



Sword Art Online

COLLATED SIDE STORIES

Aincrad

Foreword

WRITING KAZAKHSTANIPOTASSIUM

To all those who have (by whatever means) stumbled upon this shoddily assembled assortment of *Sword Art Online* side stories, hi! kazakhstanipotassium here. I just wanted to preface this compilation with a little disclaimer about where all of this content has been assembled from, and how it's been put together. For those familiar with Reki Kawahara's actual novels, this may seem quite similar to his afterwords, except I have placed my thoughts at the front of the book due to some rather large disclaimers that need to be made.

For one, I did not actually translate any of the content in this book! These translations have all been made by other (much more dedicated) fans, and I did not play a part in making any of them. If you are reading this as one of the translators I have sourced content in this compilation from, and you do not want your content distributed in this way, please email me at kazakhstanipotassium@gmail.com! I'll make sure to heed your requests; this project was done mainly because I found myself with far too much spare time, but is also intended to benefit the community: I certainly don't want to get involved in any legal trouble! A full list of translators is enclosed overleaf.

The only content within this book which I can claim as my own is the (in all honesty rather mediocre) cover image. I felt bad about just compiling other peoples' work without putting any effort in of my own (the time spent compiling was tedious and mind-numbingly boring, but didn't require any real effort), so decided to at least create the cover image. I had respect for abec before, but my level of respect for him (or is it her?) is now vastly greater. It took me hours of drawing (not helped by numerous crashes and save data corruptions in my drawing app, I hate Adobe with a passion) to create an image as simple as that, so creating such beautiful illustrations to accompany every Light Novel is no small feat. I've nearly filled the page, so I'll leave it here. Enjoy reading!
-kazakhstanipotassium, compiler

Credits

(Individual translators are separately listed under each individual side story title)

dreadfuldecoding.blogspot.com

(unavailable at time of writing, use Wayback Machine to access)

taptaptaptaptap.net

defan752.wordpress.com

eetsumkaus

(no website found, please email if you want me to add a link to one)

sao-archive.netlify.app

argos-cats.com

bato.to/chapter/1077749

wattpad.com/59592079-sword-art-online-the-fourteenth-autumn

bato.to/chapter/846700

cirtoyt.com

Contents

Foreword.....	2
Credits.....	3
[SAO: The Beginning] Prologue	
1.....	7
[SAO Progressive] The Second Day	
1.....	10
2.....	28
3.....	37
4.....	45
[Progressive - Aria Audio Drama] Lisbeth Edition	
1.....	49
[Progressive - Aria Audio Drama] Silica Edition	
1.....	54
[Material Edition 21] SAO Progressive 4.2	
1.....	60
Hopeful Chant	
1.....	70
2.....	82
3.....	91
4.....	107
5.....	125
6.....	156
[Material Edition 1] The Progressers	
1.....	159
7th Floor, Once More	
1.....	174
7th Floor, For the Third Time	
1.....	178
Agil and Klein's Exciting Meal	
1.....	181
Sound of Water, Sound of Hammer	
1.....	185

[Material Edition 4] Cold Hand, Warm Heart	
1.....	199
The Much-Talked-About Esteemed Sub-Leader	
1.....	209
[Dengeki Bunko Vol. 30] Story Pencil Board	
1.....	226
The Fourteenth Autumn	
1.....	230
[Material Edition 10] Sugary Days 1	
1.....	243
2.....	247
3.....	254
[Material Edition 11] Sugary Days 2	
1.....	255
2.....	259
[Material Edition 12] Sugary Days 3	
1.....	269
[Material Edition 13] Sugary Days 4	
1.....	281
2.....	286
3.....	291
[Material Edition 14] Sugary Days 5	
1.....	295
2.....	300
3.....	306
[Material Edition 15] Sugary Days 6	
1.....	309
2.....	312
3.....	318
4.....	323
[Material Edition 16] Sugary Days 7	
1.....	327
2.....	332
3.....	340

[Material Edition 18] Sugary Days 8	
1.....	344
2.....	348
3.....	358
[Material Edition 19] Sugary Days 9	
1.....	360
2.....	370
[Material Edition 23] Sugary Days 10	
1.....	376
2.....	385
[Material Edition 24] Sugary Days 11	
1.....	392
2.....	401
[Material Edition 25] Sugary Days 12	
1.....	409
[Material Edition 26] Sugary Days 13	
1.....	418
2.....	431
[Material Edition 27] Sugary Days 14	
1.....	436
Sugary Days Epilogue	
1.....	464
[Material Edition 6] Algade Showdown	
1.....	468
Extraordinary Ordinary Days	
1.....	482
[Silica Edition] The Final Promise	
1.....	493
Afterword.....	501

[SAO: The Beginning] Prologue

TRANSLATION DEFAN752, CJ EDITING DEFAN752, DARTHMEWTWO

Pre-Sword Art Online

“... Hmm. It failed, huh...”

In the dim Argus research laboratory, Kayaba Akihiko, wearing a white shirt, took a sip of his already stone-cold coffee.

The image that was displayed on the large monitor set up deep inside the room disappeared with a *putsun*. The research lab, which had been relying completely on the monitor as its source of light, was plunged into darkness.

Just a moment ago, that large monitor had been showing the 3D character model that had mounted an AI software that Kayaba had been developing independently.

But Kayaba was not satisfied at all with its completeness. The character, which was supposed to respond and change with its environment, had not surpassed existing artificial intelligence; its actions were clearly not natural enough.

“It seems that this will take a long time to solve.”

In 2016, his research — developing the world’s first fully immersive VRMMO video game, had encountered a bottleneck.

This was because the most advanced AI technologies and latest network load balancing technologies, fundamental elements of fully immersive VR games — had not reached Kayaba’s standards yet.

Taking another sip of his cold coffee, Kayaba leaned back in his armchair and picked up the portable terminal next to him.

Although this was merely to relax, something for a short break...

His hands stopped at a certain article on a technology news website.

“This is...”

The article was about the “Cognitive Computing System”.

The next day, Kayaba visited a researcher.

“Welcome, Kayaba-san. I’m Doi.”

He belonged to the Tokyo Research Laboratory of IBM Corporation in Japan. In his industry, he was a programmer regarded by most as a “genius”, like Kayaba.

Kayaba was then invited to a projection room. Catching sight of the content being played, he couldn’t help but gasp.

Displayed there was a fairy character even more advanced than Kayaba’s technology, holding a smooth and lively conversation with the researchers.

Doi explained to Kayaba:

“Although it’s still in testing stage, this technology is the result of long-term research. I’m very excited to be able to present this to you. You’re the Kayaba-san who was a college freshman just two years ago, yet now is head of the third development team at Argus!”

Kayaba pondered as he watched the screen, then proposed a deal to Doi:

“I’d like to utilize the cognitive system that your company is currently developing, the ‘IBM Watson’, for my goals.”

Doi nodded.

“The fully immersive technology that you are researching has a great path ahead of it. Please, this way.”

Doi opened a door to a room in the deepest part of the laboratory, and beckoned to Kayaba.

Just like that, the two men decided to join forces to proceed with Kayaba’s research.

Problems that required advanced technologies to solve were drastically improved with the Cognitive Computing System — the latest technology that helped people with decision making through natural conversation. At critical moments in the development process, Doi provided revolutionary technical advice that proved

immensely useful in advancing research. The future VRMMORPG that Kayaba envisioned was slowly being constructed into reality.

The improvements did not stop there. Their other conundrum that had involved network load balancing technology was also successfully resolved through theories postulated by Doi and others.

Three months had passed since Kayaba and Doi's first meeting.

And a few months after...

With the «Sword Art Online» prototype finally complete, invites were sent out to players to begin closed testing.

[SAO Progressive] The Second Day

TRANSLATION EETSUMKAUS

7th November 2022

1

Amidst its bundle of cutting edge technology, Sword Art Online, the world's first Full Dive MMORPG, also offered players the experience of a classical, pastoral fantasy world: stone masonry and half timber towns reminiscent of medieval Europe, familiar monsters like Kobolds and Slimes, as well as races like Elves and Dwarves. That being said, it couldn't really be called a world of "Sword and Sorcery" because magic didn't exist in it.

Akihiko Kayaba, the development head of SAO as well as the Nerve Gear, once expressed his reason for eliminating magic from this world that otherwise absolutely screamed fantasy in an interview. He said, if he introduced ranged attacks like magic, it will just turn into a shooting game, and will get in the way of the experience of dynamically moving your own body that only a Full Dive RPG can offer.

To be honest, when I read that article, I thought, whether or not there's magic, would battles really change that much? At this point, I've played tons of non-Full Dive MMOs, and even if there was magic, it never really felt like an FPS. In the first place, there's no way every player will choose to play a magic class. If more than half of them become front line fighters, we'd still get a lot of the sword and axe melee that Kayaba wished for.

But just a while ago, after having a close brush with death in the video game turned death game that is SAO, I realised maybe he had this in mind when he said that. If you're in a situation where you absolutely cannot die, of course everyone would choose the method where you don't even need to get close to monsters. If there were actually magic classes, just about everyone who comes from the Town of Beginnings would just spam spells while maintaining their distance, completely turning into an FPS. Kayaba obviously didn't want that.

However, even if I could change to a magic class, I, the Level 5 Swordsman Kirito, would probably remain the same class.

The day the death game started, out of the 10,000 players who were trapped in Aincrad that day, I was probably the first to fly out of the Town of Beginnings and make my way to the Town of Horunka in the Northwest. The reason I did that was that the mobs near the Town of Beginnings would soon be hunted down, and I figured I would be forced into a situation where I needed to camp the spawn points. In addition, in Horunka, I could take on a quest that would grant me a strong single handed sword. As soon as I activated that quest, I started hunting plant monsters called "Little Nepenthes" to get the materials for its completion. Though Little Nepenthes themselves aren't really that dangerous, I almost died there.

Back then, a player named Coper, who wanted to do the same quest, invited me to team up. At that point, the item we wanted dropped. Coper, in a bid to keep it for himself, consciously aggro'd a bunch of Nepenthes, and using his Hiding skill to keep the Nepenthes off of him, tried to leave me for dead, a classic PK move.

What he failed to account for was that the Hiding Skill didn't work against the Nepenthes who didn't have eyes. As I tried to ignore the screams emanating from the swarm that swallowed him, I desperately tried to thin the numbers of the Nepenthes rushing at me with nothing but the basic short sword.

I must have fallen into a trance at some point in the battle, because my memories during the battle were really fuzzy. However, I knew one thing for sure. As I fought, I thought-- no, felt in my bones-- "This is SAO". Swords were no mere objects, and my body was more than just an avatar. Once all of those had become one with the player's consciousness, I felt like I could see the frontier of possibility. Of course, I was but on its lowest rungs, but even so, I was sure it went on forever.

With my HP gauge down by 70%, I somehow managed to survive. I said my farewells to the late Coper, and returned to Horunka to finish the quest. At last, I was able to get my hands on the one-handed straight sword, Anneal Blade.

To "anneal" is to take a processed metal, treat it again with heat, and then strengthen it over and over again...or so they say. I have no idea if smiths in this imaginary world actually went through all that trouble. All I know was that what made the Anneal Blade special was its ridiculous Durability, a worthy partner for a solo player like

me. To even things out, it's quite a bit heavier than other swords of its class. However, that's what I actually liked about it. While there's absolutely nothing wrong with looking for lighter swords--, and in fact in our situation I feel like that might make more sense-- for me, getting to know temperamental swords with a bit of a bite to them suits my style way better. In that sense, the sword I had just gotten wasn't the irreplaceable partner I was looking for quite yet. Though it was a sword I had thoroughly used during the Beta, that was two months ago at this point. Moreover, getting back into the swing of things will take a bit of time.

To speed up that process, there was no choice but to keep fighting battle after battle. Even knowing that though, at this moment, I find myself struggling to get out of bed for 30 minutes to no avail.

Today is 7 November 2022: two days after SAO's official launch. Players other than the guy who just died should be coming to this town any minute now. Since I have no intention of getting friendly with anyone in the near future, I figured I should finish up everything I wanted to do here and make my way to the next point. However, the energy to do anything just wouldn't come out. While I wasn't able to sleep like a log like I usually do last night, I should still have had 4 or 5 hours of sleep, and as far as I can tell my body doesn't really feel out of whack or anything. All that being said, for whatever reason, my body just doesn't want to move. Even on choir competition days or game days at school, I never felt this sluggish. Maybe it's the Nerve Gear's side effects. In that case, I might never be able to get up from this bed.

As I was playing with those thoughts in my head, suddenly, I heard a short rap on the door facing the hallway. Shortly after, a hushed voice ventured, "Hello-o"

"...?!"

I immediately jerked my head, and while still laying down I opened the menu window. Materializing the Anneal Blade I had just gotten, I grabbed the scabbard with my left hand and, suddenly forgetting the stupor of my body, slipped out of bed.

As soon as I stood up, the voice called out again:

"Heeey, I'm not gonna do anything bad. I just wanted to chat!"

That's exactly what someone who'd do something bad would say! I thought as I fought back the urge to yell back at the intruder, I

noticed something about their high-pitched odd speech. It sounded neither like a woman's nor a boy's. It could even be either a player or an NPC. At this point, I shouldn't be on any quests, but it could still be an event that triggers when you, for example, "stay awake in your bed at this lodging without moving for 30 minutes or more". At this moment, it should be 7 AM sharp. Even if the player on the other side of the door had no ill intent, it's way too early to be calling on a stranger!

As if the stranger were reading my mind, they then added, "If you were still sleepin', then my bad.. But I have my reasons y'know. Can you just hear me out? I don't think it'll be a bad deal for you or anythin!", as they gave the door another sharp knock.

The lodging, which is inside the Anti-Criminal Code Effect Area, should have indestructible doors, so nobody but the person renting the room should be able to open it. If I just ignore them, they'll eventually leave. However, if I should, after that, meet them around town, or even outside the Safe Zone, it's going to be awkward.

Just in case, I placed my hand on the Anneal Blade's hilt, ready to unsheathe it, and approached the door from an angle where even if they suddenly bust down the door, I won't get hit. Now that I think about it, after yesterday's events, there's no such thing as being too cautious.

After getting a feel of their presence, in as tough of a voice as I could muster, I grunted "Who's there?"

"Oh good! I thought I was gonna get ignored forever you know! My name is Argo!" came the answer immediately.

"Argo..."

I feel like I've heard that name somewhere before, but at the very least, not since the official launch.

"Argo, what do you want?"

"I want you to sell me somethin"

"Uhhh...", I said suspiciously, as I looked down on my body. My armor is just about all starter equipment. I don't even have any accessories. My storage is almost completely empty. The only thing anybody would want is the Anneal Blade in my left hand.

Without a doubt, the thing the visitor who called themselves Argo wants is this sword. However, having literally risked my life to obtain it, I have absolutely no intention of selling it. What's more

important here is how the heck someone like Argo found out I have this sword. I have to at least fish that out of them or I wouldn't be able to concentrate on something as simple as leveling up. For the moment, I'll pretend to negotiate and find out where they got that information from, then send them away.

With my new determination, I replied through the door.

"Ok then. I'll open the door. Wait 5 seconds then enter"

"You got it!"

Agreeing immediately to my weird request just made it more suspicious...but at this point, I'm in no place to take it back.

Tapping the door with my index finger, I pushed the "Open" button on the small window that appeared and immediately jumped back. This is inside the Safe Zone, but the chance that Argo wasn't a player but an Event NPC that the Code doesn't work on is not zero. As I waited gripping the hilt of the sword, exactly 5 seconds after, the door happily burst open.

"Phew!", said the small, basic leather armor clad...something, without a hint of nervousness. Trying to figure out what they were, I immediately looked at the Color Cursor. It was green. They're a player, not an NPC. But I still couldn't tell if they were male or female from their avatar.

After the visitor made sure the door was properly closed, they peered out from underneath the hood pulled over their eyes, first at me then around the room and then back to me.

"There's no need to be so nervous, I'm not gonna do anythin'! Can I sit over there?", they said, pointing to the round table in the middle of the room. After getting the nod from me, they pulled out the wooden stool from underneath the table and plopped down on it. "Go on, you sit your butt down too!" they said. While I nodded in agreement, I elected to sit not on the other stool, but the bed a bit further away, finally releasing my hand from the hilt.

"So I have to ask...what are you willing to pay?", I asked, intending to get a step ahead. However, Argo, blinking blankly under their hood, shrugged their shoulders slightly.

"Before you ask that, I haven't even told you what I wanted to buy"

"Huhhh?" I blurted, raising the Anneal Blade in my left hand. "Y-you don't want this?"

"Nah. I can't even equip a one-handed sword"

"Ahh, is that so..."

Dumbfounded, my eyes wandered to Argo's waist, but there were no weapons equipped there. Even if this is inside the Safe Zone, meeting a stranger completely unarmed is either incredibly bold or absolutely reckless. Either that or they only look unarmed, but are actually hiding a small dagger behind their back or...

"Hey! Starin' at a lady's legs is pretty rude!"

"Ahh! Lady? Where?" I blurted out, flabbergasted at the sudden complaint.

"Me you dolt!! Ya can't even tell?!"

...how the hell am I supposed to know that? I thought as I bit my tongue.

"My apologies. But I wasn't looking at your legs, it was your waist" I answered, clearing my throat.

"There ain't much of a difference!"

"Well, I guess it's not your waist. I was checking what weapons you had"

"Well you better apologize!" she said, throwing my words right back at me as she smirked under her hood.

"That bein' said, what weapon skills you equip is also crucial information you know. I'm not gonna be revealin' those that easily" *Now that's just way too paranoid* I quipped in my head as I fought the urge to blurt it out. Knowing the various weapon skills in SAO can be the deciding factor in one on one battles. In other words, you can figure out if you have an advantage, and even if you don't, there's still a way to work out a strategy.

From that point of view, I've just shown my hand to this self-described female player. However, one-handed straight swords, for better or worse, are pretty average weapons, so even if she came up with a strategy nothing would come of it. In any case, if she had any intention of PK'ing me, she wouldn't have gone to the trouble of knocking in the first place.

Placing the Anneal Blade on my lap, I asked once again.

"Well if it's not this sword you want, then what is it you want me to sell?"

"Well, sayin' it's your sword that I want isn't exactly wrong but..." she ventured, and flashed her right hand, "what I wanna buy is, the information about the quest to get that AB"

"AB...?" I snickered at the crude abbreviation. Quickly returning my composure, I then asked, "but because you know about this sword, you must be a former Beta tester too aren't you? You don't even need to buy that information from me, you already know it don't you?"

Argo raised the corners of her mouth slyly. "I didn't say anythin' 'bout YOU bein' a beta tester"

"Huh??", I furrowed my brows as I realized adding the "too" gave me away as a former Beta tester. I feel like my information has been leaking one word at a time this entire time. Who the hell is this person anyway? I thought, shaking my head at myself as I tried to pick up after my blunder.

"D-did I even need to say that? In this dire situation, would anyone who isn't a former Beta tester even get all the way to Horunka?"

"Well, it's not that. I had no idea. Even in this kind of death game where everythin' ends after you die once, if you have 10,000 people, there's bound to be fifty or a hundred meatheads who'd blindly charge ahead."

She had a point. Most games have a "First Come First Serve" mentality. In the uncharted Blue Ocean, I mean Blue Field, once the treasure chests, rare items, and rare monsters are pillaged, the players who come after will face a huge disadvantage. The reason why I flew out of the Town of Beginnings was in fact to accomplish just that. That being said, in my case, I had the knowledge I gained from the Beta as insurance. Those who just jump into it completely blind are nothing but reckless.

"You went around town once when you came here, right? How many players were here?" I asked

"Hmmm" Algo pondered before going on "That information'll cost ya 10 Cor...would be what I would normally say, but, well who cares. It's Zero"

"Zero...?" I said, blinking my eyes at the surprising information.

"Didn't you just say that there could be fifty or a hundred meatheads blindly charging ahead?"

"What do you think the chances are that someone could run blind and stumble all the way to Horunka?" fired back Algo.

Taken aback for a second, I finally offered a counter argument, "even so, if you leave the Town of Beginnings from the Northwest

gate and follow the road, you'll eventually arrive at the Horunka Forest. Yeah, it can be easy to get lost in the forest, but compared to Floor 3's Forest of Wavering Mists it's nothing. If you're meticulous about where you've already searched, you'll eventually get here."

"That Northwestern---ahhh that's annoying, I'll just call it the West Gate--- but it's impossible to get out of there without knowin' the 1st Floor's geography. The North gate is three times more reasonable than the West Gate. Most of the non-Beta Tester sprinters would leave from the North Gate and choose to cut across the grassland."

"But beyond the grassland on that route is a Kobold Town and the Field Boss..." I pointed out weakly, which Argo acknowledged with a nod.

In the Town of the Beginnings, which is located on the First Floor's southern end, there are three main gates: the Northwest Gate, the North Gate, and the Northeast Gate. However, Beta testers commonly called them the West, North, and East gates. Whichever gate you choose will lead you to the next town. However, the Eastern route, which passes through the mountains to the town of Medai, sees a lot of high level monsters. And while the Northern route, which goes through the grass field, is smooth sailing at first, getting to the Town of Tolbana in the Northern part of the First Floor requires one to go through the wetlands that Swamp Kobolds nest in, and after that, to beat the giant boar-type field boss nesting in a narrow one-lane canyon.

While there is some danger of getting lost in the forest, the Western route that goes to the Town of Horunka presents the lowest difficulty which makes it the most optimal choice.

However, the only way you'd make that choice is if somebody who already knew it told you, or you undertook errand quests in the Town of Beginnings where you would learn it from NPCs.

"...what about the other testers? The ones who know the map should be getting here any minute now"

"Mmm..." Argo mulled. The one who wants to buy information apparently doesn't want to give anything away for free herself.

It's not like it's secret intelligence or anything I thought in my head as I stood up from the bed and made my way to the desk by the wall. I poured out two glasses of water from the room's pitcher, and turning back, placed them on Argo's table.

"Here you go. Sorry all I have is water"

"Water huh..." said Argo cheekily, as she threw back her hood.

As soon as I saw her face, I felt my mouth come open. In addition to her already unique frizzy, golden brown hair, and the rather cute face they framed, what drew my eyes to her were the clearly drawn, whisker-like lines on her face. It didn't look like it was water colors or anything, but rather seemed like a high quality dye that you would use for face paint.

"What's up with those whiskers?" I meekly asked. Argo gingerly raised her right eyebrow.

"It's nothin' really. Even in the Beta, weren't there also a ton of other players who used paint?"

"Yeah that's true but...cosmetic items are expensive aren't they? Why would you go to all that trouble when you don't even put any 'meows' in your speech--"

"Huhh???" Argo exclaimed, as she pointed to her face with her left thumb. "What the hell about this looks like a cat to you???"

"Wait, it's not?"

"Like hell it isn't! It's a mouse's, can't you freakin' tell???"

"Nobody can freaking tell if it's a cat's or mouse's! You don't even *squeak* or anything!"

"There's no squeakin', I mean freakin' way in hell I'd do that!"

After giving a short puff from her nose, Argo grabbed the glass on the table and gulped it down in one swig. After setting it down with a thud, she continued.

"Well, in a week or so, all the frontline players includin' yer ass would know the name of Lady Argo the Information Broker!"

As I stayed silent, I set myself down on the bed again. Everything she just said was just a flood of information; I didn't really know where to cut in. For the moment, in a bid to calm myself down, I drank the water in my glass. At that moment, Argo opened her mouth to say-

"Hey! You tell me your name too! It's pretty rude to let a lady introduce herself and not give anythin' in return!"

"Eh...if you're already here then that means you already know about me right?" I shot back, as I slowly realized my blunder.

Argo smirked as she prepared her surgical strike.

"Well somebody's full of himself. Unfortunately, I didn't find you here because I knew your name or anythin'"

"Well then, how do you know where I'm even staying so you could come barging in here ? In the first place, how the hell did you even know which room I was in!?"

"What I was lookin' for was the sneaky bastard who already cleared the AB quest on the first day. I figured this guy would still be in the lodge at this time, so I looked at the reservation window at the front desk and saw that this room was the only one occupied. I was tryna figure out how to fish out whether or not you were the one who completed the quest, but fortunately for me you busted it out and fixed that problem for me"

That made me glance at the Anneal Blade on my bed. It seems like I've been leaking information to her from the moment I opened the door. I guess her self-described Information Broker skills aren't just talk. Waving away these thoughts, I finally piped up about my last doubt.

"There's one more thing. How do you know that there was a player who cleared the "Secret Medicine of the Forest" quest? I don't think there was a reservation window for the quest or anything?

The "Secret Medicine of the Forest" quest was about a mother who wanted you to fetch a medicine that dropped from a plant-type monster, in other words, the Little Nepenthe, variant from the Western Forest, in order to heal her ailing child. Every time a player visits the mother's home, an individual instance activates, so even if I bring back the medicine and the child gets better, should another player come along to the same house, they'll find the child still ill. In other words, there's no way of knowing if there's another player who came before you or not...or so I thought.

"Ah..." said Argo, mulling over something as she looked up at the ceiling, and then replied, "Ah well, this I'll tell you for free I guess. Unlike the Beta, that quest now has a cool down timer.

"Huh? How many minutes?"

"24 hours"

"...are you serious..." I said, dumbstruck.

"Cool down timers" in SAO are when someone undertakes a quest, and other players have to wait a certain amount of time before they themselves can undertake the same quest. The "Secret Medicine of

"the Forest" quest didn't have that in the Beta. In other words, 10 or even 20 people can all take the quest on in a row. However, during the official service, with a 24 hour cool down timer, that means there can only be one Anneal Blade produced in a day.

Of course, unlike the Beta, it's unlikely there would be more than a tiny minority of players who would risk their life just to beat the game, and an even smaller portion of those would even wield one-handed straight swords. Even then, a rate of one sword per day, there's no way the supply would meet the demand.

"If you tried to go on the "Secret Medicine of the Forest" Quest, that means you're a one-handed straight sword wielder aren't you? So what you want is not the sword itself, but information about the quest?" I asked, realizing that it might sound accusatory. Argo, in response, drew her cheeks taut.

"I've been tellin' you this whole time, I'm an Information Broker. Even if I were a one-handed straight sword wielder, I'd never do anythin' as pathetic as askin' you to sell me your sword. If somebody asked me to do it for them though, that's a different story"

"...i-is that so?"

The buying and selling of items between individual players is one of the basics of MMORPGs, which of course means SAO would have a trade system for that, so I don't really think it should be seen as pathetic or anything like that. As for me, so long as I didn't have to deal with someone nagging me to sell an item I didn't want to sell, I didn't care what she thought.

"So the information you want to buy is..."

"Hey! Tell me your name first!"

...come to think of it, we never got to that did we?

My username "Kirito" is just a simple abbreviation of my real name "Kirigaya Kazuto", so telling her my name felt a bit awkward. Then again, it's not like she'd know that much, so I quickly spat out "It's Kirito".

"Kirito..." repeated Argo as she furrowed her brow. There's no way she'd figure out that it's based on my real name would she? But the self-described Information Broker nodded to herself two or three times approvingly.

"Oh I see, you're...well I shoulda seen this comin'"'

"...what do you mean by that?"

"I mean exactly what I mean, you're that Krito right? The one person who got to see the 10th Floor's boss?"

That's exactly right.

Out of the 1000 people who were lucky enough to get into the closed beta (not that I'd completely agree with that sentiment now), I, on the last day, August 31, was the only one who arrived at the top level of the Castle of the Thousand Snakes, the Labyrinth Tower of the 10th Floor. I almost got all the way to the boss's room when the test shutdown timer started. I thought at least I could see what the boss looked like so I ran like hell through the last hallway, leaving all the other test players behind. Charging into the giant door, I was barely able to see the Floor Boss's name and what it looked like before I was forced to log out.

When I woke up on my bed after, I started feeling a weird mix of accomplishment and dissatisfaction. I can still feel it to this day. Since the official launch, I promised to myself that I'll beat the 10th Floor's Boss, "Kagachi the Samurai Lord". Unfortunately, I currently find myself in a situation where I doubt I'd even get to the 1st Floor's boss.

As I shrugged off the fleeting thought, I responded, "well, I'll let you figure out whether or not I'm that Krito"

"Oh hoh, your guard's gotten tougher!"

"In any case, what kind of information do you want to buy?"

"Well then. Let's cut to the chase!" said Argo, as she crossed her legs above the small stool she was sitting on. Her upper body was clad in the same basic armor as I had, but below she was wearing puffy ankle pants that looked like knickerbockers. They're not sold in this town, so she must have obtained it in the Town of Beginnings along with her hooded cape. Even a Beta tester like me had no idea where to get those.

"Hey! Starin' at a lady's legs is incredibly rude!" Argo repeated.

Flustered, I took away my gaze.

"Nono, I'm not looking! Just, just get on with it!"

"Fiiine. There's two pieces of information I wanna buy off ya. First, the 'Secret Medicine of the Forest' quest's details, especially the dangerous points. The next is the Anneal Blade's base stats. What do you say 200 Cor for both?"

"Really, that much?!", I responded before quickly realizing my blunder. As I feared, Argo let her face form into a half-jeering, half-pitying grin.

"There's no fun negotiatin' with you man. That bein' said, 200 is just about all I can manage at this point so I don't think I can go any further than this."

"...then why don't you throw in some information as a freebie for me then?" I said hoping to land a counter. In response, Algo puckered her face in an expression of obvious displeasure.

"I really shouldn't've said anythin'. Ya wanna know somethin'?"

"I want to know why you paint your whiskers in" I asked casually, but was instead met with a burning hot glare.

"Look here, don't go 'round askin' things like why women wear makeup!"

"Well it's not exactly makeup is it...?"

"If you really want to know that then gimme 100,000 Cor!"

"O-one hundred..!" I said, dropping my jaw. In a bid to make up for my rudeness, I put up both my hands.

"I got it, I got it. I'm good on the freebies. Let's just call it a deal at 200 Cor. Alright, so about the 'Secret Medicine of the Forest' quest..." I pursed my lips, and then shook my head. "Never mind, if you're a Beta tester too then you should know. The quest's details and its trouble points, shouldn't you still know all of them?"

"Of course I do. It's just that I think all of that is a trap."

"A trap? What do you mean...?"

"Yesterday, the thing the frickin' huge robe guy said when we were teleported to the plaza in the Town of Beginnings: 'This is the reason for this whole thing'" Argo said with a straight face.

As soon as she said that, the voice too replayed in my head: the red robed GM, Akihiko Kayaba's chilling words. I repeated it with my own mouth:

"... "In order to create this world and observe it, I developed the Nerve Gear and SAO. At this very moment, that has all come to fruition'..."

"Well don't you have a good memory" said Argo as her mouth turned up into a smile, which soon disappeared. "I might be simplifyin' things here, but if we interpret his words literally, then his goal is to observe 10,000 players go into a frenzy in this death

game. It is true that even the world's richest tycoons have never seen anythin' like this. It has to be the greatest entertainment in history. It could even be that he's watchin' this very conversation. We are in the forefront of the game's conquest."

As soon as I heard that, my eyes unconsciously went up to the ceiling. They only found decaying wooden planks, but I felt like beyond them something, someone was gazing down upon us.

"Don't say things like that..." I said as I turned my eyes back. Argo shrugged her shoulders.

"That's what observin' is isn't it? S'long as you're aimin' to be one of the leaders in beatin' the game, you should keep Kayaba's existence, or rather his intention, in the back of your mind somewhere."

She has a point. While we may be fighting the monsters who live in Aincrad, our real enemy is the SAO system controlling them, as well as Kayaba, the one person who can control that system. In other words, Kayaba is this world's God, and we are but the insects he created and put in his little box garden.

Just as I said that, an indescribable chill ran down my spine.

"...if Kayaba's goal is to observe this world, then what does that have to do with the traps you just talked about?"

"Just think about it. If you were in his shoes, what would you think if the map you worked so hard to make was run over by the people who figured things out before? They won't even get lost on the routes or trigger any traps. In other words, what would he think of the Beta testers?"

"He'd get bored?" I answered. As soon as I did, the Informant clicked the ring on her right hand.

"Right? That bastard would have wanted all 10.000 of us to start from the same point. But there's no way he couldn't go without a Beta test, and he couldn't get rid of our registered accounts. At the very least, I think that Kayaba would have at least thought of a way to kill all of us Beta testers right at the beginnin' of the Death Game."

"Wait, wait a second", I said, reflexively raising my right hand to touch my temple. But the Nerve Gear that my body in the real world is wearing is of course nowhere to be found there.

As I quickly put my hand down, I found Argo stone-faced at my reaction. Rather, as if she was trying to keep herself from doing the same thing, her hands stayed clasped on top of the table. I don't know whether it was the wisps of hair brushing against her nose, or the painted whiskers, but I couldn't tell her age. While it seems like we could be the same age, I also feel like she could be much older. That only thing I know is, just like me, her real body is somewhere in the real world, laying down and wearing a Nerve Gear. And the fact that when either of our HP gauges reaches zero, the Nerve Gear will deliver a fatal microwave pulse that will not just wipe away our avatars, but also snuff the life from our flesh bodies. As soon as I heard Kayaba's declaration yesterday, I immediately understood that it was no bluff. The Kayaba I know, and even idolized, would never do that. However, if you turn that on its head, that means he would definitely keep his word to "free all the players if you beat the boss waiting on the 100th floor" And that means the way to both keep his word and eliminate the Beta testers would be to...

"Oh I see. If you just change a few things slightly from the Beta..." I started asking, and Argo snapped her fingers.

"That! That's what I've been trying to say. If, for example, he completely changes the monster that appears in a certain place, former Beta testers would be put on alert. But if it looks the same and is called the same, yet has a slightly different spawn or a slightly different attack pattern, don't you think that will trip up former testers?"

"You have a point..." I nodded as I remembered the battle last night. Thinking back, the Little Nepenthes from the "Secret Medicine of the Forest" quest haven't really changed their appearances or attack patterns from the Beta. However this time, the flower sprouting variant that drops the medicine's ingredient, the Little Nepenthe's Ovule, has a very similar looking, fruit bearing variant that draws other Nepenthes if you kill it. Coper, who panicked after I killed the flower sprouting variant, intentionally killed a fruit bearing Nepenthe in an attempt to PK me. During the Beta, the flower-sprouting and fruit-bearing variants never spawned together, so I guess that was what Argo was talking about when she talked about the "small changes". Even if I had hunted the Nepenthes myself,

there's a very big possibility seeing both the flower-sprouting variants that I must kill and the fruit-bearing variants that I should never kill spawn at the same time would have led to a fatal error.

"In other words, Beta Testers' knowledge would actually get in the way of beating the game..." I said under my breath, as Argo chimed in.

"Nah, you should use your knowledge from the Beta as much as you can. In fact, thanks to that, you and I were able to get here in Horunka just 14 hours after the start of the death game.

"14 hours...". I was surprised at how little time had passed, but come to think of it, Kayaba's announcement came yesterday night at 5:30 PM, and today is 7 AM the next day. Even then, I feel like I passed through the Town of Beginnings' West Gate ages ago.

"Argo, when did you leave the Town of Beginnings?"

"I guess it was this mornin' at 5 AM. It didn't even take me an hour to get through the Horunka Forest."

"I see. Well, if you didn't know the way then you can easily spend three hours there."

"Right?" Argo raised the corners of her mouth slyly and continued.

"I think that just 'bout by this evenin', all the other Beta testers would start travelin' to Horunka. In two to three days, the non-Beta testers should get the hang of combat and set out lookin' for new huntin' grounds. Errr, Beta Tester and non-Beta Tester is a little bit confusin'. There has to be a more fittin' name for them..."

"Ehh. how about Veteran and Newbie?" I suggested after wringing it out from my vocabulary, but Argo just rolled her eyes.

"Hey hey, after participatin' in the Beta for just one month, callin' yourself a veteran is a bit presumptuous don't ya think?"

"T-then why did you even ask..."

"Heehee. Well, somethin'll naturally pop up eventually. In any case, before the new accounts, which outnumber the Beta testers almost 10 to 1, get movin', I figured I'd gather a bare minimum of information. How would you call it...I guess a guidebook kinda thing, and I want to distribute it."

"G-guidebook? Distribute...?" I repeated dumbfoundedly before I understood. Argo was trying to get the Beta testers' knowledge on paper and give them out to the non-Testers.

Come to think of it, you could take something you wrote to an NPC's print shop and reproduce a few flyers and booklets. But the cost to print something was so high, in the Beta there was hardly anyone who used them.

"Wouldn't that take a ton of money?" I asked blankly, and Argo shrugged.

"Well, yeah. That's why the first issue will be paid, and then maybe use the proceeds from that to make a second edition...? In the first place, I don't even have the money to make that first edition" giggled the self-described Information Broker again as I flushed at myself.

The reason I made my way to Horunka by myself was to increase my chances of survival. If your objective is to not die, then staying inside a town where monsters wouldn't come might be one of the correct answers, but there's no guarantee that that situation will continue forever. If one day the system's barriers fall and the monsters flood into the town, if you're still a level 1 at that point then you'd most definitely die. Argo has probably thought the same thing. But this girl, she's not just trying to save herself, she's also trying to save even one more person from the Town of Beginnings. Even though you could understand that that was the best answer for clearing the conditions that Kayaba put on us, would there be anyone who could put that thought into motion on the second day? "So in other words, you intend to put the information you get from me about the AB Quest in the book too?"

"You betcha! It's a one handed straight sword that you can upgrade to be useful even up to the fourth and fifth levels. Even if you can only get one sword a day, no, because of that, players should flock to this quest. If every one of them dies, would you be able to sleep well at night?"

...well there's already one person dead anyway. I thought in my head as I nodded. After finding an additional Little Nepenthe Ovule, I put it in the place where Coper died. But by now it should have disappeared. I'm sure even he wouldn't object to his existence being commemorated in this way in Argo's book.

"Alright, alright. I'll tell you about both the quest and the sword. No need for money"

"Oh? You sure?"

"If after hearing all that, I still charge you money, I'd just be a giant miser" I spat out. "Well shucks" said Argo with an expression that showed not an ounce of shame, and then giggled.

So over the next twenty minutes, I talked about the things to keep in mind during the "Secret Medicine of the Forest" quest, and while I was at it, explained to Argo the trick to getting through the Horunka forest quickly. After that, I let her copy down the Anneal Blade's stats.

Argo, having obtained her information, gave me a quick and simple "I owe ya one" before she stood up and headed to the door. But just as her hand reached for the door, she paused, brought it up to face height and on the door's face gave a rhythmical knock, knock knock knock.

"Next time, if I knock like this then just let me in" said Her Highness, to which I blinked and shot back.

"Don't tell me you're coming back...?"

"You betcha! You're an important source after all. Don't go killin' yourself now"

"You take care of yourself too" I snickered as Argo's whiskers arched up in a smirk.

"Hey now, loosen up a bit there. Let's just keep it casual"

After opening the door this time, the information broker slipped out and disappeared. I stayed sitting on the bed, and after staring at the door for 10 seconds, shook my head lightly and stood straight up. I got a lot of things ahead of me. I have to sell the items I don't need, replace my armor, replenish my potions, and as much as possible upgrade my Anneal Blade to +1 or +2. The stupor that hovered over me until just before Argo came was now nowhere to be found.

By the time I finished my shopping in Horunka's town square, it was already 8:30 AM. It seems like there aren't any other players besides me here yet...but if there were any players who left the Town of Beginnings this morning, they should be getting here any moment now. While I don't exactly hate meeting new people, I also don't have any intention of partying up with anyone, so it would just be a pain should someone invite me.

For the moment, I set out and followed my instincts from the Beta, figuring I would just take on all the quests in this town, and keep clearing them until just before my potions run out. I went to the plaza, the houses, and the back alleys to seek out every single NPC who would give me a quest. Most of them were the type of quests that asked "Defeat a certain amount of X monster" or "Gather a certain amount of X ingredient". But there was one quest from the ranch on the edge of town that had a reward that made it worth it. As I followed the unpaved roads east, I found the ranch in the place just as I remembered, looking exactly like in my memories. If this were the real world, its ranch-like odor would already be tickling my nostrils, assuming it isn't one of those touristy type places. But here there was only the aroma of dried grass. As I approached a small cow shed, a middle-aged man wearing a straw hat, cradling his pitchfork with an obviously concerned look on his face sighed as he shook his head. Above his head, I made sure there was a "!" mark that indicated that he was a quest NPC, before approaching and calling out. But just as I did that...

"Hey! Wait, wait!", called a familiar voice from behind me, as I abruptly turned around. There I found a small, hooded player (she must have had a familiarity of her imaginary body that allowed her to approach while barely making a sound). Her name wasn't indicated above her head, but there was no doubt it was the Information Broker I had just parted with.

"It's you again. What is it you want this time?" I asked the Information Broker named Argo in front of me, as the mouth that peeked out underneath the hood curled into a cheeky smirk.

"Ahh, it's a good thing I went to check out this quest first. Count me in for this one!"

"What?" I blurted in an obviously annoyed voice, but Argo wouldn't be cowed.

"Of all the quests in Horunka, this quest is second only to the Anneal Blade quest in its value. In other words, it's pretty likely this one also has a cool down timer. You don't care how long I'd have to wait so long as you got yours don't you?"

"You don't have to put it that way..." I protested, though deep inside I knew she was right. There are a few basic rules to MMORPG culture, but one of the most basic ones is "First Come First Serve". Rare items belong to the first person to pick them up, rare monsters are that of the player who draws first blood, and quests with cool down timers go to the first player to trigger them. But right now, more than any of those rules or manners, the survival of as many players as possible should take precedence, and it is for that purpose that Argo is trying to make a book. But even then...

"Fine, fine. Alright, let's party u---" I started saying before realizing something. If this quest didn't have a cool down timer, then there wouldn't even be a need to party up. "If I remember correctly, even if you form a party after you take on a quest, it should be shared. So let's do this: I'll take on the quest, and if there's a cool down timer, I'll party up with you. If there isn't, we go our separate ways"

"Well shucks, guess I have no choice then. Go on, get on with it" said Argo seemingly unfazed. But if she was in a hurry then so was I. Turning back to the straw hat man, I asked him "Good day sir. Is there anything troubling you?"

Replying just as he had in the Beta, the straw hat man said "One of the calves got lost. It's probably in a field out of the east side of the forest. Can you bring it back here before it gets attacked by a monster?" to which I quickly agreed.

At that moment, the Quest Log Update message came up, and the man's "!" mark changed to a "?" indicating that the quest was in progress. But if there were no cool down timers on this quest, then from Argo's view there should still be a "!" mark above his head.

"So?" I asked, turning back to her. She shrugged, as if to say "I told you so"

"Ain't nothin' poppin' up"

She pushed me out of the way and stood in front of the man and asked again, "hey bro, what's up?"

In response, the man shrugged his shoulders exactly like she did and answered "Can you come again at 3 in the afternoon?" The template response for every quest NPC with a cool down timer. Right now, it's 8:50 AM, so if he tells us to come back at 3 PM, then that means we can assume the cool down timer is 6 hours.

party.

"See?" asked Argo, turning back to me.

Silently, I brought up the menu window and invited the smirking information broker to a party.

The "Lost Calf" quest, true to its title, was about finding a calf who got lost and bringing it safely back to the ranch. If that was all there was to it, then it would just be a regular search or hunting quest. However, what made this particularly troublesome was that, to find the calf, you had to borrow the mother cow and bring it all the way to the grass field where you would search. It turns out that this cow was a bit temperamental, and once every 4 or 5 minutes, you have to give her her favorite rock salt to lick, or she will lose her temper and run all the way back to the ranch, where you would have to start over again. Fortunately, monsters would never target the cow.

However, the Salt Gauge can run out in the middle of a battle, so taking this quest on solo would be pretty difficult.

Argo no doubt knew that as she helped me dispatch the two Worms who attacked us right as we left town.

"See? Aren't you glad there's two of us?" she sneered.

"...it's not like I needed you. Even if I were alone I could have stomped them" I replied childishly, as I rummaged in my belt pouch for the egg sized rock salt and gave it to the cow. The cow's salt gauge didn't have any visual indicators, but as the gauge decreased its tail would wag faster, so as long as you kept that in mind you could keep it from running away. The now satisfied cow gave a hearty "moooo!" so I gave its black spotted white (or was it white spotted black?) body a quick pet and went back on our way.

The path that comes out of the east side of the forest, unlike the route that connects Horunka to the town of the beginnings, was no maze. You don't even need to worry about dangerous monsters spawning, so you had plenty of time to enjoy the sparkling tree dew and the birds chirping away.

However, my gaze was drawn to the information broker walking ahead of me, specifically to the weapons equipped on her waist. I can see now why she made such a big deal of it at the inn, because her main weapon turned out to be the incredibly rare Claw: a weapon that is wielded on your knuckles on both hands, in other words a sort of Metal Claw. However, even in the Beta I hardly saw anyone choose that weapon. I too tried it once in the beginning, but even before I could learn how to use it I gave up. While its strength lay in its light weight and ability to attack with both hands, its reach was incredibly short, so you need a certain determination to brawl directly with monsters. Of course, there's always a chance you'd get into something like that during a battle, but consciously choosing to close in while in this full dive environment requires quite a bit of daring. The official service turned death game now brings an extra dimension of fear to close quarters combat, which made me wonder why Argo chose the Claw.

As I was lost in those thoughts, Argo suddenly turned around and deftly walked backward as she gave me a smug grin. "Hey kiddo, yer really into Big Sis' legs aren't you?"

"K-kiddo? Big Sis?"

I'm not a kid! And what makes YOU my big sister? I thought as I bit it back with all my might. Taking a deep breath, I opened my mouth to speak again. "What I was wondering about was your weapon. Of all things, why a Claw?"

"That'll cost you a hundred Cor"

"Ugh" I grumbled, thinking I should have seen that coming. 100 Cor isn't particularly egregious, but that information also isn't really something I would go to such lengths to know. More than anything, it seems like a waste of money. "Well, I'll just guess what it is before the end of this quest so never mind."

"Oh yeah? Well bring it on. If you can guess what it is then your Big Sis will send you a big fat friend request"

"Look here..." I started complaining, but was interrupted by a low buzz. Argo seemed to notice it at the same time, and before I could see anything she had already equipped the Claws that were hanging at her waist.

"Moo-ko, hold up!" I ordered the cow as it obligingly stopped. Argo glared at me as if to say "What the hell is Moo-ko?", but I ignored

her and drew the Anneal Blade on my back. From the thicket approached two more-than-40 centimeter long giant bee-type monsters. If I ran across something like this in real life, saying I would scream and run away would be an understatement, but here in Aincrad it was in the smallest class of monsters. However, that meant it was hard to get a clean hit in.

There were two of the huge bee-type creatures, called the "Forest Wasp". I took a position to protect the cow, and turned to my third party member since the official launch and barked orders, "Argo, take the guy on the left. Forest Wasps spit poison so watch out!"

"Who the hell do you think I am?" replied Argo with a bit of an attitude, but also with some reassurance to me. Knowing I had my back covered, I concentrated on the Forest Wasp on the right.

ZZ. ZZ. went the unnerving buzzing as the giant wasp approached slowly, trying to draw me in. Just like their lower level cousins the "Yellow Wasps" in the fields near the Town of Beginnings, their movements were unpredictable and as I had just told Argo, they had a ranged attack where they spit poison. Liquid-type ranged attacks can be easily countered with a large shield, but to maintain a large field of vision I chose to forego the shield. With defense out of the question, I was left with no choice but to dodge. You can block it with your sword, but the poison's hit on a weapon's durability is more than twice that of its effect on armor. Argo should be facing the same thing on her side, but I couldn't afford to take my eyes away from the enemy in front of me. As soon as the erratically approaching Forest Wasp stopped in mid air and protruded a poison needle...

"Hya" I yelled as I flew to the right. I must have come in too close because I felt a few droplets burn as they touched my cheek. But their HP damage wasn't anything significant, and their debuff didn't work. As I hung in midair, I brought the Anneal Blade across my right shoulder as I readied the one shot diagonal slash Sword Skill "Slant". I put my weight on the foot that had landed and activated the skill. As the Forest Wasp was cooling down from its poison attack, I aimed in the fine area between its neck and chest. Even though the Anneal Blade's weight and reach was completely different from the basic sword, since I had used it so much during the Beta, it turned out that the sensation of using it was ingrained in

my body more than I thought. With a faint blue aura and with a heavy slash, the sword point sank into the less than 5 millimeter point I was aiming for. With a satisfying crunch, I took another swing and lopped off the Wasp's head. The separated Wasp's head and body came to an unnatural halt and contracted for a split second before disappearing in a cloud of blue particles.

Without any hesitation, I looked to the left and found Argo just as she was parrying her Wasp's bite attack with her right Claw and plunged her left one into the now defenseless left side. The Wasp's HP gauge went to zero and made a shattering sound like glass breaking before fading away. After quickly skimming the result window that popped up, I approached the information broker.

"Good job"

"You too bud"

If she were a familiar party member then I'd usually bump fists with her, but I had only known Argo for a few hours. On top of that, she had her sharp claws equipped. So with that excuse I tried to do away with the fist bump, but Argo, stowing away both Claws, stuck out her right fist. Left with no choice, I extended my left fist and tapped it. At that moment, a memory from the back of my mind popped up. From SAO's official launch at 1 PM to Kayaba's death game announcement at 5 PM yesterday, I was in the company of a certain player. This player, a katana-wielding newbie named Klein, was able to sniff out that I was a Beta tester.

"Please teach me this game!" He begged without a hint of shame. Swept up in the heat of the moment, I ended up agreeing. I had to quickly give up my initial plan of speedrunning the first few hours as I taught him how to draw out his Sword Skills.

Once you get the hang of them, Sword Skills can be deployed even when you're hanging in midair or laying down. But at first, just about anybody will have a hard time activating them. Even if you were able to hold your weapon at a certain position and angle and activate your skill, controlling that activated skill (or more accurately, System Assist) and aiming it at your target is no easy feat. If you get ahead of the Assist and swing your sword, then you'd Fumble the Skill. On the other hand, if you miss the Assist's activation, then the skill will just move your body and you won't even have time to aim the sights.

As for me, my ability with teaching sword skills, or rather, teaching anything in the first place, was just about non-existent, so I could only tell Klein things like "you swoosh like this and put it in your sights and swish like that to slash" that were probably way too vague to understand. Even then, Klein was able to struggle again and again, until he was able to activate the basic sword skill "Reaver" to kill the weakest monster, the Blue Boar. His "Oh yeaaaahh!" at the time sounded as if he had just gotten the last attack bonus on the floor boss, striking a pose and coming up to me for a high five. Even now, I can still feel a bit of the throbbing numbness it left in my left hand.

While I still planned to continue being a solo player during the official service just like I did in Beta, I felt that maybe for once, I might be able to get along with this guy.

But I abandoned him.

Right after the death game announcement, I urged Klein to follow me to Horunka to set up base. But he shook his head. He had friends from other games still in the plaza.

I had two choices at the time: one was to team up with Klein's partners and then bring everyone to Horunka. The other was to part ways with Klein right there and head to Horunka alone. Seeing me struggle with the choice, Klein offered some words.

"I can't keep relying on you forever. I was a guild leader back in my last game, so I'll be fine. I'll find a way to manage with the techniques you taught me. So pay no mind to me, just go to the next town."

With those words, I flew. Abandoning the first friend I made in SAO, I set out on a path to make myself stronger.

In the long term, that was probably the wrong decision. No matter what level I got up to, there was no way I could take on even the first floor boss by myself. To beat this game, some organizational power was absolutely needed. While Klein was a novice at that point yesterday, his actual movements inside the full dive environment weren't that bad. On top of that, when he said that he was a "guild leader", there was no doubt he would be someone people would be drawn to. A person like him, who had the leadership skills I lacked, so long as he gained the necessary knowledge, skills, and level, would be able to lead people trying to beat the game. As for me, in

my selfish bid to "hit the ground running", I left behind a promising leader in the Town of Beginnings.

Once he had met up with his friends, it's not hard to imagine that they'd soon set out from the Town of Beginnings, and it's also not hard to imagine their entire party getting wiped out by a little bit of bad luck out in the wild. But there was still a way to know whether or not he was alive. I still remember his player name, so I'd know right away if I sent him an instant message. In fact, yesterday when we parted, I told Klein "If you need anything, just message me". But that was more than 15 hours ago, and there hasn't been a peep from him since. Because of that, I've been trying to muster up the courage to send him a message, to no avail. What if I send it, and the error message "That Player Doesn't Exist" comes back at me? Just thinking about it sends chills down my spine.

At the end of the day, I guess I've been running away from it this entire time. Ever since I parted ways with Klein in the Town of Beginnings, I've been pretending to make myself stronger, while averting my eyes from the responsibility I had just shrugged off. That was probably the reason I couldn't get up from bed this morning.

"What's that weird look on your face?"

I blinked two or three times blankly in response before I looked up. There, only 15 centimetres away, I found Argo peering into my face. "Whoa!" I exclaimed as I reflexively jumped back. I quickly tried to play it off. "N-nothing..."

At that moment, I realized that if I don't ask this now, I might not get the opportunity to ask it for a while, so I shook my head. "Well, it's not nothing..."

"Huh?"

"Argo, why did you decide to become an information broker? I don't think you'd make that much money, and besides, wouldn't gathering information and printing a guidebook take time away from your leveling?"

"Mmm..." intoned Argo as she played with a wisp of hair jutting out from under her hood, but eventually settled into her usual cunning smirk.

"There's a free answer, a 100 Cor answer, and a 100,000 Cor answer. Which one d'ya want?"

"...what the hell is up with the price on the last one?" I blurted out before shrugging, "guess I'll go with the free one"

"You got it. Well here it is: I think I'll make money"

"Ehhh...didn't you just say printing the guidebook would put you in the red?"

"Well at first yeah. But by the 4th or 5th volume, I should be turnin' a profit. Once I get the business goin', I'm thinkin' of hirin' people and publishin' a newspaper or somethin'."

