend's name. It should not have been loud enough to hear from over ten meters away, but as though it was only natural, his bosom friend still turned his eyes towards Eugeo, beside the wall, and nodded with that same, old smile.

It was warm, strong, and exactly the same as when they first met. The elevating disk made a dull, heavy noise as it came to a stop immediately after.

–Kirito... You are...

An emotion throbbed deep in his chest, one that he had no name for.

However, that ache was certainly not unpleasant. At the very least, it was a pain far more tender, doleful, and precious compared to the agony he felt in his head when the piety module was still in it.

With his eyes fixed on Eugeo who stood stock still, the youth clothed in black, who was his partner and mentor in swordsmanship, showed a cocky grin and spoke.

“Hey, Eugeo.”

“.....And I told you not to come, too.”

He somehow managed to reply with those words and his partner threw Chudelkin’s shoe, still in his right hand, far away with a growing smile.

“Have I ever listened to your instructions like a good boy?”

“.....That’s true. You’re always..... always going with.....”

His remaining words faded away.

He wanted to atone for his sin of turning his sword at a friend with his life. He was prepared to stab the last hope, Cardinal’s dagger, into Administrator even if it resulted in his body being torn apart. But he ended up reuniting with Kirito before he accomplished that mission in the end.

No, that was wrong. Kirito arrived here of his own will.

He had smashed through Eugeo’s full control art, repelled Chief Elder Chudelkin, and came to the hundredth floor while Eugeo was still alive.

–That’s right, I’m still alive. And the dagger is still hanging off my right hand. So it’s time to fight. That’s all I need to do now.

Eugeo moved his sight off his partner and looked towards the middle of the room.

The highest minister, Administrator, showed a broad, mysterious smile as she quietly stood still beyond the gigantic bed. Her two specular eyes hid her inner emotions flawlessly as they always did, the bluish-white moonlight wavering within them. All he could tell was that cogs were turning in her mind while she looked downwards upon any new visitor.

He had to tell Kirito before the battle resumed. That the highest minister's flesh was protected by a barrier that hindered all things metallic—and that it was unlikely invincible.

With his eyes on the highest minister, Eugeo slowly began to move towards his partner.

And suddenly.

He heard a light, metallic clank from there. He turned his eyes towards the right.

Another person walked out from the murky shadow cast by the pillar behind, by Kirito's right.

Golden hair and armor enveloped in an exceedingly noble radiance upon receiving the bluish-white moonlight. The Fragrant Olive Sword, a sacred instrument with a guard modelled after a flower, at the left of her waist. A white skirt fluttering gently.

It was the integrity knight, Alice Synthesis Thirty.

Eugeo's eyes reflected Alice, who had already been cooperating with Kirito on the ninety-ninth floor. However, the ache in his chest grew even stronger upon seeing the pair standing side by side. His foot that yearned to be by Kirito's side stopped at its own discretion.

Knight Alice first looked at the highest minister, then at Eugeo.

The black bandage was still wrapped around the right of her face. She should be capable of healing it instantly, as an integrity knight with skills equivalent to those of high ranking arts users; but she left it alone, perhaps to come to terms with that pain.

Eugeo stared into Alice's left eye, dyed in a deep indigo blue and coursing with various emotions. One that strongly exuded her inner thoughts as a human, unlike the ones filled with cold apathy when they met again in the garden on the eightieth floor.

Despite how she had yet to regain her memories as Alice Schuberg, Knight Alice's inner world had changed greatly in this short time. And the one who had brought about that was unmistakably the black-haired knight standing by her side. Kirito's words had reached that frozen heart of Knight Alice that seemed like it could never melt.

If—

If he returned that «memory fragment» Cardinal spoke of, stored somewhere in this room by the highest minister, to Alice's mind.

Knight Alice would instantly return to Alice Schuberg, Eugeo's childhood friend.

At the same time, Alice's personality as a knight, the personality that likely conversed with Kirito, sheathed her sword, endured the pain from losing her right eye, and firmly decided to fight against the Axiom Church with him, would probably disappear.

That was Eugeo's greatest hope and the reason he continued to fight. But how would Alice react to that fact? And did Kirito... truly hope for Knight Alice's annihilation despite saving Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio's life even after a struggle to the death with her...?

Taking in a deep breath and breathing it out, Eugeo forced those thoughts back.

He had to focus on this final battle now. He had the opportunity to consider various matters because Administrator had been watching over the situation in silence, but it would not be odd for her attacks to resume any time.

