

SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE

GUN GALE ONLINE

One Summer Day

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

ILLUSTRATION BY KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

SUPERVISED BY REKI KAWAHARA

VI

SWORD ART ONLINE
ソードアート・オンライン

Sword Art Online Alternative
Gun Gale Online

VI

One Summer Day



Keiichi Sigsawa

ILLUSTRATION BY

Kouhaku Kuroboshi

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Reki Kawahara

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DESIGN: BEE-PEE



Sword Art Online Alternative

GUN GALE ONLINE VI

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Sword Art: Online Alternative

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NEW YORK

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SWORD ART ONLINE Alternative Gun Gale Online, Vol. 6

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

Translation by Stephen Paul

Cover art by Kouhaku Kuroboshi

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PROLOGUE I

One summer day,

I returned to the battlefield.

In fact, I was sent there.

That was when I learned a valuable lesson.

That no one should make the battlefield their home.

Home is where family is, where a normal life awaits.

That gambling is not the most important activity in existence.

What's most important is to live life to the fullest.

I had never realized these things, and so I died on the battlefield.

On that day, I was able to return to my normal life.

But never will I forget the events that took place one summer day.



PROLOGUE II

August 16th, 2026 (Sunday) 8:20 PM

“Wait! Whoa! Help!” Llenn yelled in distress.

Her companions offered words of comfort.

“Sorry, no can do.”

“Nope, this isn’t gonna work. Sorry!”

“Uh-oh, I’ve got a sniper on me. I still can’t move.”

Pitohui, Fukaziroh, and M’s voices came in that order through the communication device Llenn had equipped directly into her eardrum.

“Ugh! You heartless cretins! May a witch turn you all into frogs!” Llenn cursed.

She was dressed in her pink battle fatigues, with pink magazine pouches on either hip and a pink P90 in her hands, as her back pressed against a stone wall—its dull gray color, standing out against all the pink, the same as the sky above.

The wall was only about thirty feet across and three feet tall, but that was plenty big enough to hide someone Llenn’s size. In its original state, at least. But then...

Ba-gomp!

“Eep!”

A terrifying explosion blew a huge hole at least one foot across straight out of the wall, causing Llenn to scream.

Pkooowwww!

The sound of the gunshot, like a wolf's howl, came after a delay.

It was only because the blasted part of the wall hadn't been in front of Llenn that she had the luxury of screaming. If it had happened right before her eyes, chunks of the wall would've hit her in the face and taken out half her hit points. There wouldn't have been time to scream.

"Pheew!" Llenn wheezed, thanking her lucky stars.

Ba-gomp, ba-gomp, ba-gomp.

"Hya! Bweef! Ahew!"

Each blast on the wall bit off more stone and elicited a fresh shriek. Llenn's hiding space was growing smaller by the moment.

For a hundred yards around the wall where she was hiding, there was nothing but dark, damp earth—not a single spot to run to or hide behind. Llenn's famous speedy sprinting might be enough to evade enemy fire in most cases, but not this time.

She knew it wouldn't work, because she'd been in the process of running across this map when a hail of machine-gun fire forced her to hide behind the wall. She managed to take cover, but no sooner had she decided she'd be safe for a while than a huge gun started blasting pieces out of the wall.

Ba-gomp.

"Hya-eee!"

Llenn was small, but her hiding space was getting smaller. There was maybe ten feet of solid stone to take shelter behind now.

She thought that her distant companions would be able to help her. She was wrong.

"At that level of destruction, it's a .50-caliber, bare minimum. Must be an antimateriel rifle. Lucky SOB."

"What about the one you used in SJ2, Pito?"

"Oh, that one? Well, the owner's not selling it to me. After I busted it up in that event, I heard that I was never allowed to borrow it again."

“I’ve been hunting around the wilderness looking for the kind of monsters that might drop one specifically for you, Pito.”

“Pito, if I find one, will you buy it off me for a ridiculous price?”

“Of course I will, Fuka! Pleasure doin’ business with ya!”

They were all enjoying the conversation from the security of a safe location. Not one of them lifted a finger to provide cover fire for poor Llenn. But she knew they were very far away, so whatever backup they could offer would be unhelpful anyway.

“Dammit!”

The wall burst open right next to her, leaving her only a tiny spot to hide in. The next shot to hit the wall was clearly going to blow her up along with it.

“Taaa!” She leaped out into the open.

Trusting her own ability, searching for life in the midst of death.

She got shot.

Right before she jumped out, a swarm of machine-gun bullets had flown into the spot where Llenn landed. They were waiting for that moment and anticipated the timing perfectly.

“Awww!”

The bullets riddled her tiny body before she could stop herself, tearing chunks out of her HP bar. The gauge went from yellow to red, and its descent did not slow in the slightest.

“That’s it... Dammit! They’re just too tough!” Llenn swore, sensing her fate in the moment that it dropped to zero. The strength went out of her legs, and her little body flopped to the side.

As she died, Llenn looked off into the distance, across the damp ground toward the quiet, ancient European-style castle, which stood at an imposing distance of over five hundred yards away.

The devil’s castle, where she would find the foes she needed to defeat but which rebuffed all approach.

In the upper left corner of her vision, one of her teammates' health gauges vanished, replaced by an X and the number *180* flickering to life.

“Okay, Llenn’s dead,” Pitohui murmured.

CHAPTER 1
Before the Battle Begins



CHAPTER 1

Before the Battle Begins

July 31st, 2026 (Friday) 3:07 PM

“Commencing the very first *How Do We Make Karen Kohiruimaki Understand How Strong She Is?* Committee!” called out a girl with braided hair and a light summer girls’ school uniform, raising her hand in a room somewhere in Tokyo.

Five other young girls wearing the same uniform cheered and applauded with petite hands.

“Yaaaah!”

“Yaaay!”

“Commence, commence!”

The five were seated around a low, round table resting atop a white rug. Six glasses of iced tea sat on the table, their surfaces sweating with condensation, as well as a variety of plates topped with snacks and treats of all kinds. They seemed to have just about everything you could possibly buy at the supermarket, in fact.

It was a midsummer day with delightful weather. Bright sunlight poured through the lace curtains drawn across the large window, and the air conditioner on the ceiling was doing its best to keep up.

“Now, as the team captain, I will take it upon myself to be the master of ceremonies for this committee,” said the girl with the black braids, sitting down and reaching for a chocolate-cream sandwich cookie.



Her name was Saki Nitobe. She was a senior at a renowned all-girls high school affiliated with a women's university. She was also the captain of the gymnastics team. She was less than five feet tall, but so were all the other girls. They were all teeny-tiny.

Saki lifted the cookie to her mouth, braids swaying, and told her gymnastics teammates, "Karen called me the other day. She said she 'wanted to be strong, too.'"

The others listened to her intently, snacking away. On Saki's right was Kana Fujisawa. She was a confident girl with straight hair down to her shoulders. As another senior, she was the team's vice-captain and Saki's best friend and right-hand gal.

"What do you make of this, people?" Saki asked, sounding like a gruff old commander.

"Simply preposterous," replied Kana, once she'd finished off a marshmallow filled with pineapple jelly.

"And why is that?"

"It will take a while to explain. Is that all right?"

"Take all the time you need."

"She's already very strong. Explanation over."

"That was fast!" snapped the girl with short hair sitting across the table from Kana. Her hair was cut about as short as a girl could go, in fact, and her features were handsome enough that she could pass as a boy if she wanted. Her name was Risa Kusunoki, and she was a junior and a member of the team. She kept her comment brief so she could pop five round little egg biscuits into her mouth.

"That sounds quite like Karen," said the sweet, slow voice of the girl seated next to Risa. Her long black hair was tied into a ponytail, and she was rather reserved. She was a junior, like Risa, and her name was Moe Annaka.

Moe reached for the curry-flavored potato chips and began to loudly crunch on them.

Saki grunted and nodded. “That’s right. Karen is already very strong, but she says she wants to be stronger! But that’s not because she’s some stoic warrior ever in search of greater inner strength—it’s an admission of her inner insecurity, a sign that she believes she’s still a weakling!”

She smacked the table, shaking the plates of treats.

“We must somehow convince Karen that she’s already plenty strong enough!” the committee chairwoman ranted, her voice filling with fervor, but she was really just repeating the same thing she’d been saying for the last few minutes and hadn’t moved the discussion any further than that. The only thing that had changed was the amount of food on the table.

Another pale hand reached out to further deplete the snack supply. This one belonged to the only blond member of the group. It was her natural hair color, of course, flowing to her shoulders and framing her eyes, which had been blue since birth.

Milana Sidorova was a Russian resident of Japan and the third junior of the group. She grabbed her favorite snack from the table, dried sheets of pickled kelp. Before she popped a piece into her mouth, she said, “But if we try really hard and end up killing her, she’s going to think that she’s weak, after all.”

It was, admittedly, a very violent-sounding suggestion. But it emerged in conversation so casually because she wasn’t talking about *actually* killing a person.

The shared understanding among the girls was that they were talking about a full-dive virtual reality game, something that engaged all five senses vividly and absolutely. Specifically, they were referring to the game *Gun Gale Online*, which the whole gymnastics team and Karen played together.

Next to Milana, a girl was trying to eat a traditional mochi rice cake that had been coated in soy flour and drizzled with syrup, carefully trying to avoid exhaling through her nose and blowing the flour off the treat. She lifted the mochi on a toothpick and popped it into her mouth.

“Mmm, that’s so sweet,” she gushed with pure bliss. That was Shiori Noguchi. Her black hair was fashioned into a bob, making her look like a traditional Japanese doll. She was a senior.

“Ah. What do you think, Shiori? To clarify, I am not asking about the mochi,” Saki asked.

“Um, well,” Shiori murmured, chewing and swallowing before she answered. “I think that doing our best to defeat Karen—or Llenn, in game terms—and helping her realize that she’s strong already aren’t as contradictory as they seem. After all, we’re pretty tough ourselves, and Karen knows that. So if we really beat on Llenn and defeat her, that’s fine, and if we’re not up to the task, and she wins, that’s fine, too. But I do want to win.”

It was a headstrong statement from the soft-looking girl.

Saki smacked her knee. “Yes! That’s the opinion I was looking for!”

“So you’re saying...,” Kana followed up as she swallowed a grape-flavored fruit snack, “...the high school gymnastics team should continue to treat Llenn like our eternal rival?”

“Indeed!”

“I can’t wait! I wanna have a real fight with her again!” said Risa, the tomboy. She reached for a red bean pancake.

Saki nodded to herself with satisfaction and turned around.

“Do you see just how seriously we’re taking this very major problem?” she said to the person whose room they were snacking in.

Seated upon the bed—as she’d been instructed—through the large doorway adjacent to the living room was all six feet of a young woman: Karen Kohiruimaki.

The only response she could come up with was an awkward “Umm...”

* * *

At the time that Karen and the gymnastics team were having a little junk food party, other people were doing various things all over Japan.

For example, a petite singer-songwriter by the name of Elza Kanzaki was helping out a young man named Goushi Asougi—

“Don’t you know any other way to strengthen your abs? Huh?!”

“Urgh!”

—by pummeling his powerful, tight stomach with her fists.

They were in a spacious room of her private apartment, somewhere in Tokyo, dressed in matching athletic shorts and running shirts as they worked up a sweat.

Elza was already dripping wet, but she didn’t let up on the stomach punches. She was wearing simple gloves to protect her fists.

For his part, Goushi stood proud, hands on his hips, abs tensed. He did not budge when punched. He clearly had a very firm core, not limited to abs.

“Here we go! One, two, one, two!”

“Urgh! Urgh!”

For the puncher, it was boxercise. For the punchee, it was abdominal training.

At first glance, it looked like a wholesome bit of physical activity.

“You want more? You want me to punch you lower?”

“Yes, lower! Punch me lower!”

But, in fact, it was not wholesome at all.

Then there was a college student named Miyu Shinohara, who stood outside a large train station smack in the middle of the cool northern island of Hokkaido, waiting for a date.

“God, it’s so hot this year... Has global warming finally decided to finish us off? Or is this the famous ‘Hokkaido-killing summer’ ...?”

She was wearing a frilly pastel dress with her hair styled in a reserved fashion, like a fancy, demure young lady—but if anything, she was the type who could kill without warning. She wore contact lenses today instead of her usual glasses.

And there was sweat glistening on her forehead.

Yes, the large thermometer readout outside the station was displaying a very high number for this region of Japan. In fact, it was nearly at the top of what it could display.

“Ugh, dammit, I got here too early. But if I retreat into the station, he’ll know I was keeping cool in the shade... And I don’t want to message him and be like *Hey, I’m inside,*” Miyu grumbled out loud, taking advantage of the fact that no one was around to hear. “A woman’s got to have patience!” she scolded herself, choosing to smugly wait in the sweltering outside heat.

It was her first date with a boy from another college whom she met at a mixer a few days earlier and had really enjoyed his company.

But over the next few hours, they would mutually decide “This person sucks!” and go their separate (still-single) ways.

For instance, there was a *GGO* player with an avatar named David, who arrived at the front door of a home, bowed his head low, and shouted “Pardon me!”

He was in a residential neighborhood of Narita, in Chiba Prefecture. At the peak of summer weather, it was significantly hotter than Hokkaido. The ringing of the cicadas was overwhelming.

The man was dressed in the short-sleeved uniform of a major shipping company. He trotted back to the electric truck bearing the company’s logo, which was parked on the narrow street.

He was in his midthirties, with short hair and a firm physique; he resembled a judo athlete. His thick arms, tanned from a career spent delivering packages, snapped the seatbelt quickly into place.

He pressed a button next to the steering wheel to start up the vehicle and glanced at the cabin’s monitor to see where his next delivery would take him. He moved the stick into gear and put pressure on the pedal, engaging the truck’s quiet electric motor.

It was quiet to the point of being dangerous, in fact, so a piteous little warning sound started up to alert any nearby pedestrians to the truck’s presence.

As he drove carefully down the tight road, he muttered, “Lovely weather. When the sun’s out like this, it really makes you wanna shoot some guns. I’ll kill her this time...”

He was referring to *GGO*, of course, and the woman he meant to kill was none

other than Pitohui, who had inflicted a bitter fate upon him in the last two Squad Jams.

What he didn't think about, however, was that the truck's recorder picked up the sound of him talking about shooting people, and when his supervisor performed a surprise safety audit a few days later, he had to make a very awkward excuse for his statement.

In another case, look to a scene in the city of Ito in Shizuoka.

"Bye-bye, Sensei!"

"Be careful on the way home, now. And watch out for heatstroke; it's very hot in the sun."

A high school girl in a typical uniform waved energetically at a man who beamed and waved back at her. He was in his late twenties, with an unexciting haircut and a delicate face. The silver-rimmed glasses and relaxed suit gave him an overall intellectual appearance.

They were in a small cram school located inside an office building, shortly after the daytime session of the college entrance exam summer curriculum, and his final student was on her way out the door.

"Good lesson today, sir. Would you like to take a break before the evening session? I can put on some tea and grab the snacks."

He turned around to see a petite young woman right behind him. She was the new part-time assistant at the school and around twenty years old. When not on the job, she was a college student.

The look she gave him was direct and enraptured. Between that and the way she got much closer than necessary to speak to him, she wasn't making any attempt to hide her I-want-you attitude.

You would have to be an extremely dense man to fail to recognize the young woman's interest.

"Thank you. But I'd like to finish grading some tests first, so I'll wait on the tea until I've finished with that," the man said, extremely densely, using the same pleasant smile and neutrally polite tone he used with everyone else.

“Oh... I see...,” she said, deflated. Without noticing how she retreated in disappointment, the man sat behind his office desk and began to grade English tests.

In 2026, many cram schools used tablet computers to conduct tests, but here they still used old-fashioned paper. He promptly began to mark up the sheets with brilliant efficiency. With industrial-equipment precision and tremendous concentration, he finished grading about fifty sheets—multiple classes’ worth—in a manner of minutes.

He tapped the stack of papers to straighten them out, placed them in file folders for the separate classes, and sat back to sigh. Then he retrieved his smartphone from his desk drawer. He had stored it away on silent mode to prevent himself from being distracted at work, so when he finally turned his screen back on, the message notification came as a surprise.

The message itself was very simple: I GOT THE THING.

“!”

But that alone was enough for the man to clench his other hand into a fist. Wrinkles appeared on his handsome face, and he closed his eyes and beamed.

Moments later, the part-timer swept into his office bearing a steaming mug of tea like a newlywed wife and asked brightly, “Did you get some good news?”

She simply wanted some kind of conversation starter—she was ready to leap at that opportunity, no matter how he answered. But the man calmly put his smartphone back in the drawer and said, “Ah...pardon me. I got a text, but it doesn’t have anything to do with work. I shouldn’t have been checking during office hours. But thank you for the tea.”

He reached for the mug and took a sip, saying nothing about the taste, whether it was good or bad. He had all but ignored the young woman, who clearly wanted to find *something* to talk about, now that they were alone together.

“.....I’ll...just go clean up,” she said, crestfallen. He did not watch her go. When she went back to the classroom, he took his smartphone out again and checked the screen, smiling as he looked at the message, which came through

the smartphone app for *Gun Gale Online*.

The man's name was Shuuya Shinohara, and he was a member of the team of machine-gun fans scattered across Japan known as ZEMAL, the All-Japan Machine-Gun Lovers.

Finally, there was a writer in his fifties, living in Kanagawa Prefecture near Tokyo, posting short messages to a social media site designed for that very purpose, exposing his shame to the entire world.

UGH, I CAN'T WRITE MY NOVEL! I'M SO SLEEPY! CAN I GO TO SLEEP NOW? CAN I?

His work desk was a total mess, covered in manga, magazines, and model air guns, as well as his one actual work tool, a computer. The man leaned back in his tall chair, closed his eyes, and tried to nap.

His computer beeped to inform him of an incoming e-mail.

"What? I haven't finished the book yet," he muttered, sleepy-eyed, clicking on his mail program. It produced a rather long e-mail in English. A second later, the message was automatically translated into perfect Japanese. Life sure was convenient these days.

He scanned it dully, then suddenly lurched into an upright position.

"I'm in!"

It seemed he wasn't that tired, after all.

* * *

Four days later, on Tuesday, August 4th, Karen returned home to Hokkaido in the grips of its summer heat wave. Two days after her at-home junk-food party with the gymnastics team, she hopped on a plane and returned home for the first time since spring vacation.

There, she met up with her still-local best friend, Miyu Shinohara, who claimed to be "running this town," and the two went to the nearest diner, a place they'd visited many times back in high school, to chat and catch up.

They were casually dressed in T-shirts and shorts.

"He didn't dump me! I dumped *him*! There's a world of difference! A whole world!" Miyu ranted about her recent date and insta-breakup. After Miyu had

gotten it out of her system, Karen changed the topic to VR games.

Saki and her friends had begged her, *Let's fight again! It's a promise!* like children hoping to play again the next day. But once she told Miyu about that, she admitted, "I don't know, it's just... I feel like I'm having reservations about playing *GGO* at all." Despite her height, she was deflating, shriveling up into a ball.

"Whaddaya mean?" Miyu asked, squirting ketchup onto the large order of fries she'd gotten a few moments ago, despite the fact that they were already working on a pizza.

"Well, to sum it up...I'm kind of wondering if it's okay for me to enjoy all this shooting and killing, even if it's just a game."

Miyu blinked. Her eyes were large behind her plastic-framed glasses. "Whoa, what the heck makes you think that?" she asked, aghast. It wasn't meant as an insult, though.

Karen sipped through the straw on her iced tea—a favorite in real life and in virtual reality. "Well...the reason I started playing VR games was to be another person. I achieved that, and now I feel like maybe I should find some other hobby... Should I learn to drive and get a license like you?"

"The other day, I dented both Daddy's car trunk and the wall of the house, and he almost put my license into the paper shredder. It's our car's fault for being too big, though."

".....Maybe go with a different hobby..."

"Hey, Kohi," Miyu said menacingly. "By any chance, have you seen any of those 'Summer of War' specials they're running on TV? The ones saying such and such about the Battle of Okinawa, and such and such about the War on Terror, and such and such about eighty-one years since the end of the big war..."

"Umm...I..."

"Okay, so you did. You always did take these things so seriously," Miyu said, pausing her assault on her plate of fries. "Yes, *GGO* is a murderous gun battle. Yes, you can do things in-game that you can't do in real life. But it's just a game.

You have fun, you get tougher, you mess around, and no one actually dies. Except for very rare cases of extremely crazy people, like what happened in SJ2. Capisce?”

“Yeah...”

“When I play that crazy American game where you commit grand theft and hijack cars and stuff, I’m running over innocent pedestrians all the time. Do you think I’m going around doing that in my car, now that I have a license?”

“If you did, we would probably have heard about it on the news in Tokyo.”

“Then you understand the difference between these things. Are you going to be a mercenary after you graduate, Kohi? You gonna join the French foreign legion?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you’re fine.”

“Hmm...”

It didn’t seem like this speech snapped Karen out of her funk. Miyu used the french fry in her hand to point at Karen. It was rather rude. “You wanna come hang out in *ALfheim Online*, then?” she smirked.

“...”

Karen considered this.

About one year earlier, the very first full-dive VR game she tried to play on Miyu’s invitation was *ALfheim Online*, abbreviated *ALO*. It was a colorful and beautiful world where winged fairies flew about wherever they wanted.

“Maybe...that wouldn’t be the worst idea...,” she said. It would be difficult to say good-bye to her little Llenn, even temporarily, but Karen didn’t rule it out because of one possibility.

In VR games based on the same basic system, one could convert their character into another game. Several times, Miyu had brought over her famous character Fukaziroh from *ALO*, with her relative strength intact.

At this point, Karen could probably deal with the tall and skinny avatar she

initially rolled. She was almost about to go ahead with it, but then Miyu added something.

“Just so you know, though, since *ALO*’s a world of swords and magic, the fighting there is pretty gnarly!” she said excitedly. “I’ve walked into an ambush, turned around and gotten a huge thick ax right through my skull. I’ve split a man in two across the chest. I’ve skewered two cute cat-eared fairies with my sword at the same time. I’ve been burned by crimson hellfire, flattened with a hammer, and knocked out of the sky only to be sent crashing to the ground. See, just because it’s a fantasy world doesn’t mean the battles are fantastical. Since guns are pretty much all used from a distance, I think the sensation of killing is actually much weaker in *GGO*.”

Fortunately, the restaurant was so empty that it was a wonder they were in business at all. It wasn’t the sort of conversation you wanted others to overhear, especially if they were eating.

“Ugh...”

“Listen, Kohi. You didn’t actually just watch a war documentary and decide you didn’t like gun battles anymore, did you?”

“Ugh...”

“Your expressions are so easy to read. Let me guess: Pito and Boss from SHINC are projecting this really direct, pure—maybe not so pure, in the case of Pito—sense of fierce rivalry, and you’re low-key freaked out, and you kinda-sorta want to weasel your way out of fighting them, don’t you?”

“.....”

“And because you watched that summer war special, you thought it would make for an endearing excuse?”

“.....”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! No way; you gotta face them, girl! That shows how tough you’ve gotten. Once you’ve gotten your rivals fired up, you at least have to do them the courtesy of a good, honest fight. You can start running away after the next battle is over. Though I can’t tell you when that might be.”

“.....”

“Plus, I know you know the truth about all this: Fighting is fun. Human beings have a competitive drive, no matter who you are. It’s not a bad thing to admit it and satisfy that urge in a game. Let’s just have fun!”

Karen was at a loss for words. She put on a frumpy face and said, “This is the problem with psychics. If only you could use that power on people from outside the country...”

“Hya-hya. Oh, you’re simply too easy to understand. It’s one of your best qualities, Kohi.”

“Ugh. Are you making fun of me?”

“I so am.”

“Ugh! I’m gonna eat your fries!”

“Go right ahead! And if there aren’t enough, order more. I’ve got lots of money that I was supposed to spend on a guy.”

From that point on, they were simply a pair of french-fry foodies. Nothing but a couple of spud sisters, chowing down on taters together.

“Kohi, you know those summer war specials are basically the same thing every year, right? You don’t have to take them so seriously. More importantly —”

“More importantly?”

Munch, munch.

“Watch some paranormal TV shows.”

“*Those* are the ones that are all the same!”

Munch, munch.

“On a different topic, I’ve been going online and watching some old anime series lately.”

“Oh boy, I can only guess what this will be.”

Munch, munch.

“Those old-fashioned shows my parents would watch from like the seventies or whatever? They’re actually pretty good.”

“Ah.”

Munch, munch.

Between the two of them, they demolished the second (extra-large) order of french fries. No sooner had they finished than—

Bzz-bzz-bzz. Vrrr.

Both of their smartphones vibrated at the same time—one in a handbag, one on top of the booth seat.

“Hmm? Both at the same time? Does that mean *GGO*?” Miyu wondered, quickly wiping her greasy hands on a napkin and picking up her phone.

Karen pulled hers out of her bag, but she already knew that if they were getting simultaneous messages, the most likely source was from *GGO*. And since the content would be the same, she decided to let Miyu check it out first and drank some iced tea to balance out the salt content from eating too many french fries.

“Ooh!” Miyu exclaimed, her eyes flashing dangerously. “It is! And it says, *To all high-ranking prizewinners from past GGO Squad Jams.*”

“...?”

Karen was quite confused. She couldn’t begin to imagine what the content of such a message might be.

Time passed as Miyu read the message. The only sound in the restaurant was the quiet music over the speakers. It must’ve been a long letter; a minute passed, then nearly another.

It was taking so long that Karen wanted to read it for herself, but she felt like that would be losing the battle of patience, so she toughed it out.

“Ha-ha!”

At last, Miyu grinned devilishly and pulled her face away from the screen. With glee, she said, “Rejoice, Kohi. The battle is soon to begin.”

*

*

*

To all high-ranking prizewinners from past *GGO* Squad Jams,
Greetings.

First, let me apologize for the sloppiness of this message. I'm really not good at writing letters.

I am the novelist who sponsored SJ1 and SJ3. A lot has happened, but I'm still alive and well.

I'm writing this letter to invite you high-ranking Squad Jam teams to a fantastic new game.

I think it's really fun, so please read all the way to the end.

At twenty hundred hours (eight _{PM}) on the sixteenth (Sunday) of this month (August 2026), there is going to be a new game event, different from Squad Jam, on a special map within *GGO*.

This was not my idea, but a suggestion from an acquaintance living in America and working at *GGO*'s publisher, Zaskar (let's call him Mr. Smith).

The application method, complete details, and rules are written in the document I've attached to this e-mail, but I'll sum it up briefly here first.

This is a playtest of the battle ability of NPCs controlled by a newly developed AI. It doesn't have an official name like Squad Jam, so we're calling it 20260816 Test Play (hereafter, Test Play).

On the special map, the new NPCs will be protecting a base, and we want you to attempt to take it over with multiple teams at once.

The first team to bring down the enemy base wins. Therefore, you don't actually need to wipe out all the enemy NPCs. You can capture them alive, if you want—but I bet you would find it a lot more difficult that way.

Your teams do not have to kill one another in this event. You are certainly free to kill one another if you want, however.

According to Mr. Smith, the enemy NPCs will feature the *GGO* dev team's most advanced game AI yet. Not only are they quite tough, they will even evolve and learn during the game, apparently. They'll have the latest powerful gear, too.

He decided that a single-death game over would be too harsh, so the attackers will get three lives. If you die in battle twice, you can come back into the game. On the third death, you're out.

In *GGO*, where solo play reigns supreme, you have proven yourselves to be fantastic team players.

Despite the hustle and bustle of the Obon holiday, I hope that you'll find the time to participate in the further development of *GGO*.

You can join with a team as few as two players, but the test data will be better with full six-person teams with optimal equipment.

Participating players will receive experience points commensurate with their fighting, and though I'm not revealing any details, I can tell you that the winning team will receive a grand prize.

I look forward to your application to join.

P.S. They said I couldn't play, so I will not be in attendance.

* * *

High-ranking Squad Jam players from all over Japan simultaneously received this message.

No more than three minutes after it arrived, about the moment that Karen had finished reading the letter, she received a text from Saki.

YOU. BETTER. BE. GOING!!

Miyu instantly reacted by attempting to send a response from Karen's phone, saying YOU. BETTER. BELIEVE. IT!!

"Hey!" Karen protested, just in time for Miyu to pause in the act of moving her finger toward the SEND button.

"We good? Or do you have some serious business to attend to on the night of the sixteenth?"

“No, but that’s not the problem. I’ll still be over here! I have my laptop, but no AmuSphere!”

There was no way to play a full-dive VR game without an AmuSphere, the goggle headset that actually transported your mind to a far-off land. Karen kept her *GGO* habit a secret from her family, so the bulky and conspicuous AmuSphere naturally had to stay back in Tokyo while she went back home during vacation.

But Miyu merely said, “There’s no problem, then” and tapped the button.

“Hey!”



“No worries. I got two at home. And one, I just bought. It doesn’t even smell yet.”

“Wait...what...?”

By their very design, it was impossible for one person to use two AmuSpheres at once, so Karen was initially confused.

“Oh!”

Five seconds later, she understood. With great sympathy, she said, “It was the one for your missing boyfriend... I get it... You wanted to play with him... RIP...”

“Nobody likes a smart-ass.”

CHAPTER 2
Invitation to Battle



CHAPTER 2

Invitation to Battle

Sunday, August 16th.

The day of the test battle had arrived.

Karen had been in Hokkaido the entire time, from the day of the invitation until now. During Obon, she'd enjoyed some family time back at home with her older brother, older sister, niece, and nephew.

In other words, she didn't log in to *GGO* once. She did no training as Llenn to improve or keep her skills fresh.

"Mmm. I'm a little worried—no, I'm very worried," she said when she crossed through the doorway of the Shinohara household around five o'clock. She was at Miyu's house.

Karen had visited this place many times in the past. It was quite spacious, and the other family members were away on vacation, so it was a free-for-all. Karen had always gotten along well with them, however, so she'd never had a problem with that before.

The sun was still tall and bright outside, but the exhausting heat of the day was dying down, and as usual for Hokkaido, it was still much nicer than Tokyo.

In the Shinoharas' living room, Miyu plopped down a huge plate of spaghetti carbonara as an early dinner, with a side of Caesar salad and cheesecake for dessert. There was cheese as far as the eye could see.

As they wolfed down the food, the two held a strategy meeting.

"Hey, I just converted myself back to *GGO* last night. Thanks for holding on to my items, by the way. Rightony and Leftania were in perfect shape."

Miyu normally played in *ALO*, so she reached out to her fairy friends first before making her third foray into *GGO*. In the meantime, she placed the pretty

and petite blond warrior Fukaziroh's weapons and gear into a safe locker belonging to Llenn, with a security code on it.

"You're welcome. How about Pito and M?"

Karen had left all the correspondence with Pitohui and M up to Miyu. She couldn't get into *GGO*, after all, and contacting Elza Kanzaki directly was intimidating in several ways.

She'd gotten a message from Pitohui that same day, essentially assuming that she would be participating, if not quite as vehemently as Saki did. She was in. She was in it to kill.

And if Pitohui was taking part in something, then only the death of Goushi Asougi would keep M from being there as well. The previous four would be returning to action as Team LPFM.

"We're going to meet up at the entrance to the west block shopping mall at 6:57. Sounds like they'll be there early to do some shopping," Miyu told her between bites of food. The choice of an arbitrarily early time was a mental trick to prevent people from assuming that showing up a bit after seven would be fine.

"Okay. What're we getting? New guns? Or are we stocking up on ammo?" Karen wondered, recalling that she had plenty of P90 ammo, last time she checked.

The prize for Team Betrayers in SJ3 was a choice of any 5.56 mm assault rifle from a catalog and a full set of magazines and ammo belts. It applied to all team members, so there were also prizes for the ones who died early, like Cole from TOMS, the first to die; Ervin from T-S, whom Pitohui killed on the bridge; David, the leader of MMTM; and Boss, who went out in a blaze of glory at the end.

It would have been quite an ironic feeling for Cole, who'd been intending to betray Betrayers all along, although Llenn had no way of knowing about that.

She instantly sold off her prize at a gun shop and used the money to buy bullets and magazines for her P90, then bought a successor to Kni-chan, her lost combat knife.

Her character stats were advanced enough that if she wanted to, she could

equip a different gun, one with more weight, range, and power—but she wasn't going to cheat on the P90. She was in a committed relationship. She'd keep using this gun until it got removed from *GGO*.

"What, Pito's shopping trip? She's gonna buy a secret weapon to beat you," Miyu admitted casually.

"Well, I'm not fighting Pito this time, no matter what!" Karen protested, helping herself to another serving of salad with way too much bacon. "I'm sorry to the people who want us to help test the abilities of the characters they programmed, but I'm only in this for one thing: to fight SHINC."

"Oh? Oh-ho?" Miyu smirked.

"So everyone else can figure out how to capture the base or whatever. I'm going off on my own to find Boss, and when the moment is right, I'll charge them."

"That's nice, but do you really think you can beat all six of them on your own?" Miyu asked, adding more parmesan to her serving of spaghetti. Just how much cheese was too much?

"I don't know. But I don't need to win. I can lose and die, and it's fine. I just want another chance to fight them, that's all."

"Ohhh."

"But if I can get the jump on them and make it a close-range fight...I think my chances are better than zero. I've got a knife for close-quarters combat, too. I'll use every tool at my disposal," said Karen. Her eyes were sharp, the eyes of a fighter. It said something about *GGO* that it could make a twenty-year-old woman in college make a face like that.

"Good grief. The pampered young lady who made up some frivolous reason to avoid fighting not long ago has suddenly become a man. What, did you miraculously grow a pair?"

"I just remembered my promise. So you three have fun conquering the base. Bring home the W."

"Okay, will do. We'll win this thing so hard. How hard could these NPCs

possibly be?”

“You’re that confident?” Karen asked, surprised. In the letter and the full rules, they made it abundantly clear that these NPCs would be no joke.

But Miyu was unconcerned. “I think it’ll be easy-peasy. They can be tough to beat, sure, but if the devs make ’em *too* hard to beat, then what’s even the point of the game? I’m sure that whole *You can die twice for free* thing is just because it won’t be a very useful test if people die from lucky shots and the whole thing’s over in a flash. In fact, I’m sure that’s the only reason.”

“Uh-huh...,” murmured Karen. She twirled pasta around her fork and stuck it in her mouth. “In that case, I’m not worried about you.”

At 6:57, Pitohui celebrated their first meeting in over a month with a hug fit for a strangler.

“Llennnn!”

“Ha!” Llenn slipped away and darted behind M for safety. She could always match Pitohui for speed. As long as she knew what the other person was going to do, avoiding them was a cinch.