"A-a newspaper?" I asked with my mouth agape. I guess if you think about it, the world of SAO doesn't really have any entertainment of any sort. It wouldn't be hard to imagine that the players who decided to wait it out inside the Safe Zone would be dying for information or anything to read. So if you print a newspaper, it would probably make a nice bit of cash.

"In other words, you think you'll make money so you want to be an information broker?"

"You got it. Well, that's the free answer anyway" Argo giggled as I stared into her face. As I toyed with whether or not I should ask for the 100 Cor answer, I nodded. "I see. Well, godspeed to you and your business then"

"Oh hoh? You don't wanna know the 100 Cor answer?"

"Ahh. Well let me just make one thing clear. I'm not penny pinching over 100 Cor or anything. How should I put this...paying cash to look into your private thoughts just rubs me the wrong way." I said with a straight face.

This time, it was Argo's turn to blink her eyes blankly, before a massive sneer enveloped her face. "I see, I see. Well, it looks like this kiddo's finally learned how to treat a lady right."

"Can you please stop calling me kiddo?"

"My apologies, it looks like Moo-ko's started losin' her temper kiddo..."

"Ehhh..."

As I turned around to look at the cow, I found her tail was moving really fast just as she had pointed out. Panicking and moving closer, I fished some rock salt out from my pouch and gave it to her to lick. As she moo'ed contentedly, I whispered to myself "One day, I'll save up 200,000 Cor to ask her both the reason for her whiskers and becoming an information broker"

While we ran into three more monster encounters after that, we didn't really have much of a hard time repelling them, thanks to, as much as I hate to admit it, Argo's deft athleticism and her cool and composed decision making. While keeping the cow's salt gauge happily maintained, we were able to clear the forest and, just before 10 AM, arrive at our destination.

Separated from the Southern Grassland that nestled the Town of Beginnings by a giant river, the grass field that stretched out before our eyes was but one part of Aincrad's largest flatland map. If I recall correctly, it was officially called the "Rata Plain", but everyone in the Beta era called it the "Central Plain". Assuming the size stayed the same from the Beta, then it should measure three kilometers from north to south and as much as four kilometers from east to west. I've heard some people say that that makes it about the size of Tokyo's Taitou Ward. The plain's central region turns into a wetland, and right in the middle of that lies a town of the strongest of the basic monsters, the Kobold. If we don't pay attention and end up stumbling into it, even we would end up dead.

On the north side of the plain, as if to cut it off, towered giant cliffs, splitting the First Floor into north and south. To go beyond, you would need to go through either the dungeon in the east of the cliffs, the caves in the west, or the central canyon where the Boar-type Field Boss lay in wait. Going through the dungeon and the caves would take some time, and since the crucial town of Tolbana lay after the canyon, you would have no choice but to face the Field Boss. During the Beta test, it didn't even take three days to beat him but, that time it was because it took hundreds of people dying countless times in a reckless charge. Since we can't afford any more sacrifices since the official launch, that means that the conquest team would have to meticulously upgrade everyone's equipment and drill everyone's teamwork to beat it. In the first place, how many people can you even put together for that conquest team? As for me, would I even want to join that? Do I even have the right? I thought as I watched the grass plain waving in the southern wind when suddenly...

"Here you go!" as a small bottle was thrust underneath my nose. I looked up.

"W-what is this?"

"What is it? It's a drink dummy" said Argo with an exasperated face as I accepted the bottle.

The bottle was made of crude glass that still had bubbles in it, sealed not by cork but by a wooden plug, and finally, displayed a label that simply showed a lemon.

"...wait, I'd never seen anything like this in the Beta"

"Well, you guys were so focused on getting to the top floors, once you got past the Second Floor you hardly even came back to the Town of Beginnings did you? I found this guy just before the end of the Beta test in the Town of Beginnings' Western district. It's only sold in a tiny booth."

"Is that so? Thanks, how much do I owe you?"

"This one's on me" said Argo, surprising me, to which I thanked her. As I looked around, I found a comfortable looking rock and sat down on it. First I checked to see how the cow was doing. Her tail was wagging lazily in the air as she happily munched on the grass. Figuring I had about 3 more minutes, I popped open the bottle. But I stopped right there. In the world of SAO, outside of the Safe Zone, as a rule, just about anything goes. So during the Beta, there were some bastards who delighted in PKs, or killing other players. Of course, there shouldn't be any players who would do that now that the official launch turned the whole thing into a death game. That would be because that would make that person a bonafide, 100% genuine murderer. Moreover, it would make beating the game much harder. While it's one thing from a friend or a guild member, eating and drinking anything from a person you just met a few hours ago without any suspicion whatsoever just doesn't sit well with me but... As I was mulling over these thoughts, Argo came and grabbed the bottle in my right hand and shoved in her own unopened bottle.

"There, does this make it better?"

"Oh, s-sorry. It's not that I was suspicious of you or anything but..."

"Nah, you have a point. That was my bad. You're right to have that level of caution" she said as she threw back her hood, bringing up the exchanged bottle to her lips and gulping down almost half of it.

"Phew!" she exhaled contentedly, as she showed no hint of numbing or damage.

If I were much more cautious, then I should have suspected that she would have put poison on both and applied purification just before she drank it. But in that case, you should see a buff icon blink below her HP bar. As far as I can tell, Argo's HP bar in my eyesight didn't show anything like that, and in the first place, she was the one who suggested partying up.

After mulling it over, I popped open the bottle and took a big gulp. It's sweet. And sour. A rich lemon aroma washed over both my tongue and nostrils, and gulping it down left a refreshing bitterness as everything from my throat to my stomach felt a certain heat... me.

"...wait a second, isn't this alcohol???" I yelled out as Argo raised her eyebrow beside

"Well yeah, that's 'cause it's limoncello"

"Limon...what's that?"

"Well since I already spotted you one, might as well tell you about it. Normally I'd charge money for this kind of information you see? Anyway, limoncello is an Italian-made liqueur. They infuse vodka or some other strong but neutral spirit with lemon rinds and sugar to make it."

"Is that so? So in other words, it's, um, kinda like a lemon sour?"

"That's nothin' like it!" protested Argo with an exasperated expression as she stuck her half empty bottle under my nose. "Look here bud, a lemon sour is shochu put in soda water and squeezed with lemons. Well, it is pretty good itself, and it's really only 5% alcohol at most, but it's a completely different drink!"

...well excuse me. I'm just a middle schooler who turned 14 last month. Would be what I was dying to shoot back at her. However, judging from her alcohol knowledge, Argo is probably over 20 years old, so the next time she calls me "kiddo" I would have absolutely no recourse. Taking one more swig of the limoncello, I swallowed my protest with the alcohol's help and nodded.

"I see. By the way, how strong is limoncello anyway?"

"Hmmm. Well how much water is put in usually differs between each household or brand, but roughly speakin' it's about 30% thereabouts? This one feels like it's in that neighborhood"

"30%..." which means it's 5 or 6 times more alcohol than the beer my mom drinks.

Of course, in the real world, I've never had any alcohol that strong, nor did I even have the time to taste anything like that in the Beta's Aincrad. If I finish this bottle, wouldn't I get drunk and not be able to fight properly?

As if she was reading my mind, Argo smirked. "Don't worry, in this world alcohol is just a taste. Even if you drink an entire barrel of vodka you wouldn't get drunk. Well, there are some idiots who'd get drunk even if they drink Oolong Tea, but if you were the type of person who'd delude themselves like that I wouldn't know what to think of you"

"Delusion" I whispered to myself as I shook my head slightly. If I could manipulate my thoughts like that, I wouldn't be worrying about Klein or Coper so much.

"Nah, I'm not like that" I answered, as I gulped down some more limoncello. The rich sour sweetness and sharp aroma suited my tastes exactly. And the burning sensation as it passed through my throat wasn't half bad either.

cold."

Once I had drained that bottle, I let out a sigh before standing up, and looked up at Argo.

"Thanks for the drink, that was great. It'd probably taste even better if it was freezing..."

"Hey now, don't be greedy. First of all, in this world there's no refrigerators, and there isn't even a way to get ice" Argo said, rolling her eyes.

I smirked at her.

"Is that so? I guess it's impossible for even a mighty information broker like you isn't it?"

"Now you've said it! One day, I'll give you some freezin' cold ice water, just you wait!"

"Oh boy, I can't wait," I answered, as Argo looked at me and sighed.

"From your attitude, you'd probably forget this conversation even happened"

After finishing our break and giving the cow some salt to lick, we set out once more on the "Lost Calf" quest. Which, at this point, basically just involved leading the cow around the grass field

wherever. The calf was in the Rata Plain's western end, inside an area with a diameter of about 500 meters. Once we get close to it, the cow will let us know with a sound. Of course, monsters will still spawn, and you might still find some geographic feature traps like ponds hidden between the reeds or thorns strewn about, but if you pay attention to where you step, then there's no danger of running into them. The grass is at most 50 centimeters high, so even a calf should be visible over them. However, I don't know if it's because of the rolling

geography, but our visibility only went so far. So we left the calf searching up to the mother cow, and as players we took up the task of watching out for monsters and the geography. That would be the fastest way to clear this quest. As if she were thinking the same thing, I found Argo silently walking while keeping her eyes at her feet. While fending off giant rats and giant scarab beetles, we ended up covering about half of the 500 meter diameter search area when...

"Moo!" sounded the cow in a different tone from before. It was as if she was in a hurry. Turning her giant body around, she ran to the east. Argo and I immediately followed. The cow itself shouldn't be in any danger of plunging into a hidden pond or anything, but she could aggro a bunch of monsters. In that case, all we could do is ignore all the attacking monsters until she finds her calf. While praying she wouldn't trigger anything dangerous, we ran after her with all our might.

Fortunately, the cow stopped after only 20 meters and let out another sharp bellow. In response, a shriller "moo!" emanated in the distance. Argo and I rushed in front of her to get a handle on the situation when...

"What?"

"Oh!"

We both exclaimed in unison. The calf was right in front of us. But around its neck was a rough rope made from intertwined dried grass, and leading it with his back turned to us, was a small man. It seemed like he was trying to take it somewhere.

"Hey!" I yelled instinctively, as the cow thief turned around at the same time.

As soon as I saw the man's face, I let out a "whoa!".

He was no man. A canine snouth, pointy triangular ears, and finally, popping out of the grass that had been hiding it up until a few seconds ago, a long tail. It was one of the humanoid monsters that made the First Floor their home, a Kobold.

The cursor above its head indicated that it was a "Swamp Kobold Rat Hunter". I had fought a few of them during the Beta. As far as Kobolds go, it was the weakest class, but for someone who's just barely level 5 like me, it made for a concerning opponent. In the first place, why is something that shouldn't even be coming out of the central wetlands here in the western part of the plain anyway? "Kororu guru..." yelped the Kobold in its language as it noticed me and Argo, throwing away the rope in its right hand and drawing the short spear on its back. It was only a crude contraption that had a twisted wooden handle and a bone tip, but its attack power was no slouch. In fact, the cursor above its head, which made the colors darker or lighter based on how much stronger the opponent was than you are, sported, for a level 5 like me, a rich, blood red.

"Argo, what level are you?" I asked as I watched the freed calf run to its mother out of the corner of my eye. This time, she answered without charging for the information

"Level 3"

"I'm Level 5. If there's two of us, it's going to be close. What do you think?"

"This quest is turnin' out different from the Beta. As much as possible, I'd like to get info" replied Argo, as if saying that it's for the sake of all the players who undertake this quest from now on. Without a doubt, anyone who takes this on without any prior information, and encounters a Swamp Kobold for the first time here would most likely be squashed like a bug.

"Got it" I whispered, as the Kobold screamed "Naru ran gura!"

Bring it on! We thought as we readied our sword and Claw.

But at that moment, a rustling came from behind the Kobold as the grass swayed, and out popped not one but two more Swamp Kobolds.

"Wha-"

Looking at the cursors above the new Kobolds, my heart almost stopped in fear. One of the Kobolds clad in rags was like the first Rat Hunter. But the other one was a head taller, clad in leather armor.

In its right hand was a thick dagger, and its left gripped a rope tipped with an iron hook.

Even without looking at the cursor, I knew what it was. Called a Swamp Kobold Trapper, it is the most dangerous among the Swamp Kobolds. Just about everyone during the Beta died at least once to this guy.

While the Sword Skill that comes from its right hand should not be taken lightly, what is even more terrifying is that the rope hook in its left hand had a special attack called the "Weapon Dropper" that wrenched your weapon away. As soon as you try to pick up the weapon, a fierce attack will rain down upon you, and has a good possibility of draining your HP right then and there. On top of that, the Trapper's cursor was dyed the dark crimson of dried blood, and its stats were far higher than my current ones.

"Konjura!" bellowed the Trapper, calling the two Rat Hunters to flank him.

"Argo, let's run for it! At this point, there's no way we'd win!" I yelled, as Argo shook her right hand.

"No, if we both turn our backs to them we'd be screwed!"

I forgot. She has a point. Usually when a party tries to run away, the fastest player needs to remain behind to try to counter the rope attack. But back then, the player who stayed behind had a pretty high chance of dying.

As the Trapper curled its gigantic mouth into a sneer, it started twirling the rope in its left hand. While the rope was limp, you could hear the whoosh of the heavy iron hook. The Rat Hunters on either side also cradled their bone spears as they closed the distance.

As I was paralyzed with fear, Argo whispered in my ear, "Don't worry. The Weapon Dropper doesn't work on my Claw. I'll bait him into tossin' his rope, and as soon as I cut it down, I'll catch up. Don't mind me and just scram!"

She was right. The Claw, which was fastened securely by metal clasps, was in no danger of being stripped by the rope hook, and if it snags one of the Claws, then you could still use the other one to snap the rope. But that only works if you were 1 on 1 with the Trapper. In this case, if the rope catches you, then when the Rat Hunters charge in you're a sitting duck.

"I'll take care of the Rat Hunters, I'll leave the rope up to you" I shot back as I stuck out the Anneal Blade.

"...ya dummy. Can't even listen to your Big Sis huh" murmured Argo angrily, but stopped her complaints there.

As if realizing what we were up to, the Trapper increased the speed of the rope hook's rotation and took a step forward. Entering the Weapon Dropper's range in 30 centimeters...20 centimeters... 10 centimeters...

At that moment...

"Moooo!" came the bone rattling bellow from the cow that we thought was protecting the calf. And soon after, the ground began to rumble.

Freezing in place and looking back, we saw the cow lower its horned head, and charge in with a vengeance.

"Whoa!"

"Wha!"

Argo and I leapt out of the way. The mother cow who charged between us shook the ground as it plunged straight into the Swamp Kobold Trapper

"Narungo!!!" it yelled as it hurled the rope hook towards the cow. The attack, which would have taken a huge chunk of a player's HP with a direct hit, glanced off the cow's right horn with a clank as it was unceremoniously cast aside. Right after, the slightly more than 500 kilogram cow's head rammed straight into the chest of the Trapper. While it was bigger than most other Kobolds, the Trapper was far smaller than an adult human, which meant the attack sent it flying. At the peak of its trajectory, it turned into blue particles and scattered.

"No way..." I whispered, as the two Rat Hunters whimpered "roggo..."

Argo and I looked at each other, nodded, and set our sights on the now demoralized Rat Hunters.

After handing over the calf and its mother safe and sound, the straw hat ranch owner burst into happiness, and gave us the promised Cor reward, as well as a mysterious basket. Right after the quest complete message displayed, my and Argo's bodies started displaying level up effects. With this, I have become Level 6, and Argo Level 4. Not a bad result after just shy of 24 hours from the beginning of the game. But to even attempt the First Floor's boss, Illfang the Kobold Lord, you need to be at least Level 10. The Labyrinth Tower seems like just a far off dream at this point...

"Alright, that was something!" said Argo as she stretched and shook off her hood, "who would have thought that straightforward "Lost Calf" quest would have such a freakin' terrifyin' event added to it right? Bet you're glad you didn't do it solo didn'tcha kiddo?"

Argo's smirk peeved me to no end, but this time I had nothing.

"That goes for you too. Make sure you write in your guidebook: If the Trapper turns up, don't panic and run away"

"I know, I know! But hold on..." Argo went to confirm her updated quest log and furrowing her brow, continued, "in the first place, it looks like the name of the quest changed from the Beta. It looks like we forgot to check it when we started the quest"

"Huh? Isn't it the 'Lost Calf'?"

"Ahh. It says it's the 'Revenge of the Cow'"

We stood there speechless. Without a doubt, a fitting name for a quest where the cow instantly squashes a Swamp Kobold Trapper. But if it was that strong all along then I couldn't help but think that maybe it should have at least helped a little bit with the battles along the way.

As I gave a big sigh, I opened the basket that I received from the ranch owner. Inside were two loaves of black bread, and a small jar.

"Bread and...what is this jar? We didn't get anything like this in Beta did we?"

"Ya got that right!" Argo said, peering into the basket. With her index finger, she tapped the jar. After tapping "Use" from the window that appeared, her fingertip started glowing, "hey! Give me your palm!"

"Why do you want to use my hand?" I complained, while I obligingly stuck out my left hand.

Argo poked her finger in the middle of my palm, and out gushed a milk white paste. It looked a bit like cream...wait come to think of it... I scooped up a little bit with my right finger and licked it. At that moment, a yogurt-like tartness and sweet, rich taste filled my mouth. It is cream.

"So good!" I blurted out, proceeding to scarf down the rest. I wanted to grab my hand and lick every corner of it, but now that I'm a 2nd year middle schooler, there was no way I'd do something like that in front of an older woman.

"This looks like sour cream. I bet if you spread it on that bread over there and eat it, it'll be freakin' delicious"

"Oh yeah? Well, I'm not sure it makes up for being scared half to death by an SK Trapper, but that dude hooked us up!" I replied as I tapped the jar. The remaining uses showed "4/5", which means that there's still about 80% of the sour cream left. The problem was that we only got one basket. If I recall correctly, unlike the "Secret Medicine of the Forest", if you wait a little bit, the "Lost Calf"...make that the "Cow's Revenge", should become available for you to undertake again. However, there's still four more hours to the cool down timer, and while it was no more than an event battle, knowing that a Swamp Kobold Trapper appears makes me want to equip a secondary weapon just in case.

As I was mulling over these thoughts, I closed the basket and offered it to Argo. "Here you go"

"Wha-. What for?"

"What for? Well there's only one jar of cream..." I mumbled.

Argo slapped my back hard and gave a giant grin. "Heehee. That's how you do it kiddo. But well...that one's for you my friend"

"Huh? Wait, why?"

"Because back there, you didn't run." said Argo as she took a step back and added a wink. "Well if you still can't bring yourself to eat it, then maybe next time you come across some depressed dude you can cheer them up with that. People...just give them somethin' tasty and they'll get right back on their feet."

"There's no way something that simple..."

"It works because it's simple. Alrighty then, smell ya later Ki-boy!" said the smirking Argo, as the information broker turned up her cape and ran towards the plaza and disappeared in an instant.

Dumbstruck, I stood in place for a while before I whispered, "what the hell is up with that 'Ki-boy' bit".

Shaking my head, I stashed the basket in my storage. Since I plan to stay solo for a while, I don't think I'll run into any depressed dudes anytime soon. Fortunately, in this world, any food items stashed in your storage maintained their durability. The problem was I might give into temptation and scarf it all down. I guess at that point, I would just go back and clear the "Cow's Revenge" all over again. Somehow I feel like that would just make me run into that information broker again...

I quickly realized that I had completely forgotten to take a shot at why she chose the Claw as her weapon. But could it be that what she said during the battle was literally the reason? A Claw would be effective against the Swamp Kobold Trapper's "Weapon Dropper" attack...? Next time I meet her, I'll let her hear that hypothesis. Well, it's not like I particularly wanted to add her as a friend or anything but...

"What am I saying, I got places to go"

Punching my left palm with my right fist, I started heading out of town to finish up the remaining quests.



SWORD ART ONLINE THE MOVIE

—PROGRESSIVE—

Aria of a Starless Night

[Progressive - Aria Audio Drama]

Lisbeth Edition

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PROOFREADING GSIMENAS EDITING GSIMENAS, KAANTANTR
November 2022

“And here I was hoping I'd be able to handle that a bit better than that.....”

These words were my attempt at sweeping it under the rug... this sense of disappointment in myself seething within my chest.

Still, I found myself unable to muster the spunk to get back on my feet. Far from it, actually, as the cold hard stone bench seemed to be sucking the energy out of me at an alarming rate.

In a corner of the Town of Beginnings, there was no one but me around at this little plaza I'd found. So, there was nothing really stopping me from letting the screams, cries, and tears out of my system—heck, that's something I actually do want to get over with, probably, yet *something* was putting a lid on all of those emotions of mine.

That's what I've always been like, even before I got trapped inside this world. As I hyperfocused on presenting a cheery and humorous version of myself, Shinozaki Rika, to my family and friends, I wound up forgetting how to express my tears and anger. Perhaps what drew me, a girl not all that interested in games, to Sword Art Online was the idea that I might just be able to draw out my real self here.

Yet in the end, it didn't turn out as I had hoped. Even when we lost the ability to log out from SAO and were told that we would actually die for real if we lost our lives here, I simply hunkered down on the ground, spacing out as an uproar unfolded amongst the other players. Sure, I was really scared back then, but my sense of disbelief, questioning the reality of the situation, won out in the end.

It's already been three weeks since that day. Despite spending days upon days holed up in an inn, or aimlessly wandering around town

during those weeks, not only did the reality of the situation *not* sink in for me, things got even worse: I started questioning the reality of this world, the whole death game thing, and even questioning my own existence..... That's why I gave the idea of stepping outside the town a shot today. Seeing as I wasn't feeling scared, I figured I wouldn't have a problem fighting monsters either. Heck, I'd had no issue going into battle back on that fateful evening before I was teleported to the town's main square, in fact.

And yet things went horribly wrong today. My sense of fear was still as blunted as it's always been, and yet my hands and feet turned into a bumbling mess, causing my mace to veer off course despite all my attempts to aim straight. Finding myself at half HP in a battle against a single «Green Worm» , one of the weakest monsters out there, the only course of action my jumbled up mind managed to come up with was to fling my mace away and head for the hills with my tail between my legs.

“.....What were you even thinking, Rika.”

I let out a mutter once more, hugging my knees atop a bench. Even my words rang hollow, as if I'd borrowed them from some cheap drama.

Now that I've thrown away my one and only weapon, and I lack the money to buy a new one, there's no way I can fight monsters anymore. There's only one thing left for me to do: roam about town and just hope the police or something manage to get us out of here in the meantime.

.....Wait, no... there actually is *one more* option available to me. A way to test if the whole shebang about us dying for reals the moment our HP falls to zero isn't just a load of baloney...

And that is... to take a crack at experiencing what death is actually like. There are ways to go about it: I could go to the edge of the Town of Beginnings and just jump off into the never-ending sky, or I could find a monster outside town and just let it attack me till my

HP drops to zero; if I were to find myself waking up in the real world afterwards, it would just prove that this Kayaba dude was full of it all along. On the other hand, if I were to fail to wake up afterwards...

At this point, I found myself torn between two voices in my mind: one warning me that there are some lines that should never be crossed, and the other arguing that it's all bound to be a load of baloney anyway, so why not give it a shot. The version of me that's already thrown in the towel, or the version of me that still stands her ground. The one that wants to shed her tears, or the one that isn't capable of doing so. Which of them is the real me? What does 'real' even mean.....?

By the time I returned from my thoughts to the outside world, I'd found myself aimlessly stumbling about an unfamiliar street, the bench long since left far behind. Was I feeling so giddy because I haven't had anything to eat for a long time now, I wonder? Then again, it's not like anything I eat in this world would actually find its way into my physical stomach.

Drip, I felt a drop of water splashing on my cheek. Then another one fell down on my head, and then my shoulder. When I looked up, I spotted swirling, grey clouds drifting so close to the ground that it almost felt like I could reach them with my hands if they were just a little bit longer. The rain, awfully realistic and yet somehow off compared to the real thing, pounded down on me without mercy as I plodded along the road.

Just as the thought that I might catch a cold if I get all soaked at this rate ran through my mind, I immediately chided myself for that silly idea. My avatar is just a knock-off: it doesn't bleed from any cuts, and it certainly isn't going to catch some stupid cold from dealing with chilly weather either. Seeing as my HP had gone back up to max while I wasn't looking, my avatar should be the epitome of pure spunk right about now, actually.

I'm Rika-chan, a bundle of spunk. I'm Lisbeth, a bundle of spunk. No matter if I get soaked in the rain, or if I'm freezing cold, or if I'm dying from hunger, I'm always a bundle of spunk, always.

At this point, a broad street came into view further up ahead. I'd just need to take a right turn there, then press on straight ahead and I'd reach the part of town at the very edge of the Floor at the end of the road. A small set of handrails is all that separates the town from the endless expanse of sky beyond. I'm guessing that only beyond this great expanse will I ever find the answer as to what is actually real in this world, probably.

Splish, *splash*, came the sound of me treading through puddle after puddle, only moments away from reaching the broad street... when...

I noticed a girl, soaking wet just like me, walking down the middle of the road.

Both her waist-long, chestnut-colored hair and her short, reddish-brown cape were battered down to a sorry state by the rain. And yet, the girl refused to cast down her eyes. With her chin up, her chest puffed out, and a firm grip on the sheath of her rapier dangling from her left waist, she marched down the road at breakneck speeds the exact opposite way of where I was heading.

Her chosen path would lead her to the Northern Gate of the Town of Beginnings. Beyond which lies the very same Outer Field that I myself bolted out of with my tail between my legs earlier on.

She's going out to fight.

I had no real basis for that assumption, but that's the vibe I got from her. From a glimpse at the girl's profile, I could discern neither hope, nor despair behind her expression; all I saw was the will to press on. Burning in her eyes like bluish-white flames.

At some point, my hand found itself searching for something at my waist. Yet, my starter mace was nowhere to be found.

All of a sudden, I was struck by a crushing sense of regret. There's no point in crying over getting my ass handed to me by a monster and running away from the fight, but why, oh why did I dump my weapon in the process. How could I forget that it was the one and only thing that I could have a firm grip of in this world. How could I forget that even when I struggled to shed my tears or vent my anger, it had always been supporting me by my side.

As I stood stock still, the chestnut-haired girl walked past me before my eyes and pressed on into the distance, straight as an arrow. In a matter of moments, the pouring rain shrouded the silhouette of her back from my sight. And yet, I could still make out a trail left in her wake, clear as day. The trail of an azure shooting star, piercing through the pitch-dark sky of the night.

—Time to get my mace back.

The idea struck me out of the blue. Yes, I don't really remember the exact spot where I had fought against the «Green Worm» ; yes, my mace might have expended all of its durability and disappeared by now; yes, I might be forced to face monsters unarmed. And yet, I'll just keep looking until I find it.

And if I do succeed in tracking it down...

If I do manage to grab hold of my weapon with my hand once more, then—.

Instead of taking a turn to the right, I opted for a left turn as I walked into the broad street. Despite not being able to catch sight of the girl no matter how much I strained my eyes anymore, I was all but certain I'd get the chance to meet her again someday, if I managed to live through this world long enough. My gut says so.

With my chin up and my chest puffed out, I began making my way through the rain.

[Progressive - Aria Audio Drama]

Silica Edition

TRANSLATION DAVIGRON PROOFREADING CELEST ADDITIONAL EDITING CELEST RAWS CELEST
November 2022

Good things and bad things come one after another.

I don't remember whether I read this proverb in a book, or if someone told it to me; but I'd repeat that sentence in my head every time something good or bad would happen to me. On days I scored perfect marks during school tests, I made sure not to lose my belonging. And whenever I got hurt, I told myself, "surely something good is going to happen soon".

So I wasn't surprised either when an astonishing stroke of luck shone upon me last month. I received an email stating that I won a NerveGear in an online giveaway to which I entered on a whim. At first, I thought this was a scam, so I doubled-checked the email over and over again.

When I finally convinced myself that it was the real deal, I jumped out of joy. Following that event, I went straight ahead and bought a copy of Sword Art Online with the money I had saved from New year, then excitedly dove into this virtual world I had given up hope of ever reaching before.

However, as I expected, my jinx was not going to miss a chance to go against me.

Good things and bad things come one after another. When we were forcibly teleported to the plaza, and they told us that we couldn't leave this world, the first words that crossed my mind weren't '*no way*', but '*as expected*'. I foolishly cried thinking my bad luck had doomed almost ten thousand players inside this deadly game, even though I knew deep down inside me that something that absurd was impossible.

Of course, from the point of view of the other players, I was a mere, helpless twelve-year-old child as I was sitting in a corner of the Teleport Gate Plaza for many days. Eventually, some random person came and told me that there was a place where other child players would take refuge.

That place was a building similar to a traditional European church. I peeked through the window and saw children just like me, all gathered around a large table eating rice. I believe some of them looked even younger. I was so hungry as well, but I couldn't bring myself to knock on the door. My legs froze out of fear, having the same anxiety I've had during my time at the real-world school.

In the end, all I do is run away. I dove in S A O so I could escape the other world, but here I am, running away from this world too.

It wasn't like this in the past. I used to enjoy going to school and I had a lot of friends. Those good moments probably went away when I confided my dreams for the future to the person I believed was my best friend.

The following day, school was a completely different place from before. My belongings disappeared, I got constantly tripped up, over and over again, every single day... Until the day I got trapped in S A O.

Perhaps, in a tiny corner of my heart, I was slightly happy this incident happened so that I didn't have to go to school anymore... And that I didn't have to face the children who used to be my friends anymore.

But at the same time, I wonder where I should go. There's no place for me in the real world or in this world. I don't even have the courage to jump off the edge of the city to see if what that dude named Kayaba said is true.

I began straying away from the church. As I was walking away aimlessly...

A small shadow of a creature appeared at the end of a narrow alley. It had a gray fur and a tail tensely stretched like a flag.

“Pina...?”

I instinctively called out the shadow, which looked exactly like the cat I own in the real world.

But the gray cat didn’t stop. It walked straight down the alley, as if it had somewhere to go.

I felt the urge to chase that cat desperately. Of course, there is no way that it was the real Pina, but its fluffy fur looked so warm I wanted to touch it for just for a moment.

“Pina, wait!”

I called it out as I chased it with all my might. But the cat would run when I ran and walk when I walked, and I just couldn’t catch up.

I Turned right in the alleyway, then to the left, jumped over stacked wooden boxes and passed under a fallen pillar. I crossed a water bridge, climbed up and down small staircases, continuing onward endlessly. At that point, I didn’t know what part of the town I was in. But even so, I kept on chasing it with all my willpower even if it led me to fall over countless times.

Eventually, the cat disappeared inside a half-crumbled wall covered with ivy. I trotted towards the wall and set aside the remnants of iv, only to find a small hole to which I desperately forced my body through, as I could barely fit inside.

On the other side of that wall occupies a small garden surrounded by stone walls on all sides. The stone-paved ground was more than half covered with weed, and the trees growing in each corner of the place looked completely neglected. What’s more, there was no sign of the gray cat I had chased so desperately.

“Pina, where are you...?”

I walked down to the center of the garden as I whispered its — temporary— name.

Suddenly, the paved stone below my feet made a sudden sound of clatter and collapsed. I was swallowed up down the dark hole, unable to scream. I closed my eyes and curled my body reflexively, thinking I was about to die. But then, my back hit against something hard.

That impact was rather *too* realistic, rendering me unable to breath. The H P bar in the upper left of my field of vision dropped drastically, falling below half. Maintaining my posture, I cautiously stood up ensuring my H P didn’t decrease any further.

That place I fell down in was a rather dusty basement. Covered in spider webs, broken bookshelves and chests lined the walls. I must have fell down outside the Safe Area since my H P decreased, but thankfully, it didn’t look like there was any monster here. ...On the other side, there was no exit in sight either.

I looked up to the grossly tall ceiling, where a gray light was flowing through some gap. I definitely wouldn’t be able to reach that gap even if I climbed up, helping myself with the bookshelves lined in the wall.

When there’s something to chase, most of the time there’s a trap waiting. It’s common for games to include traps, but getting caught in a trap inside a V R M M O game was considerably despairing. On top, I felt very, very heartbroken because it was the pina-looking cat that led me in this trap.

No matter how much I’d scream in here, It’s unlikely that any player would come to notice. Perhaps, I will be stuck in this basement until someone reaches the distant 100th floor and defeats the final boss.

...alright then. I don't care anymore.

With gloom, I sat down on the gelid floor. I held my knees with my arms and deeply bowed my head.

But then, something shone glimmeringly beneath my feet.

I picked it up with my right hand, it was a very thin silver coin. The piece of silver was covered in dust, but a number could be read on the surface. A coin worth a hundred Cor... approximately three times the money I currently have. I hurriedly stood up and scanned the floor intently. A little farther away, I spotted a pile of coins. I quickly picked those up and noticed yet another one beyond that.

Beyond that, buried among the junk, was a wooden box about the size of a randoseru. Sure, the color of the box faded, but it was unmistakably a treasure chest. I lunged at it, praying it wasn't locked, and gently lifted the lid.

It opened surprisingly with ease, revealing approximately twenty silver coins and a dagger with a red sheath inside. Just by looking at it, I could tell it was far superior to my starter equipment.

There was something else I realized. if there's a treasure chest here, then there must be an exit somewhere.

Bad things and good things come one after another. ...No, actually, there are good things AND bad things. It's not about jinx and what-not, it's just the way life is.

With all this money, I could buy the best armor available in the town and I'd still have some left. As for this dagger, I could try and fight outside the town. With this... I could find a place to belong here, with my own strength.

Suddenly, a meow~ reached my ears, calling from above. Looking up, I saw the very same cat I was chasing earlier, peering down at me from the edge of the hole.

“Hey, stay right there! I *will* be going to pat you!”

As I shouted, I put the silver coins and the dagger in my storage, then began searching for an exit.

[Material Edition 21] SAO Progressive 4.2

TRANSLATION GSIMENAS

January 2023

"A chanto skill.....?"

Unable to comprehend the words that came from Asuna as she sat in front of me, I tilted my head.

"Umm, is that a non-system skill that helps you do things properly, or, um, something like that.....?"

At that moment, the girl directed a speechless smile, tinged with pity, towards me.

"Well, you are indeed not doing things properly, Kirito-kun. It's only been three days since you started staying at this inn room and look what's become of it so quickly."

When I looked around the room upon hearing her remark, I had to agree that it certainly couldn't be called tidy. There were all kinds of weapons and pieces of armour lying everywhere on the floor, tons of different materials and accessories cluttering the bed, as well as numerous potions, food, and other consumables taking up the entire table.

"U-uh, this is all because I started organising my storage yesterday; that doesn't mean my room is always like....."

With a cough, I opened up my window and threw all the containers on the table into it for starters. Gazing at my action, Asuna asked a logical question.

"Can't you just organise your storage by sorting the items through your window; you'd only need to decide whether to sell or dispose of the unnecessary items then? Why exactly do you need to materialise each item one by one?"

"Well, you see, you can't really tell what exactly quite a lot of the stuff is from just the item name and their description..... Like this one, for example."

The item I picked up from the table while answering her question was a small bottle filled with a orangish-red liquid. Its hue was similar to that of a healing potion, but the name that was displayed upon tapping the item was—

"..... «B l u s h C i d e r» . And its description says.....
«Sweet and tasty» . What is this thing?"

"Who knows?"

"Who knows?' Aren't you the one who bought or picked it up somewhere."

"While I did buy or pick it up somewhere, I don't really know where that «somewhere» was....."

"That's because you waste your money everywhere!"

While Asuna complained like a mother, I handed the small bottle to her.

"Oh well, seeing as it's a cider, I guess it's some sweet and fizzy drink, as the description implies. And you do look thirsty, so here you go."

"Hey, don't make me test it for poison. And, for starters, the sweet and fizzy soft drink that you're thinking of is basically only called cider in Japan and Korea."

"Oh!"

Admiring her usual well of knowledge, I asked a follow-up question.

"In that case, what's cider like outside Japan and Korea?"

"An alcoholic beverage made from apples, or apple juice itself. It's called cider even in Japan; both names are spelled as c i d e r."

"Oh! Then how is Japanese cider called in America?"

"Soda pop, I guess."

"I see. Though, in that case, I wonder which cider we have here....."

The bottle in Asuna's hands had a vividly red liquid, thus it seemed like the apple type of cider, but SAO is a game developed in Japan, thus it could just as well be the soda type. Where did I buy that thing, I wonder..... eh, or maybe it was a monster drop..... as I racked my brain...

".....Well, we can just find out through a taste test."

With these words, the visitor pulled out the cork with a pop and moved the bottle closer to her mouth, thus I hurriedly leaned forward.

"He-hey hey, don't actually drink it. What if it's actually poi-

The moment I was about to finish my word, the bottle was shoved inside my mouth with such speed that I couldn't even catch sight of it, just as I pursed my lips in order to pronounce the "s" sound in my word. As I reflexively bent backwards, the liquid from the bottle flooded my mouth.

"Mghghgh.....! Mgh?"

At first, I was about spit out the liquid due to being shocked by the irritation of the carbonic acid, but then the invigorating sweet and sourness, as well as the mellow fragrance, assailed my taste buds, causing me to finish drinking the entirety of the bottle's content

while still holding it in my mouth. I then pulled out the now empty bottle from my mouth and exhaled, before saying the following.

"It was the apple type. Though I didn't really feel any alcohol, so I guess it was Japanese apple cider....."

"Oh, so how was the flavour?"

"It was tasty; especially since it didn't come with any bad status. I kinda want to drink a large bootful of it."

"O-oh..... In that case, I should have taste-tested it myself as well....."

This time, Asuna was the one who stopped mid-sentence; after repeatedly blinking several times—

'Pfff', she burst out. Since she continued laughing so hard that she had to hold her stomach, I looked around my surroundings and myself, though I couldn't spot any changes in particular.

"W-what the heck is going on."

When I asked this question, Asuna took out a hand mirror from the pile of stuff on the bed and tossed it to me, rather than giving me an answer.

As for why a guy with no interest in fashion at all would have a mirror, it's because a mirror is a handy tool for checking what's beyond a corner in a dungeon, or for using it to reflect light at enemies. The hand mirror I received as a present from Kayaba Akihiko on the day the death game began was, unfortunately, broken to pieces when I dropped it out of shock of seeing Klein's and my own IRL faces; this little gem is a far higher grade mirror made from crystal.

When I looked into the mirror nervously, I saw—— that my face had been dyed in such a vivid ruby-red that I even winced a bit.

"Uwah, wh-wh-what the heck is this!?"

"Ahahaha..... I kind of guessed that this would happen."

As Asuna was having a blast from the situation as always, I spitefully asked.

"How.....?"

"Well, the word '*blush*' means 'getting red in the face', after all. I would have told you what that word meant too, if you had just asked."

"Grrr....."

Although I subconsciously let out a grr, this situation was brought about by my lack of English proficiency. 'If only Aincrad had some English textbooks, I'd study from them every night.....', while thinking about stuff that I'd probably forget about the next day, I looked at the mirror and saw that, luckily, the ruby colour of my face had slowly begun to fade.

Heaving a deep sigh of relief, I began searching my memories to recall how we ended up with this conversation in the first place. If I recall correctly, Asuna had said that I didn't do things properly, and that was brought up because—

"Oh, right right, that chanto skill. In the end, what is that thing?"

"Huh? Oh, you're talking about that."

Having stared fixedly at one more bottle of Blush Cider that remained on the table, Asuna raised her head as she said the following.

"It's not the Japanese word «*chanto*» (properly), but rather the English word «*chant*» . It's a *Chant* skill."

"Grr..... More English..... Though, I wonder, did such a skill exist in the beta test....."

"Ah, so it's probably like that one. Like your «Martial Arts» skill, Kirito-kun....."

"What, an Extra Skill!?"

Subconsciously, I half-rose to my feet.

Today was the third of January, 2023. With the New Year's mood already dissipated on the frontmost lines, Asuna and I had been working through Aincrad's 6th Floor as well, when I figured it was time for a break at our inn..... just then, my temporary partner said, "I need to talk with you for a bit", and entered my room just as I was in the midst of organising my storage.

However, if the topic of the conversation was related to extra skills, even I wasn't reluctant to hear it out. On the contrary, I was very much interested in the topic. After all, it's nearly been two months since SAO's official service began, yet only two Extra Skills are known at this point: the «Martial Arts» skill that you can get on the 2nd Floor, and the «Meditation» skill with dubious use that was discovered during the beta period. Thus, the past few days I was thinking that it would be nice to find some new skill already.

".....So, what is that '*chant*' thingie?"

When I asked this question while remaining in my imaginary chair pose, Asuna gave me a complacent smile for some reason.

"It means «*song*» or «*sing*» ."

"S-sooong?How is that different from the English words *song* and *sing*.....?"

"To be precise, it refers to «sacred songs» and «chanting» in the Catholic Church. Like Gregorian Chants or Byzantine Chants."

"H-hah....."

Those sounded like words that I've never heard of, but since it seemed like asking about them would result in another digression, I just nodded and returned to the topic.

".....So, that means that the Extra Skill is, that is to say, a skill for singing songs?"

"That seems to be the case. System-wise, the skill's name is rendered as «吟唱 (ginshou)» in Japanese. How's about it, Kirito-kun, wanna try getting that skill for yourself?"

"G-grrr....."

Letting out the third grr of the day, I sat back down on my chair.

It's the long-standing ambition of numerous gamers to seek out «hidden skills» ; naturally, I do very much enjoy doing so myself as well, but I can't quite even imagine a skill for singing songs in the first place.

".....Um, but what's stopping you from just singing songs without it? There were even plenty of guys singing in a chorus after drinking alcohol in the New Year's Eve party....."

"Ah, looks like I didn't explain it clearly enough. To be precise, it appears to be a skill that triggers buffs as a result of cheering people on with songs."

"Oh!"

Now I could very much accept it. That is to say, it's probably a skill equivalent to the abilities of a «bard» in other games. However,

when I imagined the skill being put to use, I had a strange and unnerving feeling about it. After all, SAO is the world's first VRMMO-RPG, so if you wanted to use song buff, that meant....."

".....Ehm, so that is to say, the *Chant* skill requires singing an actual song on the battlefield..... is that right? Does it have some special songs? Or is anything O K as long as it's a song.....?"

"Ugh..... huh, I wonder....."

Perhaps even Asuna hadn't actually considered the practical details before as she answered with a complicated expression.

"Even I have only heard talks about it on the level of rumours from Liten, after all....."

"Oh, so that means that the ALS was the one who found the skill quest then? In that case, that sounds quite credible."

"If you're so interested in it, how about we investigate it together?"

As she proposed the idea so promptly, I barely managed to close my mouth in time before I ended up going with the flow and saying "sure". Based on my experience so far, I had a premonition that I'd be the one forced to take up the skill; however, if I, a person known as the 《Rogue Beater》 or 《Blackie》 by the Clearer Group, were to abruptly start singing during a boss fight, it could result in a great disaster with everyone in the raid group bursting out in laughter, despite getting some buffs out of it.

"Ah, ehhm, umm....."

How can I avoid such a disaster while still investigating that Extra Skill?, I thought desperately, before deciding to say the following in the end.

"I-I'm not reluctant to do some research on the skill, but I think I'd rather hear your songs, Asuna, instead of getting the skill myself. That way, I'd be more fired up on the battlefield too."

Just go with it!, just as I hoped she would accept my excuse—

"Wha.....Hey, w-what's with that all of a sudden."

Since Asuna muttered this while lying face down, I belatedly realised that I had said something inappropriate as I peeked at the fencer's face.

At that moment, her usually Forest Elf-like white skin seemed to suddenly turn red, or maybe that was my imagination.....

"Ah, n-no, this isn't what you think!"

Having noticed my glance, Asuna cried out while pressing down her cheeks with her hands, before grabbing the second bottle of «Blush Cider» that was on the table, quickly pulling out its cork, and gulping down its content.

"Ah, I was so thirsty. This thing really is tasty, I'd like to drink full-plate-armourful of it."

As she said this, her face became as red as a ripe tomato, just like my face had been mere moments ago.

Hesitating whether I should pass her the hand mirror while bursting out in laughter, or refrain from doing so, I thought, 'Even with her face dyed in bright red like this, a beauty is still a beauty'.

(The End)



川原 磯

イラスト／abec

ソードアートオンライン

トオル・ライエン

ホープフル・チャント

Hopeful Chant

TRANSLATION GSIMENAS EDITING ZEHAFFEN RAW TAKAZUKI

October 2023 Onwards

1

"Team B, Team C, prepare for a Party Switch!"

Shouted Asuna, raising the «Wintry Stroke +2» rapier in her right hand high. Reflecting the light of torches burning on the dungeon wall, the blade shined bluish-white. The six members of Team C, who were confronting a large monster at the end of the passageway, called out "Roger!", "Okay!"; the five members of Team B under Asuna's command also gave strained answers from the rear.

Floating Castle Aincrad fortieth floor, Labyrinth Tower twenty-third floor.

Being the sole passageway to the next floor, the Labyrinth was, inevitably, about a hundred metres high. The number of floors inside it depended on the design theme, but, in general, there were quite commonly about thirty floors. This tower should also be a little less than eighty percent covered already. The topmost floor, where the Floor Boss awaited, was steadily getting closer.

Boss monsters, the greatest hurdle in clearing the game on each floor, were predicted to be outstandingly powerful at the quarter points: the twenty-fifth floor, the fiftieth floor, and the seventy-fifth floor, while the bosses every ten floors followed them power-wise. Meaning that once they defeated the fortieth Floor Boss, the next hurdle would be the fiftieth floor.....The fiftieth floor made up the midpoint of the floating castle.

An even fiercer fight than that of the twenty-fifth floor probably awaited them there, but if they could break through it, the clearing of Aincrad will have crossed the turning point. One year after this death game started, the final goal of clearing the game, which had

been awfully despairing so far, and the release of all players into the real world would finally be faintly in sight.

So, they were not having a hard fight at a place like this. They were going to break through something as measly as the mid-boss and find the route to the topmost floor before the day was over.

The monster they were currently fighting was, befitting the «Prison» design theme of the fortieth floor, a massive jailer. Its proper name was «Ruthless Warder Chief». Although humanoid, it was, of course, not a human; all of its skin was dark red, its bizarrely large and long arms were grasping metal rods with countless thorns, and beyond its steel mask shined eyes of muddy yellow.

Its attack patterns were simple, consisting solely of brandishing its metal rod with all its might, but the power of even a single attack was large, therefore the attackers couldn't get in close. However, during the battle that continued for close to twenty minutes, they were finally able to grasp all of its patterns, thus they were going to press on at once when they stepped forward during the next Switch.

Having decided on this, Asuna stared at the Warder Chief, who had raised his metal rod high overhead.

"Team C, on the count of 3! 2, 1....."

In response to the monster's roar that was similar to the hitting of a bass drum,

"Zero!"

Asuna's shout overlapped it.

The huge metal rod coming horizontally was met by Team C's leader's glaive, glowing with a green light effect. The other five also combined their multicoloured single-strike Sword Skills.

An intense sound of impact roared throughout the passageway and the Warder Chief, who had its metal rod repelled, was taken aback. The six members of Team C were similarly pushed backwards. The two high-power attacks collided and both were knocked back.

This knockback was the crux of «Switch» , the most fundamental and essential technique in SAO.

In order to exchange places with comrades through Switching, it was necessary to force a break in the battle for a fixed time. In the case of a Switch between two partners who worked smoothly, a moment's worth of interruption created by guarding against the enemy's strong attack or forcing it to guard against theirs was sufficient, but in the case of a six-member party changing places in its entirety, a so-called Party Switch, it was essential to produce a break that lasted at least three seconds.

The knockback created by all the members combining their Sword Skills against the enemy's full swing greatly staggered the Warder Chief, but the six of them were also pushed back nearly five metres. However, that was the plan. A sufficiently long break that came about due to months of special practice.

"Team B, forward!"

Giving instructions in a loud voice, Asuna kicked off the dungeon floor.

Breaking through the rigid members of Team C, she went to the forefront.

The Warder Chief had yet to recover from its backward-bent state. Sharply drawing the rapier in her right hand, she executed a three-hit combo Sword Skill, «Triangular» , at the monster's weak point, the knees. The first of its two HP bars was eliminated with a cracking effect, reaching the second one.

"Durudaran!!"

A roar of anger in monster language surged out as the jailer recovered from its backward-bent state. This was the critical moment.

"Segro, Muldar, draw its aggro from the front! The attack pattern might have changed, so focus on defence. Fultz, to the right; Sanza and Nautilus, spread out to the left!"

After she gave her instructions as fast as she could, the two Team B tanks, raising their large shields, leapt in front of the Warder Chief and simultaneously engaged their provocation skill,

«Threatful Roar» . The yellow eyes that had been glaring at Asuna turned toward the two men.

During that opening, Asuna met up with the mace user Fultz and went around the monster to its right.

On the opposite side, the spearman Sanza and the one-handed sword user Nautilus spread out—

Or should have. However.

Only the large-built Sanza, gripping a cross-spear, broke into a run, while the swordsman with a shield that was supposed to support him was nowhere in sight.

In the case of Warder Chief's narrow-range attack, the two tanks pulling the aggro could just withstand by guarding, but in the case of a horizontal swing wide-range attack, the four attackers would also have no choice but to defend or dodge. If there were a lot of space in the area, it would be possible to dodge with a backward step, but this passageway was only six metres-wide.

The jailer's horizontal swing attack would reach from one edge of the passageway to the other, thus it was necessary to guard with either a shield or a weapon.

A rapier was a fundamentally inappropriate weapon for guarding, but Asuna's beloved sword was not bound by that. She had turned her first beloved sword, the «Wind Fleuret», into raw materials and had a Dark Elven blacksmith craft it into a sharp sword, the «Chilvalric Rapier»; her «Wintry Stroke», born again from the raw materials the rapier was turned into, boasted attack power and durability that would be unimaginable from its delicate appearance, and could easily use its sides to guard against an attack from a measly mid-boss.

Yet, Sanza's cross-spear, despite having no shortcomings in attack power and reach, had a wooden handle and thus lacked durability. He was advised time and time again to change to a full-metal lance-type or halberd-type weapon, but due to seemingly having a strong obsession, he didn't comply.

Right now, even Asuna understood that such an obsession could bring forth a power that didn't appear on a status window, and he could withstand the enemy's area attack if he had a swordsman with a shield with him. The formation was based on that conclusion. However.

"Nautilus, what happened!?"

She shouted, sensing that some trouble had occurred without looking behind her, but there was no answer. She considered whether she should call someone from Team C, but they had exhausted themselves fighting and were now using potions to recover. If she forced them to join the battle with low HP, it could turn out bad.

".....Sanza, retreat!"

Shouted Asuna, grinding her teeth. A spear was a weapon proficient at debuffing, so it couldn't be helped that the burden on the tanks would increase if he were gone. The four of them had to hold out somehow until Team C recovered, then once again execute a Party Switch and investigate why Nautilus couldn't move.

Having heard Asuna's instructions, Sanza made a regretful expression for a moment. He and Nautilus had just risen to the guild's First Army together on the fortieth floor, and were full of hope that they would definitely be picked as members for the Floor Boss clearing. His chagrin at retreating without getting to do anything was understandable, but that eagerness backfired at that moment.

A moment quicker than the spearman could fall back.

"Diruaah!!"

The Warden Chief, roaring at its loudest, held its huge metal rod horizontally, close to the floor.

"Area attack! Low guard!!"

The moment Asuna shouted this, the at least thirty centimetre-wide metal rod came attacking with a roar. Asuna and Fultz on the right wing, as well as Segro and Muldar in the centre, narrowly succeeded in guarding against the fan-shaped sweep attack.

However, Sanza, who hadn't managed to retreat in time, pierced his spear into the floor to guard—

And the black metal rod of its handle was cruelly broken.

"Guaah!"

Suffering a hard blow to his waist, Sanza was blown away.

He crashed into the wall right behind him and collapsed onto the floor. One of her party members' HP bars, displayed on the left side of Asuna's view, swiftly decreased by over thirty percent.

"Darurururu....."

Letting out a weird laugh, the Ruthless Warden Chief turned its face toward Sanza.

Some of the jailer monsters loitering on the fortieth floor known as the prison floor had a troublesome algorithm known as

«Bullying» . As that name, which was English for «tormenting the weak» , implied, it was a trait of ignoring the usual hate value and aiming for players who had collapsed and couldn't move or who had suffered a debuff.

"Shi....."

Asuna attempted to attack the Warden Chief in order to prevent the final blow on Sanza, but, due to crouch-guarding against the large blow, she had been imposed a short-term rigidity and couldn't move her legs. The tanks Segro and Muldar were similarly unable to stand up.

"Sanza, run!"

She shouted earnestly, but perhaps because he suffered from a weak stun due to enduring consecutive high-damage attacks, Sanza remained collapsed. Aiming for the defenceless back of the spearman, the jailer raised its weapon overhead. On the atrociously designed metal rod, a venomously vivid violet light appeared. A Sword Skill— could possibly cause death in a single attack if it landed a direct hit.

A chilly shiver ran through Asuna's entire body.

"Duruah!!"

The certain-kill metal rod, swung down with a roar—

Bounced back due to a slash that even the eyes couldn't catch, from a figure that rushed in from the back of the passageway like a hurricane.

Just as she had reasonably thought that Nautilus had finally returned, Asuna's intuition denied this possibility.

The dash speed, the power of the slash - both of them were impossible for a beginner like Nautilus. Asuna knew this presence from before.

The swordsman, who had offset the mid-boss's Sword Skill with a regular dash attack rather than a Sword Skill, turned to Sanza as his hem fluttered, and shouted.

"I'll take over the left! You fall back and heal up!"

Having pulled up Sanza by the arms, he had Sanza fall back. At the remark of the swordsman who was trying to cover the opening left by two people, not only the members of Team B, but also the ones from the Team C, who were currently healing, caused a stir, but there was no one to object. All of them knew. The power of the player who joined them at the spur of a moment.