Taking his sight off Alice, Eugeo gazed further into the room once again and continued moving. Stepping onto the moonlight shining in from the windows behind, he carefully walked sideways and finally arrived at Kirito's side.

Kirito whispered to Eugeo, who leaned his weight upon his drawn Blue Rose Sword after thrusting it into the floor once more.

“You're hurt. They aren't... from me, right?”

“.....”

In response to the words his partner spoke—willingly spoke to bring the battle downstairs to an end, Eugeo's mouth unconsciously slackened as he replied.

“Your sword didn't hit even once. I just slammed my back into that pillar a little.”

“Then you should have waited for us to get here.”

“...Hey, Kirito, I'm the one who stopped the both of you, you know?”

“As if we're weak enough to be stopped by just that.”

Their whispered quarrel continued on and he felt as though they had returned to how they were before they were separated on the eightieth floor... when they still lived together in the Sword Mastery Academy's dormitory; the aching in his chest dulled by just a little.

However, there was no taking back what had already happened. His sins of losing himself to the highest minister's temptations and pointing his sword at his bosom friend were not minor enough to be wiped away by words alone.

Eugeo pursed his lips and tightly gripped his beloved sword's handle.

Kirito, too, gazed further into the spacious room for a while in silence, then muttered in a tense voice.

“So that's... the highest minister, Administrator, huh.”

The one who answered was the knight standing on Kirito's other side, Alice.

“Yes. ...She is exactly as she was, six years ago...”

Perhaps hearing the pair's exchange, the highest minister finally broke her long silence.

“My, my... it must be the first time I had so many visitors in this room. Goodness, Chudelkin, were you not the one who said you would handle Alice-chan and the *irregular* boy?”

The hanging sheets beside the bed were pushed up from inside at that, and out shot a large head and nothing more than that. Facing the wrong direction, Chief Elder Chudelkin scratched his forehead as he shrilly screamed.

“Hoh, hohiii!! Y-Your humble servant was reduced to this unseemly state after an epic battle of valor and courage and...”

“I’ve already heard that one.”

“Hoaaaa! I-It was not my faaaauult! It’s because number thirty two went easy and covered less than even half of the traitors in ice, that’s why... besides, number thirty, that crude, gaudy knight even went and used that Release Recollection art on meee! Of course, I am certainly not one that could get even a single scratch from that glittery girl’s secret technique, hohihihii!”

“...That man is the only one I will definitely...”

Alice murmured in a voice filled with a cold thirst for blood. Paying absolutely no attention to that, Chudelkin spun about and looked up at Administrator, standing atop the bed, as his screechy voice droned on.

“In the first place, even number one and two were beaten downn! Their stupidity must infected number thirty too, yes, I am sure of ittt!”

“Hmm.Stay quiet for now.”

Chudelkin shut his mouth the instant Administrator said so and stayed still prostrate on the floor. But it appeared his two eyes were wide open, taking in the view of the stark naked highest minister without any sense of decency.

Despite saying she had no interest in the chief elder’s deeds, Administrator stared at Alice with her silver eyes and inclined her head slightly.

“It was about time to *reset* Bercouli and Fanatio, but... Alice-chan, I hadn’t used you for even six years yet, had I? I don’t see any sign of *error* in your logic circuits either... I wonder, was it really the influence of that *irregular* boy, after all? How fascinating.”

Eugeo understood nearly none of the words the highest minister spoke. However, the tone used by the silver-haired girl caused chills to run through him—as though speaking of domesticated sheep, or even of a tool.

“Hey, Alice-chan. You have something you want to tell me, don’t you? I won’t get angry, so go on, tell me.”

Administrator took a silent step forward atop the bed with a faint smile.

As though pushed back by an invisible wall, Alice took a step back.

Eugeo took a glance at her and saw the knight's side profile turn paler than the bluish-white moonlight as her blood flow slowed down, her lips weakly pursed together. However, Alice's feet moved no further back and she had apparently took her golden gauntlet off, unnoticed, with the fingers on her left hand softly touching the bandage over her right eye. As though the crude piece of glove had granted her strength, her withdrawn right foot stepped forth once more.

Clang.

Her footstep rang out sharply as though the thick carpet was never there. Instead of kneeling down, the golden knight threw her chest out proudly towards her lord and her cold voice reverberated.

“Esteemed Highest Minister. Today marks the end of the noble Order of the Integrity Knights. We were felled by the swords held by the mere two rebels standing by my side. ...Along with that bottomless obsession and deceit you had built up together with this tower!!”

Credits

Translation – Tap