Underneath the black night sky, which was synced up to Japan’s actual time, glowing neon signs kept the capital city, SBC Glocken, eternally illuminated. The four were standing at the entrance to a shopping mall in the city’s western block.

Karen was located in Miyu’s room, logging in with her own laptop and the brand-new AmuSphere that Miyu had bought for date night. Of course, the bed went to its owner, so she was resting on a guest futon on the floor, instead.

Llenn had her usual gear on. She wore battle fatigues and a hat, both dyed a faded pink, with her pink partner, the FN-made P90, slung over her shoulder. Her previous guns had broken in SJ1 and SJ2, so this was P-chan the Third. The knife was behind her back.

Fukaziroh, too, was dressed exactly the same as before: a MultiCam long-sleeve shirt and shorts with black tights and a big helmet. She also wore a special harness to hold the bulletproof plating she had as armor. It held pouches for holding her grenade ammo.

Although her guns were in her virtual inventory rather than on her person, she wielded a pair of MGL-140 six-shooting 40 mm grenade launchers. For a sidearm, she had a single M&P automatic pistol that she could barely hit the broad side of a barn with.

“Well, it sure is good to see you two looking happy and healthy!” Pitohui beamed, her facial tattoos stretching. Of course, virtual avatars were always going to look the same, so there was no way to tell if someone was actually feeling sick.

As for Pitohui, there was no change for her, either. She wore a tight-fitting navy-blue bodysuit. She didn’t have a single gun on her person at the moment, but she’d probably pull out the KTR-09 assault rifle she’d used in previous Squad Jams when the time came.

“Hey,” greeted the always-reticent M. That was fine, because it would be weird if he turned chatty all of a sudden.

The imposing man, who was the size (and almost the shape) of a boulder, wore his favorite dark-green camo. His gear and backpack weren’t out yet. Most likely, he’d have his 7.62 mm M14 EBR rifle, an HK45 pistol, and that unfolding, separable shield.

“Done shopping already, Pito?” Fukaziroh asked.

“You bet!” said Pitohui with a smile. The expression itself was very benign, but Llenn couldn’t help but feel that there was trickery lurking behind it. It was hard to be completely unguarded around someone like Pito.

“What did you two buy?” wondered Fukaziroh. Clearly, she was hoping they would say something like *We bought a bunch of plasma grenades for you to shoot!*

“That’s a secret!”

“Awww.”

Fukaziroh pouted in protest, and Pitohui gave her a wink.

“Oh, you’ll find out soon enough. *If* these enemies are strong enough to warrant it, that is.”

“Hmph. I’m not getting my hopes up...,” grumbled Fukaziroh, shrugging her shoulders.

Pitohui did not reply to that.

The test began at exactly eight o’clock.

The group of four sat with drinks in hand at a table in a restaurant surrounded by noisy players carrying on with their own business, and they waited for the moment to arrive.

Llenn stopped by the shooting range in the mall to fire off a few dozen shots with her P90, just to make sure she still had the feel for it. When she was done, there was still time to spare, so they sat down for some tea.

According to the attached rule book, there was no need for any pre-event meetups at a special pub or ten-minute waiting periods after dying. As long as you were logged in to *GGO* when the time came, you would be teleported automatically. If you died three times or resigned, you would be sent back immediately. There was no live footage and no audience.

Simply put, this test was on a far smaller scale than Squad Jam, with fewer participants. But at the moment, Llenn and her companions didn’t know who would be participating nor how many players or teams were taking part. Nothing had been announced. Some of the people in this very restaurant might have been participants.

“Well, we know that Boss and SHINC are taking part,” said Pitohui happily. She seemed to have some idea up her sleeve, but that was normal for Pitohui. “And probably Daveed and MMTM, too. He loves this kind of crap, so he’ll be all-in.”

“Uh-huh. Who else?” asked Fukaziroh.

“No idea.”

“So it’s possible it’s just our three teams?” She sounded hopeful this time.

“It could be that few, or the opposite could be true.” Pitohui didn’t seem interested in giving it too much thought. She was that confident in her ability—perhaps.

If only it really were just three teams, thought Llenn. She sipped her iced tea through a straw rather than speak her thoughts aloud, though.

“We don’t know anything about the strength of the new NPCs or the features of their base,” said Pitohui, “and we don’t know which squads might turn out to be our enemies, either. It’s like a spelunking trip.”

“Like a normal quest.”

“Just like a normal quest.”

“But if we’re doing this, we’ve gotta try to win it.”

“If we’re doing this, we’re gonna try to win it,” Fukaziroh and Pitohui parroted each other, right as the clock hit eight.

The four vanished into little puffs of light all at once, leaving only their cups behind. It certainly looked like they had made off without paying their tab, but that transaction happened when they ordered, so all was well.

This was just a playtest. It was entirely different from Squad Jam, so there was no special waiting-room zone beforehand. The four were instantly teleported from the restaurant to the actual battlefield.

The bustle of people around them was instantly silenced.

There were probably—hopefully—no enemies positioned right next to them, but as was customary for *GGO* players, Llenn immediately took stock of her surroundings. She crouched, pulled the P90’s handle, and loaded the first 5.7 × 28 mm round into the gun’s chamber.

The pleasing sound of metal sliding against metal was the signal that she’d become a warrior. She was here to do battle with Boss and the rest of SHINC.

“Okay! Let’s go, P-chan,” she said. “And you, Kni-chan Number Two.”

The combat knife was safely placed behind her back. Although she designated it out loud as the second, she ordinarily wouldn’t specify the number like that.

Llenn stood back up, hearing Pitohui and M loading their guns nearby. She scanned the area, keeping the muzzle of the P90 in sync with the direction of her head.

The field was barren.

The earth was damp, without a blade of grass sprouting from it. There were massive rocks the size of cars scattered every fifty to one hundred feet. The overall vibe it had was a pointless region where the rocks were too big to feasibly move, preventing the land from being cultivated for farming. Then again, *GGO* was set in an Earth post-humanity, so nobody would be tilling those fields anyway.

The sky was cloudy, that unique *GGO* color like dull gray with a hint of red, an odd mixture that would be annoying to re-create if you tried to paint it. There was enough cover to prevent the sun from being visible, so its location in the sky was a mystery. It was somewhere, though.

There was hardly any wind. Since wind strength would have an effect on bullet trajectory, this meant a major advantage for snipers.

The terrain was flat, so between the rocks, you could see that the land continued onward for at least half a mile. It was too hazy to make out anything beyond that from their position.

She examined her surroundings on all sides, but there were no human figures visible that might pose a threat. Llenn exhaled in relief.

“Hmm... That’s weird...,” muttered M.

“Yes...very,” agreed Pitohui.

Llenn spun around, lowering the P90. The other two were already in full gear.

M had his main M14 EBR—the weapon he’d been using for as long as she’d known him—on a sling over his shoulder. The HK45 pistol was in a holster on his right thigh. From his back hung the massive shield-carrying backpack, which Llenn could probably fit inside if she wanted to. There were also four plasma grenades below it, near his waist.

Pitohui had her usual black armored vest over her suit and a piece of headgear around her temples. It wasn’t visible now, but she surely had that lightsword somewhere on her person, too.

Her choice of guns, however, was completely different.

In Squad Jam, she preferred to shoot a KTR-09 with a seventy-five-round drum magazine, but not today. This time, she was carrying a Heckler & Koch HK416C, a short-body assault rifle.

She had used the HK416C before when they went hunting monsters together and gave Llenn a lengthy and unsolicited explanation about the gun, which is why Llenn remembered it so well.

The HK416 was the Heckler & Koch version of the Colt M4, and the 416C model was the compact version of that. The stock was adjustable for easier carry, and the barrel was significantly shorter. It was also lightweight—less than seven pounds, which was about as heavy as Llenn’s P90.

It was supposed to be a rather expensive gun, but Elza Kanzaki put down real money to buy her in-game guns, and she was a rich and successful artist with several hits, so that was no concern to her. Even Karen had bought her music.

The muzzle had a metal tube attached—a sound suppressor to quiet the gunfire. She didn’t use any optical instruments like red-dot sights, as they were redundant with the bullet circle.

When Pitohui used this gun, she had the adjustable stock set to its shortest length and didn’t brace it against her shoulder. She held it with both hands out in front of her, stabilizing it with her carrying strap, and fired it like a pistol.

That wasn’t the only difference in her loadout. The double XDM pistols she kept on her thighs and the M870 Breacher shotgun she had at her waist like some katana—the one she used to shoot down the grenades last time—were nowhere to be found.

Overall, she was keeping it lightweight, compact, and smaller profile. If the usual Pitohui was the “Pitohui heavy soldier” model, this was more like the “Pitohui light shock trooper.”

Apparently, she had taken the nature of the base-conquering playtest into account and anticipated battle in tight spaces where mobility would be key. But in that case, why remove the pistols and shotgun that would be good for close-range combat? It was a rather extreme combination. Perhaps she thought having the lightsword would be enough.

M always used his trusty favorites, while Pitohui was flexible, depending on the situation. Llenn asked the contrasting pair, “What’s weird, exactly?”

It wasn’t weird that Pitohui would have a different loadout than before. And it didn’t explain why she, too, would find this odd. It was a real mystery.

“What? Are you shocked to find me even more beautiful than usual?” asked Fukaziroh, double brown-painted MGL-140s on her shoulders like big, fat revolvers.

“No, you’re the same,” Llenn retorted without missing a beat.

“It’s the sky,” Pitohui said simply. Llenn looked up. She saw the same old *GGO* sky.

“Pardon...?”

“What time is it now, Llenn?”

“Um...8:01,” she said, glancing at the digital wristwatch on the inside of her left wrist. “Oh!” That clued her in.

“Oh!” Fukaziroh echoed. “That’s what you meant! Yeah, that’s weird!”

Time of day in *GGO* was linked to the real world. Or at least, the place where the server was located in the real world. So, in this case, Japan Standard Time.

If you dived into the game during the day, it would be daylight hours in the game and dark during the night. In fact, Glocken had been in nighttime mode mere moments ago.

Obviously, if it was *truly* dark at night, you wouldn’t be able to play the game the way it was meant to be enjoyed, so there was always some kind of light source nearby—or extremely bright moonlight—to make sure it was still playable.

But even with the clouds blocking out the sun, it was obviously meant to be daytime now.

“That really is strange... I’ve never seen this happen in *GGO* before,” Llenn said, looking up at the sky again.

The unmoving, leaden sky seemed to hang over them like a blanket, silent and

oppressive.

“I know this is a playtest, but I wouldn’t have expected them to set it up with a fixed time of day and everything... Impressive! This is elaborately done!” Pitohui raved, going from serious to entertained.

Time of day aside, the first step was to ascertain the field of play.

According to the rule book, unlike the maps of Squad Jam, which were roughly six miles to a side, only the minimum needed space for this base-capturing battle would be used.

Since there weren’t any satellite scans, they had no special interface devices with them. Instead, a map would show up by making the left-hand gesture normally used to summon the game window. It always displayed the player and base location, but there was nothing for enemy NPCs or other player squads that could potentially be hostile.

It wasn’t a battle royale, so the locations of other teams didn’t actually matter, but Llenn was frustrated that she couldn’t see exactly where SHINC could be found.

M waved his hand to bring up the window and tapped the icon that said MAP, which was placed right on the first button for easy access. He waved his arm at the map that only he could see and “spread” it out on the ground before the group so that all could view it together.

“Sooo, what’s the battlefield like this time?” Pitohui chirped, exactly in the manner of the next-episode preview of a decades-long family-oriented anime that was still running strong in 2026. Llenn and Fukaziroh joined her in peering down at the map below.

It was a fairly simple one.

The map’s compass indicated that north was “up.” The terrain was split into four groups of forest, wasteland, grassland, and plains, and they were broadly arranged to the east, west, south, and north.

There was a red circle on the map. In the bottom right was a scale measurement, indicating that the diameter of the circle was a bit under two miles. Whatever that circle meant, there was a smaller black circle inside it,

containing the letter *G*.

“Aha! *G*, huh?” said Fukaziroh knowingly. “That must be where they have the...great big sesame balls.”

“Pretty sure it stands for *goal*,” Llenn snapped.

If the middle of the circle was the goal, then that had to be the base that the newfangled NPCs were protecting. The rule book attached to the invitation e-mail contained a background scenario for the event.

A team of the seven hardest soldiers have stolen a devastating gas warhead capable of wiping out all human life on Earth and have taken it to their stronghold! Your chosen team of elite warriors must infiltrate the stronghold and either wipe them out or retake the warhead before it falls into the hands of an evil organization seeking the end of humanity! You have two hours to complete your task! Best of luck!

When they read it over back in the restaurant, Karen and Miyu mocked the backstory.

“The world of *GGO* ended once already. Who cares about devastating gas warheads or evil organizations seeking the end of humanity at this point...?”

“Yeah, whoever came up with this is an idiot. This writing is trash.”

For our part, let’s leave that one untouched. The novelist who wrote that scenario doesn’t need to be kicked while he’s down.

“Well, I suppose it’s just supposed to be a MacGuffin,” said Miyu.

“Is that the thing that’s an item within the story that the characters need but that doesn’t really matter in itself?” Karen followed. When she was in high school a film-buff teacher of hers had taught her about MacGuffins.

As long as it served its role within the story, what the MacGuffin *was* didn’t matter. In this case, it didn’t matter if the item was a gas warhead, or a nuclear missile, or an Earth-destroying bomb, or a secret diary—all that mattered was that something bad couldn’t fall into enemy hands, so they had to go steal it back.

Now that Llenn was here on the map, she didn’t care about gas weapons or

the future of Earth. She just had to wipe out the enemy or steal the thingy back.

In fact, Llenn didn't even *want* to steal the thingy. She wanted only to fight against SHINC.

As far as the enemy goal was concerned, there was no terrain or building information on the map. Like the last event, it wasn't going to tell you what to expect ahead of time. The surprise would be preserved until you could see it for yourself.

At the very southern end of the map, brushing up against the line of the circle, was a single white dot.

"We're here," said M, pointing at the dot.

"Kind of reminds me of last time," Llenn admitted. Nobody voiced any argument with that observation.

In SJ3, the map was an island that was rapidly sinking into the sea, so the battlefield got smaller as the game went on. By the end, the stage of combat ultimately turned into a luxury cruise ship that was hidden at the center of the island.

But before that point, their placement was a lot like this one. Perhaps this playtest had even been designed based on SJ3.

Bleep!

A message appeared before Llenn's eyes with a cute little sound effect. The words were floating in physical space, so anyone could read them, facing her direction. It said the following:

Added rule: This circle's radius measures the length from the center to the location of the most distant surviving player from the center.

"Ah, I see," Llenn murmured. If they all proceeded toward the G in the center, the circle would get smaller and smaller. If anyone retreated, it would get larger again.

But what was the purpose of the circle?

It didn't seem to be suggesting that you shouldn't or couldn't leave the circle. The terrain continued beyond its bounds, both on the map and before their

eyes. Surely there would be some physical barrier eventually, but it wasn't the circle itself.

Fortunately, the answer presented itself right away. Another message appeared right below the first one.

If a player's character dies, for the first two times, after 180 seconds, they will resurrect along the circle's circumference in the location closest to their teammates. (If there are no surviving teammates, they will appear along the circumference on the angle of their death location.)

"Ah, so that's the point," Llenn noted.

This event was a three-life system, meaning that you could come back to life after dying the first two times. In game lingo, a dead character returning to the field of battle was called respawning. That made this circle the respawning line.

This system meant that there was no fixed respawn point; instead, as the teams pushed in farther and farther, the closer to the goal any player's restart location would be. It would suck if you died at the end of the game and had to start over at their current location, nearly two miles from the center point—so this idea was a welcome one.

According to the rule book, respawning also granted ten seconds of invincibility. The player would suffer no hit point loss during this time, but their own attacks would do no damage, either.

That was an emergency measure just in case you were unlucky enough to spawn right next to a rival team. It was hard to tell if ten seconds was long or short in this case. With Llenn's speed, she could cover a whole lot of ground in ten seconds.

"That's gonna be a bitter pill to swallow if you're the team closest to the great big sesame ball...er, the goal," said Fukaziroh.

The circumference of the circle was the distance of the farthest surviving player. If someone died from the most aggressive team pushing ahead the hardest, they'd get sent back to a spot far behind their teammates.

Pitohui said, "In that case, there are two strategies you can take. One, you retreat as a team and regroup with the reviving player or stay put and wait. If

most of the team dies, you'd want to do that anyway."

"Uh-huh. And what's the second?" asked Fukaziroh.

Pitohui looked gleeful. "You leave them behind, obviously."

"That's messed up! I could never leave Llenn behind!"

"Look, it hurts me, too! But...get over it!"

"Damn... I'll never forget! I'll never forget...about Llenn!"

"That's the spirit. Now let's sing together. Sing the ballad of the legendary warrior..."

Before Fukaziroh and Pitohui could get any deeper into their silly role-playing session, Llenn snapped, "Stop assuming that I'm the one who's going to die."

"Oh? I mean, I could be the one to kill you. You'll be fodder for my grenades," Fukaziroh said with a smirk.

"No! Llenn wants *me* to beat her!" Pitohui insisted.

"Do you two need a refresher on how this game is supposed to work?"

Leaving aside the potential discord among the team, the mystery of the circle was solved. Pitohui continued, "Basically, it'll depend on the situation. Besides, if anyone can catch up with ease, it's Llenn."

It was true that, with Llenn's speed, covering two miles wasn't too hard at all. It would be much more difficult for the other three.

In the rule book, they made it clear that there would be no vehicles for them to use, so the only locomotion available was your own two feet. It made sense that Pitohui and the others wouldn't want to be forced to make a long trek back.

In the meantime, the extra rule clarifications vanished, and an image of items appeared before her. They looked like large syringes or pens—the familiar Squad Jam emergency medical kit.

Its single use would heal up to 30 percent of a player's maximum health, but only over a period of 180 seconds. Like BoB and Squad Jam, three of these were given to all players, with no other healing items in the event—it was only fair.

Otherwise, players with enough money and strength could bring all the recovery items they wanted.

Llenn took her kits and placed them into the small pouch over her stomach. As always, she hoped she wouldn't need to use them.

"Okay, gang, let's go!" said Pitohui excitedly, as if she was about to leave for a picnic.

Llenn checked her watch and was surprised to see that it was already 8:05. In the meantime, M had been carefully—and with the highest vantage point—watching their surroundings. There wouldn't be any enemies nearby, but they did need to get moving. There was always the possibility that one of the enemy teams might ignore the map and rules and just come charging after them.

"Oh, we didn't decide on a leader, did we? I nominate M," Pitohui suggested, and no one argued.

With this roster, M was the obvious choice. The leader designation and scan location didn't factor into this event, so when they said *leader*, they meant it in its original sense: the one who decided on the plan.

M promptly began giving orders. "We'll go straight north. Llenn will take point. Keep the compass at the top of your view at all times and make sure the angle is zero."

"Got it." It was always the small and speedy Llenn who went first.

"Pitohui, watch the left. Fuka, watch the right from a slight distance. I'll be the rear guard. We'll proceed with that vertical formation. This isn't a battle royale. There are few squads likely to attack us, but if we get ambushed, I trust you to react on your own."

The other three voiced their understanding.

M had taught them how to deal with an ambush while on the move: You unloaded with full power in the direction the enemy was firing from, without hesitation. There was no point to searching for and running for cover, because if they were attacking, they already had you in their sights. The idea was to respond with maximum firepower instead. Once the bullets flew at the enemy, they were likely to falter at least a little bit.

After that, you could either charge forward while shooting or take turns covering one another and retreating, depending on the situation. They'd have to wait for the leader's orders.

I hope SHINC comes and attacks, Llenn wished. Then she could fight back, win or lose, and fulfill her reason for being here today.

Although it was a three-life system, if they fought for real and one side died, that was probably good enough to consider the fight settled. That's how Llenn saw it, and although she forgot to clarify things with Boss, she assumed the other girl shared her viewpoint.

Oh, if only I could see Boss again soon. I don't care about the goal, Llenn thought. She didn't bring it up to the others.

"First, we'll see what the enemy position is like at the center. Approach using cover whenever possible and watch for snipers once we're within almost half a mile. Move out," M commanded. Llenn started running.

CHAPTER 3
Respawn



CHAPTER 3

Respawn

Llenn ran and ran.

She raced faster than anyone across the damp earth.

It was a graceful sprint beyond anything the human body could achieve.

By the time the dirt, kicked up by her boots, flew through the air and back to the ground, she had covered a considerable distance. Viewed from the side, it looked more like the dirt had risen on its own. In a world without wind, she was the cause of the biggest gusts around.

As she sprinted, Llenn looked to the right and left with her overwhelming agility, checking for human figures in the distance or behind rocks.

She reached a large rock, came to an abnormally abrupt stop to hide behind it, and spun around, surveying her surroundings with both her eyes and her gun muzzle.

Once she had determined that the area was safe, she used her communication device to tell her teammates, "Clear!"

Dozens of yards behind her, Pitohui, Fukaziroh, and M followed, one at a time, and took shelter behind rocks one or two behind Llenn's. There was only one person moving at any given moment; the other three watched and waited in the meantime.

As the rear guard, M never failed to check their six. If an experienced team spotted an enemy on the move, they'd surely let them pass only to ambush them from behind.

Once everyone had finished moving forward, Llenn picked out the next rock she wanted to reach. The compass was always out and set to zero, so she was looking directly north—well, if not exactly north, then as close to it as possible.

I'm running to that one next, Llenn told herself, drawing back her foot to bolt forward.

“Don’t move!” M hissed. “Enemy! Far off to the right!”

“Ah!” Llenn circled around the left side of the boulder on instinct. *Already found some?! And I wasn’t the one who spotted them!*

A shiver ran itching up her spine, and she clenched the P90. That was a bad thing for aiming, so she focused on relaxing her grip. Just in case, she glanced to the west behind her, but she could see no enemies.

“Distance, slightly under a quarter of a mile away. I caught a glimpse; I think they saw us, too. No movement since first sighting,” M stated briefly.

It felt like the calm before the storm.

Though Llenn couldn’t see him, she was certain that he was looking around through the scope of his M14 EBR. If he had an open shot, he would be firing 7.62 × 51 mm bullets at them.

Who is it? What team?

Llenn waited for M’s report. She wasn’t foolish enough to peer around for herself—though she did have the monocular she’d been using in Squad Jam tournaments. She hoped that it was SHINC, but she didn’t expect to be that lucky.

The map was smaller, but if they were already running across another team, there had to be many event participants. The likelihood of running smack into SHINC was low. Very low.

So when M said, “I see ’em. Green camo, long hair. It’s an Amazon,” she thought she misheard him. Or that she was dreaming.

“Ooh! Yeah!” Llenn shrieked, hoisting up her P90 and shivering with excitement.

Boom!

A bullet fired from a Dragunov sniper rifle missed her side by barely a foot.

“Eep!”

“Llenn, be careful,” warned Pitohui at the same time the distant gunshot arrived. That was one order from Pito that Llenn was more than happy to follow.

She’d been very confident that she was safe because she was behind the rock. That was sloppy of her. Depending on the positioning and angle of the other team’s location, she could have easily been exposed and shot.

“They’re all spread out. Be careful of the entire eastern direction,” M advised. Llenn obeyed and moved farther to the center of the rock’s cover and got down as far she could on the ground.

It was great that SHINC was nearby but losing by getting sniped was such an embarrassing way to go out. She didn’t want to die until she’d at least seen the whites of Boss’s eyes.

“Can you tell where they are, M? I’ll aim at ’em,” suggested Fukaziroh. Her weapons were grenade launchers. Because she could deliver that explosive payload on a parabola, she could attack enemies behind cover. But a quarter of a mile was about the limit of her range.

“Nope, can’t. When we start moving, follow behind Pito. I’ll have you take the rear guard.”

“Okeydoke.”

Then he issued orders for the rest of the group. “Pito, Llenn, and I will advance at the same time. Keep the intervals to about one rock’s worth.”

The two women replied simultaneously.

“Okay.”

“Got it.”

After teaming up with M for so long, Llenn was starting to understand his strategy as soon as he gave instructions. Even in a gunfight, the closer you were, the better accuracy and more power your gun would have. And the P90’s effective range (a close enough distance to aim, hit, and incapacitate a target) was barely over two hundred yards. She was at a disadvantage here.

But compared to SHINC’s six, this attacking group only had three. They were

outnumbered and outgunned. So instead, the idea was to stick close—but not so close that the entire group could easily be wiped out in a single attack—and approach the enemy as a three-man cell.

Of course, once they caught sight of the enemy, it would be an all-out brawl. If SHINC was spread out wide enough, there was the possibility that their members could be picked off in one-on-one battles.

Once he knew they were on board with the plan, M ordered, “Go!”

Llenn and Pitohui sped out from their hiding places together, sprinting with all the speed and burst they possessed. Llenn expected to get shot, but no bullets flew at her.

GGO closely resembled reality, but it was still a game. For the purposes of game balance and fun factor, there was a player-assistance feature called a “bullet line” that indicated the path of an incoming bullet.

It was a bright-red line that was visible to any player being aimed at and to those players around them. If Llenn saw it, she was going to evade with a quick sidestep, but she saw no light.

Pitohui arrived at the adjacent boulder a few moments later. She slid in fast, holding her sling-carried HK416C down with one hand to keep it from bouncing.

Sliding wasn’t typically a good idea in battle, because it made it harder to transition into the next action after that. She probably just thought it would look cool.

Pitohui followed up by saying, “This would suggest the enemy isn’t going to shoot at us.”

“I see,” said M. “I’ll come after you now.”

His much larger form rushed forward to the space behind a different rock. Still there was no firing coming from SHINC.

“What does this mean?” asked Fukaziroh through the comm, all the way from the back.

Pitohui replied, “It means they’ll let us have a serious shootout. Otherwise, we’d be taking potshots from a distance and ultimately end up both deciding

it's not worth it—and withdrawing.”

Llenn added happily, “They’re thinking, *Let’s get close enough to see each other’s faces before we fight!*”

“Exactly.”

“Oookay, gotcha. I guess Boss is a real samurai, huh?”

Oh, yay! Llenn thought, her heart skipping a beat. Boss wanted an all-out, close-range firefight; one that was vivid and satisfying.

Part of it, of course, was that the range of Boss’s silenced sniper rifle, the Vintorez, and the speedy attacker Tanya’s Bizon were both shorter than their teammates’ PKM machine gun and Dragunov sniper.

But with their machine gun, two sniper rifles, and the PTRD-41 antitank rifle available if needed, SHINC was a very good long-distance team. If they wanted only to win the fight, they could have started shooting by now.

“Ahhh, good ol’ Boss!”

It took a real man to approach head-on and wait to do battle. Or a real woman, in Boss’s case.

“Let’s do it! M, Pito, once we get as close as possible, I’ll rush in! Back me up!”

“Oh no! Llenn, you can’t... You can’t rush off to your death!” lamented Pitohui, going back to the well of hammy acting.

“If I die in a duel with Boss, at least I’ll die with a smile on my face,” Llenn said with the utmost sincerity.

This sentiment was strictly limited to the game, of course.

Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle.

If there was a streamed broadcast of this event, like Squad Jam, aerial camera footage of the scene would probably contain those sound effects.

Llenn and company were moving forward in small bursts, from rock to rock, thirty feet at a time.

There was no doubt that their enemy lay ahead. They hadn’t fired once since then, but she could tell. There were glimpses of distant green along the way.

The flickers were small, but they were people. They had guns. They were coming this way.

“It’s so quiet. Should I let one fly by *accident*?” asked Fukaziroh, who was making her way up from the rear.

“No,” came Llenn’s immediate reply.

They’d advanced quite a distance by traveling along the rocks; a hundred yards at least. If SHINC had been advancing at around the same pace, there would be roughly 150 yards between them at most. That was a distance Llenn could close in the blink of an eye, given that her speed made the Olympic world record for sprinting look like child’s play.

In recognition of that, M said, “Next one, Llenn.” That meant she was given the green light the next time they moved forward. Llenn would draw the enemy’s attention and rile them up, while Pitohui and M formed a two-man backup cell.

“Roger that!”

It was her long-awaited match against SHINC. Llenn thought about when she faced off against them at the end of the very first Squad Jam.

She’d split off from M and rushed across the wilderness, unsure of what she should be doing. It was a charge she didn’t expect to survive, and yet, she found one bold path to victory after another.

In fact, the way these boulders were scattered about on flat ground was very similar to that battleground. She could probably go with the same strategy. And this time, she had three very powerful allies she could count on.

Let’s do this!

She felt adrenaline surging through her brain, putting her in maximum overdrive.

P-chan’s full weight rested in her hands. Small stones flying at a rate of fifteen per second—at the speed of sound—became her fangs and claws. Llenn had never once doubted P-chan’s ability.

Her only other weapon was her tempered speed. She would take full

advantage of the fleet feet that had gotten her this far. SHINC lay just ahead, waiting for her.

I'm so glad I decided on this game, she thought.

With one final breath to calm her nerves, she waited the few seconds remaining until M's order.

"Go now!" M said, right at the exact same time that Fukaziroh said, "Wait, enemies behind!"

"Okay, here I goooo— Wait, what?"

Llenn darted out only two steps before she stopped short. The world lit up.

Red lines—in the sky, on the ground, on the rocks, many, dozens, all at once. One even on her own body.

Bullet lines!

Like any *GGO* player, Llenn hated the sensation. Her body reacted on its own, throwing her out of the way. At the same time, she bellowed, "From behiind?!"

They were coming from the rear, not the front. In other words, these weren't bullets from SHINC's guns, but some other foe.

What idiots would be dumb enough to get in the way of my long-awaited face-off with Boss?!

"Hey, we're getting outta here—or at least I am!" Fukaziroh jabbered, right as the gunshots started.

Dut-dut-dut-dut-dut-dut-dut-dram-dram-blam-bwut-bwut-boom-boom-kablam-kadoom-dut-dut-dut-kablam-whomp-dut-dut-dut-dut-dut!

The roar of incoming gunshots was overwhelming. Adding to the clamor was the *whoosh* of bullets cutting through the air around them, the *phut! phut!* of them hitting soil, and the *gak! chernk!* of them striking rocks.

Llenn jumped behind the rock she'd been using as shelter a moment earlier. This specific sound was one she'd heard before. It had been a part of that unforgettable first Squad Jam, when she was hiding at the edge of the forest.

"Machine guns!"

It was the sound of several machine guns simultaneously blasting away at her position. Each gun gleefully roared at the maximum fire rate—no concern whatsoever for wasted shots.

“Dammit!” Llenn howled. The rock she had her back to was trembling slightly as it was subjected to the bullet hell. There had been a team in Squad Jam that liked to employ obnoxious tactics such as this. The team was certainly memorable if nothing else.

“Not you again, All-Japan Machine-Gun Lovers!” she screamed. She’d just been thinking of her fight against SHINC in SJ1, but now all she could remember was how they’d shot at her relentlessly.

At the start of Squad Jam, they were the first enemy team she encountered, when leaving the forest going into the city. They had shot at her like crazy; it had been a hailstorm of bullets. If it weren’t for the thick tree trunks she’d taken cover behind, she would have died ten times over.

“Whoa! What the hell?!” yelled Fukaziroh. She appeared a few seconds later, having leaped behind the rock to join Llenn in her hiding spot. Her shoulders and side were glowing red, a sign of bullet damage.

All in-game damage was visually represented by this light. If a limb got blown off, the stump would simply glow red. No blood, no gore, no problem.

It looked like she’d taken three hits on the run. She’d lost about 40 percent of her HP. The fact that she’d taken three bullets and *only* lost 40 percent was a sign of Fukaziroh’s toughness. Llenn would’ve easily been in the red.

“Ah, dammit!” cursed Fukaziroh, using one of her emergency healing kits right away. Her body glowed, and her hit points began to recover.

The drumroll of machine-gun fire continued endlessly. ZEMAL couldn’t be aiming specifically at them, but the fact that occasional bullets hit the rock they were hiding behind was scary enough.

Since that team was peerless in ammo storage and continuous shooting ability, Llenn’s group couldn’t even poke their heads or hands out from behind the rock, much less attempt covering fire to force the other guys to back off.

Judging by the sound, ZEMAL had to be around two to three hundred yards

off. They were located behind the team's previous position, fanned out to the west.

Incensed at being shot, Fukaziroh fumed, "I'm gonna fire a few grenades and light 'em up, 'kay? I dunno if they'll connect, but that should at least freak 'em out a bit!" She lifted the MGL-140 in her right hand.

M told her, "Go ahead. At the sound of the blast, we all withdraw to the south."

Going east would put them in SHINC's sights, and there was nothing but machine-gun fire to the west. There was still the possibility—however slight—of another team to the north. Running away put a bitter taste in Llenn's mouth, but they had no other choice.

"Gahhh!" Llenn was frustrated that her fight with SHINC had been so spectacularly interrupted. All she could do was howl about it.

"Here we go!"

Fukaziroh unloaded six angry shots: *pomp-pomp-pomp-pomp-pomp-pomp*. The grenades soared off into the sky.

A few seconds later came a quick series of explosions: *bo-bo-bo-bo-bo-boom*.

The machine-gun sounds immediately came to a stop. The best-case scenario would be if the blasts had wiped them out, but that was most likely wishful thinking. The blasts had probably only startled them for a moment.

"Go now!"

It was enough of a distraction for Llenn's team to escape, though. Llenn let Fukaziroh rush out first, then followed behind. "Dammit! So much for my fight with Boss!"

She let her anger drive her legs and didn't notice at first that she had passed not only Fukaziroh, but also Pitohui and M.

Behind her, ZEMAL had recovered from their surprise and resumed firing. She began to hear the sound of bullets whizzing overhead again. They were the kind of people who were more afraid of *not* shooting their machine guns than of dying. So getting shot was never their primary concern. They were idiots—but

that made them fearsome foes to be pitted against.

Llenn found a large boulder in the direction she was running. She could tell it was one she'd used earlier, because it was bigger than those around it. She leaped behind it for cover before anyone else on her team.

And then she hit something.

"Bwubh!"

Llenn bounced off a soft wall and rolled onto the ground, finally sprawling on her back to face the sky. She tilted her head and saw someone standing ten feet away.

"Yo!"

It was Boss.

The massive, muscular, pig-tailed woman always made for an imposing sight—in this world, gorillas were confused for *her*. She wore her usual camo fatigues and combat vest, Vintorez in hand. It was her meaty thigh that Llenn had bumped into.