Shutting out the many emotions sweeping over her heart, Asuna shouted.

".....I am counting on you!"

The black-clothed swordsman gazed at Asuna for just a moment from within his slightly long forelocks, and nodded.

From then on, the sense of the battle's stability felt as if their enemy were not a mid-boss on the foremost lines of the Labyrinth, but a field Mob on a floor way below.

This was only natural, seeing as the swordsman, with machine-like swift and accurate movements as well as superhuman foresight, crushed almost all of the attacks the Warder Chief let out. Even the two tanks joined in on the attack midway through, thus the second HP bar very rapidly whittled away and, in less than a mere five minutes, the formidable Ruthless Warder Chief's huge figure dispersed throughout the dim Labyrinth.

With a gallant sound effect, the result screen was displayed and the members of both parties let out grand cheers, but Asuna didn't feel like joining them.

"Recover your HP."

Giving instructions to her comrades in the area, she left the circle. She stepped up to the black-clothed player further down the passageway, who was putting his longsword away into a scabbard on his back.

She had instantly gone through at least ten different patterns for calling out to the man, but what left her mouth was the most dull and uninteresting phrase.

"I appreciate the support."

Then, the player turned about a hundred and sixty degrees and gazed at Asuna from a slight angle.

"Oh well..... I had to go through here anyway."

At his somewhat reserved-mannered reply, she felt a prickling pain in her chest. It had been close to half a year since they disbanded their group, but there was still no sign of his pain disappearing.

Quelling the emotions inside her with a deep breath, Asuna greeted her former partner and the only solo player currently among the Clearers, Kirito, with her eyes.

".....You're still going further ahead?"

Upon being asked, the swordsman calmly nodded as if he felt no fear in stepping forth into an unexplored area by himself.

"Yeah, since I want to find the boss room soon."

"I see.....be careful."

"Thanks, you too."

The swordsman lightly waved his hand without giving a smile, once again turned his back to her, and his figure disappeared into the darkness of the passageway. Having waited until the faint footsteps disappeared, Asuna slowly turned back.

Suddenly, the ache in her chest turned into an intense urge, and she choked.

She wanted to throw away the cape dyed in the white and red colours of her guild, throw away the sigil ring she wore on one of her right fingers, and go after Kirito. She wanted to shout 'I've withdrawn from my guild, so form a duo with me again' to that nostalgic back.

However, she couldn't allow herself to do that. Because the one who chose to break the duo she had with Kirito all the way to the twenty-fifth Floor Boss battle, and to join the emerging guild
«Knights of the Blood» , was Asuna herself.

Somehow quelling her urge and converting it into a sigh, Asuna returned to her guildmates. She had to ask the newbie of Team B, Nautilus, why he had ignored the order for the Party Switch. However, before Asuna could find Nautilus, she heard a sharp voice from the group.

"Hey, you, why didn't you Switch!?"

The voice that didn't even try to hide its anger belonged to Sanza. When she approached them in a half-run, the large spearman, grasping the cruelly broken cross-spear handle in his left hand, had lifted a thin player by the nape with his right hand.

"Stop it!"

Having quickly forced her way through and made Sanza release his hand, Asuna stood before Nautilus.

The face that still retained some boyish features—though he would have probably been older than Asuna, in her third year at middle school, at the time he logged in—was more than half hidden by his fluttering, decayed-leaf-coloured hair. His eyes were downcast, but his mouth was mortifyingly distorted and his tightly squeezed fists were trembling slightly.

Having once again looked at the HP bar displayed under the player name 【N a u t i l u s】 , she saw that it had barely decreased and had no debuff icon. Meaning that the reason for not abiding her instructions for the Switch was neither damage nor a debuff.

"In the end, we defeated the monster and we have no intention of condemning you here."

Asuna addressed Nautilus, his eyes still cast downward, in a whisper.

".....But, for a party battle, the most important thing is tightly-knit cooperation. I need to hear the reason you were unable to act according to my instructions."

The moment she said this, Nautilus looked at Asuna's face for just a moment, and said in a creaky voice."

"Even I.....tried to step forward."

Once again casting his eyes down, staring at his own boots—

"But, my legs.....just wouldn't move."

Taking her eyes off the guild member who shut his mouth as if he had nothing more to say, Asuna spent a moment thinking, then gave an instruction to everyone.

".....We will now be returning to town for the day. Formation D number two; do not let your guard down till we leave the Labyrinth.

The players who had finished recovering swiftly formed a line. There were four formations for moving in a dungeon: one for speed, one for defence, one for exploration, and one for levelling; number two was the one that focused the most on safety by placing the tanks and scouts in the front and back.

After looking at the passage leading to the upper floor once more, Asuna raised her right hand and waved it forward.

"Move out."

2

The headquarters for the Knights of the Blood guild was located on the thirty-ninth floor, not far off the foremost line.

Today was the 15th of October, 2023; the town opening occurred a week before, on the 8th of October, so with that in mind, they had just moved in from a lower floor.

Having disbanded her party in the main town of the fortieth floor, Asuna was about to carelessly indicate the twenty-fifth floor, the previous location of their headquarters, as her destination at the Teleport Gate, but voiced the correct destination at the last moment and teleported one floor below.

The main town of the thirty-ninth floor, «Nolfret», was a typical "town in the countryside of a fantasy world" with no special features to speak of. It had plenty of trees and waterside scenery, and the red roofs on every house were also lovely; Asuna by no means disliked it, but it had few restaurants and bars, thus it couldn't really be called popular among her guild members.

The guild headquarters was a rural mansion, standing at the outskirts of the town of Nolfret in obscurity; when it was announced that the guild would be moving from the metropolis of «Giltstein», the main town of the twenty-fifth floor, to this place, none of the members were able to surmise the guild leader's intentions.

However, they all understood his reasoning by the time they moved over.

The field beyond the gate very near their headquarters was abundant in ore and herb collection points, as well as seething with «awfully firm but weak» -type monsters most suitable for battle practice, and monsters that dropped high-quality leather and scales.

For the headquarters of a developing guild that pursued the main guilds of the Clearing Group—recently, it was frequently shortened to «Clearers» —there wasn't really a more appropriate place.

'I wonder how on earth the leader managed such a lucky find despite not really going out much.....', Asuna thought as she passed through the gate of the two-storey mansion.

Atop the front door fluttered the deep-crimson guild flag with an undyed crest that consisted of the three letters «KoB», the abbreviation of «Knights of the Blood», the guild's English name, along with crossed swords. Passing beneath it, she entered the mansion, went up the stairs at the front of the hall, and came to the guild leader's room at the northern tip of the second floor.

Upon checking the time and knocking on the door, the reply "Come in" came instantly.

"Excuse me."

She bowed and entered. The approximately ten-jō-wide room was dim, with the red of the setting sun shining in from the south window. A huge desk, close to two metres wide, was placed near the window and a man was sitting there with the sun shining from his back.

Standing in front of the desk made of extravagant, solid mahogany wood that cost who knows how many cor, Asuna once again lowered her head.

"I shall report on today's floor clearing efforts."

"Mmhm."

The man, who had nodded and raised his head, had long, steel-grey hair tied behind him and was wearing a deep crimson robe on his slender and tall figure. He was probably aged around his late

twenties and his composed demeanour was more like that of a scholar than a swordsman, but the light dwelling in his brass-coloured eyes was sharper and more solemn than anyone's.

His player name was Heathcliff. He was a bigwig who raised the late-starting Knight of the Blood into one of the core guilds of the Clearers in merely half a year since founding it. Although the man called «Commander» by the guild members was adored—or more like worshiped by the other guild members, Asuna always felt like she was suffocating when she stood before this man.

After sucking in some of the cool, dry air and calming down, she opened her mouth.

".....We have arrived at the twenty-third floor of the fortieth floor Labyrinth. Although the mapping is completed to about seventy percent, I believe we will be able to find the boss room tomorrow or the day after that."

"I see, thank you for your work. Are we moving ahead of all the others?"

"That was the case until today, but....."

After stammering for a bit, Asuna added an explanation.

"During the battle against the mid-boss-class monster on the twenty third floor, an issue came up and we received aid from a passing player. We pulled back after the conclusion of the battle, thus, currently, that player is ahead of us, I believe."

"Hmm. The DKB?"

As Heathcliff mentioned the name of the «Dragon Knights Brigade», the oldest yet biggest guild among the Clearers, Asuna quickly shook her head.

"No..... a solo player."

At that moment, the guild leader nodded with a faint wry smile.

"I see, so it's him. He seems to be improving his skills even more, huh..... I wonder if I should try to invite him once more right about now."

"I believe that would be pointless."

"If you say so, Asuna-kun, I shall wait a bit for now."

With his smile having disappeared, Heathcliff laced his fingers atop the desk.

"Setting that aside.....what was that issue that occurred during the battle? Seeing as it was enough to make you interrupt the battle, I assume that it wasn't something trifling?"

Asuna hesitated on how to answer him. Heathcliff wasn't the kind of person to pointlessly raise his voice and be angry without it showing on his face, but, at the same time, he was a complete pragmatist. She couldn't say that there was no chance of him making a heartless decision if he knew about Nautilus's
『condition』.

However, she couldn't just remain silent. Today, because Nautilus had been unable to move, Sanza's life was exposed to danger. In the death game of SAO, where the total loss of one's HP would result in their death in real life, the safety of the players had to be treated as the utmost priority.

Not only for the sake of the other members, but for Nautilus himself as well, she had to share information.

".....As a matter of fact....."

In a few minutes, Asuna finished explaining everything that had happened during the fight against the Ruthless Warder Chief and Heathcliff closed his eyes, muttering "Hmm....."

He instantly raised his eyelids, and his brass-coloured eyes stared at Asuna.

"Was today Nautilus-kun's first time participating in clearing the Labyrinth?"

"Yes. Because he had moved up to the First Army, along with Sanza, only last week."

Nodding, Asuna glanced outside the window. In the front yard of the mansion, four or five players were practicing coordinated action.

Currently, the KoB guild had a total of twenty-six members. Eighteen of them were members of the First Army's A, B, and C parties, while six had become members of the Second Army in no time since joining the guild. One of the two remaining members was Commander Heathcliff, who basically only took part in Floor Boss battles. The other was Daizen, a cheerful man, but he had been entrusted with single-handedly managing the guild's resources, thus he also barely took part in battles on the front lines.

Team A's leader was a two-handed sword user named Godfree, Team B's leader was Asuna, and Uzala, a glaive user, was entrusted as the leader of Team C, which was formed at the same time as the guild moved its headquarters; adding Daizen to the group, the four of them were the players managing the guild. Nautilus and Sanza's promotions were a result of the discussion among these four people; as a general rule, Heathcliff would not say a word about party compositions.

"I see..... —In the battles before now, Nautilus-kun had no problems with fighting?"

At this new question, Asuna nodded a second time.

"Yes.Though, today was his first time fighting against a large, mid-boss-class monster. So, it's only natural to end up cowering....."

As Asuna naturally stuck up for Nautilus, Heathcliff's eyes looked at her face with a compelling force, as if they were magnets.

"If it were merely a case of cowering, it could probably be resolved with practice, but..... the problem could be a bit more deep-rooted."

"What do you have in mind.....?"

"It could be that Nautilus-kun is a slight FNC."

The moment she heard that term, Asuna inhaled sharply.

FNC was an abbreviation of FullDive Non-Conformity; as the name implied, there was some sort of flaw in the NerveGear connecting with the user's brain. With a severe case of FNC, it would be impossible to Dive into a virtual world, nor be trapped in this death game in the first place, but even if Diving itself were accomplishable, there were cases of players having problems with their avatar's sensations or movements.

Asuna's friend, a player named Nezha, also had a case of slight FNC which resulted in a flaw in his perspective, thus making him unable to fight in close combat; having switched over to being a chakram user due to Kirito's recommendation, however, he had become a valuable long-range attacker in SAO and his name was even tied to the Clearers at present.

However, even if Nautilus's condition was the result of FNC, it was highly likely that he wouldn't be able to just cope with it by changing his build.

"But.....what kind of FNC would he have to be unable to move his legs only in specific situations.....?"

When she asked dumbfoundedly, Heathcliff put his pointed chin atop his linked hands and answered, barely moving his mouth.

"The NerveGear reads the motion commands sent out by the brain, converts them to digital code, and transmits them to the avatar in the virtual world. However, you see, the human brain is quite complicated.....it isn't rare for there to be conflicting commands sent simultaneously."

"What do you mean.....?"

"For example, try imagining a scenario of jumping out of a burning building to escape from it. There is a safety mat on the ground and you won't die if you fall on it. But, despite knowing that, it's not like everyone can immediately jump out. On the one hand, reason commands you to jump down, on the other hand, the instinct of self-preservation commands you to remain on the spot."

".....But, in a situation where you would burn to death otherwise, wouldn't you choose to jump out in the end?"

"In the real world, that would probably be the case. At the final moment, the sense of reason dwelling in the cerebral neocortex, the highest-ranking centre of the brain, would overcome one's instincts dwelling in an older part of the brain. However, in the case of a virtual avatar, unless the NerveGear converts the brain's commands into code, you cannot move. If there were a problem with the conversion process or matching, and one's instincts rather than reason end up taking preference....."

".....In a battle against a boss, the avatar could end up unable to move.....?"

At Asuna's words, Heathcliff gave his assent. A composed voice flowed out from his mouth, hidden by his bony hands.

"In that case, it's highly likely that the problem wouldn't be solved by simply getting used to fighting. Because it wouldn't eliminate the instinct of getting away from danger, you see..... —If you conducted some special tuning to the NerveGear to amplify motion commands, it's possible that you'd be able to move then, but....."

"In our situation right now, it would be impossible to do something like that....."

Asuna muttered, and Heathcliff raised his face, blinked a few times, and nodded.

"Yeah, you're right. Nevertheless, this is nothing more than my conjecture in the end. It is possible that, with experience, the problem will be resolved. —Asuna-kun, how would you evaluate Nautilus-kun's abilities?"

At the sudden question, Asuna also blinked before answering.

".....I believe he has a good sense when it comes to Sword Skill activation speed and accuracy. Despite breaking his posture, he practically never messes up the activation.....and he is also earnest and has never skipped out on training or meetings."

"I see..... In that case, it wouldn't be futile to try to solve the problem. I'll leave dealing with him to you, Asuna-kun."

Although these words were half-expected, she still didn't think she'd be entrusted with the decision so easily, thus Asuna faltered.

If Nautilus were truly afflicted with light FNC, she didn't want to just use that as pretext to oust him. However, on the other hand, as a sub-leader, Asuna had the responsibility of protecting the lives of her guild members. Pragmatically, if Kirito hadn't happened to have come by during the battle against the Warder Chief today, the glaive user Sanza's life could have been lost. She couldn't allow such an accident to occur in the upcoming battle against the Floor Boss.

After shaking free from her hesitation that lasted a few seconds, Asuna answered.

".....I will not have Nautilus participating in the fortieth floor boss battle. After getting past the floor, I will investigate his condition again and think of some counter-measures."

"Hmm. Understood. Let's go with that."

Nodding, the guild leader returned his gaze to his hands.

There were tens of piles of parchment on the large, mahogany desk, and while looking at them, Heathcliff typed on his holo-keyboard with extreme speed. He was constantly gathering the latest intel on the hundreds of players aiming to join the clearers, organising that info, and considering new players to invite day after day.

The reason why the Knights of the Blood grew into a top-class clearing guild in merely half a year was due in no small part to Heathcliff's ability at intelligence.

However, it seemed he had no intention of turning the guild into a huge organisation like the DKB or the former ALS. Asuna and the other sub-leaders also agreed with the idea to aim for a guild of a select few that would be small-yet-effective, but specifically because of that goal, she couldn't help but imagine ousting a player as troublesome as Nautilus.

'I won't make it before the boss battle on this floor, but when we get to the next floor I do want to have a proper talk with him and find a solution to his problem.'

Deciding this in her heart, Asuna gave a bow and left the commander's room behind her.

3

"Shittt.....!"

Cursing with in a low, angry voice, Nautilus swung a small dagger downwards with all his might.

The sharp tip of the sword went towards his knee, covered in black leather pants—and just as it was about to be pierced, it was blocked by a violet barrier. The Anti-Criminal Code, effective only in the so-called «Inner Area», activated and obstructed his attempt at self-injury.

The event was repeated two... three times. Of course, the Code wasn't broken by this and the blade did not reach his leg. Nevertheless, he earnestly continued moving his dagger. The violet flash flickered over and over again in a dim inn room.

His party was disbanded at the fortieth floor Teleport Gate plaza and it seemed that the majority of his comrades had returned to their guild home one floor below, but, not feeling like joining them, he wandered around town and plunged into a cheap inn that caught his eye. The new home of the Knights of the Blood was far more elegant than their previous base in an inn on the twenty-fifth floor, but not big enough to be able to supply all twenty-six members with a private room, thus Nautilus stayed in a room that he had to share with three others who joined the guild at the same time. The cross-spear user Sanza was among them; if he returned there now, it would undoubtedly lead to a talk about the recent battle. He was determined to avoid that.

However, just because he shut himself in an inn room alone, his self-loathing wouldn't disappear, and he ended up impulsively pulling out his dagger.

"Shiiit.....!"

His dagger, having been swung down and repelled by the barrier for the umpteenth time, fell out of his right hand and made a dry sound as it landed on the floor.

There was no point in this action at all—after all, even Nautilus understood that it was no more than a farce to make excuses to himself. If he truly wanted to hurt his legs, he could just do it in the Outer Field with no Anti-Criminal Code active, rather than an inn in town. SAO allowed dealing damage to oneself in the Outer Field and, although there was probably no one to have tested this, it should be possible to commit suicide as well.

However, despite not being able to forgive himself that much, he did not have that much courage either.

Even if he did try it, Nautilus's avatar would probably end up unable to move once his HP was on the verge of becoming zero. Just like when he was ordered by the raid leader to Switch in the battle against the Labyrinth's mid-boss.

The fact that his avatar's movements sometimes became dull in states of danger was already known to him before he joined the Knights of the Blood—since the time he first fought against monsters in the Outer Field. However, believing that the issue would be resolved with time and experience, he, obviously, did not consult his other guild members, but neither did he consult even with his childhood friend, whom he valued more than anyone. In fact, in battles against regular monsters nowadays, his condition did not manifest itself even when his HP decreased.

Though, the «Ruthless Warder Chief» they fought today was different from any enemy he had fought till now.

A huge build that nearly touched the high ceiling of the Labyrinth. A spiky metal rod that looked like it could crush players wearing even the heaviest equipment in one strike.

Yellow eyes seething with anger beyond the mask whose design made it look like a prison cell—

'That thing is trying to kill us'; Nautilus felt this so much that it hurt.

Of course, all the monsters he had encountered thus far were trying to do the same, but, after all, they were nothing but lumps of polygons moving according to the commands of their program. However, he couldn't think of the Warder Chief as anything but a being that was trying to massacre the players, no, the people before it by its own will. The moment he perceived the monster as such, Nautilus's legs..... far from just them, his arms, torso, and even eyes became stiff as if they had been petrified, making him unable to move at all.

Even that atrociously huge jailer was no more than a mid-boss guarding the passageway. In that case, just how terrifying a being was the Floor Boss?

Nautilus had left the «Town of Beginnings» on the first floor about half a year after the death game began. Yet, that didn't mean he had just spent that half a year waiting for help in an inn. He had been earnestly practicing Sword Skills in a deserted training field at the outskirts of the town.

Although in SAO, which used a combination of a level/skill system, stats like HP, STR, and AGI could only be raised by fighting against monsters, earning experience points, and levelling up, the proficiency of each skill was not bound by that. For example, in the case of the One-Handed Sword skill Nautilus had chosen, if he earnestly used «Vertical», a basic technique that was available from the start, on empty air in a training field, despite the rate being slower than if he had been using it in actual battle, his proficiency would rise bit by bit and, eventually, the next Sword Skill would become usable.

The reason for using such a tactic, which seemed like knocking on a stone bridge before crossing it, was because there had been quite a

few players who had gone out to the fields, overestimating the skills they had honed before the world was turned into a death game, and were killed by the weakest-class monsters due to careless mistakes.

He earnestly continued practicing against a humanoid dummy for six months, and when he raised the proficiency of his One-Handed Sword skill to 150, unlocking the four-hit technique «Horizontal Square», Nautilus finally left the town. He cowered even in his first battle against an actual monster, but, knowing that he could easily defeat it with a powerful sword skill that did not suit his level, his fear faded and, through radical leveling that even exhausted the farming grounds, he finally reached the point where he could see the backs of the top players.

No, since he was even scouted by the KoB, a clearing guild based on the principle of having only a select few members, he should even be able to say that he had succeeded in joining the top players, even if his absolute stats weren't on the level of a true front runner.

And yet, to think that in a battle against a mid-boss at best, he became unable to move in an unsightly manner.

".....Why....."

His raised, empty right hand feebly hit his knee, along with this hoarse voice of his.

With things like this, he would be unable to fulfil his promise. The precious promise he exchanged with his childhood friend, more precious to him than anyone else, the day he discovered that they were involved in a death game—the promise that 'I will protect you and ensure that you return to the real world'.

The reason why he continued practicing against a humanoid dummy despite being laughed at as a coward by unknown players was because he couldn't leave his childhood friend on the off-chance she died because of that.

As he sat on the inn's hard bed, head hanging way down in shame, a light sound reached Nautilus's ears. It was the ringtone for a friend message.

There was but one player Nautilus had registered as a friend. He opened his main menu and displayed the newly-arrived message.

After continuing to stare at the short letter for more than ten seconds, Nautilus slowly rose from the bed, picked up the dagger on the floor, and left the room.

The main town of the fortieth floor, «Jaileum», was once a huge jail lore-wise; enclosed from all four sides by stone walls at least twenty metres tall, the entire town was dim. The illumination was scarce even at night, and each time the iron bars, still remaining at various places, opened and closed, a jarring sound was created.

Having returned to the Teleport Gate plaza from the inn, Nautilus looked around the square space with grey stone paving. There was quite a bit of pedestrian traffic before six in the afternoon, but he found the figure he was looking for, wearing a white, hooded cape, in the northwestern corner and approached it in a half-run.

"Yuna, what's up."

He called out at the female player who turned around and lightly puffed her cheeks in displeasure.

"Don't you 'what's up' me when I went out of my way to see how you were doing."

"Eh..... it's just that it's rare to see you coming to the foremost lines..... Besides, this town doesn't look like a place you'd enjoy, Yuna."

After staring at Nautilus as he retracted his head while making excuses, "Eh-kun, you're still the same as always even after

becoming distinguished, I see.", she said as she gave a smile inside her hood. Called by a nickname based on his real name, Nochizawa Eiji, Nautilus retracted his head even further.

Yuna was his childhood friend that had Dived into this world with him. Her real name was Shigemura Yuuna; they lived in the same neighbourhood and went to the same kindergarten, elementary school, and middle school. Yuuna then went to an all-girls school, thus they ended up going to different high schools, but because both of them liked games, they continued their friendly relationship thereafter.

Eiji had a liking for her ever since kindergarten, but whether it was because she was too close to him or because he simply lacked the courage, he had been unable to open his heart to her. When he invited her with, "Let's play SAO together", it was due in part to feeling that he would be able to confess if he were in a completely virtual world created by the NerveGear.

In the first place, since Yuuna had been learning to play the piano and classic guitar ever since childhood, her favourite game genre was onge and she didn't seem to have much interest in MMORPGs; he invited her mostly because he had nothing to lose, but, to his surprise, she accepted the invitation. There were musical skills in SAO as well, and it seemed that this was what drew Yuuna's interest in the game.

The next issue was how to obtain the expensive hardware, as well as the software of which merely ten thousand units (nine thousand if you excluded the units that beta testers had priority in purchasing) were available during the initial sale; the former was solved by making use of the money he had been saving since childhood, but as for the software, he was in a predicament where he couldn't buy it even though he wanted to. He participated in every single raffle to buy it from a net shop, but all of his entries were unsuccessful, thus he was resolved that his only other option was to stand in line at a retail store all night, but a lifesaver came from a place he didn't even think of.

Yuuna's father was the professor advising Kayaba Akihiko, the developer of SAO and the NerveGear, during his days as a student and had been helping him with research into FullDive technology. Eiji, who knew that the professor was a teacher at a technical institute but didn't even consider the possibility that he had such connections, went to thank Professor Shigemura for obtaining two SAO packages for him. On top of it having been years since they had last met directly, the professor dearly loved his only daughter, thus Eiji felt greatly stressed during their meeting.

And so, on the 6th of November, 2022.

Eiji and Yuuna, who logged into SAO from their own rooms, discovered that Professor Shigemura's disciple, Kayaba Akihiko, turned their virtual world that should have been overflowing with dreams and hopes into a death game with no escape.

Close to a year had passed since that day.

Having promised to the frightened Yuuna in the central plaza of the Town of Beginnings that, "I will protect you and ensure that you return to the real world", Eiji strived to practice Sword Skills in order to accomplish this and became a member of a clearing guild named the KoB.

He was also selected to become a member of the First Army's parties and came much closer to his final goal of clearing the death game with his own hands—the moment he thought this, it ended with today's disgrace.

Despite not having met with Yuuna/Yuna for the past three days, Eiji/Nautilus looked away from the face of his childhood friend, unable to smile as he always would. He attempted to shake off the gloom lurking in his chest somehow, but before he could do that, a worried voice came to him.

"Did something happen, Eh-kun?"

".....I keep telling you to stop calling me that in town."

Answering with his face still turned away, he deeply inhaled some of the virtual air and, after calming down his emotions to some extent, gave a short answer.

"I kinda made a bit of a blunder in the battle, you see."

"Hmmph, and so you're so depressed because of that."

"I-it's not like I'm depressed or....."

Stopping Nautilus mid-sentence by going around him to face him from the front, Yuna lightly poked his chest with her index finger.

"How many years do ya think I've been lookin' at your face, Eh-..... I mean, Nau-kun. Today's depression is about level 7."

".....What kind of scale is that on.....?"

"Ten grade."

Answering with an impish smile, Yuna moved her hand inside the leather bag on her waist and took out a somewhat biggish glass bottle.

As the multicoloured candies inside of it would come out very quickly, he reflexively ended up raising his palms. Yuna swung the bottle and an orange candy fell onto Nautilus's hands.

"Lick it and cheer up."

".....I'm not a kid anymore....."

Despite complaining, he put the candy in his mouth and, contrary to the colour, tasted the bittersweet flavour of strawberries.

Ever since childhood, Yuna—Yuuna always had some fruit-flavoured throat lozenges in her pocket, and when Eiji was angry or dejected, she'd give him a piece. Even after coming to Aincrad, it seemed that this trait of hers remained unchanged.

Once she returned the bottle into her leather bag, Yuna said in her usual big-sister-like tone.

"Nau-kun, you're still a nobody in the guild, so isn't it only normal that you make mistakes? The KoB isn't that kind of thick-headed guild to not forgive a single mistake from a newbie. Just be careful not to repeat the same mistake next time."

The smile on Yuna's face was exactly like Yuuna's smile in the real world.

The NerveGear reproduced the player's physical appearance, so it was only natural, but it seemed the scan of the player's face by microwaves wasn't perfect, and he had heard there were plenty of players who felt some subtle differences between the looks of their avatars and their actual bodies.

Eiji himself felt that Nautilus's face looked more timid than his actual self did and was a bit discontent with that, but the reproduction of Yuna's face could be said to be flawless.

Looking at the face of his childhood friend, whom he had been unable to confess his feelings for during the nearly one year since coming to the virtual world, he felt his emotions becoming just a bit lighter, yet some anxiety that he couldn't wipe away continued to remain in his chest.

It was true that Nautilus had committed but one mistake in today's Labyrinth battle. However, because of that mistake, the weapon of Sanza, a glaive user who was promoted to the First Army along with him, was broken and the man himself had barely avoided death. What's more, the condition of his body freezing up when he felt

danger would likely appear again after today as well. He did not even know the means to be able to conquer this state.

".....You don't know, Yuna; the pressure of the foremost lines."

Having ended up replying so while chewing his candy, he suddenly shut his mouth.

During the time he was training his One-Handed Sword skill, the two had lived in the same inn— though, of course, in separate rooms— but after Nautilus joined the KoB, they separated; Yuna was currently renting a room for one person in the main town of the tenth floor. Before he knew it, she seemed to have even acquired the Dagger skill and started doing some safe farming to earn her living expenses, but, honestly feeling anxious even about that, he kept asking her, 'Please don't go out into the Outer Field'.

However, having known her for a long time, Nautilus could easily imagine that the seemingly obedient yet strong-willed girl also wished in her heart to fight at the foremost line herself.

Despite showing a gloomy face for but a moment, Yuna instantly turned it back into a smile and spoke.

"That might be the case, but I can at least cheer you up, Nau-kun."

Before he could reply, she took a step back and removed the white hood she always wore.

Her rather short hair, swaying due to the dry autumn breeze, was light brown like milk tea. It was not a colour present in the default colour set, but there were proportionately rare hair dyeing items that could dye one's hair to such a bright colour, though even Nautilus didn't know where Yuna had acquired one.



As he instinctively became worried about what she planned to do in a plaza with so many people, Yuna walked along the wall, pulling Nautilus by his hands, and approached an NPC orchestra standing in a corner of the plaza.

The trio, carrying instruments that looked like a violin, cello, and an oboe, were playing a calm, nocturne-like melody. There was no game-like BGM in SAO, but—supposing that music was played in fields and dungeons in a VRMMO, it would end up raising the question of who was playing it—in towns, NPC orchestras like this one played music day and night as a replacement for BGM.

Yuna stood next to an NPC with a short mustache, playing a woodwind instrument, and placed her hands on her chest.

She closed her eyelids and, after several deep breaths, opened her mouth—

She began singing at a volume that had no chance of being overwhelmed by the three instruments.

The moment the carefree mezzo-soprano resounded throughout the Teleport Gate plaza, the majority of players hurriedly moving back and forth stopped. The conversations and footsteps that had drowned out the NPC orchestra's performance slowly disappeared, and only Yuna's voice flowed lightly through the now silent plaza.

The lyrics were in Japanese and it seemed to be a song about the evening spectacle and the feelings of people following the road home. Most likely, Yuna herself added words to the nocturne played by the NPC orchestra.

Tens of players became lost in her beautiful yet lonely song, kindling feelings of nostalgia. The scene both moved and surprised Nautilus.

It was one thing for the Town of Beginnings on the first floor, with nothing but people on standby with too much time on their hands, but this was the foremost line. Of course, there were quite a few tourists, but even players from the Clearers, who used every second

to vigorously push forward to clear the game, were enraptured by Yuna's voice, some having closed their eyes, some slowly swaying.

He could see members from the DKB, the largest guild, «Divine Division» , the next-in-power guild, «Fuurinkazan» , the emerging samurai guild, and even members from the KoB, his own guild.

When the song that lasted just under two minutes ended, a round of applause arose like ripples. Even the NPCs continuing to play their instruments seemed to be sending looks of praise at Yuna... this was, of course, just his imagination, but the tens of players continued clapping even as Yuna gave them several bows.

Eventually, the claps seemed to change, urging her for an encore, but Yuna put her hands together as if saying sorry and quickly escaped from the plaza while pulling Nautilus by his arm.

Blindly walking through the narrow back lanes, she stopped at an empty corner and took a big breath, releasing his hand.

"Ah, that was tense!"

As Yuna shouted this while pressing on her cheeks, Nautilus called out to her with a wry smile.

"What are you saying now of all times; weren't you the one who suddenly started singing, Yuna?"

"But I didn't think so many people would gather."

"They would gather, of course... Yuna, were you always that good at singing?"

He asked, still surprised, and ended up getting lightly glared at by Yuna, who had once again put on her white hood.

"Are you praising me with that? Or ridiculing me?"

"P-praising, of course."

As Nautilus answered in a panic, Yuna said, 'Then it's alright', with a smile.

".....I've been learning to play the piano and guitar all this time, but I actually preferred singing. What's more, not singing classical songs or operas, but girls' pop or anime songs."

"O-oh....."

Nautilus, who had no clue about this even though he had been with her since they were children, stared fixedly at Yuna's face with a new surprise.

".....So, those throat lozenges you're always carrying around are actually used to care for your throat..... —Do your old man and mother know about that?"

When he asked, Yuna leaned on the bars near the road and slightly shook her head.

"I tried talking with my mother just once. I said that I wanted to quit the piano and guitar and go to a vocal school. When I did, she told me, 'if you can persuade your father yourself'..... But, in the end, I couldn't tell my father. Because ever since I was child he would always tell me that, if I were doing music, he'd only allow classical."

Remembering the strict-looking appearance of Professor Shigemura, Yuna's father, Nautilus silently nodded. Indeed, when he had come to visit Yuna at her home in his elementary school years and played games in the living room, he recalled that the professor seemed to have vaguely shown an expression of displeasure. Although called a researcher on Brain-Machine Interface technology, the professor's speciality was, in the end, electrophysiology, and he shouldn't have had any ideas of applying that to games.

".....When you return to the other side, be sure to tell your old man."

When Nautilus said this, Yuna gave a faint smile as she answered.

"Mm.....if we return, right."

"We will. I'll make sure to bring you back."

Nautilus proclaimed, shaking off the anxiety about his «condition» , and he raised his head in an attempt to get closer to Yuna.

At that moment, he noticed that an unfamiliar icon had lit up below his HP bar. He had no memory of a musical note shining yellow.

"Huh, what's this buff....."

As he inclined his head, beyond the icon displayed on his overlay, Yuna smiled impishly.

"That is the «Protection of the Sound of the Wind» . It gives a bonus to defence, poison resistance, and stun resistance."

"Wha.....Yuna, why do you....."

'Know that', just as he was about to finish his question with that, he realised. Such a buff icon undoubtedly did not exist when he left the inn, thus there was only one situation where he could have gained a buff since then.

"Ah, don't tell me.....it was because of your song, Yuna.....?"

He asked, filled with even more doubt, and his childhood friend smiled under her hood.

"Correct! It's the effect of my Extra Skill, «Chant» ."

"Chant.....Extra Skill.....!?"

As Nautilus was surprised, wondering when she acquired such a thing, Yuna suddenly spoke with a serious look.

"You know, Nau-kun.....I was thinking about aiming to become part of the Clearers too. Since there're practically no players who have acquired the Chant skill, even someone as bad at fighting as me could surely be of use."

The electronic sound of her alarm pulled Asuna from the abyss of her shallow sleep.

She stopped the alarm by hitting the button through guesswork and once again buried her face into her pillow. After fighting the temptation to fall asleep again for about thirty seconds, she somehow managed to wake up.

Her small room on the second floor of the guild headquarters was illuminated by the light blue moonlight. The time was still one o'clock in the morning. After dinner, she accompanied the guild members on their levelling then took a nap for just two hours after returning, thus her head felt heavy, but, having resolved herself, she got down from the bed.

In the real world, just imagining the trouble of getting herself dressed that awaited her would make her want to go back to bed, but, luckily, in Aincrad, it was possible to change from her sleepwear to her battle equipment with just a few taps on her window.

After confirming the additional weight of her «Wintry Stroke» on the left side of her waist, she quietly left the room.

The Knights of the Blood had decided to set their departure time for the floor clearing work to eight o'clock in the morning, earlier than that of the DKB and the Divine Division, thus there were practically no members staying up late. With silent steps through the still-as-death corridor—though it was impossible to catch the sound of Asuna's footsteps through the doors without having raised one's Straining skill—she descended the stairs and headed outside the mansion.

Under the bluish-white moonlight coming from the aperture of the outer circumference, it seemed that the entirety of the floor was peacefully sleeping. However, monsters that made late night walks dangerous loitered around the fields, thus there were some players venturing out to fight them.

Aiming not for the Teleport Gate plaza but, rather, to step outside through the nearest gate, Asuna equipped a deep gray hooded mantle and, having hidden her red and white costume, began running along the unpaved path.

The design theme of the thirty-ninth floor was still unknown even after the floor was cleared. If the main town were a «prototypical fantasy RPG-style rural town» , then the fields and dungeons were designed in the literal sense of the words, and the Floor Boss was a mid-size dragon of classical design.

Daizen, a guild member well-versed in numbers, said at the party after the floor was cleared. ‘Why, 39 appears to be the first «uninteresting number» , which of course makes it an especially interesting number, because it is the smallest number to have the property of being uninteresting.’—it seemed this was a joke introduced in a book by a certain mathematician. It was unclear whether this was the actual inspiration for the thirty-ninth floor, but it indeed lacked individuality and thus, conversely, its tranquil meadows and forests stood out in Aincrad; running through them took twenty minutes.

Having arrived at a gently hilly area stretching out in the northeastern part of the floor, Asuna came to a stop and strained her ears.

She didn't have the Straining skill, but faint metallic sounds touched her ears. She dashed towards them right away.

During the daytime, this hill was a safe place where only the weakish Nepenthes would sparsely pop up, but Asuna had acquired

intel that this aspect undertook a complete change at night. Before she could run even ten metres, a blue light that looked like heat haze shimmered in front of her, slightly to her right. It was the effect for a monster resurging.

What appeared was a bat-like monster with a body that had swelled out perfectly round like a balloon. Even with its wings extended, its size was only about sixty centimetres, but four fangs glistened in its large mouth, and long talons grew from its wings. Its proper name was «Balloon Roussette» .

The moment the balloon bat popped up, its huge ears began moving restlessly. Bat-type monsters were practically all «blindsight-type» creatures that could even sense players behind them, thus it should have already sensed Asuna behind it, but there was no sign of it coming in for an attack. It faced the same direction Asuna was heading, flapped its wings, and flew away in a straight line.

Running for tens of seconds in pursuit of the Balloon Roussette, she saw a new light halfway up the hill that stood along her path. It wasn't the effect of a monster resurging this time, but a vehement silver flash. It was the light effect of a Sword Skill. Next, several fragmentation effects flickered simultaneously.

She approached while reducing her speed, and the Colour Cursor of the player engaged in battle was displayed. It had neither the name, nor level, nor even a guild tag, but nevertheless, Asuna already knew who that person was.

Stopping about twenty metres away from him, she watched over the battle.

Fighting solo was a one-handed sword user, wearing a black coat that seemed to blend in with the dead of the night.

Using his shield-less left hand as a balancer, he continued to brandish the sword in his right hand as if he were dancing. Even the

balloon bat that Asuna had been pursuing attempted to attack the swordsman while, *kiikii*, letting out a cry, but it was repelled by a slash with godlike speed and was entirely unable to get close.

The Balloon Roussette was monster with high evasion abilities but no troublesome special abilities like poison or breath attacks; alone, it was quite easy to fight, but it had but one special trait: its «link range was abnormally large» . Practically the entire hilly area fell into this range, thus, if you fought a Roussette somewhere on the hill, every single monster of the same class would gang up on you.

Meaning that if you didn't have the power to exterminate them faster than the speed of their resurgence, sooner or later, you'd be surrounded by a large number of bats and end up unable to move. In SAO, where you absolutely couldn't allow yourself to die, the biggest danger was to lose your path of retreat. In that sense, the bats on this hill should have been one of the worst kinds of monsters to fight, but the black-clothed swordsman did not appear to have the slightest consideration for the possibility of falling under siege. On the contrary, he was using the trait of the Balloon Roussettes to link up with their kin from a wide area to gather up the monsters, thus continuing his super-high-efficiency farming.

As Asuna watched on, the swordsman, having decreased the HP of the three bats to half with just regular attacks, invoked the area of effect Sword Skill «Horizontal Square» with superb timing.

A vivid light blue light ran through the darkness, drawing a square parallel to the ground. Right after that light scattered, the bats also broke into blue particles and dispersed.

Although not that formidable by themselves, Balloon Roussettes were monsters living on the thirty-ninth floor, which was nearly the foremost line. Despite their HP by no means being small, the swordsman defeated all three of them at once; however, without assuming any triumphant pose, he nimbly returned to his stance.

A new bat was approaching from the west side of the hill. If he struck it, the wide-range link would be invoked again, resulting in the second and third one coming at him.

—'At this rate, this won't end for a while, huh.....'

Asuna muttered in her chest, wondering whether she should come again another day; just then.

The swordsman sheathed his weapon in the scabbard on his back and, after making a skillful action of turning around while back-dashing, began savagely running to where Asuna was. Having run twenty metres in one breath, he decelerated while scraping the grass with his soles.

"Let's move away a bit."

Despite her wearing a dark mantle to blend in with the darkness, it seemed that he had noticed her presence long ago. As the swordsman once again began running after whispering quickly, Asuna hastily began pursuing him. Turning around, she saw that the balloon bat behind her, having lost track of its enemy, was staggering to the left and right.

Of course, there were several bats popping up ahead of them as well, but the swordsman skillfully ran around their perception range and finally stopped in front of a long and narrow rock towering at the edge of the hilly area.

Bathed in the moonlight and gleaming bluish black, clear water gushed from the side of the approximately three metre-high rock. The water flowing along the rock formed a small spring on the ground, around which lovely white and blue flowers were swaying because of the wind.

The black-clothed swordsman, gathering the spring water with his hands, drank it with gulps coming from his throat. Getting his fill

after drinking for more than five seconds, "Buhah!", he took a breath.

Seeing the swordsman—her former partner Krito wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his coat in profile, Asuna had to endure two urges.

The first was the simple desire to drink her fill of the spring water that seemed strangely tasty.

The other was the impulse to place her hands on her waist and scold him with, "You sure are indecent; at least use a cup!"

Until half a year ago, she would have said that with no restraint. However, Asuna was no longer Krito's partner. As one of the leaders of the Knights of the Blood guild, it wasn't her place to act high-and-mighty with a player from outside the guild.

Whether or not he saw through these thoughts of hers, Krito turned around and finally smiled.

"It's tasty, y'know; Asuna, you should try some too.

His smile and manner of speaking were unchanged from the times they had formed a duo together; only the shadow dwelling in his black eyes wasn't there before.

The change in Krito's mood came about around June this year, after about two months had passed since his duo with Asuna was dissolved.

Even Asuna couldn't easily approach him when he was giving off a stinging aura as if it were an invisible damage zone, and an extremely perilous-looking light dwelled in his eyes. During Floor Battles, he would recklessly use Sword Skills, seemingly being glued to the boss as if he had absolutely no fear of dying—no, it was more like he was even wishing for that; even the veterans of the Clearers feared this attitude of his.

Asuna didn't know if something had happened to Kirito. She had only asked him once indirectly, but he just shook his head slightly without answering her.

If she were to ask the info broker Argo, she would probably learn of his circumstances, but she couldn't do that either. Having dissolved their duo and chosen to join the KoB, she had no right to pry into matters that Kirito wouldn't talk about on his own.

After four months, it seemed that Kirito's behaviour had calmed down to some extent. However, Asuna felt that there was still a deep wound inside him even now. It seemed as if he were punishing himself with the way he went deeper into the Labyrinth than anyone else at noon and holed up at spots where there was the danger of accidentally dying for some high-risk solo farming at night.

Taking her eyes off her former partner, Asuna lightly shook her head.

".....I'm... not thirsty."

Without waiting for his response, she continued with a question.

"Is this a safe zone?"

"Yeah, monsters don't seem to come out at the area around the spring."

Having answered thus, Kirito sat down on one of the rocks encircling the spring and once again let out a breath. No matter how mentally exhausted a person was, their avatar's complexion wouldn't change, but feeling that his cheeks, basking in the moonlight, were abnormally pale, she ended up scolding him unconsciously.

"Even if there's a safe zone, farming solo like that is reckless. If you fumble a single Sword Skill, you'll be vulnerable to a stun due to suffering consecutive attacks.

"No worries, I've taken enough of a margin."

".....How high is your level?"

This was, essentially, an ill-mannered question, but Kirito answered, giving a light shrug.

"I just recently went up to 57....."

"Fif....."

She became speechless before she knew it.

The standard safety margin for the Clearers was the floor number + 10 levels. The current foremost line was on the fortieth floor, thus, although slightly dependent on the build as well, level 50 was required. Actually, the average level of the top players was around that number; making use of the strength of her beloved sword, Asuna herself had reached 53, but even in the KoB, excluding their commander Heathcliff's level, hers was the highest.

However, Kirito even surpassed Asuna by four levels. It was certainly a fact that solo play was the most efficient way to earn experience, but his level-up speed was so abnormally fast that it couldn't possibly be explained away by just this.

Most likely, he had been conducting high-risk farming like what she had seen this night for the entirety of the past several months.

'Why are you going so far.....', Asuna swallowed down these words.

Instead, following Kirito's lead, she shrugged and sat down on a nearby rock.

".....In that case, I can understand how you were able to deal with the «Warder Chief» today..... no, yesterday. Thanks for that..... Thanks to you, we were able to get by without casualties.

"Oh, well....."

Lightly moving his head to the left and right, Kirito said this as if it were nothing.

"I'm glad that I wasn't a hindrance..... Did you come all the way out here at a time like this to say that? Actually, who told you that I was here?"

"I bought info on the latest high-efficiency farming spots from Argosan. There were four of them, but knowing your preferences, Kirito-kun, I figured you'd be here."

With his second question answered, Kirito gave a faint, forced smile.

"An insight, huh....."

"I suppose..... But, I didn't just came here to say my thanks. I want to talk to you, as a fellow member of the Clearers, about the next Floor Boss battle....."

As Kirito inclined his head, Asuna told him about today's affairs.

Nautilus's disobedience to her order, and the crisis that struck Sanza. The possibility of a light degree of FNC that she had talked about with her commander, Heathcliff. And, the party composition for the upcoming fortieth Floor Boss battle.

Truthfully, she probably wanted to depend on Kirito for this as well. Because, as a solo player, Kirito had no relation whatsoever to the KoB's internal issues.

However, dealing with Nautilus was too heavy an issue for Asuna, who was inexperienced as a leader. Holding her knees atop the rock, she muttered as if half speaking to herself.

".....I did tell the commander that I will not allow Nautilus to participate in the next boss battle, but I'm actually not so sure if that's a good choice. Of course, I do intend to search for a proper solution when the battle is over..... but, if I use his FNC as a pretext to exclude him even once, I don't feel like I'd be able to build up mutual trust with him a second time....."

Even when Asuna finished talking, Kirito continued to keep his mouth shut for a while.

Unable to bear the silence any longer, she was about to apologise for bringing up an unreasonable discussion; at that moment.

"So that's why your cooperation was so disordered, huh..... I did think that it was an unusual Switching mistake for the KoB."

Turning his eyes towards the imposing Labyrinth tower in the distance, Kirito began speaking.

"If Heathcliff's the one saying that, umm.....the fact that Nautilus has light FNC is probably true. I'm sure the guy himself is aware of this to some extent. As he got over that handicap and became strong enough to be scouted by the KoB, his strength should be the real deal..... But."

For a moment, he stopped talking and his blacker-than-the-night-sky eyes looked at Asuna.

".....If he were a solo player and stepped out into the Outer Field, knowing that there was the possibility his legs would become unable to move, the only one to die if he lost to a monster or PK would be himself. But, if he's fighting as a member of a guild..... a party, he would even expose his guildmates to danger. I believe that, until the problem is resolved, he should pull out from clearing the game of

his own accord, and if he can't choose to do this himself, the leader should force him to."

For the Kirito that Asuna knew, his words sounded too strict. However, seeing a tinge of pain stain his face as if he himself were hurt by his own words, Asuna did not say a thing for a while.

In the field late at night, only the gentle sound of water falling down a spring resounded. The spray effect drifting in the air disappeared moments after sparkling blue due to reflecting the moonlight.

She wanted to know what had happened to Kirito four months ago. She once again felt a strong urge to ask, but was still unable to do so. Instead, Asuna mentioned the name of the chakram user who had overcome his FNC handicap due to Kirito's advice one day.

".....If Nautilus converted from a shield and sword user to a throwable weapon user like Nezha-san, I wonder if his condition would disappear as well....."

".....I don't know about that....."

The black-clothed swordsman inclined his head.

".....In Nezha's case, his FNC was just a subtle disorder of his sense of perspective. But, as far as I've heard, Nautilus's condition is worse. Just because he's in the rear doesn't mean he'll never be targeted by the boss, and if some henchmen suddenly appear, he'll have to deal with them himself. I don't think that becoming unable to move when you're in a pinch is a problem that can somehow be solved by just changing your build."

Having her thoughts from the conversation with Heathcliff formally put into words, Asuna felt the difficulty of solving the problem and had no choice but to nod in silence.

Just as she had thought, she couldn't allow Nautilus to participate in the fortieth Floor Boss battle that would probably take place several

days later. However, as soon as the next floor opened up, she had to talk with him personally and find a basic solution.

Having decided thus, Asuna stood up.

"Thanks for the counsel. Sorry for interrupting your farming."

Thanking Krito, who still sat on his rock, she took a step backward.

'As an apology, I'll treat you as much as you want', these words went up her throat, but she forced them back. Krito also stood up, gave a short "No problem" answer, and looked around his surroundings.

The hilly area was dotted with the Colour Cursors of repopped balloon bats. Facing the swordsman who seemed to be intent on return to his farming, Asuna was somehow able to voice out a single phrase.

".....Don't be too reckless, okay."

'Yeah', Krito's back as he nodded, taking his leave, had already blended in with the darkness and disappeared. After waiting until his cursor disappeared, Asuna turned around and began running towards the main town.

When she arrived at the town gate without having caught the attention of any monsters, the time was past two o'clock in the morning.

Asuna knew that she would lack the sleep to take part in today's game clearing if she didn't hurry to bed, but, nevertheless, she didn't feel like returning to her guild headquarters like this, so she continued randomly walking along the stone-paved road.

Before long, she could see the Teleport Gate plaza of Nolfret in front of her. In addition to the fact that it was an unpopular floor, it was this late, thus there seemed to be no more than about five or six people, players and NPCs alike, there.

".....?"

However, noticing that the player Colour Cursors remained motionlessly in one place, Asuna inclined her head.

When she entered the circular plaza, a faint sound of music reached her ears. The NPC orchestras, always present in the Teleport Gate plaza of every floor, were playing an orchestral piece with their instruments at a slow tempo and moderate volume. Both the players and the NPCs seemed to have gathered in front of the orchestra.

Passing-by NPCs would frequently listen to the performances of the NPC orchestras, but why were even players doing so?

The orchestra's repertoire consisted of only two or three songs, thus people should have ended up getting completely used to hearing them by the week after the town opening, and there shouldn't be anyone stopping for it.

Feeling even more confused, Asuna went towards them, keeping her footsteps silent.

After taking a few steps, she once again noticed something. What she heard wasn't just the orchestral music. She also heard a whisper-like singing voice on top of it.

Having joined the small crowd, what Asuna saw was a sole female player standing in line with the NPCs from the orchestra and singing, her hands placed on her chest.

She wore her white hood low over her eyes, thus only her mouth could be seen. However, the song flowing from it was more beautiful than any song Asuna had heard in Aincrad till now, despite its

volume being suppressed to the limit. It was the first time she had heard those lullaby-like lyrics, thus they were probably original ones written atop the NPC orchestra's tune by the female player herself.

Looking to the side, she saw that not only green-cursored players, but even some yellow-cursored NPCs had shut their eyes, attentively listening while swaying their bodies. Asuna also closed her eyelids and listened to the clear whisper that sounded as if the moonlight had turned into a voice.

Currently, there was very little player-made entertainment in Aincrad. It was only natural, as this was a death game where escape was impossible, but close to a year had passed since the game began, so it was true that there were more and more people who sought comfort and enrichment in «living» in this world. Lately, she would happen to see not-so-few players fishing at a safe waterside, or players raising pets.

With this much ability, she would have gathered a larger audience and even found some players who'd give her tips if she had sung at daytime in a large city, like the Town of Beginnings, or Giltstein on the twenty-fifth floor, rather than in such a declining town at such a time.

Perhaps— she had a different goal than just having her songs heard.

With this thought, Asuna attempted to speak to the female player, who gave a quick bow after finishing her lullaby.

However, the girl quickly passed through the crowd with her head still lowered, speedily crossed the Teleport Gate plaza, and disappeared into the blue portal without stopping.

As the NPC orchestra began playing the same tune from the start, the yellow-cursored NPCs turned and began walking away; the three players present there also moved their bodies slightly, as if having woken up from a dream. Asuna called out to the one closest to her in a whisper.

"Excuse me....."

The hammer user, who looked quite high-leveled despite not being a Clearer, turned around and inclined his squarish head.

"Hm?"

"Umm, the person who sang just now, does she always sing here around this time?"

"Is this your first time meeting «Uta-chan» ?"

"Uta.....san? Is that her name?"

Having his question answered with a question, the hammer user slightly shook his bullneck.

"No no, «Utachan» , as in the abbreviation of «Song Enchanter (*Uta*)» . Since no one knows that girl's player name, that's how we fans have been referring to her. Well, right now, it kinda turned into «Uta-chan» like a nickname.

"Song.....enchanter....."

When she repeated the unfamiliar term, the man finally said with a smile.

"Try looking at my HP bar."

As told, she focused her eyes and a single unfamiliar icon appeared below the man's bar. The icon with a violet-shining musical note as its design was probably some kind of buff, but she didn't know its effect. Looking at her own bar, she found no icon there.

"When you listen to a single one of Utachan's songs from start to finish, you get a buff, which depends on the song. That's why she's

the Song Enchanter..... Ah, but don't get the wrong idea. We weren't here because of the buff, but because we like the girl's singing."

The other two players, who came up to the hammer user unnoticed, also gave deep nods. One of the two, a tall and thin rapier user, opened his mouth.

"That girl always sings at Teleport Gate plazas late at night, but she changes the floor and doesn't give any notice in advance. What's more, she only sings three songs each night. So, you'll have quite the hard time if you want to hear them all. Like, you'll have to predict the floor she'll appear on, or split up to wait for her at different places."

"I've heard that last evening she sung at the Teleport Gate plaza of the fortieth floor, but she usually has her live performances late at night."

It seemed that the men were taking pride in being her core fans, but Asuna's interest lay only in «Utachan» herself.

No matter how good one's songs were, it couldn't have given a buff system-wise. Meaning that the girl should have some special skill.

Thinking about it this far, she finally recalled. Who knows how many months in the past— when she was still in a duo with Kirito, she had heard about the existence of a skill that seemed to work like that. It was an Extra Skill, a skill that could only be obtained by fulfilling some special requirement; its name, if she recalled correctly..... was «Chant» .

At the time, Asuna had also considered learning that skill, but she didn't think she had the courage to sing in front of a large crowd of people, thus it ended on that note. If the white-hooded girl had acquired «Chant», she could be singing late at night in front of a very small number of players to raise the proficiency of her skill.

"Well, if you want to listen to Utachan's songs as well, we wouldn't mind welcoming you into our group, ya know?"

It was a mystery how the hammer user had interpreted Asuna's silence as he said this, but, very soon, the third man, a short dagger user, poked his associate at his sides.

"O-oi, this gal..... I mean, this person's guild tag... is KoB."

"Geh, you serious..... Ain't that a Clearer guild?"

Squabbling in a whisper, the three of them simultaneously stepped back.

"W-well then, we'll be....."

"Yeah..... thanks for the info."

Having raised her head, Asuna thanked them, and the three disappeared into the Teleport Gate while saying things like, "Oh, no worries" and, "Well then".

Looking around the plaza where there was no longer anyone but the NPCs from the orchestra, Asuna sat down on a bench beside the wall and replayed «Utachan's» whisper in her mind.

The English word *enchanted*, which meant 'to cast magic' or 'to bewitch', should be derived from 'reaching inside one's heart by song. Which meant that the strange nickname the trio had given the girl, «Song Enchanter», was unexpectedly accurate.

Raising her head and looking towards the northeastern part of the floor—the place where the black-clothed swordsman should still be farming bats, Asuna had a thought.

'Someday, I want to listen to «Utachan's» singing again, together with Kirito.'

Asuna's wish was granted unexpectedly quickly.

The following day, the KoB force led by Asuna encountered Kirito while exploring the topmost part of the Labyrinth, then returned to town upon reaching the boss room with him. After dissolving the party, Asuna went to the thirty-sixth floor in pursuit of Kirito; she found him stopped at the edge of a large crowd of people listening to «Utachan's» relaxed, beautiful voice and stood next to him.

«Utachan» had changed her simple hooded cape from yesterday into a white feathered hat and blue dress, while the black-clothed swordsman's profile as he listened to her song looked more calm than she remembered seeing the past few months.

However, «Utachan's» full-blown performance in Aincrad lasted only that day and the next one. Among the endless, daily fighting, Asuna ended up forgetting about the girl, who disappeared unnoticed, and only got to meet her again and learn her real name two years and seven months later.

16th of October, 2023.

Summoned to the commander's room after breakfast, Nautilus was informed by the commander of Team B, Asuna, with the guild leader Heathcliff watching over them, that he would be taken out of the First Army until the battle against the fortieth Floor Boss ended.

'I'll be fine; the problem won't happen again', he pleaded with utmost effort, but they did not accede and, after he left the commander's room, all the members were informed of the temporary change to the party composition while Nautilus rushed out of the guild headquarters as if he were running away.

He wished to open up to Yuna, tell her everything, and have her console him, but he couldn't do that. He took off his conspicuous KoB uniform and replaced it with a plain, brown leather armour that he had hidden in his storage, then walked around town with no goal in mind; even when night came, he didn't return to the headquarters and instead secluded himself in the same place as yesterday: a cheap inn on the fortieth floor.

That evening, Nautilus found out that the boss room in the Labyrinth had been discovered via a message sent by the guild to every member.

On the following day, the 17th, the boss was scouted and a strategy meeting was held; at nine o'clock on the morning of the 18th, the assault group party of forty-eight people, chosen from over a hundred Clearers, left the town of Jaileum in order to subjugate the Floor Boss, «Bracken the Prison Warden». All Nautilus could do was send them off while hiding in a corner of the Teleport Gate plaza.

The raid party didn't go by foot, but instead teleported using the «Corridor Crystal» provided by the KoB.

Ever since around the thirtieth floor was passed, single-use «Teleport Crystals» began to be occasionally—and this was undoubtedly rare—dropped, but Corridor Crystals, which could teleport a group to a chosen point, were such super-rare items that it was questionable if even a single member of the entire Clearing group would get one of them as a drop during the time it took to clear a floor. Naturally, most of the major guilds seemed to be stocking them as one of their most important supplies, but the KoB alone used them unsparingly, when they anticipated a difficult boss, to prevent the group from getting exhausted before the battle.

Meaning that Heathcliff and the other leaders had concluded that the boss of the fortieth floor, which Nautilus didn't even get to see, was that formidable. With that in mind, gazing at the members of the subjugation force stepping into the flickering blue teleporter one after another, he saw that they were all elites gathered from the top players of each guild. Among them was the black-clothed solo player who had come to their aid in the battle against the Warden Chief the other day.

Forty-eight players was the upper limit for a raid party system-wise; of course, it was possible for even more people to enter the boss room. Actually, it seemed that the subjugation of the twenty-fifth floor's boss was done with the first ever 2-raid in SAO, that is to say, a formation of ninety-six players.

However, when there were too many people in the room, it would get hard to coordinate them all, and also, the upper limit for the number of people that could be teleported with one Corridor Crystal was forty-eight, thus it was decided to form a carefully selected 1-raid party for this subjugation. 2 parties from the KoB, the same as with the DKB and Divine Division, would be participating, but Nautilus could not join them.

And, he did not know whether he'd have the chance to participate in future boss battles either.

Among the cheers of the players crowding the plaza, the final member of the subjugation party teleported away and the blue

Corridor disappeared. Nautilus suppressed a sigh and was about to leave the plaza.

Just as he was about to do so, somebody tapped him on the shoulder from behind.

When he turned around hastily, standing there he saw his childhood friend, who wore a white hood on her head.

"Yu.....Yuna, how.....!?"

The reason for Nautilus's surprise was because he wasn't wearing his usual white-and-red Knights of the Blood uniform, but rather, his brown leather armour. However, Yuna smiled as if saying that such a disguise was pointless.

"I sensed your dejection, Eh-kun."

"I-it's not like I'm dejected....."

Noticing that he ended up giving practically the same response as the one he gave three days ago, he pondered on how to explain away the situation, but then Yuna pouted beyond her hood.

"Eh-, I mean, Nau-kun, you haven't replied to any of my messages since the day before yesterday. Wouldn't you think that something was wrong?"

"If you used Friend Tracking, you'd have found out that I was in town....."

"Weren't you the one who kept saying, 'Even the area inside a town can't be called absolutely safe', Nau-kun."

With this pointed out, he could only nod with his mouth shut.

Since a few months ago, the PKers, or player killers, had been getting more active; their modus operandi were extremely varied

and wide ranging, and it seemed that they also had ways to kill in the Inner Area. Truthfully, Nautilus wanted to live in the same room with Yuna, but he couldn't propose such a thing when he had yet to even confess to her, and, due to having little experience with farming monsters, he didn't have the funds to just leave the guild headquarters and rent a two-person room.

If he could land the last attack on the milestone that was the boss of the fortieth floor, acquire a rare item from it as a Last Attack bonus, sell the item, and instantly become very rich, then Yuna could..... he had considered such a scenario just a little bit in a corner of his mind. However, because he had been removed from the First Army, this dream of his remained but a dream.

".....Sorry for not replying. I kinda had this and that going on....."

It seemed that Yuna had guessed what «this and that» was from Nautilus's appearance and the fact that he wasn't participating in the Floor Boss subjugation party. Her smile disappeared as she slowly nodded, then she gave a faint smile as if sympathising with him.

"For now, let's go out for a meal. There apparently stores with surprisingly tasty food even in this town."

The place that Yuna took Nautilus to was a small open-cafe facing the plaza of Jaileum's western gate.

In Jaileum, where practically all the stores and restaurants reused former cells, the doors and windows had iron bars and the walls and ceiling were composed of deep gray stones, so when you had a meal inside, you'd feel as if you had become a prisoner rather than being a customer. However, the seats on the outside terraces had a somewhat better environment and, just as Yuna had told him, the taste of the food wasn't so bad, thus Nautilus was finally able to calm himself down a little bit.

"Considering the price, it was relatively tasty, right?"

As Yuna, having finished her pancakes with fruit sauce just like that, smiled on the other end of the table, Nautilus also nodded with a smile.

"Yeah, the croque monsieur I ordered isn't half bad either."

"Really? We should have done halfsies."

Saying this, she glimpsed at the plate in front of Nautilus that was still half full.

".....You can have it."

With a forced smile, he pushed the plate away; Yuna said, "Yay, thanks, itadakimasu!", then quickly took the fork and knife into her hands.

After gazing at the face of Yuna, who gave a happy look upon stuffing her cheeks with melted cheese and white sauce, Nautilus pushed away his hesitation and brought up his topic.

"Say, Yuna..... about what you said before, that you had your eye on joining the Clearers....."

"Nmm?"

After waiting for Yuna to finish chewing, he continued.

".....I do indeed believe that the «Chant» skill has potential. You can never have enough buffs, and if all you need to do is to be within range to hear the song, you should be able to cast it on a considerable number of people at once."

"I know right? I believe that, if they all packed in tight, it wouldn't be impossible to buff a full raid at once."

"Y-yeah. Though..... still, I don't know about stepping out onto the front lines..... Of course, I do intend to protect you, but I don't know what's going to happen on the battlefield. At the very least, I cannot....."

'Protect myself' were words that he was unable to voice out.

Because just before he could, a player rushed in from the gate towering to the west of the plaza, shouting in a loud voice.

"S-somebody.....! Somebody, please help us!"

Having reflexively risen from his seat, Nautilus saw a man wearing full-body leather armour and wielding a curved sword.

For a moment, he thought that the Floor Boss subjugation party that had just departed might have run into some trouble, but that couldn't have happened. The subjugation party that teleported through a Corridor Crystal wouldn't be returning through the west gate, and he had no recollection whatsoever of having seen the man's face before.

The man's leather armour, unlike that which Nautilus used for disguise, was high-class enough to be used even on the foremost line, but it was damaged all over; he must have suffered considerable damage. Also, there was a black short-spear still stabbed into the man's back.

"Oi oi, are you alright!?"

His HP should have stopped decreasing when he entered the Inner Area, but a nearby player rushed over to the man and pulled out the spear.

The plain yet somewhat ominous design looked familiar to him. It was a weapon carried by a «tormentor» -type monster that infested the fortieth floor's dungeons. That is to say, the leather-armoured man was not attacked by PK.

Thinking, 'In that case, there's nothing to worry about anymore, since the man has entered the Inner Area', Nautilus was about to sit down on his chair once again. However, the curved sword user, who didn't care about the damage he had received, once again shouted, straining his voice.

"Fi.....Five of my comrades were imprisoned in the field dungeon and are being chased around by an army of Mobs! They won't hold out for very long..... Somebody, please come with me to help them!!"

At those words, the ten players in the western gate plaza gulped.

In the dungeons on the «prison» -themed fortieth floor, a pain in the ass «imprisonment trap» would be encountered frequently, and even Clearers had difficulty with them. Generally, there was a gimmick to disarm the trap located somewhere in the locked-in room, but it was common that it couldn't be used unless the monsters that surged up upon the trap being triggered were defeated.

Most likely, the curved sword user's party failed to deal with the group of monsters and the man alone escaped through some means. However, even in such a case, there still was a means of emergency escape.

Nautilus, who ran up to the curved sword user with Yuna, took out a hi-potion from his belt pouch and, handing it over to the man, asked.

"What about Teleport Crystals!? If you're fighting on this floor, you must have at least one of them!?"

However, the curved sword user shook his pale face.

"No dice..... Among the Mobs that surged up, one was able to cast a Silencing debuff and we became unable to use Crystals! I myself just got out of that debuff as well....."

Once again, tension ran through the players in the area.

In the early days of the death game, the «Silencing» status seemed like a debuff that merely impeded communication among players, but ever since various Crystals began appearing as drops, it suddenly joined the ranks of brutal debuffs. All Crystals, such as the Healing Crystal, Antidote Crystal, and Teleport Crystal, could only be used by uttering a voice command with them in hand. Meaning that the Silencing debuff could practically be called a Crystal sealing debuff.

That was essentially why players fighting on the foremost line should always have a «Cough Potion» in reserve, to be able come out of their Silenced state, but—.

As if having guessed Nautilus's momentary thought, the curved sword user moaned.

".....None of us have a Cough Potion. We never expected a Mob that could cast Silencing to appear....."

'If you're going out into the Outer Field on the foremost line, at least have the decency to read the strategy guide distributed free of charge!' were words that Nautilus forced himself to swallow down. It was pointless to say that now.

If what the man was saying were true, they had to form a rescue party and go out right now or the five imprisoned men would be in danger.

Surveying the merely ten players who had gathered in the area, he saw that more than half of them were upper middle-ranked players aiming to join the ranks of the top players, just like the curved sword user, but among them, just two men wore mainly red

Japanese-style armour. He didn't even need to look at the Takeda crest on their guild tag to know that they were members of a Clearer guild named «Fuurinkazan». Most likely, only the upper-ranked members participated in the raid party to subjugate the boss, while the others stayed in town.

Although they weren't selected, they were still Clearers, thus their levels should be around 50, the safety margin. Nautilus was level 48 himself, thus with the three of them, it was hard to conceive that they'd be beaten by a field Mob.

".....You guys, can you come with me?"

At Nautilus's question, the two members of Fuurinkazan hesitated for a mere moment, but they both nodded. Additionally, five or six other men, "We're coming too!", also came forward.

".....Alright."

Helping up the curved sword user, whose HP had recovered, Nautilus himself stood up and quickly operated his equipment figure. His plain leather armour for disguise changed to his vivid, red-on-white-background formal equipment set from the Knights of the Blood, causing a large stir among the players.

"It's the KoB!", "We can do this!"; stopping such comments with his back and taking a step forward, Nautilus looked at Yuna beside him.

"Yuna, you wait here. Don't worry, I'll help them out quickly and will be back then."

At those words—

Yuna shook her head conclusively.

"I'm going too."

"Wha....."

Before Nautilus could say a thing, Yuna's right hand operated her own window. The light of an equipment change flashed under her white cape and, once it disappeared, she grandly opened up the cape with her arms.

What appeared from inside was a vivid, royal-blue dress, entirely unlike the plain, deep red tunic she had been wearing till now. Despite being cloth armour, its golden frills and buckle indicated that it was a rare piece of equipment with high defence.

Additionally, a white lute appeared in her left hand, a dagger on the right of her waist, and a pure white, feathered hat on her head. Her outfit made her the very image of a troubadour.

Having changed, Yuna firmly declared while tipping up the brim of her hat.

"I can't use a sword, but I can support everyone with my songs. I'm by no means going to get in the way."

"S-song.....?"

A man from Fuurinkazan repeated dumbfoundedly, but then, as if having realised something, he shouted.

"Y-you mean..... the «Chant» skill that's become the talk of the town lately.....!?"

Yuna affirmed this, and, "Ooooh!", such cheers surged up. Even the curved sword user looked at her as if she were a goddess of salvation as he shouted, "Please, help us!"

Nautilus no longer had the words to restrain his childhood friend, who once again nodded firmly.

Splitting into two parties, five people each, the rescue group stepped into the Outer Field from the western gate.

The field of the fortieth floor was largely a dreary wasteland. A steep wall of rocks formed a maze-like terrain and it was quite hard to see anything ahead.

Running through wasteland beside Yuna, Nautilus stared at the back of the curved sword user, who was leading the parties.

As a matter of fact, until leaving the town, he harboured just a slight doubt that the man could have been a member of a PK group. It was the typical modus operandi of PKers to give some plausible reason to lure players into the Outer Field.

However, seeing how the man was so awfully desperate that he kept running while tripping up numerous times, it was impossible to believe that this was an act. Besides, PK groups basically did not take action on the foremost line. Because even those guys knew that, in terms of pure fighting power, they were no match for players from the Clearers.

Eventually, the half-collapsed, ruin-like silhouette of their destination came into sight. That was probably the field dungeon in question. The curved sword user turned around while running and shouted.

"Just a bit more!"

"Let's hurry!"

Yuna shouted back and raised her running speed.

Hastily chasing after her, Nautilus once again caught sight of his childhood friend.

On the move, he confirmed... that Yuna's level was already over 40. She seemed to have raised it, either by joining farming parties on a

lower floor or doing some solo levelling or some other means, but it was not something that she could have accomplished with just ordinary effort. Meaning that Yuna was serious. With her «Chant» skill in hand, she intended to join the ranks of the Clearers.....

If he couldn't stop her determination, he had to always be with her to protect her. There was but one way to do that. He had to get Yuna to join the Knights of the Blood—there was no other way.

Considering the rareness of the «Chant» skill, he didn't expect the guild leader Heathcliff or commander Asuna to say no to her. Once this rescue operation was over, he should quickly bring Yuna to the guild headquarters to meet with the guild leader. If he could fight with Yuna, there was no doubt that he wouldn't end up cowering before monsters.

".....Yuna."

Facing the back of his childhood friend, running slightly ahead of him, Nautilus called out to her in a very low voice.

It seemed to have blended in with the footsteps of the ten people, thus not reaching her, but despite that, he felt new strength welling up inside his body.

The field dungeon where the curved sword user's comrades were imprisoned was the ruins of a prison, just like the main town. However, its residents weren't NPCs, but monsters. Having encountered some kobold-types and some slime-types on two occasions but crushed them without a problem, the group arrived at the central portion of the dungeon approximately eight minutes after leaving through the western gate.

The end of the large passage was closed off by sturdy-looking iron bars and, from inside, they could hear the screams of players and

the roars of monsters overlapping disorderly metallic sounds; the so-called sounds of battle.

"They're still alive.....!"

The curved sword user leapt at the iron bars. Beside him, Nautilus also peeked inside through the opening of the bars.

The stone-paved room was quite large; it seemed it could be twenty metres from left to right, and thirty metres long. Its top was open and bright, but since the left and right walls were also more than ten metres high, it would probably be impossible to climb up even if you were to grasp the small bars here and climb them.

Five players were clustered on the right side of the large room, fighting almost the same number of demi-human monsters. The tubby and small monsters, wearing leather armour with tattered hoods and gripping deep black short spears, were undoubtedly tormentor-class monsters.

If a player were around level 40 and had knowledge of the monster's attack patterns, then it wouldn't be much of a problem to beat, but the reason why they hadn't been exterminated even after more than twenty minutes was because tormentors weren't just small fry Mobs.

Beside the wall furthest down the large room, he could see a large figure that was probably over two metres-high. Undoubtedly, that was the boss monster of this field dungeon. The small tormentors were the boss's minions and were probably the «infinitely resurging» type; even if you defeated one, another would instantly spawn. The fighting power of the five men locked inside and the repop rate of the minions had ended up balancing each other out; they defeated one after another of them, but were unable clean up.

Luckily, the boss monster inside had yet to begin moving, thus the guys wouldn't be wiped out so easily at this rate, but, having said that, one couldn't be optimistic. Slowly, the accumulating damage

would result in them using up their healing potions or their coordination would fall apart due to mental fatigue, thus the moment the balance would be broken would definitely come at some point.

"Where is the device to open the iron bars!?"

Shouted Nautilus, and the curved sword user pointed at the boss monster that was striking a daunting pose beside the wall deep inside.

"There's a lever that looks like one behind the boss! But if they get close the boss will probably begin to move..... I managed to just barely escape right before the bars closed."

Hearing his words, one of the Fuurinkazan members standing behind him, a giant wearing a towel twisted into a headband, moaned.

"Meaning, for us to come to their rescue, the guys inside have ta get close to the boss and operate the lever....."

The other, a scrawny sasumata user, also nodded.

"But, that's a gambit. Most likely, the bars will only open up for two or three seconds. Once the boss begins to move, it will be considerably difficult for all of them to escape at once."

An accurate analysis that only a member of the Clearers could provide. Like the two of them said, once the boss was aggroed, controlling the situation would become challenging. It wasn't impossible for even more people to get trapped inside if they attempted to rescue all of them untactfully.

If there were such a danger, it would be better—

".....Let's defeat the boss."

At Nautilus's words, the players around him and in the rear were stirred up. The five who were not Clearers,

"B-but, we don't really have experience fighting against bosses....."

Said this, but he turned around and made an earnest speech.

"Don't worry, I and the two guys from Fuurinkazan shall take the boss's aggro. This is the boss of a field dungeon close to town, and we have fifteen people if you include those inside the room, so, if all of us are over level 40..... no, over 35, it should be enough."

At these words, the curved sword user added his desperate voice.

"I beg of you, save my buds! If it gets dicey, you can jus' run away!"

".....B-but....."

The five men exchanged glances, but it seemed that they couldn't take the final step.

At that moment, Yuna, who had been observing the course of events from a short ways away, called out to the curved sword user.

"Umm, could you call the people inside to come closer?"

"Wha? Y-yeah...."

Nodding, the curved sword user gripped the iron bars with his hands and took in a deep breath.

"Ooi, I've come to save you! Can you get closer to us!?"

Then, the five people who were locked in the room began moving bit by bit along the wall while fighting against the tormentors. After backtracking approximately fifteen metres in thirty seconds, they moved the battlefield in front of the bars.

Looking at them up close, the exhaustion of the five men was evident. Their HP bars were all below seventy percent, and their movements were lifeless. The passage that Nautilus and the others were in was right in front of their eyes and noses, but indestructible iron bars separated the two groups.

Even if they got the five to move here, in order to raise the iron bars, they had to operate the lever behind the boss monster. Unable to fathom Yuna's intention, Nautilus was about to face his childhood friend, but before he could do that, he heard a light sound.

Yuna was playing her small lute. Atop the uplifting chords, she added her sonorous singing voice.

The five men fighting against the tormentors were unaware of the «Chant» skill. So, it was only natural that they became confused when Yuna suddenly began singing, but as if getting new energy from her voice, the five men regained their vigour for battle. With their swords and axes flashing, the HP of the monsters began to visibly decrease.

Compared to the time she sung in the Teleport Gate plaza of Jaileum, Yuna's singing voice was more comforting, bewitching, and serene. Nautilus felt something hot welling up from the depths of his body. This wasn't the effect of a system-wise support. It was the power of Yuna's song itself, with no relation to the Chant skill.

Until now, Nautilus/Eiji had always thought of Yuna/Yuuna as merely a being he had to protect. But... he was mistaken.

Yuuna had far, far more power and potential than Eiji had thought. About as much as the leader of the Knights of the Blood's Team B, Asuna..... No, even more than that. The power to encourage all the players trapped in Aincrad, to give them hope, to lead them.

Before he knew it, tears welled up in Nautilus's eyes. The song ended in merely thirty seconds, but he felt like he had heard it for tens of times longer.

The moment that Yuna played the final chord with her lute, a yellow icon lit up below Nautilus and others' HP bars.

"Oooh!"

Hearing such cheers from the other side of the bars, he turned to them and saw that the HP bars of the five men were gradually recovering. Having lowered her lute, Yuna shouted.

"The regen will continue for one minute! Clear out those small fry and manipulate the door's lever!"

"Ou!"

The five men, responding with a war cry, activated their Sword Skills one after another and annihilated the tormentors.

Immediately, new resurgence effects appeared all over the large room, but the five men charged towards the boss without any hesitation.

The moment they came within ten metres of it, the large boss monster reacted.

"Dirararaah!!"

Bellowing, it brandished its terrifyingly huge axe over its head.

Its figure, its head hidden by a steel mask, was undoubtedly in the same class as the Warden Chief they had fought in the Labyrinth tower. Recalling his memories of that time, his legs felt numb for just a moment, but Nautilus shook off his fear by stamping down on the stone paving.

Four of the five men charging forward caught the boss's attention and lured it to the left. The remaining man jumped at the lever sticking out of the wall deep in the room, and pulled it down as if hanging from it.

'Gogoon!', a solemn sound roared and the iron bars before Nautilus began rising. Starting at that moment, he began counting the seconds.

Upon them having risen up halfway, the curved sword user passed under the bars as if he could wait no longer. Nautilus and the others followed suit. Once all ten of them had entered the large room, standing in the lead, the headband-wearing man from Fuurinkazan brandished his iron club overhead and shouted.

"Alriiight, we're goin' innnn!!"

"Yeah!!"

Responding to him by thrusting his one-handed sword, Nautilus charged at the boss together with the two red-armoured men. As they narrowed the distance, a double HP bar appeared over the head of the boss who wore an iron mask. The proper name displayed was «Feral Warder Chief». Undoubtedly, it was the same type of monster as the «Ruthless Warder Chief» they had fought at the upper part of the Labyrinth.

Continuing his count, Nautilus glanced behind him and met eyes with Yuna, who had changed from her lute to her dagger and was running, with her pure white cape fluttering. This was probably the first boss battle for Yuna, but she gave him an encouraging smile.

Responding with a firm nod, Nautilus increased his speed even more.

From behind the four men pulling the boss, he shouted in a loud voice.

"We're taking the aggro!"



Running through the center of the group of four that quickly split to the left and right, he activated his charging technique, «Rage Spike» . From a charge that seemed like he was creeping along the ground, he stabbed with all his might. The tip of his sword deeply pierced the boss's left knee, the boss's roar of anger shaking the air.

Once again, a chilling feeling ran through his body and he felt that his consciousness's connection with his avatar was fading away. However, he clenched his teeth to resist the unintended rigidity and prepared for the boss's counterattack.

"Dararuwah!!"

The Warden Chief brandished his two-handed axe high. Nautilus gazed at the bulky blade, used its angle to predict the trajectory of the slash, and, matching the timing, leapt away. The axe pierced deeply into the stone paving, momentarily halting the boss's movement.

Making use of that time, Nautilus gave instructions to the curved sword user who had regrouped with his comrades.

"We'll defeat the boss, so you handle the minions!"

"G..... Gotcha, we're counting on you!"

The moment the curved sword user who shouted this began running in order to pull the aggro of the five newly-resurged tormentors, the iron bars behind them once again closed. If the count that Nautilus had continued in a corner of his mind was correct, the time until it closed was merely twenty seconds. Just as he thought, it would be hard for all fifteen of them to escape with a single use of the lever. He had no choice but to trust himself and his allies, and defeat the boss.

To the left and right of the Warden Chief that pulled its axe from the floor, the players who joined the rescue party in town, as well as Yuna, divided into groups of three and spread out. At the front, Nautilus and the two from Fuurinkazan took up positions. If the

three clearers continued pulling aggro and left the attacking to the groups at the sides, although it would take time, they should be able to safely beat it. Luckily, the Warder Chief-type attack patterns were ingrained in his head.

Before the huge jailer brandishing its axe bellowed once again, Nautilus shouted.

"Vertical slash coming! Vanguards, when the axe gets stuck in the floor after evasion, one Sword Skill!"

Immediately afterwards, the monster once again swung its two-handed axe down with a roar, but its target, the sasumata user, dodged it by a wide margin. The moment the axe sunk into the floor, Nautilus and the towel headband-wearing man, as well as two others from the left and right, pounded the monster with their Sword Skills. Blue and yellow flashes gushed out, and the Warder Chief's double HP bar's first bar visibly decreased.

—We can do this.

—Even I can pull this off.

Regripping his sword, Nautilus focused all his senses on the huge jailer before him.

* * *

Just as Asuna had evaluated him in front of Commander Heathcliff, in a narrow sense, Nautilus's battle abilities had practically reached the level of the current top players of the Clearers.

However, Nautilus lacked absolute experience. The same applied to the members of the emerging Fuurinkazan guild.

They were not aware. That there was a correlation between the size of a dungeon boss's room, the boss's size, its attack patterns, and the number of minions.

Although the Feral Warder Chief was large, it was only a little over two-metres tall. It seemed far smaller when compared to dragon- or golem-type boss monsters, its attack pattern only consisted of physical attacks with its axe, with no area of effect breath or shock wave attacks.

Therefore, if they had been players with sufficient knowledge and experience, they should have felt it the moment they saw the thirty metre-long boss room and its master. That a danger corresponding to the size of the room was hidden within it.

* * *

Eight minutes had passed since they entered the room, and the battle against the boss was going according to Nautilus's plan.

The three clearers with more than enough HP and defence continued coping with the Warder Chief's attacks and, upon getting an opening, Sword Skills were launched at it from the left and right without a moment of delay. Focusing on safety, their attacks were limited to two-hit ones that wouldn't leave them open, thus it had taken some time, but no one had suffered any lethal counterattacks so far.

Even the five infinitely resurging minions continued to be dealt with by the curved sword user's party, which had now returned to its original six-man composition, without any errors, thus they weren't allowed to approach the nine people battling against the boss. At

present, no one seemed to have suffered the troublesome «Silencing» debuff.

Having reached the boss's second HP bar and cut it down by fifty percent to yellow, Nautilus was convinced of their victory.

He had been assailed by an unpleasant feeling at first, but since the battle was going according to plan, the phenomenon of his body becoming unable to move had not occurred. The responsibility of being the leader and, most of all, the presence of Yuna had been giving him strength.

He had been unable to participate in the Floor Boss battle, but he was able to splendidly command a large force of fifteen people in a sudden rescue mission. When Asuna learnt of his achievement, even she should change her thoughts about him.

"Alright..... just a bit more! Everyone, do your best!!"

At Nautilus's words, his comrades responded vigorously.

Evading the two-hit attack from the left and right, unleashed by the boss, and counterattacking in kind with a two-hit technique, «Snake Bite». The Warden Chief's HP bar was changing from yellow to orange.

Seeing this, the sasumata user from Fuurinkazan faced Nautilus and shouted.

"At red, the attack pattern could change! Should we temporarily stand back!?"

"No, Warden Chief-types shouldn't have a change in pattern!"

Answering thus, Nautilus guarded against the boss's kick attack with the shield in his left hand. The moment the boss's posture crumbled, the attackers pounded away at it with their Sword Skills

from the left and right. Its HP bar was reduced even further, the remaining twenty percent entering the red zone.

He prepped his shield just in case, but, as he thought, and just like with the Feral Warder Chief's superior version, the Ruthless Warder Chief, there was no sign of its attack pattern changing. The simultaneous attacks ended with the second blow; concluding thus, Nautilus raised his voice.

"I'm focusing on the last and going in!"

However.

His voice was drowned out by a new sound.

Throughout the boss room, a metallic sound as if rusty iron were being rubbed resounded many times over. When Nautilus reflexively looked aside, what plunged into his sight was a hair-raising spectacle.

All of the iron bars on the wall, which he had only thought of as mere ornaments till now, slid up and, from inside the dark passage inside, small monsters jumped down into the large room one after another. They were the same type of Mob as the boss's tormentor minions, but the weapons they were gripping in their hands looked much more ominous, as if they were large, cleaver-like hatchets.

The number of Mob reinforcements that appeared from the holes in the wall had reached fifteen or sixteen. Adding the minions that had surged up from the very beginning, they totaled twenty. Their number was far from what the curved sword user and his group could handle alone.

There was no choice but to split the nine people fighting the boss into two groups. Having had this thought for a moment, Nautilus was about to instruct the attackers on his left and right to switch to dealing with the reinforcement Mobs.

But, the moment his attention strayed from the boss for an instant—

"Oh crap, an area of effect....."

He heard the towel headband-wearing man say. Right afterwards, the Warder Chief, gripping its large axe with both hands, made a full rotation with its body as if it were in shot put. The huge tip of the axe assailed them at such a low trajectory, it was as if the monster were trying to scoop out the ground.

"Uaah.....!"

Shouting this, Nautilus was somehow able to guard against the attack with his shield, but it was blown away along with his body, and he fell on his behind. The postures of the two men from Fuurinkazan had also been broken, and even five of the six attackers at the monsters' sides had suffered a direct attack from the axe and fallen on the ground. Luckily, no one had suffered instant death, but the five of them were enveloped in light green spark effects. That was the effect of a movement impossibility..... no, a paralysis.

The only one who had managed to evade the grand, unknown technique, which the boss unleashed now of all times, was Yuna. Holding the dagger in her right hand in a resolute stance, she searched her waist pouch. What she took out was a small bottle filled with a yellow liquid—an abnormal state recovery potion.

Paralysis, unlike stuns, which only lasted three seconds, was one of the worst debuffs, continuing for six hundred seconds. In order to recover from it, the only choices were to drink a recovery potion or use a super-rare Purification Crystal. But even Nautilus as a Clearer did not have the latter.

Yuna threw the potion to a nearby man and looked at Nautilus, as if asking for instructions.

In front of him, the Warden Chief, who had recovered from the rigidity after his area of effect attack, was slowly getting up.

'What to do..... should we give up on subjugating the boss and escape with Teleport Crystals? No, the paralysed five can only use their dominant hands slowly, thus they won't be able to use crystals right away. If we leave just those five behind, they will undoubtedly be wiped out.

As Nautilus's thoughts came to a halt, even more despairing voices reached his ears.

"Uwaah..... Not good.....!"

"S-Silencing....."

Looking behind himself, still on his back, he saw that the curved sword user's six-man party was encircled by the twenty tormentors. It was a state of complete siege.

For the moment, they had their backs against the wall, but they were unable to guard against the waves of spears and hatchets, and their HP was visibly decreasing. The reason why their screams stopped was undoubtedly because they had all suffered the Silencing debuff. With this, they became unable to escape even through the use of Teleport Crystals.

Though, if the six of them made an emergency escape, the twenty tormentors would all descend on Nautilus's group and the boss battle would become the last thing on their minds. However, the same conclusion would arise if the six of them were wiped out instead. And this scenario would certainly come in a few minutes..... no, in tens of seconds.

Nautilus once again looked at Yuna.

Below his mantle, his left hand moved of its own accord and gripped the rectangular Crystals—the valuable-as-cubs-to-a-tiger Teleport Crystals in his second belt pouch.

In their current state.

In their current state, Nautilus and Yuna alone could still escape from this peril. The players left behind, including the two men from Fuurinkazan, would probably be wiped out, but he could still avoid the worst development that was the death of Yuna.

That's right, he had to at least protect Yuna. He had promised, no matter what happened, to protect. Even if the others would die, he'd protect Yuna..... at least Yuna...

"Yu....."

With a hoarse voice, Nautilus was about to call out to his childhood friend.

However, as if having predicted what he was going to say, Yuna firmly shook her head, and shouted.

"Eh-kun, I'm begging you, defeat the boss..... save everyone!"

And so, she switched her dagger to her lute and began running, with her white cape fluttering. Towards the six encircled men.

"Th.....There's no use; Yuna, stop!"

Nautilus desperately attempted to hold back his childhood friend. Although the stats of the minion Mobs were nothing special individually, the tormentors numbered twenty. The situation would not be overturned just by Yuna coming to their aid.

At that moment—

Yuna began singing while playing her lute.

It was a brighter, as if the light of the sun were turned into sound, and even more heroic song than the one she sung when she cast the regen on everyone.

Though, a buff this late could not possibly overturn the situation.

Having thought that for a moment, Nautilus was engulfed by a new shock.

The tormentors, who had been trying to wipe out the curved sword user and his friends, had all stopped attacking and turned around.

The countless, small eyes gleaming from within their hoods all focused on Yuna. Noisily, the short spears and deba bōchō knives were refocused on a new target.

This song wasn't a buff. It was a song meant to increase the Hate value of monsters. Singing while running, Yuna was trying to pull all the minions onto herself.

As Nautilus unconsciously stood up, a huge shadow engulfed him. Even the Feral Warden Chief boss stepped forward to chase after Yuna.

"Like hell we're letting you!"

"Your opponents are us!"

The two members of Fuurinkazan, who had regained their footing from the shock of guarding against the grand technique, dealt heavy blows on the boss's legs with their iron club and sasumata.

"Dyurah!!", bellowed the Warden Chief, who once again changed its target.

Despite knowing that he was within range of the boss's attacks, Nautilus was unable to move his eyes away.

The twenty tormentors flooded towards Yuna as she continued her song while running. Her white hat and blue dress were obstructed by the countless trembling spears and knives, making him unable to see her.

With her cloth armour, Yuna would probably be unable to hold out for even thirty seconds if all those monsters concentrated their attacks on her.

Enduring a feeling of uneasiness as if his insides were being cut open, Nautilus called out to the two members from Fuurinkazan.

"I.....I'm begging you! Please go save Yuna.....!"

However, despite a deep sense of anguish appearing on their faces, the two did not move from that spot.

"We can't! We have to dispose of this guy first!"

"If we don't defeat the boss now, we'll be wiped out!"

Shouting thus unanimously, they activated their Sword Skills. The boss's roar overlapped the sound of impact.

Their decision was probably correct. Yuna pulled away all the minions in order to buy time for Nautilus and the others to defeat the boss. They couldn't waste even a single one of the tens of seconds she had given them.

But, despite understanding this in his head, Nautilus couldn't turn around to face the boss.

Yuna's voice as she sung, encircled by the tormentors, was interrupted. She had undoubtedly suffered the Silencing debuff. With this, Yuna was no longer able to escape with a Teleport Crystal.

—Protect. I'll protect Yuna.

"Yuna——!"

Shouting so much that it strained his voice, Nautilus kicked off the ground to help his childhood friend.

Charging at that many monsters alone, even Nautilus as a Clearer wouldn't get out unscathed.

He could end up basked in the monsters' concentrated attacks and die.

But, if that had any chance of saving Yuna.

If, in the worse case, he ended up dying with her—

Nautilus's decision and resolution.

Were betrayed by himself.

Gakun, as if struck by a petrification debuff, his legs..... no, his entire body became unable to move. It was the exact same phenomenon as three days ago, when he didn't follow the instruction to Switch at the upper part of the Labyrinth.

—Move! Move move!!

—I'm not fucking scared of dying! If I can't protect Yuna, there's no fucking point in me living on!!

Shouting this within his mouth that he was unable to move, he desperately tried to move his body forward. But, as if his soles had become glued to the stone paving, his legs did not move one bit.

Sensations from his entire body began to fade. All the colours faded and the sound went away.

In his monochrome vision, he saw something vivid flying in an arc from beyond the group of densely-packed tormentors. The object that descended and fell down just a bit away from him was a glass bottle packed with colourful candies. Yuna had thrown it to Nautilus.

In the centre of his mind, he heard the voice of the person he treasured more than anyone.

—Eh-kun, sorry. I won't be able to cheer you up anymore.

—Whenever you feel like crying, lick one of these and keep going.

—Knowing you, Eh-kun, I'm sure you'll be fine.....

Behind him, the Feral Warder Chief, having suffered a fierce attack from the Fuurinkazan members, made a bulky sound and scattered light as it burst and dispersed.

At that same moment, a meager light gleamed from beyond the group of tormentors. The luster soared up with the breeze and dissolved into the blue sky.

On the same day as the battle against the boss of the fortieth floor, during a rescue mission taking place at the same time, the only victim was Yuna.

There were very few people who knew the whole story about the battle, but the danger that the «Chant» skill had of its user being targeted by all Mobs within its area of effect was spread widely among the players, and, during the approximately one year till the game was cleared, no one ever used «Chant» on the foremost lines.

After the battle, Nautilus withdrew from the Knights of the Blood guild and disappeared from the foremost line. The next time he appeared in front of players from the Clearing group was two years and seven months after that day.

Waking up from his shallow sleep, he saw a white light flickering on the left side of his vision.

When he placed his fingertip at the corner of his eye, a tear spilled from it, went along his cheeks, and fell to his neck.

After lightly shaking his head and putting a lid on his memories of the distant past, the now twenty-year-old Nochizawa Eiji slowly got up.

In the room that was by no means large, he only heard the sounds of the air conditioner and the exhaust from the servers. The sunlight coming from beyond the white curtain was still bright. It seemed he had ended up dozing off while organising the data for the «plan» in the laboratory.

The still-equipped wearable AR terminal, the «Augma», sensed Eiji waking up and rebooted from its sleep state. The windows for his scheduler and the weather forecast were displayed in his vision one after another, and, finally, a single girl appeared, sitting at the work desk a slight ways away from him.

Her slender body was enveloped in a black and purple dress of futuristic design. Her straight, pure white hair was so long it dangled down the edge of the desk, and her legs, enveloped in black tights, were slender like those of a fairy.

Having raised her eyelids, the girl sent the gaze of her strange, red eyes at Eiji, and smiled sweetly.

"Eiji, you're finally awake."

The moment he heard that clear voice and saw her well-featured face, he felt a sharp pain run through his chest.
Nevertheless, having returned the girl's smile, Eiji spoke.

"Good morning, Yuna."

"'Good morning' is the greeting for mornings. It's already 15:27, you know."

The girl, who replied without a moment's delay, had a face that looked exactly like that of his no longer living childhood friend, Shigemura Yuuna.

But Yuna, no, Y U N A , wasn't Yuuna. She was an AI whose appearance was an accurate reproduction of Yuuna's, for the sake of a certain goal— a «plan» .

Professor Shigemura Tetsuhiro, Yuuna's father, as well as the creator of Y U N A and the Augma, saw Y U N A as nothing but an AI data crawler that had the same face as his daughter. However, Eiji was still unable to make that distinction. Despite knowing in his head that she was no more than a tool for the sake of reviving the actual Yuuna, whenever he saw this face, he became a bit attached to it.

Y U N A was holding a large glass bottle on her lap. Inside, there were numerous, sparkling candy-like things.

Both the glass bottle and the candies, just like Y U N A , were not physical objects. They were the cornerstone of the «plan» — a visualisation of data fragments of Yuuna collected from the memories of SAO survivors. The moment that bottle was filled to the brim, Yuuna would return to Eiji.

The one who had earnestly begged the professor to materialise the pieces of memories as candies inside the bottle, despite there essentially being no need to visualise them, was Eiji.

However, Y U N A didn't understand exactly what the things she was gathering were. As an AR idol, the girl, whose personality was set in a way so that she'd only want to sing, had no need to know the contents of the «plan» , but, nevertheless,

whenever Eiji saw Y U N A holding the bottle of candies with great care, he felt sentiments that were close to pity.

".....Have you grown to like them that much, Yuna?"

When asked, the AI girl smiled innocently.

"Yeah, because they are pretty."

"Is that so..... well then, we need to gather even more of them, right."

Smiling once again, Eiji stood from his chair and moved in front of the window. In the process of gathering memory pieces from the survivors, Eiji had already used forceful measures many times over. In order to increase the sense of fear needed for a memory scan as much as possible, he had resorted to physical means in addition to the AR attacks, but considering the laws of the real world, he was obviously committing the crime of inflicting bodily injury. Since the police were probably not incompetent, the criminal investigation would undoubtedly reach for him in the not-so-distant future. However, that was a trivial matter. If Yuuna could be revived with Eiji going to prison, he'd spend any number of years there. Because Yuuna was never able to leave that prison dungeon on the western part of the fortieth floor of Aincrad alive. Having been unable to fulfil his vow to protect Yuuna, it was only natural for Eiji to throw away anything he had if it were for her sake.

.....Yuna.....

Without voicing it out, he muttered the name of his childhood friend.

The late spring sky he could see through the curtain was light blue and hazy.

He felt that its colour was quite similar to that of the sky he saw that day.

[Material Edition 1] The Progressers

RAWS SAO SCANS

TRANSLATION GSIMENAS

EDITING GSIMENAS

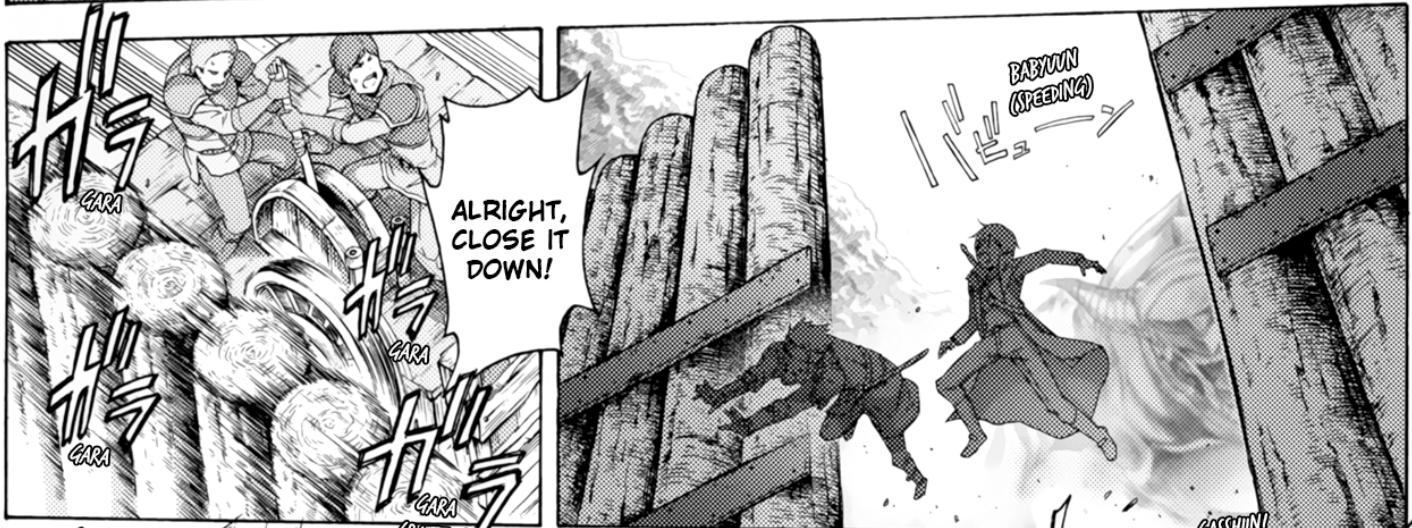
REDRAWING MTTBLUE2, CELEST

TYPESETTING MTTBLUE2

March 2024

The following is a manga originally released by Kawahara in the SAO web novel days, although it has since been redrawn to more accurately reflect the Light Novel / Anime appearances of the characters. It features the story of the Field Boss Battle on the 56th floor of Aincrad, which was partially adapted into the intro of episode 5 of S1 of the SAO Anime series.







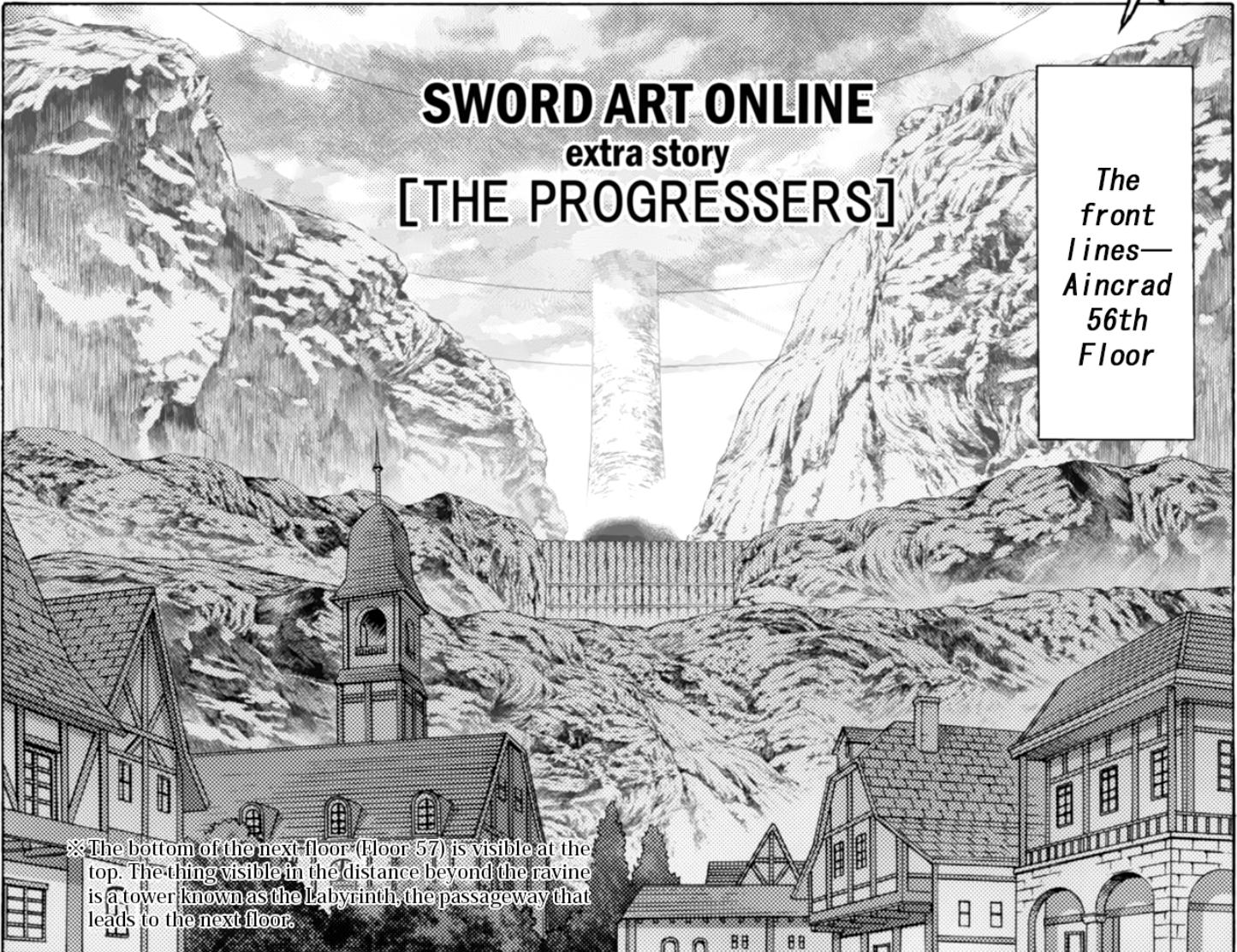
Awww...
...my
A-grade
ingredient
.....

SWORD ART ONLINE

extra story

[THE PROGRESSERS]

*The
front
lines—
Aincrad
56th
Floor*

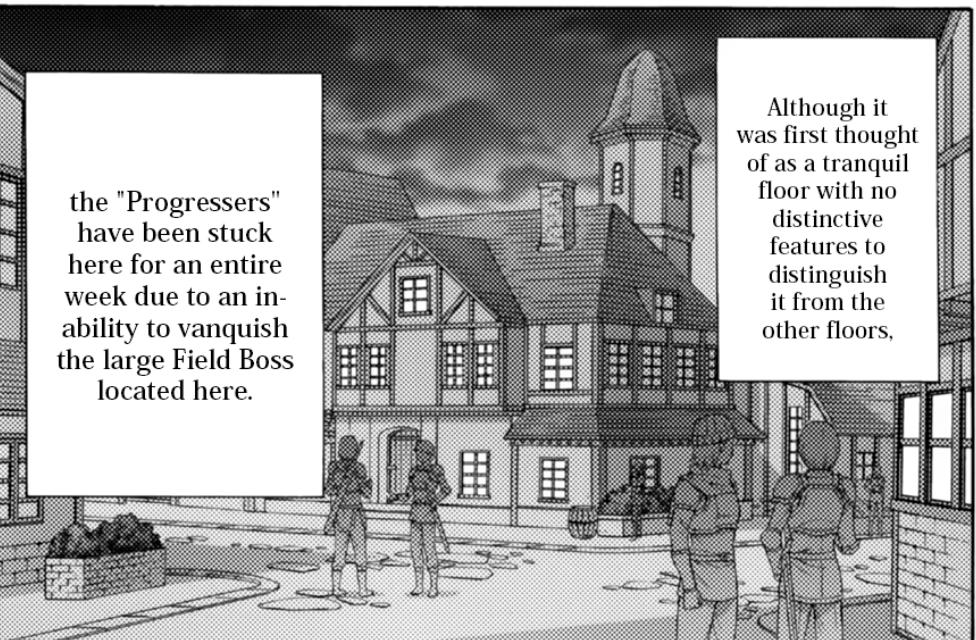


*The bottom of the next-floor (Floor 57) is visible at the top. The thing visible in the distance beyond the ravine is a tower known as the Labyrinth, the passageway that leads to the next floor.



BAM
(SLAM)

the "Progressers"
have been stuck
here for an entire
week due to an in-
ability to vanquish
the large Field Boss
located here.



Although it
was first thought
of as a tranquil
floor with no
distinctive
features to
distinguish
it from the
other floors,

HOW LONG
ARE YOU
GOING TO
DRAG IT ON
WITH THOSE
HAREBRAINED
SCHEMES OF
YOURS!

『Grand
Meaty
Plan』
my ass!

Knights of
the Blood
Sub-Leader,
Asuna

KNOCK IT
OFF WITH
YOUR EX-
CUSES!

Fuurin-
kazan
Leader,
Klein.

WELL,
I DIDN'T.

I actually
had reason
to believe we
could pull this
thing 'ere off
this time.

Solo Player,
Kirito.