"Hey," said Llenn reflexively. "Huhhh?" Then her eyes and mouth gaped and hung there, very foolishly.

With great pains, she finally put two and two together. SHINC had been spread out much farther than she had realized, and Boss was coming around to the south to sneak up on them from behind—until Llenn herself had run into her, literally.

Oh. I'm dead. RIP. Watashi wa mou shindeiru.

She knew it was coming. The fall had knocked the aim of her P90 askew, while Boss's Vintorez was swinging with her line of sight, directly at her.

But rather than open fire, Boss opened her mouth to speak.

"That was wild, wasn't it? Here, calm down."

"Hwoh?"

"I'm not going to shoot you here; that wouldn't be any fun. Everyone, listen up. Llenn just ran into me. Don't shoot the other three as they pass by, either,"

she commanded the rest of her team.

Then she approached Llenn and extended an arm like a log. Llenn grabbed her hand and let the other woman pull her upright. “Got it! First, let’s do something about those machine gunners!”

Members of ZEMAL were firing indiscriminately in the distance, as though they’d suffocate if they weren’t shooting their guns.

“Momentary cease-fire, huh?”

Pitohui came racing through the hail of machine-gun fire to the rock where Llenn and Boss were hiding. After overhearing Llenn’s comments in her earpiece earlier, she could tell that, at the very least, Boss had no plans of shooting her for the moment.

At the same time, M and Fukaziroh were greeted behind another rock by the fox-eyed, silver-haired Tanya. “Heya!”

In SJ3, Tanya and M had engaged in an all-out brawl, complete with choking and grappling.

“Yo,” said M, who knew that greetings were the bedrock of proper communication.

“So what do we do now?” asked Fukaziroh, revolving her MGL-140’s magazine to eject the empty cartridges to the left. They clattered to the ground.

Now if she wound the springs to charge them, simply pulling the trigger would rotate the revolver and allow her to fire grenades consecutively. Lastly, she pulled more ammo out of her backpack to reload another half dozen.

“There’s not much we can do,” M said as bullet lines appeared over their heads and vanished as the bullets themselves flew past.

Tanya added, “First, we beat those guys.”

“Together!”

Wu and Yue in the same boat.

This was a saying based on ancient China, in which the opposing nations of Wu and Yue were trapped on the same boat, forced to work together to keep it

from capsizing in the storm. In practical use, the saying meant working with an enemy temporarily. It could also simply mean being stuck in the same situation, but in its original context it referred to cooperation.

Llenn's team and SHINC were Wu and Yue in this situation.

Before they could engage in their own fight, they had to eliminate these impossibly inconsiderate machine gunners who forced their way in between them with considerable firepower.

"What should we do, M?" Llenn asked. Boss heard her say it, and that meant it got picked up by her comm and sent to her teammates, too.

In the meantime, bullets were zipping and whizzing past. They were shooting as thoroughly as sweeping them with brooms. The location of where the sound was coming from was uniform, indicating that they had barely moved from their original firing location, if at all.

M replied, "How can they all keep firing for so long? They haven't stopped to switch out ammo at all, this entire time."

That was a good question, Llenn thought. She repeated it to Boss. They needed to share strategic information.

This raised the possibility of another enemy aside from ZEMAL. Boss asked her teammates, "Does anyone have a visual on them?"

Tohma the sniper said she would try to get one. She was a tall, beautiful woman with a green knit hat over her black hair. Her real-life player was Milana, the pretty, petite Russian girl. Tohma was farthest back of all of SHINC; she poked her gun and face around the side of her rock, watching for bullet lines.

When she spotted the flash of machine guns at a distance of about 440 yards, she set her scope to maximum zoom. If she wanted to take aim and snipe, she could—but she instead concluded her reconnaissance and ducked back behind cover.

"Five enemies, machine guns only. They all have some kind of metal rail attached to their left side," she reported.

SHINC's machine gunner, the stout, red-haired Rosa, instantly knew what that meant.

"Oh! They're doing that thing!"

"Not *that*!" Boss scowled in response.

"Not what?" Llenn wondered instantaneously.

"The backpack-feeding system," Boss explained. "They're wearing huge backpacks with ammo feeders that go into the gun. They can shoot five hundred, even a thousand bullets in a row."

"Are you kidding?! That's not fair!" Llenn fumed. She was spoiled, though, because the carrying capacity of her fifty-round magazine was already twenty more than a typical pack of assault rifle ammo.

When she relayed that info to M, he said, "Got it. So those are in *GGO*, too? And they've all got them? That's a pain." The entire time, bullet lines and their bullets continued to fly over their heads.

Normally, portable machine guns used ammo belts that strung a hundred to a hundred and fifty bullets together. If they got any longer, whether hanging off to the left or contained in an ammo box beneath the gun, it made movement more difficult.

So the solution to that problem was the backpack-feeding system. A huge box packed with ammo hung from the shooter's back, attached to the gun by a flexible metal rail.

Normal firing rate for a machine gun was eight to ten shots per second, so by basic calculation that meant it could be fired for a maximum of one hundred seconds consecutively. That would be while holding the trigger down, so if you were firing in bursts, it could last minutes instead.

And there were five all at once, so it was no wonder the bullets were coming in an unceasing shower of hot lead.

"Boy, these guys are a real pain in the ass," said Pitohui, who was lounging behind the rock. "So how about we ignore them and slip away?"

"No way!" "We have to fight!" shouted Boss and Llenn simultaneously.

“Ha-ha-ha. In that case, I guess I’ll fight them with you. Just a little light exercise before breakfast. M?” Pitohui said, throwing it to him.

“I know. I’m thinking. Llenn, connect your earpiece to everyone else for the time being.”

She did as instructed and altered the settings of the device so that rather than only communicating to the team, it went through Boss to the rest of SHINC as well. Now, until one of the two cut it off, all ten players would be able to share information.

Llenn’s first statement to the combined group was “Let’s destroy those obnoxious jerks for getting in the way!”

A few seconds later, M had put the plan together in his mind. He then said, “Sorry, Pito, but I need you to kill yourself.”

“Aw, shucks. Oh well,” she said, pointing the suppressor end of the HK416C into her own mouth. Since it was flipped around, she used the thumb of her extended right hand to pull the trigger.

Shhp-puh-puh!

The sound was considerably muffled. Right before Llenn’s eyes, Pitohui put three 5.56 mm bullets into her own mouth. They penetrated her brain through the upper jaw and exited the back of her head. It meant instant death, even for an immortal being like Pitohui.

Her hit point bar instantly fell to zero. Pitohui was dead.

Her body flopped over on the spot and remained there as an indestructible object. The icon reading DEAD popped into existence over it, with a countdown below it that went 179, 178, 177...

“Wh...what?” Llenn gaped, baffled. But Boss understood its meaning at once. She gave orders to a distant teammate.

“Tanya, you too. Don’t get left behind.”

“Hya-haaaaaaa!”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Yaaaaaaaah!”

Smiles and empty cartridges sparkled beneath the leaden sky.

The men fired the hell out of their machine guns.

Five, each perched on a rock of his own, his machine gun steadied on a bipod, firing bullets like they were going out of business.

Dut-dut-dut-dut, dut-dam-dut-dam-dam-dam. Trat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.

Five men, located all across the islands of Japan, brought together by the intensity of their love for machine guns. They were the All-Japan Machine-Gun Lovers.

Their acronym tag for Squad Jam was ZEMAL, based on their Japanese title, Zen-Nippon Machine-Gun Lovers. There was no *correct* way to pronounce this, because it was an abbreviation, but most people said “zee-mall.”

Their registered leader was the big, tough Huey, who had his brown hair slicked back. He used the American military machine gun M240B.

The man with the longer black hair held down with a headband like a certain famous action-movie protagonist was Shinohara, the M60E3 guy.

The one with the bandanna who was chosen for the betrayers’ team in SJ3 was Tomtom. His favorite gun was the famous FN MAG, the original model for the M240B.

All three used powerful 7.62 × 51 mm rounds. This was the same ammo M’s M14 EBR used, and they were effective for about nine hundred yards. They had good penetration and destructive power, too; in short, they packed a serious punch.

The other two used guns that took 5.56 × 45 mm rounds, which were less powerful but lighter, so they could carry more overall. These were the bullets that the M16 assault rifle and the Japan Self-Defense Force’s Type 89 used.

One of the two was Max, and he had the most widely used of this type of machine gun, the Minimi Mk2 model. He stood out from the team because his avatar was brawny and dark-skinned and sported a fade hairstyle.

The last one was Peter. He kept tape over the bridge of his nose and was the

smallest member of the team. His machine gun was the Israeli Negev, a rare gun in the world of *GGO*.

The five had made great advances in the third Squad Jam.

They'd gone from a (sorry to say) joke of a team to a powerhouse that couldn't be ignored.

Ever since SJ3, their uniform was a green fleece jacket bearing their logo on the right breast—an ammo belt fashioned into an infinity symbol.

They didn't wear utility belts or vests. No pistol sidearms or knives. *Absolutely* no helmets or defensive armor. All of their carrying limit was spent on machine guns and ammo.

Until now, their style had been to wear large backpacks and keep all their ammo belts and boxes in there. But this time was different.

Now they had the backpack-feeder system that was tormenting the two other teams. The message that Shinohara, the cram school teacher, received was about this very item. Max and Tomtom had taken down a powerful monster in the wilderness and looted the plans for the item, which the crafty Peter had managed to create.

On each member's back was a large metal box resting in a frame, much like external frame packs for hiking. They might have looked like merchants carrying general supplies in the olden days, but these were filled with ammo belts and nothing else.

A metal rail stretched from the top left edge of each box, reaching around the body with a decent amount of slack before it hooked into the left side aperture of the gun. Then the bullets rattled along the rail, pulled by the feeding mechanism into the gun.

"Cease fire!"

"Cease fiiire!" "Cease!" "Eyy!" "Cease!"

Their targets were completely out of sight, so even the trigger-happy gunners had to stop firing temporarily. Those who were able to switch in fresh barrels took the opportunity to do so. It was useful to have spares around, because so

much consecutive shooting caused overheating and reduced accuracy.

Swapping out machine-gun barrels was surprisingly simple, in fact—just unlock them and remove the barrel, handle and all. An experienced person could do it in seconds.

They didn't forget to retrieve more ammo belts from their inventories, either. They operated the menus and materialized the ammo, which automatically appeared in their backpacks, linked to the previous belts. Real life could never be so convenient.

Now ZEMAL was ready to fire a few hundred more shots.

"Hey! Machine gunners!" hailed a distant voice.

Somehow, all of ZEMAL heard M loud and clear.

"Huh? What the...? Hold your fire, guys," said Huey.

The five men watched, machine guns at the ready, as a man emerged from behind a rock with his hands raised. He was about a hundred yards away.

That was a distance they could certainly hit him at.

M didn't have a gun—or his shield. He walked out from the rock with his empty hands high. With all the lung power he had, he shouted, "I want to talk! Can you hear me?"

Since there was no wind to drown out his voice, the five were able to understand him perfectly.

"Hey, what do you think?"

"Shoot him?"

"Should we? We could kill him right now."

"Or should we hear him out?"

"Hmm. What if we shoot him, *then* hear him out?"

The five were a bit conflicted. Huey acted as the mouthpiece of the group in responding to M. He pulled the M240B away from his cheek and sat up a bit. In a voice as loud as M's, he replied, "What do you want? Who are you?"

ZEMAL watched the video replays of Squad Jam, but they didn't have any interest in the names of other players. They only watched to see themselves looking awesome.

M replied, "I am M! The leader of Team LPFM! I've come to negotiate the end of this meaningless conflict!"

"How come?"

"This isn't Squad Jam! I don't think there's any need to fight like this right at the start!"

"Yeah, maybe you've got a point! But it's a player's right to choose whether to shoot or not, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's true! Well, we can do it that way!" M admitted, so easily that it caught Huey and the others off guard.

"Uh, okay, we're gonna shoot, then!" said Huey. "By the way, do you like machine guns?"

M answered him with a smirk. It was very rare to see M smile. "Yes, I love them! I don't use it often, but I do own one!"

"Oh? What kind?!" He took the bait. They really did love their machine guns.

M replied, "An MG 42!"

"What?!" Huey went wide-eyed.

"No way!" "Are you kidding?!" "Hyao!" "Whoo!"

The others all perked up their ears at that. They were too easy.

The MG 42 was a brilliant machine gun used by the Germans in World War II. It could fire an astonishing 1,200 rounds per minute, twenty bullets per second, with a high-speed rattle that was known and feared by the nickname Hitler's buzz saw.

In the world of *GGO*, the MG 42 was a fairly rare gun. Its 7.92 × 57 mm Mauser rounds were uncommon and pricey, too. It wasn't the sort of gun you hauled out in any situation where you might lose it. A collector's item meant for the shooting range, one might say.

But that just made it all the more enticing to ZEMAL.

“Hey! M, or whatever your name is! How much ya want for it?” Tomtom asked, already in haggling mode.

“No, wait! I want it! I’ll give you my summer bonus!” said Shinohara, inadvertently revealing that he was an office worker.

“Say, what if we held an auction, just between us?” suggested Max.

“It’s the only way. Let’s do it,” concluded Peter.

“Whoa, whoa, hang on, everybody! You got it all wrong! Use your heads!” snapped Huey, asserting his leadership and bringing reason back to the situation. “Obviously, the best plan of action is to *recruit him to our team, duh!*”

At no point did they spare a thought for M’s opinion.

“Agreed.” “No objections.” “Yup.” “That’s it.”

They reached a team consensus, again, without any consideration for M’s opinion.

“All right, then! M, or whatever your name is, as a fellow lover of the machine-gun arts, why don’t you come and fight on our side?”

“No, I can’t do that. The talks have broken down, I suppose. Do we have no other choice but to fight, then?”

“I suppose not... We’ll talk about the MG 42 later. But for now...”

Gunfire punctuated the rest of his sentence.

Five machine guns burst into life at once, sending a hail of bullets toward M’s location—but he anticipated it coming and had rushed back behind the rock for safety. It was very close, but he made it barely in time without taking a single shot.

“Now give me some suppressing fire,” said M.

“You got it,” said a “teammate” in the back.

Rosa, SHINC’s gunner, unloaded with her PKM machine gun from atop a rock, spraying bullets into the vicinity of ZEMAL. The bullets thundered out of the barrel, flying at supersonic speed from east to west. Tracer rounds created the

occasional stream of light in the midst of them.

But ZEMAL's reaction was quick and their counterattack powerful.

"Enemy machine gun!"

"That sounds like a PKM!"

"Let's beat 'em!"

"Roger!"

All five guns trained on Rosa's location, where the bullet lines aimed at them were coming from, and they opened fire. Now the stream of light was going the other way, from west to east—at five times the density.

"Hya!"

If Rosa had been 0.2 seconds slower to pull back, she would have been riddled with bullets.

In the meantime, M was free to act again. He leaped out from behind the rock. "Hrmf!"

Before Tomtom could react and swing the muzzle toward him, M sped over to the next rock and hid, stomping heavily the whole while.

"What's wrong? He's not gonna shoot at us? What a waste!" Peter lamented. This was a situation where you needed to charge, even if it meant going out in a blaze of glory. What better way to die than with the honor of the machine gun's beautiful bullets? What a letdown that he wouldn't do that for them.

"They don't want to fight!"

"I'm not surprised. They're poor lost souls, loathed by the god of machine guns."

"That's right. They're forsaken," said Max and Shinohara, suddenly full of pity. Their devotion to machine guns was approaching cult status.

"All right! C'mon, let's fight!" said Huey to the raucous responses of the other four.

They hopped down from their boulders and held their guns at the waist. If the others weren't coming to them, they would charge instead.

Their plan was both simple and dynamic.

With their machine guns in firing position and capable of shooting for a long time without stopping, the five would enter an A formation and rush the enemy. If they saw anything hostile, they would open fire and continue moving toward the target. You might call it a steamroller strategy.

If the other side fired back, who cares? Ten times as many bullets in the other direction would sort that out. It was an offense akin to a mad, charging bull.

If this scene were being shown in a bar, like Squad Jam, the audience would be making bets at this point: Who would win—ZEMAL or the combination of LPFM and SHINC?

Someone would've claimed that ZEMAL would win with this advance. Five machine guns would be enough to overpower the enemy in a place with relatively good visibility, rocks notwithstanding.

Someone else would say that if Fukaziroh's grenades were used effectively, they'd be able to push back ZEMAL.

Another person would've realized it was eerie that SHINC wasn't attacking harder.

"All right—let's move!" said Huey.

With that order, ZEMAL took off running. They bolted out from behind the rocks, made an arrowhead formation, and rushed for the place where they saw M run last.

"Go!"

Five men started hustling. They passed one rock, running after M.

"There he is!"

Shinohara spotted M from behind, fleeing at a distance of over 150 yards. He shot with the M60E3, and the other four followed his lead.

The beams of light chased after M, but once again, they failed to hit him, just as he ducked behind a distant boulder. The tracers deflected off the rock and shot high into the air.

But they didn't stop shooting. If they kept firing now, they could get to the rock where he was hiding and circle around the sides to trap him.

"That's it! Push, push, push!"

"Yaaaah!"

"Raaah!"

And right when ZEMAL thought they had M dead to rights—the charge of five turned into seven.

At the ends of the A formation, two more people arrived behind the group. But ZEMAL didn't look back—or even feel the need to look behind them—so they never noticed their “new” members.

"Sorry, boys."

"I feel bad about this."

The two newcomers' HK416C and Bizon were trained right at the men running ahead of them.

Shhp-puh-puh. Shhp-puh-puh-puh-puh.

With the suppressors on, the gunshots were so quiet that they were completely inaudible underneath the tremendous clatter of the roaring machine guns.

Max and Peter, the two in the rear, took a few shots to the back of the head and died instantly. They fell forward, still firing.

While their hit points were in the process of dropping, Tomtom and Shinohara suffered the same headshot fate and toppled over.

The last target was Huey, who was leading the team.

"He's all yours."

"Oh, no, you take him."

"Well, if you insist."

The assassins argued over who should have the honor. Soon, Huey fell victim to a bullet from an HK416C.

“Wow... They really did it...”

Llenn stood over the five dead men, still clutching their machine guns, timers counting down over their bodies.



“I wish I could have gotten one of them! Anyway, once they come back, then it’s my turn,” claimed Fukaziroh.

“Is everyone else all right?” wondered Tanya, switching in a new fifty-three-round cylindrical magazine for the Bizon.

“Thanks to you,” M said.

M’s plan was quite simple, in fact.

It was also a strategy that would be completely impossible in real life. And in Squad Jam, for that matter.

In essence, he just needed Pitohui to commit suicide, then come back to life three minutes later. When she revived back at the ring on the map, she approached ZEMAL from the rear this time.

M bought them time by talking to the other team and allowed the dialogue to transition back into combat at the right time. When ZEMAL resumed shooting, they stopped paying attention to their six.

Boss picked up on the strategy the moment M asked Pito to kill herself, and just to be sure—and to be fair in sacrificing one of their team’s lives, too—she ordered Tanya to off herself, too. Tanya used her Strizh 9 mm automatic pistol to shoot herself and respawned in the same spot as Pitohui, a few seconds behind her.

The two ran the long way around, snuck up behind ZEMAL—and in the end, it was easier than target practice.

“I have to say, the things M and Pito come up with are scary,” opined Llenn.

“This coming from the girl who turned me into mincemeat with a cruise-ship propeller?” Pitohui shot back. She gazed down at the bodies of ZEMAL, still in the respawn countdown. “These guys have really gotten tougher, haven’t they?”

It was honest praise for an enemy team. “For such a crude strategy, they can really make themselves a nuisance. If they were any smarter, we would’ve had a real fight on our hands,” she added.

Llenn had to agree. If even a single one had been assigned to rear guard duty,

they wouldn't have been slaughtered this way by Pitohui and Tanya.

"Well, all of that aside, what should we do now? Regroup and resume our battle?"

"Oh...!" Llenn gasped. *How could I forget?! You idiot!* She was shocked and disappointed in herself for not keeping the most important thing in mind.

"No, let's not," said Boss, tapping a hand to her ear. That severed the connection in the comm she had hooked up to Llenn. Her voice was only audible through normal means now.

"That's a good point. I wouldn't want these guys bothering us again while we're getting our fight set back up."

ZEMAL's recovery countdown was under sixty seconds now. Based on the map, the ring was farther out than the white dot, which meant that at least one team was farther away from the center than they were, but it was no fun thinking of ZEMAL catching up.

Boss said, "Plus, I'm curious about what this base is like and what the 'most powerful NPCs ever' are all about. We can check that out and beat most of them before we fight. Can't we, Llenn?"

"Yeah. I'm fine with that. Thanks, Boss."

"Don't mention it. Well, everyone, we'll meet across enemy lines—or in hell," she said, leading the other five Amazons in a sprint to the east. They were going to adjust their route and head for the goal now.

Fukaziroh's hit points were back to full. "All right, shall we get going, too?" she asked, hoisting the MGL-140s onto her shoulders. That was how she preferred to run with them.

M said, "Okay. But no one-by-one advance this time. We'll rush it."

"How come?" Fukaziroh asked.

"Because after all that ruckus we caused, no other teams showed up. I can think of two possible reasons for this. One is that there are actually only a few teams taking part to begin with. The other is that the teams are putting their focus on the goal instead. It could even be both."

“So we just have to hurry...,” Llenn murmured to herself. If they didn’t pick up the pace, SHINC and the other teams might clean up all the NPC fighting before them, and then the game would be over.

“Okay, M, let’s hurry! I’ll rush out and do some recon first!” she cried boldly.

It would be dangerous to rush ahead first, of course, but with her speed, she’d managed to survive even through enemy fire. At the start of SJ3, she’d been chased around by so many enemy squads, and it had all worked out in the end, hadn’t it?

“All right. You’re on reconnaissance.”

“You got it!” Llenn said, full of confidence.

It would not take very long at all for her to completely regret her suggestion.

CHAPTER 4
The Devil's Castle



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The Devil's Castle

Llenn was on the run.

She raced directly north through an area dotted with rocks.

At her max speed, it was a trip that would not take long at all. The goal, according to the map, was less than one thousand yards away now.

There were no enemy attacks in the meantime. But she could hear the drumming of consecutive gunfire in the distance ahead, so there was clearly some battle happening. One of the other teams had arrived already.

She wondered if she might run across the members of SHINC, who were heading to the same spot, but it didn't happen. They must've gone much farther east.

The mist-shrouded goal came into Llenn's view.

The location all but confirmed it. This was the base the enemy NPCs were protecting.

The enemy's stronghold, the details of which were concealed on the map—was a castle.

A castle built of stone, in the European style. The stone was gray, shaded such that it blended eerily into the gray of the sky.

Tall walls surrounded the castle. Rounded portions of the walls were slightly taller, probably containing staircases within. Those would have turrets near the top.

Four spires towered behind the castle walls. The keep itself was hidden, but she could imagine its shape beneath the spires.

The walls and towers were perfectly intact, making it clear that these weren't the usual ruins. They'd be able to go inside, presumably. And the enemy would

shoot from above, presumably.

“I see it! They’re protecting a castle! Like one in Europe. It’s about a thousand feet across, I’d guess? I can see a big wall surrounding it!” Llenn reported to her teammates, who were following up somewhere behind her.

M said, “Got it. Can you see any combat?”

“Not on visual. Just distant sounds.”

“All right. Wait for us in a safe location.”

But Llenn thought it over for a bit and disagreed with her team leader. “I’ll be fine. I’ll keep approaching for a better look until they start shooting.”

There was still plenty of ground to cover, and as long as she kept moving, she knew she could avoid any sniper shots. If they started firing en masse, Llenn had the legs to dodge, as long as she could see the bullet lines.

M’s reply was delayed a bit, probably out of surprise and confusion. “All right. But don’t attempt to get too close or charge in there alone.” Ultimately, he acknowledged her enthusiasm.

“Got it!” she chirped happily, continuing to run.

Then she saw, up ahead, where the rocks disappeared. There was almost no cover whatsoever. The best she had was a few isolated bits of crumbling stone wall. It seemed to have once been part of the castle town, but it had gone past ruins into simple scraps of standing material.

What now...?

Llenn hesitated briefly. She was less than 650 yards away from the castle now. Any gun that fired 7 mm bullets would be able to hit her at this range.

But she didn’t slow down.

I can get there! I will get there! I must get there!

She rushed past the last boulder. Her speed dipped slightly as she made certain not to step on the bits of crumbled stone, and she continued on her way to the castle, occasionally feinting to either side to keep it unpredictable.

It was still far away, so she couldn’t see the lower part of the castle very well.

She'd just barely get within two or three hundred yards, find somewhere to hide, and then look for an entrance.

At that moment, something large and orange flashed to the side of the castle.

The very next moment, a patch of dirt in front of her burst upward as though exploding on its own. It showered her face and body and even went into her mouth and eyes.

"Pbleck!" she yelped, hearing the quick drumbeat of gunfire in the distance.

I'm under fire!

The dirt in her eyes impaired her vision, but she knew enough to seek out the stone wall about three feet high and thirty feet long, ahead to her left. But as soon as she turned to the left, another series of explosions in the dirt happened on her right, followed by the sound of the gun. If her turn had been a moment later, she would have run directly into the path of the bullets. Their accuracy was frightening.

"Fwaah!" She nestled her diminutive body behind the stone wall and shouted, "I'm getting shot from the castle! Machine gun! But I couldn't see a bullet line! They're shooting without lines!"

GGO was a game, so when a player placed their finger on the trigger, it would display a visual target called a bullet circle that would indicate where the shot would go. The drawback was that it would also show a bullet line to the target. The only exception was the very first shot in a sneak attack.

But initial surprise shots aside, Llenn never saw a line with the second volley of shots. That meant the other side was a skilled enough shooter to fire without producing a line.

She knew that M could do it, because he'd had training at live shooting ranges overseas, where that was legal. But Llenn never considered that an NPC might lack a bullet line. Or more accurately, she never thought that the system would state that NPCs could perform such a feat. So the whole thing about them being the strongest NPCs wasn't a bluff.

"I heard the shots. Where are you?"

“I managed to hide behind a stone wall! I’m about five hundred yards from the castle!”

“Got it. We’ll come closer,” M said, which was a momentary relief—but in the end, it did not help her.

Minutes later, without any backup and the protective stone wall reduced to rubble by a large-bore sniper rifle, Llenn had no choice but to rush out into the open, where she was cut down by machine guns.

“That’s it... Dammit! They’re just too tough!”

She was dead.

Llenn knew what would happen if she died in the middle of the playtest.

First, once her hit points reached zero, she would instantly be teleported to a waiting room. Like in Squad Jam, she found herself standing in a fishy-looking place almost like outer space, where up, down, left, and right seemed like amorphous concepts.

In front of her was a large timer, counting down from 180. She could either wait here for the number to hit zero or choose to end the game session and return to Glocken right now.

Communicating with her teammates was not possible, of course. She was allowed to take items out of her virtual storage to equip them, it seemed. But at the moment, there was nothing for Llenn to do.

“Ugh, I pushed too hard. I got sloppy!” Llenn complained, plopping into a seated position on the black floor and cursing her own foolishness.

She had gone off way too far on her own. She never imagined that the enemy would be able to fire machine guns and large-caliber sniper rifles without bullet lines. But she should have known better.

This was a mistake of overconfidence.

“I really let Pito down.”

When they fought ZEMAL earlier, it should have been Llenn’s job to commit suicide and come up behind then. She was the speedy one. It was the ideal strategy for her.

But M gave the order to Pitohui.

That was probably—no, certainly—because he didn't want to waste one of Llenn's lives here, but preserve them for the battle against SHINC at the very end of all of this. And now she had wasted one for no gain at all. She didn't even catch a glimpse of the enemy.

"I won't be sloppy again!" she told herself, waiting for the number to tick down to zero.

She'd been teleported to the waiting space instantly and came back just as fast.

"Ooh!"

She was standing behind a boulder. It was familiar scenery: the place she'd passed through with the team earlier.

A look around the area turned up nothing that looked like an enemy. Based on the HP bars of her team in the upper left corner of her vision, no one had suffered any damage since she died. A ten-second countdown appeared in the center of her view, but she ignored it. Llenn opened her map screen and spoke to her teammates through the comm.

"I'm back. Sorry. Where are you now?"

The map showed Llenn where she was: to the south, almost a mile from the goal.

"We're hiding in the ruins of a large house, half a mile from the castle in a south-southwest direction. Can you make it here?" said M.

"Got it! I'm going now! I'll make it to you!" Llenn said, bursting into motion.

"Yo, Llenn Number Two!"

She ran like a bullet and eventually reached a crumbling stone house, exactly where M said it would be. When she got there, she found Fukaziroh and the other two were crouched behind it.

"Sorry for the wait!" she said, sliding over the damp ground to rejoin the group.

A number of Western European–style houses were falling apart in the area; it seemed to have been a residential area at some point. A large flat section made of smaller pieces was lying at a diagonal. It was probably the ceiling. Several layers of rubble many feet thick propped it up. That would protect them from any kind of shooting, even an antimateriel rifle. It was the perfect place to take cover.

The problem was that there was nothing of note between them and the castle. It was just flat land that was perfectly visible from the distant destination. M might be able to snipe the castle from this distance, but that would do little good on its own. And if they ran closer, they'd only get shot.

“How does it look?” Llenn asked.

Fukaziroh replied, “It’s bad, Llenn. We can’t get any closer to that castle. The other guys are crazy tough.” She lifted her empty hands in a gesture of abandonment.

Pitohui pointed out, “The south side is no good—it’s too open. They shoot with an antimateriel rifle with no bullet line, plus they have machine-gun support. The western side is slightly better, as you can see, but there’s still no cover up ahead. So, in that sense, it’s no different from the south side.”

“What about the north?”

“There’s thick forest there, and it should get us the closest to the castle. You ready, M?”

“Yeah,” he said, turning to face them. A rectangular box was in his hands. It was gray, seemingly plastic, and about the size of a standard A4 sheet of paper, but it was two inches thick.

“?”

It was not a common sight in *GGO*. Llenn looked confused, so M hurled it up into the air. Immediately, bits like arms shot out of the four corners. There were propellers on the ends of the arms that spun and stabilized the box in midair.

“Ooh!” Llenn exclaimed. “Wow! This is one of those thingies... A drone, right?”

“Yes, indeed. This is the toy I just bought,” said Pitohui.

This was the item she wanted to arrive early to purchase, Llenn realized. So drones were implemented in *GGO* now, too.

Drones were the catchall name for a variety of devices—unmanned mobile units that could be remotely controlled or were entirely autonomous. An automobile or ship could be a drone if it was controlled without a human on board, but the kind of drone best known in Japan was this multicopter type, a small helicopter with multiple propellers powerful enough to keep it elevated.

It rose until Llenn could see a hemisphere of clear glass on the underside of the box. It was very clearly a camera, like the kind on the ceiling of convenience stores.

“And we’ll watch it on here,” Pitohui said, showing her a flat panel like a tablet computer. On the tablet, Llenn could see herself looking *at* the tablet from an overhead angle—it was the image the drone was capturing.

The visuals were crisp, colorful, and with hardly any visual lag. Llenn waved at it and saw herself doing so on the screen with no noticeable delay. There was no sound.

“So they put them in the game! And you bought one!”

“It was really expensive. There aren’t many available yet,” said Pitohui.

“Ooh,” Fukaziroh exclaimed. “I’m not going to ruin the fun of the game by asking the price, but between you and me, how many thousands of yen did you throw down?”

“Ah, let’s see... Enough to field a whole soccer team of the guy who said, ‘People are born equal but don’t live equal, so you better study hard and make something of yourself!’”

“Wowza! Eleven Yukichis!” said Fukaziroh, referring to the man on the ten-thousand-yen note.

“Incidentally, if it gets shot down, the item is lost forever.”

“Hot damn!”

“So fly that sucker veeery high, M.”

“Got it.”

The buzzing of the propellers got much louder, and it began to ascend. M was using the controller grip connected to the screen, using his thumbs on little sticks. His face was dead serious with concentration. If it crashed or got shot down, it represented a major financial loss, so of course he was careful. This was his first time piloting it.

“All flight aside from stasis hovering is manual, so it’s pretty old-fashioned compared to modern drones. You can’t have it run recon for you all on its own. Pretty high difficulty,” said Pitohui.

In 2026, even a drone you could buy at the toy store would take off automatically with the push of a button on a smartphone screen and follow a route if you just traced it on a map with your finger, automatically avoiding danger and returning to its origin point before its battery ran out.

This *GGO* drone would stay at its designated location and maintain altitude if the user wanted it to, but everything else had to be done by the pilot. If it were totally autonomous, that would be too much of an advantage for the owner. It was also fairly large and not very cool-looking.

Despite all that, Llenn was thrilled. “This is incredible; we can see the whole map from above!”

“That’s nothing new for me,” bragged Fukaziroh, who came from the world of *ALO*, where all characters could fly as much as they wanted.

Llenn watched the video on Pitohui’s tablet—or as much as she could while still remaining vigilant. It was so entertaining to watch the camera footage as it rose higher and higher. She felt like she was a bird.

“And in *ALO*, I could see this with my own eyes...? Maybe I should try it out...”

“Oh! You wanna come over? You wanna? You’re welcome anytime!”

“Um...maybe...kinda...?”

“With pleasure, then! One guest, coming right up!”

With a smile and a shake of her head, Pitohui watched Fukaziroh and Llenn carry out their mysterious little routine. “You can do that later, you two. We

need to check out this castle for now.”

The drone was very high up now. The entire castle was visible on the screen.

The stone castle walls made a decagonal shape, where each side ended in towers topped with a spire and turrets. The walls themselves were about sixty-five feet tall, with the towers adding another fifteen.

Atop the walls were battlements with embrasures at regular intervals for both defensive and offensive purposes. The way they jutted up and down was very clear on the image. The entire breadth of the space enclosed by the walls was about a thousand feet, as far as Llenn could tell.

There was a gate in the wall on each of the cardinal directions. The gates had straight sides and soaring arches. Each was the same size, about thirteen feet high and ten feet across. A large truck could easily drive through it.

You would expect a wooden door firmly bolted shut, but whether it was from sheer age or damage, there were no doors on the gates. Instead, piles of rubble made of stones and bricks rose to about the height of a person within the gateway, making access more difficult.

“It looks just like...a castle,” said Fukaziroh helpfully.

The interior behind the walls was a courtyard with no plant life whatsoever. There was only bare, flat earth, with the occasional simple wooden building—they could have been stables or storehouses. The group could see a little circle, too—a well, maybe.