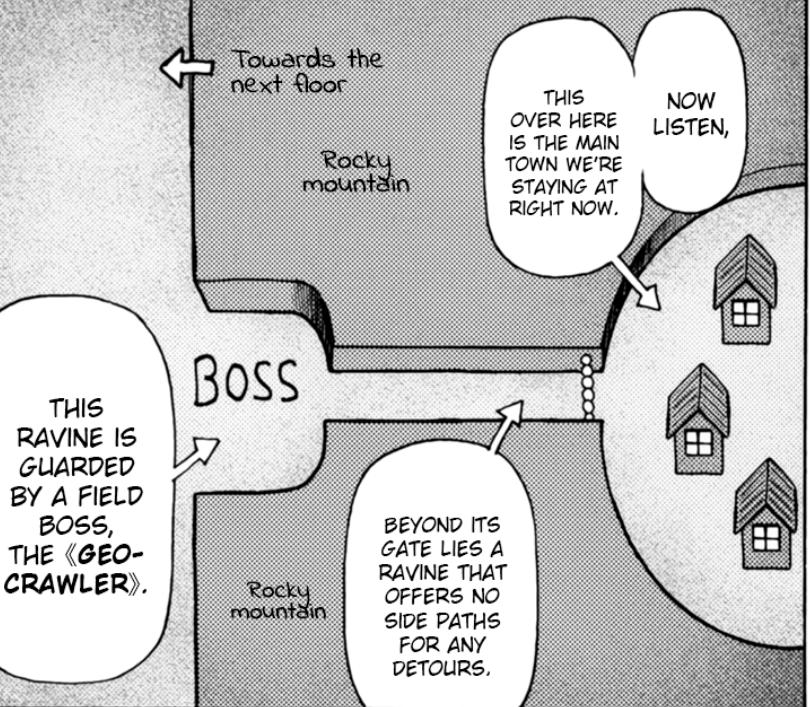
* Guild abbreviations are registered in the game system as well. KoB is an abbreviation of Knights of Blood. Even Fuurinkazan has an abbreviation of its own: "WWFM"; however, no one actually uses it.

WE, THE
『KOB』, WILL
BE TAKING
COMMAND OF
THE GAME
PLAN, AS WE
HAD AGREED
UPON BEFORE-
HAND.

FOR
THE
NEXT
PLAN,

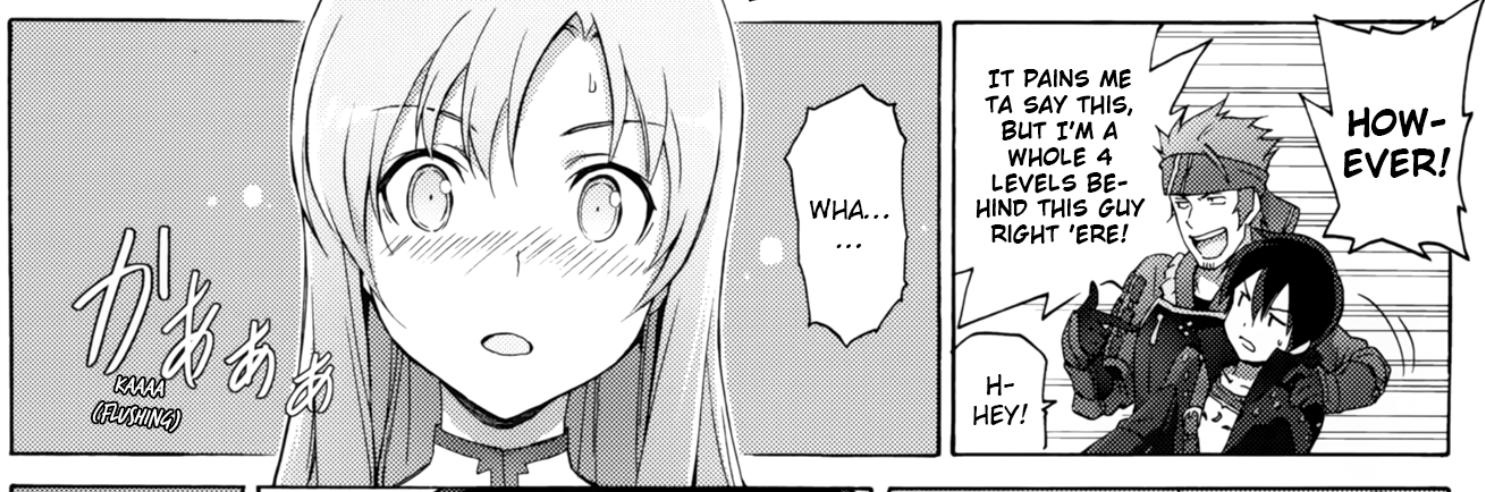
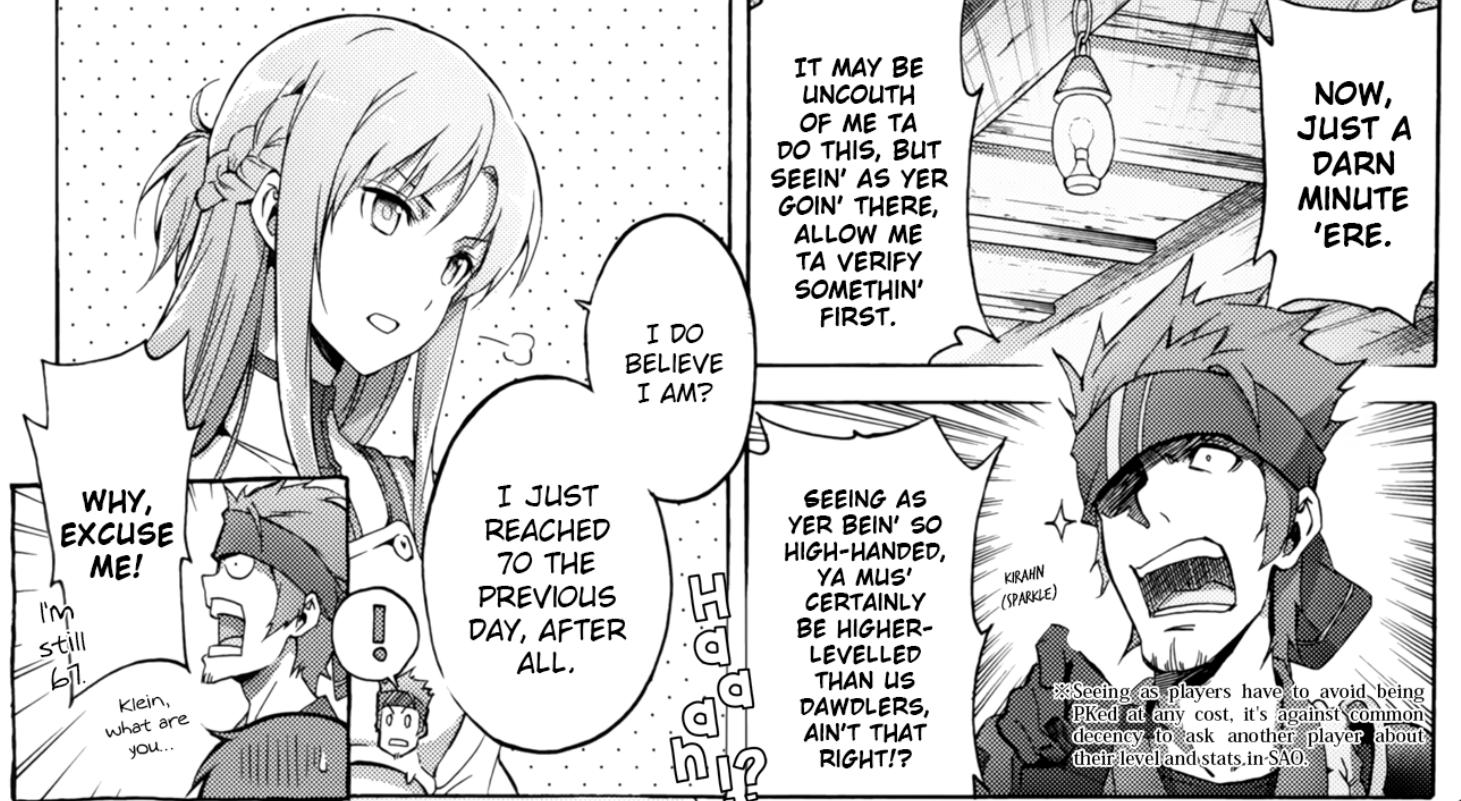
Practically all Weapon Skills in SAO are classified under one of these 4 attributes. The Thrusting category consists of rapiers and other close range weapons, while Piercing consists of throwing picks, lances, and other mid-to-long range weapons.

FROM THE ANTERIOR SIDE, THE BOSS IS LIKE A LITERAL FORTRESS! NEITHER SLASHING, NOR THRUSTING, NOR BLUNT, NOR PIERCING... NONE OF THE GAME'S DAMAGE TYPES WORK ON IT.

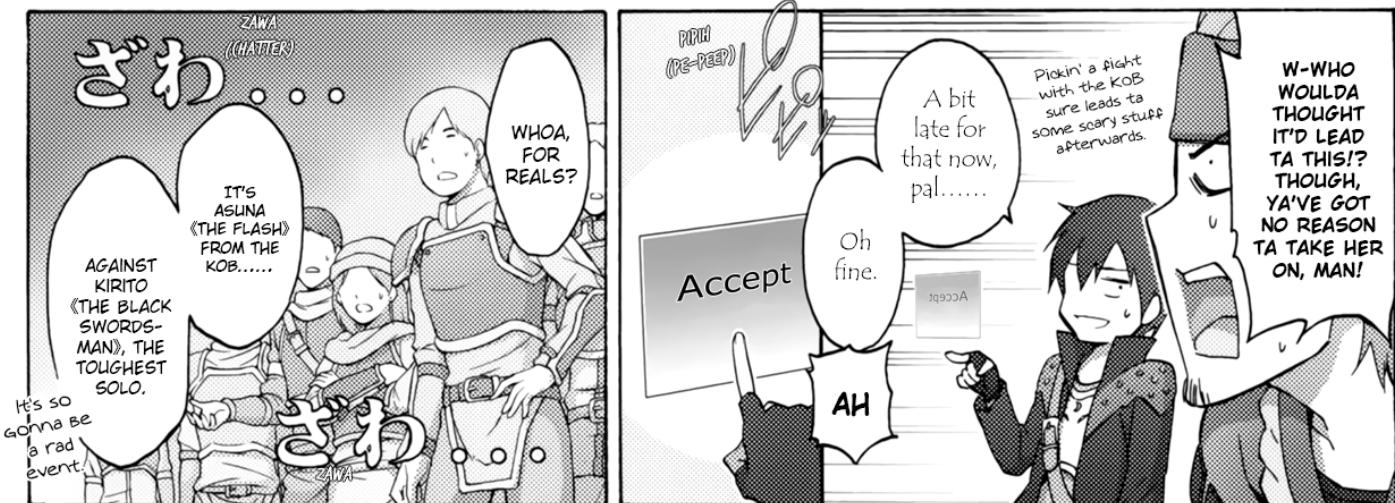
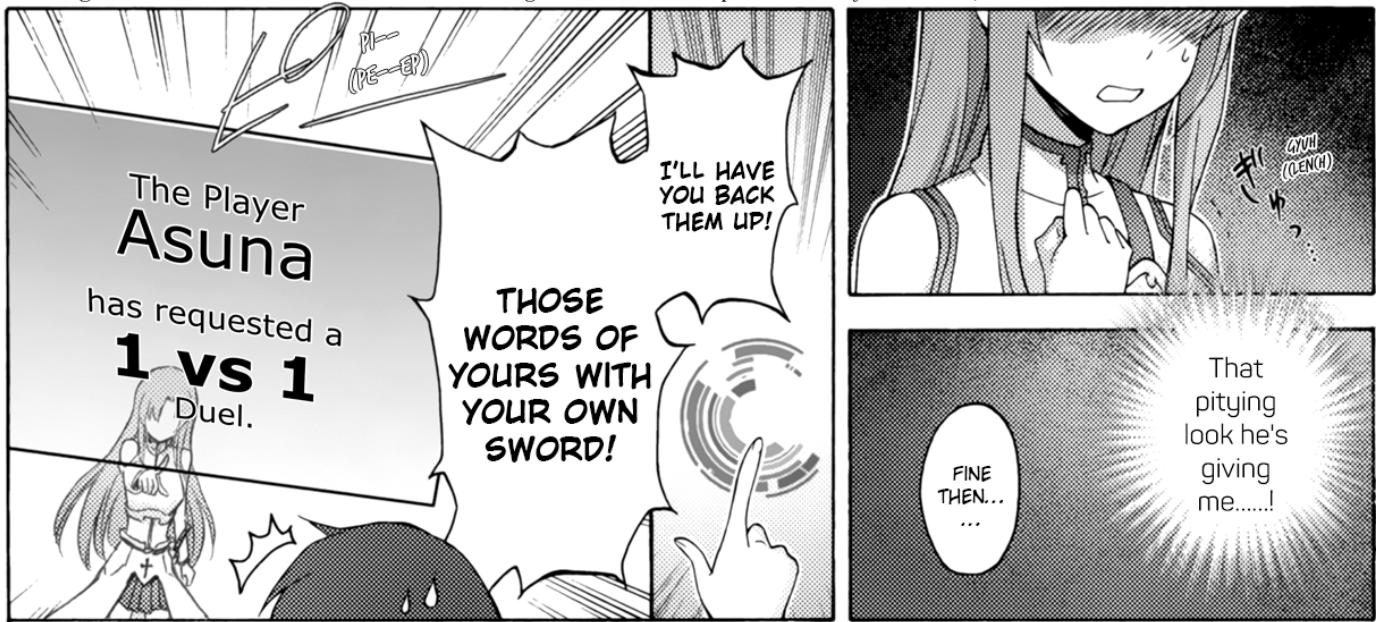




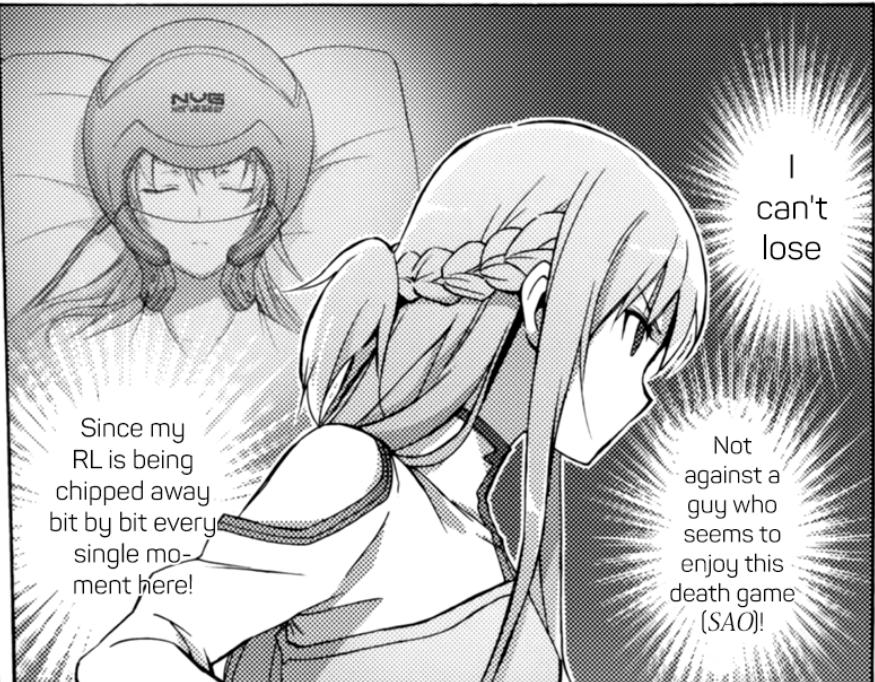
*The safety margin for the Progressers is the frontline floor number + 10 (on this floor, that would be 66):

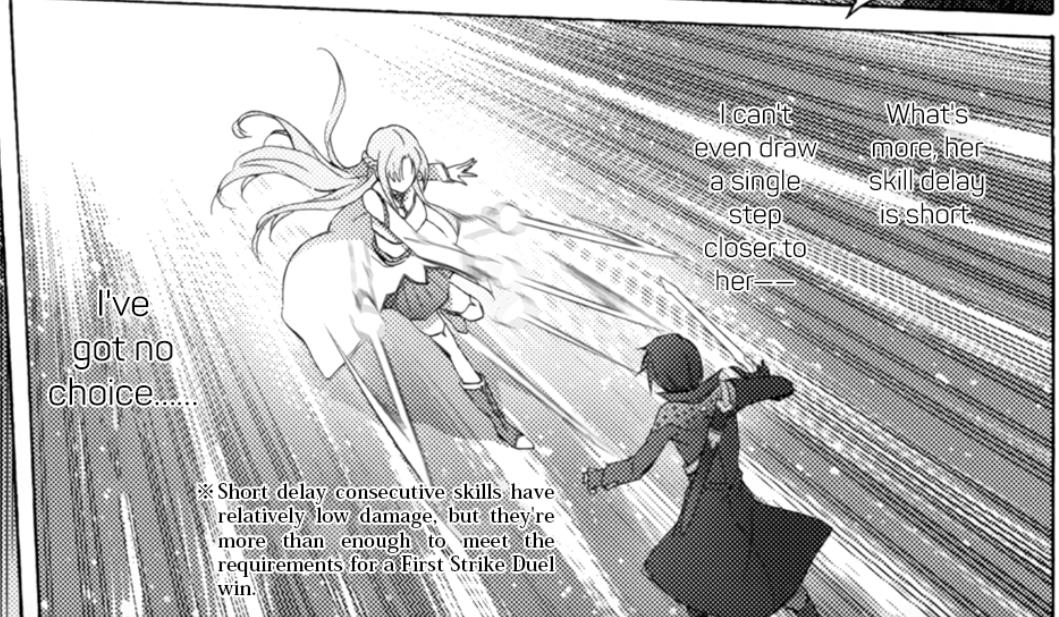
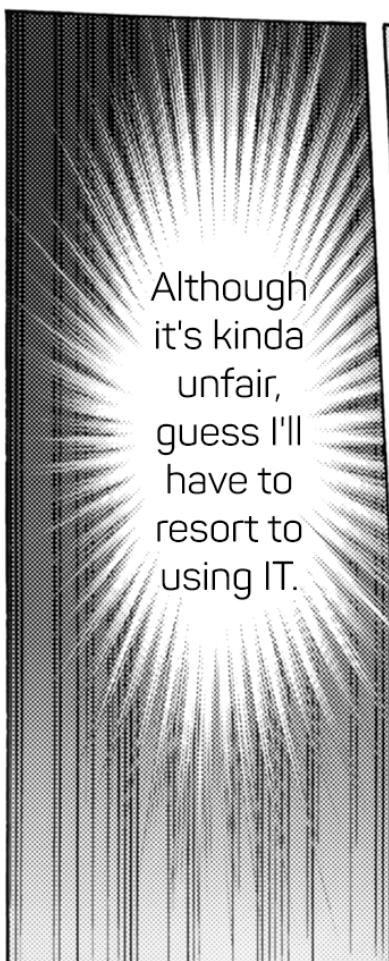
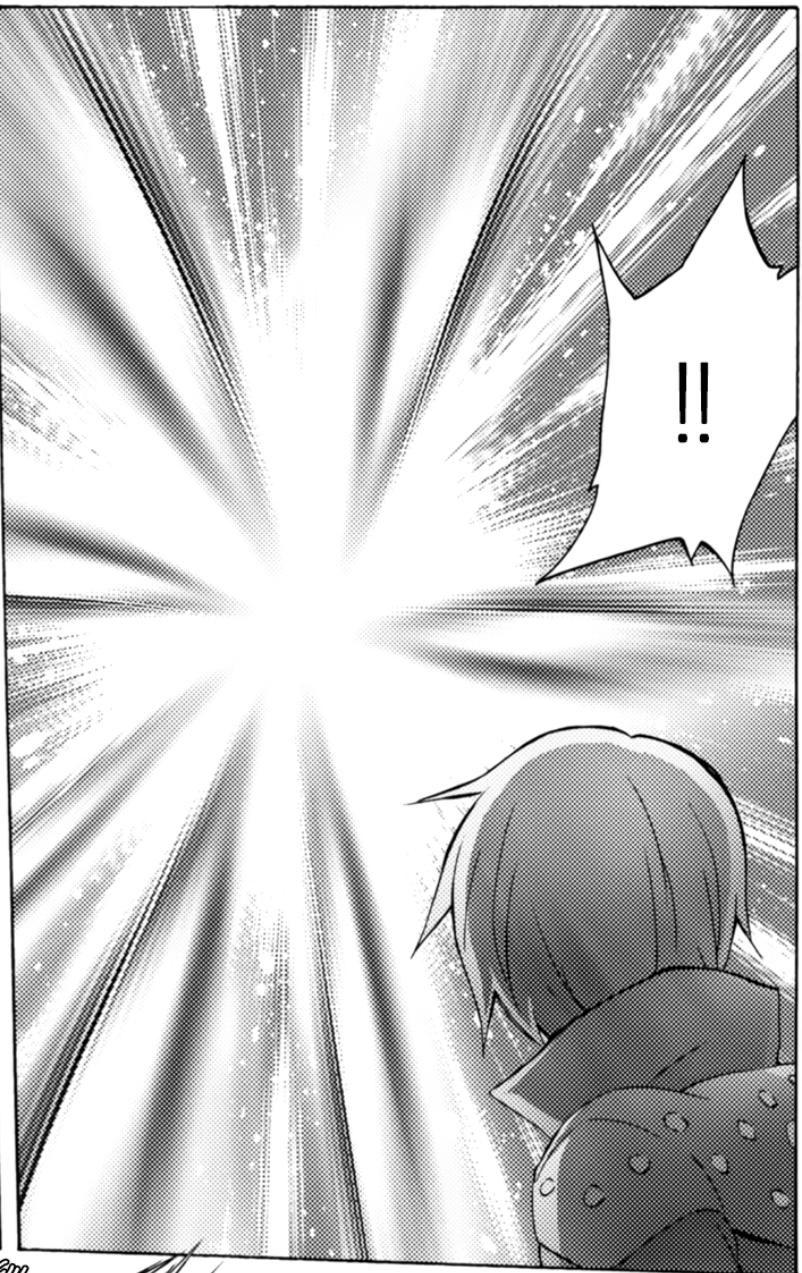


*Players can call out the main menu window by extending the fingers of their left hand and swinging them downwards. Generally, there's supposed to be a logout command at the very bottom of the command list, but it is currently removed. (Note: After calling out the menu, players can operate it with their right hand as well. In this comic, the motion for calling out the menu isn't depicted due to layout concerns).



*Aside from the "First Strike Mode", where the first player to get a decent hit wins, player duels have other modes as well, such as the "Full Finish Mode", where players fight until either of their HP bars reach zero, though there is (mostly) no one who uses this mode, of course.





* Short delay consecutive skills have relatively low damage, but they're more than enough to meet the requirements for a First Strike Duel win.

I've got him now!
No matter what
trajectory he
uses, I've got all
the variations of
One-Handed
Sword overhead
slashes down!

I'll just knock
him back with
a parry and
then slam him
while he's re-
covering from
his rigor!

!?

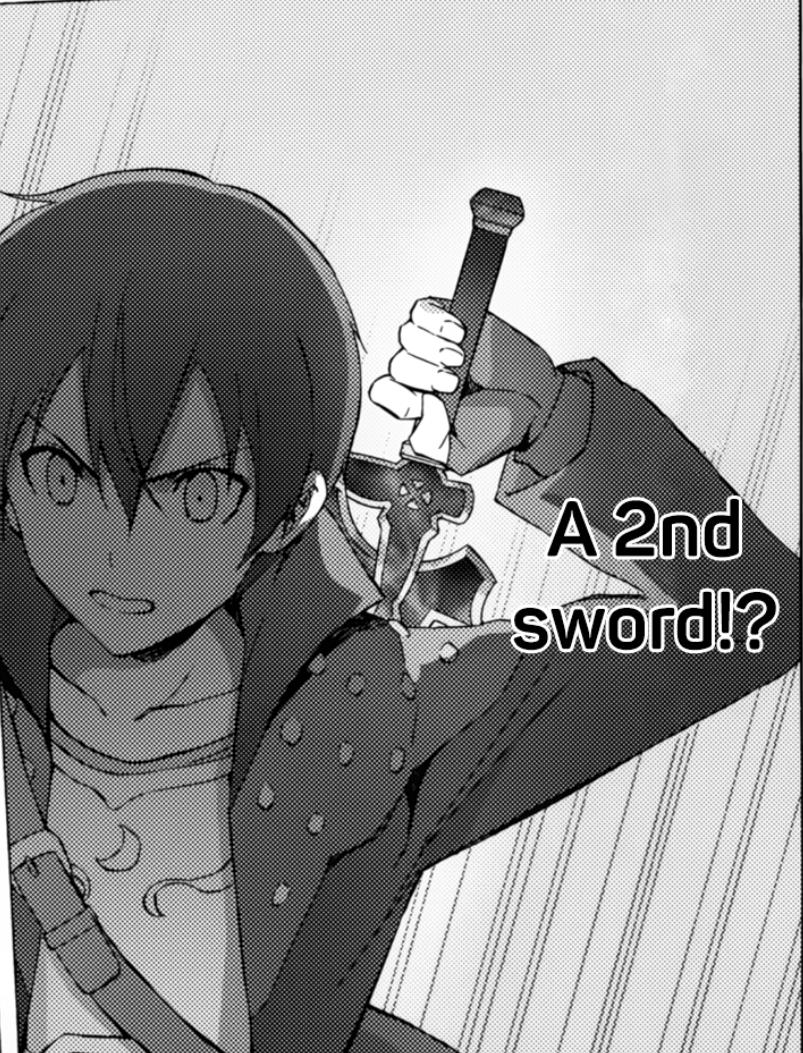
BAH
(GRANDISH)



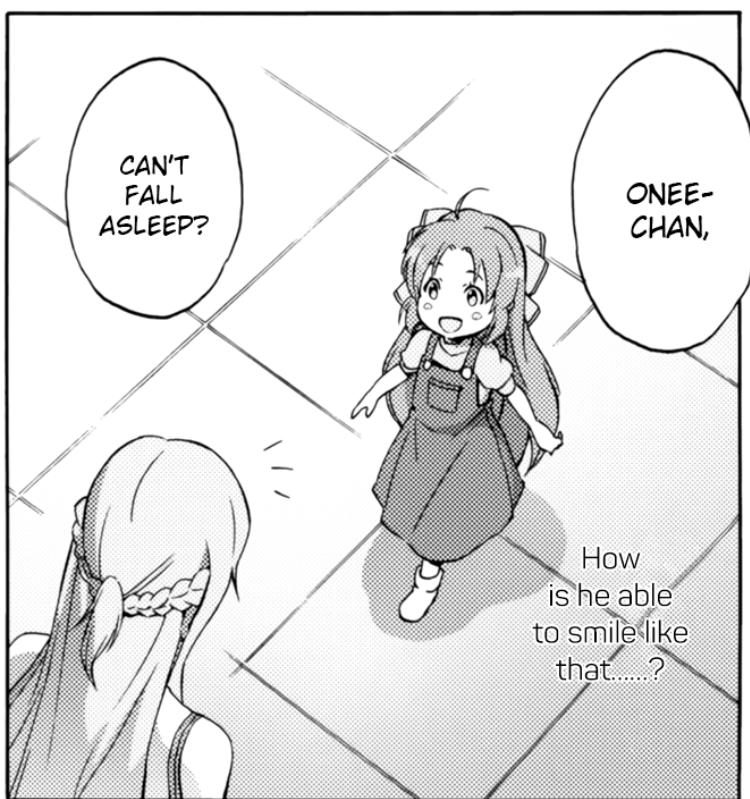
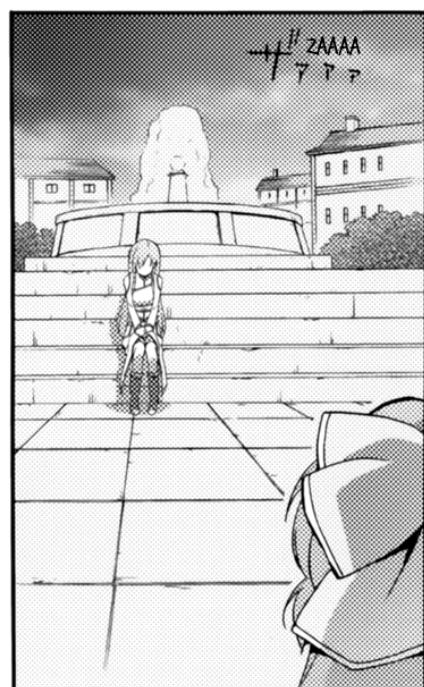
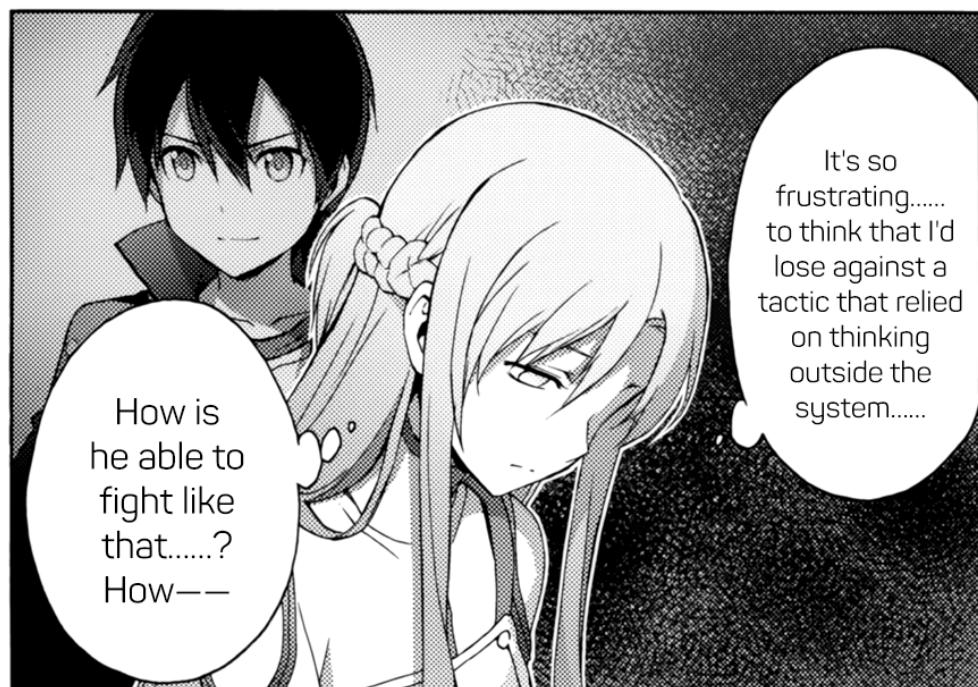
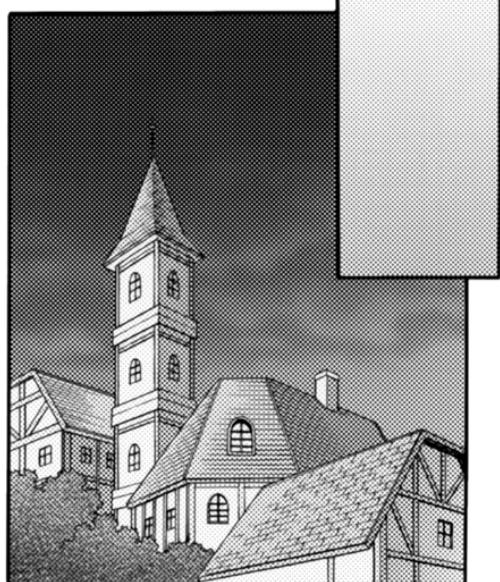
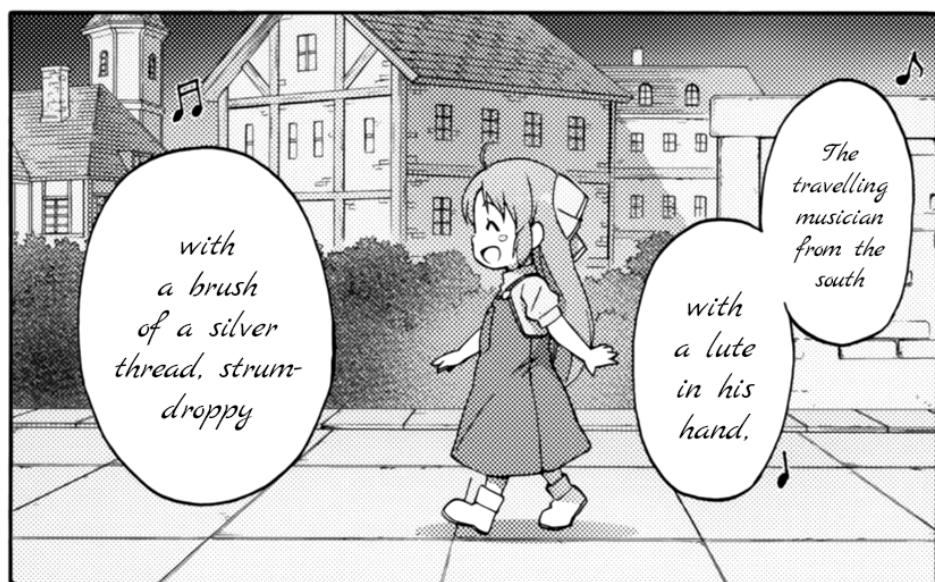
You've
got to be kid-
ding.....when
did he even
manage to
manipulate his
equipment
window?!

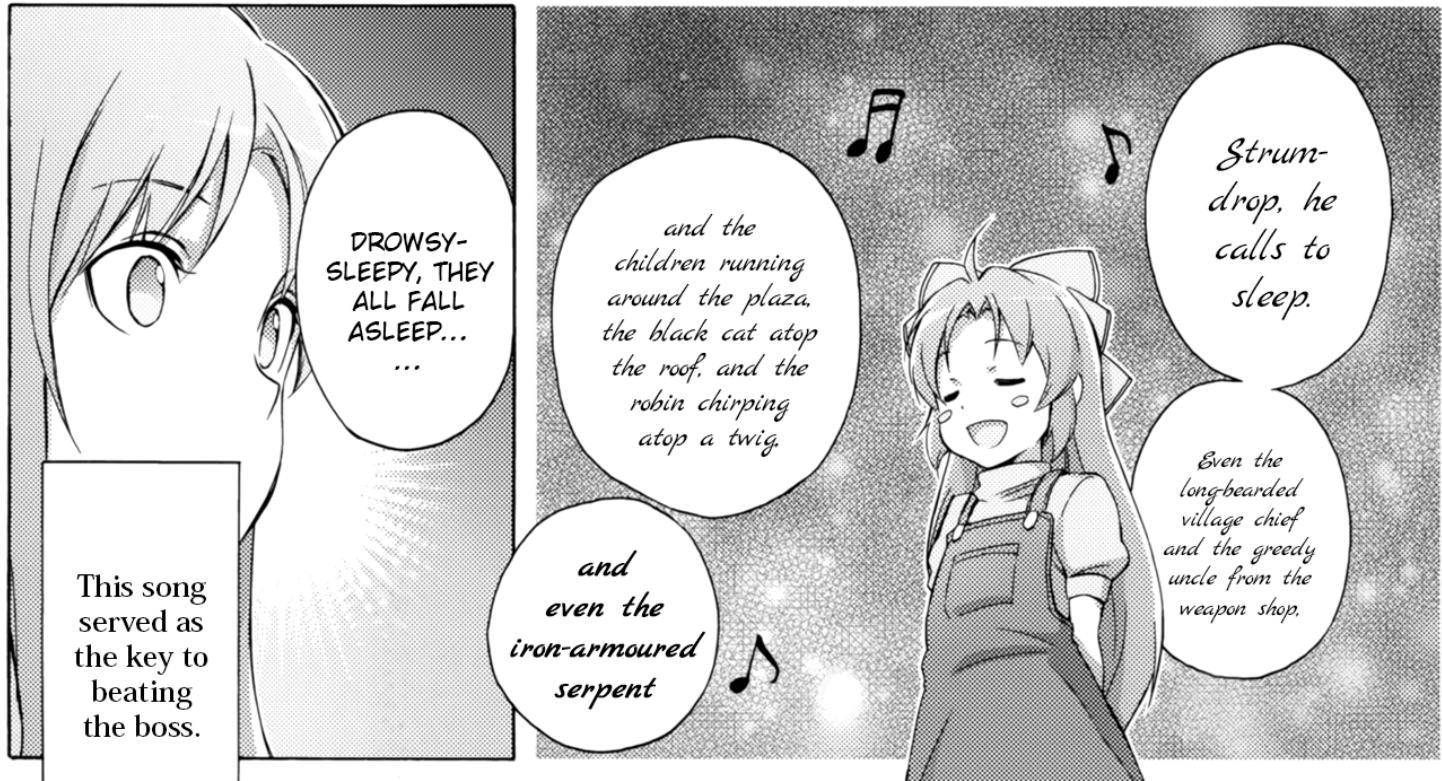


A 2nd
sword!?



*Seeing as materialising weapons and armour requires manipulating the menu window, it is considerably difficult to do this in the middle of a fight.





This song served as the key to beating the boss.

DROWSY-
SLEEPY, THEY
ALL FALL
ASLEEP...
...

and the
children running
around the plaza,
the black cat atop
the roof, and the
robin chirping
atop a twig.

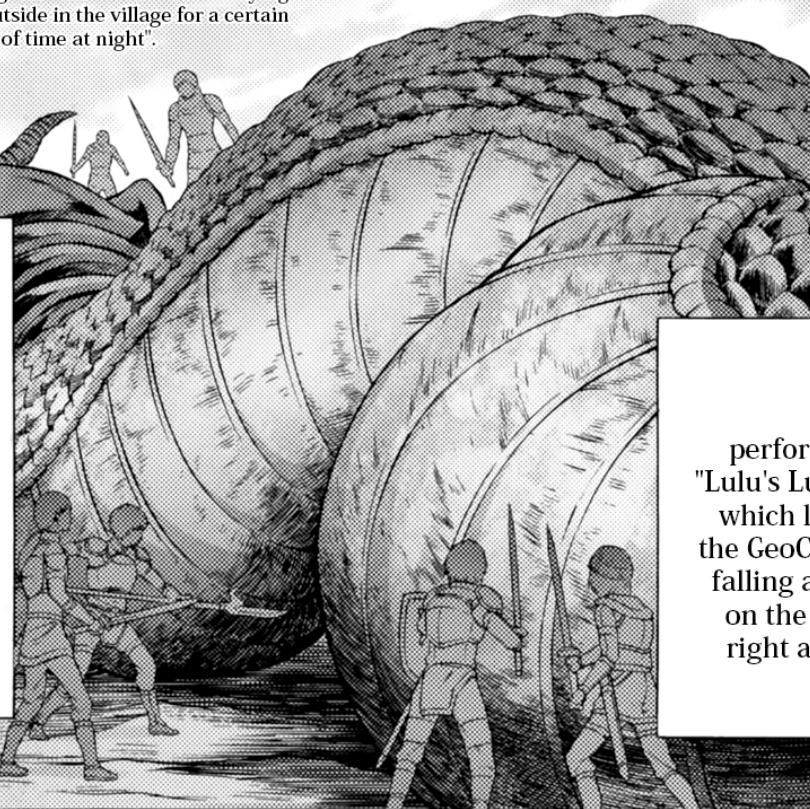
and
even the
iron-armoured
serpent

*Strum-
drop, he
calls to
sleep.*

Even the long-bearded village chief and the greedy uncle from the weapon shop.

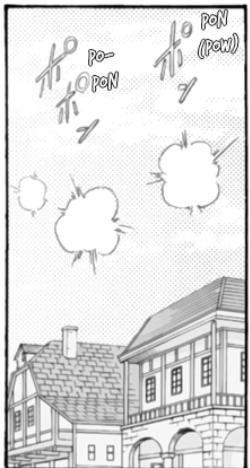
*The flag for the event was "staying alone outside in the village for a certain amount of time at night".

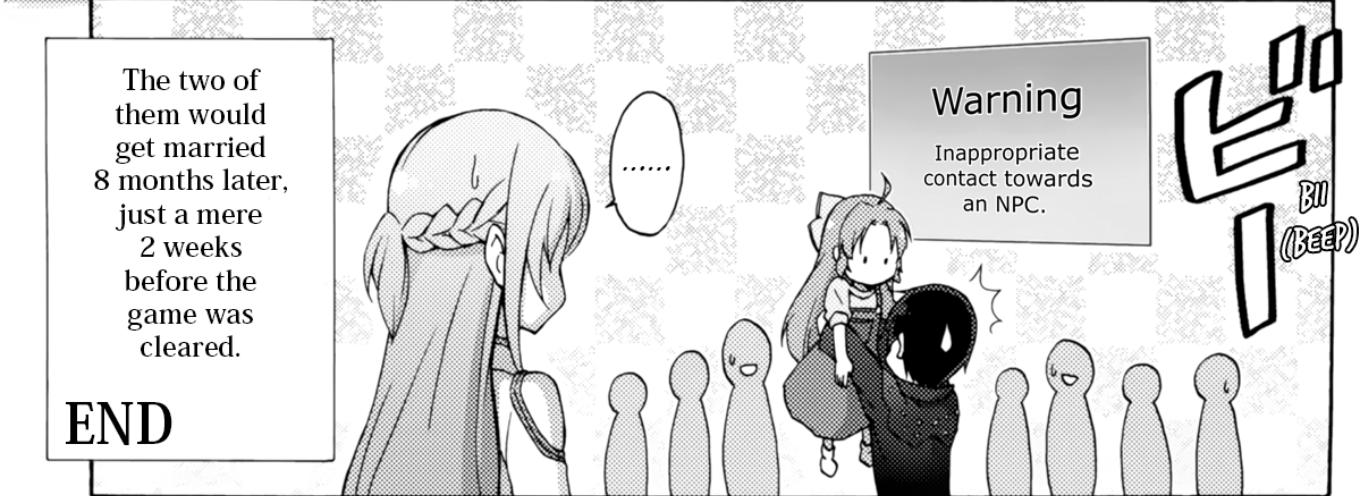
The vanguard party climbed over the boss's back to its rear, where they attacked its weak spot: its torso———and easily succeeded in vanquishing it.



From the very edge of the area where a player draws the monster's aggro with their mere presence, a player who had mastered the Musical Instrument skill

performed "Lulu's Lullaby", which led to the GeoCrawler falling asleep on the spot right away.





7th Floor, Once More

RAWS CELEST TRANSLATION DAVIGRON PROOFREADING EMIL EDITING CIRTOYT

July 2024

“I’m boiling.....”

Asuna muttered, expressing her immense fatigue whilst holding her voice.

After thinking about it for a bit, I responded with an equally slight whisper:

“At least your clothing is mainly white so it’s more bearable. This is entirely black, you know?”

“Seems that you still like wearing it regardless... by the way, could the heat be connected with how light reflection and absorption affects the perception of temperature in this world?”

With that unexpected question thrown at me, I thought for 2 seconds before replying.

“Aren’t I right? I remember feeling very fresh when I wore a light blue linen t-shirt and white cotton pants back when we were on this floor.”

“It seems that it’s not because of the colour but rather the texture and the material.”

After pointing this out, Asuna’s shocked expression suddenly loosened.

“...How nostalgic. It’s been a year and a half, right?”

“Right...”

I shifted my gaze from the building I was monitoring and looked towards the plains in the distance.

Asuna and I were lying alongside on the rooftop of a church, the tallest building in Tribula Village, northwest of the 7th floor. This floor is famous for having a perpetual summer, and on top of that, it's currently late July in the real world, the peak of summer, so the heat here feels double that of normal.

Of course, we didn't come here to get a tan. There was information about members of the assassin guild «Laughing Coffin» frequenting Tribula, a village outside the Safe Area —with no anticriminal code—so Asuna had asked me here to help with her task of verifying that.

Asuna is currently the subleader of «Knights of the Blood Oath», the strongest guild in the game, so she could have ordered any of her guild instead of asking me and taking the trouble of paying me for it... or at least that was what I pointed out to her, but she answered with a “Nobody in K o B has levelled their Hiding Skill like you, Kirito.”

Of course, there should be one or two K o B members with a scout build, but still, anything involving Laughing Coffin also involves danger. So, with that in mind, I took the job of guarding Asuna in case that such information could be a trap.

“...Well, nobody showed up...”

I whispered, returning my gaze to the item shop at the other end of the plaza.

We began the monitoring at 6:00am, so six hours have passed since then. Perhaps Laughing Coffin members operate only at night, and there's no proof that they come to shop there every day, so I had a hunch that this was misleading information.

I was totally sure she was going to say “It's only been six hours” or something like that, but...

“Maybe it was false information...”

Asuna replied, and with a serious look she added:

“I strongly believe that the Laughing Coffin headquarters are in some remote place on the lower floors that were completed so long ago now. But I’m sure even those guys wouldn’t be able to stand this heat on the 7th floor.”

“Me too... moreover they’re a bunch of hedonists and on top of that they dress blacker than me.”

“I thought the heat had nothing to do with the colour, however, if they don’t show up in two... no, three hours, we can head back.”

“Agreed.”

I nodded, and then realized something and asked:

“Should we use crystals to head back? Or run to the main city just like when we first came here?”

“Speaking of...”

After a moment of doubt, Asuna said:

“How about we go to Volupta and give Nirrnir a visit?”

“Ah...”

I was little, no, quite surprised. Since our formerly tragic separation incident, Asuna kept her distance from the A I advanced N P C s that inhabit this world.

I firmly gulped down the question of what had caused that change of mind. If something is changing inside Asuna, I don’t want to intervene in that.

“Yeah, that sounds good. I feel like eating again one of those... Dossaka, was it?”

“It was a mix of Dolma and Moussaka.”

After correcting me with a “Good grief” expression, Asuna sweetly smiled.

“In any case, it’ll be about night when we arrive, so let’s go and invite Nirrnir and Kio to that restaurant.”

7th Floor, For the Third Time

RAWS KAZUKI TRANSLATION DAVIGRON EDITING CIRTOYT

August 2024

“I’m boilinnnnnggggg!”

Asuna shouted, not bothered by being heard by those around her.

I quickly glanced around, identifying five, six players about the Teleport Gate Plaza, and quietly pointed out:

“Weren’t you the one who suggested to have the victory party on the 7th Floor, Asuna?”

“Hey, I’m not complaining or anything. I’m just saying it’s really hot.”

After saying such nonsense with a straight face, Asuna’s expression suddenly shifted to serious, and added:

“...Kirito, I don’t think you need to keep your guard up so high. After all, the whole thing about Laughing Coffin’s hideout being on the 7th Floor wasn’t real in the end. In any case, those guys already...”

“...Well, yeah but... Let’s get a move on.”

Asuna silently nodded, and we promptly began to walk, side by side to the Plaza’s western edge.

Five days ago, the red guild «Laughing Coffin» was annihilated by a subjugation party mainly composed by the assault team’s main guilds: «Divine Dragon Alliance» and «Knights of the Blood Oath». There were plans for a victory party, but they never took place. The reason was because, despite the plan to simply capture all Laughing Coffin’s members without casualties, it resulted in a bloodbath massacre with two-digit casualties on both sides.

I didn't hear any news about it being rescheduled, so I concluded that it was cancelled, until yesterday, when Asuna sent me a message saying, "Let's have the party". Honestly, despite being more in the mood to lock myself up inside a frontline labyrinth for a week, I considered Asuna would end up the most depressed since she was the one who commanded the raid, so I ended up heading to the 7th floor (the designated place for the party) to cheer her up—or that was what I intended.

The esteemed Knights of the Blood Oath Vice Commander who was briskly walking next to me looked just the same as back then, like nothing had ever changed.

Although, her personality certainly did change over time, once during the first quarter of the game when we formed a duo between the 1st Floor up until the 25th Floor, again during the second quarter when we parted ways where she then joined the Knights of the Blood Oath, and finally once more now during the present third quarter, as we conquer the 60s. Of course, I'm sure she hasn't changed on the inside, but on the outside her personality, or I mean, her attitude towards me had hardened and then softened, like some kind of next-door neighbour's cat.

Looking back, it had been five months since the time we had duelled in front of the assault team, triggered by an argument around deciding how to defeat a field boss on the 56th Floor. In that moment, the tension between the two of us reached a boiling point, although things gradually softened over the following months and so on, until today. Maybe it was because of something, but I don't have a clue as to what it could be...

Just then, along the right edge of my vision, I saw Asuna widely opening her mouth. I thought she was going to complain about the heat again but instead, "Fuwaaaaaaaaa~", she let out a superlong yawn. She closed her mouth the instant she noticed I was observing and guiltily muttered:

"Don't you get sleepy when it's this hot?"

“Uh, that, seems like a symptom of heatstroke. When you’re one step before passing out or something.”

“Eh? ...Really?”

Asuna’s expression turned serious for a moment, lowered her gaze to examine herself and then scowled at me.

“Even if that’s true, you can’t get a heatstroke in this world! I need to cool off so I’m running to Volupta!”

“Huh...”

I reflexively furrowed my brows, as currently we were in the centre of the plaza of the 7th Floor’s main town, Lectio, and if I’m not mistaken, the town of Volupta is five kilometres away, so it would take about an hour to get there walking at a casual pace.

As I started to run after the as swift as wind Asuna’s white overskirt through the main street of Lectio, a certain scene suddenly flooded back to my mind.

It was on April of this year—I think, when I was sleeping near the 59th Floor Plaza on a day with very pleasant weather, and Asuna appeared out of nowhere to scold me. I replied with a lazy “lie down and you’ll see” or something like that and then she slept soundly until the early evening. Thinking about it, maybe that was the event that started to relieve the tension between us... if that’s the case, I wonder if it all started because of her lack of sleep.

She probably still doesn’t get enough slept these days, so it would be nice to stop by Nirrnir’s mansion and borrow a bed from the guest’s room for Asuna... I thought, and began to run faster to catch up with Asuna.

Agil and Klein's Exciting Meal

RAW TAKASADASAN TRANSLATION DEFAN752 PROOFREADING ZEHAFFEN

August 2024

Argo the «Rat» was the best information dealer in the floating castle of Aincrad.

Her motto of ‘Selling any info that can be sold’ meant that she peddled any type of information: from normal MMORPG intel, like where to find rare, high-efficiency hunting grounds or how to beat monsters, to epicurean guidance, like the locations of fashionable cafes suitable for dates or taverns with great fish, to the latest gossip, such as the personal info of famous players from well-known guilds.

Although that was the case, she had her own rules as well. Personal information pertaining to matters of life and death (such as who would be hunting alone at what time, a detailed list of one’s skills, and so on) were not for sale; as for information other than that, things which she deemed safe, those were only open for purchase by players she trusted.

In that sense, the small mountain of white rice billowing clouds of steam from a large bowl sitting before me, along with an equally full dish of cream stew placed in front of two giggling men, were perhaps evidence of Argo’s trust in us. If you want to know why, it’s because she had, without a moment’s hesitation, sold my exceedingly personal information to these two snickering guys — Agil the axe merchant and Klein the katana wielder.

Nevertheless, just in case, I posed a question to them to confirm it.

“Umm... How did you guys learn that the only food combination I don’t like is «rice and cream stew»?”

The two of them immediately smirked even wider and spoke in unison:

“Aw c’mon, forget that. More importantly, get it while it’s hot, Kiridude!”

“Totally. We went to great lengths to get the last-attack bonus on the boss of Floor 68, so we wanted to celebrate a bit with a congratulatory party.”

“.....”

I glanced at the two dishes on the table on the second floor of Agil’s shop once more. They called it a congratulatory party, but there clearly wasn’t any other food. Furthermore, putting aside the ingredients for the cream stew, rice was the classic example of an elusive S-class ingredient. It must have been particularly difficult for them to obtain this much of it.

“... You know what? Since you went through the trouble of getting the rice, you could have prepared something more exciting to go with it, like Hamburg steak or tonkatsu... Cream stew doesn’t go with rice at all, trust me...”

I complained while picking up a giant spoon.

Although I’m not usually a picky eater, the only combination I’ve never liked since I was young is rice and stew. I love both rice and stew on their own, so the problem doesn’t lie with how they taste; rather, it’s probably psychological. Even in the virtual world, I don’t think I can overcome something I dislike in the real world.

But, unfortunately, Agil and Klein had probably not gone through this much effort just for a practical joke. Not long ago, the Floor 67 boss fight had resulted in the first deaths in a while. It’s been something I’ve been unable to forget since coming to Floor 68, so these two were trying to cheer me up in this weird way of theirs... probably.

Determined, I stuffed a full bite of stew into my mouth.

It was delicious. The slow-boiled meat and sweet vegetables, enveloped in rich white sauce, imparted a flavor that stacked up against cuisine you would find in the best NPC restaurants. There was no question about it; the best companion for this dish would have to be a toasted French baguette. But the only candidate before me was steaming white rice. No way. No matter what anyone said, there was no way cream stew and rice went together.

Utterly convinced, I scooped up a large bite of rice in half-desperation. I then shoveled it into my mouth, still fresh with the taste of the stew, and chewed. My body rejected it; I almost couldn't resist spraying a grain of rice onto Klein's sniggering face — but I'd already prepared myself for this.

"... It's... g-good," was what came out of my mouth. The katana wielder's jaw dropped like a stone.

"Yo... Yo, yo, that's not what we were told! Don't you hate rice with stew?!"

"No, that's what I thought too..."

Incredulous, I took another bite of stew and rice. The stew amplified the flavor of the rice, which was something I hadn't had in a long time. Far from rejecting it, I couldn't even stop moving my spoon now.

Scarfing down nearly half the bowl at once, I demanded of the calm-faced axe merchant:

"Hey Agil, who made this food?! I thought about it, but there can't be any player who can cook the S-class ingredient rice so perfectly. And this stew, it's got this nostalgic aroma that I can't explain. That's why it goes with the rice... Get me the chef!"

I blurted out, perhaps because I was overly surprised, but Agil said nothing and merely smiled at me with a knowing look.

"Sorry, but we agreed to keep the chef's identity a secret."

“You old bloke, you’re not even telling me?”

Klein looked disgruntled, and Agil slapped him loudly on the back.

“Well, isn’t that the exciting feeling we’re going for? If you wanna eat this chef’s, no, this player’s food again, do your best to survive all the way through.”

“If that’s how it is, then I want some too!”

Klein yelled. So as not to lose to him, I reached my spoon towards the large dish again.

Sound of Water, Sound of Hammer

TRANSLATION WORDGEAR, PONZ.INFO

August 2024

"Please reinforce it."

I stared hard at the face of my client, who placed a long sword in a white scabbard onto the counter while calmly saying that line, for roughly two seconds.

"...Wh-What is it?"

Upper body leaning away, the other party finally responded with a single cough.

"It-It's nothing. ...It's just that, I was wondering how long you're intending to drag this sword along."

It was a line meant as a light jab at that display of bashfulness, but with a-

"It-It's fine, isn't it, me dragging it about. I like it, after all."

I was rendered once again, speechless at that reply. If we were to continue looking at each other face to face like this, that near unnoticeable reddish tinge on my cheeks would be exposed, so I hastily averted my face and spoke.

"Well, it's just like you to not even update your equipment though. Well then, please come along to the workshop."

Reaching my hands towards the counter, I lifted the long sword with my fighting spirit, going "Yoisho!". The reason my face turned red was simple.

It was because three months ago, this slender long sword in my arms right now, «Dark Repulser», was what I-Lisbeth the smith, forged by swinging my smith hammer: a player-made weapon; also, the black-haired, black-clothed one-handed sword user, Kirito, who just made the "I like it" comment, was the person I am in love with. Ever since the day we met, without ceasing.

My shop, «Lisbeth's Equipment Shop» stood in the southern district of the main town area on Aincrad's 48th floor. It was

somewhat average among the manufacturing-class player shops, with the sales area and workshop situated on the first floor, and the second organized into four rooms for the kitchen and bedrooms.

As for the reason it was valued highly despite that house plan, it was due to the fact that it was furnished with a large water wheel at the back of the house, connected to a waterway.

Various large-scale devices could be connected to the power transmitting axle that pierced through the wall, reaching into the work-shop. For a bakery, a flour mill; as for a tailor, a weaving loom; and as such, for a smith, bellows or a sharpening wheel. Considering the merit of automating these tools that would originally require a player to push and turn them by hand, the thumping sound of its rotation that rang out regardless of day or night could be said to be rather pleasant.

Kirito appeared at the shop early in the afternoon, in the second summer of Aincrad. As it was a time when steadfast players secluded themselves in the hunting grounds or labyrinth areas, while the converse sipped away at iced drinks after a meal at bars or restaurants, there were no other customers within the shop.

I left the NPC, Hanna (female, estimated to be fifteen years old, surname, Heinemann) to tend to the shop, and moved towards the workshop while carrying the heavy sword. After Kirito, who came along, opened the door without requiring any additional prompting, the sound of the water wheel's rotation became remarkably louder.

"...It's such a relief that Aincrad's summers aren't that hot, really." His impression was probably due to spotting the furnace burning red hot in a corner of the room, I thought, as I heard him speak from behind. I lowered myself onto the chair beside the anvil, unintentionally broke into a wry smile.

"If you care about the heat, you should just take that off when you're within the area, at least."

The trademark of Kirito, who possessed the cool second title of «The Black Swordsman», was that black leather coat of his that extended below his knees; if one were to take up that sort of appearance in the real world during August, it would probably eventually result in heatstroke. Leaving the sheathed Dark Repulser on the anvil for the moment, I shifted my view to Kirito, who was leaning against the wall, and he had a bitter smile on while scratching his head.

"It's like, well, aside from sleeping, I just can't calm down without this on nowadays, you know..."

"That said, don't tell me you actually had the same one equipped since the first floor?"

Previously, when I was chatting with my close friend, Asuna, at this very spot, the topic ended up being Kirito's only set of clothes. According to her, it seemed that he had the same appearance ever since he got his hands on a unique rare, «Coat of Midnight», from the floor boss on the first floor.

At my question, Kirito smiled once again and shook his head.
"I do have to update my armor every now and then. This «Blackwyrm Coat» is the... fourth generation, I guess?"

"Oh... That's a monster drop too?"

"Nope, it's player-made..."

That somewhat complicated expression that flashed past Kirito's face as he replied did not escape my gaze. Maintaining my smile, I pressed on without a moment's delay.

"Oh. Which shop is it from?"

"Well, that's... it's just something from A-«Ashley's»..."

"Ohh. Hehh. Is that so."

As I dragged my words out, Krito made the truly conspicuous motion of averting his eyes. Ashley was a charismatic seamstress, widely said to be Aincrad's number one. Although it wasn't like she was a business rival to me, a smith, she set up shop in Lindas like me, in the northern section, and it was thrice the size of mine (with two water wheels), not to mention the shop's name, «Ashley's», was one most could not help but to notice. In addition, the person in question was a considerable beauty in her early twenties.

Likely due to being aware that the defensive line-up in my Lisbeth Equipment Shop included lightweight armor for swordsmen using one-handed swords as well, Krito babbled on with an expression on the verge of letting out a cold sweat effect.

"Nah, it's just that my build is based on leather armor and all, and the only tailor I knew that could handle a high grade raw material like black dragon leather was Ashley-san, so I really had no choice at all, you see..."

"I didn't even say anything, did I. But still, if I'm not wrong, wasn't it Ashley-san's policy on custom-made items to only take up requests that interested her?"

"Re-Really? I was, you know, referred there by Asuna, her regular customer... oh right, that's just like the first time I came to Lis's shop, isn't it. That time was a real disaster, eh, smashing that sword you were sell- ing when I tried swinging it and..."

Upon getting to that point, he froze up with an expression that said "Oh-crap-I-stepped-on-a-land-mine", and I ended up bursting out in laughter, unable to suppress it any further.

"Ahaha... there's no need to make a face like that, that's nothing more than a good lesson to me now. Back then, I did make swords only focused on Accuracy and Quickness, without much care for their durability, after all. Swords that are strong with the system assistance are popular, but I realized that the swords that'll protect my customers' lives in a pinch are the durable ones..."

After my laughter settled down and I turned back to the anvil, I lifted Dark Repulser up once again. I gently pulled the sword out from its sheath, it was heavy enough for me to have no proper way of swinging it in actual combat even if I could carry it around with my STR.

The blade that was fairly slender for a one-handed long sword was silver, with a faint bluish tint. Asuna's beloved sword, «Lambent Light», was of translucent silver much like a crystal, but in contrast the appearance of this was exactly like that which often appears in fantasy works, «Mithril Silver».

"If I'm not mistaken, this is +39 at the moment, right?"

"Yep. In short, I'm challenging for that +40 today."

Kirito assented to my question without hesitation, but having a number of +40 as a reinforcement value wasn't quite common. Every piece of equipment that existed in Aincrad possessed a property named «Reinforcement Attempts Count>>. As its name implied, it was the number of times one could challenge for a reinforcement on it, and that number fell by one each time, regardless of success or failure.

The value of the attempts count for «Dark Repulser» was 50, far more than the rest, among the swords I forged. And now, the remaining count was 8. In other words, the results of reinforcement thus far was 39 successes, compared to a mere 3 failures. Putting it into a success rate, it was at, erm... approximately 93 percent. This was a figure that could already be said to be a miracle, and if the information brokers were to get wind of it, they would likely come here straight away, sniffing for the trick to it. But still, even if they were to come, it's not like I knew the reason for it.

In any case, the reason why this sword that was forged three months ago could still be used by Kirito on the frontlines (currently the seventieth floor), was mainly due to this terrifying reinforcement

value. Players uninterested in weapon reinforcement mostly updated the arms they mainly used with each floor, but Kirito equipping the sword that I made for this long was a cause for happiness, and conversely, concern, as well.

As for why that was so, if one planned to boost the success rate of reinforcement to its maximum value, the quality and quantity of the raw materials required simply became outrageous. Even if he was a solo player, laying claim to all of the drop items, it was not difficult to guess that an immense amount of time was needed to gather all those raw materials.

-How about abandoning this sword, and advancing to a rare weapon dropped on the frontlines?

I wonder if I should be giving such advice, as a smith myself. Probably, if it's a rare weapon at the class of the 70th floor's, by getting to around +20, its cumulative properties should be able to match this Dark Repulser +39. And considerably fewer raw materials would be required for reinforcement compared to the present.

As I stared at the sword, I took in a breath of air, and opened my mouth.

However, the words that came out were-

"...The raw materials, you made sure to get all of them, right? If you're challenging for +40, I have no desire to do it without the probability fully boosted."

Stifling my inner thoughts, I spoke with my lips pouted, and Kirito nodded with a broad grin.

"Of course."

The right hand fitted into a fingerless glove (of course, made from black leather) nimbly manipulated a window. What materialized was an excessively large leather bag. Laying the sword down and

peeking into the bag I received, metal plates that appeared undoubtedly high grade, along with fangs and horns of monsters, various types of jewels and such were tightly packed within.

Spreading those onto the floor to confirm their quantity would require a dreadful amount of time, so I tapped the bag with my finger, displaying a small window indicating its content.

Tapping the sword atop the anvil next and hitting once again, on the reinforcement value shown on the small window, a sub-window with the information on the raw material items needed for reinforcement floated out.

If I were to drag the bag's window with my fingertip, the moment it got into contact with the sword's, it would automatically go into comparison mode, informing whether both contents are the same. If the items' names and quantities all turned blue, it was a complete match.

"Looks okay. But really now, it's amazing how you manage to gather this much every single time!"

After I voiced out a line that went against my actual thoughts again, Kirito casually shrugged his shoulders.

"Most of the items drop even at the frontlines, so they naturally pile up while mapping. There's only a small portion that I have to gather over at the lower floors, you know."

I knew just how difficult it was to gather the required amount of that «small portion», with me doing the same for my one-handed mace on occasions. But as expected, words opposing that left my mouth.

"Don't let the news that the clearers are rampaging about the lower floors get tattled on to the information brokers. I'm totally against getting onto the newspaper as «That Mr. Big Shot Bastard's favorite shop» or anything like that!"

"Hahaha, I limited myself to only hunt at the lower floors late at night, so it's fine."

"...Is that so. Well, that's fine, then."

Mapping the frontlines' dangerous labyrinth areas in the day, and after taking a mere short nap, switching to the tiresome work of gathering materials. That meant Kirito had kept up that sort of lifestyle for these three months. I checked his complexion with a sidelong glance on reflex, but that smoothness on his avatar was just like that of a girl's, without any sign of the fatigue that must have accumulated within him.

Chewing over the silent discord in my mind, I cleared away all of the windows with a single wave of my right hand.

"Well then, let's get started right away. What's the property you want?"

"Sharpness, please!"

My perpetually positive client gave a slight nod in return, and after I reached my hands out to the large forge, what could be said to be the main fixture of the room, I changed the menu from «Production» to «Re-inforcement». Setting the details to Sharpness, I poured the raw materials for reinforcement, stuffed in the bag, into it.

Actually, there was a need to operate the bellows until the furnace burns bright red, but thanks to the water wheel, that process was currently automated. The small hand-carry furnace meant for street stalls used fuel, so bellows were unnecessary, but it did not have the capacity to take in this large quantity of raw materials. The large furnace that easily swallowed down the objects, which numbered over a hundred, somehow appeared delighted as it burned ever stronger, and the mass of raw materials was liquefied in mere seconds. The blaze, which was orangey-red in color, turned into the silver used to represent the Sharpness reinforcement mode.

Without further delay, I thrust Dark Repulser, extracted from its scabbard, into the furnace. The silver-tinted light wrapped around the blade, and right as it started gleaming brilliantly, I moved the sword to the anvil.

All that was left was to hit it with the smith hammer for the required number of times.

Although I really had no choice but to swing the hammer for close to two hundred and fifty times back when this sword was meticulously forged from the ingot, for reinforcement, whether challenging for +1 or +40, the number of hits needed was fixed at ten.

I unfastened my beloved «Zoringen Hammer +20» from the belt on my waist, and firmly held the grip, wound up with red leather.

Smith hammers were classified as tool items while being blunt-type weapons at the same time, so they naturally could be reinforced. That said, it was impossible to hit it with itself, so I had a sub-hammer exclusively for the sake of reinforcing it.

I matched my breathing with the lifting of my beloved hammer, the so-called beloved sword of my own, that though not at the level of Kirito's tenacity, still took a good two months to reinforce. I held it still for a slight bit at its peak, and brought it down in one go.

Kaan!, a clear hammer sound. The sound I loved. Silver and orange mingled in the scattered sparks, springing onto the floor and vanishing.

Two times. Three times. When producing my goods for sale, or reinforcing the weapons of other customers, I was able to achieve a state of nothingness on the very first hit—or rather, I became entirely absorbed in the sounds and lights, but only when working on Kirito's sword did I end up getting my personal feelings involved.

Do protect that person; be sure to come back to this workshop with him; I would swing my hammer as I speak.

Four times, five times. As long as this sword stayed on Krito's back, we were connected by a unique bond. I was unable to guard his back during the boss clearing battles like Asuna, but I could assist him by repairing his sword's durability, and increasing its reinforcement value.

Six times, seven times.

...However.

This bond would not last forever. Dark Repulser's reinforcement attempts count would decrease by one yet again today, with 7 left. If it were to continue being reinforced at this pace, there would be two months left... it would wear out before the arrival of winter. If that happened, there would be no choice but to switch over to a new sword to continue fighting at the frontlines.

When that time came, it was not certain that Krito would request for me to produce a new sword once again. No, that possibility was unlikely. To forge a sword with high specifications, overwhelmingly rare... in other words, extremely highly priced ingots were necessary, but a monster drop wouldn't cost even a single col. To Krito who was always fighting at the frontlines, participating in all of the boss battles, not to mention having a rather high chance at obtaining the last attack bonus, there should be plenty of opportunities for him to get his hands on a rare one-handed sword.

Eight times. And the right hand of mine that caused the ninth hammering sound to echo out-stopped in midair.

I felt Krito's confused gaze on my left cheek. But I could not bear to look in that direction.

Instead of swinging the hammer down, I embraced it close to my chest. «Dark Repulser», engulfed in a silver brilliance atop the anvil, was waiting for that final hit in silence. The duration of the reinforcement effect was three minutes. If that time passed by, the

glow wrapping up the blade will extinguish, and the re-inforcement would result in a failure automatically.

"...I..."

What leaked out from my lips was a quivering voice unfitting of the ever cheerful smith, Lisbeth.

"...I-I won't hit it anymore... Because... be-because when the attempts count runs out, this sword's role will... it will then..."
End.

Honestly-Honestly, if I really were thinking for Kirito's sake, I would have thought it better for that day to hurry up and arrive. If he were to advance to a new sword, reinforcing from +1 again, gathering materials will get much easier. My mind understood this, but my arm refused to move. With the hammer clutched to my chest, I could only tremble softly.

Then, I felt Kirito parting from the wall. Step by step, I could hear his muted footsteps stopped right beside me. The hem of that black coat fluttered as it spread out, the swordsman went down on his knees at my side.

"...Hey, Lisbeth. I... have a hunch."

It was a situation where it would have been perfectly fine for him to go, "Hurry up and hit it!" with anger as the client, but Kirito's voice was gentle. Since that night of the day we met, when he recounted various stories to me at the bottom of that dragon's nest; nothing has changed.

"...A hunch?"

I turned apprehensively, and those black pupils shyly blinked once, right in front of my own.

"Yeah. The frontlines are still on the seventieth floor, and there's still thirty left above... but I wonder why. I have a hunch-no, a belief

that when I fight the last boss of this castle, what I will be holding, is this Dark Repulser."

"...Why exactly, do you think so...?"

"Well, you see, the Cardinal System's the one who decided the title for this sword, right? «Dark Repulser», that which will repel darkness... there's no way such a name will be labeled onto anything aside from «end equipment»."

Having said all that, he looked on at me with that impish grinning face for a bit, without any further words.

Normally, this would have been the point when I took a deep, looong breath, or jab in with a "Why are you running your mouth off like that". But for just this time alone, my lips too, twisted into a meek smile. I answered in a voice that was soft, but trembling no more.

"...That might be right. No... it will, definitely happen..."

"That's right. ...So, come on, that one last hit, finish it off with a clang."

"Yeah. I have a hunch too. This time too, will be a success."

I gently lifted the hammer that I was embracing up once again. I inhaled a deep breath, stopped, shut my eyelids, and whispered to the sword.

-Sorry for the suspense. You, with your master, have always driven away the darkness from around me, haven't you? I'll believe too... that one day, a time when that light of yours shines upon all of the people imprisoned in this castle will arrive.

Tenderly, and thus, strongly, the hammer swung down.

Ten times.

The right hand clothed in a black leather glove firmly gripped the hilt of the «Dark Repulser +40» I held out.

"*Swish, swish* the blade flashed with nearly no hint of its weight, dispersing a prismatic display of radiance into the air. Finally, the sword blade slid into its scabbard with a fluid sound, and its owner smiled, seemingly pleased.

"Yeah, with this, the 70th floor boss can just come at me."

"If you're going to say that, don't you dare go tumbling over accidentally right in front of the boss, like on the 69th floor. That report got on the front page of the newspaper, and even I got ashamed over it, you know."

"Y-Yes... Sorry about that..."

Before the smith, Lisbeth, with her arms folded, was the swordsman, Kirito, scratching his head. We had completely returned to how the two of us usually were; it felt somehow comforting, yet just a little lonesome.

Stifling those feelings, I stretched out vigorously.

"O-Oof... Haah, well, anyway, I'm glad it succeeded. Even if the probability was fully boosted, there are still times when it fails. No way will I be accepting another reinforcement attempt this stressful for a while."

I mentioned those lines casually, but upon hearing it, an awkward expression surfaced onto Kirito's features for some reason.

"...What's the matter?"

"N-Nah, that's... actually, just how should I say this, the timing just happened to cross over today..."

"...The timing?"

With that, the swordsman opened his storage window and stored Dark Repulser. Following that, with some swift manipulation, what

materialized above the window was wrapped in a scabbard of black leather, a long sword that gave off an intense presence that I could feel, even from where I stood.

"...I was thinking that it would be nice if I could entrust the +40 for this guy to you as well..."

Those words, along with the sword which was brought before me, «Elucidator», another one that was precious to Kirito, made me gaze at him in silence for several seconds.

Haa- And I let out a deep, long sigh.

[Material Edition 4]

Cold Hand, Warm Heart

TRANSLATION PRYUN, BEGINNERXP, TAP COMPIILING BAKA-TSUKI, MAMUE

September 2024

After completing a day of hunting, I returned to my house on the fiftieth floor, which was located in «Algade», but my body still had that marvellously uncomfortable feeling.

My body movement became slow. I couldn't stand straight. My entire body felt like I was carrying a prop which my back could not achieve the required strength, it felt really heavy, as I opened the main menu window, but could not see any place written in red.

As I unsteadily staggered out onto the path from the square, my thoughts remained uninterrupted. If this discomfort is a negative status, there should be a warning flashing before my eyes. And since I'm within the District Boundary, negative status such as poison and paralysis should be removed. Maybe I got affected by a new unknown monster's negative status effects. Even after entering the boundary it did not disappear, and at the same time does not trigger a warning — something like «Curse».

At this point, an evil cold crept up from my toes to my body, causing me to shiver.

It is still September in Aincrad, too early for winter. But, going through my coat, penetrating deep into my muscles and bones, was like the wind of winter.

I couldn't return to my room under these conditions. Thinking like this, I increased my pace, going into the first hotel I discovered. I quickly rented an empty room at the front desk, and after taking the key I rolled and crawled to the front of the furthest door from the desk. As I sat on a simple bed in the narrow room, I unequipped all my equipment to make my body feel lighter, then took out all

kinds of antidotes for all kinds of negative statuses and tried them all one by one. I then used a Crystal which could remove all negative effects, and awaited the moment I would be returned to normal.

— However.

“.....This..... is..... Really bad.....”

This evil cold did not leave, and my field of vision began to blur. I could no longer withstand it and collapsed onto the bed, and using my brain, whose operating speed had dropped to very low levels, to think, desperately searched for a countermeasure. If this was a «Curse», an NPC in the church should be able to remove it right? However, was there really a church in the “disorderly” [Chaotic] Algade’s streets?

As I was filtering out the buildings on the map, my consciousness began to fade, so I had no choice but to decide to seek help from others.

In other words, I had given up on the idea of solving it on my own.

I opened the directory to my list of friends. With my blurred vision, I searched for Klein’s name from a list that couldn’t be considered long, selected it, and pressed the button for sending messages then immediately typed out on the virtual keyboard:

"I can't handle it I'm dying Save me"

After keying in this message which was rich with melodrama, yet did not lose its poetic flavor, I pressed the send button, then turned the room into the «Friends Allowed» mode, and lost consciousness. My forehead was caressed by a cool comforting touch.

As I stirred, I discovered that I was covered by a thick quilt. The bone chilling evil cold had also changed into sweltering sweat inducing heat.

In this uncomfortable heat, the only cool object was applied to my forehead, controlled by a constantly moving hand. At this moment

“Ah, you’re awake?”

A refreshingly sweet voice came from beside my pillow. As the word repeated itself a few times in my brain, I realized that it totally didn’t sound like Klein’s crude “Oi, you’ve woken up”.

I desperately opened my heavy eyelids, the thing swaying in my sight was... the «Knights of the Blood» Sub Leader, the strongest rapier user, «The Flash» Asuna who actually revealed a gentle smile.

“.....!!?!”

I was so surprised I wanted to bounce up, but Asuna immediately used her left hand to hold me down. “Not lying down won’t do. Although it won’t make you better immediately.”

She used her index finger to poke at my cheeks.

What is this all about? How did this happen? Is seeing Klein as Asuna caused by this mysterious negative effect? If this is the case should I call Agil?

These bursts of stupid questions hit me as my brain functioned, before finally realizing the truth.

According to the order in the list of friends, Asuna’s name was just above Klein’s. In my semi conscious state and blurring vision, I just wanted to press his name, and must have pressed the wrong one. In other words, I had sent Asuna — Aincrad’s idol, as well as the heroine of the raiders, some embarrassing information.

What should I do? What is the best action to take?

My brain continued to operate inside my head, as Asuna dunked the damp towel into a basin next to me. *Plop*, the sound of water being displaced could be heard.

The towel was quickly taken back out, squeezed dry, and applied to my forehead once more. The cool comfortable feeling slightly dispersed the heat gathered onto my body.

“The cooling effect of water doesn’t last long, but this is the only option. It’s better than nothing.”

Seeing the smiling Asuna, I could only emit —— a single phrase.

“Tha.....Thank you. Helping me with this.”

Subsequently, my cheeks turned into a pink shade, and feeling this change, quickly turned my head to the side, to see Asuna smiling again.

“It’s nothing. We should help each other in a moment of need. A person on his own would definitely feel uncomfortable, I understand.”

At this kind of time.

That said, Asuna should have experienced this mysterious negative status effect before.

“What kind of negative status effect is this.....? All kinds of antidotes, as well as the Crystal doesn’t work on it.....?”

After I inquired, Asuna’s hazel eyes blinked.
Then broke out in laughter.

“Ahahaha..... So-sorry..... but..... huff huff..... Being like this, is it your first time?”

“Of..... Of course it is the first time. I’ve never heard of this status effect.”

I replied in an injured tone, and Asuna apologized a few more times, while mopping my head with the wet towel.

“I say, this negative status effect, is neither poison nor paralysis.... it's a sickness. You caught a cold.”

“Co.....Cold?”

“Um. It's not your avatar, but your body in the real world which caught a cold. Right now, the seasons should be changing over there. Around this time last year, many people collapsed from this.”

“A.....Aah.....”

I could not help but sigh.

It was completely in my blind spot. However, this was truly possible. Although the body's five senses were completely cut off, the Nerve Gear was unable to isolate fever and other physical discomfort.

In other words, as Asuna said, my real body was what gave me such discomfort.

“Which is why I said, a cool forehead can let you feel more comfortable.”

With that said, I looked away from Asuna who was once again wetting the towel, to determine the time. It was eleven thirty at night.

Since I rolled and crawled into this hotel at around six, Asuna had continued to do this for five hours. Using the «Wettable cloth equipment» to produce a cooling effect, could only last for five minutes at most. Although it was very comfortable, isn't it a waste of effort?

Suddenly, an odd feeling emerged from my chest, causing me to

have no idea what to do. In my semi conscious state, I had no idea what this feeling meant.

Instead, I moved my hand out from under the quilt, and held the towel on my forehead, getting ready for Asuna's hand to take it.

"What.... What is it?"

Although her words became obscure, Asuna maintained her smile, while on the other hand I couldn't find any words to reply her. I didn't understand what I was doing either. It was clearly like this, but my mouth emitted some words in a rough voice on its own.

"Enough with this towel. Instead of it..... just use your hands to touch my forehead."

-- Don't take advantage of my weakness!!

Was what I had expected her to spit out, but contrary to my expectations, ".....Em" Asuna answered in a quiet voice. Squeezing my hand in reply, she used her cool hands to brush across my forehead with the other. As my body was exhausted, my consciousness gradually faded. The anxiety of getting the disease made way to a comfortable sense of security.

As I entered a light sleep, By my ear, I could hear a soft lullaby. "I said, you..... Kirito..... kun. It's ok to give your cold..... over to me. Like that, you might be able to recover faster." After that, I could feel a gentle kind of touch to the cheeks, on my face with my eyes closed.

I wanted to open my eyes to confirm --- Obviously, I was unable to do so.

* * *

“.....ooh.....”

Asuna grunted, and opened her eyes.

The view entering her eyes was not the white ceiling of her home, but instead it was the black of an old wooden board. The bed was hard and the blanket was thin. Despite complaining to herself to find a better room, she was not in any condition to get out of bed.

Could it be — a real cold?

No, it is impossible to be infected by a virus in the virtual world. The players were completely separated in the real word, connected only by wires. However, this is too much coincidence!

The strongest solo player, The «Black Swordsman» Kirito, perhaps due to the excellent physical condition, as well as the overnight care by Asuna, had recovered. This is good. This is fine enough.

However, facing this exchange, she didn't think about her own collapse. Asuna was sitting beside Kirito's bed, humming a lullaby until she fell asleep. Based on the sun shining through the window, it was now evening.

She looked away — to the empty chair by the bed. In the midst of her mind, she recalled that until afternoon, Asuna was changing the wet cloth on the forehead constantly. But, seeing Asuna asleep, Kirito probably went out to complete his daily hunting.

“Maa..... there is nothing I can do about it.”

She whispered aloud. Different from Asuna who was associated with a guild, Solo Kirito had no training partners. If he missed one day of hunting, it would require a lot of effort to make up for it. She understood this, but...

To be relied on, that happy and warm feeling, still could not stop the buried feelings of cold loneliness. Her body was obviously hot, but in her chest was an icy coldness, she could not help but let her tears emerge.

“.....Aaaa..... This won’t do..... as expected.”

Tightly closing her eyes, she buried her head into the blanket, just then —

Suddenly, in the middle of the room a blue vortex shimmered. As a hum was issued, a two meter high elliptic door appeared.

“.....Corridor Crystal.”

Her head left the pillow to say these words, when a black figure jumped out of the door.

Of course, this was the «Black Swordsman» Kirito. And no one else. However —

“I, I say..... Can’t you come in from the main door.....”

At this point, Asuna was finally aware that Kirito had brought something.

It was a large wooden bucket. No, it should be called a basin. The basin was filled with grains that glowed white, reflecting the light of the afternoon sun.

After looking at it for a few seconds, she finally realized what it was.

“That..... that is, snow.....? But..... where did you get it, in this season?”

After that question, Kirito carefully placed the basin on the table, faced Asuna, and lowered his head.

“I’m sorry, I came back too late! I intended to come back earlier..... it’s all because of that tough dragon.....”

Kirito’s words reminded Asuna of the tall mountain that was full of ice and snow. It was at the top of one of the hills that was located at one end on the fifty eighth floor. However, climbing that mountain required encountering many monsters along the extremely long mountain road, and at the end of the road, the regional boss monster, the Ice Dragon waited. Being able to go there and return in two hours was nothing short of a miracle.

“.....Why would you go this far.....”

Kirito did not answer Asuna’s question, picked up the towel on the table, and put it into the ice basin. Upon taking it out, the towel was completely frozen.

“Lie down.”

At these words, Asuna’s head returned to the pillow, and the ice cold towel was placed on her forehead. «Frozen towel» produced a cooling sensation much higher than the wet towel.

“Ah..... Comfortable.....”

As Asuna smiled and said this, Kirito shyly laughed.

Her forehead obviously felt very cold, yet at the same time she could feel a gentle warmth. Asuna blinked, then stretched out her hand, and held the hand which protruded from the sleeves of the black clothes. The hand Kirito had used to collect snow had become cold, but after holding tightly for a while the temperature was restored, so Asuna held on tightly.

“ I say..... this time I will pass my cold over to you.”

Listening to this, Kirito replied with a bitter smile.

“Then this will have no end.”

“Isn’t that fine? If you collapse again, I will go to collect snow and ice, and make shaved ice for you to eat”

“.....If it is like this, collapsing will not be that bad.”

Maintaining a smiling face, Asuna closed her eyes, and waited for that moment.

[Material Edition 17] The Much-Talked-About Esteemed Sub-Leader

TRANSLATION TAP EDITING ZEHAFFEN

“Clearing group players popularity poll...?”

I replied half-heartedly with the same words and the katana wielder with a red bandana confirmed with a stern look.

“That’s right. There are apparently ballot boxes set at the teleport gate plazas for a bunch of towns from today onwards.”

“Ohh...”

“And so, I hear a newspaper today comes attached with a ballot paper.”

“Uh-huh...”

“The results will be announced next week, in that newspaper, on 30th September.

“Hmm...”

Staring hard into my face as I repeated those interjections, the katana wielder turned the fork in his right hand towards me.

“Hey, Kiritard, you may think it’s someone else’s problem, but that’s not how it’ll go. You’re one of the nominees too!”

At that, I finally refocused the seventy percent or so of my attention from the cheesecake plate to our conversation thus far, and blinked thrice before putting on an utterly grim look.

“...Huh? N-Nominees... you mean, don’t tell me, people can vote for me too?”

“That goes without saying, «The Black Swordsman»-san.”

The grinning katana wielder—Klein, the leader of the guild, «Fuurinkazan», and someone who had been around me since right after the death game began—quickly went through his menu window and materialized folded pieces of paper. I reluctantly picked it up after he plunked it onto the table.

The document’s name, «Aincrad Shuuhou (*Weekly Aincrad*)», lined the upper end of the front page on the «newspaper», two stiff pieces of thin A3-sized paper folded in two. My brows drew close together once more before I muttered, “So it’s this newspaper...”

Currently, in September 2024, there were three media outlets in Aincrad in the form of newspapers.

The first was «Weekly Argo», the strategy guide paper published by the distinguished information dealer, Argo the «Rat».

The second was «Shuukan Stories (Weekly Stories)», specializing in literature, with columns and short stories.

And the third was the youngest «Aincrad Shuuhou», boasting the most content as a general-interest newspaper.

Though each and every one of them was published weekly, there was a number of players reading all three since «Weekly» released on Wednesdays, «Stories» on Fridays, and «Shuuhou» on Mondays. Regularly-provisioned textual media were precious in Aincrad with its lack of entertainment.

However, of course, the players publishing each newspaper were not doing it out of volunteerism. Printing a large quantity of newspapers required either commissioning a NPC printing shop or preparing a personal printing machine (in which case, there would be the cost of paper and ink), and money was needed to pay the royalties for those who write their articles as well. And considering profit margins too, their prices had to be set to a reasonable level; at the current

moment, «Weekly» was 200 cor, «Stories» was 300 cor, and «Shuhou» was 500 cor.

It wasn't much to those on the front lines, normally earning over several thousand or even ten thousand each day, but it was quite an expense for those players in the middle zone, and those waiting in Starting City would find it difficult to even purchase either regularly. That was why the phenomenon of lending out or reselling developed: out of necessity.

In Aincrad, almost every item aside from equipment would not be dirtied or break regardless of how much it was touched unless someone consciously attempted to break it. Newspapers and magazines would be rather worn-out in the real world when passed through five or six people, but it would be practically new here even if a hundred people read and passed it on.

The number of readers who did not buy them directly was estimated to be five to ten times the newspapers' sales, and that was apparently a source of worry for the publishers. That said, Argo, making her main income as an information dealer without any need for profit through the newspaper, laughed with an "I'm glad the clearing information can spread even without effort from mE, nyahahaha".

At any rate, «Aincrad Shuhou» which had the most pages and highest price among the three papers, leading to the highest risk when it came to finance, was definitely up to something by planning this popularity poll that would drive their costs even higher—I opened up the newspaper handed over from Klein with that suspicion.

I then saw that the center spread was used for it, with summaries on dozens of the clearing group's players listed. That included not just their names, but even photos, likely via photography crystals.

"Woah, seriously...?"

I moaned while reluctantly searching for my name. The temptation to throw the entire newspaper overhand surged over me for an instant upon finding “Kirito” easily enough under K in the alphabetically-sorted listing, along with an alias of “The Black Swordsman” which I certainly had never referred to myself as.

But fortunately, that impulse abated at the photo above my name: a blurred back view of me, cropped from a distant shot of the clearing meeting of some floor. Shifting my focus, I nearly slipped off my chair when I saw “Klein (Leader of Fuurinkazan)” two places away and a photo of him showing a brilliant smile straight at the camera with a thumbs-up.

“.....Hey, Klein, this photo.....”

“Oh? Ooh, det wan!”

The katana wielder nonchalantly replied after gulping down a large mille-feuille.

“Some girl who said she’s a reporter from «Shuuhou» came the other day and mentioned I’d been nominated for the popularity poll, so I let her take one.”

“O-Ohh...”

Even if you are the leader of a clearing group guild, how about putting up more of a guard...? I stuffed a piece of cheesecake into my mouth, stifling those words, and kept it shut.

The PK guild, «Laughing Coffin», which ran rampant in Aincrad’s darkness and brought about many tragedies and much chaos was vanquished after a large-scale subjugation operation last month. Though it bothered me how PoH, the leader, was still at large, I doubted any PK would be after any of the clearing group’s players now.

Laying down my fork, I brought the glass of iced coffee to my lips and looked towards the eastern skies.

The three hours of tea and information exchanging Klein and I shared took place at an open cafe on the outskirts of the seventy-second floor's main town, «Ozmalt». As it was the front-most line as of now, 23rd September, the vaguely visible labyrinth tower in the distance had yet to be explored. It would be a few more days at least before the clearing group reached the tower and discovered its boss room.

The clearing group's pace had clearly fallen in recent days, so just what would the sub-leader of that one top guild think upon hearing of this project making use of them...? I lowered my head, turning my eyes towards the paper atop the table once more.

That particular esteemed sub-leader was noted on the top-right of the still-open double-page spread with the lengthy caption of “Asuna (The Flash) (Sub-leader of Knights of the Blood)”. Her photo appeared to have been taken from a distance without her knowing, like mine, but her beautiful features lost no luster despite the moderate amount of noise.

I looked up and spoke to Klein, grimacing from his spicy ginger ale.

“Hey, isn't this popularity poll rigged from the beginning?”

“Oh, really?”

The katana wielder flicked his fringe held up by his bandana and put on an abrupt impassive (or so he must think) smile.

“Well, unlike that shot of your back view from some hidden camera, Kiritard, they came right out and asked for mine. Looks like it's about time for me to think up of some cool alias for myself too, huh? Hmm... If you're the black swordsman, then I'll be the Red Master Swordsman... no, Grandmaster Swordsman...”

“Yeah, sure, name yourself whatever you like.”

Putting aside Klein, playing the fool with all he had, with a smile, I pointed at the top-right corner of the list of nominees.

“Unfortunately for you, The Red Grandmaster Swordsman, first place’s definitely going to this person here.”

The katana wielder grinned at that and prodded at my leg with his foot under the table.

“Oh, my, how rare hearing you putting her up on a pedestal.”

I almost fell off my chair yet again at that and quickly refuted.

“E-Everyone would say the same! That was nothing but an objective conjecture!”

“C’mom now, don’t worry, it’s okay being honest with yourself every now and then, young one.”

Nodding away with those ludicrous words, Klein downed what was left of his ginger ale and stood up with a flourish.

“Ight then, guess I’ll try keeping it up even at night to get into the top 3, then. Just stand back and watch while I hit this floor’s labyrinth before you!”

“Yeah, sure, don’t overdo it, though. The black nepents appearing beyond Agarla Village can grab you from afar, so watch out.”

“What, you’ve already gotten that far...?”

Expressing his gratitude by lifting his right hand into a rough salute even as he muttered away, the katana wielder then staggered out of the store.

I let out a breath and began reading the Aincrad Shuhou Klein left behind from the first page.

The first headline addressed the progress of the seventy-second floor's conquest. It reported on the clearing group reaching Agarla Village at the floor's center and the dense forest beyond it taking up their time.

I flipped through the pages; the second and third pages were filled with information on happenings and quests on the middle floors, the fourth and fifth were for the aforementioned list of nominees for the popularity poll, the sixth had columns, the seventh had estimates for item prices, and the eighth page at the end had a ballot paper at the bottom to be cut out, though that was likely limited to this time.

It put quite a bit of work into its layout, living up to its claim as a general-interest paper, but there were still issues. In particular, sparse mistakes scattered around the clearing-related articles on the first three pages. Or the names of important NPCs or locations needed on the quest walkthrough articles, or the discrepancies in the reports on incidents and events. It occurred even on the front page article: «DDA» was made to be the guild who first reached Agarla Village despite Knights of the Blood actually arriving several hours earlier.

It was their level of fact gathering, inferior to the «Weekly Argo», that caused those mistakes. Something unavoidable when they simply put mere rumors spreading within safe haven straight into articles. Their intent of providing a general-interest newspaper to Aincrad, lacking leisure activities, was applaudable, though it appeared they were still in lack of that actual capability.

I focused my eyes near the masthead, wondering who were the players producing it, and found no more than the words, “Published by: Aincrad Shuhou Editorial Staff”. Though the answer would be revealed in an instant if I asked Argo, my desire to know hardly justified the price.

“...Well, even if it’s by a little, I’ll just hope they improve at collecting data...”

“At what?”

“Like I said, this newspaper needs to..... w-whaaa?!”

I jumped for real this time, thirty centimeters up despite maintaining my seated posture, at the face belonging to the person who abruptly interjected from the back-right and fell towards my left. A hand quickly shot out, however, and grabbed my right shoulder, bringing me back.

“What’s with you, screaming right after seeing someone else’s face?”

This frowning player was precisely that esteemed sub-leader of the guild, Knights of the Blood, whom I had predicted would win the popularity poll. The radiance given off by her bodice based in white and red, the mithril breastplate atop it, and the silver rapier hanging off her waist blinded me for a moment before I replied to Asuna, «The Flash».

“Nah... nah, I was just thinking this newspaper had too many mistakes as always...”

Asuna glanced at the Shuhou in my hand and put on a sour look, but simply quietly sat down on the chair Klein vacated.

Ordering a banana tart and nuts milk tea from the NPC waiter who immediately approached, she swept her long chestnut hair back with both hands and let out a short breath. I gazed upon that visage for several moments before beginning my interrogation.

“...Why did you know I was here?”

“It’s easy enough to predict what someone as simple as you would do, Kirito-kun.”

Showing a defiant smile, «The Flash» pointed with her right index finger.

“While the hunting areas are crowded, you would return to town for maintenance, resupplying, and tea. The stores near the teleport gate are crowded, so you would avoid them and choose one on the outskirts, especially one with good desserts. When it comes to Ozmalt, where else would you be but here?”

“...How much of a sweet tooth do you think I have...?”

“But you would go for some tasty cake as a snack at three, wouldn’t you?”

It was as she said; or rather, I could hardly object when that served as my motivation for my «daytime». I smothered my words and sank into silence as Asuna giggled with a lightened expression.

“...You were the same back then.”

“.....”

I immediately knew when «back then» referred to.

Back then, when we formed a duo soon after the first floor boss conquest. After finishing our exploration for the afternoon and returning to town, we would have tea with sweets without fail. Bread with cream; shortcakes; berry tarts; cake rolls... I could still recall the hues, shapes, and even taste of the many desserts I ate with Asuna then.

But those days came to an end when Asuna joined the new guild, Knights of the Blood, as I recommended.

More than a year passed since. Before I knew it, my level of 10 or 20 back then was now 90, and my main weapons were replaced, one after another. The front lines approached the three-quarter point,

the seventy-fifth floor, and our objective of clearing the game would come within sight as we crossed that.

We had certainly come a long way... I chewed over that thought as I questioned my former partner.

“...So, what is it?”

“That. That.”

Bringing the cup of tea that had arrived in no time to her lips, Asuna pointed to the tabletop with her left hand. To where the folded copy of Aincrad Shuuhou was, left behind by Klein.

“Something’s up with the newspaper?”

“You saw it, didn’t you? That... popularity poll for the clearing group players.”

“Yeah...”

I shifted my focus from the newspaper to Asuna’s face and grinned.

“What’s there to worry about, the great sub-leader of the KoB’s sure to win the top spot if we’re considering this roster...”

“That’s not what I’m worrying over!”

Asuna let out a sigh she had been holding onto with a complicated look after that muffled bellow.

“...It’s the opposite, the exact opposite that I’m worrying over.”

“What?”

“Erm... keep in mind that this all relies on me not wanting to be first place. ...You’ve heard of my guild recruiting with renewed vigor lately, haven’t you?”

“Um... well, yes.”

Stumped at the sudden change in topic, I shook my head.

Knights of the Blood, to which Asuna belonged, was the guild that made up most of the clearing group’s might and was led by the toughest and strongest tank in Aincrad: Heathcliff, «The Holy Knight». Even if they lost by far in terms of numbers to the largest guild, those divine dragons, they were entrusted with commanding the battles against the floor bosses, serving as an example of the phrase, few but mighty.

Still, not even they were entirely spared from causalities in SAO, a death game without respawning. Especially these days, with the oddly refined AI the normal monsters had; it seemed practically as though more fatalities appeared in the field than during the boss battles where everyone prepared with utmost caution. That, too, was a reason why KoB, which had strictly evaluated all applicants until now, started scouting for players with potential. I personally had Heathcliff, the leader, drop a casual hint that I join, but the desire to do so still eluded me.

“Come to think of it, another person joined lately, right? Erm, the name’s, if I recall, Nautilus... isn’t it? Wasn’t half bad too.”

I let out the name of that rookie I saw at an effective hunting spot near the front-most lines, and Asuna frowned as she assumed the air of a sub-leader.

“Hmm... that is true, and it went smoothly enough even when hunting for experience points in groups. But those movements turned sluggish during the field boss battle... it doesn’t look like the floor boss raids are getting a new member for a while.”

“I see...”

Being capable of fighting common monsters yet shirking from the bosses is a phenomenon suffered by most players who catch up to the top groups from the median zone. After all, they had had few opportunities for boss fights. Floor bosses would never respawn after the clearing group defeated them and there was no reason to fight field bosses that respawn with the teleport gate to upper floors available. One could conquer the fear of bosses, with their gigantic frames and ruthless attacks that coerce the impression of «death», only through the accumulation of such experiences.

“Well, that’s the one thing others can’t help with, after all...”

Sipping my iced coffee, I pulled the topic back.

“So, what does the KoB’s new recruit have to do with anything?”

“Aah, erm... that’s, well...”

Starting off awkwardly once more, Asuna began her speech, interspersed with sighs.

“...The guild has someone called Daizen in charge of accounting and someone called Havok in charge of resources, you see.”

“Right.”

“They handle their jobs well and we feel safe with KoB’s finances with them in charge, but how do I phrase this, their spirit as merchants is a little too strong...”

“Uh-huh.”

“Upon finding out about that popularity poll, that pair spoke out about utilizing it to boost the guild’s reputation.”

“Oh?”

“To be exact..... they.....”

Getting stuck again there, the sub-leader of KoB showed a truly complex look expressing anger, embarrassment, and dejection as she got to the core of the matter in a soft tone.

“.....They started talking about how in order to get me first place, they would collaborate with the Aincrad Shuuhou to publish a photo book of me as advertising if I won.”

“.....P-Photo book?”

Repeating absentmindedly, I stared hard at my former partner blushing slightly and looking downwards, from her head to her torso.

For Aincrad, a fantasy world so to speak, the technology for publishing was technically beyond its era. The property window for the printing press (of course, a wooden installation operated manually rather than powered by electricity) had features at the level of DTP software, and not only could text be directly input, pictures taken by photo crystals could be pasted in as well.

In other words, by taking a bunch of Asuna’s photos with crystals and laying them out neatly, it would be feasible to publish what would be recognized as an idol photo book. And there was no difficulty in imagining the multitude of players wanting such an item. They would rake in the votes if they announced, “We’ll publish a book if she gets 1st!” and well, that could lead to an increase in applicants to KoB.

“So that’s it... KoB comes up with some interesting ideas, huh...?”

I expressed how impressed I was and Asuna breathed in long and deep before converting that pent-up energy into an earsplitting shout.

“This... is no laughing matter!!”

After several instances of panting hard, she glared sharply towards me.

“I am in charge of KoB’s battle strategies, not its advertising strategies. ...I can’t say I’ve had many chances to see women photo books in the real world, but it’s like that, isn’t it...? They aren’t in the same outfit each time, are they?”

“Well, sure they aren’t. Aside from battle gear, there could be some normal, cute, personal clothes...”

“Cu...”

“Or maybe school uniforms...”

“Sch...”

“And maybe, there are always swimsuits...”

“Swimm...”

Deciding it would be pitiful bullying the esteemed sub-leader, stumbling over her words from overwhelming shock, any further, I offered the countermeasure that had immediately come to mind.

“Still, well, if you’re that against it, why not just refuse it straight out, or maybe even run away while you’re at it?”

“Huh.....?”

Switching her expression over to a serious look as though caught with her guard down from the astonishment mere seconds before, Asuna blinked time and time again. Her unaffected look gave off a surprisingly childish atmosphere, and I turned a similarly genuine smile towards my former partner as I continued my words.

“Asuna, you’ve always been supporting SAO’s conquest from the front as KoB’s sub-leader. Everyone recognizes how hard you

worked and no one would criticize you for saying what you want every now and then. If Daizen and the rest make things difficult for you when you say that you won't do it and refuse, you just have to threaten them by saying you'll leave the guild."

Asuna must have had some inherent sense of responsibility that made her unable to refuse when told it was for the guild. However, the players from the clearing group were here to clear this death game, not to expand the influence of their guilds. It was a pity, losing the opportunity to see a photo book of Asuna—no, it was preferable to having some unspecified number of players being able to see it. Not that I could voice that out.

Asuna frowned as she appeared to consider my suggestion, but eventually looked at me with a refreshed expression, rare in recent days, before her lips formed a teasing smile.

"I'll be making use of that suggestion. ...But you better assume responsibility if I end up leaving the guild for real, Kirito-kun."

"Eh? ...H-How would I?"

"Naturally, by forming a duo with me again."

Replying without hesitation, Asuna stood and placed her right hand on my shoulder without waiting for my response.

"Thanks, it helped having you hear me out. Mind if I intrude on you again when I need to vent?"

"Of... of course, feel free whenever."

I somehow got that reply out, and the KoB sub-leader flashed another smile before exiting the shop with a hop in her step.

Letting out a breath, I gave myself to the chair's backrest. My vision caught sight of the Aincrad Shuuhou still on the table.

Not even the higher-ups of KoB would force through publishing it when her leaving the guild was on the table, but still, it was doubtful Asuna could avoid snatching the top place on this popularity poll. If one were to ask who they liked with a glance through the nominees—not even I would have any difficulty deciding.

I turned the newspaper about and tapped the ballot paper printed at the bottom of the last page, choosing to cut it out from the appearing window. I muttered an apology, “Klein, sorry”, to my friend while writing down my former partner’s name on the automatically-cut ballot with a feather pen I had on hand.

It would be time to head out for the night after submitting this at the teleport gate at Ozmalt. I hoped to pass through the tough wetlands tonight to reach the final village.

“—go!”

Casually raising my spirit as I stood up, I started walking at a quick pace as the golden sunlight fell at my back.

Yet, still—

The clearing group players popularity poll underwent a development no one expected: not me, not Klein, not even those who organized it, the Aincrad Shuuhou’s publishers.

The humongous clearing guild, previously known «Aincrad Liberation Squad» and now renamed to «Aincrad Liberation Force», thought up of an idea similar to Daizen’s from KoB.

Monopolizing many newspapers with ballot papers through the reach and numbers of their organization, the ALF sent in a mountain of ballots for that one nominee who got in for being a clearing player of the technically largest guild and took first place from Asuna by a narrow margin. Staring at that result on the following week’s Shuuhou with Klein, the photo of a nostalgic spiky-

headed individual grandly placed on the front page sent us both into momentary shock before we shouted out in sync.

“—Ya gotta be kiddin’!!”

[Dengeki Bunko Vol. 30]

Story Pencil Board

TRANSLATION TAP EDITING BAKA-TSUKI COMPIILING MAMUE

October 1 2024

There were two things that Asuna, the rapier-wielder who was the sub-leader of the guild, Knights of the Blood, and nicknamed «The Flash», poured her passion into, even though they had no direct benefits for the clearing of the death game, SAO.

One was «cooking». Raising its proficiency level was extremely troublesome and it wasn't like being able to make delicious dishes increased your survivability in dungeons—there are food that gave a temporary boost to one's status or resistance, however—which resulted in Asuna not knowing of any other players among the swordsman classes who completed their cooking skill.

And the other was not a skill. It wasn't an item or a quest either. It was the moment of utmost bliss when she could soak in hot water, up to her shoulders, and let loose her body and heart, or in other words, «a bath».

Her home in the main city of the sixty-first floor, Salemburg, had a bathroom with a bathtub, even if it was small, and she had an exhaustive list of sleeping quarters that included large bathhouses on every floor, for times when she felt the desire for a bigger bath.

And that was how Asuna was, but she couldn't help but to have second thoughts when she bought newly discovered bath related information from the information broker, Argo, the other day. She wanted to go. She absolutely wanted to go. However, her rationality threw the brakes on that this particular time. That was because that bath existed outside the area of the Anti-Criminal Code and to make things worse, it didn't even have any solid walls surrounding it, a so-called «open-air bath».

There was no point in not removing all equipment when entering a bath. But the fact that it was outside the area meant that attacks

from monsters were a given, with the possibility of orange players as well. Weapons, at the very least, could be placed right beside the bathtub for immediate response, but it was necessary to manipulate various windows to equip armor. Above all else, there was no way she could enter the bath and relax while on the guard against attacks.

—And Asuna grumbled so to her close friend, Lisbeth, a blacksmith, on the afternoon of 1st October, 2024.

While putting Asuna's beloved sword, Lambent Light, against the sharpening wheel, Lisbeth thought for a bit, but submitted a proposal with a smug smile before long.

“.....Hahhh... this is the best.....”

And Lisbeth let out a comment that couldn't possibly be more lethargic, something Asuna thoroughly agreed with.

“Certainly, this must be the second best I've entered in Aincrad.”

“That's kind of contradictory. Where was the best?”

She replied to Lisbeth, who turned around with a splash, while smiling.

“I guess it really must have been on the first floor, the time I first entered a bath.”

“Aah, I know, right! I didn't know Aincrad had baths at the start.”
“Hehe, me too.”

Nodding, the slightly cloudy, hot water dripped down from between her fingers.

The open-air bath, which was at the exact coordinates the information described, was far more authentic than Asuna expected.

The bathtub surrounded by rocks was slightly inclined and a lavish stream of hot water gushed out from uphill, flowing down without moderation. Beyond the plain wooden fence surrounding the bathtub was the foliage of trees turning bright-red and an unobstructed blue sky, as the outer circumference was nearby. It was practically the same as a free-flowing natural hot spring.

Asuna's rapier and Lisbeth's mace were placed on the nearby rocks as a minimum level of protection, but the pair was fully unequipped aside from that. Thinking about it, it was the first time she entered a bath with someone else—or in the first place, it was the first time she was seeing another's avatar stark naked. Lisbeth turned her body up the moment she realized that, so Asuna unconsciously stared at her.

Noticing her gaze, Lisbeth grinned with a slight blush.

“What’s with that perverted gaze, Asuna?”

“Eh, th-that’s not it, I didn’t mean it that way, erm... I just thought you looked pretty and...”

“What, is that supposed to be sarcasm!? Sure, you have a slender waist, but still!”

Squeezed by the two hands that suddenly reached out and caught hold of her waist, Asuna twisted her body.

“Ahaha, h-hey, that tickles!”

“That would be because I’m tickling you!”

They made a ruckus with the water splashing around for a while, before fully stretching out their arms and legs once again, next to each other. Over half of the bathtub was still free, even with those two as they were.

According to the information Asuna bought, this open-air bath was a key spot of a certain quest and it seems that that would be an assault from a mysterious ninja squad here by proceeding onwards with the story. Of course, she wasn't concerned over that at the moment, but the possibility of monsters, unrelated to the quest, or players attacking still remained, like she fretted over at the start.

However, Asuna, and probably Lisbeth as well, couldn't be any more relaxed with their entire bodies in the hot bath. That was because they were protected by something more reliable than any sort of weapon or armor.

A gentle autumn breeze brushed against the water surface, the steam lightly hung over it. In that moment, a terrific sneeze could be heard beyond the wooden door heading out. Following that, a miserable voice.

“Erm~, do you think it would be possible for us to switch in just a little more~~?”

Meeting Lisbeth's glance, they both giggled, before Asuna called back to the one she believed to be the strongest among the clearing group—which would make him the strongest among all of the players—that black-haired, one-handed sword user.

“Another ten minutes, please!”

Without missing a beat, Lisbeth added on.

“No, make that twenty!”

The Fourteenth Autumn

TRANSLATION SCARLETTBULLET_21

October 4 2024

"Kirito-san, congratulations on clearing Floor 73!" announced Silica, holding up her wine glass. The black-haired swordsman touched his glass to hers, looking slightly embarrassed as he did so.

Clink, a crisp echo rang out and a small, blue dragon gave a high-pitched cry, "Kyuru!" from her place on the table. The sound caused by the glasses may have triggered the response, but Pina somehow looked happy, too.

Taking a sip of the light-pink wine, Kirito carefully raised his glass again. "Thank you, Silica. Though...I barely had any action this time."

"...Really? Is that true?"