Paved stone paths extended in each direction from the gates. Large, rectangular divots were visible along the sides of the paths; perhaps they were meant to be ponds. Nothing reflected from them, so there was no water in there now.

In the center of the property was the citadel itself, a castle with four spires. It had a plain, practical exterior, nothing fanciful.

The towers were placed at perfect forty-five-degree angles from the cardinal directions. Each one was about the height of a ten-story building. There were black holes here and there on their surfaces: windows.

The building itself was about half that height. The whole thing was maybe 160 feet across. Many more windows yawned darkly from the higher parts of the castle.

The wooden roof of the building was still firmly intact, so you couldn't see the inside from above. There were other castle-like dungeon areas in *GGO*, but Llenn had never gone into them.

"Hmm... It's already tough enough to merely approach it, and even if we breach the walls, it'll be a nasty fight to cross that courtyard. They'll shoot at us from the towers and castle," Pitohui observed. No sooner had she said it than a light flashed from a window near the top of one of the castle towers. A narrow orange beam approached the screen.

"Higher, M!"

"Got it."

The castle got quite a bit smaller on the screen—M put the drone into a rapid ascent. The firing from the tower stopped. Either it was out of range now or the drone was at such an angle that it couldn't be struck from the window.

"Yikes, that was close. Hold it at the highest possible height, M. I'll zoom in the camera," Pitohui said, pinching the tiny image of the castle with her fingers to zoom in. That was a pretty handy feature, and she could do it with her gloves on.

As the castle got larger and larger on the screen, a soldier came into view. The man was prone next to a turret on the castle's east wall, holding a huge, blocky rifle.

"There!" Llenn cried, at the first sight of their enemy. Given the abnormal size of his rifle, this was clearly the one who'd shot up the wall Llenn was hiding behind before she died.

And just when they'd finally caught a visual of the enemy for the first time—a tiny glimpse through the screen, at least—there was a cute little *bing!* sound, and more words appeared in the air before Llenn's eyes.

You've got intel on all of the enemy units!

So it seemed the developers had given them some extra information. Presumably that would be because they had gotten a good glimpse of the enemy for the first time. Even through the drone camera and not in person, though? It probably wasn't important enough to quibble over. Llenn was grateful for the information.

There are seven enemies. Each of these soldiers is the toughest in his field!

Fukaziroh was clearly reading the same message that Llenn was. "Gee, thanks," she snorted.

Bing! A picture of the first member appeared.

It was very considerate of them to provide the characters' appearance. It would be quite annoying if a player got into the castle and couldn't tell if what they were seeing was an enemy NPC or a member of another human team.

The picture was of a large white man. His beard was so long and thick that they couldn't see his jawline. He was the very picture of a burly foreign man. He seemed to be in his forties.

The man wore American-style MultiCam fatigues, with a military issue helmet and a plate carrier vest protecting his torso. There was a bandage over his forehead beneath the helmet. Perhaps part of his character story was that he was already injured.

Beneath the photo was written the name Jacob in both Japanese and English.

"Get a load of this bad guy," muttered Fukaziroh.

Under his name was a section titled PRIMARY WEAPON, which displayed the gun that this NPC would be using. There would be other guns he might use, of course, but this was meant to be a guide to his general combat focus.

Jacob's main gun was the M4A1, the standard-use American 5.56 mm assault rifle. That was a very typical weapon in *GGO*. But just because the gun was standard didn't mean his ability with it was.

Bing! The second member was a black man.

He was also built like a wrestler, and though Llenn found it difficult to guess his general age, she estimated he was in his forties, too. He had no facial hair,

but he was smiling in his picture with attractively white teeth.

The clothes and gear he was in appeared to be the same as Jacob's. His name was listed as Roy. His gun, too, was the M4A1.

"He's a bad guy, too."

"Are you going to say that for every one of them, Fuka?"

Bing! The third member showed up.

This white man was slightly younger, probably in his thirties. His face was narrow, his eyes sharp. His listed name was Rock. It wasn't clear if that was his given name or a nickname. His main gun was a GM6 Lynx. Llenn didn't recognize that name.

"That's an antimateriel rifle," said Pitohui, who wanted a complete collection of every gun in *GGO*. "It's Hungarian, part of the Gepárd series. It's a .50-caliber semi-auto, ten shots to a magazine. And it's a bullpup."

She listed off the specs as smoothly as if they were right on the tip of her tongue. A bullpup referred to a gun design where the magazine was loaded behind the grip and trigger. By placing that apparatus in the back of the gun, it enabled the overall length to be shorter.

"It's extremely compact for a gun of this type, which means you can fire it standing up if you want to. The last thing you want is to be on the opposite end of a gun with such a terrifying combo of flexibility, portability, and power. He's definitely the one who sniped at you through the wall."

"Grrr. So that's what he looks like..."

"I don't think they've implemented this member of the Gepárd series yet, though. Damn privileged NPCs. It's a scary gun, so everyone be careful he doesn't shoot you through a wall."

"Mmm," grunted Llenn.

Beside her, Fukaziroh said, "You look like you want to kill him and steal it, Pito."

"Uh-oh, you can tell? I wonder if you can actually procure NPC weapons before they're available to players. Some games'll let you do that," said Pitohui,

who was having more fun now than at any point earlier in the day.

Procurement was a military term that meant claiming the enemy's weapons for one's own. Usually it meant picking up weapons that the enemy left behind and saving them for research—or sometimes just using them among your own troops.

“Everything's a new challenge! If you give up, that's the end of the plunder and revelry!”

The fourth member was named Cain, and he looked like an Asian man with lightly tanned skin. All of them seemed to be wearing the same thing, so it had to be a uniform. That was helpful for identifying the enemy.

Cain was easily the youngest so far, in his twenties, though maybe that was just the good ol' “Asians looking young” magic. He was quite handsome, as a matter of fact. Whoever modeled the character must have worked off a movie actor or something.

Fukaziroh looked as serious as she ever had and pointed at the screen. “Our goal today is to extract him from the evil organization and make him my boyfriend. Is that understood?”

“Fuka, don't change the story.”

“I expect one hundred and fifty percent from every last one of you to fulfill this objective.”

“Are you listening?”

Cain's primary weapon was the Steyr F90. That was an improved, updated model of the famous bullpup-style assault rifle, Steyr AUG. It could also fire grenades, so that meant they had to be aware of flying projectiles.

The fifth member was named Vodka. It sounded like a Russian name, and sure enough, he looked like a big Russian polar bear. He was a good match for M.

“That's one big, ugly dude. Definitely not boyfriend material,” Fukaziroh said, jabbing her finger at the picture. Llenn kindly ignored that comment.

He must be the one who blasted me full of holes earlier, she thought. In the primary weapon field, it said he used a PKP Pecheneg. That was the latest

iteration of the Russian PKM guns that SHINC used.

Shiori, who played the avatar of Rosa, kept talking about how she wanted this gun next, like a child begging for a game for Christmas, Llenn recalled.

According to her, “It’s got an air-cooled barrel with a steel jacket that pulls cool air into the barrel, which makes it possible to fire it for longer periods of time, and it’s not a removable barrel, so the accuracy is much higher! *And* you can put a scope on it for better long-distance shooting! It also has a higher rate of fire and does more damage to boot!”

It sounded like a product pitch, in fact. You didn’t need to be a mind reader to know what Llenn was thinking, though. *Why would high school and college girls want to know so much about guns?*

The PKG was one of the newest machine guns in *GGO*, however, so it was extremely difficult to find and would cost a very pretty penny if you tried to buy one.

SHINC couldn’t pour their real-life funds into the game, so Rosa lamented that it would be quite a while until she was able to acquire one.

Bing.

The first of the remaining two to appear was Hassan.

Like his name suggested, he was Middle Eastern. His skin was dark, and his face was rugged and bearded. He looked like a capable middle-aged man in his fifties. The photo of him looked somehow haunted and mournful.

“This guy...is currently going through a divorce,” Fukaziroh made up on the spot. “His wife cheated on him, but she’s got a big-shot lawyer, and he hasn’t been able to finalize it yet. She’s about to gain custody of their daughter...even though the daughter’s closer to her dad...”

Now he seemed even sadder.

This man’s weapon was the FN SCAR-H. It was a 7.62 mm assault rifle. That was a gun with good sniping capabilities, too. Like M, he probably acted as a sniper who could shoot on semi-auto. That was a tough combination on a long-distance map like this one.

The last of the chosen seven was a white man named Doc.

He appeared to be in his thirties, and like the nickname for doctor implied, he looked like the delicate intellectual type. He wore stupid-looking round glasses, like a real chump.

“Ha-ha, so the last boss of the seven is this guy. I can tell because usually it works out that way in the movies. Don’t be fooled by the fact that he looks like a total virgin,” Fukaziroh warned.

“We’re gonna kill all of them either way, so I don’t care,” said Llenn flatly.

“Wow! Listen to Llenn the Pink Maiden of Manslaughter!”

“Don’t bring back that weird nickname,” Llenn protested. But after she slaughtered all those teams inside the pink mist within the dome in SJ2, there were probably many people who thought of her that way already.

As for the virgi— As for Doc’s weapon, he used the SIG Sauer MCX, a very rare, high-precision assault rifle. It looked like the M4 series: lightweight and adaptable. He would be a tough opponent to face indoors.

“So Jacob, Roy, and Doc have assault rifles. Cain has a grenade launcher. Rock uses the antimateriel rifle. Vodka’s the machine gunner. And Hassan’s the sniper. Got it,” said Pitohui, repeating their names and weapons and swiping with her left hand to remove the window. Surely that information would be accessible at any time, but nobody was going to go to the trouble in the midst of battle.

Llenn scrolled through the screen before her eyes once again, memorizing all the faces. There weren’t any prizewinning teams in Squad Jam with faces quite like these, but just in case, she wanted to be able to tell them apart.

So their names, faces, and weapons had all been revealed, but that told LPFM nothing about their actual skill level. Based on the accuracy of the sniping and machine-gunning earlier, it was clearly quite high.

“How’s their ability as a team? I bet teamwork between NPCs pales in comparison to that of real people. Like, maybe they can follow patterns, but they don’t have the adaptability to change on the fly,” Fukaziroh pointed out, as a gaming veteran.

“We should find out soon. Watch the screen,” M said.

Llenn and Fukaziroh peered at the tablet Pitohui was holding. It showed the castle from above, with the forest on the north side in view. Six square cursors lit up within the forest. M had touched the screen to pop up those targets.

“These guys are going to attack the castle. I’m guessing they’re MMTM.”

He made the footage zoom in. One of the wonders of the video-game world was that he could go in as far as he wanted without making the picture grainy.

It was definitely MMTM. They had disguised themselves with grass, but the geometric green camo was identifiably Swedish in design. That was the uniform MMTM wore from SJ2 onward.

“Ohhh, well done, Daveed,” teased Pitohui. The actual name of MMTM’s leader was David. Pitohui had been on a squadron with him a while ago, and she knew from experience that he hated it when she called him Daveed.

MMTM had a high level of overall skill and teamwork. They were at the edge of the forest, within a hundred yards of the castle. They’d been spending all their time going at a slow, boring, painful crawl, just to make sure they weren’t spotted if the enemy happened to patrol outside the castle.

“If they rushed out of the forest, don’t you think they could get to the walls? And at that point...,” Llenn said. It seemed like they might stand a chance of getting into the castle itself, if they rushed through the north gate quickly and managed to get across the courtyard somehow.

Knowing how much MMTM loved interior combat, they might clear out all the enemies indoors and mop them up. That would be the end of the game.

“But will it really be that easy?”

“Oh! You’re making your evil face, Pito.”

Gulp.

There wasn’t much to be done at this point but watch. Llenn was going to be a bird soaring over the battle that was about to unfold.

“It feels like we’re the audience hanging out in the bar,” she muttered.

On the screen, MMTM's forward crawl came to a halt.

They had reached the edge of the forest. There were no trees ahead, just a hundred yards of flat, dry ground until the castle wall.

"You know...this might actually work," Llenn said.

"Oh, I'm sure they'll get to the walls. There are no NPCs up there," Pitohui told her.

Zooming out showed no enemies atop the wall. That meant they weren't aware of MMTM's approach yet.

The charge began.

Six men began running all at once. Their cursors vanished when they left the forest and became easily visible to the naked eye. You could tell they were running, but from above it was impossible to see their faces. It was hard to tell them apart by gun, too. A further zoom might clear that up, but then they'd have a bad angle on the entire arena, so Pitohui didn't bother.

The six rushed toward the thick gray line on the screen that was the wall. There was no shooting from the castle yet.

Within moments, they had reached the wall and run down its length toward the gate. Although it wasn't visible from this angle, there was a pile of rubble through the gate that would slow their ability to get through. One member stayed put with his gun at the ready while the others filed through.

Just when MMTM reappeared on the other side, having passed through the gate—there was an explosion.

A huge explosion, in fact, set off shortly inside the gate entrance, in the courtyard.

"Aaah!" "Ooh!" "Oh my." "..."

Llenn saw it. Fukaziroh and Pitohui saw it. Even M saw it happen, without comment.

A few yards inside the castle wall, the ground simply exploded. It wasn't an attack from above, but a land mine or some other type of explosive already in place as a trap.

Four members of MMTM were in the vicinity. Their bodies were blown sky-high, floating like scraps of paper in the wind. Limbs were torn and severed, but there was no point in taking stock of damage values and hit points this time around. Everyone caught in a blast of this size would be killed instantly.

The remaining two were outside the wall. They were supposed to take a defensive position and provide covering fire while the other four ran through the courtyard, presumably.

A single shot flew in their direction. It was slower than a bullet; a 40 mm grenade. Its aim was perfect. It landed on the ground immediately outside the castle wall and exploded directly between the two surviving men.

They, too, were killed instantly.

All six members of MMTM were obliterated within moments, without having the chance to fire a single shot.

Boooooom! Boom!

Llenn heard two explosions, one large and one small, roar through the virtual air. When the smoke from the blasts cleared on the camera footage, there were six bodies total inside and outside the castle wall, DEAD markers floating above them.

“Whoa...,” Llenn gasped.

“Not bad!” Fukaziroh praised, for some reason.

“Well, well...” Pitohui grinned.

“They knew the whole time and set a trap...? Was the enemy simply waiting for that?” Llenn asked. But there hadn’t been a single shot fired on them to that point.

“Well... I suppose...,” Pitohui said hesitantly, which was uncharacteristic of her. Normally, she’d say something like *Of course they did! Ha-ha-ha, your fault for being sloppy, Daveed! Loser!*

Llenn tore her eyes from the tablet screen to look at Pitohui. The woman looked dead serious, her facial tattoos utterly still. This was the first time she’d ever seen her looking so stone-faced.

Who are you? Llenn wanted to ask. But she didn't.

Then M said, "The Amazons are going to try from the east."

"Oh!"

Llenn looked back to the screen. Pitohui had pulled back the zoom to show the whole castle, then pushed in to the east side.

On the map, this side was listed as grassland, and on the screen, it was definitely grass. It grew tall and thick, up to an adult's waist. The place looked like a vacant lot in the summer, after the pampas grass had been left unattended.

People were running through that empty lot of grass now. It was hard to see them because they were wearing green on green, but it was clear that someone was running. There were four of them.

Four members of SHINC were in a formation several yards across, running toward the east wall of the castle perimeter. They had about 650 feet left to go.

"They left the snipers behind and rushed the castle," M pointed out. Llenn could see that now.

They left behind Tohma, who used the extremely long PTRD-41 antitank rifle, and their other sniper, Anna. The remaining four sprinted for the castle wall so they could burst into the castle grounds.

Of course, rushing across the grassland with no actual cover from bullets made them sitting ducks. But because they heard the explosions from MMTM's battle, they'd been waiting for this moment to make their move.

In other words, they'd hold steady until the fighting picked up somewhere else, then they'd join the attack. The defense would have to split their attention between both sides, and one of the two would eventually give way.

An unorthodox strategy, but one that got results.

But Pitohui was not impressed. "They're going to fail."

"Ah!" Llenn noticed it, too, and she went pale.

SHINC was trying to launch their attack while the seven-man NPC squad dealt

with another team—but that fight was already over, in two simple explosions. MMTM had been obliterated.

“No, Boss! Run away!” Llenn cried, but they couldn’t hear her.

A merciless sight played out on the screen.

Light flashed in a hole in the middle of the spire along the east wall, and then beams of light poured down onto the grassy area. That was an attack from a PKP machine gun, and the beams of light were terrible blades that pierced one of the SHINC members. The tracer rounds came one every four or five bullets, so the hail of gunfire was several times what they could actually see.

“Damn you, Vodka!”

He’d definitely taken out one person—but he’d also revealed his own location. If Tohma and Anna attacked, they could beat one of the NPCs!

But Llenn’s anticipation did not bear fruit.

“Huh?”

Vodka’s attack ended, and the light of the tracers and the muzzle flash stopped coming from the window. In the next moment, an especially large beam of light shot toward the window. It was a sniping attempt by the PTRD-41.

A little trickle of gray smoke appeared from the window; a phenomenon often seen when you hit stone.

“They missed,” Pitohui observed. Then people appeared on the eastern castle wall. Three men emerged from the sides of the gate tower bearing rifles.

It wasn’t clear who was who, except that they were obviously the enemy. The three hid behind the battlements, sticking just their muzzles through the embrasures to aim at SHINC.

You couldn’t determine the types of guns being used, but you could certainly tell that they were firing. The tempo was staccato and semi-auto. The other three dropped quickly as they ran.

“Dammit! Tohma, Anna, you can do it!” Llenn urged the two hidden snipers, but her hopes were crushed without mercy.

When the first three men were done with their brief, efficient burst fire, another man emerged onto the roof of a different gate tower, knelt down, and fired a massive rifle. It created a tremendous muzzle flash. Then another.

And that was it. All was still.

The three on the castle wall retreated back inside the tower. Nothing moved in the grassland area.

You didn't need to see the details to understand what had happened. SHINC's assault was a failure. All six had died in battle.

"Oh no..."

As far as Llenn could tell, the enemy NPCs' teamwork was absolutely perfect.

Take Vodka, the machine gunner. When you shoot down one target from an advantageous position, you often get greedy and want another one. But he immediately pulled back behind cover.

Thus, he avoided SHINC's impeccable sniping, and he managed to alert his companions to their locations. It was hard to miss the PTRD-41 being fired.

The next three men then appeared and quickly eliminated the remaining members of the forward team. While Tohma and Anna were preoccupied with that, they got shot by Rock's GM6 Lynx.

If he only fired twice, that showed that it was all he needed. He must have split Tohma and Anna in half—or something close to it. Hopefully their valuable PTRD-41 antitank rifle didn't get destroyed by a bullet.

"W-wiped out... SHINC wiped out..." Llenn murmured lifelessly.

"How many seconds was that?" Fukaziroh wondered.

Pitohui provided the answer. "Twenty-seven seconds."

You were counting! Llenn thought, shocked. She didn't say it out loud.

"You were counting!" said Fukaziroh.

"Ugh..."

First it was MMTM, now SHINC. Llenn's shoulders slumped dejectedly.

“You’re too nice, Llenn. We just saw rival teams attempt the enemy boss and fail, *and* we learned something about their strategy. That’s really good for us,” said Fukaziroh, who had been through life-and-death battles in many games over the years. She was sparing no sentiment in this situation—and she was correct.

“Yeah, I know, but...”

Llenn couldn’t help her frustration, seeing the team she’d chosen to be her eternal rivals get utterly spanked like that.

“Another team’s about to test them. They’re going in from the northwest,” said M.

“Another one looking to get destroyed?” Fukaziroh asked.

“It would seem so,” replied Pitohui.

“All right, then. Which team’s next up on the the chopping block?” said Llenn, sulking.

“The machine gunners,” said M.

Ah, so that’s where ZEMAL is.

Fukaziroh wondered, “How many seconds do you suppose they’ll last? I say twenty.”

“Hmm, maybe less. Fifteen?”

“I don’t care.” Llenn sulked.

Pitohui moved the camera focus to ZEMAL. There were five of them, right between the forest and wasteland along the northwest edge of the castle wall. They’d been hiding at the edge of the forest before this.

The trigger-happy bunch was probably set to charge and spray loads of bullets. They’d be an easy target. Llenn expected to see them getting shot up and eliminated promptly.

But when the camera got up to maximum zoom, she couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Huhhhhhh?” she shrieked.

CHAPTER 5
The All-Japan Machine-Gun Lovers' Trap



CHAPTER 5

The All-Japan Machine-Gun Lovers' Trap

Llenn had an image in mind.

She could easily envision the five members of ZEMAL, machine guns blazing, as they rushed the castle gate.

Then, the team of seven, who were every bit worthy of the title of toughest NPCs ever, would destroy them even faster than they did MMTM and SHINC.

So when they showed up bearing a large placard, she couldn't help but shriek, "Huhhhhhh?"

She could hardly believe what was happening on the screen. She could scarcely believe her own eyes, in fact.

"Wheh?"

"Nnn?"

"Wha—?!"

Fukaziroh, Pitohui, and M were just as startled, so it wasn't their eyes playing tricks on them or a malfunction of the drone's camera.

On the screen, at maximum zoom, the five were carrying not machine guns, but a large board. Comparing it to the size of their bodies, the board seemed to be about sixteen feet long and six feet tall.

It took every member of ZEMAL using both hands to lift the board. In other words, their machine guns and backpack ammo-loading systems were stored away in their inventory.

Llenn recognized the huge, faded-red placard. There was one of them right on the top of the ruined building they were hiding behind. It was part of what had once been a roof. More importantly, there was something written on the board. They had turned the huge roof board into a giant sign that they held up for the

NPCs to see as they approached.

The fact that the letters were gray and very straight was a sign that they had used not paint, but duct tape to write them. There were two rows of words on the sign, which, between the overhead angle and the fact that they were moving, were very hard to read.

Llenn gave it a shot but gave up after three letters. “W, E, R...”

“What language is that?” Fukaziroh wondered, giving up without reading a single one.

“WE’RE NOT A HOSTILE TEAM! LET US GET INTO THE CASTLE!” Pitohui read fluently in English.

“Huhhh?” Llenn exclaimed, understanding its meaning.

“Ooh,” murmured Fukaziroh sagely. Then she asked again, “What language is that?”

“It’s English, obviously!” snapped Llenn, but she knew that Miyu was worse at English than any other school subject.

“Oh! Engleesh!”

M, the translation machine, helpfully converted it to Japanese for her. “It means *We’re not your enemies; let us in the castle.*”

“Ohhh,” she murmured. Then she let out a “Huhhh?” just like Llenn. “Are they crazy? What’s that about? Are they giving up?”

Pitohui happily replied, “Oh, hardly. They’re doing the old ‘pretend to be your friend so they can get inside and slaughter you’ trick. They’re hiding their guns in their inventory.”

“Is it...going to work?” Llenn asked.

“Mmm, probably not,” said Pitohui. “It’ll take a few seconds for them to pull out the guns and use them, so the other side will notice first. And besides—”

“They’re NPCs who aren’t controlled by human beings. They won’t even understand the words or point of the sign. They’ll think, *Oh hey, an enemy* and shoot them,” finished Fukaziroh.

“Yup! Too bad, since they clearly went to the trouble of writing in English,

knowing the game's made in America. I'm guessing they'll get shot any moment now."

On the screen, ZEMAL was within about one thousand feet of the castle. Then 750 feet. Still nothing. The men continued their march, holding up the giant placard.

"What the...?" Pitohui murmured.

"Pito, you were wrong!" pointed out Fukaziroh. "It looks like it's gonna work after all!"

"Whaaat? What gives? What the hell's going on?!"

For the first time in her life, Llenn felt like she was seeing honest confusion and trepidation from Pitohui. Back on the screen, ZEMAL was now within six hundred feet of the castle wall.

The two NPCs who shot SHINC were visible atop the wall. They had their guns at the ready, but they weren't firing at ZEMAL.

"Dammit!" Pitohui hurled the tablet away.

"Aaah!" Llenn rushed off to pick it up, while Pitohui yelled, "M, hand me a gun!"

"!"

M was startled, but he moved quickly to obey her. He took his hand off the controller, pulled the M14 EBR off by its sling, and tossed it to Pitohui.

His toss and her catch made the heavy weapon look as light as could be. How much physical strength did those two have? The gun had to be at least thirteen pounds, and they made it look like a tennis racket.

"Whatcha gonna do, Pito?" Fukaziroh asked.

Pitohui answered through demonstration. She hopped atop the rubble they were hiding behind, crawled up near the top, and took aim with the M14 EBR in a truly exhausting-looking position. She was aiming for the castle walls, of course.

"What is she...?"

Before Llenn could figure it out, Pitohui fired. *Blam!* The heavy sound of a 7.62 mm gunshot rattled the area.

Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam! A rhythmic five-shot sequence. The empty cartridges soared against the cloudy sky.

It was M's gun, but knowing Pitohui, she probably thought, *My guns are my guns. And M's guns are my guns.* So it wasn't a surprise that she had mastery over the M14 EBR, too.

The half mile to the wall was just short enough that she could hit it with accuracy.

"Oh!" Llenn had the camera feed in her hands, and she saw two men hit the deck atop the wall. A series of smoke puffs from the bullets' landing points rose about three feet away from them against the stone.

The gun's owner would have had better skill than Pitohui, after all. M would have hit them on the first shot. Pitohui said, "They're coming," and slid back down the pile toward them.

Ga-ga-ga-ga-gak! Ga-ga-ga-gak! Ga-ga-ga-ga-ga-gak!

A tremendous clatter of bullets hitting the mountain of rubble in front of them filled the air.

"Eep!" Llenn didn't need to look at the screen to know what had happened. Somewhere in the castle, probably still in the spire, Vodka the machine gunner spotted Pitohui firing and quickly shot back.

Once again, the reaction speed was frightening, and the accuracy of the bullets was insane. Essentially, all the bullets hit the rubble, tearing away at the debris on its front. A scrap of wood that was torn loose flew over Llenn's head.

Pitohui didn't pull the trigger again, so the onslaught stopped there.

"Well?" she asked, peering at the screen.

"Well, what? Oh!" Llenn gasped. ZEMAL had tossed their giant sign aside and begun to flee toward the opposite side of the castle.

Fukaziroh noted, "Aha, so they thought they were getting shot and assumed that their bad joke of a strategy hadn't worked. What cowards. They ought to

have rushed the gates and tried to run inside, going ‘Help, help!’ Their strategies are always so sloppy.” She was talking down to them from the same height at which the drone was observing.

“Very good. Well, that’s that,” said Pitohui with satisfaction. That seemed to have been her goal; she was back to watching with her usual wicked smile.

ZEMAL ran as quickly as they could, without materializing their machine guns. Their backs made great targets as they fled—but not a single bullet flew after them.

Once every last member was well out of range of the castle, they abruptly changed course to the north and vanished into the deep, dark woods.

When the entire act had finished playing out, Llenn asked, “Pito, what were you trying to do...?”

“I just don’t want them to get the jump on us with a stupid plan like that one. So I pranked them a little,” Pitohui replied with a wink.

“...?”

Llenn didn’t quite buy that answer. She didn’t think Pitohui was the kind of person who would waste shots and give away their location to the enemy without good reason.

In the meantime, M said, “The battery’s running low. We’ll need to switch it out,” and he began to pilot the drone back. It couldn’t be too convenient, or it would unbalance the competition. A single flight could only last a few minutes, which was very short.

She heard the buzzing of propellers overhead, and the device slowly descended toward them. Llenn looked up at it with fondness and said, “Welcome back, Mr. Drone!”

“There has to be a better name than that,” Fukaziroh complained, so Llenn came up with an alternate.

“Welcome back, Miss Drone!”

“That’s the same thing!”

Llenn didn’t want to hear any complaints from the girl who called her

launchers Rightony and Leftania, but she had to admit that she didn't have a knack for names.

The drone slowly descended toward them until it was only fifteen feet above their heads, when— *Bwoahcrack!!*

Two of the four propellers on the device disintegrated in midair.

“Ah!” She recognized what had just happened.

The *bwoah* was the sound of a heavy bullet roaring closer. Given the distance and precision, it had to be that damn antimateriel rifle. The gunshot itself arrived later.

The bullet didn't hit the body of the drone, but it passed through the propeller axis and destroyed the two propellers, front and back, on its right side. What happens when a multicopter hover drone suddenly loses all the lift on one side? The answer was playing out right before Llenn's eyes.

The shock of the bullet's impact instantly tipped the drone to the left, and the lift from the left-side propellers then flipped it over, causing it to plummet toward the ground, directly toward Llenn's face.

“Taaa!”

Fwap!

The next moment, the body of the drone was nestled firmly between Llenn's palms, sideways with the destroyed propellers at the bottom. She had caught it with the legendary two-handed blade-catching technique some attempted against the katana.

Llenn's sheer reflexes, courage, and love had saved the life of Mr. Drone.

When its upturned left-side propellers stopped rotating, Llenn exhaled in relief. She placed the half-winged drone gently on the ground.

“Way to go, Llenn!” Fukaziroh cheered. “If you ever come to *ALO*, let's try that with a sword!”

“No way,” Llenn snapped.

“Are you okay? You didn't cut your hand on the propellers, did you?”

“No, somehow.”

She would have if the left side had fallen first. She might have failed to catch it and had it lacerate her face instead. The thought of what those high-speed propellers were capable of was too frightening to ponder.

Of course, it was only a game, so at worst, she would have lost a few hit points, nothing more. It would be better than being shot, in fact.

M examined the device, then looked up at her. “If we replace the propellers, it can fly again. Thank you, Llenn.”

“You’re welcome!”

“But we don’t have any spares at the moment.”

“Awww!”

So they didn’t lose the actual item that cost 110,000 real-world yen, but they had effectively lost their secret weapon of aerial sight for the rest of the game.

“I knew we might need some, but they don’t sell backup propellers yet.”

“S-so what do we do now?”

“There’s nothing we *can* do.” M swept his left arm to return the drone, controller, and tablet display to his inventory. They vanished instantly, leaving behind a momentary trace of their contours in little dots of light.

“But we learned a lot about the enemy. That was well worth it!” Pitohui chirped.

“Can we...even beat them?” Llenn couldn’t help but wonder. The enemy had tremendous weaponry that had destroyed MMTM and SHINC in seconds, and they were situated in a very advantageous location.

“This doesn’t seem like it was designed to be winnable,” she murmured.

Smack! Pitohui clapped her hands together. “All right! No feeling sorry for ourselves! No giving up before the end! Have you forgotten our team motto, Never Give Up?!”

“That was never our motto...”

“Well, it is now!”

“Oh...”

Pitohui turned to her partner and asked with a smile, “Have you come up with any plans, M?” M’s craglike face simply swung side to side in silence. “Okay, then! We’re going with my plan!”

“Ooh! What’s that?” Fukaziroh was all ears.

“We give up on the prize!”

“Oh?”

“We’re going to forget about winning the competition! Basically, there’s no way our team can win this on our own, right?”

M figured out her point. “Meaning that all the surviving teams should work together to take down the objective.”

“Exactly! So the first step is to win them over,” Pitohui said, jabbing a finger to the southwest.

“Who’s that?” Llenn wondered. She pulled her monocular out of her pocket and pressed it to her eye. “Ah!”

Hiding in the distance, about seven hundred yards away and watching them with great fear, was a group of players wearing full body armor.

She remembered them well. She could hardly forget.

That was Team T-S, the very group that so considerately killed her and the rest of her team in SJ2.

“Um... Hi, everyone...”

A group of soldiers wearing full body armor, face-concealing helmets, and shields on their off hands came over, as if out of a sci-fi story, answering their beckoning signal.

T-S was the champion of SJ2. A win was a win, no matter what form it took. They all went into the record book the same way. The team logo on their helmets was an orca whale sticking its face out of the water, fangs bared.

“Um, no one else wants to show their faces, so I’ll be the representative for the group...,” said one of the men, whose armor featured the number 002.

Apparently, they were fine showing their orca faces, but not their people faces.

The speaker, however, had his helmet open from the jaw position backward. He was a timid-looking man named Ervin. He'd been on the betrayers' team in SJ3, but despite his best efforts, Pitohui slaughtered the poor fellow in the end.

"Yoo-hoo! Ervin! Hi again!" called out Pitohui.

"Eep!" He flinched—but no one laughed at him for that. Once you'd been skewered from the throat to the back of the skull with a lightblade, no one could blame you for being a bit skittish in the presence of your past murderer.

Their entire team had undergone quite an experience, in fact. The rest of them had been waiting atop a high-rise building that was almost entirely submerged, only for a massive cruise ship to smash right through it and kill them all. Of course they didn't like Pitohui.

T-S's gear was the same as in SJ3. Their machine gunner used the minor HK GR9. The four assault rifle shooters used two AUGs and two SAR 21s. Both types were sci-fi-looking bullpup rifles.

Like last time, Ervin had an XM8. This gun wreaked quite a lot of havoc on Fukaziroh and M as they tried to approach *There Is Still Time* in SJ3. M nearly drowned, in fact.

Pitohui beckoned the intimidated team of six toward the protective pile of rubble. "C'mon, come closer. They'll shoot you with a .50-caliber from the wall."

Wary of the direction of the guns, T-S crouched in a huddle. Pitohui's HK416C was at her side, but behind her was the little pink person with the P90 and the huge guy with the M14 EBR resting across his stomach.

Llenn wasn't going to shoot them over a grudge, of course. Pitohui said she had a plan, so she was going to stay quiet and see what unfolded. A glance at her watch told her it was eight thirty.

"All right, Tees. How many lives do you have left?" she said, giving them a cute nickname. It wasn't worth the trouble for T-S to complain, so they didn't.

Ervin said, "We've wiped once. Everyone has two lives left."

"I see. And how did it feel, crossing blades with them?" she asked.

For an easily intimidated guy, Ervin looked fierce for once. “They’re crazy strong! They’re crazy quick! Their teamwork is crazy good! They’re crazy accurate!”

“That’s right. It’s a good thing to be able to admit your opponent’s strengths,” said Pitohui, an odd compliment for her to give.

“Also, we’ve never seen a single bullet line from them... Is that even possible?”

“Sure it is. You’ve seen M here do it, too, haven’t you? If a player can do it, so can an NPC.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“So what would you like to do?”

“.....Please let us join you! We don’t care if people mock us for being pathetic! We at least want to make it into that castle!”

“Uh-huh... Nice spirit. I like that!”

“And...?”

“As a matter of fact, I have a plan. My idea is to get all the survivors to raid them together. Since you’re here, I want you to take orders from me. At the very least, I’ll make sure you don’t die in vain.”

“.....”

Ervin was silent for several seconds.