"Yeah. The boss was one of those «Giant and Solid» types. In theory, something like that takes a coordinated attack by a lot of people, so the major guilds like KoB or DDA went up against the boss while I cleaned up the underlings the entire time," said Kirito, who laughed like he couldn't care less about it, but Silica pursed her lips in his stead.

"I don't quite get it. Shouldn't the whole party handle the boss and the minions while rotating players?"

"Nah, that would've made the operation more complicated... But I do feel kinda bad that I didn't have a chance to take the LA." Kirito chuckled lightly and blinked a few times, then stared straight at Silica. She subconsciously hid her mouth behind her wine glass and peered back up at him.

"W-What is it?"

"Nothing... I was just thinking how time flies and you're even using words like «minions» and «rotating» now..."

"T-That's normal! How many years do you think we've been here?!" Silica shot back and gulped down her drink to conceal her burning cheeks.

No matter how many liters of alcohol were consumed in this world, the player's real body would never ingest a single drop. The player could still get a little light in the head though when the wine-flavored liquid was downed in one shot, like it was more sour than sweet.

This day was October 4th, 2024. It had been one year and eleven months since the start of the Death Game «Sword Art Online», so the "how many years" line from Silica was a slight exaggeration, but it really did feel like many years had passed. She was completely used to life in the steel floating castle with its day-to-day adventures—even mastering various MMORPG terminologies—but her level still fell short of Krito's and the clearers'.

So opportunities for Silica to see Krito were typically scarce. The reason they were meeting in the NPC restaurant on the first floor of the inn «Weathercock Pavilion» in the town square of Mieche on Floor 35 was because she had summoned him under the pretext of treating him to a celebration for clearing Floor 73.

Silica had used the same «ruse» several times before, but the feelings hidden in her heart were just a little more special today. Of course, she didn't plan on confessing this or anything at all. Far from it, Silica had no intention of telling him why today was special to her. She was content with being able to spend just a few hours together with Krito during the early evening.

Krito set his glass down on the table. He lifted the bottle and refilled it with the pink liquid. Even a gesture as simple as that made Silica's virtual heart skip a beat. Convincing herself to act normally, *just normally*, she returned to conversation.

"...If the Floor 73 boss was the «Giant and Solid» type, then the Floor 74 boss has gotta be the «Tiny and Cuddly» type. You're going to get lots of action next time!"

"Hmm, those bosses are a massive pain in the butt to fight...so I don't really want to take them on." Kirito gave a faint, wry smile at Silica's words, then poked at the nut tart on the table with his fork. The cake tart with a fluffy crust, that was loaded with a cheese mousse and tons of nuts, seemed like it would've been all but impossible to eat neatly in the real world. In this world however, it was sliced into perfect proportions with just a light stab of his fork. The crust didn't fall apart, nor did any nuts fall out. Kirito started to bring a bite-sized piece of the tart to his mouth when—

Pina, who had been quiet the entire time on the table, stretched her long neck toward Kirito and crooned, "Kyuru?" She looked as if she was begging for cake...and she wasn't making any other motion.

"H-Hey, Pina, that's bad manners!" Silica hurriedly reached toward her pet dragon, not unlike a pet dog. However, Pina slipped freely through her hands and kept looking straight up at Kirito's face with her beady eyes.

By principle, pets in SAO—officially, Tamed Monsters—would only eat when personally fed by their owners. Even when they found their favorite nuts or bugs while in the Field, they would ignore them. Since pets didn't complain directly when they were hungry, the hidden parameter for affinity would fall if the owner forgot to feed a pet for a prolonged period of time, leading to the abrupt termination of the Tamed status and the ex-pet would flee. In the worst case scenario, they would even attack their former owners.

Silica always kept Pina's favorite nuts in her waist pouch and even wore a timer earring on her right ear, so she never forgot to feed Pina regularly. She had even faithfully fed Pina before entering the restaurant, so she shouldn't have gotten hungry for another hour and half... No, even in this case, Pina absolutely shouldn't show

interest in the human cuisine that another player was eating, even if it was a nut tart chock-full of her beloved nuts.

Thinking of something along those lines in a corner of her mind, Silica tried to pick up Pina. "Geez, I said no..."

However, she was held back by Krito's hand inches away from Pina. The black-haired swordsman smiled faintly and moved his fork in front of Pina. The small dragon instantly sank her teeth into a piece of the nut tart and blissfully munched on it.

"Ohh... Pina, you..." Silica bowed her head and apologized for her pet. "I'm sorry, Krito-san. Her manners usually aren't this bad..."

"You don't need to apologize. In the real world, I'd get chewed out instead for giving treats to someone else's pet without permission."

"Hahah, that's true...but that's not the problem. I'll ban her from the table from now on!" Silica declared firmly, reaching out again to put Pina down on the floor before she could ask for seconds.

But what nerve. The small, blue dragon nimbly dodged her master's hands and took flight from the table, flying a small circuit before landing on a head.

Not Silica's but Krito's.

"Ah, augh! I-I'm so sorry..." Silica bolted upright and threw out her hands, but the table was too wide and she couldn't reach.

In the meantime, Pina folded her wings, beneath which she tucked her head after wrapping her neck around herself, and assumed a sleeping position. Before the speechless Silica's very eyes, she was fast asleep, breathing peacefully with a "kyururu...spee..."

"~~~~~!!" Uttering a muted growl at her pet for the terrible misbehavior, Silica tried to circle around the table, but Krito stopped her again with a single raised hand.

"It's okay. Let her sleep."

"B-But that's not..."

"I'm fine with it. She's not heavy at all, and my head's all warm."

"...I'm really sorry..."

Silica hesitated about plucking Pina regardless from Krito's head despite being told otherwise, but she forced herself to sit back down. She quickly glanced around the eatery. Luckily, there weren't any other players. It was still a little early for dinner; «The Bewildering Woods» on Floor 35 that had once been popular with mid-level players half a year ago had become deserted as of late with the successive discoveries of more efficient leveling grounds.

When Silica looked forward again, Krito was nonchalantly stuffing his face with the nut tart while Pina rested atop his head. Spurred on by him, Silica also lightly jabbed into the cheesecake that had been placed in front of her. It responded with a *plop* as a light-yellow piece was sliced off, which Silica then brought to her mouth as mannerly as she could. A sweet, rich, and refreshing taste radiated through her.

Silica was especially fond of «Weathercock Pavilion»'s baked cheesecake and while she was leveling regularly in The Bewildering Woods she had it almost daily, but now she was ordering it only when there was something special, because—

"...This sure brings back memories," Krito mumbled quietly, across from her. He continued to gaze out the window steeped in sunset hues. "I think we toasted with the wine that I had brought back then, didn't we? ...Has it been half a year already...?"

"It really has been... Your wine was delicious. It raised my AGI as well."

Hearing those words, Kirito looked back at her and grinned. "The drop rate for that wine has been patched and you really can't get it anymore. If you're thinking of having some now, a single glass of it is like 1,000,000 col."

"Wha..." Silica reflexively covered her mouth with a hand. If she had 1,000,000 col, she could afford a fairly spacious place in the neighborhood of «Mieche». For a moment, she almost imagined 100,000 col in gold jingling in her stomach, but she promptly perished the thought. "...To me, what happened on that day is a precious memory that not even all of the col in Aincrad can buy. One mega col can't shake me!"

"Hahah, really? ...Yeah, I guess so... To me as well..."

The swordsman paused and looked out the window again. No matter how much his head bobbed, Pina showed no sign of waking up. She appeared as relaxed as when she slept by Silica's side at night, still snoozing with a "kyururu...kyururu..."

"Maybe..." whispered Silica, but only Kirito's gaze shifted to her briefly. Staring into his pitch-black eyes, she repeated, "Maybe Pina remembers that you're the one who brought her back to life, Kirito-san."

"Really...?"

"I'm sure she does. That's why I love you."

The words tumbled out naturally. In the three whole seconds it took for Silica to recognize what she had said, her hands thrust out in front of her and waved wildly as she cried, "Oh, n-no! For Pina! Pina! I didn't mean anything else!"

"...Uh, okay."

Seeing how speechless Kirito looked, Silica realized that her reaction had been over the top. She flailed again, screaming shrilly—

"Oh, f-forget what I just said! Forget it!"

— But was that the best idea? By retracting the statement that it was Pina who loved Kirito, the subject inevitably had to be someone else and the only candidates in this place were Silica and the NPC waiter. If only it was a waitress, then there might've been some room to construe it...

Silica was incredibly flustered, her embarrassment magnified. She was ruining this «Special Day» and she felt so miserable that tears started to pool in her eyes, when—

Kirito suddenly raised his right hand and flicked down. A menu window opened, accompanied by a ringing sound. As Silica watched, caught off-guard her thinking abruptly halted, his slender fingertip fluidly navigated the screen and a single object materialized in no time flat.

A small, white box fell into Kirito's palm from the closed window with a soft *fwump*. A blue ribbon criss-crossed its opaque exterior.

With the box in his right hand, Kirito smiled, "It's late, but here's the answer to your quiz."

"...It is...? I gave you...a quiz...?" she asked, stunned.

The swordsman looked somewhat taken back and answered, "You did. The last time we met, when I asked about where your character name came from..."

"Huh... Oh...!" Silica's hands flew to her mouth and her eyes opened wide. She recalled that they did have such a conversation when she had a meal with him last month under the excuse of a celebratory party for clearing Floor 70.

The name 'Silica' was based on her name in the real world, so its origin wasn't quite something to keep secret. Rather, she felt

strangely embarrassed about its lack of substance, so she turned the answer into a riddle: "My real name comes after Arumi but before Rin."

At the time, Kirito looked baffled, like "what was that?" but apparently he had arrived at some sort of an answer after a month. However, why didn't he say it but present a box? Could the answer have been written on a slip of paper inside it?

With Pina still sound asleep on his head, Kirito skillfully spun the box on a fingertip. "Well, actually, I should've caught on when I heard Arumi and Rin. I was thinking that Rin was a girls' name...and Arumi could be spelled like 有美-chan or 亞瑠魅-chan... So I put a lot of thought into what name would come between the two."

Silica burst out laughing at the unexpected reply. "Hahahah... I did have a real friend named Rin-chan, but I've never, ever, had anyone named Arumi-chan."

"I wouldn't know that. My dad really liked that name... But that's not the point." He returned the small box atop his finger to his hand and heaved a sigh. "It took me a week to realize that Rin and Arumi weren't girls' names. Arumi was short for aluminum and Rin was the phosphorus used in matches...and what comes between them, to put it simply, is on the periodic table."

"Yes, you're on the right track!" Silica clapped lightly. She clasped her hands together and brought them up to her mouth. "...So, do you know what comes between them?"

"Of course. ...Or that's what I want to say, but all I could remember was «Happy Henry Likes Beer But Can Not Obtain Four Newts»...so I asked an acquaintance about what comes after that: sodium, magnesium, aluminum, silicon, phosphorus. So what comes between them is silicon. In Japanese, it's called keiso. When bonded with two oxygen atoms, it becomes oxidised, which is... silica.

"Oh yes, that's right!" Silica clapped again, but she still didn't understand why Kirito produced a small box from storage. As if she was the one being quizzed now, she waited for Kirito to continue.

"So I think your real name has something to do with silicon, possibly by containing the character for «kei»... Though I won't follow up on that," smiling broadly, he leaned his head as forward as he could without dropping Pina. "By the way, why is your character name «Silica», and not something like «Silico»?"

"Oh, that's just because...Silico doesn't sound too cute..." She giggled and tugged at the red ribbons tying her hair to the sides of her head. "And now I get to have oxygen...two O atoms bonded right here."

"Whoa... I see, so those ring baubles are supposed to be O₂. They make SiO₂ with silicon... I see why you're called Silica. ...Anyhow, I've solved the quiz you gave me. Now I'm curious why your parents used the character «kei» in their kid's name..."

"Oh... Normally, you'd use the «kei» without a radical or the «kei» with the person radical," remarked Silica, thinking that he didn't know why, just as she expected. However, since it was Kirito who she was talking to— No, because it was Kirito, that was the only thing she couldn't tell him. It was directly linked to the secret lying in her heart today.

However, Kirito placed the small box on the table and grinned knowingly again. "I started to wonder about it when I got the message from you. It's rare for you to specify a meeting date, isn't it? You wrote, "on October 4th," but before this, you've always written "tomorrow" or "the day after tomorrow."

"Huh... O-Oh, really?"

"Really. That's when I wondered... –So anyways, umm...Happy Birthday, Silica." With those words, Kirito slid the small, blue-ribboned box right in front of Silica.

She stiffened for a full five seconds, then—

"Whaaaaaa?!" Silica jumped up from her seat while screaming at the top of her lungs.

Immediately, Pina perked up from Krito's head and hastily scanned around. Confirming the absence of monsters, she let out a great, lazy yawn, took off from Krito's head, and settled at her usual spot, Silica's left shoulder.

As if squashed by the weight of the small dragon, Silica slumped back into her chair and whispered, stupefied, "U-Um, why...?"

"Oh, am I right, given that reaction?

"Uh, y-yes, you are... But how...?" she asked again, forgetting to even thank him. The «special» reason that she'd planned to keep secret forever was thwarted just like that.

Relieved, Krito unclenched his jaw and ruffled his flattened black hair. "Thank goodness, I was wondering what I'd do if I got it wrong. The reason why that character «kei» is used in your name is because your birthday's on October 4th...right? Because together, they make 14...the atomic number of silicon. Maybe your mom or dad is a chemist?"

Still in a state of shock, Silica answered reflexively, "Oh... Um, my grandfather is the chemist. And he named his child...my dad; he was born on February 6th, so he named him «Tetsuhiko» after iron[3], which has the atomic number of 26... My dad is really into arts and literature, but I think he wanted to carry on the naming trend, so when I was born on October 4th, he tried to name me after atomic number 104."

"Erk, 104...? What element is that...?"

"It's «Rutherfordium». But no matter what he tried, he couldn't get a girls' name out of it...so he resorted to adding 10 and 4 together to

make 14 and came up with the name «Keiko» from silicon..." She knew she had revealed her real name after going into so much detail, but with her birthday disclosed as well, she no longer thought of it as a big deal. Silica withdrew herself, as if hiding behind the wings of Pina on her shoulder, and she continued, "...So, um...I'm sorry, Kirito-san, for calling you here without telling you it's my birthday..."

"N-No, please, don't apologize." Seeing Silica getting further depressed, Kirito hurriedly waved it off. "Uh, um, there's like a taboo around bringing up the topic of the real world here in Aincrad... So I understand how you felt like you couldn't say it's your birthday...and I should be the one apologizing, for prying into your real name and birthday..."

"N-Not at all! I'm actually glad!" Now Silica was waving. If she was the one who had summoned him for her birthday, then she should be the one to reveal her real name. There was nothing for Kirito to apologize about.

Her downcast eyes caught the sight of the small, white box. She glanced at it for a moment, then looked up with a jerk. "Er...um...so, is this box...is it, uh, f-for m-...?!"

As if rattled by Silica's outburst, Kirito pulled back somewhat and nodded with a wry smile. "It'd be cruel of me to say that it wasn't a birthday present for you now. ...Though I didn't have any time to prepare something big, so please don't get your hopes up too much."

"W-W-W-Why would I? I'd be happy with anything from you. Um, may I please open it?"

Kirito had barely nodded his approval before Silica picked up the box from the table with both of her hands.

If this was the real world, then she'd be eagerly untying the ribbon, but unfortunately she couldn't experience the process in this world. She tapped the box with her fingertip and selected «Open» on the

displayed pop-up screen, after which the box auto-unlocked and disappeared.

Into Silica's palm, down fell—

A thin ring shining in gold.

So startled that she couldn't even cry, "Whaaaaaa—?!" Silica was completely frozen.

There were four types of accessory items in SAO: earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and rings. Kirito could've picked any one of them, but he dared to pick a ring because it meant that...it meant that—?

With the beautiful ring designed like an angel's wings in her hand, Silica looked up nervously.

Their eyes met. The black-haired swordsman gave a small smile as he slowly nodded, "That's the reward item for the «Angel's Ring» quest, which showed up recently. Its proper name is «Ring of Angel's Whisper». It doesn't really raise stats, but it does have a pretty powerful magic ability..."

"...Magic...ability?"

"Yep. It can send voice messages to registered players once a month. You know, Silica, don't you send me messages about that often? It must be tough for you to think of what to write each time, so you can use that ring like a cellphone from now on."

"...Like a...cellphone?" She eyed the ring in her hand again.

—In other words, this ring had never had an underlying meaning... It was only meant to be a convenient way to communicate...

"...Umm..." Lost for a moment on how to react, Silica took a deep breath, then broke into a smile. "...Thank you very much, Kirito-san.

I'm so happy!" She gently held the ring with her right hand and equipped it on her left hand's ring... –nope, index finger.

No matter the connotations, it didn't change the fact that she was able to receive a ring from someone whom she loved on her birthday. It'd be too greedy to ask for anything more.

The current front line was Floor 74. The clearing of the floating castle was no more than three-quarters complete. The estimated time for reaching the highest floor was another year and Silica's secret goal was to join the clearers there.

—I'll never miss a month contacting him with this ring until that day.

Making up her mind, a pure joy, after some time lag, spread through Silica's body from the depths of her heart. A wide grin lit up her face once more and she uttered, "Daddy said that my fourteenth October 4th would be a special birthday. And it's true!"

On her shoulder, perhaps Pina sensed her master's emotions, as she also spread her wings wide and happily cooed, "Kyururururu!"

However, in the end, Silica never sent her voice to Kirito with «Angel's Ring».

Approximately one month after her birthday, on November 7th, Sword Art Online was cleared with 25 floors remaining.

The steel floating castle collapsed and resurfaced about half a year later in the skies of another world. With the new Aincrad as the setting, this time Silica took on the challenge to obtain «Angel's Ring» through her own power—

But that's another story.

[Material Edition 10] Sugary Days 1

TRANSLATION TAP
October 24 2024

1

Putting the index and middle fingers on my right hand together, I lightly extended them out. Some fold in the other three fingers, but I'm one of those who would leave them slack and opened.

Next, I moved the tips of the two extended digits slightly below my line of sight, then swung them down, parallel to the axis of my body. Putting a moderate amount of force into the speed of the fingers is fine for this, but the line drawn was rather strict.

I could let them fall straight down with the virtual gravity if I was standing, but it was rather difficult to feel the axis of my body when lying down on my side. Hence the usual recommendation to first stand up before pulling the window out, rather than trying to force it out while lying down.

However, I was now lying straight on a firm wooden surface, so my right arm succeeded in executing the gesture command, despite its awkward movement caused by my tension, and a translucent rectangle appeared under my raised right hand.

Called by its name, the “Main Menu Window” was the one and only interface between me, a player of the VRMMO game, «Sword Art Online», and the incorporeal game system. [Kirito], my name, was displayed at the top of the window along with my numerical level and two bars for my HP and EXP. On the left were tabs such as [EQUIPMENT], [STORAGE], [STATUS], and [SKILL] lined up vertically while on the right, the main region, first showed a human silhouette that was named the «Equipment Figure». And at the bottom were shortcut icons for activating each and every skill.

Taking my middle finger away, I touched the [OFFER] tab near the middle of the menu with my index finger. The main region switched

to a mode where the various forms of requests could be chosen from. From the top were trade requests, party requests, friend requests... and the button I was looking for at the bottom-most area.

[MARRIAGE]. This must be the button least pressed in this death game, SAO, where scams and double-crossing ran rampant. Two years and seventeen days had passed since the game began, but I could hardly recall meeting any married players.

However, my finger touched that button without any hesitation. Unlike trades and duels, proposals could only be sent to someone mutually registered as a friend. Without the need to switch to the offer cursor, the available targets were shown directly within the window. Right now, there was only a single player within a ten meter range... no, even if that was widened to a kilometer, there would only be a single name shown there.

I put my index finger on those five alphabets, that arrangement that I now thought of as beautiful; as sacred. I traced the letters with my gaze, an initial “A” followed by “s”, “u”, “n”, and “a”, then softly touched it with my finger.

There wouldn’t be any additional “YES/NO” dialogs coming out on my side at this point. The only one with the privilege to choose was the one who got proposed to. Raising my face, I stared hard at the girl standing two meters in front of me.

Aincrad, twenty-second floor, near the outskirts. The afterglow from over the log house’s roof in the back shone on the girl’s—Asuna’s long hair and her white-themed bodice, illuminated in gold. With its radiance so dazzling, I could barely see the girl’s expression.

A small window was shown in landscape orientation in front of Asuna. The message displayed there was probably something blunt, on the lines of “Kirito had sent a marriage proposal”, “YES/NO”.

To be honest, we had already gone through a verbal proposal last night. And Asuna had already replied with a “Yes”. But still, I could feel my heart rate accelerating without brakes.

Most of the sensations avatars receive in SAO were artificial signals generated by the Nerve Gear, but the common opinion was that internal senses like the heart rate and breathing were probably real. In other words, that meant my physical body lying down on a bed in some hospital in the real world, too, had the heart energetically pulsing away. I wondered if Asuna was the same, but I wouldn’t know just from her outward appearance.

The few seconds that felt like an eternity passed and finally, Asuna’s right hand moved. Light shone off the silver studs attached to the white leather long glove moving up towards the window. The extended index finger paused above one of the two buttons.

That finger stayed still for a short while, like what I had gone through, as Asuna raised her face.

Her hazel eyes peered straight into mine. My heart pounded.

“.....Kirito-kun.”

I wonder if I had truly heard that whisper, or if my brain had simply dreamed it up from how Asuna’s lips moved. Time froze once more and that slender index finger slowly touched down on that window in this sunset world enveloped in complete silence.

A new message window floated up atop the main window I had left open earlier. But I had no need to read words written down there. Asuna’s smile and those gem-like tears in her eyes told me her answer.

We both took a step forward. The windows vanished on their own. The gap of two meters turned to zero with another step.

It didn't matter who was first; we reached our arms out and drew each other in. The closeness in our heights made our hearts overlap. We were dragged into a certain quest that involved combat several tens of minutes ago and thus, a small chest protector covered my chest as a silver breastplate covered Asuna's. But I could vividly feel her heart beat where our avatars were connected.

Our hearts, pounding like alarms, soon synchronized as they slowed down to a gentle tempo. The perpetual beating, once each second, brought a mysterious calm to my heart. The nervousness that froze my breathing when I proposed yesterday was gone.

And thus, as of 24th October 2024, 5:19 PM, I—a swordsman, Kirito, was connected to this girl—a fencer, Asuna, through a bond called marriage, both in the system, and emotionally.

2

“Hey... you sure you don’t want it? Something like... a marriage ceremony.”

Asuna held her tea cup in both hands as she inclined her head with a “hmm”.

The many lamps we have bought scattered bright light into the log house’s living room where the afterglow from the window had almost faded. However, we had only started customizing these three rooms; with nothing much more than a dining room set and a sofa set for this room; a set of cooking utensils for the kitchen; and a bed for the bedroom. However, the wooden floor and walls were warm and a real (as real as it got in this world) flame flickered in the built-in Russian stove as it crackled.

Asuna who seemed lost in her thoughts on the other side of the round table looked up at me and gently nodded.

“Well, about that, I do wish for a marriage ceremony a little. And Ashley said she would make a dress for me too... I am actually a girl, after all, no matter how it seems like.”

“Y-Yeah, actually, I knew that from the start.”

The amazing swordswoman who held the nickname, «The Flash», giggled at my response, then drew her herb tea, steam faintly hovering above it, close to her lips. Her expression stiffened as she returned the cup to the saucer atop the table.

“...But you see, even so, we did retire from the guild due to personal reasons... the Knights of the Blood and Divine Dragon Alliance, as well as Agil, Klein, and the rest of the clearing group are all working hard to break through the seventy-fifth floor now, aren’t they? So... I figured it wouldn’t be very respectful towards them.”

“.....I see.”

I nodded as well while reaching my hand out towards my tea cup. Even if we had a marriage ceremony, Agil, Klein, Lisbeth, Silica, and some others would probably happily attend—I couldn't claim to be certain that Argo the information dealer wouldn't abandon her work for this—but the most important factor was Asuna's feelings. I will give my all for what Asuna truly wants from this day onwards. She had always been supporting, encouraging, and guiding me this entire time, regardless of whether she was at my side or not.

Looking at me as I silently reflected on that resolution in the depths of my heart, Asuna smiled once again and spoke unwaveringly.

“I’m already happy enough being able to stay with you alone in this lovely house, Kirito-kun. ...I don’t know how long this will last... but this is the happiest moment I had in these two years I’ve lived in Aincrad.”

“.....Yeah. The same goes for me.”

Saying that out in a murmur took everything from me. After all, I felt it in Asuna’s words. That living on the twenty-second floor like this would be our one and only short respite in the sun. That we would have to return to the frontlines one day and throw ourselves back into days of battles.

I took in a deep breath and shook off the irritation drawing close, and then spoke.

“Then, erm. Let’s have a marriage ceremony when the hundredth floor’s cleared and the fighting’s all over. We’ll call Klein and the rest, along with a whole lot of the others, when the time comes. Like Caynz and his group, the members of DDA and KoB... I wonder if Heathcliff will come if we ask...”

Asuna’s eyes opened wide at that, but a smile came back to her face and she nodded.

“Hmm, I wonder. Let’s ask the leader for a speech.”

“Aah... I bet he’ll make it all boring and solemn...”

Our laughter overlapped.

Of course—I, the one who suggested it, knew that the «marriage ceremony after clearing the hundredth floor» wouldn’t happen and the same went for Asuna too, I’m sure. If the death game known as SAO were to be cleared, the players would all be logged out and never be allowed into Aincrad ever again in all likelihood.

The clearing group, including Asuna and me, had fought all the way here for two years in order to release all of the players. There were also many who lost their lives in the midst of battle and vanished into polygon fragments. That was why I couldn’t possibly voice out this faint emotion bubbling up from the depths of my heart.

Instead, I stood up from the dining chair made from plain wood and then took two steps around the table. Asuna stood up with the same timing and moved before me.

I hugged Asuna tight as though to drive back the anxiety and unease. It wasn’t an embrace filled with tranquility like the one from when I proposed; I put strength into my two arms in my urge to feel all of Asuna’s existence. Both Asuna and I had removed our metallic armor, so the sensation of her slender yet clearly tangible body was transmitted to me.

“Asuna...”

I called out in a hoarse voice as I buried my face into her lustrously soft and fragrant hair. With my senses all focused on this being so dear to me I felt like I was going mad, I suddenly became aware of what seemed like an unusual numbness deep in my body.

Unusual, but this wasn’t the first time I felt it. Yesterday, I had found out about a base desire included in the avatars of this world

aside from hunger and drowsiness since getting imprisoned in SAO, in Asuna's room on the sixty-first floor's main city, Selmburg. A single checkbox that appeared after earnestly following small buttons and links in explanation notes so deep in the depths of the main menu window's [SETTING] tab that I had to question who would actually find it. Checking that would allow players' virtual bodies to gain... or perhaps, recover, a certain function.

Just who was the one among the SAO development team who prepared an option like this? I did think that it might not be Kayaba Akihiko, the one who plotted this death game. I recall that in a magazine article I had read in the real world shortly before getting imprisoned in the game, several members of the development team had hinted at displeasure towards the ethics code of the game self-regulatory organization. They had committed the function into a version still in development as a joke and that was obviously deleted before the release edition, but it then made a return when it became a death game for one reason or another... or so I would like to imagine.

I had left the «Ethics Code removal setting» checked since last night. In other words, if my feelings intensify along a certain direction, a certain change would occur upon my avatar—

I tried to separate our bodies in a fluster, but Asuna's two arms, wrapped around my back, wouldn't permit that. She must have realized my response, as her slim body shook with a shudder.

“S-Sorry...”

Asuna apologized softly, but clung on to the embrace and raised her face before she whispered at point-blank range with her cheeks blushed pink.

“...I am your wife now, Kirito-kun.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“...Let’s go to the other room.”

The kitchen? Abandoning the thought of verbalizing that joke, I silently nodded, then turned my feet towards the door that continued to the room that wasn’t the kitchen.

Upon entering the dim bedroom from the bright living room, we turned to each other without switching the lamp on. The west window where the purple afterglow shone in from was the only source of light, but I could distinctly see Asuna’s form as a result of my mastered Detection skill. Her metal armor, as well as her gloves and boots were removed, but the familiar knight uniform in the colors of the Knights of the Blood stayed on as always. Her gallant figure as a swordswoman heightened my desires all the more.

Whether she realized that or not, Asuna clasped her lowered hands in front of herself and spoke in an embarrassed tone.

“At times like this... should the guy be, erm... the one to take the girl’s clothes off?”

“Erm... w-well, I wonder...”

There was no way an online game addict in his second year of middle school when this became a death game could give an immediate answer to such a question. But I would have to do my best if I had to. First taking in a deep breath, I took a step towards Asuna and my right hand—

“.....Wait, that’s impossible, isn’t...”

To my knowledge, there weren’t any methods for a player to remove another’s equipment, even if it was a mere ring. I could reduce its durability and destroy it, if I had to state all possibilities, but that was obviously not happening here and now. Asuna looked up at my frozen expression with upturned eyes, blushed with a giggle, and spoke.

“Sorry, that was a joke.”

—And she sets the pace from the start yet again.

That sense of impending danger, too, disappeared in the instant Asuna opened a window and pressed down on the «Remove All Clothes» button in her equipment figure. The knight uniform and socks disintegrated into light particles and nothing more than modest, white undergarments lined with lace covered her avatar.

When I became absorbed in simply gazing at the texture of her moist skin and those graceful curves that practically rejected the notion of being mere polygons, Asuna’s arms and legs squirmed as she slightly pouted.

“It’ll end up just like yesterday at this rate.”

“Hah... fweh...?”

I blinked, and finally remembered. Last night, I had turned towards Asuna, undressed as she was now, and made an unbelievable slip of the tongue, resulting in the fear of an in-the-area attack carved into me. It would be preposterous to repeat that same mistake. I, too, pulled out the window and removed my clothes, throwing caution to the wind. My familiar shirt and trousers vanished into my storage, but I felt no coldness on my skin, perhaps thanks to the stove still burning in the adjoining room.

Looking at me wearing nothing more than a single piece of black-colored equipment, Asuna continued her pursuit despite her blush turning even rosier.

“Well... let’s press the next button on a ‘ready, go’?”

I couldn’t handle any more than stiff nods.

Matching Asuna who putting her right hand upon the window, I, too, braced my finger above the «Remove All Undergarments» button.

The great vice-leader of the strongest guild, Knights of the Blood, (retired for the moment) put on a solemn face for some reason and drew in her breath—

“Ready, go!”

And she let out a dignified yet lovely yell.

Our opposing fingers moved centimeter after centimeter and three articles of clothing vanished from the room in the next second.

Once again, I was mutely enthralled by Asuna’s standing posture with all of her equipment taken away. I believe the word, avatar, originated from the Sanskrit word, «avatara», with its original meaning of «a manifestation of a deity». A fact that crossed my mind with just how beautiful, how unapproachable the existence before my eyes was.

But the longer that continued, the more my lust surged and heightened from the depths of my body. I could just barely hold myself back, but my breaths were shallow, my heart rate quickening without release. The saturation in my sight started fading to white as—

“...Go on, you can do what you want... I’m all yours now, Kirito-kun.”

With that line from Asuna while she tactfully covered up a part of her body with her arm, my sense of reason vanished into a gap to some other dimension just like my underwear did.

Though we had bought it in quite a hurry, the bed was wide enough, soft enough, and elastic enough, faithfully serving its purpose.

3

“Your heart’s... beating.”

Lying down on her face atop me, Asuna had her left ear on my chest as she said that with a murmur.

Nightfall occupied the entire world outside the window and the pallid moonlight sneaked in slantingly in the place of the afterlight. The fingers on my right hand toyed around with Asuna’s hair, clad in beads of sapphire light, as I muttered.

“Avatars’ hearts beat with the same timing as their real bodies’... or so I’ve heard somewhere else.”

“I see... then, this is, really the sound that your heart’s making, huh, Kirito-kun...”

A thought came to mind, and I voiced it out to Asuna, smiling as her eyelids fell.

“Let me listen to yours too, Asuna.”

An unexpected response returned after she glanced at me with upturned eyes.

“...You pervert.”

“Wh... th-that’s, after all that we’ve...”

“Well, the way you said it sounded perverted. ...But alright. After I’m done, though.”

And with that whisper, Asuna pressed her left ear even deeper against my chest.

[Material Edition 11] Sugary Days 2

TRANSLATION TAP
October 25 2024

1

Asuna sighed with her left ear atop my chest.

“This throbbing... This is the real sound made by Kirito’s heart, isn’t it?”

“Er.....”

I replied after a little thought.

“No, I wonder about that... It might be at the same frequency as the real body, but the sound itself is an SE reproduced by the system, right...?”

Asuna brought up a mildly upset face and pouted.

“Isn’t it the same if it has the same frequency? If you were to bring that up, then the voice you hear when you call someone over a mobile phone in the real world isn’t real, but a reproduction from the phone, right?”

“...That’s true.”

I nodded and a smile easily returned to my new wife who then placed her ear back on my chest, her mood recovered. With my eyelids shut, my thoughts, too, dimmed gradually as I listened to her gentle murmurs of my heart beating.

Now that I think about it, I had never heard anyone’s heartbeat in the real world.

Of course, I had heard them numerous times as sound effects in television dramas or movies, but in the first place, was it even

possible to hear someone else's heartbeat without a stethoscope? Could those beating sounds actually be heard if one placed one's ear against a chest like Asuna was doing right now?

Above all, exactly what sound was a heartbeat? The sound of the muscles contracting? The sound of the valves opening and closing? The sound of blood flowing...?

...While considering countless questions of that sort, I developed the urge to listen to that sound too—even as a reproduced sound effect—and stuck my two hands under Asuna's arms.

“Kyaa, what?”

And I lifted the grand, flustered swordswoman's slender figure with a grunt. The sheets against Asuna's body slipped off and her bare skin, in its Remove All Equipment state, glittered beautifully under the moonlight; but to accomplish my initial objective, I pressed my face between her breasts.

“Noo, wait... e-erm...”

I wrapped my two arms tightly against her struggling body.

“I asked to listen to your heartbeat earlier, right, Asuna? It's my turn!”

Or so I declared—

“Then you should do that on your side instead of straight on!”

And with that, Asuna's two hands firmly caught my head and spun it ninety degrees to the right with a creak.

The day had changed, it was the twenty-fifth of October, 2024, fifteen minutes after midnight.

A quick seven hours had passed since Asuna and I married. The murky night hung down on the log house we bought on the outskirts of Aincrad's twenty-second floor and the only sounds audible were gentle ones from insects and melancholic wails from far-away wolves (they were from non-active monsters, the «Maroon Wolf», to be specific).

The streets remained boisterous even in the middle of the night at Algade, where I lived until not long ago, so utter silence might actually be unsettling instead—I considered that before buying the house, but it seemed my worries were unfounded. Rather, lying on this bed here filled me with a sense of ease, rare in this world. Though that might just be thanks to having someone willing to share in the same warmth as myself.

With such thoughts running through my mind, I focused on my right ear, in contact with Asuna's cool, smooth, bare skin, and the faint sounds coming from beyond it.

Thump, thump, thump.

The sound was neither low, nor high; neither deep, nor shrill.

Living in Aincrad, our bodies were naturally avatars, so warmth, touch, taste, and such were all false sensations created by the Nerve Gears. However, there were a mere two actual sensations fed back from our real bodies lying in hospitals somewhere in the real world. Our breaths and our heartbeats.

Like Asuna mentioned earlier, Asuna's heartbeat that I felt now was at the same pace as her real heartbeat. It was a little fast... perhaps about eighty beats a minute?

“...Are you feeling a little nervous?”

I asked softly and Asuna replied with a slightly embarrassed voice with my head hugged in her breasts.

“O-Of course I’m nervous at least. This is... my first time.”

“Eh...? First... but yesterday... no, the day before that, at your room in Selmburg, we...”

Creak.

And my neck was spun a hundred and eighty degrees to the left this time.

“T-Th-That’s not what I was talking about! I was obviously saying that it’s the first time I let anyone listen to my heartbeat!”

Asuna’s heart rate rose to 100 BPM as she shouted out in a near falsetto voice, so I quickly nodded in panic. It seemed that action of mine had caused an unexpected tremor to a certain part of her body.

“Hyan.”

The great fencer froze after letting out that peculiar voice. Could a young man who had just become sixteen years old remain coolheaded to such a response when in a full contact state during a Remove All Equipment state? The answer was naturally, a “no”.

I silently turned my head back ninety degrees, then put strength into my two arms that wrapped around Asuna’s body.

I couldn’t hear the sound of her heart any longer, but its beat was certainly conveyed to me. Placing my lips onto the skin right above it, I gently traced over it with my tongue.

“Aah... no, wait, come on, I said...”

Asuna softly denied me, but I definitely heard her declaring “you can do what you want” a few hours ago.

Hence, I continued doing what I wanted.

When I lived in the rented room, or rather, sleeping place in Algade, I managed to wake up each day somehow with the power of the alarm configurable from the time display window.

It wasn't like I was particularly bad with mornings—I did make it barely on time for school before the first bell at eight-fifteen, pre-SAO—but before I knew it, I had reverted to my classical nocturnal style since I came here. The reason, of course, was my hard work levelling up in the middle of the night when the hunting spots were empty.

My daily schedule was as follows for the last few months.

First, I wake at ten in the morning. I spend the morning settling the maintenance for my equipment, replenishing consumable items, and gathering information, then have a simple brunch and finally head out to the fields.

The main battlefield in the day is the front lines of that floor. I explore the uncharted areas in the fields and gather information if the labyrinth tower hasn't been reached yet, and devote my time to mapping it out otherwise. I can't quite claim this time period is very effective. The enemies are strong and the drops are of good quality, but I still have to keep safety as a priority with those being unknown areas.

I keep at it until six or so in the evening before returning to the main city of that floor. I walked back—naturally, without using those costly teleport crystals for these usual trips—while considering what to do for the day's greatest pleasure, dinner; the fulfilling fatigue then is a pretty nice thing.

After solo-ing a heart dinner in the area, I immediately head for an inn for a nap. Doing that in the real world would be a straight conversion from an AGI build to a VIT build (VIT doesn't exist in SAO, though), but luckily, even devouring french fries for an entire

day in this world would cause no change to one's avatar's build... probably.

Upon waking up after an hour and a half's nap, I begin my night life where I actually get «serious». There are times when I return to the labyrinth if the clearing seemed to have slowed down, but basically, I fight to strengthen myself here. I clear quests if I took up any or otherwise, stick to some spot for hunting. The latter's tough as expected, with me hunting straight from ten at night, through midnight, to four in the morning at a training spot that «has strong enemies, though not at the level of the front lines, which made it relatively dangerous», before getting close to collapsing at the end.

Using the bit of concentration barely remaining in my reserve tank, I return to the main city and head to Algade from the teleport gate this time. Upon retiring to my sleeping place, I shut away the refreshing rays of dawn pouring in from the window with the curtains and sleep like a log from five to ten in the morning.

Putting it all together, each day would be divided into six and a half hours of sleep, twelve hours of training and working for the conquest, and five hours for transport, meals, and breaks.

There certainly were those tenacious people in the existing MMOs I had played in the real world who could confidently play for twenty hours a day. I, too, had strived for such unreasonable levelling up right after I was trapped in this death game or after the first guild I belonged to was wiped out.

But I felt this while I fought back then. If I maintained that rate of training that shaved away at my mind, I would eventually draw the ace of spades.

But who cares—or so I did think, especially when my guild was wiped out. But there were those who reached out their hands and talked to me even in the state I was in.

It was thanks to them that I began my fight to live once again and that led me to finding a pace that suited me... and.....

I woke up to electronic noises from an alarm that practically stabbed into my mind—no, that sounded like a gentle and light simmer.

I looked at the time display window at the bottom-right of my sight with drowsy eyes. The digital numerals were 08:12, nearly two hours before the alarm would ring. I drew the blanket over my head, extending another invitation to the sandman, and this time, some sort of delightful scent invaded my nostrils.

Fragrant, rich, and abundant in sweetness; this was the smell of...

“Cream soup!”

I got up with a shout and the excess momentum propelled me off the bed as someone looked down at me with a dumbfounded expression from the living and dining room beyond the door: naturally, that was Asuna-san, «The Flash», no, «The Young Wife».

“...Good morning, Kirito-kun. That’s an unusual greeting for the morning.”

With my feet on the bed and back leaning against the floor, I voiced out a greeting more suitable for the morning of my new marriage’s second day.

“G-Good morning, Asuna. Erm, that was, I was having a dream... about all the cream soup I could drink and...”

Asuna’s bewilderment grew a degree deeper as she spoke.

“That’s no dream. There isn’t quite enough for that, though.”

“...What did you say.”

I muttered as my nose twitched and sure enough, the fragrant scent had yet to disappear. In other words, that simmering that cut short my sleep was probably no other than the sound of the lid atop a pot on boil?

Despite it being an hour and fifteen minutes earlier than usual—though I did sleep at two last night—I felt completely awake and made full use of my AGI to backflip onto my feet and charge into the dining room.

Now that I had gotten a look, I saw a black pot with steam rising from it atop the wood-burning stove in the corner of the room. And to add on, there was a green salad and round bread already set up on the dining table where Asuna was reading the newspaper, wasn't there?

Putting down the newspaper and getting onto her feet, Asuna, with an apron on, finally showed a smile as she spoke.

“Let's eat after you're done washing your face. I'll be frying the eggs in the meantime. What do you want for yours?”

To be honest, I had no prior experience in both washing my face and choosing options for fried eggs in this world, but confessing that would likely bring about that astounded mode from my young wife again, so I replied after a little thought.

“H-Half-done and cooked on both sides.”

“Alright. Over easy, then.”

...That term was new to my ears, but if the grand master chef, Asuna, said it, that was probably right.

“W-Well then.”

I nodded and rushed off to the bathroom combined with the toilet room.

I focused on three points when hunting for the new property. ①, a place rarely visited by players; ②, a lack of spawn spots for active monsters in the vicinity; with ③ being a large bath.

The snug arrangements of this log house were as follows: living and dining room x 1; kitchen x 1; bedroom x 1; but despite that, the bathroom was relatively large with a plain wood bathtub that measured two meters long. The water and gas fees would probably be horrible in the real world, but in the dangerous and convenient VR world, fresh hot water was always running from the clay pipe installed on the wall, filling up the bathtub.

I was in no way obsessed with baths, but even I wanted to plunge my head in, instead of washing my face, upon looking at the surge of steam rising from beyond the wash basin. But it would likely turn those from over easy to over difficult if I did it, so I abandoned the idea of a morning bath and twisted the silver faucet.

The drawback of this bathroom was how the bath had an endless supply of hot water, but the wash basin had nothing more than water so cold it could give you frostbite. “Uhii!”, I screamed while washing my face, the last vestiges of drowsiness flowing away, before dashing back to the dining room.

“Coldcoldcold....”

And I chanted a mysterious spell while warming my face and hands at the stove before letting out a sigh of relief after the virtual chill was cancelled.

Asuna, standing in the kitchen and looking at me, turned to me in that same, old confounded mode.

“It feels best washing your face with cold water, doesn’t it?”

“That... That’s true, but it’s practically ice water here, so...”

“You’re a man, bear with it!”

And Asuna spoke a line that some older sister would probably use before shrugging her shoulders lightly.

“...Well, I went in the bath, though.”

“Wha..... th-that’s unfair! Or rather, you could have woken me up and...”

“...Woken you up, and?”

Asuna’s right hand held a spatula, glistening in the light, as she smiled brilliantly.

“Ah, n-no, it’s nothing... anyway, hey, the egg won’t be easy anymore.”

“There are still three seconds left. ...So. And. What?”

—Come to think of it, I believe I had been able to neither block nor dodge this attack from Asuna ever since she got me with that “Give. Me. Half!” in front of Agil’s general store. But I couldn’t very well be on the receiving end all the time as «The Black Swordsman». It was only recently that I noticed, but even Asuna who always seemed composed, too, was surprisingly weak against frontal attacks.

I cleared my throat and put on a smile with as much poise as I could muster along with a smidgen of severity—

“...You could have woken me up and we could have gotten in together.”

I inched my right foot away, bit by bit, in preparation to escape the instant that spatula gets the light effect for «Linear» (though I

didn't know if she could activate that), and before long, Asuna's face was dyed a brilliant red from her chin to her forehead, with a bit of steam puffing out from near the roots of her hair. This was no analogy; that really happened.

Wow, so there was an emoticon like that.

I restrained my surprise from appearing on my face and Asuna turned back to the stove with extreme haste, poking at the fried egg in the frying pan with the spatula as she softly spoke.

"W-Well... If you insist... on it....."

Poke, poke, poke.

"...But we're only going in together, okay? ...I-I can wash your back at least, but..."

Poke, poke, poke, poke.

"...E-Erm, I'm not doing any perverted, okay? I mean, it's still morning... and we need to get groceries for lunch..... wait, ah, kya ——!"

Her left hand flashed out with that scream and tossed the frying pan with such vigor it became a blur.

The fried egg that were definitely beyond half-done and now overdone swiftly flew up and spun near the ceiling, landing back on the frying pan. Still holding onto it, Asuna turned back once more.

"Geez! It's all because you said something weird like that that it ended up over hard, Kirito-kun!"

...So it wasn't difficult.

That went through my mind as I obediently apologized. Though the way she scolded me was somewhat unreasonable, everything paled in comparison to the «Bath OK» agreement I got out of her.

“Sorry, really, but I’m sure the egg will turn out delicious even if they’re hard since you fried them for me.”

Those were my honest thoughts. It appeared Asuna understood that too, as my young bride’s face turned red again before finally giving her usual collected smile.

With a sense of fulfilment, I thanked Asuna for the breakfast more perfect than any I had before, made up of that fried egg that was well fried on both sides, fresh green salad, soft round bread, and a fragrant cream soup, that I took my own sweet time to polish off.

“Thank you for the meal, it was really delicious. This isn’t breakfast anymore, it’s breakfast... no, a morning dinner, huh...”

“You’re contradicting yourself there.”

A giggle escaped from Asuna before she replied with a “You’re very welcome”.

After absorbed in the sight of my wife gracefully tidying up the tableware on the table for a short while, a thought suddenly came to me. I had taken Asuna waking up before me and making breakfast for granted, but that wasn’t an acceptable attitude to have in this time and age, was it?

In the real world, I had unwittingly built up walls between myself and both my mother and sister, hardly helping out with the housework. No matter how I thought about it, my mother, with her job as a magazine editor, and my sister, in the kendo club, should have had overwhelmingly less time to themselves than me, absorbed in online games without joining any clubs.

If this game was cleared and I could return to the real world, I should pitch in and do the housework. Or rather, I should start from today.

Pledging so in my heart, I stood up as well and carried the remaining tableware to the kitchen.

“Erm, I’ll take care of the dishes.”

I called out, but Asuna turned back and shook her head with a smile.”

“It’s fine, it only takes an instant.”

“...An instant?”

“Yes.”

Nodding and taking the dishes from me, she passed it through the water flowing from the tap once while they were still stacked on each other. With just that, the dirtied effect on the dishes completely vanished and they even dried immediately, so I ended up letting out an “Ooh!”. Asuna’s eyes instantly changed to staring hard at me.

“Ooh, you say... Krito-kun, what have you been doing in your home this whole time?”

“Erm... I basically eat out, or go with meals that don’t need tableware like sandwiches, or buns, or...”

“Ooh.”

“.....I humbly apologize...”

“Well, you are a man. But make sure you take your baths.”

After commenting with a wry smile, she apparently noticed the other nuance within the words she had just uttered and her face immediately went red once again.

“Ah, that’s not quite what I was trying to...”

Asuna’s shy murmurs were truly lovable and I couldn’t help but to grab hold of her left hand.

“Yeah, will do.”

There was nothing else I could have said.

[Material Edition 12] Sugary Days 3

TRANSLATION TAP
October 25 2024

1

The first consumer-use full-dive machine, the «Nerve Gear», sends extremely weak electromagnetic pulses into its wearer's brain, making it possible to experience the five senses, sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, in a virtual reality environment.

But my impression of that virtual reality—or electronic prison—after spending close to two years in it was that the degree of its senses replication was somewhat spotty.

Sight and hearing could be said to be almost perfect. The information delivered were either artificial 3D objects or synthesized sounds, so it wasn't exactly like the real world, but I hardly ever felt any sense of disconnect in regards to seeing or hearing.

Taste and smell also worked pretty well. They gave up on creating the «sensation of eating something»—that was, the food's taste, aroma, texture, and feel—in real-time from the very start, instead combining pre-set data through the «taste reproduction engine» and recreating that, but after getting used to it, something sweet honestly would taste sweet. The food prepared by a certain esteemed fencer who completed her Cooking skill, in particular, granted a sense of satisfaction that would make one forget one was in virtual reality, even if it was a simple fried egg. —Well, I couldn't claim to be entirely uninfluenced by other factors, though.

And the final sense, touch: sensations on one's skin, including warmth.

Unfortunately, the sense of discomfort it had haunted it even to this day.

It was fine when actively touching something. The trusty ease of gripping the leather wrapped about my cherished sword's handle. Or the silky sensation of a loved one's long hair. Those felt more vivid than in reality, satisfying my touch.

But passive information, the various sensations constantly received on one's skin over the whole body, was undeniably much different from in the real world.

The feeling as clothes inside rub against one's skin. The weight of clothes outside and elasticity of bottoms. The temperature and fluctuations of air. The pressure against one's soles when standing or thighs when sitting on a chair. Most of those «composite sensations the entire body constantly experience» were actually simplified to the bare minimum in SAO. The reason was probably due to the excess of information. Of course, there was the sensation of wearing something, but its coarse surface ended up feeling flat, like an image at low bit rate.

That said, it was perfectly possible to get used to that. It wasn't like one would be conscious of the texture of clothes the entire time in the real world either. It was fine if one didn't pay much attention to it; it didn't feel strange or anything in everyday life (though it felt weird using that term for Aincrad).

But there was one situation where one couldn't avoid experiencing the low quality of the sense of touch.

When one's entire body, with all equipment removed, is soaked in warm fluid.

Or in other words, in the bath.

25th October, 2024, 10 A.M.

I could hear faint humming from beyond the door leading into the bath, going “Nn, nn, nn, fufuu, fuu, funn ↗”. And in addition to that, the soft sound of water.

The situation reminded me somewhat of a time long ago when I slept over in the Dark Elves’ camp site, but I now possessed one thing that I didn’t back then. That was, the right to open this door.

I took in a deep breath before lightly knocking on the wooden door.

The humming stopped with that and after a brief silence, a soft “Okay” came back.

“E-Excuse mee....”

And I, too, replied softly as I opened the door. The morning sunlight shining in from the window inside made the steam effect shrouding the bathroom glow white and my eyes narrowed.

The log house built on Aincrad’s 22nd floor was in no way huge, but its bathroom alone was made to be quite spacious. It measured roughly two meters by four meters, a little below 2.8 times a size 1618 standard bath, or one that was 1.6 by 1.8 meters in other words, and it was closer to those in hot springs hotels... no, I’m going too deep into this.

According to rumours, the guild, «Divine Dragon Alliance», had a gigantic ten-meters-class marble bath in their fortress-class guild home set up on a knoll on the 56th floor, but it seemed hard to relax when it was that big. This size was likely exactly what would be considered luxurious in a player home. Not to mention how it was made entirely from cypress wood and had a free flow of hot water.....

“Hey, are you planning to stand there the whole day?”

Those words rang out from beyond the thick steam and interrupted my thoughts. Shocked back to my senses, I spoke in a fluster.

“Ah, I’ll be there, I’ll come in.”

Just as I was about to unsteadily run towards the bathtub, another question came in.

“Like that?”

Taken aback, I looked down at myself and noticed I was wearing my usual blackish clothes. Replying with an “Ah, I’ll take them off, I’ll strip” as I pulled out the window, I spammed the buttons to unequip. The hot steam gently caressed my avatar’s revealed skin after I stored the various cloth equipment in my storage.

Sure, it might be possible to recover from this state, but if there was a young man of age sixteen capable of going through this situation with his presence of mind, he could become the main character of some standalone RPG. As a single player of a VRMMO, I could only stagger forward with a ninety percent debuff to my ability to think.

Parting the dense steam, I walked roughly three meters to the bathtub and saw the gleaming, quivering water surface spreading out. And the fencer with chestnut hair on one end, exposed from her shoulders upwards.

Asuna’s face, as she looked this way with upturned eyes, turned increasingly red, perhaps due to the hot water or maybe... such thoughts went through my head as I quickly finished pouring water over myself. It was probably the norm and only polite to first wash oneself before entering a hot spring in the real world, but in Aincrad, one would stay clean unless covered by mud, paint, or mucus from monsters. Muttering “Excuse mee...” softly once again, I slid into the plentiful hot water opposite Asuna. The bathtub was a whole two meters, so it didn’t feel tight at all, despite both of us around.

Even with the situation as it was, what I first noticed was the pleasantness of the bath as expected.

“Hauuoo...”

My voice naturally leaked out from my mouth. In terms of passion of baths, I probably only had a thirtieth of what Asuna had, but I certainly didn't dislike it. The sublime warmth, moderate pressure, and the feeling as hot water soaked into every single one of the cells that made up.....

“Houfhhbbbb...”

My mouth sank into the bath as well and let out a long sigh, forming bubbles, before I finally noticed «that».

“Bbbb.... bbb?”

Lifting my upper half, I first scooped up the water with both hands and letting it fall numerous times before looking into Asuna's face on the other side of the steam.

“Huh... is it just me? The water sort of feels different from before...”

“Yes, it is, isn't it?”

Curtly nodding her head that popped out from the surface, the young wife with a completed Bathe skill spoke.