Llenn could tell what he was thinking. He wanted to cooperate with their team, but he wasn’t sure if he really wanted to be working for *her*. Pitohui was the kind of person who wouldn’t think twice about turning on others.

But this time, he was going to make a firm decision. He knew that, on their own, there was no way they’d even get inside the castle.

“All right. We will fall in under your command! However...”

“However?”

“If we get into the castle, we’ll prioritize destroying the enemy NPCs, but...”

“But?”

“We’ll turn on you whenever we please! We’ll shoot you in the back if you give us the chance!”

“Ha-ha! Sounds lovely!”

Coming into contact with Pitohui often made one tougher in a variety of ways.

“So did you see the other teams? We watched MMTM and SHINC get wiped out and ZEMAL go running,” Pitohui said.

Ah, so we’re sharing intel, Llenn thought approvingly. She would need to listen to this.

Ervin said, “We started in the middle of the forest. We did encounter MMTM there, but we went separate ways without entering combat. Also, TOMS was around, too.”

“Oh? Cole’s team?”

That was the speedy team with people who played high-agility builds like Llenn. They’d survived to be among the last six teams in SJ3, too. Cole had been the member selected to join the betrayers.

“They were trying to use their speed to attack quickly, but they wiped twice, and I don’t know what happened after that. I’m guessing...”

“They got sick of how tough the enemy was and dropped out. I see,” said Pitohui. She stared hard at a point in empty space, thinking hard. The pause lasted thirty seconds.

“Okay. Well, I guess we’ll see how far this can take us!” She turned to Llenn and ordered, “Run, Llenn! Run!”

“Okay!” Llenn replied, just as loud. She paused. “Run where?”

Pitohui pointed a finger upward and twirled it in a circle.

“All the way around.”

* * *

“Message! Message!”

Llenn hurtled over the desolate ground, speeding around the castle at a

distance of at least a mile and a quarter.

“Message!” she cried over and over.

Pitohui’s order was for her to deliver a message. She was supposed to run all the way around the map, hailing any team she met to give them the recruitment pitch and connect her comm to that of the other teams’ leaders.

With all her gear in her inventory, even the equipment belt, Llenn was as light as she could possibly be, for speed purposes. As a matter of fact, whether it was on her person or in her virtual storage, it didn’t affect her speed, but she did feel better running with her hands free.

It was a dangerous gamble, however. If any other squads were feeling impatient or short-tempered, they could shoot at her, and she had no way to defend herself.

She ran and ran, gray skies overhead, until eventually she came across ZEMAL.

“Message!”

She plunged into the midst of the five.

“Whoa, what’s with you? You’re a messenger?” Tomtom demanded. He pointed his FN MAG at her but did not shoot.

After their last retreat, unbelievably enough, ZEMAL was back at it again pasting duct tape on another huge board. Llenn came to a screeching halt and said, “Again?!” Apparently, they hadn’t given up on that idea.

“Oh! It’s the pink shrimp. What do you mean, message?” asked Shinohara, who was giving directions to the ones placing the tape. Llenn relayed Pitohui’s message to the team.

It was a call to join forces. If each team attempted to attack separately, there was no way they stood a chance against the enemy’s terrain advantage.

Squad Jam veterans were invited to this playtest because of their abilities as a team; it would be frustrating to lose in such spectacular fashion to AI-controlled NPCs. Therefore, it’d be best to work together, she suggested. They should meet up with Llenn’s team alive so that they could learn about the plan. A little more than a mile away from the castle, southwest corner—they would be

hidden from sight there, where no gun could hit them.



“Hmm... What’s the call, then?” Huey asked, checking with his team.

“You’re the team leader,” Peter retorted.

“Yeah, that’s true. Hmm...”

This was the point where Llenn had a line prepared. “Pitohui said, ‘The alliance team won’t have many machine gunners, so you guys will steal the show. We can’t wait to see what you’re capable of.’”

“We’re in!”

Thankfully, they were very easily convinced.

Llenn turned on her comm and reported back to Pitohui. Then she turned it off again and resumed running.

“Message! Message!”

Llenn came across MMTM in the forest.

But it wasn’t an ordinary encounter. She knew they would be somewhere in the deep woods north of the castle but couldn’t find them at all, so she was running much slower than usual in an attempt to spot them.

“Yaaaah!”

Kenta, the G36K user, popped up from his hiding spot in the underbrush and leaped at Llenn.

“Hya!” He got her into a martial arts grapple at once, pushing her to the ground and locking her right arm outward. “Eep! Message! I’m here to talk!”

She nearly wound up with a knife through her throat.

“.....Leader!” Kenta called out to David, lowering his combat knife. He had her left arm and knee pinned to the ground.

They were still well over half a mile to the castle walls, so David removed the branches and leaves on his head for cover and came over. The other members did not move. They were effectively invisible.

It was impressive and in character that they remained in place on vigilant watch without being told. They were clearly watching out for the NPC group

either in full or a fraction acting as a smaller unit to come ranging out of the castle on the offensive.

Surrounded by green-camo paint, David's eyes were bright and sharp. His grenade-launcher STM-556 was on his back. On his upper right arm was a patch bearing the team emblem of a skull with a knife in its mouth.

"What do you want?" he questioned Llenn, who was trapped on the ground under Kenta.

"Um, first, I want you to let me go..."

"Can't do that. You're too dangerous. We're paying you a compliment."

"Gee, thanks... I'm a messenger. I have a statement from Pito."

"Oh yeah? From her...?" David's eyes narrowed.

Now he's gonna kill me! Dammit, Pito! Llenn thought. She'd seen the replay of what Pitohui did to him in both SJ2 and SJ3.

David was a fellow betrayer with Llenn during SJ3, but that was then, and this was now. There was nothing stopping them from shooting each other, so she couldn't complain about anything they might do to her, short of harassment.

"Well? What is it?"

"Phew..."

It seemed that Llenn wasn't going to lose one of her lives here. *Yet.*

When she was done explaining the situation, facedown in the dirt, David asked, "You knew a lot about our situation—how is that possible?"

This struck Llenn as a very keen deduction. He had a sharp mind. But Pitohui said that she was free to explain if needed, so Llenn admitted, "M got a drone, and we watched from above."

"Oh!" David exclaimed. "Can you still use it?"

"Unfortunately, a sniping attack wrecked some propellers. Can't do anything more with it now," she told him.

He looked disappointed. "Then how do you intend to gather up the survivors and take down the castle?"

“I don’t know. She told me to run around and talk to everyone. If you don’t want to meet up in person, I’ll hook up our comms so she can talk to you.”

“And Pitohui didn’t consider that we might just decide to kill you?”

Llenn had no reason to hide, so she was truthful. “She mentioned that before I left. She told me to be ready for it.”

“And you still came?”

“Yup. I still have two lives. And I do owe one to Pito.”

“.....”

David thought long and hard for about ten seconds.

“Patch me in.”

“Message! Message!”

Llenn was racing across the grassland of the eastern side now.

At her height, the tall grass came up to her stomach. It was hard to see when everything was green around her. Off in the distance, the castle was faintly visible, but she wanted to believe they wouldn’t shoot at her from there.

“Oh, hey, it’s Llenn. Get down,” she heard Tanya’s voice say, so she obeyed. There was a sound of rustling grass all around her. SHINC was in the area.

A face with silver hair and fox eyes popped out of the undergrowth. She had grass wrapped all over her head and back for camouflage.

“Aaah!” Llenn freaked out momentarily, seeing only the disembodied face.

“Ya-ha!”

“Where’s Boss? I’ve got a message from Pito.”

“Okay. Follow me.”

They quickly scrambled on hands and knees through the grass for a few dozen yards until they reached the other five members, who were arrayed in a circle for maximum alertness. The six-foot PTRD-41 antitank rifle was propped up on a bipod right in the middle of the group.

“Oh, good. It didn’t get busted! Well, I guess the part where you died wasn’t

good...”

“Oh? How did you know about that?” Boss asked, for good reason, so Llenn had to explain again.

“Hmmm... It hurts to lose the drone.” Boss’s comment echoed David’s. “And you’ve got a winning plan, even without it?”

“Well, I...don’t know...” Llenn had to admit her ignorance, just like she did earlier.

She could reset the comm and ask Pitohui for answers, but her teammate might be telling David about it now—or more likely, placating him—and she didn’t want to interrupt if that was the case.

Instead, she asked them something she hadn’t had the chance to ask MMTM earlier: “Did you see any other teams?” Pitohui told her to ask that, in fact, but things had gone so fast with ZEMAL, and so thorny with MMTM, that she hadn’t been able to bring it up.

Boss said, “No, we haven’t. But there’s no guarantee that there aren’t others. Bring up the map.”

Oh, right, I could’ve done that. Llenn turned on her map, nice and small, right in front of her eyes.

There was the circle that showed where they’d respawn. It was about a mile and a quarter from the castle, so it matched the distance that her teammates were located—or hiding.

“Well, doesn’t look like anyone else is behind,” Llenn said, turning off the map.

“Hrmm...,” Boss murmured, crossing her arms.

Llenn waited in silence. She felt surprisingly nervous about the answer. Eventually, Boss glanced at her watch and said, “We’ve still got over an hour. I suppose we can hear you out.”

It was 8:50.

CHAPTER 6
Pitohui's Charge



CHAPTER 6

Pitohui's Charge

9:08 PM.

An hour and eight minutes had passed since the start of the game.

“Heya! Thank you for coming together, chosen warriors!”

Between Llenn’s scurrying around and Pitohui’s persuasion, they had gathered a whole bunch of players taking part in the playtest.

They were standing behind a large ruined building about a mile and a quarter from the castle in a south-southwest direction. Even the GM6 Lynx couldn’t hit at this distance, and it was too far away to even see the enemy.

There were twenty-seven people present, all told.

“All right, can everyone hear me? If you can’t hear me, raise your hand!”

Addressing the crowd like the king, or like a teacher leading a student assembly, was Pitohui. Four of the twenty-seven were LPFM. M, Fukaziroh, and Llenn had their backs to the crowd, watching out in case the enemy emerged from the castle on the offensive. Llenn and Pitohui had two lives left, while M and Fukaziroh had three each.

The other players were gathered before Pitohui, bunched in their own squads.

“.....”

David, who was glaring at Pitohui in silence, and the rest of his teammates on MMTM made up another six. Each of them had two lives left.

T-S was another six people, looking larger than anyone else because of their bulky full body armor. They all had two lives.

ZEMAL had five members bearing their machine guns and ammo-feeding

backpacks stuffed with bullets. They, too, had two lives left.

Lastly, the six Amazons that everyone knew as SHINC were standing in a circle with the PTRD-41 standing at the center like a lance. Tanya had one life left, the rest had two.

“I don’t suppose we need to do introductions. We went through plenty in SJ3,” said Pitohui. No one protested, because it was true. Even David didn’t say anything, although he went through *more* than plenty and scowled.

“...”

“First of all, I’d like to take any questions or comments you have at this stage. Anyone?” Pitohui asked. There was no response. “All right, then. Let’s go over the situation.”

She brought up a map and set it to a large size on the ground between herself and the groups. It was in full 3-D with the various terrain laid out, castle in the center and the respawning circle at the outside. Each team looking at the map saw only their own dot, but since they were all in the same place, the location was the same anyway—and located directly on the circle.

“So the castle is surrounded by walls, with gates to the north, south, east, and west. The towers are at each of the midpoints,” Pitohui explained, pulling up screenshots taken from the drone earlier and opening windows to send them to each team. The screens appeared in the air in front of them.

She’s so thorough. She knew it might come to this, Llenn admired, listening as she stayed on guard.

The team leaders and their members eagerly examined the valuable aerial details. Aside from four members of MMTM, no one else had seen the interior courtyard or the castle building itself. And they’d died almost as soon as they set foot inside, so there’d been no time to memorize anything.

“This is huge,” admitted David.

“It’s fantastic intel,” agreed Boss.

Both of them were clearly thinking of how to conquer that castle at full tilt. Some of the other members were murmuring among themselves.

“If you put a machine gun atop that castle, it’d be damn easy to protect,” said Huey of ZEMAL, inviting vigorous agreement from his teammates. So one team was thinking in exactly the wrong direction.

“Whoa, you’ve gotta be kidding me. Good job pulling that stunt earlier, Pito,” said Fukaziroh, overhearing them.

“One hundred percent agreed,” added Llenn.

If ZEMAL had somehow joined the NPCs side, they would have had that many more machine guns shooting in all directions to worry about. It’d be like attacking a porcupine.

Once all the chattering died down, Pitohui said, “As you’ve seen, all the gates are open, and they are guarded by rubble. It seems like there were never closeable gates by design—if they did exist at this size, the whole place would be impregnable to begin with. So they took them out for game balance.”

That rang true for Llenn. If they were having this much trouble already, having full-size castle gates blocking them from the start would make the whole exercise completely impossible.

“You can get inside by climbing over the rubble, but they’ve got explosives placed just inside the gateways. We found that out when MMTM got blown to kingdom come earlier. Thanks for that! We won’t let those valuable lives go to waste!”

MMTM scowled as a group, but none of them said anything.

“However, they can’t have an unlimited series of explosives. If you rush in after the blast, you could probably get past. Also, they’re not booby traps, but manually detonated bombs. If we can throw off their timing, there’s a good chance we can pass them up.”

Oh? How do you know they’re manual? Llenn wondered, but she didn’t want to ask and interrupt the speech.

David, in fact, knew the answer. “That figures. We didn’t see any activation wires or anything else. And it was perfectly timed to catch all four of us together.”

Ah, that makes sense, Llenn realized.

"I would assume that it was Cain who activated the trap and shot the grenades. The north gate is his territory."

"Got it."

"It's easier to approach the north side because the forest comes up close. That's why they're using mines and grenades to protect it. Elsewhere, there's no cover for half a mile around the walls. Therefore—"

SHINC's Boss picked up from there. They'd been rebuffed from the east. "The machine gunner, antimateriel rifle user, and four assault gunners move flexibly around the walls to guard."

"That's right."

"What a goddamn pain in the ass," swore David.

"It is a most bothersome challenge, indeed," said the burly Boss in the daintiest manner.

Pitohui added, "For a moment, I actually had a strange thought. That the people presenting the game just *wanted* us to try to take the castle."

What does that mean? wondered Llenn. The others seemed to have the same question. They waited for Pitohui to explain.

"In other words, to make us rival teams kill one another and have the game end with the castle totally unharmed. It seems like the sort of messed-up thing that twisted author would come up with. That's one possibility, of course—but that kind of pisses you off, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." David nodded.

"Of course," said Boss, puffing out her chest.

Even Ervin of T-S, who hadn't said anything to that point, piped up. "I'd hate that! I wanna knock that castle down! And if that's not possible, I'd at least like to get a toe inside!" he said through the helmet.

"That's right! Let's do it!" cried Huey, raising a fist.

Hang on, you were the ones just saying..., Llenn thought. *Well, at least they're*

in the mood to help. As Pitohui said before she went running around the map, ZEMAL's prodigious firepower was a major benefit to have on their side.

"In that case!"

Smack! Pitohui clapped her gloved hands together crisply.

"Hey there, head honcho! I've got a great deal on a strategy if you're interested!" she cried out like a barker in a red-light district luring passing drunks into her establishment.

It was 9:20, and everyone had heard Pitohui's entire plan.

"All right. I'm in." David was the first to accept.

"We'll do it," said Boss.

"No objections!" chimed in T-S's Ervin.

Lastly, ZEMAL's leader, Huey, cheered, "We saved some ammo just for this!"

Llenn was impressed by Pitohui's smarts and David's quick thinking in agreeing to it, but she did want to know what exactly ZEMAL considered to be "saving ammo."

"Very well! Then we are all one—for the day, that is! Let's show those NPC developers and that wretched author that Squad Jam players aren't actually at one another's throats all the time! We'll do this, life and death!" Pitohui said, launching into a passionate speech. Llenn wondered how long it was going to be.

"One last thing! A very important thing, in fact!"

Apparently, not that long.

"Don't think of these enemies as NPCs and AIs! What I mean is: They're as brilliant as human beings but just as flawed as human beings! They are not perfect, infallible automatons!"

Finally, Llenn couldn't resist the urge to turn around and look.

What she saw was a group of soldiers, eyes blazing with battle.

* * *

Llenn's wristwatch read 9:38.

It was getting late, but the sky was as gray as ever. It was daytime here. She felt like she was going to get jet lag.

“All set,” she murmured quietly.

Pitohui’s voice sounded right in her ear. “We’re all good, too. Well, it’s two minutes ahead of time, but shall we get started? Is everyone else ready? It would seem so. In that case—let’s do this!”

Llenn brushed her finger along the P90’s side to make sure its safety was off.

Pitohui’s operation had begun.

It began in the flatlands to the south of the castle. What was it, exactly? The closest comparison might be a “centipede race,” that event from school competitions where teams of players were tied together in a straight line, front to back.

A number of centipedes were making their way toward the castle at a brisk walk over the packed soil. Unlike the school competitions, however, all of these centipedes had guns and were on a mission to kill their enemies.

Also unlike the school competitions, the lead member of each centipede was a sci-fi soldier wearing full body armor. Each one bore a large shield in both hands.

So there were six centipedes, spread out at intervals of about twenty yards, all power-walking their way directly toward the castle. As soon as they got within half a mile of their goal, a point on the castle began to flicker.

The PKP machine gun was streaming bullets toward them, with perfect aim as usual. But all of the bullets bounced harmlessly off shields and armor.

“Everyone all right?” asked Ervin to the “teammates” behind him.

“We’re fine. Nice job,” said David.

Then everyone heard SHINC’s eagle-eyed sniper Anna cry out, “Get down!”

All of the centipedes hit the deck. It was almost as if they were competing in some kind of sport.

The armored soldier in the lead of each centipede lifted his shield to cover his

head and pulled it as tight to his body as he could. The second person behind him would then cling to him for dear life.

There was a larger flash of gunfire from the castle, and the antimateriel GM6 Lynx's .50-caliber round came screaming toward them. It struck the centipede led by Soldier 005 with perfect accuracy.

Ga-gonk!

The sound of the bullet hitting the shield was even louder than the gunshot, it seemed, and sparks flew from the surface of the shield. It was tilted at an angle, however, so the bullet did not go through, but instead got deflected up into the air.

The force of the impact was severe on 005, but fortunately for him, Boss was right behind him to help absorb the blow.

“Hrgh!”

Pitohui's strategy wouldn't have worked without the cooperation of the entire allied team—but it would have meant absolutely nothing without the life-or-death determination of T-S.

Ervin's valiant effort in SJ3 said a lot about the defensive ability of those suits they wore. His had deflected bullet after 7.62 mm bullet from M's gun.

Each of the six was holding a hardy plate from M's shield, made out of spaceship hull. They were there to stand at the front and be targets as walking shields.

The rest were sticking as close as possible behind them, forming long lines just like those schoolyard centipede races. It was very simple, but without any cover to hide behind, it was the most effective method of closing the gap to the wall.

“Center tower! Fourth window from the right!”

Anna and Tohma were in the back, about a hundred yards behind the centipedes. Tohma, of course, had her special antitank rifle poised and ready. When Anna—watching through binoculars—gave her orders, she said “*Khorosho!*” in acknowledgment, placed her scope over the spot where the

GM6 Lynx's muzzle flash happened, and fired when the bullet circle reached its smallest width.

The shock wave of the blast traveled through the ground, kicking up dust. The massive bullet shot forward, and its sizable cartridge ejected downward.

Even this gun, in the hands of the team's best sniper, Tohma, couldn't hit its target from a thousand yards away. The bullet hit the side of the spire and kicked off a tremendous hunk of stone.

Tohma quickly reloaded, aimed for the same window, and fired again. The enemy sniper had lots of targets to aim at this time, so they didn't want him to have a lock on them at all times.

This time, the bullet vanished through the window. Tohma reloaded again, sure that after two shots the enemy would aim for her next—but the GM6 Lynx did not fire.

There was no way to tell whether she had killed him or destroyed the gun.

"Staggered advance! Odd numbers!"

Pitohui was giving orders from the safe spot behind M's large body in one of the centipedes. Her comm was connected to everyone else's.

The odd-numbered T-S members stood up, followed by the people behind them. These were the odd teams. They reformed as an airtight centipede and began to move forward, step by careful step.

To provide backup to the others, the machine gunners behind the even-numbered leaders steadied their guns in a crouch and began suppressing fire toward the castle.

There were five gunners with 7 mm guns capable of firing half a mile in the allied team, each one in a different centipede. They were ZEMAL's Huey (001), Shinohara (004), and Tomtom (003), SHINC's Rosa (005), and MMTM's HK21-wielding Jake (002). M was in centipede 006, so he used the M14 EBR instead.

The machine gunners were arranged to be third in each column. The second person had to be a physical backstop to T-S. And since the attacking shots were coming in from a slight overhead angle, the farther back in the column—tightly

packed though they were—the higher chance of getting hit. So the gunners were third.

For the purpose of stability, the machine guns were either placed on the shoulder of the second person or on a bipod. That left the muzzles right next to the head of the T-S member leading the centipede. If it wasn't for the helmet, the exhaust fire and blast would be absolutely concussive.

Firing a machine gun at this distance, between the recoil and the inherent lower precision, inevitably caused a spray effect. You couldn't pinpoint-attack a target the way you could with a sniper rifle.

Still, it was enough to just send a curtain of bullets toward the castle. The enemy would either be afraid to pop their heads out into the open because of a stray shot hitting them or be prevented from aiming properly. That was enough.

Jake, Shinohara, and M opened fire, filling the area with furious sound, while the odd-numbered teams made it forward about fifty yards safely. There was no attack from the castle during that time.

“Now switch!” Pitohui ordered. The advancing and covering teams switched places. The off-numbered teams huddled down, and their machine gunners started shooting. Tomtom and Huey made full use of their backpack-reloading system.

“Ryaaa!”

“Aiyaaaa!”

They peppered the distant castle without hesitation. They could fire their guns without screaming, of course, but if they weren't screaming, they wouldn't be ZEMAL.

“Yikes...”

Ervin and the rest of T-S were both aghast and impressed.

“I wish I had one of those,” Rosa muttered to herself.

The alternation of advance and back up continued. The centipedes were slowly but surely getting closer to the castle.

“Will this work the whole way...?” Boss murmured to herself.

Pitohui heard her and replied, “Probably not. They’re not stupid.”

“No, they’re not,” agreed David, who was supporting Jake’s HK21 on his shoulder.

They might be catching the enemy off guard for now, but they weren’t stupid enough NPCs that they would let the advance continue indefinitely. They were probably moving as much manpower as possible in the direction of the enemy advance, preparing to counter. If they couldn’t snipe their foes from long distance, they would find another way to neutralize the humans.

“The only question is when,” Pitohui commented. Llenn listened in absolute stillness.

It was 9:43.

Five minutes had passed since the centipedes started moving. They’d succeeded at closing to within two thousand feet of the castle without a counterattack.

Anna and Tohma stayed farther back, still half a mile from the castle, changing positions constantly.

“I’ve got movement!”

Anna was the first one to notice through her binoculars. Smoke began to issue from the ground at the southern part of the castle wall. The smoke was coming from over ten points at the same time. They were in all different colors: red, yellow, green, and so on.

The trails quietly mingled until they formed the same gray color as the sky, stagnating in the windless air and hiding the castle.

“Large number of smoke grenades in front of the castle walls. Can’t see the gates anymore,” Anna reported. The centipedes reported back in the affirmative. They could see the castle blending in with the sky and vanishing, too. It was almost like magic.

“I figured they’d try this,” said Pitohui, smiling.

Several minutes earlier, she’d been in the midst of explaining the plan to the allied team.

“The thing is, let’s say this centipede race strategy works, and we close the distance bit by bit. If you were guarding the castle, what would you do to eat up the clock and delay the enemy’s advance?” Pitohui asked.

“A smoke screen,” said David immediately. “I’d toss out all the smoke grenades I have to rob them of visibility, if only for a minute or two.”

Fukaziroh listened to the entire plan in silence, but eventually she couldn’t resist saying what was on her mind and whispered to Llenn, “It’s the Dororon Smoke Screen strategy!”

“Huh?”

“Oh...you don’t get it? I was making a pun on an old anime...”

“Let’s just stay quiet, shall we?”

Boss turned to David. “I don’t understand. We wouldn’t be able to see, but they couldn’t see us, either. And wouldn’t that make it easier for us to approach the castle?”

T-S and ZEMAL had the same question and looked to David for the answer.

“That’s right. But it instills a measure of doubt in the attacking side. Are they going to send a strike team out from the castle through this screen? If we get too close, are we opening ourselves up to attack from the side?”

“Ah, I get it...,” Boss muttered, as did the others.

By strike team, he meant a group of soldiers who broke off from their main encampment to achieve certain objectives. If one or two enemies left the castle without the team’s knowing, they could easily attack the defenseless sides of the centipedes, which were meant to focus all defense on the front. And even if they didn’t actually attack, the centipedes would be forced to watch their sides at all times, as David warned. They couldn’t simply throw a unidirectional hail of bullets toward the front.

“We have the option of just making a power play and charging while we have the smoke screen up,” David continued, “but if there’s no strike team, they could be ready to meet us in combat right outside the walls and gates. We have two more rifles than they do, but that’ll make it a lot harder to take down the

castle within the time limit.”

“Exactly! You come up with the nastiest strategies very quickly! Splendid thinking!”

“I’d prefer if you pick either complimenting me or insulting me and sticking to just the one. Anyway, what do we do if that happens?” David asked.

Pitohui grinned and said, “I’ll explain that now. But I’m not considering the possibility that it doesn’t turn out this way, so cut me some slack.”

“What do you mean?”

9:43.

Now that Pitohui knew it had indeed turned out that way, she gave the order.

“Time to go, Llenn.”

9:43.

Llenn had been hiding in the forest on the north side of the castle, watching for movement at the gate. When Pitohui’s order came in, she stood up.

She ripped off the mottled-green-camo poncho, returning to her most comfortable and fitting outfit: that all-pink combat suit.

“Taaa!” She began to run.

Llenn burst forward at top speed, P90 held in front of her. She raced through the tall trees and was quickly out of the forest. From there, it was a hundred-yard sprint to the castle wall.

But Llenn wasn’t the only one who left the trees.

A few yards to her sides, SHINC’s Tanya and MMTM’s Kenta rose and began to run as well. They were the quickest members of their teams—but of course, Llenn was the fleetest of foot, faster than everyone.

She promptly reached automobile speed, rushing forward without another thought, straight toward the castle gate. “Taaa!”

There were no zigzags, no serpentines, no feints. She would be very visible if she was running at a direct right angle, so she was approaching from a slightly oblique angle to ensure she wasn’t seen from the castle itself.

She hurtled directly toward the spot where MMTM had been blown up earlier without losing the tiniest bit of speed.

“Taaa!”

She jumped. If this were the real world, Llenn had world-record one-hundred-meter-dash speed. She could win the gold medal for certain in the high jump.

Her launch line was outside the castle wall—and her landing point was inside that wall. Llenn soared through the air over the pile of rubble stuffed into the northern gateway. The arch of the entrance hurtled past her head at incredible speed.

If she’d misjudged the strength or angle of her jump even the slightest bit, she might have come in too low and hit the mountain of rubble or too high and struck the arch of the gateway, easily killing herself with the impact. You didn’t often hear of “collision suicide” as a means of death, but that would have taken another one of her lives. And the angle of entry was important, too—too direct, and she’d get shot from the castle, too far to the side, and she’d hit the side of the perimeter wall.

I can do this! Llenn thought, once she was in the air and couldn’t adjust. The small pink projectile shot perfectly through the gateway untouched.

When her feet landed on the courtyard cobblestones, she continued running. She was now the player who had penetrated the farthest into enemy territory, and she was building on that record.

There was an explosion behind her, and the blast winds blew past her—but she was already out of lethal range. Most of the force traveled upward, and since she rushed past it to the side, no shrapnel hit her.

She didn’t slow down. She was going at full speed. In fact, the force of the blast behind her actually sped her up a bit. The castle towered before her—and it grew larger the closer she got. Down the stone path was the darkened entry to the building.

There they are!

She saw a man poking the muzzle of a gun out of the doorway. His face was handsome, and it was mixed with shock and nerves.

That was Cain; she knew it. Two muzzles pointed at her, in fact—one large, one small—from the launcher-attached F90.

Too slow!

Before he could get it fully in place, she slid feetfirst. Cain's 5.56 mm bullet sailed over her head.

As her heel and tush slid over the stone, she zoomed inside the castle straight past Cain. Instantly, she was surrounded by darkness.

"Taaa!" she cried, pointing her P90 in the general direction of her target and pulling the trigger.

The flash of gunfire burned her eyes in the dark interior, leaving her unable to see anything else. Between fifteen gunshots a second, the spray of bullets striking hard stone, and the lighthearted clinking of cartridges bouncing off surfaces, she was surrounded by a tremendous clamor like never before.

The span of shooting from start to finish was just a touch over three seconds.

Once she had fired—no, streamed—all fifty bullets, the world grew silent. Faceup on her back on the stone, her head craned all the way back to look out the doorway.

The window of light in the shape of the arched doorway was hazy from the smoke of her shooting. A figure moving in the middle of that shape blocked half the light from coming through.



No good...?

The figure wobbled, then toppled with a heavy crunch. All outdoor light entered her virtual retinas again.

A red glowing marker that said DEAD floated over Cain's body.

Llenn exhaled a huge breath and murmured, "Sorry, Fuka. I killed your potential boyfriend."

CHAPTER 7
Jacob



CHAPTER 7

Jacob

9:44.

Llenn had gotten into the castle and successfully killed the first enemy NPC.

“I did it! I beat Cain!” she reported to the rest of the team. All of the centipedes suddenly buzzed with excitement.

Mere seconds later, Tanya and Kenta reported that they, too, had succeeded at getting inside the enemy base.

“All right!”

“Well done!”

Even Boss and David were pumped.

Pitohui’s strategy was a bit—well, incredibly—gutsy.

Its two pillars were to “crawl forward from the south in an attention-grabbing way” and “burst in from the north when the enemy shows signs of movement.”

On the south side, they had T-S, the shields, and everyone working together in unison, but on the north side of the wall, the only thing they could rely upon was Llenn’s speed and size.

If they put enough pressure on the enemy, the bad guys would have to focus their defensive ability on that side—whether in the form of a smoke screen or an all-out offensive.

That would mean drawing the enemy’s attention south more than ever. The machine gunner and sniper camped out on the spires to watch the distance, in particular, would have to keep their eyes peeled to the south.

And that’s when Llenn’s group would charge.

They rushed from the forest toward the northern gate, where only Cain would

be waiting. Land mines? Jump over them.

It was a fifty-fifty shot (at best) depending on speed and jumping power that was beyond human capability.

Naturally, when Pitohui explained the strategy, David asked, “If Llenn messes up on the advance, what happens?”

Pitohui blithely admitted, “Nothing happens. The two behind her probably get shot, too.”

“Hang on.”

“But what other choice do we have?”

“.....”

David had no answer.

“Moving on to stage two!” Llenn announced.

“Give it all you’ve got. Good luck!” Pitohui replied. To the others in her vicinity, she said, “Then let’s move through, ourselves.”

“Well done! So long!”

“Nice raiding with you! Farewell!”

Tanya and Kenta ran ahead, leaving Llenn behind. They were advancing farther into the castle. The dark corridor left no hints about how the interior might be structured. They grew smaller and smaller, until they found a staircase or another room, and they split in opposite directions and vanished.

Once they got in safely, stage two of the plan would commence. They already had their orders: Split up and raise hell.

There was no thought to two or three of them joining up to fight together. Better to rush around individually and draw out any enemies that might be lurking inside the castle.

This idea was based on the difficulty of three people from different teams having the coordination to work together—as well as to preserve the competitive aspect. Each person had a chance to spot the “gas warhead” that was the final objective and achieve the win for their team this way.

As soon as Tanya and Kenta took off, they switched their comms to speak only with their own teams. Llenn brushed her own ear to switch it and muttered, “Guess I’ll get going...”

Fukaziroh heard it and gave her some distant encouragement. “Good luck in there. We don’t have much time, actually.”

It was 9:46.

The team on the south side knew they didn’t have much time left, either.

“Then let’s move through, ourselves. You’re all freed up,” Pitohui said, allowing the columns to disband. This was part of the strategy, too.

They had a little over a quarter of a mile to go. Any closer, and the defensive capability of T-S and the shields would no longer be optimal. The accuracy of gunfire would get much sharper, so a slow and methodical approach would no longer work.

So they charged.

It was a competition of speed and luck from this point on. If they didn’t get as close to the castle as possible before the smoke cleared, they would die. They might still die if they did get there, but the closer to the walls, the better the chance of survival.

If staying still meant death, and getting closer meant death, advancing made the most sense.

Six from T-S, three from SHINC, five from MMTM, five from ZEMAL, and Pitohui and M. Twenty-one people in all had spread out in a line and began to charge.

Despite not being able to see through the smoke, the other side must have sensed something. Machine-gun bullets flew from the spire.

“Ugh!”

One of them caught Boss through the left shoulder, in truly unlucky fashion. She lost over 20 percent of her hit points.

“I’m not done yet!” she shouted, using her emergency medical kit and continuing to run.

“C’mon, guys, you can do this!” said Pitohui, as though she wasn’t actively involved. As a matter of fact, she was located behind the very large target of M, who had two shield plates for protection already.

At the very moment everyone on the south side began running, Kenta from MMTM caught sight of a gun muzzle out of the corner of his eye.

“!”

He was in a room of the castle, surrounded by rock, with a light to illuminate it all. The lightbulb and shade that hung from the ceiling sent soft orange light through the room. It was about thirty-five feet to a side, with stone walls and floor and a wooden ceiling, but nothing else.

“Crap!”

Kenta spotted the man pointing an assault rifle at him from the corner of the room and knew that he wouldn’t have time to shoot back.

He’d kicked open the door, expecting to see more hallway, but it was the gun barrel pointed at him that sealed his fate.

A man with glasses and a cold expression fired the MCX pressed to his shoulder. He was fifteen feet away from Kenta and approaching fast. There was no way he’d miss.

The first shot from the suppressor-attached MCX pierced Kenta’s right flank, and the second hit his right knee. The G36K fell out of Kenta’s arms.

The third shot hit his right breast. “Gah!” Kenta toppled backward, reaching with his left hand behind his back to grab an M26 fragmentation grenade. His back hit the cold, hard ground and bounced upward, and he pulled out the grenade, lifting it to his mouth to bite the safety pin and pull it out.

Yank!

Doc’s hand reached out and squeezed Kenta’s, grenade and all. The pin being pulled out didn’t matter if the lever didn’t pop off.

“Dammit! You’re just a stupid NPC!” Kenta swore, spitting out the pin.

Doc responded with action. He swept the MCX over and pulled the trigger when the gun pointed over Kenta’s head. *Shunk*. The man’s hit points dropped

to zero.

Doc pulled the grenade out of Kenta's hand, then scooped up the safety pin from the floor. He carefully, deftly placed it back into the handle of the grenade.

All alone, he murmured, "No...not him."

When Kenta died, there was a tremendous battle taking place in the open area south of the castle gate. The smoke was slowly but surely clearing, steadily revealing the castle again.

As the players rushed for the castle walls, a furious stream of gunfire issued toward them. Four different muzzles flashed atop the wall—and one from a spire. It was impossible to tell which assault rifle was which up on the wall, but the gun shooting from the spire was clearly Vodka's.

The world was suddenly full of noise. Thunderous gunfire clattered across the empty dirt. Bullet lines appeared from five guns, piercing the ground all over. Just as quickly, the bullets themselves traveled those lines and sent up sprays of dirt— *Pa-thup! Pa-thup! Pa-thup!*

"Gaaah!"

Occasionally, they hit someone running along, too. That one was ZEMAL's Tomtom, shot through the left arm.

"Raaaah!" Naturally, he shot back.

His machine gun roared as he ran, sending bullets back at the castle wall. They struck the stone here and there, chipping off pieces of the wall and causing the enemies nearby to falter and stop firing, at least for a moment.

But between the shooters on the castle wall with cover to hide behind and the shooters running through open terrain, the former had an overwhelming advantage. Even if you could see the bullet lines coming, it was impossible to move fast enough to avoid them all. And the NPCs' accuracy was tremendous. They could easily hit a moving target.

"*Gugh!*" Dreadlocked Bold from MMTM took PKP bullets to the throat and head. "Shit!" He swore as he died.

He'd been blown up once already, so this was the second death. His ARX160

hadn't had the chance to shoot a single bullet yet.

"Come on back!" shouted David, though there was no way his voice was heard by Bold or Kenta, who had both recently died. This was a game—they'd have another chance in three minutes.

As for David, he was running pell-mell. Red lines crisscrossed the ground before him, and it took nothing less than intense concentration to avoid them as he ran. The sound of the bullets whistling past his ears was frightfully close and loud.

His STM-556 had the grenade launcher attached, and it was loaded, of course, but he hadn't fired it. He hadn't had time. All he could do was run and try to avoid the enemy shots.

The best fight was being put up by T-S now.

"Fire away!"

"Roger that!"

They were much slower than the rest due to their heavy protective armor, so there was no way they could reach the castle first.

Instead, they walked. And as they walked, they shot and shot, exchanged ammo, and shot again. The entire team was taking on a supporting role. Naturally, the opponents were shooting back at them as well, creating showers of sparks where the bullets struck armor.

"Whoa, I found a staircase!"

While Kenta was getting shot, Tanya had found a spiral staircase elsewhere in the castle.

It was huge, about thirteen feet across, and clearly leading up to a castle spire. The steps were slabs of stone embedded into the curved walls of the tower, leading up to the left. The middle of the curve was a hole no wider than five feet. There were no handrails for safety.

The spires were on the four corners of the castle building: northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest. Tanya had entered the castle from the north, then run this way and that in the darkness... She tried to envision her path in a

mental map and decided that this was the southeast tower.

Tanya stopped just short of the stairs, kept her suppressor-equipped Bizon steady at her waist, and reached out to her teammates quietly through the comm. "This is Tanya. Any enemies on the southeast tower?"

Anna replied immediately. "Yes. One nasty machine gunner."

She also got an answer from up above: the sound of gunfire echoing down the tower walls and the clinking and clattering of golden cartridges falling down. As always in *GGO*, they promptly vanished in a little twinkling of light.

Tanya made up her mind. "Okay, I'm gonna get that guy! Someone else can handle the poison gas warhead!"

She rushed into the spiral tower toward the stairs and nearly tripped on the fresh empties on the very first step.

"Whoa." She regained her balance somehow and began to climb.

"Llenn, they say Kenta is dead," Pitohui reported, courtesy of David.

"Got it," said Llenn.

That left only Tanya and herself inside the castle. If she ran across someone, the chances of it being an enemy were now that much higher.

Llenn was in a long, dark hallway. Her P90 was ready at her shoulder, and she walked quietly down the middle of the corridor, to lower the chance of being hit by any potential bullet ricochet.

Speed was Llenn's best weapon, but if she ran here it would make too much noise, so she moved no quicker than a sneaking stride. From inside the castle, the battle outside was completely inaudible. There was hardly any sound at all, perhaps because everything but the ceiling was stone. It was an eerie place where the air was chilly and dank.

But this was the enemy's lair.

See the enemy, shoot. See the enemy, shoot. See the enemy, shoot.

"....."

Llenn quietly walked through the cold, holding her finger just a hair off the

trigger. Eventually, a door came into view. Double doors, in fact; old-fashioned and wooden.

They were cracked slightly in the middle, creating a seam of light coming from the inside. She couldn't see a bar or lock on it. A good kick should open it.

But there was no telling what or who she might find on the other side. There could be a wire-and-grenade booby trap there or an enemy NPC with his gun pointed right at her.

She checked her watch: 9:47. Then 9:48, a second later.

Don't have time to mess around, she thought, rushing forward to kick open the door.

There he is! Tanya screamed internally.

She'd been climbing for several seconds. After about seventy feet of swift running, she saw a large man's back several yards above, through the hole in the middle of the tower.

She could tell from the PKP machine gun that this was Vodka, the very fellow who had caused the team so much trouble. It was time for him to die.

He was firing with the PKP propped against his shoulder and pointed out the window. The reverberation of the gunshots echoed down the length of the tower. The empty shells fell backward down the hole between the stairs.

From behind, it was very clear that the black gun was being fed from a belt connected to his backpack, just like ZEMAL had. No wonder he was able to shoot nonstop like that.

Vodka hadn't noticed Tanya sneaking up on him from below just yet. They were three rotations of the circular stairs apart. She tried to aim the Bizon up at him from there.

Not yet! The Bizon wasn't powerful enough that she could guarantee a hit to the back would be fatal. She needed to get at least one more rotation of stairs closer. She dashed up the spiral stairway, passing below the gunner until she came back around the opposite side where she could see him again.

"Ugh!"

The bearlike man had already turned around, his large face and gun pointed in her direction. Either he knew she was there and was luring her in as a trap, or he'd noticed a second ago. In either situation, it spoke to his combat ability.

She looked into the eyes of the man holding his machine gun at waist height.

"Hiya!" Tanya greeted, pulling the trigger.

"....." Vodka was silent, pulling the trigger.

The tower was full of raucous gunfire coming from two guns just a few yards apart. But Tanya's Bizon was silenced by her suppressor and was totally inaudible.

Tanya took ten shots a second, her body painted red all over with damage effects, like someone had dumped a bucket of red paint over her head. Her Bizon kept firing, even past the moment the DEAD marker appeared over her head, and her body fell limply through the hole.

The tower was quiet for a moment, then *Thump!* A dead body crashed to the stone floor far below.

Vodka lifted the PKP and turned around to aim toward the outside again—but he did not fire. Technically, he pulled the trigger, but the gun did nothing.

In her dying moments, Tanya's gun shot 9 mm bullets into the rail feeding into the right side of the machine gun, stopping the line of bullets. One hit the large scope atop the gun, cracking it into a sheet of white.

Vodka sat down at the top of the spiral stairs.

"....."

He waved his left hand, then pressed a button floating in midair that only he could see. His body fell backward and was still.

A DEAD tag floated over his head.

The tag was barely visible through the window.

"Machine gunner went down with Tanya, looks like!" Anna reported.

"Whoa!" "Nice job!" "Way to go!" roared the rest of SHINC.

Without the aggravating machine gunner up top, the amount of enemy

gunfire coming southward was significantly lower. The rest of it was from the four assault rifles atop the wall.

As she walked behind M, Pitohui smirked and said, “Yesss.”

M’s shield had been clattering and clanging as it deflected a deluge of 7.62 mm bullets, most likely coming from Hassan. He shifted his hands from moment to moment, altering the shield’s position to deflect them all. The sniper rifle was unerring in its accuracy, its bullet line totally still—which made it easier to anticipate where the bullet was going to come in.

“Fuka, you all ready? You awake?”

“Finally! I’m dying of boredom over here. I’m practically asleep!” Fukaziroh replied to Pitohui through the comm.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha. Then go ahead and let ’em fly. Your target is the south castle wall. I’ll give you the orders.”

“Aye, aye.”

“Finally, it’s my turn.”

Fukaziroh popped out from a huge tree to the northwest of the castle and brandished her six-shooter MGL-140 grenade launchers, one on each shoulder.

She was located significantly to the west of the spot where Llenn’s trio charged the castle. And Fukaziroh was seated flat on the ground, her back against the closest tree to the castle. There was no one left to snipe her with all the chaos happening to the south. If there were, she would die.

She lifted her right-side MGL-140—Rightony—said “This looks about right,” adjusted her aim, and then yelled “Yah!”

Pomp. She fired a single grenade.

The 40 mm projectile arced up, flying toward the castle, over the northwest castle wall, and even a little bit over the south wall, to explode on the dirt just past the entire structure.

“Close one. Thirty yards shorter.”

Pitohui was acting as the bombardment spotter, hiding behind a crouched M

with his two shield plates for protection. In her hands was M's M14 EBR, and she was peering through its scope.

The distance to the castle was slightly less than one thousand feet. Her "teammates" were busy pushing toward it up ahead, evading bullet lines.

Four shooters with assault rifles were firing from atop the castle wall, changing locations constantly and being a huge headache for the allied team.

Bold died earlier, and now ZEMAL's Peter was down. Elsewhere, SHINC's Boss and others were glowing with damage from shots, but they hadn't died yet.

"Got it. Here comes number two," Fukaziroh said.

She was hiding out in the distant northern forest, waiting for the right moment to come forward and launch her deadly grenades toward the castle. This was one of Pitohui's plans, of course.

Fukaziroh's sheer firepower at a bombardment range of a quarter mile was huge, which is why they couldn't afford to lose her during the charge. It was a boring but crucial role she was playing, prioritizing support.

That meant she absolutely could not get shot at before her time to shine came. She couldn't pop her head out of the forest while the sniper and machine gunner in the spire were watching.

As she waited alone among the trees, Fukaziroh muttered to herself, "Feels like someone's watching me. Maybe there's a ghost about?"

Then it was her time to appear at last. She shot two grenades, *pomp-pomp*. The first exploded high on the castle wall. The second was perfectly placed, landing directly atop the narrow parapets, shattering the stone.

But the enemy was not in the vicinity at the time.

"Didn't get 'em, but don't worry. Scatter the rest of the shots," Pitohui instructed. Fukaziroh had three grenades remaining in Rightony and six in Leftania.

"Hya-haaaa!"

She began to fire them all relentlessly.

The sight of nine grenades detonating atop the castle wall in succession, creating a tremendous din and sending up billowing smoke, elicited a cheer from the allied team.

“Yeaah!” “Wow!” “Nice one!” “Kaboom!”

The enemy’s attack ceased immediately. After all those shots at the NPCs atop the castle wall, they were no longer showing their faces.

There were no visible DEAD markers, so it was highly likely that they’d snuck back inside the tower and descended out of harm’s way, abandoning the grenade-vulnerable parapets and withdrawing their defensive line toward the castle.

Pitohui watched it happen through the scope. “There we go. Nice work, Fuka! Reload and wait.”

“Okeydoke. Call on me anytime you need help.”

Then Pitohui addressed the companions she could see. “They’re hiding behind the wall, everybody!”

“All right! Chaaaaarge!” bellowed Huey, and *all* of them hastily ran for the gate, not just ZEMAL. There was no need to watch for bullet lines like before.

This was their first and last chance.

If they failed to get to the wall this time, they’d have to give up on breaching the castle altogether.

The time was 9:50.

Ten minutes left.

Meanwhile, as everyone charged the walls, Llenn was inside, fighting an enemy she couldn’t see. *No one here. Nothing here...*

After she braved death to kick that door open, she found herself in a large square room with a rather tall ceiling. It had to be a hundred feet to a side. There were skylights cut into the ceiling, so the interior was fairly bright.

Based on the size, this had to be the central chamber of the castle. *So why is there nothing here...? Where are they...?* Llenn wondered, utterly confused.

There were no tables or chairs on the stone floor—and certainly no MacGuffins like a poison gas warhead to be found. She would have thought, *I made it to the goal first! Yahoo!* if not for the fact that it clearly wasn't the goal.

Given the European castle design, she at least expected a throne dais in the center of the chamber, but it was basically just an empty storeroom. Of course, it was part of the game map, so she could chalk it up to being another environment in which to do battle—but this was strange for *GGO*.

This game was known for its extremely intricate environmental design; they would put faded family photos atop the dusty mantels of abandoned homes. You never saw interiors as plain and empty as this.

And there was no one here. Nowhere to hide.

There were four doors, including the one she'd come through, so it was possible that someone could burst through any of the others.

Llenn rushed quickly to a corner of the room and crouched, making herself small. Once she had all four doorways in her field of vision, she checked in with Pitohui.

"Pito, I'm in a big open space in the middle of the castle. There's nothing here, though. No enemies."

"Got it. That's weird."

"Yeah, really weird. Do you think there's a basement? I haven't seen anything that looked like a way down..."

"....."

Pitohui paused to think for several seconds. "Let's do this. Ignore the poison gas thingy."

"And?"

"We change the objective to slaughtering the enemy. The team that kills the last one of them wins. Just go crazy in there."

Llenn was just thinking that it was about the only thing left to do, when three doors opened all at once.

Pitohui, M, and Fukaziroh could only imagine what happened to Llenn based on her voice and the sounds coming through.

“Ah! Four enemy— *Gahk!*”

Tat.

There was a faint gunshot sound, making it clear she was shot. Llenn’s hit point gauge dropped then—it was unmistakable. She was down to 60 percent. They didn’t hear her P90 firing.

“Gawaaa! Gdewa! Doffwheu!”

She made three quite bizarre and strangled screams in a row. No sound of gunfire.

Lastly, she managed to squeak out some context clues. “Mrrgh! I’m cau—gmrugk! Grrmm!”

Then she went silent. The connection from her comm unit had been cut. According to the readout all of her teammates could see, Llenn’s hit points weren’t moving. That told them something.

Fukaziroh said, “Whoa, Llenn got captured!”

M said, “She’s been captured...”

And Pitohui said, “Oh, shit, she’s a POW!”

Their allies on the charge were stunned.

David said, “Captured? Huh?!” practically squawking the last bit.

Boss, too, was stunned. “What do you mean? That’s impossible!” she yelled on the run.

“Do NPCs even take hostages? Are you sure this isn’t some kind of mistake?” wondered David, for good reason: Taking prisoners itself was a very rare occurrence in *GGO*. There was simply no reason for it. It was much quicker just to kill an enemy. And this was an AI-controlled NPC—as far as they knew—who had taken a hostage.

“Maybe since it’s a test, they’re trying out some new tactics? Let’s toss out all that old common wisdom!” Pitohui suggested casually, and David did not

respond. He was more focused on getting to the wall with his squadmates. He ran, keeping his gun steady.

“But Llenn gave us some valuable information. Four of them have gone back into the central castle building. Meaning?”

“We know they’ve all abandoned the wall and retreated to defend the castle itself,” Boss answered.

“Correct!”

“Once we’re through the gate, we’re attacking it on our own.”

“As you wish. In fact, you’re all free to go your own way now. Good luck!”

The surviving, injured or not, were nineteen in number. The closest were just a hundred yards to the castle at this point. The plan was to get to a gate and rush in immediately. South, east, or west, it was up to the team, but going south would definitely be the quickest in terms of time.

It was 9:52.

Eight minutes left in the game.

While Pitohui was saying “Oh, shit, she’s a POW!” Llenn could hardly believe what was happening to her.

“Mrrmgh!”

When enemies poured through three doors at once, Llenn hesitated for a brief instant, unsure of who to shoot at, and that was enough time for them to shoot her once. It went right through her right arm, and she dropped the P90. She lost 40 percent of her health.

Before she had time to pick up her gun, a thick arm grabbed her, lifted her up, and immobilized her. Naturally, she was unable to use her P90 or knife. She wasn’t sure if her teammates heard her say there were four enemies, either.

It was Roy who held her captive. He slapped handcuff restraints made of nylon bands around her wrists, tying her hands behind her back. He also brushed the side of her ear, deactivating the comm device.

He even wrapped a cloth around her mouth, gagging her. All of this happened

in a matter of seconds. His movements had been swift and methodical.

“Mrrggh!”

She couldn’t speak. It was the first time in her *GGO* career that Llenn had been taken prisoner by an NPC. All the other NPCs she’d ever seen in the game were the guys and gals who happily sold her guns at the store.

They sat her on the stone floor so her face was visible. Her hands were restrained behind her back. Llenn tried to figure out who was who.

In addition to Roy, the black man, there was Jacob, the bearded one with the bandage, Doc with the glasses, and Rock with the piercing glare.

Rock was the sniper with the antimateriel rifle, if she recalled correctly, but now he was using an M4A1 assault rifle, like Jacob and Roy. The GM6 Lynx must have been destroyed by a sniper shot. Or maybe it was out of ammo. In either case, that was good. Llenn would not forget her original grudge.

She had killed Cain, and she’d heard the report that Vodka and Tanya had killed each other not long ago. That left only Hassan, the man in divorce court, still located somewhere other than here.

He was almost certainly watching the south gate. The defense was thin there now, and the east, west, and north gates even more so. Llenn wished she could tell her comrades about this, but she didn’t have the means.

She didn’t know what would become of her now. This was her first experience being a hostage, after all. *GGO*’s in-game tutorial didn’t tell you what to do if you got taken prisoner.

Then one of the NPC’s spoke: “What’s up with her...?”

“Mguh?”

Llenn’s eyes bulged. *Of course* the NPC could speak. The guys and gals who sold the weapons would speak a whole lot, in the hopes of getting you to buy stuff from them.

But she never imagined that she would see a look of pure, stunned shock from one of them, like she saw on Jacob’s face now—his eyes wide, mouth hanging open, revealing pearly whites.

“I don’t get it,” Roy replied. He, too, looked very human. Llenn was amazed at the advancement of NPC programming. It was very convincing.

She also noticed something was wrong: The timing of the movement of their mouths didn’t match their speech. She heard them just a fraction of a second after she saw their mouths moving. And the muscle movements didn’t actually match the sounds she was hearing.

Ah, a translator, she realized. *GGO* was an American-made game, so they only had their mouths programmed to match spoken English.

If they said *Hello!* then their mouths would match the word perfectly, but instead, Llenn would hear *Konnichiwa!* on a slight lag. It really was rather impressive.

In fact, it was so well done that Llenn momentarily forgot about her situation to marvel at the latest state of video games. As for the NPCs, whatever they thought of tiny pink-dressed Llenn, they seemed to remember they had a more important role to play.

“You gather intel. We’ll protect the south gate,” said Rock. The earnest look in his eyes was utterly human.

But she didn’t have any info for them to glean from her. Plus, there was nothing here. Was there even a point to keeping her prisoner? Llenn wasn’t impressed with the NPCs’ dialogue. Three turned on their heels and returned to the door, guns in hand.

As he left, Roy turned back and said, “Jake! The chopper’s coming in seven minutes! Hang in there!” That had to be a nickname for Jacob.

Llenn couldn’t see her watch, but now she knew the time. It was 9:52 and change.

When Roy mentioned the “chopper,” that had to correspond to the end of the game, when all the players would lose. Given how carefully constructed *GGO* was, surely a helicopter would arrive at ten o’clock and blast all the remaining players with machine guns and missiles to force a game over.

“*Mrrmgm!*” she grunted, an attempt to say “I don’t think so!”

“.....”

Bearded Jacob just stared down at her. He was about five yards away, holding an M4A1 assault rifle. It was packed with accessories like a dot sight, laser sight, and so on. The muzzle glared right between her eyes.

That's it! Llenn realized suddenly. There was still a way for her to do something productive. This was *GGO*. It was a video game. And Llenn had two lives left.

In that case—!

There was no time left. Llenn made up her mind.

Using all of the tensile strength her body possessed, she rocked back and then bounced to her feet. There she was, standing right before the enemy soldier.

C'mon, shoot me!

"Muhh, moomee!" she gurgled, as loud as her lungs would allow, with a tremendous glare. The result was not very impressive.

Then Jacob, in the face of furious hostility from his captive, would easily and mercilessly shoot her dead, like any evil movie villain—she hoped.

Huh?

But he did not.

“.....”

Jacob merely fixed her with the same incredibly hard glare, steadied the M4A1 against his shoulder, and did not fire it. Instead, he commanded her, “Siddown!” Llenn knew enough English that she was sure of what the line was originally.

No, please! C'mon, you gotta! she begged in her mind. All she wanted was for him to shoot her, another first in her *GGO* experience—and hopefully the last.

In that case...

If the stupid NPC wasn't going to give in to her request, she would have to force his hand. Llenn ran, straight for the gun. She was going to give him a body blow, as small as she was.

She didn't expect to move Jacob's huge, burly form even a fraction of an inch. She just wanted him to shoot her, once.

"Ah!"

Jacob seemed quite taken aback by her choice of action, but he dodged out of the way, avoiding her charge as nimbly as a matador.

"Mwuh?" Llenn shot past him by a dozen feet at least, then turned back. *"Muh-muhhh-muuuh? Moomee!"*

What are you doing?! Shoot me! she had tried to shout, though there was no way he understood it. The NPC had no intention of shooting her.

What's his problem?! Why won't he shoot me?! Llenn wondered. Several possible answers spun through her head.

Was he deciding not to kill her, because he wanted information from her?

Was his gun actually broken, so he couldn't shoot?

He might be smart for an NPC, but he was still an AI, so was he unable to decide on a course of action?

Ahhh, no! None of those! Llenn realized. *This NPC knows what I'm trying to do!*

The moment she understood it, Llenn wanted to sing the praises of the person who created them. She wanted to apologize to Jacob for thinking of him as a stupid NPC earlier.

She also got a rush of desire not to let him win and, right on the spot, made up her mind about what to do next.

"Mgaah!"

Llenn started running—right at Jacob. As fast as she could go with her hands tied behind her back.

Jacob nimbly dodged out of the way, but this time Llenn did not stop. She kept running.

Straight toward the stone corner of the wall behind Jacob—at full speed.

"Gaaaah!"

Hiyaaaaa!

She collided with the stone wall headfirst.

CHAPTER 8
Reason to Fight



CHAPTER 8

Reason to Fight

Llenn was in the waiting room for the second time today.

“Yesssss!”

Most of all, she was grateful she was able to die. She thrust her arms into the air, all alone, and bellowed victoriously.

If the other guy wasn't going to kill her, she'd commit suicide on her own—with the power of her legs. All that focus on her speed had paid off. It was the first time she'd ever attempted it—and it worked.

On the other hand, the fear of running into the wall herself was a different kind of terror from jumping out into live gunfire, but it wasn't enough to make her hesitate.

You couldn't get much more “video game” than dying and respawning just to get out of a sticky situation.

“Thank God this is just a game. I could never do that in real life,” Llenn murmured to herself, not that this needed to be pointed out. She looked at her feet. “Oh, you guys are here, too! Awesome.”

She reached down and picked up P-chan and Kni-chan off the floor.

Was Jacob back there in the castle staring at Llenn's body—at least for the next three minutes—in disbelief? Or would he promptly lose interest in her and rush off to protect the south wall with his companions?

“Well...it doesn't matter either way.”

Llenn had no idea what an NPC thought about. They were created by humans but thought differently—they only seemed human in the way they acted. Perhaps they were too smart to be human.

More importantly, she wanted to tell Pitohui and the others about the NPCs'

strange insights—and the imminent increase in defense at the south wall. Alas, there was nothing she could do from this dark, empty space.

She checked her watch. It was after 9:54. The countdown to her respawning continued right before her eyes, 150, 149, 148...

Dammit... That's too long! she thought, clenching her jaw.

She would get back to the field of battle at 9:57. That would leave her with three minutes left to play.

The real question was where she would respawn. How wide was the respawning circle at this point?

Fukaziroh was outside the castle to the northwest to serve as a bombardier, so if the circle was close to her, that would be perfect. She could rush back through the north gate and hit the enemy from behind as they tried to defend the south side.

But if any player was farther back than that, it meant that much more ground to cover and time to waste. SHINC's Anna and Tohma were providing backup sniping, so she might wind up a few hundred yards farther away from the walls.

Ugh...

Llenn was helpless for now. All she could do was watch the number count down.

145, 144, 143, 142...

"Nice one, Llenn!"

Pitohui saw that her companion had wiped out all her own hit points, and her tattooed cheeks broke into a smile. When Pitohui smiled like this, it was pure and infectious.

"So she took herself out? Excellent," said M, who was her walking shield.

"Heh. That's a woman who knows what she's doing...," gloated Fukaziroh from her perch at the edge of the forest. You could practically see the look on her face.

Pitohui, M, MMTM, ZEMAL, T-S, SHINC—basically all survivors except for

Anna and Tohma—were next to the castle wall. The south gate, which had looked so far away, was very clear now, as was the six feet of rubble piled up in the large open gateway.

The question for all the players on the south side now was how to conquer this narrow gate. They had less than six minutes left to either wipe out the five remaining enemies in the castle or find the poison gas warhead that was somewhere inside.

Both options didn't leave a lot of time for mucking around outside the castle walls.

There was one thing Pitohui hadn't forgotten about, however: The distance of the revival point was the distance of the farthest living player from the castle.

"Eva, bring our two backup players as close as possible. I want Llenn to come back as close as we can get her," she said to Boss through the comm.

"Got it," said Boss. She gave orders to Anna and Tohma to proceed forward as fast as they could.

She even told them they could leave the antitank rifle behind, if that would help. The two put the ammo in their inventory, then shouldered their Dragunov rifles and started running.

The first bunch to reach the south castle gate were four members of MMTM, David included.

"There we go!"

They'd already suffered a terrible fate at the northern gate, so they weren't going to be caught careless this time. David and Lux took a position on the right side of the gateway, with Summon and Jake on the other side, the team stopping just short of the way through.

"Summon! Mirror!"

"Got it."

The towering Summon produced an extendable metal rod, on the end of which was a mirror about the size of a paperback. He put his back against the wall to steady himself, then slowly reached out with it, high in the gateway. The

mirror was meant to give them a peek into the courtyard over the six-foot-high pile of rubble...

Zwing— Crack!

A single bullet pulverized the mirror.

“Tsk!” David clicked his tongue. The enemy’s awareness and accuracy were frightful.

Based on the heavy power of the bullet, it was probably a sniper’s shot from Hassan’s SCAR-H from inside the castle. There was over three hundred feet of space between the walls and the castle itself, but at that range, he was going to hit them with pinpoint accuracy. If he’d stuck his face out instead of the mirror, he would have been shot through the eye and killed.

“Don’t stand in the gateway! You’ll die!” David shouted with a wave of his arm, not to his teammates, but to others like T-S and ZEMAL who were approaching the wall now. They hastily split to the side. Pitohui and M weren’t a concern in that regard, because they weren’t stupid enough to make that mistake in the first place.

“We’ll go in!” said Ervin, he of the 002 helmet, with the rest of his teammates behind him.

“Good idea!” David agreed. He wasn’t going to argue with another team offering to take the brunt of the attention.

They could take a 7.62 mm shot without dying. They could stand on the rubble, or run over it, and take shots at the castle. And if the opponent ducked out of trouble for even a moment, that could be enough to break through.

Or perhaps...

As T-S crawled toward the gate on hands and knees to hide themselves behind the pile of rubble, David silently gave hand signals to Summon on the other side of the gate. He opened his hand and pointed four fingers at the castle. His teammates nodded.

It meant *If T-S gets blown up by a mine, we go in next*. In other words, they were using T-S as sacrificial lambs.

Pitohui saw David's gesture from about a hundred feet away, farther down the wall to the left of the gate.

"....."

She said nothing.

T-S finished preparing, right in front of the gate rubble.

"Go!"

At 001's orders, they stood up at once and began to climb the mountain of junk.

As soon as their heads appeared over the top— *Zwip! Clank!*

A bullet rocketed off a helmet, creating sparks everywhere.

"Gah!"

001's head took a jolt, but he continued climbing up the rubble, got out his gun, and started returning fire. The other five repeated his movements and began firing at once.

The air was filled with noise again. The four in the castle fired at them ceaselessly, the team at the gate shooting back in equal measure. A bullet that been deflected off T-S ricocheted again off the side of the gate and shot back.

Bshap!

"Aaah!"

It took a nasty angle back toward Jake and kicked up dirt right near his feet.

T-S's defensive power was for real. They took dozens of shots, each one like a solid blow to the gut.

"Guh!"

"Yaaah!"

But despite the occasional loss of balance, they crossed the top of the mountain of junk and began to descend the other side. A few of them took shots to their guns, which then stopped working. They tossed their beloved weapons aside and kept moving forward, raising the shields on their

nondominant arms and proceeding onward in a side stance to reduce their profile.

ZEMAL's Tomtom watched the six of them spraying sparks as they pushed onward from ten yards away, on an angle from the gate. "Holy shit, man."

Shinohara had his M60E3 pointed up to watch out for the turrets over the wall, just in case. "I would go for one of those, if it wouldn't put me over the carrying limit," he admitted.

If you were carrying a heavy machine gun with tons of ammunition, there wouldn't be capacity left over for that armor. If you brought a set, it would make you as slow as a turtle.

"What, you'd quit using a machine gun?"

"You want me to die?"

That's simply who they were.

The T-S member in the lead, deflecting the storm of bullets raining upon him, finished descending the gate and set foot inside the castle grounds at last.

If this spot was like the interior of the northern gate, there would be explosives planted here. They were aware of that, of course, but they were prepared—mentally, if not physically.

"I'll go!" Ervin volunteered, going into a run as soon as he was on flat ground. That meant he was rushing ahead alone toward the castle, but that was the point.

If there were mines that were going to explode, then he was the only one who would die—and no one else. He would be the sacrifice to protect the other five.

Ervin became a star in the sky.

The ground exploded directly between his feet, the upward force hurtling him high into the air. He splattered heavily onto the cobblestone path.

Even a person wearing full body armor couldn't withstand shock of this magnitude. The total damage to Ervin's body surpassed his hit points.

Bing. The sign reading DEAD appeared over his body.

“Now!”

The other five rushed through, fanning out in their advance toward the castle.

Cylindrical objects flew toward them. The end of each was smoothly pointed, like a plastic bottle, while the rear ends were tapered and featured metal plates like arrow fletching.

They roared toward the group, fire shooting from the back—and hit T-S.

005 took one directly in the stomach, and the resulting explosion blasted through his armor, body, and even the back armor piece, leaving a small hole all the way through his midsection. He was killed instantly.

The second projectile exploded on the ground between 004 and 006. They were tossed to each side, smashing headfirst against the sides of the gate. Their necks were broken.

“Huh?” “What?”

001 and 003 could only watch as their teammates were tossed aside right before their eyes. The next blast blew them backward.

“Gyaaaa!” “Dwoofh!”

They hurtled back over the wall, arms and legs flying loose, and died.

The team had anticipated one blast from a land mine, but they hadn’t counted on three consecutive explosions that tossed them aside like scrap.

“Wha—?!”

“Whoa!”

David and his MMTM teammates had been about to use their sacrifice to mount their own charge and were completely taken aback.

Shwaaaaaa!

A cylindrical, flaming projectile hurtled right past their eyes at tremendous speed. It went by in a blink, but the sight burned itself into David’s retinas.

“RPGs!” he shouted, looking to his left. The rocket’s flaming exhaust was

visible, meaning it continued to accelerate into the distance. The Doppler effect made the roar lower in pitch.

The rocket fire rotated smoothly, pushing the projectile onward, until it abruptly exploded in midair a third of a mile away.

Anna and Tohma were rushing forward about sixty feet away from the blast at the time.

“Bwaaah!” “Eek!”

The burst of air and shrapnel knocked them off their feet, tumbling. They took enough damage to remove about 40 percent of their hit points.

Anna rolled until she wound up staring up at the sky, her eyes swirling.

“Wh...what just...?”

“RPGs! Here comes another!” shouted David, spinning around and fleeing away from the gate. Lux nearby and Summon and Jake on the other side of the gateway similarly booked it out of there.

After seeing the massacre inside the gate and hearing David’s shout, Boss started to flee, too. Rosa and Sophie sprang into motion at the same time.

“What? What happened?”

“What’s an RPG?”

“Isn’t that what this game is?”

“Right? Why all the fuss?”

The four ZEMAL members, startled by the blasts but otherwise not fleeing, were gathering around the castle gate and preparing to bolt inside after MMTM. But the next moment, rubble burst out from the open gateway.

No weapons actually shot rubble and stone, so that meant it was from an explosion. Something blew up on the other side of the pile of junk, tossing the loose material away from the castle.

“Huh?”

ZEMAL came to a stop, startled by the sound and rubble. Then a second tube-shaped projectile landed right in front of them.

“Huh?”

Too quick for any of them to process, the object exploded, spraying fine pellets in every direction and killing all four of them at once.

Fifty yards from the wall, crouched behind M for safety, Pitohui gleefully commented, “Ooh, scary! That was an RPG-7!”

While the abbreviation is the same for *role-playing game*, this was something entirely different. It was a Soviet-developed rocket-propelled grenade or, as it was originally known in Russian, a handheld antitank grenade launcher.

In short, it was an antitank missile.

A rocket warhead was attached to the end of the tubelike projectile. It was fired with gunpowder like a cannon, and the warhead would ignite once in the air. Then it flew, accelerating as it went, and exploded as soon as it hit something.

The launcher wasn't single use; it could be fired again and again as long as you kept loading projectiles into it. This was probably the most powerful weapon that a single person could carry and operate.

It was cheap, easy to use, powerful, and if it landed in the right spot, it could incapacitate any tank in one blow. A very dangerous weapon to face.

Of course, there were weaknesses. The trajectory of the rocket could be affected by the wind, so aiming long distances was difficult. The rear propulsion was so fierce that it was easy for enemies to spot where you were firing from.

On the plus side, you didn't need to use it against tanks, either. It was effective against normal armored vehicles, helicopters—and people.

There were many kinds of rockets to use, too, so if you had a variety of them, you could pick and choose as the situation required. The one that put a hole in the T-S member was a high-explosive antitank (HEAT) warhead designed to puncture thick armor with a shaped explosive that boosted the flow of force into a single direction.

The ones shot after that were normal explosive warheads—very powerful ones.

The last was an antipersonnel warhead designed to destroy people, rather than vehicles. It didn't come on a rocket; it was simply fired like a cannonball that exploded on impact.

RPG-7s and other portable rocket launchers were almost too powerful when used in personnel-based combat, so they hadn't been introduced in *GGO*, and most expected they would never be available within the game. This development came as a surprise.

"Mmm, I want one! I wanna shoot one!" Pitohui bubbled, eyes sparkling like a child's.

M was calm and reserved, in contrast. "It might only happen this one time."

"Then I want to steal one from them!"

"Goddammit!" swore David, turning back now that he was safely out of blast range. Now he understood what happened less than a minute earlier.

He let T-S rush in first, allowing them to take the brunt of whatever land mine setup the enemy had, and was preparing to charge through after that happened, when the enemy NPCs launched a series of RPG-7s at them.

They had perfectly anticipated that T-S—armored soldiers whom normal bullets couldn't hurt—would go through the gateway first and had the rockets on call in case activating the mine wasn't enough.

They must have had a whole line of RPG-7s all set up and ready to shoot up there. These NPCs were very smart.

Now they were looking at certain rocket fire if they even approached the gate. It was like the entrance to hell. The situation was even worse than before, and they'd lost a significant number of people with which to attack.

The surviving members outside the south gate now were M and Pitohui, who were crouched at the side of the wall; David's team of four survivors; and the last two of MMTM, Kenta and Bold, having come back at the same time.

"Made it!"

"Whew!"

There was also ZEMAL's Peter, who was returning to the front only to find

that the rest of his team was now dead.

Lastly, there were three members of SHINC, excluding Tohma and Anna, who were running up from about three hundred yards away.

The time was now 9:56.

“Did you see this coming, Pitohui?” demanded David, half-vengeful and half-sardonic.

“Hardly! Who would expect them to have RPGs?”

“Dammit! What do we do now?”

“Well, I was thinking...”

“Spit it out; don’t hold back!”

“Was this playtest designed to prevent us from winning from the very start?”

“Could be! It’s completely unfair!” David ranted. He was clearly upset. Then he asked a question he already knew the answer to: “Wanna surrender, then?”

“Hell, no! This is trouble, though. T-S and the machine gunners aren’t gonna revive in time.”

They’d be back by 9:59, but that wasn’t enough time for them to be of any use in the fight.

“No, I suppose not. Should we make a break for the east and west gates and rush inside?”

“I considered that, but if they block us with mines and RPGs, we’re out of options. We’re already short on manpower as it is.”

Through her comm, Boss chimed in. “Should we send one or two per team in on a suicide mission?”

Pitohui and David understood what she was getting at immediately. They were meant to take a bullet or an RPG blast and die. David shook his head, though. “It won’t work... You can defend against a bullet with a shield, but a rocket warhead is a different story entirely. And even if it did work out...”

Say the first wave was taken out by the RPGs, and the next fell to a bullet, and the group after that made it into the castle grounds safely. Even if successful,

you'd have to close a hundred yards with nothing more than empty moat-like ponds for cover.

"It's not enough! We're still completely outgunned."

Even angry, David was rational. He was able to consider the deaths of his allies as dispassionately as if they were chess or shogi pieces on a board.

"What about the blond grenadier?" he asked.

"Fuka? She can shoot the castle, but it won't do any good against the people inside."

"Does she have smoke or plasma grenades?"

"No. They're expensive. Do you think a poor little lady like me can afford to buy those things every time out?" Fukaziroh retorted.

"Was that supposed to be a joke?"

Just when it seemed like they were out of options, M's quiet voice was the only sound on the battlefield. "We should use it, Pitohui."

Pitohui looked down at his face as he swiveled around to face her—and she threw a fit. "What?! No! No!"

But M's expression didn't change. "We're going to lose at this rate."

"Llenn's going to respawn any moment now and rush through the north gate!"

"Even if that works, she'll only kill one or two at best. Wiping out all five would be very tough. In any case, we'd lose."

"But—but everyone's watching..."

"Why did you spend all that money to buy it, then? You were seen buying it anyway, so the word's going to get out soon enough. Perhaps all of Glocken already knows."

"Ugh..."

Based on their conversation, everyone could tell that Pitohui was in possession of *something*. That would also help to explain why she'd gone into this battle less equipped than ever before.

The survivors stared right at Pitohui.

“Oh, fine! Enough already!” Pitohui shouted. For good measure, she kicked M right in the face.

“Augh!” He toppled backward.

Pitohui waved her left hand, said “All right, all right! I’ll do it!” and ordered her menu to produce the weapon she had tucked away in her inventory.

9:57.

“I’m back! Good, I’m in the forest!”

“Yo, Llenn the Third.”

When Llenn returned to the forest, Fukaziroh was right there waiting for her. She was waiting at the end of the forest, grenade launchers resting on the ground at her sides, legs splayed out. She looked bored.

“Hey, Number Three, did you shrink a little?”

“Maybe I did. How are things looking?”

“Pretty bad. Apparently, they’ve got serious firepower at the south gate, and no one can get in.”

“Then I’ll go through the north gate!” Llenn said, ready to rush off on the spot.

At that point, Pitohui piped up. “That’s fine but wait a second first. We’ll raise hell at the south gate, and you go in at the same time.”

“Good to hear you, Pito. All right! What’s the fuss gonna be about?” Llenn wondered.

Pitohui said, “I’ll skip the explanation. You’ll know it when you hear it.”

As she was explaining this to Llenn, the object finished materializing. Tiny light molecules came together into a shape, revealing a weapon that Pitohui had kept hidden in her inventory until now.

“...How dare you,” David said, glaring.

“My goodness!” said Boss.

“Ooh!” cheered Sophie.

“Aww, it’s not a machine gun?” said Peter, disappointed.

There was a metal tube in Pitohui’s hands. It was quite long, at five feet three inches long and nearly three inches across. It had a handle, a trigger, and a simple resting pad to place it atop a shoulder.

In a box at her feet was another tube two and a half inches wide and a few feet long. Its tip was bulging, and its end was narrow, with small metal fins folded in. It looked very much like what had just flown past their eyes.

“An M9-A1 bazooka...” David gasped. His glare turned even sharper.

The newly bought weapon that Pitohui was revealing for the first time was a bazooka.

It was an antitank rocket weapon less than three inches across. You could use it to shoot a rocket using that tube, without requiring a whole cannon.

The M9-A1 was an American-developed weapon from World War II, an improvement on the original model, the M1. After that, antitank weapons evolved into disposable mini-launchers or weapons like the RPG-7, which were not strictly bazookas.

But the name stuck around in common parlance. Any large, cylindrical weapon that rested on the shoulder and fired like a cannon tended to be called a bazooka.

As a weapon, this bazooka was a very old one. But its destructive power was well beyond any gun’s, and it was very vexing when in enemy hands. Old didn’t mean weak—the presence of WWII-era antitank rifles was evidence of that.

With a bitter expression, David spat, “So you brought one of *those* things into this game...”

“Oh, I’m not gonna use it in Squad Jam. All those rockets are too heavy to lug around. But they said we were conquering an enemy base, so I thought this would be a good chance to get some practice in with it.”

“Then bust it out earlier! You...you wanted to keep it a secret from everyone, didn’t you?!”

“Yes.”

“.....And you probably dropped a huge wad of cash on it.”

“Money that I earned with my own blood, sweat, and tears in a different world.”

“Keh! Bourgeois freak.”

“You two can fight over this later,” interjected Boss. She turned to Pitohui. “Just smash them with it. It’ll help us win somehow.”

“Okay. But I’ll need backup, all right? Do you understand what I mean?” she said, hauling up the fifteen-pound tube onto her shoulder like it was made of cardboard.

Everyone understood what she meant.

For the few seconds that Pitohui was aiming and firing the bazooka, she needed someone to be a decoy for the enemy’s precision shooting—someone who was inevitably going to die.

After three seconds of silence, the lone survivor from ZEMAL, Peter, said, “Aw, hell, I guess that’s me.”

It was 9:58.

Behind a tree at the edge of the forest, Llenn waited for the moment to arrive.

When M gave the order, she would break through the northern castle gate at maximum speed. Fukaziroh waited for Pitohui’s command nearby. If M needed it, she would toss as many grenades as she had at the north side of the castle to help Llenn out.

They had no idea what was happening at the south gate.

9:58 and thirty seconds.

There was a minute and a half left in the game. Ninety seconds.

At the south gate, Peter had all his weaponry in his inventory and raised his hands high in the air as he approached the gate, shouting “Don’t shoot!” The RPG-7 had blown up nearly the whole pile of rubble in the gateway, so he

would be immediately visible from the castle.

But there was no shooting when he came into view. He trotted toward the castle.

“Ah, I see,” said Boss, impressed.

Members of team ZEMAL were the ones who approached with a giant sign reading *WE’RE NOT A HOSTILE TEAM!* about an hour ago. The hope that, if that had left any impression, the enemy might hesitate to fire for even a moment proved to be accurate.

David murmured, “They’re too smart to be NPCs” with no small amount of exasperation.

Peter walked along the left side of the gateway in the wall, getting right up to the edge of the courtyard without drawing any shots.

Then he shouted, “It’s up to you now!” and bolted into action. He ran not toward the castle, but along the left side of the interior wall. He pulled the hand grenade that David gave him from behind his back and grabbed it with both hands to remove the pin—when he was instantly riddled with bullets. That had been enough to draw their suspicion.

Their bullets left his body glowing red and covered in holes. It was an instant death sentence.

“All right!” said Pitohui, popping her head around the side of the gate. The bazooka was on her shoulder.

Zwabooosh!

The brief moment of distraction that Peter created was enough for her to fire the rocket. Once she’d done so, she pulled back immediately. The enemy’s bullets passed harmlessly through the space where she’d been standing.

The rocket sped through the hundred yards of the courtyard, blowing fire behind it, and smashed against the side of the castle itself.

An antitank missile like this one had penetrative damage because of its shaped explosive, but in this case, the shock ran all through the castle structure, shaking and cracking the stone. The pieces of the walls turned to rubble, falling

onto the entrance to the castle.

On the right side of the gate, across from Pitohui, David used a mirror to peer around the side. “You can do it. The opening’s a bit lower!”

“I knew it wouldn’t be that easy; it’s the first time I’ve ever shot it. But I’ll hit them with the next one.”

As they spoke, M loaded the next rocket behind Pitohui. You loaded them by sticking them in the back end of the tube. Once he was done, he patted her on the head to indicate it was good to go.

David leaned his left side into the gateway with his gun to be the next decoy and placed his finger on the trigger of his grenade launcher.

“Take this!”

He could only shoot one at a time, so this was his maximum offensive force, a weapon he’d been saving until the very end.

A bullet pierced his left shoulder.

“Ugh!”

Pomp!

The grenade was sadly far off its mark and flew up to the top of the castle. But it was enough of a space for Pitohui to shoot her next rocket.

“Nice one!”

Shaboosh!

The second rocket, true to her word, did not miss its target.

It flew practically level with the ground, vanished into the castle entrance, and a beat later, it exploded.

The castle shook even harder than before. Flame from the explosion and chunks of rubble shot through the doorway—along with the body of Hassan, limbs and head separating as they flew.

David had his head out to watch the result, resigning himself to being shot if it happened. When he saw the blast, he shouted, “Everyone, go!”

The explosion of the first rocket echoed in the distance.

“That’s the signal.”

“Then I’ll go check it out,” Llenn said to Fukaziroh, as casually as if she were talking about jogging down to the corner store. She broke into a run.

It was the second time she’d charged this exact route today, leaving the forest and bolting for the castle wall. There was no answer from the castle.

The last minute of battle had begun.

While she was still in the air from jumping over the ruins of the castle wall, she heard the second rocket explode.

“Don’t be late!”

“Got it!”

Boss and her team didn’t want to come in second to MMTM, who was first through the gate. Sophie, who was the carrier of the antitank rifle and had no weapon of her own, borrowed the Strizh pistol from Boss.

“Oh, hey! We’re going to miss out on the last kill we deserve,” muttered Pitohui with a smile. She set the bazooka on the ground; her new weapon had fulfilled its purpose admirably.

At this time, Anna and Tohma had pushed up to a distance of a hundred yards from the castle walls.

“Aww, no fun!”

“We didn’t make it in time!”

They hung their heads in disappointment.

David was in the lead group charging through the gate. The first thing he saw was a large, powerful black man sticking his gun through the outer wall of the castle building.

Aha! So that’s where he was hiding! he thought. He’d been baffled by how they were shooting when there was only the one open doorway to the building, and now the mystery was solved.

A few yards to the side was a hidden door painted the same color as the stone

material, and he'd been shooting out of it this whole time.

"You coward!"

He stopped and aimed his STM-556, right as Roy pointed the M4A1 back at him.

David did not dodge the shot.

Two bullets were fired from a hundred yards apart, and two bullets hit the heads of their respective targets, blasting out the back side.

Three enemies left.

The other five members of MMTM rushed right past David where he lay collapsed on the ground. Not a single thought spared for their dead leader. The team was heading for the castle interior, consequences be damned.

As he ran, Jake fired his HK21 machine gun at the side of the castle. It was purely for suppression, not aimed at anyone or anything in particular.

Rock watched them from above—from a large hole that had recently opened in the southwest face of the castle, about fifty feet up. Another wooden door disguised as a flat stone wall opened in its side, revealing a hole big enough for one person to slip through.

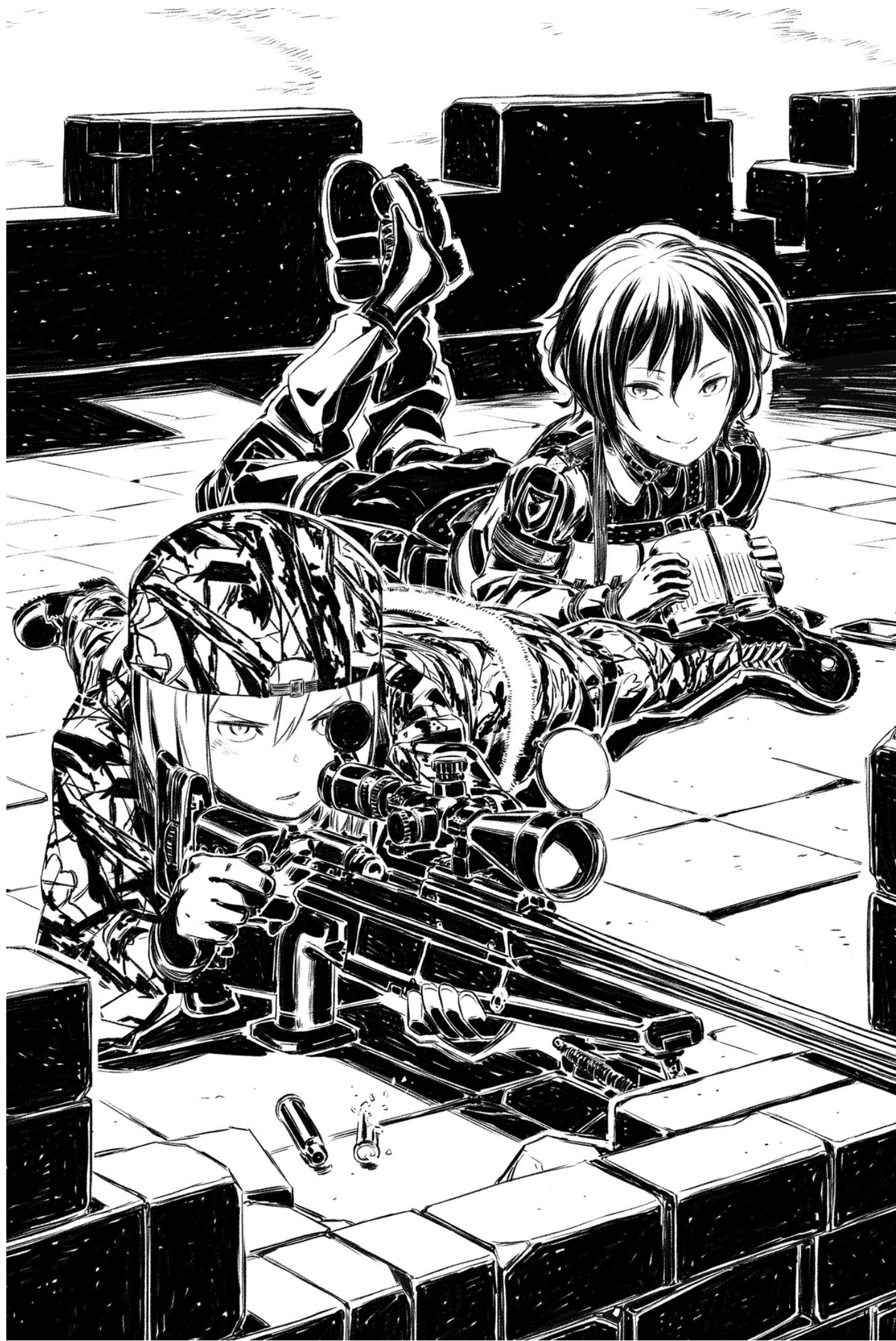
It was Rock, the sniper who had plagued the allied team this entire time. Resting on his shoulder was not the GM6 Lynx, but an RPG-7.

He was aiming at the close-knit MMTM pack, who hadn't noticed his presence. His finger touched the trigger.

Bwim!

A single bullet hit Rock in the right shoulder.

It was an explosive round that blew up as soon as it hit him. With a muffled blast, Rock's right arm tore off and fell down off the castle, still holding the RPG-7. Before it even hit the cobblestones, a second bullet hit the dying Rock, blowing off his upper half and finishing him off.



*

An ejected empty cartridge rattled around on top of the wall. It collided with the first one and clinked away. They disintegrated with little graphical effects, one after the other.

Atop the western part of the castle wall, R93 Tactical 2 bolt-action sniper rifle in her hands, Shirley snarled, “Damn! So he wasn’t the last one...”

Nearby, Clarence peered through small but powerful binoculars.

“Hmm, too bad,” she said. As a stream of players pushed through the south gate—MMTM, SHINC, Pitohui, and M—she added, “Hey, why don’t you shoot them, instead? You got all your ducks in a row.”

Clarence and Shirley.

These two women were also part of the playtest and on the same team. They didn’t bother to reach out to their old teammates.

After their stunning mutual kills in SJ3, they talked in the pub post-death and traded contact info, eventually meeting up later on to hang out and hunt monsters together. They had no reason to turn down an opportunity like this.

As usual, Shirley wore a green-camo jacket with realistic tree patterns. Clarence wore an all-black outfit with a vest, just like in SJ2 and SJ3.

But when the game started, and they saw the map and the castle, they quickly came to a conclusion: Even with three lives each, there was no way the two could conquer that base together.

Instead, they hid in the forest—employing every type of camouflage they could—and lay low when MMTM crawled past them on hands and knees, when Llenn’s group moved right by on their way to rush forward, and when Fukaziroh sat around waiting for the call to move out.

Every time Clarence got the urge to lift her AR-57, the gun that used the same magazine as Llenn’s, saying, “Ugh, I wanna kill someone,” Shirley had to glare at her and warn, “Don’t—or I’ll kill *you*.”

“I gotta say, you’re really patient. Have you been upping your perseverance stat this whole time, Shirley?”

“It’s basically my job.”

“Oh? What’s your job? You promised you were gonna tell me sometime, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. One of these days.”

They had to wait over an hour and a half. When their first and final chance arrived, they didn’t miss it.

The big charge from the south of the castle was a huge distraction. While it was going on, the two left the forest, crawled through the grassland, and reached the northeast castle wall. They didn’t go through the gate where the mines were placed, of course. They’d seen MMTM get wiped out.

Instead, Shirley produced a rope and grappling hook and threw it over the wall a good sixty feet up. While everyone else was preoccupied with the explosions on the other side of the castle, the two climbed up the rope onto the top of the wall, then proceeded to crawl again. Their continued advance behind the cover of the ramparts was very slow going and very boring.

As they crawled, they chattered away freely.

“This is booooring. I’m so boooored. My elbows hurt.”

“Shut up, or I’ll push you off.”

“I just wanna shoot people. I wanna shine. I wanna kill everyone.”

“Shut up, or I’ll push you off.”

They went halfway around the entire wall, counterclockwise, until the south gate was within view. They quietly witnessed the trading of rockets, drawing a grin from Clarence.

“What’s going on over there? It’s like a war scene.”

“Perfect timing.” Without getting up, Shirley aimed her R93 Tactical 2. She pointed it toward the castle. “Show yourself. I’ll take you out in one shot.”

“Then I’ll be your spotter. Where’s my thanks?”

“Thanks. And if you spot badly, I’ll kill you.”

And once she had blown Rock to pieces, and Clarence said, “Why don’t you

shoot them, instead? You got all your ducks in a row,” Shirley engaged the safety on the R93 Tactical 2.

Then she turned to the other woman, neither smiling nor angry, and informed her, “I’m a deer hunter. I don’t shoot ducks.”

For the second time today, Llenn made a huge leap into the castle grounds. It was the kind of jump that should end on the head of a mushroom-shaped monster.

This time, she heard raucous gunfire coming from the south side. The castle was before her, and she could see the smoke of battle rising from the other side behind it.

A hundred yards directly ahead of her was the entrance where she’d eliminated Cain earlier. Two men were emerging from it at this very moment.

One wore glasses: Doc.

The other was the man who refused to kill her earlier: Jacob.

Neither held a gun. Their assault rifles were hanging from their shoulders by their sling straps. Instead, what they carried together was a wood box about three feet long and a foot and a half in height and width. It must have been heavy, because they were carrying the object out of the castle by handles on either end with both hands.

There was no version of Llenn too stupid to understand what this was: the poison gas warhead, their objective. They were taking it out in this direction to keep it away from the attackers invading from the south.

She wasn’t going to let this chance pass her by.

“I don’t think soooo!” she bellowed, still on the run. She turned the fangs of her P90 on the two men, who were shocked to see the tiny pink person suddenly blazing toward them with astonishing speed.

For an instant, she couldn’t decide whether to shoot Doc or Jacob, but she felt like she saw the lenses of the glasses reflect light for a split second, and that was enough for her to shift to her right toward Doc.

She held the gun at her waist as she ran, placed the bullet circle only she

could see over his body, and immediately pulled the trigger.

Brrraaaaaa, the P90 roared, putting about twenty tiny holes in Doc's body. He toppled over, and Jacob hurried to draw the M4A1 from his back. With neither man holding it, the wooden box fell to the cobblestones and broke. She could see what looked like a mortar shell roll onto the stone.

In the meantime, Jacob grabbed the M4A1 and pointed it at Llenn—and the two shot simultaneously.

Llenn's five bullets hit Jacob's gun and sling, ripping them from his hands and tossing them ten feet away.

Jacob's shot hit the magazine at the top of Llenn's P90. It broke through the plastic case, spilling out ammunition that she would have fired otherwise.

"Gah!"

Llenn didn't stop running. She yanked the sling off her shoulder, tossed the P90 aside, and hurtled the last hundred feet toward Jacob.

The NPC who had previously chosen not to kill her seemed more than happy to oblige this time around. She saw him draw a pistol from his right hip.

Get there in time!

She pulled the black combat knife out from behind her back as she rushed toward Jacob and his rising gun barrel.

Bang!

He fired, right as she leaped into the air. The bullet ricocheted off the stone behind where she'd been standing.

Her jump was angled perfectly. She landed both feet directly on Jacob's chest, and the momentum was enough to knock the large man backward.

"Gah!"

Jacob fell onto his back, and Llenn rolled over him, doing three somersaults and stopping with her hands against the castle side as she stood up. Then she turned and leaped onto her fallen opponent in a single move, thrusting the knife at his neck.

Zwoop.

Jacob spun with surprising agility for his size, and the blade hit only dry cobblestone. By the time Llenn's face tilted up, Jacob was standing over her, .45-caliber pistol pointed directly at her.

"Ugh!"

He was so close that evasion wasn't even an option in her mind. On pure instinct, Llenn reached out and stabbed. The tip of the knife, held in reverse in her left hand, stuck into that .45-inch hole.

"Ah!"

Jacob and Llenn were connected through their weapons. It had been an impulse move on Llenn's part, and now she couldn't help but think, *Um, what's happening here...?*

Could the pistol fire with a knife tip stuck in its muzzle? She didn't know; no one ever told her. Maybe the force of the bullet would easily tear the knife out. Maybe it would break Llenn's fingers.

But it was still better than having a bullet hole in her head.

Jacob did not fire the gun. He looked down at her from above, his face framed by his beard and bandages. He appeared to be frozen with fear.

"Why...?" he said abruptly. It was the same time-lagged speech, while the program translated English into Japanese. "Why do you...fight?"

Llenn's mind nearly went blank from the shock of this question. Why would he ask something like that in the middle of the game? She had no idea what was going through these cutting-edge NPCs' heads.

However, it was human nature to want to answer a question asked of you. That had to be what he was banking on. If so, tally up yet another frightfully advanced feature of the AI.

Llenn's mind spun at high speed, ideas floating through it one after the other. *Because that's what kind of game this is. Because you're the final enemy. Because there's no time left.* They were all such obvious answers.

But ultimately, she came to the conclusion that none of them were

appropriate singular answers on their own. Her brain stopped her mouth from responding.

Why am I playing GGO today?

What am I looking for?

What's the reason I keep up with this virtual life-and-death competition?

She arrived at one very simple answer.

The most appropriate answer of all.

So she gave voice to that answer.

“Because it’s fun!” declared the tiny girl, beaming. She had no idea how the NPC took this.

She rotated to her left, pulling the knife from the muzzle of the pistol. She thought she was going to be shot. She was ready for it. Bring it on—mutual death was fine.

When Llenn caught Jacob’s face in her sights again, his mouth dangled open, and his eyes were wide and lifeless. The pistol did not follow her. It pointed at nothing and did not fire.

The man might as well have been deactivated, switched off. Her knife edge ran across his neck so fast it was invisible.

“Gfhk!” Jacob gasped.

“It was too shallow!” Llenn realized.

If he was still vocalizing, that meant he was still alive. The one blow hadn’t been fatal.

Falling to his knees, Jacob put his left hand against his throat.

Llenn placed her right hand against the base of the knife so she could attack again and finish him off this time.

They were now at the same eye level. At the very end, he said something most unlike an NPC.



“This is wrong... I want...to stop...”

Well, not on my watch.

“No!” Llenn said in English. A tear ran down from his left eye shortly before she jammed the knife deep into it.

This time, it sank all the way in.



EPILOGUE I

After the Battle

Pling-a-ling! Dun-duh-duh-daaa!

A completely inappropriate victory fanfare played, and a message danced in the air.

Congratulations!! Winner: LPFM! Clear time: 01:59:57.

It was the same message she'd seen twice before in Squad Jam.

According to the time, Llenn had finished it with a mere three seconds remaining. She hadn't had time to check her watch once she started rushing in, and now she let out a long, heavy sigh to relax the tension.

"Whewww..."

She glanced down at her feet and saw the bearded man, knife stuck in his eye, with the DEAD tag floating over his head.

"You were tough. Though I suppose that compliment should go to the one who created you," she said, grabbing the knife. "You need to give this back now."

She tugged on it, but it didn't want to come out.

Upsy-daisy. There we go... But the knife still did not come out. Argh!

She put all her weight and leverage into her grip, and the blade was yanked free at last, sending her tumbling, legs flying in the air.

If this were real life, the eye would still be attached, but this was GGO. The knife was as clean and perfect as if it were brand-new.

She was picking up the P90 she tossed aside when Pitohui's voice said in her ear, "You did it, Llenn."

"I did it! Where are you?"

“Everyone’s outside the south gate. Come quick. You too, Fuka.”

“But the poison gas warhead is on the ground right next to me.”

“Oh, who cares about that?”

“Good point.”

“You could even set it off if you wanted to.”

“No, that would be messed up. Hang on, I’m coming now,” Llenn said, breaking into a run.

Leaving behind two bodies and a warhead.

The playtest was over, but it seemed they’d be staying on the map a little while longer. At least, until she pressed YES on the prompt in the corner of her vision asking if she wanted to return to Glocken.

Her weapons were locked from use, however. A sign indicating as much appeared when she held the grip of the P90. Llenn put it and her knife in virtual storage and walked back empty-handed.

Now that the courtyard was safe, she could take her time admiring the scenery that had been too dangerous to examine before. She saw Rock’s body next to the castle, a large cylindrical weapon tucked under his right arm.

At last, she saw her allies.

Pitohui, M, MMTM, SHINC, and ZEMAL. T-S, too.

It looked like those who had died in the last three minutes were back, as were the players who’d died all three times. Everyone who had been present when Pitohui explained her plan was back together.

The group seemed to be in a congenial mood, congratulations and compliments traveling in every direction. It felt like a big party, in fact.

“Oh! It’s the return of the woman of the match herself! The one who eliminated the last two!”

Pitohui beckoned Llenn over with her hand. When the others recognized who it was, they all welcomed her back.

“You did it!”

“Congrats!”

“I knew you could do it!”

Tanya, Anna, Tohma—the members of SHINC hurled congratulations her way.

The largest of them all looked down on Llenn with kind eyes and said, “We’ll have our fight some other time. Well done.” Their duel would simply need to wait.

“Thanks. Next time. If there’s another Squad Jam, maybe. And if not, then out in the wilderness somewhere,” Llenn said firmly.

Pitohui’s eyes glinted dangerously, but Llenn pretended not to see it.

MMTM watched her with 70 percent admiration and 30 percent frustration. David told her, “You did well.”

“Thanks.”

“I’d like to fight you in earnest next time.”

“Ha-ha-ha. If the opportunity arises...,” Llenn said, though her heart wasn’t in it. If there was a next time, it belonged only to SHINC.

As for ZEMAL, they appeared to be getting grilled by Sophie and Rosa, probably about that backpack ammo-feeding system. The conversation seemed to be very enthusiastic.

“Okeydoke, congrats-grats, ulations-lations,” jabbered Fukaziroh, returning her weapons to item storage and strolling back to the group with her hands tucked behind her chest plate. “Way to go, Llenn. As expected from our resident Angel of Death. Three of those kills were yours, weren’t they?”

“Hi, Fuka. Technically, I suppose so.”

“Oh, so humble. So Japanese. I bet you got a ton of experience points, too, didn’tcha?”

“Maybe.”

“Gimme some.”

“...How?”

While Fukaziroh pestered Llenn, Pitohui and M stood aside from the rest of the group and crouched next to the castle to examine one of the bodies.

It was Roy, the black avatar whose fight with David ended in a double death. The bullet had hit him in the head, but he was whole now, although not moving. There was no countdown, since he was just an NPC. His body would remain, apparently.

Pitohui lifted his right arm, then his left.

“What are you doing?” M asked suspiciously.

She showed him Roy’s hand at the end of his thick left arm. “Look.”

The hand was missing the tip of its middle finger and the entire pinky. Since there was no damage effect visible, that meant it wasn’t a wound suffered in this battle but was either the result of a previous fight or a birth defect.

“.....”

M looked at it with surprise. Pitohui lowered the man’s arm without a word. Then she picked up the M4A1 rifle lying nearby and laid it on top of him, covering the hand.

“There we go!”

She got to her feet, spun on her heel, and trotted toward Llenn and the other players, leaving M behind.

“Hey, guys, we oughtta wrap this up now. Anyone feel like partying at a bar back in Glocken? All participants are welcome to join!”

Immediately, Fukaziroh asked, “On you, Pito?”

“Hmm, I guess I walked into that one, huh? It was my idea, after all. So yeah... M will pay!”

“Then I’m in! And so is Llenn! You’ve got some thoughts, don’t you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

As the representative of MMTM, David said, “We appreciate the offer, but we’ll pass. The next time we meet, we’re enemies.”

“Oh? We still are now, aren’t we? But...fine, if you insist. Good job today. You

were an excellent team worth using in my strategy.”

“We’ll crush you next time. You could even bring that bazooka if you want. So long—and the same to everyone else,” he said, addressing the group. The six of them swung their left arms, turning into outlines of shining light and disappearing from the scene.

“What about you girls? Want a drink?” Pitohui asked SHINC.

Boss replied, “We appreciate your offer, too, but it’s late. We’ll be ducking out now.”

“Too bad.”

“This was fun. Let’s do it again sometime. Let’s meet up under fire.”

And the six brave and mighty women—who were secretly teenage girls—left the game before their families could scold them for playing games too late at night.

“What about you?” Pitohui asked ZEMAL.

Tomtom replied, “If anything, we’re hoping you could let M there join our team.”

“Can’t do that. He owes me money, and it’s going to take him three hundred years to pay it all off.”

“Damn, that’s a shame. M, if you’re ever looking to sell that MG 42 for a little extra cash, let me know first. We’re gonna go do our own thing now.”

“Oh, you are? Well, see ya.”

The machine-gun superfans vanished. The only ones outside the castle now were Llenn’s group of four and the six sci-fi soldiers.

“I’d ask what your plans are, but...”

Ervin said, “Well, it would be odd if I was the only one going, since I’m the only one who’s shown my face... So we’ll head our own way. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“No, thank *you*. Just make sure you bring straws next time.”

The members of T-S bowed, a tiny gesture for such large, bulky figures, and

then they vanished. Now it was only the four of them left in front of the castle.

“Dang, Pito, nobody wants to hang out with you! You’re not gonna empty out M’s wallet at this rate!” Fukaziroh said, legitimately angry. “Well, I guess Llenn and I will have to drink for everyone else.”

“You will?”

“I’m going to reserve a booth then, okay? Should I put us down for four? It doesn’t have to be all-you-can-drink, since you’re paying,” said Fukaziroh, making a gesture like she was holding a smartphone in her hand.

The truth was, though, that in all VR games, not just *GGO*, if there were too many people in a given space, the system could simply create an additional layer for the space and phase the overflow players into it. It would never truly be packed to capacity.

“Hang on. We can invite two more.”

Two more? Fukaziroh and Llenn shared a look of confusion. Pitohui swiped with her left arm. Her M9-A1 bazooka appeared again.

“Oh?”

“That’s huge!”

Llenn and Fukaziroh hadn’t seen it yet.

“Here, take it.” Pitohui put the five-foot-plus-long, three-inch-wide object in M’s hands. “Point it over there.”

She indicated a spot over the northwest part of the castle wall. Then she walked around behind him and stuck her face into the hole where the rocket was meant to be loaded. “Hey! You two! Let’s go out for drinks!”

That was undoubtedly the first time anyone in *GGO* had ever used a bazooka as a megaphone. Probably hadn’t happened many times in real life, either.

The trick worked, because two people stood up from the ramparts of the wall and answered with different gestures.

Shirley held her R93 Tactical 2 sideways in one hand, high over her head.

Clarence held out her hands and shrugged her shoulders.

Then they both flashed and vanished from the wall.

“Well, we got stood up. Put us down for four then, Fuka.”

“You got it.”

Llenn had been in Squad Jam and watched the replays, so she could tell right away who the two were, even from a distance. “When did they get there?” she asked.

“Dunno. But they killed one of them, so I’m grateful,” Pitohui replied. “Now, shall we go grab some drinks?”

She waved her left hand, and the bazooka on M’s shoulder vanished. With the weight off, he said, “All right. I’ll teleport the entire team back to Glocken, then.” He waved his left hand to call up the menu.

“How did it feel to fight for the first time in a while, Llenn?”

“Huh? Oh!” Llenn didn’t expect to be called upon. She recalled that Jacob had asked her a similar question only a few minutes ago. “It was fun!”

“Good! That’s the whole point. Well, if there’s another Squad Jam...”

“This was more fun than Squad Jam! We all got to work together and beat a really tough enemy we couldn’t handle on our own! We should come together as Team LPFM to do little games and ordinary quests like this in the future!”

“Slow down, Llenn... Why don’t we discuss that at the bar?”

“Awww!”

Her wail was the last sound before the four vanished from the castle courtyard.



EPILOGUE II

One Summer Day

The next thing I knew, there I was.

A cold stone structure, rife with mold. I could see a tall, dark, and barren ceiling above.

“Whoa! You awake? Hey, Doc!” said a familiar voice. My head hurt. My thoughts were woozy and disconnected.

Then a thick, burly face that I’d grown to rely on leaned into view. “Okay, you’re all right. I thought you were just gonna be passed out the whole time!” said the voice, exposing perfect white teeth.

It was Roy.

It had been a long time since I’d seen him dressed in fatigues and a bulletproof helmet.

* * *

I’ve never once regretted enlisting to fight for my country.

Once I was in the army, I strove to be the best soldier I could possibly be. I underwent grueling training that made me sick to remember, endured the sadistic grins and insults of my drill instructor, and became a soldier of my country—one of the chosen few, in fact.

I was part of a team for twelve years, a team whose very name I could never disclose. During that period, I went to war many times when my country demanded it. When one mission abroad ended, I went to another country. I took part in operations that weren’t even in war zones. Operations that were always off record.

I killed many people. With guns, with explosives, even with knives.

I suppose you could chalk it up to my harsh training, or perhaps you could say

I had an innate talent for it. Maybe it was both. I eliminated many enemies. I had the ability to do so.

Thanks to that, I didn't have to see as many of my teammates die as I could have. In fact, it never once happened under my watch.

Others in my unit died in the midst of fierce fighting. Nearly ten perished in a helicopter crash once.

But I never lost any of the guys I fought alongside or led into battle. I took part in a number of operations, and I got my entire team back out alive in every case. That was the one thing I was proudest of.

Roy, a reliable partner in combat for years, shed the only blood we ever lost, and it was because he was careless enough to accidentally shoot himself in the hand.

It was a story we'd always been able to laugh about.

He'd wave around his mutilated hand and say "Goddammit, there goes my chance at an Academy Award! I'll never be able to hold an Oscar!" He'd been an actor before he enlisted, and that always got a laugh.

Once I sensed that I was reaching my physical limit, I quit the special unit and the military altogether. I went back to my hometown to take on a normal job.

Thanks to the good economy, I had plenty of options. I jumped around from job to job on a whim, but I never suffered on account of that.

I even got married and had kids. I thought I'd live out my life as a proud patriot, good husband, good father, and the owner of a typical, happy life. I truly believed that.

I never suspected for a moment that my body and mind might be going completely haywire.

So when my old war buddy invited me to do an unspecified job with him, I went along without thinking much about it. I would be an employee of a "private security company," providing protection to a critical facility in a foreign country with an unstable political situation.

It wasn't a job that could be carried out by just anyone. Plus, I knew I could do

it well.

My wife was furiously against it.

I told her that it would make life easier for us, that it would pay much better than anything before—but she went so far as to threaten divorce in our argument. In the end, I got my way.

Over and over, I told her, *I'll be fine; nothing to worry about. I've been in far more dangerous battles and come back alive every time.*

I traveled to that foreign nation, and I returned safely.

It was a two-month stint, and things got hairy a couple times in that span.

They shot at our convoy from a distance and hurled mortars into the ground. One of the new recruits from the destination country who was in training as a part of the mission fucked up, and his machine gun backfired. Spontaneous battles arose from time to time, either to protect the oil refinery or to protect the truck convoy transporting weapons.

I made it through every challenge successfully and returned home a much richer man. I didn't suffer a single scratch.

It was fun.

Back home, I stopped working cheap jobs.

Instead, I regularly left the country to do lucrative missions. I didn't know where any of them were located. They were all places where you'd get stopped if you tried to cross the border.

In each country, I would take part in a few battles. Some were fierce, and some ended quickly. Every single time, I came home unhurt.

I'd be overseas for two or three months at a time, then go back home to be with my family for a month before shipping out to perform another job.

My wife stopped giving me a hard time about it. She did an incredible job raising our daughters.

To my shock, the person who put up the biggest fight against my new lifestyle was none other than Roy.

Like me, after he quit the military, he worked all over the world as a “security officer,” and made himself very desirable to a number of companies. We even worked together on a few jobs.

But one day, out of the blue, he swore to himself that he would never do this again and even recommended that I retire for good.

“C’mon, Jake... You know you’re the best damn soldier I’ve ever met. But haven’t you had enough? Why do you need to keep leaping headfirst into danger just for work? You might actually die this time.”

No, I’ll be fine.

I can still fight.

I won’t die.

I’ll come back alive from any battle.

Just like I always have.

* * *

The next thing I knew, there I was.

It had been a long time since I saw him dressed in fatigues and wearing a bulletproof helmet.

A man with glasses was wrapping a bandage around my head.

“Ah, I see. You were lucky, Jacob,” he said sociably, but I didn’t recognize him. Who was that?

More importantly, where was I, and what were Roy and I doing here?

“Oh, you’ve got some memory damage. I don’t blame you—not after a blow to the head like that. You’ll need a proper scan when you get back home.”

What did that mean? Roy answered that question for me.

“Dammit! So you really lost your memory? Come on, man, you gotta snap out of it! We’re in the middle of a job!” he said.

I really didn’t know. I couldn’t remember.

When is it? Where am I? What am I doing?

“.....”

Roy gave me the pitying look you’d reserve for an unfortunate child and filled me in on everything.

Our team—whoever else that included—was in Eastern Europe, performing an important job. We secured a Russian-made nuclear warhead in this abandoned castle and had to protect it for the next two hours, until our chopper arrived.

Eastern Europe? Nuclear warhead?

Roy showed me the video camera footage. He was always the one recording everything for posterity, going back to our days working together.

On the little camera screen, I saw myself. There I was, in some room, announcing the plan the way I always did.

I was describing an operation to seek out a nuclear warhead to a bunch of men I didn’t recognize, aside from Roy. They were listening to me intently. On another video, we were riding on a Russian-made helicopter that belonged to this nation’s military, on the move to the operation site. In yet another video, we were proceeding warily through a forest.

I couldn’t believe it, but neither could I doubt it.

That was me in those videos, doing what I always did.

That meant I’d screwed up worse than ever before: I’d been injured in the midst of a job and lost my memory of it happening.

“No, it’s gone well up to this point. Though you probably won’t agree with that,” Roy said. Then he filled me in on something that wasn’t clear in the videos.

We’d been recruited and flown out to this country for the sake of this job. “A Russian nuclear warhead was being transported to a disposal site when it went missing,” they said.

It was vague and hard to believe, but the point of our mission was to reach our objective and confirm the item for ourselves—and it was true. A team of seven of us eliminated impediments and succeeded at infiltrating this castle.

Then we found the nuclear warhead.

In the midst of battle, a piece of shrapnel hit my helmet hard enough to knock me out. But I didn't die. I had a headache, a bloody wound, and a few minutes of unconsciousness, plus some memory confusion.

"You're a true force of nature, Jacob. You're unkillable."

I know.

"The chopper gets here in two hours. We need your help to last until then. Now get up!"

The little castle we had to protect for two hours was surrounded by the dead.

They were the bodies of anti-government militiamen and civilians who took part in the battle against us. They were stacked dozens high, in the surrounding flatlands, meadows, and forest.

It had been years since I saw such a stunning battlefield. It got my blood pumping.

"And we've got all the weapons we could ever want!"

The men named Cain and Hassan showed me the pile of arms near the entrance to the castle. This was a stronghold of the local anti-government rebels. They had tons of guns, ammo, explosives, and RPG-7s.

The man named Vodka had a machine gun, and the man named Rock took a powerful antimateriel rifle.

On the videos, we were already familiar with each other, but I'd forgotten everything. Still, they obeyed my orders. They were good, reliable soldiers.

"I'm not a soldier by trade. So don't expect too much out of me," said Doc. He wasn't actually a doctor; he was a nuclear physicist and expert in nuclear weapons.

He showed me the wooden box with the warhead inside and told me some useful information: that the weapon wasn't going to explode in this state, but there was no telling what might happen to it if someone else got their hands on it.

Then he said, “You’re the leader, okay? So lead!”

My headache cleared up much faster than I expected.

Once my mind was at ease, my work instincts returned. I memorized the layout of the castle, determined positions for the team, and gave orders. I set the sniper and machine gunner on spires to watch the surrounding area and had the other members flexibly change locations as needed.

As it turned out, aside from Doc, the other members of my team were just as skilled as Roy. They understood how I meant to protect the castle with a small team and carried out my plan exactly the way I intended.

Then the battle started.

From what Roy said, these were anti-government militias and ordinary armed civilians who’d been swept up in their rhetoric. The fools were converging on the castle, hoping to steal the warhead and claim the glory for themselves.

We spared no effort in reducing them to a bloody mess. We had the advantage of position. It was very easy to stop them, with the way they charged us in small groups without any real strategy, over and over.

When they flew that toylike drone over the castle, it proved annoyingly difficult to shoot down, but Roy downplayed the failure. “It’s not like they can actually see inside. And they should know the exterior pretty well, right? I mean, it’s *their* castle.”

We piled up as much rubble as we could in the gates, the only way into the castle courtyard, and placed mines behind them. Everyone who attempted to get in too close, we blew up.

I watched the men who fell into our trap get blown to bloody bits, and I thought nothing of it.

The bodies strewn around the castle grew in number.

When I saw the people approaching in suits of armor, it stopped seeming like real life.

What museum did they get that stuff out of? Six men wearing medieval suits of plate armor came pushing their way into the castle.

They deflected our 5.56 mm bullets—but eventually Rock's antimateriel rifle made short work of them and killed them all. We left them among the bodies littering the exterior of the castle. I was getting bored of keeping count.

The one group that threw me for a loop had men carrying a sign saying WE'RE NOT A HOSTILE TEAM!

They could have been suicide troopers strapped with explosives, of course, but their appearance didn't seem to indicate that. And it was strange that they didn't have any weapons on them.

Based on experiences from my military days of having difficulty identifying friend from foe, I couldn't make a snap judgment. In places where we thought there would only be enemies, it wasn't that rare for armed groups to become allies instead. Sometimes you ended up fighting them without realizing you had the same goals.

But as soon as another group of enemies started the shooting, the would-be allies fled, so we never found out if it was an honest offer or not.

One very loud, busy hour after I regained consciousness, the world around the castle quieted down all of a sudden. It seemed like the enemies were running low on numbers.

Everyone hoped that the remainder of the time would simply run out without incident. But at the same time, I knew that no matter how many times they came, we could fight them off. I never dropped my guard. The scariest thing of all in battle was a bit of downtime causing the adrenaline to wear off and your concentration to lapse.

I kept giving orders over the radio. The team was probably getting sick of me.

When the helicopter was twenty minutes away, the enemy made their move.

They attacked the south gate of the castle. They had bulletproof shields—probably tore the metal off an armored car of some kind—and they advanced on the castle in single-file lines.

It was a primitive but effective strategy. They could deflect our bullets, so there was no way for us to keep them from advancing.

But once they got close enough, we could start punching through that

defense, and they got within RPG range.

We can handle them. No problem. The chopper will get here soon.

We weren't going to panic—or, *I* wasn't going to panic.

Not until two of my men died.

Three incredibly fast enemies surprised us by breaking through the north gate.

We'd placed mines at all the gates and set them up so that the lookout could set them off at the right time. It never occurred to me that someone might be able to evade those defenses and get past.

We beat two of them in battle, but Cain and Vodka died in the skirmish. When I heard that two of my subordinates were dead, I couldn't believe my ears. I thought Roy was joking. For a moment, I couldn't tell where I was anymore.

Then things got worse. Up in the spire, Rock's excellent, critical antimateriel rifle got shot and destroyed. With less vigilance from the high point, the enemies on the south side started a charge. Grenades struck the side of the castle and shook the stone structure.

"We're getting pushed back. What do we do now?" asked Hassan from the defensive perimeter. I elected to pull it back from the walls into the castle building. We couldn't thin ourselves out on the walls and lose more men. I told them to evacuate to the safety of the castle and protect the defensive gate with explosives and RPGs.

There was one other thing we needed to do. There was one last enemy who'd gotten inside the castle. We looked for her, and we eventually found her.

She was just a girl. She charged at us with a P90 submachine gun, but we caught her. She was a tiny little girl who looked no older than my own daughter who was in elementary school.

I'd seen enough child soldiers in my time that it wasn't a surprise anymore. A ten-year-old could learn to use a Kalashnikov pistol. But what kind of group would send a girl this age in on a suicide run? The thought made me furious.

The chopper would arrive in a few minutes—a helicopter armed with machine

guns and rockets. They'd wipe out the enemy outside the walls in no time.

I wanted to take this girl back alive, so I could get information out of her. For that reason, I didn't kill her, even after she started struggling.

And yet—never before in my life had I seen someone commit suicide by ramming their head into a wall.

The girl raced at a full sprint toward the wall and collided into it headfirst. The sound of her neck snapping was sickeningly loud. The girl's face pointed a direction it wasn't meant to go. It knocked the wind out of her lungs, sent her limbs twitching and flopping, and she died with her eyes open.

For the first time in my life, I vomited on the battlefield.

"It's all right, Jake. Calm down. The south gate's plenty safe. Ha-ha! Blew 'em up with an RPG!" Roy said over the radio. I felt the horrible headache and nausea return.

"Hang in there, sir! You're our CO!" yelled Doc as he came into the room. The weak-willed man had somehow become a warrior. "Let's move the warhead into the north courtyard to be safe. No enemies there. That way the heli can pick it up as soon as it gets here!"

But what will happen to Roy and the others, fighting on the south side?

"We'll just have to have faith."

The warhead was too heavy for us to carry it out of the long hallway where it was stored.

"Roy's down! I repeat, Roy is dead," said Rock's voice in my ear. That made the warhead feel even heavier.

Until that point in time, I never believed those words could exist together.

"They got inside! I'll use the rockets!"

"What about Hassan?" Doc asked.

"Didn't I mention him already? He blew up with the RPG ammo! But we can still hold 'em off! Hurry, the chopper's almost here!"

That was the last thing Rock ever said.

Dead. Dead. All dead.

My men were dead. Roy was dead.

And at last, the thought occurred to me.

The very first time I'd ever thought it in my entire life.

Am I...going to die, too?

No, I'm not going to die.

I haven't died yet, and it won't happen here.

Fifty seconds until the heli arrives.

I won't die.

Doc and I exited into the empty northern part of the castle yard.

"Ah!"

That was the last word Doc uttered before he died.

Then I fired the M4A1 at the attacker and saw the person shooting back at me—the girl I just watched die.

No...that's impossible.

She was lying dead in the castle.

It had to be someone else, a very similar person with the same clothes and weapons. Perhaps her sister?

Whether for revenge or some other reason, her rage was tremendous. I'd never seen such an unpleasant creature before in my life.

Her little body lunged at me, kicked me over, and plunged a knife at me. When the tip of it stuck into the end of my pistol, I reacted with curiosity. I asked her, "Why do you fight?"

"Because it's fun!" the girl said with a smile.

Oh, she's me.

She was me, unable to pull myself away from the thrill of battle, finding life in a place of peace to be stifling.

The girl pulled the knife out, twisting herself around and plunging toward me. She was an abomination.

The knife slashed my neck, and I pressed down on it to stop the flow of hot, wet blood.

“This is wrong... I want...to stop...,” I said. I was saying it to myself.

It's wrong. This isn't the ending I wanted. I don't want to live like this.

“No!” said the girl.

Then she jammed the knife directly into my eye.

Its narrow blade grew thick, turning my vision entirely black.

* * *

“Yo, Jake. How you feeling?”

A brown face was looking down at me, backed by a white ceiling. It was Roy, waving his hand with the mutilated fingers.

I was in a hospital. It looked just like a hospital back home, clean and comfortable and pristine. Roy was wearing a T-shirt of his favorite baseball team, sitting in the chair next to the hospital bed.

“You remember it?”

I remember it all. Clear as day.

“What happened?”

You died. You died in the battle at that castle.

“Okay. And what happened to you at the end?”

I fought with a girl dressed in pink. She stabbed me in the eye and killed me.

“That's right. Incredible,” said another voice. I hadn't realized there was another person in the room until then.

I looked over and saw Doc on the other side of the bed. There was the bespectacled face I'd seen shot and killed moments earlier. But now he was wearing a white doctor's coat. He was an actual doctor now.

I reached up to the left side of my neck, not certain what I would find; the skin

turned out to be whole. There were no bandages. No pain, of course.

Doc leaned closer to me, the angle of his glasses catching the room lights and hiding his eyes. “Mr. Emerson, do you know,” he said, “what a full-dive virtual reality machine is?”

I hadn’t played a video game since I was a kid, so of course I had no idea what he was talking about. I only used the bare minimum of Internet necessary to live in the modern era.

It took a long time and a lot of explanation from Doc for it to make sense to me. According to him, it was a machine that could shut out my actual organic sensory signals, send its own signal to my brain, and essentially replace reality with its own dream version.

I didn’t even know such a thing existed.

“The sensations created by the device are completely identical to those of real life.”

Meaning what?

“You’re taking too long to get to the point, Doctor.”

“Look, I can’t break it down for him any simpler than this.”

“Fine, fine. Listen, Jake, I’ll give you the good news and the bad news, all in the same sentence.”

What’s that?

“This isn’t heaven.”

It was a dream?

The battle, my comrades dying, even the girl?

It was a dream someone forced me to have, and nothing more?

“That’s right—now you’ve got it. Think about it. Wasn’t it odd? Going to that mysterious Eastern European country? The nuclear warhead? The convenient memory loss? The waves of enemies? The radios not working? The helicopter that wasn’t going to show up for exactly two hours? Well, apparently they came up with that scenario because sometimes the big lies are easier to swallow than

the little ones,” said Roy. It all added up.

The whole thing had been weird. But when you’re dreaming, everything feels real, no matter how absurd it is. I’d certainly experienced that feeling plenty of times in my life.

“And it all worked out, right? My whole plot was perfect,” Doc bragged.

Then why? What was the point?

“Before I answer that, I just have one more question. And answer it honestly, friend.”

What is it, friend?

“Do you want to go back to work? Do you want to go to that dreamlike place again?”

None of it was real.

I’d been having a dream forced upon me by the device that Doc called a Medicu-whatever. And the person who hired him to do that, of course—

“It was Liza. She came crying to me for help. You know why, don’t you?” Roy said. He was talking about my wife.

Her image floated vaguely into my head, then the memory became firmer and clearer in time.

She told me I had to get an examination as a requirement for our new health insurance. The first thing I needed was an endoscopy, apparently. So I went to the hospital and got down on the bed. They said it was painless with an anaesthetic, so I signed off on it.

That all happened half a day ago—this morning.

“I was a willing participant, of course,” said Roy. He’d been hired to make the whole thing more believable to me.

He entered the same dream using a different machine and acted out fighting alongside me in battle. Doc was also in the same world, in more of an observational role. His job was to rewrite the script if he deemed it necessary.

The others—Cain, Rock, Vodka, Hassan—were former soldiers themselves

and had received similar “treatment” to keep them from wanting to return to battle in the past. In their case, apparently, it wasn’t quite as dramatic as my treatment and had been intended to ease their trauma bit by bit through gradual virtual experiences.

“But we knew a cheap round of shock therapy wasn’t going to work on you,” Roy said with a shrug.

Out of the many full-dive virtual reality games in existence, they’d chosen the one that was the most realistic to modern-day combat, modeling real guns and their effects. I’d never heard the name, and it didn’t mean enough for me to commit it to memory.

The scenario called for me to die in battle, no matter what.

If that little girl hadn’t killed me, one of the other members, perhaps even Roy, would have turned out to not have died. Then he’d have betrayed me unexpectedly and killed me in some cruel and cowardly manner.

“But you’re tough, pal. It’s how you survived through every battlefield, including civilian life—with your brains, your balls, and your good luck. And without getting hurt or losing any of your teammates. You’re a gambler who just kept winning. Because you never lost, you stopped thinking twice about risking your own life. You didn’t understand what phenomenal risks you were taking. You couldn’t imagine yourself losing anymore,” said Roy. I listened to him speak without interrupting. His ever-lucky gambler analogy was right on the mark.

Doc asked, “What do you think? Do you want to go back into combat?”

“You asked him that earlier, Doc.”

“I know. But Mr. Emerson didn’t actually give an answer.”

“C’mon. Do you really need to hear it out loud?”

“I do. Remember, I need to hear him say it so I can have it on record.”

“Ugh! Stickler doctors, man...”

No! I told them.

It was the same thing that girl said to me.

I turned to Doc. What was with that girl, the terrifying opponent I fought at the end?

“Oh, that?” Doc said, lifting his glasses with a flourish. “It was the most powerful NPC I could create, an artificial intelligence designed to be our combat opponent.”

What’s an NPC?

“Ah, I may need to go over some more basic concepts first...”

“We’re going to keep you here tonight, Mr. Emerson, to observe your progress. Don’t worry, you’ll have a private room, a comfortable bed, and good food—it’ll be like you’re at a hotel. Your wife and daughters will visit you this evening,” Doc assured me, before he finally left me alone with my combat buddy.

Finally, I can say what I’ve been wanting to get off my chest. I’m damn glad you’re not dead, man. I’ll be able to brag for the rest of my life that I never lost a man in combat.

“That’s right. You’re really somethin’, Jake. I already knew that, though. We can drink to that when we’re old men.”

So the entire time in that dream, you were just playacting?

“That’s right. That was my job.”

You really had me fooled, you sumbitch.

Roy wiggled his four-fingered hand. “Worthy of an Oscar, right?”

One summer day,

I returned to the battlefield.

In fact, I was sent there.

That was when I learned a valuable lesson.

That no one should make the battlefield their home.

Home is where family is, where a normal life awaits.

That gambling is not the most important activity in existence.

What's most important is to live life to the fullest.

I had never realized these things,

and so I died on the battlefield.

On that day,

I was able to return to my normal life.

But never will I forget the events that took place one summer day.

The End



SPECIAL SHORT AFTERWORD

A Gaming Journey in 2026

One day, Karen Kohiruimaki and Miyu Shinohara were hanging out and being lazy.

“You know, I’m getting my fill of playing a teeny-tiny avatar in *GGO*, so I’m wondering if I should try branching out to other games...”

“You said it! I heard you say that, Kohi! Yesss! Then leave it up to Miyu Shinohara, the Gamer Princess of the North, as she assembles a comprehensive buffet of full-dive virtual reality games specifically for you!”

“I’ve never heard you use that title before.”

“That’s ’cause I just came up with it.”

“Oh, you made it up... Are there really that many VR games now?”

“There’s gobs of ’em. There’s even gob-related games.”

“I don’t want to be a gob.”

“Well, it was a year ago when you did your whirlwind tour of looking for the right avatar, so in terms of sheer numbers, there are probably several times as many games out there now. Not that I’ve actually counted them or anything.”

“That’s amazing.”

“And all this is thanks to the mysterious core system called the Seed—not that we need to get into the complex details. The point is, if you really want to, it’s easy to make a game, and everyone’s doing it these days. Okay, time to show you some options!”

“I’m looking forward to this.”

“First, I’ll start with one of the more unique picks. This one’s called *Broth of the Dead*, abbreviated to *BOTD*.”

“Hmm? If it ends in *of the Dead*, does that mean it’s one of your favorite, um...zombie games?”

“That’s right, it’s a zombie game. The player is a living person in the midst of a world full of the living dead, and...”

“You fight to survive?”

“No. You get broth from them.”

“.....Excuse me?”

“The zombies in that world make delicious broth when you boil them. Bonito broth, kombu broth—they don’t stand a chance. Basically, you risk your life capturing zombies, then boil them in a giant pot and extract the most amazing broth to cook with. The point of the game is to master that system. If I had to classify its genre, it’s like hunting and cooking rolled into one game.”

“.....How about you show me a real game instead.”

“But this is a real game! And it’s pretty popular! We should go check it out! You can taste the best ramen in the virtual universe there!”

“I’d prefer a game that’s a bit more normal...”

“Okay, fine. How about this one? It’s called *Battle Mamas*, though everybody calls it *Batomama* or *Batoma* for short.”

“You don’t eat any zombies in it?”

“Just get over that one, okay? In *Batomama*, everyone plays a young mama in the game.”

“What?”

“A mama. A mother. Mommy. *Mutter*. But the guys who play it end up being mama-lookalike papas instead. The point is to carry your baby around.”

“So it’s a child-rearing game?”

“Close, but no, not at all.”

“Is it one or not...?”

“As a young mama, you have to raise your child *and* fight at the same time. In

this virtual world, there's a critical shortage of baby formula, diapers, and bottles. If you want to raise your baby, you have to beat all the other mamas out there."

"So it still involves combat."

"You bet. Mamas gotta fight for their babies, and you do so with household items. The kitchen knives are tough, for sure, but for blunt weapons, the planters are deadly. When you get to a high level, you can smash people with strollers and shove them into washing machines and stuff. And you get big experience bonuses if your kid grows up strong. Also, the worst damage you can suffer isn't even from enemy mamas, it's from the careless comments from your unsympathetic workaholic husband. When it comes to fierce, bloodless battles amid the peace of the family home, this is a really popular one."

"Um. Okay. Well, that's better than the last game, but..."

"Still doesn't whet your appetite? What a highfalutin gourmet you are..."

"If you don't wanna fight, there are some good racing games, too. I like *Fright Flight*, known as *FriFli*."

"Sounds like it's gonna fly away. Interesting alliteration, though. So it's like a horror flight simulator?"

"Wow, you could tell that from the English title? Are you...American?"

"No... I'm Japanese..."

"Anyway, in this game, you're the pilot of a passenger plane, flying at superfast, supersonic speeds. So yes, it's a type of flight simulator. It has a realistic cockpit, and you have to hold the flight stick and everything. The view through the windows is incredible."

"Sounds pleasant."

"But since it's a consumer airline, you've got to beat out the flights from rival airlines flying the same routes."

"I see. So it's also a racing game."

"Exactly. You take off at the same time and head for the same goal, but there's a technique to winning beyond just checking the forecast and executing

a smooth flight plan...”

“And that is?”

“How many passengers you can throw off.”

“Huh?”

“You start off with a few hundred passengers in three different groups. Economy class is where the majority is, of course. Each passenger has their own weight and paid ticket value. If they bought it direct at full price, that’s a high value, but package tours and ultracheap tickets are low value. Now, the lighter the plane, the faster it can fly. You want to dump as much dead weight as possible. So if you designate the seat number and hit the switch, you can eject that seat straight outta the plane to lighten the load.”

“Wha—?!”

“But since you pay back the ticket value of anyone you throw off the flight, your profits shrink. You have to consider their individual weight and ticket value to end up with the most efficient combination of speed and profit. It’s almost like a puzzle. It’s really fun when you’ve got, like, a sumo wrestler in first class at maximum price, and you know you can win the race if you dump him, but you’d take a huge hit to your profits. And the side-to-side balance of the plane matters in the calculations, too.”

“So here’s my big question... What happens to the people who fall out of the plane?”

“No clue.”

“So none o’ these tickle your fancy yet, Kohi?”

“Nope. It’s more like, I’m amazed these all didn’t get rejected in the planning stages. I want to compliment the creators just for their games being finished.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet...”

“That’s not my point. All I’m saying is: Aren’t there any games that are a bit softer and sweeter and happier?”

“What? A game is a battle! It’s kill or be killed. Dead or alive.”

“There’s gotta be something else.”

“Okay, fine. Then I’ll show you a game where nobody ever dies. It’s called *75 Days*, which is read *Nana-Go Days*, because it’s made in Japan.”

“What kind of game is it?”

“It’s a virtual lifestyle game, set in a world pretty similar to the real world but completely different. Your avatar lives a normal life. It’s a world without hunger or war, so your character can’t die. The goal is to get friends and lovers. You can meet them and talk directly—or use in-world social media and forums and stuff. But since it’s a full-dive game, it’s better to meet them in person, you know? It’s good practice for looking people in the eye when you talk to them.”

“Sounds good. Sounds soft.”

“But while you’re playing, BS rumors will start swirling around.”

“What?”

“Rumors. Really bad rumors. Like, that person is doing drugs, or cheating on their spouse, or that they’re a wanted fugitive who killed three people in the past. And you have to do your best to continue your life despite these out-of-control rumors. People will believe the rumors and sever all ties with you. You could make a whole bunch of friends and lose them all overnight. You really have to keep your spirits up and avoid losing heart to enjoy this game.”

“That’s messed up.”

“Well, that’s the game. Didn’t you notice something about the title?”

“The saying, ‘A rumor only lasts seventy-five days’...”

“That’s it. Oh, and half the fun is making up rumors and spreading them yourself, see? It’s a game about being happy, but that doesn’t mean *everyone* has to be happy.”

“.....”

“Oh, and since there’s no dying in this game, no matter how far down in the dumps you get shoved, your only option is to keep trying to crawl back out of them.”

“.....”

“This game is ‘alive or alive.’”

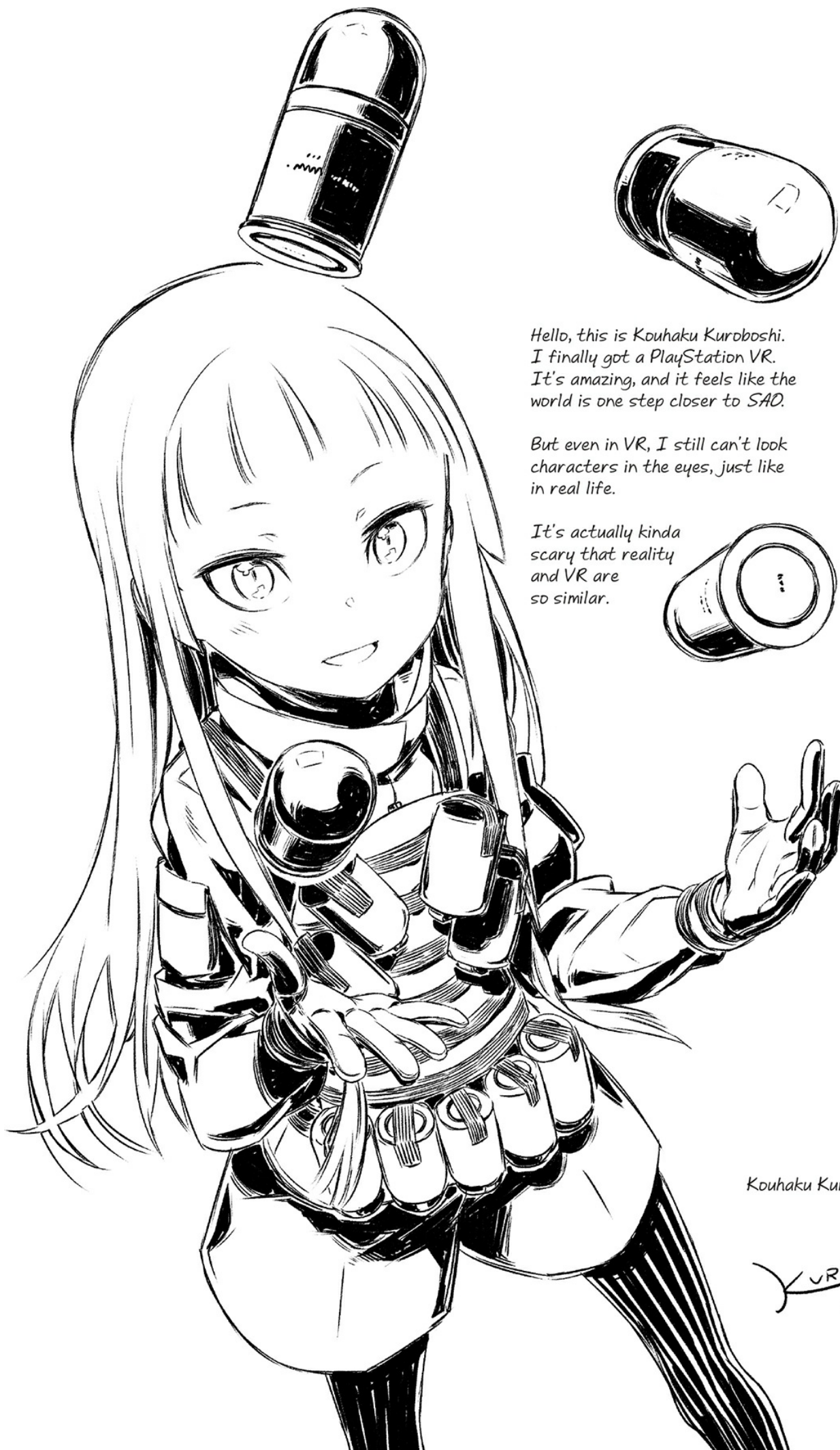
“Miyu... I get it.”

“Oh? You get what?”

“I’m good with *GGO*. I feel like shooting and stabbing and blowing up people here is the best fit for me.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that.”

The End



*Hello, this is Kouhaku Kuroboshi.
I finally got a PlayStation VR.
It's amazing, and it feels like the
world is one step closer to SAO.*

*But even in VR, I still can't look
characters in the eyes, just like
in real life.*

*It's actually kinda
scary that reality
and VR are
so similar.*

Kouhaku Kuroboshi

KUROK.

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