“I thought so when I came in, in the morning too, but it seems to feel more natural. Bathing had always felt more like a warm membrane pushing against the whole body, rather than water, though there is a little of that too... but I feel like I'm actually wet in this bath.”

“It really does... There's the water pressure, this floating sensation, and the feeling that all the drops of water are flowing over the skin too... —Aah, did bathing always feel this good...? Maybe I should take baths daily from now on too...”

I sank in, blowing bubbles, once again and drops of water came flying from in front. Asuna had flicked some of the water with her fingers.

“Hey, Kirito-kun, it’s not a ‘should’, but a ‘must’. ...No, the real question here is why it feels like this.”

“Bhh? Bb.... bh, that’s right...”

Lifting myself up again, I stared hard at the gleaming, swaying water.

There and then, I finally noticed an important fact. The hot water filling the bathtub wasn’t completely transparent—

“Ah, aaah!? There’s something like bath salts in here!!”

I waved my right hand up and down in the water as I shouted, but the clarity of the cloudy water only allowed me to see about three centimeters down. I shifted my face back forward and on the other side of the steam, the fencer grinned brightly.

“It’s a rare opportunity, so I tried putting in the herbal bath powder I gotten a hold of a while ago. By soaking in it for thirty minutes, you apparently get a buff that grants a bonus against poison for three hours. It’s a pretty rare item.”

“...Bath for a buff.”

“Said something?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“You got a problem?”

“No problem, sir.”

I answered the esteemed sub-leader while still staring into the water. The two pale, slender, and charming legs that should have been in my sight originally were utterly hidden behind the unidentified cloudy composition.

Anguish that even I had no reason for filled me as I spoke.

“Then isn’t that what caused this sensation too? Like, maybe the bathing powder had an effect that made the bath more bath-ish...”

“Well, I didn’t add any in when I took one this morning. But it felt the same as this back then.”

“O-Oh really?”

Somehow regaining my enthusiasm for solving the bath’s mystery, I splashed the water with my right hand while restarting my thoughts.

Though it surprised me at first, now that I focused on the sensation, I could say that it really wasn’t exactly like a real bath. The way the water parted was unnatural and the sounds were too uniform. But those problems were for sight and hearing, and there was nearly no sense of discomfort with the sensations on my skin submerged in the hot water if I were to stay still with my eyes closed.

“Hmm... —Maybe there was an update for fluid interaction without us noticing or...”

I voiced out idea number one and Asuna shook her head, splashing water, on the other side of the steam.

“The water didn’t feel any different when I washed the dishes earlier.”

“Then... maybe there’s a sensation magnification service exclusive to the bath in this log house or...”

“If it had a perk like that, I think it would have been written in the remarks in the purchase window.”

Idea number two was shot down just as easily.

“Erm, erm...”

I slowly sank deeper into the water as I sought out idea number three and unconsciously stretched my folded legs straight out.

And the ends of my toes touched something soft. Asuna twitched at the same time. The ripple produced crossed a meter and seventy centimeters, and the water quivered at my nose.

“Hmm, hmmm...”

I hummed while moving my toes slightly. The thing they came into contact with had a lovely bounciness and with that, a new ripple came forth.

“...Come on, Kirito-kun, think about it seriously.”

“I am thinking, of course.”

...This would be the soles of Asuna’s feet... no, the distance would be off, huh. Then her calves... or maybe the bottom of her knees...

“Ah... n-no, don’t...”

Asuna tried to draw her legs back with that soft murmur, but I slid closer in the water and maintained contact. Finding somewhere remarkably soft and smooth before long, I continued my poking and rubbing assault.

“Nn... geez... like I said, we were only, going in together...”

The fencer fought back with a strained voice and a face three times as red as several minutes ago. Her expression was truly lovable as

she lowered her eyelids, lightly chewed on her lower lip, and stopped the prods invoking her sense of touch. A sixteen years old young man capable of stopping in this situation would fit as the main character in a young adult fiction book with a narrative circling entirely around that main character.

I was already closing in to the midpoint of the two meters long bathtub when I noticed. Careful attention would be necessary from this point onwards, along with the occasional daring advance.

Observing Asuna's reaction, I extended my hand into the cloudy water and caught her petite right leg where I predicted it would be.

"Ah, no!"

A forward charge as she instinctively retreated. Finger sliding across the petite leg that shot out from the water, from the ankle to the calf. Gently massaging those tender muscles usually hidden by those long boots.

"...!"

Asuna's upper body, leaning against the bathtub, bent back sharply. Bulges, more white than even the hot water, were exposed as they parted the opaque water. I lost my sense of reason there, turning the distance of seventy-five centimeters to zero in an instant.

2

".....Ah, I see, so that's it."

I let out those words and Asuna, drinking from a glass filled with iced water on the opposite side of the table, glanced over.

"...What did you say, what is it?"

Her words and expression were apprehensive, but the fencer looked truly adorable with a towel wrapped around her head and a large white bath towel around her body. Now that I think about it, this was the first time I saw her dressed in such a state, wasn't it? Of course, I only had a towel around my waist as well—not wrapped by hand but by equipping a towel on the «lower underwear» section of the equipment figure—so the two of us should take a photograph to remember this moment... or so my mind thought, addled by the long hot bath, narrowly stopping after judging that suggesting it would result in iced water in my face.

Draining the water remaining in the half-filled glass in front of me, I cooled my thoughts down somehow before voicing out what I hit upon several seconds ago.

“Erm, look, about why the bath seemed more like a bath.”

“Eh... you know why?”

I began an explanation filled with confidence to my young wife who blinked in surprise.

“It's simple. Look, the sensations on our skin are magnified to more than the usual for us at the moment, right?”

“The sensations on our skin...?”

Asuna made a doubtful expression, but roughly three seconds later, that face immediately turned red from her cheeks to her ears. I would rather not go into detail, so I put on a solemn expression and stopped at a nod with a “yes”.

The reason for what had occurred in the bathroom earlier was because Asuna and I currently had a hidden setting, «Ethics Code Off», switched on. In this state, it was like some limiters were removed, especially in regards to the sense of touch. The quantity of tactile data, kept to the minimum by default, must have been temporarily increased.

“...Of course, that will cause just as much burden on the circuits and Nerve Gear, so we should keep it off when we go out. But you agree, don’t you, if only I knew quicker that baths would be so much more realistic just by switching off the code... it probably didn’t take long for that Argo to find out about it, so if only she sold me that information...”

And immediately after I voiced out that absent-minded remark, I ended up suffering a cold water attack in the end, after all.

Asuna went off to the bedroom in a huff, so I continued my train of thought while cold drops of water dripped from my hair.

We switched the ethics code off the night before yesterday and left it off since then. But we were only conscious of the tactile sensations being different from usual when we entered the bath, with no feeling like my senses were amplified now as I sat here half-naked and moreover, half-wet. In other words, the effect only manifested itself when all equipment were removed. Thus, even if we leave it on, there wouldn’t be any problem with the load on the machine and circuits...

“Come on, how long are you going to stay like that?”

I raised my face at that voice; Asuna stood with both hands on her waist, her bath towel changed into a dressing gown.

“Don’t come complaining to me when you catch a cold from after-bath chills.”

“R-Right.”

It remained a mystery whether such a phenomenon could happen in this world, but I could only nod obediently after being nursed by Asuna in an inn when I previously felt ill here due to my body in the real world catching a cold or something like that.

Standing up with only a towel on, I thought to turn towards the bedroom, but came to an abrupt stop. I had to tell Asuna the conclusion I arrived at several seconds ago even if it meant I had to suffer through another explosion of water.

“...Um, Asuna-san?”

“Whaat?”

Timidly, I asked the young wife who started tidying up the glasses and pitcher.

“Erm... I know I said all that about burden earlier... but apparently, those sensations only seem to amplify with all equipment removed, so I was just going to say that there’s no real need or hurry to switch it off and all...”

Is she going to get mad again?! I spoke out expecting that, but Asuna showed an unexpected reaction, holding tightly onto the pitcher with her face turned down.

“...it off yet.”

“Eh?”

“Like I said, I didn’t switch it off yet. After all... it’s such a bother going that far into the options every time...”

The fencer who quietly explained with her cheeks red was so adorable and captivating—

“Ah... I-I guess so...”

—that I could only reply in a giddy voice.

[Material Edition 13] Sugary Days 4

TRANSLATION TAP
October 25 2024

1

Clunk, clunk.

The large rocking chair's runners made a soothing sound atop the wooden deck.

The gentle up-down motion, like swaying atop waves, drew one into slumber alongside the sunlight filtering through the trees. Shutting one's eyes would set a certain course for sleep. However, I resisted the weight on my eyelids and continued staring into the profile of the one I loved most, lying atop myself.

The faint breathing from slumber had reached my ears since minutes ago. The grains of light on her lowered, long eyelashes trembled without sound. Though the breeze from the lake was slightly chilly, I felt no cold thanks to the heat from where our two avatars touched.

Yes—these were all fictitious data.

Our bodies, both hers and mine, were fictitious ones composed of countless polygons and the same went for the rocking chair, the wooden deck, and the log house behind; they were no more than data sent into the Nerve Gear my real, unconscious body somewhere in the real world worn on the head, alongside the up-down motion, the light flowing through the trees, and the warmth and suppleness from our touching skin.

The word, «fiction (*ka kuu*)» * apparently meant a «bridge (*ka*) erected across the empty air (*kuu*)». Of course, a bridge could not possibly be constructed over vacant air. Hence, it could not be real.

In that sense, the floating castle, Aincrad, where we lived—or were imprisoned—in was a true fictional world. A castle of stone and steel, over ten kilometers tall, floating in an endless sky. It far exceeded that bridge constructed over empty space.

It was practically a dream without end.

No, that would be off. Though this dream had continued for two years already, the time to wake from it will come. When the death game could be cleared and all of its players freed—or when the HP bar, our fictitious life, reaches zero.

Thus, I might as well remain here... in a corner of Aincrad's twenty-second floor, far from the front lines. After all, here, where there were no terrifying monsters or villainous player killers, I could view this warm, pleasant, and beautiful dream forever. Until the time comes when the game was cleared by someone else's hands.....

The desire from deep within my consciousness made my avatar tremble slightly.

“Nn.....”

Mild breathing. Her pale pink lips moved a little and her whispers streamed across.

“.....What is the matter, Kirito-kun...?”

It seemed she felt my fears and unease even when asleep. Raising my left hand, I gently caressed that long hazel hair as I replied.

“No... it’s nothing. I was just... a little.....”

A childish voice that sounded so unreliable, it surprised myself.

Her eyelashes lifted slowly and her hazelnut-colored eyes looked up at me. Urged on by her soothing gaze that drew in all of my fear, I continued my words.

“...I was just feeling a little uneasy. Everything around us is merely fictional... no, even we are... so I was thinking how we would wake up from this dream, too, someday...”

“.....I suppose so...”

The lips that answered so showed a smile tinged faintly with sorrow.

Her gaze shifted towards the outer circumference’s opening barely visible beyond the trees.

“You know, I’ve always liked power lines ever since I was a child.”

I initially thought I heard wrong. Chasing her sight, I gazed towards the distant blue skies, but naturally, there was not even a single power line to be seen.

“Power line... you mean those cables for electric power or signals, right?”

“Yes.”

“...And why those? I recall there always being talk about how they made the scenery worse and was being buried into the ground here and there...”

“Yes, most of those around where I lived in the real world were made underground too. But since they were hidden after being buried, don’t you think that disqualified them from being liked or disliked?”

“Well... I guess so...”

I nodded in neither confusion nor comprehension.

That pure white right hand then lifted up and sketched a smooth line in the air.

“I had always felt curious upon seeing power lines. I thought about how the mail, photos, and such sent by many people were all flowing through those lines. I was really amazed those could reach who they were addressed to, without becoming jumbled up.”

Thoughts about packets, headers, and how it would be optic lines rather than power lines that transmit data went through my mind, but the conversation likely had nothing to do with those. Data from different senders to different receivers crisscrossed endlessly within a single transmission line. In that sense, it certainly seemed like a small miracle a single mail could reach its destination.

Still, why the sudden topic... those hazelnut-colored eyes stared into my own as though sensing that doubt.

“Kirito-kun, we can currently feel each other’s presence.”

Her voice was soft, yet firm.

“That sensation data is travelling to and fro through the long distance between us in the real world at an immense speed. This world and our bodies may be fictional... but the signals transmitting our voices, these sensations, and everything else certainly exist, don’t they? To reach me, they’re rushing through those many cables as quickly as they can.”

Her finger, pointing towards the sky, poked into my left cheek as she spoke.

Adjusting herself, she reached up and our lips overlapped. It began with gentle pecks. The union of our fictional organs gradually deepened, gradually intensified. Tender, moist noises. A sweet fragrance. Breaths, growing rough.

I imagined while accepting the multitude of signals for these sensations. The unending lights flitting through the multicore fibers

running through the sky or under the ground. Those were hardly fictional. That definitely existed there—or perhaps here.

This connection between Asuna and me.

A maddening longing welled up from the depths of my body, compelling me to hug her slim frame tight. My hand had unconsciously slipped in her thin sweater.

“Nn... don’t, no more today, until... the night...”

Despite Asuna’s whispers interspersed with her breathing, she made no effort to stop my hunger kiss. The rocking chair hit against the wooden deck at an irregular, heavy rhythm.

Before long, an entreaty, half stifled with tears, pierced through my sense of hearing.

“Kirito-kun... reach me... to me... send me, you, Kirito-kun...!”

I drew Asuna’s body closer with both hands in place of a vocal answer.

25th October, 2024, 2:30 PM.

While walking through the small path leading to the main town through the lake's shore from the log house, Asuna shook her head violently without warning.

“U-Uggh!”

“W-What happened?”

Despite my flustered question, she simply brought up both hands and hid her face.

“Uggggh~~~~”

“I-Is your stomach hurting?”

“Uggh—!”

Guess not. Though eating strange mushrooms here could still cause one to experience the bad status effect, «Stomachache», our lunch was teriyaki chicken with Asuna's special soy sauce and even in the rare chance our real bodies were to experience a stomachache, that sensation should be intercepted by the Nerve Gear.

And so, I wondered exactly what could be causing her such anguish, before—

Asuna abruptly spoke in a soft voice with her head down, depressed.

“Ugh... was I always like this...?”

“Like this... like what?”

The heel of her palm immediately stabbed into my left shoulder.

“What are you trying to make me say out loud, it’s that!”

I finally understood what Asuna was getting at after a peek revealed her side profile to be crimson red. She must be embarrassed over the multiple violations of the Ethics Code since this morning.

“What, you just meant that?”

“Don’t just call it that and brush it off so easily!”

“Aren’t you the one who called it ‘that’ first...?”

Another palm heel strike came flying, so I cleared my throat and picked my words better.

“No, well, erm, right... we are married, so doing something like that is only natural and there’s no need to be so upset.”

“Don’t just call it s-something like that, that’ll make me all the more embarrassed.”

“Then... what?”

“Er... erm, hmm, s... wait, what are you making me say!”

A third palm heel strike shot forth and I almost tumbled into the lake’s water on our immediate right.

The main town for Aincrad’s 22th floor, «Coral», appeared more like a village rather than a town. Separating the inner and outer areas was a wooden fence, a meter and a half in height, too, with its buildings all made from wood. This thoroughness applied to the teleport gate in the village’s heart, constructed from polished logs, as well. Its residents were few and not even a single player was around beside us.

In exchange, it had a rather extravagant selection of wood products. The rocking chair Asuna and I were on earlier was bought on impulse from this village when we passed by yesterday and saw it in the store front. We have visited this village again in order to get together the furniture for the log house.

The bedding, table, and chairs were provided from the start, so all we had to buy were furniture for storage. And in Aincrad, ninety percent of their significance laid in their value as «interior decoration». After all, most items could be stashed in one's own inventory and the main feature of a player house, «a large capacity storage at home», was provided from the beginning in the shape of a treasure chest.

As such, I was thinking we only had to buy shelves for the living room and drawers for the bedroom.

“Wow, this is amazing!”

Upon entering the first furniture shop, Asuna let out an elated cry without any trace of the shyness from earlier.

“Look, look, Krito-kun! What a lovely table!”

“Ooh, it sure is huge.”

An unsatisfied glare came from my wife despite my pure intentions in expressing my honest opinion.

“What, that’s all?”

“No, well, all tables have going for them is their size, so...”

“Look closer, look at this smooth walnut! It can easily sit ten people, the tabletop’s over ten centimeters thick, and the grain’s utterly exquisite.”

Quietly distancing myself from Asuna whose cheek was practically on its smooth surface, I checked the price pasted on the other side of the table.

“Dggehh—”

I leapt up high with that shout.

That surprised Asuna as expected, and she asked, “W-What happened!?", which I answered by pointing at the price tag with my trembling right hand.

“I-I-I-I mean, just look, i-i-i-it says seven hundred thousand col here...”

However, Asuna simply nodded in acceptance upon hearing that.

“7ook, huh... well, I guess I can't expect it to be too far from around that much...”

“E-Eeeh!? This must be a rip-off, it's just a table, you know!? It's just wood, just some plank!!”

“Listen here, Kirito-kun, if this same table was sold in the real world, it would probably cost 10m yen.”

“W-Whaat!? Ten million... can't you buy an entire house at that price...?”

Feeling strength leave my waist, I stumbled as I backed away and sat on heavily onto a chair on display.

Now with an exasperated look on, Asuna approached me from the front and beamed as though out of retaliation for earlier.

“Hey, Kirito dearest. I've simply fallen in love with this table. ♪”

My head shook from side to side in quivering motions.

“I just know it’ll look dreamy in our living room. I’m sure it’ll make our meals all that better too.”

My body shivered in jerking motions.

“Also, 100k’s written on that chair’s price tag.”

Leaping off and rolling onto the floor, I was welcomed with gentle words from my young bride who looked down at me with a smile.

“But it could be a little too big for our home. Shall we search for something smaller?”

My head nodded endlessly, denied from any other course of action.

3

In the end, Asuna and I exited the village and returned after buying a table of a reasonable size at a reasonable price along with its chairs, both rather more refined than what the house started with, a decorative shelf and chest, various other smaller articles, and a heap of groceries.

As we stored all of our belongings into our joint storage, we were empty-handed like on the journey here. Though we did not even hold onto our swords, we could equip them in an instant with the «Quick Change» mod if the time called for it.

We had spent our own sweet time shopping and the bottom of the upper floor was dyed crimson with the setting sun. I honestly did not have much interest in the interior design, but Asuna's footsteps seemed light as though satisfied after shopping for the first time in a while.

“Hey, Kirito-kun. About that huge table we saw in the first shop...”

I answered with an involuntarily strained smile to her sudden words spoken with a smile.

“R-Right, well, it would be nice if we can buy it in the future.”

“No, I didn't mean that. You didn't look too closely at the price tag, did you? That was made by a player. It must have been consigned to the NPC shop.”

“Eh, seriously...?”

“The maker was called «Mahokl». Ring any bell?”

“No... can't say I do...”

“Same here. But I think making a table like that must have needed a mastered woodworking skill. That's amazing... I was reminded

again that Aincrad has so many people living with all they have, even outside the clearing group.”

“.....There sure are...”

I nodded deeply at Asuna’s words.

Even while we wholeheartedly enjoyed this brief intermission now, the players of the clearing group must be fighting their way to the labyrinth in the seventy-fifth floor far above. And the blacksmiths, like Lisbeth, must be creating and repairing their weapons. And the merchants, like Agil, must be purchasing and facilitating the trade of their drop items. Aside from them, there were the leather craftsmen, the tailors, the information brokers, the medicine dealers... The thousands of players were putting their all towards their individual goals day after day.

Their efforts were no fictional illusion either. Even if this world could vanish someday, their memories here would remain. If they wished for it, even until they met with true death in the real world.

I reached out with my right hand as I walked and held Asuna’s left hand.

Asuna, too, smiled as she gripped my hand back.

“You know, Kirito-kun? You know how you were saying everything in this world were fictional?”

“Ye... yeah.”

After I nodded at that abrupt question, bewildered, Asuna continued while gazing at the sunset skies in the distance.

“Fiction means that it isn’t real, right? Like a fictitious claim or a fictional account of war.”

“Or a fictional creature.”

“Hehe, yes, yes. But you see, there is something that actually exists despite being fictional.”

“Eeh?”

I tilted my head at those puzzling words.

“Wouldn’t that be a contradiction? It’s fictional because it doesn’t really exist...”

“You’ll understand if you think back to the word’s meaning.”

“Nn.....?”

A bridge could not be constructed over the air. Hence, it could not exist. That would be the etymology behind the word. With that in mind, I looked up at the bottom of the upper floor soaked in madder red.

The words Asuna spoke hours ago suddenly came back to me—the phantasmal scene she showed me.

“Ah... do you mean that, bridged across the sky... the power lines?”

Asuna happily nodded at my murmur.

“Correct! The power lines stretched up high with utility poles and pylons are called «aerial cables». I remembered since the term sounded strange. Though aerial cables are disappearing in Japan in the real world... still, I like them even if they obstruct the view. I think about how they connect the whole world.”

“.....Honestly, I hadn’t thought about power lines at all...”

Lowering my sight from the skies above, I muttered.

“...But I’m glad to learn all of that from you today, Asuna. It made me feel like looking at them from my room’s window again when we’re back in the real world.”

“Ehehe... I’m glad you think so.”

I trembled as my love for Asuna welled up upon seeing her innocent smile, and I drew her slender body closer and hugged it tight.

“Hold on, Kirito-kun, we’re in the middle of the road!”

I gently sealed the mouth that flustered shout came from.

It might have been out of anger or exasperation, or perhaps she simply gave up... but after my face separated a long ten seconds later, Asuna stared at me with teasing eyes and whispered.

“Geez... —It’s only a little farther, so let’s hurry home.”

[Material Edition 14] Sugary Days 5

TRANSLATION TAP
October 25 2024

1

“...Three, two, one...”

Asuna began a sudden, unexplained countdown while looking at the main menu’s time display.

“Zero!”

I ducked with a jerk at that, but nothing happened even after a five-second wait. The mellow atmosphere permeating the log house built near the edge of the twenty-second floor lingered as it always had. It seemed this was no prank with the sofa Asuna and I sitting upon suddenly springing upwards or the house itself blowing up.

“...W-What’s with that zero?”

I nervously asked and Asuna wiped away the window with a smile.

“It has just passed into five-nineteen p.m.”

That time was neither here nor there to point out as a time that has just passed. I pondered upon what it signified before realizing.

“Ah... so that’s it. A day just passed since we married...”

“Correct! Though it hasn’t been a year, it has been a day.”

With a crooked smile, I drew closer to Asuna who said so happily.

“I suppose we’ll have to celebrate, then.”

As I swept away the long hair covering her cheek with my fingertips, Asuna lowered her eyelids as her face grew red. I placed my mouth over her petite lips.

Our long kiss ended and Asuna asked in a small voice.

“Is it still a day... or already a day?”

It seemed she was asking whether the twenty-four hours we had spent in this house felt far too short or long.

I answered after some thought.

“Both, I guess... The day felt so complete, spending it and talking so much with you, Asuna... but I do feel like that one day passed too quick as well.”

That thought must have been from my feeling that our days at this log house could not continue for long.

Asuna and I had left the clearing guild, «Knights of the Blood», announced our temporary withdrawal from the front lines, and descended down to the twenty-second floor here.

Of course, the frontliners would, by no means, pause the clearing simply because the two of us left. They must be still fighting, aiming for the seventy-fifth floor’s labyrinth even now: the KoB, led by Heathcliff the invincible swordsman, the «Divine Dragon Alliance», the largest guild among them, the «Fuurinkazan», where Klein, my old friend, served as leader... and the many other players outside of them.

The frontliners were certainly not monolithic, but if I were to state what joined them together, it would be a common understanding—that they had all put their lives on the line, fighting on while shouldering the risk of death.

SAO lacks magic. As such, there are no healers or buff-based classes to be protected more than the others like in other games. Though there are roles assigned such as tanks, damage dealers, and scouts, each and every player among the frontliners had to stand before the monsters and fight while suppressing their fear.

That was exactly why players like Heathcliff, who exuded an absolute sense of ease, and Asuna, who could cut down monsters with overwhelming power, could garner a level of respect akin to worship.

However, turning that around, that meant those who do not fight lose their place among the frontliners.

Though few, there were cases of players among them who fell victim to their fear and lost their ability to stand before monsters. Though it did not matter much in battles against weaklings, those who ignore orders to switch when clearing the floor boss could bring about the collapse of a party... or even the raid group. Hence, it was normal for those players to signal their withdrawal from the frontliners through their speech or behavior and disappear without much notice.

Asuna's and my withdrawal was basically not much difference from that either. There must be some with bitter emotions over our sudden withdrawal among those players fighting on the seventy-fifth floor—especially those in the guild, KoB. This momentary respite would likely only last until the seventy-fifth floor was cleared at most.

No... the seventy-fifth floor, in particular, would be the third quarter in Aincrad. There was a chance the floor boss would be strengthened to a dire extent, similar to the twenty-fifth and fiftieth floors. If that turned out to be true, they might request for us to return upon discovering the boss room.

“...It’s already been a day, huh.”

I muttered once more and hugged Asuna's slender frame closer.

If we returned to the front lines, we would have fewer opportunities for contact like this too. Or rather, that would be an understatement with Asuna being reinstated as KoB's sub-leader; it might be tough for us to even meet.

As though sensing my unease, Asuna whispered at my ear.

"It's okay, it has only been a day."

".....Yeah."

"Besides, the day isn't over yet. There's still much more stuff we can do, isn't there?"

".....Y-Yeah."

My avatar twitched at those alluring words. Asuna blinked in that instant before her entire body became dyed in crimson.

"T-That's not it, I didn't mean that when I said that."

I placed my lips on her nape as she quickly spoke. Tasting the sensation of her warm skin, smooth as silk, I recall what Asuna had asked in the afternoon.

She said she liked power lines as a child. That she felt fascinated by the data incessantly transmitted through the power lines.

Asuna's shudders and panting that I now sense were sent from her brain as she laid down in a place far away in the real world, making their way to my NerveGear through the massive web of fiber cables and the SAO server. I felt that fact to be both a precious miracle and a vexing obstacle.

"...Asuna..."

I mumbled as I hugged my beloved tight.

“If.....”

However, I could speak no further. After all, that future felt far too distant, too precarious. I still lacked the courage to wonder what lay beyond the completion of this death game.

Even Asuna with her astute, telepathy-like ability to read my thoughts chose to keep her silence this time. Instead, her two hands firmly returned my embrace.

Eventually, she vocalized a single word: my name.

“Kirito-kun.”

Her voice seemed as though soothing a young child, saying that everything would turn out okay.

2

The menu for dinner was savory fish and bread, baked in the oven, potato potage, and green salad.

As expected of a maxed out cooking skill, the white fish's skin was exquisitely charred and I stuffed it into my mouth with a herb sauce, chewing and swallowing it before making an inquiry of the chef.

"Is the fish the one we bought at the village earlier?"

"That's right. ...Is it not to your taste?"

"N-No, it's super good, really!"

After shaking my head in a fluster, I added on.

"It's just, since there's that soy sauce you spent so effort on, Asuna, I thought making it sashimi could have been great too."

"Aah, sashimi does sound good..."

Asuna stared off into the distance in a daze, imagining that dish that would never be served in an NPC restaurant in Aincrad, but immediately showed a somewhat bitter smile.

"But you see, though I may be overthinking this... there aren't any refrigerators in this world, are there?"

"T-There aren't, are there?"

"And the fishmonger puts them on display in a case at room temperature, right... there's just, this hesitance to eat the fish raw after buying it in that manner."

"R-Right."

Technically, in this world, even if you were to drop the fish onto the ground and leave it there, as long as it existed as an object—that is to say, as long as its durability remained, there would be no difference in its quality (and of course, taste). Though it would get a dirtied effect three seconds after dropped, that would fade after it's washed in water.

Still, on the other hand, I did understand Asuna's hesitance. When it comes to sashimi, freshly fished ingredients would definitely make for a better tasting dish, or feel that way.

"Then, maybe we should raid the fishmonger right after it opens in the morning and dash back... no, we still wouldn't know when the fish is from, huh... —ah, that's it."

With a thought coming to me, I opened the skill tab on the main menu.

I possessed 12 skill slots at my current level of 96. The skills set there are «One-Handed Sword», «Dual Blades», «Two-Handed Sword», «Martial Arts», «Blade Throwing», «Parry», «Battle Healing», «Searching», «Hiding», «Sprint», «Extended Weight Limit», and «First Aid».

Among those, the one with the lowest proficiency and usage was unmistakably Two-Handed Sword. Though I had taken it up, thinking to try equipping a somewhat rare two-handed sword I obtained long ago, I ended up barely making use of it in the end.

Then again, looking into the Two-Handed Sword skill played its role in duels against two-handed sword users in the future, so it wasn't a waste—but there was no purpose in letting it remain in my slots.

"Don't tell me you're thinking of changing your skills?"

Asuna who stood behind me without my notice peeked into the window I displayed and spoke. I gave a deep nod and answered.

“Yeah... I’m thinking of discarding Two-Handed Sword and becoming a fisherman.”

“Eeh?”

“I know what you want to say, but don’t stop me, Asuna! This is for the sake of having fresh sashimi!”

Asuna returned to the other side of the table and nodded without hesitation at that.

“It’s not like I’ll stop you, though.”

“Oh... r-really?”

“I mean, with you having Dual Blades, it’s not like you’ll ever use two-handed swords now. Besides, I’ve always thought it would be good for you to have at least one Life-type skill.”

“R-Really?”

“Also, I want to have some tasty sashimi too. Do your best with the skill levelling!”

All I could do against such encouragement was to thump my chest with a “Y-Yeah, leave it to me!”.

After clearing the dining table together, we sat on the rocking chairs in front of the fireplace while drinking coffee before Asuna suddenly spoke.

“That’s right... this came to me after you mentioned about Life-type skills, but we went to look at furniture in Coral Village in the afternoon, didn’t we?”

“Yep.”

“There was that simply lovely table in the shop, wasn’t there?”

“Ye... yep.”

That slight mumbling was due to the slim chance of her suggesting we buy that seven hundred thousand col table. However, Asuna smiled as though to deny that and continued her words.

“I wonder, can we find that wood crafter named, «Mahokl», who made that table?”

“Eh... hmm, I wonder? I guess we could stake out that NPC shop... it should be quick if we count on Argo instead. Why?”

“You see...”

Asuna’s cheeks redden for some reason then.

“I was thinking about ordering a custom rocking chair.”

“Huh?”

I could only blink. After all, we currently were sitting on matching rocking chairs in this moment. It was something ready-made from the NPCs, but it wasn’t bad in terms of comfort.

“W-Why that out of the blue?”

“You see...”

Placing her coffee cup onto the side table before standing up, Asuna tottered to me and sat down on my lap without warning. I put my cup down as well in a panic and supported Asuna from behind with my right hand.

“Look, if we were to sit on this chair together, I’ll be completely on top of you, Kirito-kun, won’t I?”

“...Y-Yeah, you would.”

“With a little more sitting space, we would be able to sit side-by-side, won’t we?”

“Y-Yeah, we would.”

“Also, I was thinking it would be nice if the backrest angle was a little more gentle and all.”

“Y-Yeah, it might.”

My left hand moved along onwards even as I answered, but Asuna pointed a slight glare of disapproval at me before standing up. Returning to her own chair, she brightly opened up a window.

“Then, I’ll send a message to Argo-san. If she finds Mahokl-san, let’s head there together tomorrow?”

“...Let’s.”

A thought came to me as I nodded. Wood crafters should be able to make fishing rods too. It would be all «a good angler never blames his rod» for fishing in the real world, but the quality of tools affects the results in Aincrad. Raising the fishing skill was considered a chore, so being able to fish some would make it more enjoyable too.

I thought while gazing upon Asuna’s earnest profile as she tapped away at the holo-keyboard.

True, there were still many more fun events to come. Instead of thinking about how this would end in a few more days, I should live each day to its fullest. That was no different from the days on the front lines.

Turning my eyes towards the window that was still open, I touched the slot the Two-handed Sword skill was set in with my fingertip. From the submenu that popped up, I chose to erase the skill. While

reading the warning text about how my proficiency would fall to zero if I did so, I murmured in my heart.

—Sorry for not making use of you much.

After pressing the OK button, the slot turned empty with a somewhat forlorn sound effect.

3

25th October, 2024, was bright.

Having eaten breakfast, Asuna and I passed through the teleport gate at twenty-second floor's main town and descended even farther down, to Aincrad's third floor.

The main town, Zumfut, was a town constructed by hollowing out three monstrously gigantic baobab trees. Upon exiting the teleport gate, Asuna looked up towards the short and stout giant trees and whispered with her eyes narrowed.

“...It’s been a while, huh?”

“Yeah...”

We immersed ourselves in those memories from long ago as we stood side by side.

The one who first spoke was, once again, Asuna.

“Now, let’s go. Mahokl’s workshop is in... this tree, huh?”

Our hands hooked up despite neither in particular initiating it and we headed towards the south-eastern baobab.

The information dealer, Argo, had hounded down where the wood crafter, Mahokl, stayed in just a single night. I had thought the shop would be opened on some floor far above, considering that craftsmanship with a maxed out skill level, so it came as a surprise it hear it was on the third floor.

Still, it seems understandable after actually visiting like this.

What a wood crafter needs, most of all, would be high-quality lumber. Aincrad’s third floor is a «forest» floor and its surface area was wide too with it being among the lower floors. In addition, few

players would pass by now of all times, so it would be uncommon for any disputes over rare materials with those in the same trade to occur.

Crossing through the quiet—or rather, utterly devoid of other players—teleport gate plaza, we entered the baobab building and climbed to its third floor. The workshop was beyond the circular path.

A small signboard hung beside a small door. [Mahokl's atelier] was written on it.

“...No one would be able to tell what kind of shop this is from that alone...”

Asuna nodded to my opinion as well, but it appeared we were at the right place, judging from the name.

I approached and knocked, but with the lack of response, I gently pushed the door open. A loud gikogikogiko blared out right after and I unconsciously leaned back.

The atelier spanned much larger inside than it appeared outside—that said, huge logs, square lumber, and planks were piled up anywhere possible, so it turned out like a maze with only parts of the room visible. The gikogiko noise seemed to be coming from the center of the room.

Navigating through the lumber, turning left and right, we somehow reached it—a log almost a meter in diameter and three meters long being cut along its length into two with an extremely large saw manned by a truly petite player.

That height was likely two or three centimeters shorter than Argo the «Rat». The sight of that avatar who looked practically like a child, possibly smaller than the deftly handled huge saw, cutting the log which was over two times as tall into two looked as if it was some sort of artistic performance.

The saw, where the earlier noise came from, cut a straight line through the gigantic log without pause and flashed brilliantly in the instant it touched the floor.

Within the light, the log transformed into numerous planks. Come to think of it, this would be my first time watching a wood crafter's technique in person.

After they turned into objects, Asuna and I gave a synchronized round of applause.

The player with a small frame spun about towards us with that saw against her right shoulder and spoke in an adorable voice while her round glasses, adorned with a texture resemblant of classic manga, gleamed.

“—What business do you have with me?”

[Material Edition 15] Sugary Days 6

TRANSLATION TAP EDITING ZEHAFFEN

October 26 2024

1

“—What business do you have with me?”

Suddenly interrogated by the petite female player with swirly glasses and hair in braids, in a manner of speech familiar to period dramas, I was momentarily at a loss as to how to reply.

The meaningless thought about how I could answer with the hackneyed “I am no one strange!” had she only gone and asked “Name yourself!” went through my head before Asuna showed off her usual communication skills, answering in a crisp voice.

“We apologize for interrupting your work, but you are the wood crafter, Mahokl-san, aren’t you? I am Asuna and this is Kirito. We have visited today with a request for crafting furniture.”

“Hmm, customers, huh?”

Mahokl plopped the extremely large saw, which had just split that gigantic log into two, straight onto a rack before approaching with her plain work shoes shuffling against the floor.

Even after she came right before our eyes, the swirly texture of her round glasses obstructed her eyes from being seen. Her braided hair was a bright brown, she wore a blue denim apron, and thick leather gloves covered her two hands. Unlike the maid-like apron dress Lisbeth, Asuna’s and my blacksmith friend, usually wore, her appearance was the very image of a craftsman-class.

Having examined us in detail through her swirly glasses, Mahokl placed her hands at her waist and voiced out a second question.

“How did you find this shop?”

“We had an information dealer search on our behalf.”

Asuna answered truthfully and, apparently realizing where the information passed through from that alone, Mahokl snorted with a hmpf.

“That «Rat», huh?”

“...Yes, we do apologize if that has offended you.”

The wood crafter lightly waved her hand as Asuna tried to lower her head.

“That’s not quite it. There is a signboard out and all. It’s simply... nn, who have you heard my name from in the first place?”

“We hadn’t heard of you from anyone, but we saw a table you made in a shop, Mahokl-san. It was really exquisite, so we thought about putting in an order with the craftsman who made it.”

“A table?”

Having heard Asuna’s answer, Mahokl’s eyebrows drew together above her glasses.

“That is odd, I did think I recalled all of the products I consigned... where was that shop?”

“It’s in Coral Village on the 22nd floor.”

“Coral..... ah, aah.”

Mahokl nodded, hitting her right fist onto her left palm.

“There was that, wasn’t there, there was a village like that. Come to think of it, I did entrust some with the NPC furniture shop there... I had completely forgotten about it.”

I substituted Asuna, who finally let out a question mark above her head, at that moment and spoke of the doubts I had after following the conversation.

“...Erm, from what I’ve heard so far, it seems you’ve been trying to hide yourself... but is it just my imagination?”

“It is not.”

The wood crafter casually shrugged before bringing up her right hand, still in the glove, and raising a finger.

“I suppose I will ask this at least, but what did you want made here?”

Asuna answered that question.

“A rocking chair!”

“...I see.”

Mahokl lowered that index finger and turned towards the depths of the atelier.

“Well, that makes the both of you customers, then. I can serve some tea at least, so this way.”

2

A table in a strange shape, resembling the letter «Z», and four chairs with armrests were placed farther in the atelier. Sitting down beside Asuna, I was shocked by how the surface felt so soft despite being an unfinished wood plank.

Putting three mugs, made from wood as well, on the table side by side, Mahokl picked up a kettle—made from metal, naturally—from a nearby stove before gradually pouring hot water into those cups.

“Go on.”

...Even if you say so, this isn't tea but plain hot water; I politely kept that thought to myself and accepted it.

And upon bringing up my own cup while Asuna did too, we took a sip. In that instant, a richly sweet, aromatic, and refreshing flavor unfolded to my surprise and I could not help but to exchange looks with Asuna.

Grinning as her swirly glasses gleamed, Mahokl brought her own mouth to her cup as well and spoke.

“These mugs are made from S-ranked fragrant wood and you get tea just by pouring hot water into them.”

“Ooohh~ there's more to the Woodcraft skill than I thought, huh...”

While I was overwhelmed with admiration, Asuna continued as she rubbed the table's surface.

“Did you make this table and these chairs too, Mahokl-san?”

“Of course.”

“The comfort, feel, and appearance are top-class. ...Why are you in hiding despite being able to make products of this quality...?”

Asuna asked, and Mahokl gulped down another mouthful of tea before answering the question with another.

“...Asuna-chan and Kirito-kun, was it? Are the both of you among those who stay only within the area? Or those who go outside of it?”

We exchanged looks once more at the question we were hardly ever asked. She would know at a glance that we belonged to the latter if we were fully equipped, but both Asuna and I were in casual wear at the moment, without even a bit of metal. Scratching my head, I replied curtly.

“For what it’s worth, we do go outside of it, I guess...”

“Well, of course you do. You are here with an order, after all, even after seeing the price of that table.”

Though Mahokl lifted the corners of her mouth in a grin, that smile soon vanished with wrinkles forming on her brow above her glasses. She groaned with a “hmmm” with some sort of hesitation but eventually spoke out a new question at a lowered volume.

“Then, do you know of «Composition»?”

I blinked at the unexpected query before nodding.

“Yes, well...”

Composition, or composite effect, was a term in SAO that referred to the «combined effect» produced with multiple skills. For example, among those I learned, after the One-handed Sword and Martial Arts skills reached certain values, the requirements to use the sword skill, «Meteor Break», would be cleared. It was not limited to combat skills: there were numerous composite effects among the Life-type skills, like how raising the «Polearm Weapon Creation Skill» and «One-handed Weapon Creation Skill» would allow the creation of weapons like the «Halberd» with both piercing

and slashing attributes, or how raising the «Cooking» and «Mixing» skills would allow the creation of food mixed with medicine or laced with poison.

At the start of the death game, many players would search out those compositions and keep those they found under wraps, but with the nearly two years that passed since the beginning, all sorts of compositions were discovered and such listings could be bought from information dealers too. In other words, there was no need to keep them a secret nowadays, so I held on to a sense of uneasiness at the wood crafter's solemn behavior while waiting for her to continue.

It took a while before Mahokl, stirring the tea in her mug, talked.

“It’s precisely because of composition that I had my entire shop go into hiding.”

“...What do you mean by...?”

“Nn~~.....”

Mahokl groaned once more, perhaps wondering if she should expose more information or not. Looking up, she stared hard at Asuna and me through those swirly lenses before nodding as though to convince herself at last.

“...I will put my trust in your expression of appreciation for my tables. ...Last month, I discovered a new composition.”

“Ooh!”

Honestly surprised, I could not help but raise my voice.

“I have always thought they were already all found.”

“There aren’t many wood crafters, you see. At the current moment, I believe there are only around five players who have completed the «Woodcraft» skill.”

“Hm-hmm.”

“Among those five, aside from me, there is only one who has the «Sewing» skill at a decent level in addition to «Woodcraft».”

“Hm-hmm.”

“And I am the only one who raised «Polearm Weapon Creation» as well.”

“Hm-hmm.”

Swapping in for me, who could only nod in awe, Asuna put her quick-wittedness on display.

“In other words, the new composition Mahokl-san found is a three-skills composite from «Woodcraft», «Sewing», and «Polearm Weapon Creation»... is that how it is?”

“That it is!”

Her two hands, still in their leather gloves, softly hit together and Mahokl leaned against the back of her chair.

“...Polearm weapons often make use of wood in their materials, so I raised it thinking to make effective use of the offcuts resulting from making furniture. I consigned the weapons I made to NPC weapon shops and made some money off them, but I had no intention of living mainly off that. Furniture’s what I like, after all.”

That was understandable, seeing as she had completed the Woodcraft skill. Unlike combat skills that naturally level up while fighting against monsters, Life-type skills have to be accumulated

through plain, earnest training. They were not something that could be reluctantly completed.

“As for the Sewing skill, I raised it because it was necessary when making beds or sofas. ...I noticed the new composition displayed in the production window after my Sewing skill level was over 900 and my Polearm Weapon Creation was over 800.”

I let out a soft whistle. Despite how tough it was to master even a single Life-type skill, to have the skill levels for three separate types at 1000, 900, and 800 was rather amazing. It would be only understandable for Mahokl to be the only one who reached it.

If that was how it was, she certainly had my interest in finding out exactly what composition she had discovered now. There were various composite products from Woodcraft and Sewing, but just what would result from adding Polearm Weapon creation to them? A mop? Or a carp streamer?

I asked while leaning across the table.

“...So, what was that composition...?”

Mahokl’s answer struck both Asuna and I dumbfounded.

“A ballista.”

“Eh? ...S-Some sort of coffee machine?”

“In Japanese, it would be «
dohou
ballista
».”

“Balli... wait..... e-eeeeehh?!”

Asuna tugged on my right sleeve as I bent back in shock.

“Hey, Kirito-kun, what’s a ballista?”

“A b-ballista is, well, to make it short... it’s a stationary, gigantic crossbow. Like a cannon that doesn’t use gunpowder.”

“.....E-Eeeeehh?!”

And Asuna was the one to shout this time.

3

The bell signaling midday rang just as we exited the teleport gate on the 22nd floor.

Coral Village's central plaza was quiet as always with no other player in sight. There were no players at the plaza at Zumfut on the 3rd floor too, but there were barely any NPCs walking around here either. Few would imagine this to be the main town representative of the floor.

“...Aah, I did gather some lumber from here, didn't I. That would be almost a year ago, though.”

Stepping onto the plaza's stone paving after Asuna and me, Mahokl spoke in a small voice. She continued in a nostalgic tone even as she diligently checked through the surroundings.

“I had gathered a large amount of good quality wood, with my inventory almost bursting, so I borrowed a corner in the NPC shop and made a table. Since I consigned it there and then, I forgot to register it in my account book.”

“...So that means you could make a table of that quality a year ago?”

Asuna asked, apparently surprised, and the craftsman with swirly glasses grinned.

“Well, it would, but to put it in another way, it took nearly a year to complete the skill from there. Now, let us head to the shop.”

The three of us moved to the furniture shop and the table in question, its top made from a single walnut plank and with a net price of seven hundred thousand cor, was still exuding a massive presence in the depths of the shop just like the day before, naturally enough.

Briskly stepping over to her creation, its maker removed the glove from her right hand and gently caressed the table's top. Muttering "It wasn't too badly done.", she tapped the table's surface.

The window accessible only to the one who consigned the product appeared and just as Mahokl was about to press the «End Consignment» button, I quickly stopped her.

"Erm, h-hold on!"

"...What is it?"

"Are you going to stop selling that table?"

"I am, you should know why, after what I have mentioned earlier."

"T-That's true..."

What we had heard from Mahokl at her atelier in Zumfut was certainly reason enough for her seclusion. It would be best for her to put her business on hold and go into hiding for the time being when considering her safety. Asuna and I had tracked her down precisely from this table alone—even if it was through the staggering investigative abilities of the «Rat», Argo.

Still, I could hardly find it in myself to give up easily when recalling the expression Asuna had worn when we found this table yesterday. Nonetheless, unfortunately, I did not have the means to casually drop seven hundred thousand cor for furniture.

Feeling as though my «reliability as a husband» was being tested on the third day of our marriage, I growled and Asuna giggled before gently patting my shoulder.

Drawing her face closer to my ear, she whispered.

"Thank you, Kirito-kun. But the thought is enough."

“Y-Yeaah, still...”

“We can still go back and buy it once we’ve saved up enough money.”

“N-Nnnn.....”

Mahokl watched over our exchange through her thick lenses and grinned once more.

“The both of you.”

“Y... yes?”

“I would not mind taking ninety percent off this table.”

“Oh... nine... —eh, ehh?! Ninety percent off?!”

Mahokl thrust a finger on her right hand forward as I nearly hopped up.

“Of course, I will make that rocking chair you wanted to order too. However, there is a condition attached.”

“...T-That’s only natural... ...What is it...?”

“You will have to gather all of the material items I ask for!”

Temporarily withdrawing the table that was effectively sold now, Asuna and I accompanied Mahokl back to the teleport gate as she returned to the 3rd floor and looked down upon the small parchment handed to us by the wood crafter.

Five types of material items were listed there. Each was relatively rare, but the problem laid beyond that.

“...These are likely the materials for the ballista, aren’t they...?”

I curtly nodded to Asuna's whispers.

"Yeah, they must be. But I wonder why... She should have vacated her last atelier and hid on the 3rd floor because she didn't want to make it..."

"Hmm... —Well, for the time being, let's go back and have some food?"

With my forgotten empty stomach reawakened by my wife's words, I briskly answered with a "Yeah!".

Purchasing the ingredients in the village, we walked along the lake shore path and returned to the log house. It was just after five in the afternoon on the twenty-fourth of October that Asuna and I married in front of this house, and since it was now one on the twenty-sixth, it had actually not even been two whole days yet.

Nonetheless, the moment I saw that roof and the unadorned chimney on it beyond the hill, nostalgia squeezed tightly deep in my chest. Perhaps feeling similarly, Asuna put more strength into our linked hands.

"...It's nice having a home, isn't it?"

I hugged Asuna's shoulders as she murmured and replied with our heads against each other.

"Yeah. I feel like I've finally understood the significance behind the term, «Player Home»."

"Yes... It is our home, isn't it?"

The serene expression, veiling what seemed like a strong longing, Asuna showed to me as she said so forced my left hand onto her

cheek as I laid my lips over hers. Asuna's lips conveyed an aphonic "I love you" as our long kiss continued.

We went out together in the morning, passed through various places, and came home together. I felt nothing else could be more joyful, fun, and precious than even just those now.

"I love you... I really do, Kirito-kun..."

I hugged Asuna's slender frame close with all my strength as she whispered in a quivering voice.

After polishing off a breakfast of prosciutto crudo, cheese, and lettuce generously placed between rye bread along with croque-madame with the sunny-side-up fried eggs atop, I took out a memo written on parchment from my shirt's breast pocket.

Reading from the top of the listed material items, we had:

- Solidite Ingot 30
- Acutite Ingot 20
- Aged Teak Log 10
- Greatrock Dragon Tendon 8
- Legendary Bear Fats 8

The top two were rare metal ingots, the middle was wood, likely just as rare, the fourth was a material gathered from ground dragons, and the fifth—was an item of a truly nostalgic name.

Bringing cups of steaming hot coffee over in her two hands, Asuna sat by my side and peeked at my hand.

“...The last one’s that, isn’t it... on the 4th floor...”

“It should be. To think we’ll be fighting that fire-breathing bear again, huh...?”

Distant memories came back to me for a moment as I sipped the coffee.

The «Legendary Bear Fats» was a rare material necessary when constructing the gondola for moving across the 4th floor, the floor of lakes and waterways. The gigantic bear that breathed fire everywhere, «Magnatherium», dropped it, but it was a disaster when we challenged it on our first encounter.

Still, our levels were now over 90 contrast to nearly two years ago when we were about level 15. Even the terribly frightening

Magnatherium from back then would probably be go down in a fight with a single sword skill now.

We could simply hold back on the fire-breathing bear fighting and obtain it from players... that thought occurred to me before Asuna gave a quiet "hmm".

"...What is it?"

"Hmm... —I am happy over getting ninety percent off that table too... but it is really okay for us to gather these materials...?"

"Hmm."

Or so I went this time.

There was a strange contradiction in Mahokl's actions. After all, she vacated her atelier from that floor high above and moved to Zumfut on the lower floors because she did not want to construct that composition weapon, the «ballista», that she personally discovered, or so she had explained.

A major premise of SAO was the lack of «projectile weapons». Through that principle, not only was magic, something basic to the usual fantasy RPG, missing but also bows and arrows.

The reason was to abolish any shooting aspect from the game and have players experience combat as intimately as possible or so the game design went, but there was a reason behind that setting in this world as well.

That was— A long, long time ago, the humans, elves, and dwarves established and lived in their respective nations on the great earth. However, at one point, the catastrophe called «The Great Separation» broke out and many towns and villages, including all of the nations' capitals, were cut away from the earth in circles and stacked up as they floated into the sky, forming a humongous castle.

All magical powers were lost since then and arrows shot from bows lost their ability to fly straight.

I opened my mouth while sentimentally recalling the dark elf knight who taught us of that legend.

“...It’ll be earth-shattering if the ballista’s real and usable, huh. We don’t know if we can bring it to the labyrinth’s boss room, but at the very least, I believe it’ll change the face of field boss clearing and such. I can understand Mahokl’s unease based on that alone... if those divine dragon people from the frontliners or the Aincrad Liberation Force were to find out that she’s the only one capable of creating the ballista, they would never leave her alone.”

“True... they are the type to go ‘anything to clear this death game is okay aside from PK’, so they may even confine her at worst.”

Asuna, somewhat assuming the air of the Knight of the Blood’s sub-leader, nodded solemnly.

To Mahokl, who put that much passion into making high-quality furniture, being forced to make nothing but ballistas, a weapon, no, weaponry would hardly be bearable. No one could blame her for choosing to hide herself before any uproar occurred.

Still, why had she told us about the ballista, then?

Also, why had she gave us this condition to gather the rare materials likely for the ballista...?

“.....What should we do, Kirito-kun?”

I considered for another ten seconds before letting out a breath and answering when questioned by Asuna.

“Let’s do it. Not because of the table, but... I’m sure Mahokl has something in mind. If things get dangerous, we’ll just have to put a stop to it.”

“...Nn, I understand. Then, let’s get ready.”

Nodding and standing up, Asuna waved her right hand and brought out a window.

After briefly fiddling with her equipment figure, her plain sweater and skirt were replaced with a bodice for knights, pure white with a red accent.

Despite it being a mere two days since I last saw it, her beauty, grace, and charm overwhelmed my ability to speak.

The hem of her skirt fluttered gently as she spun about.

“Kirito-kun, you should hurry and...”

Asuna got that far before my two hands reached out and drew her closer.

“Ah, wait, you can’t, we’re going to gather those items, so...”

Slowly tracing my lips over the fencer’s nape as her face reddened, I whispered.

“It’s fine, we can gather those easily enough in three hours.”

“Geez, what do you mean that it’s fine... nn.....”

A warmth slowly crept into Asuna’s breaths as her body shuddered

—

[Material Edition 16] Sugary Days 7

TRANSLATION TAP EDITING ZEHAFFEN

October 26 2024

1

Aincrad's 4th floor, main town, Rovia.

The «capital of water», with an elegant townscape resemblant of Southern Europe and waterways boasting of clear water, had stayed as the most popular sightseeing spot for some time after the opening of its teleport gate. Visitors would form long lines at the docks for gondolas handled by NPC gondoliers, and there would even be congestion in the main canal on days with clear skies.

However, that was a thing of the past—

Barely any players were at the teleport gate plaza Asuna and I descended to. Even if it might be now known as no more than a town difficult to get around in, with its catchphrase as the Town of Water stolen by the main town of the 61st floor, Selmburg, this fall in population felt rather bleak. Though the 3rd floor's Zumfut, where we visited in the morning, felt desolate as well, that paled in comparison, strangely enough.

“...It’s a little cold, isn’t it?”

I held Asuna’s hand tightly after she offered it with those words. It was 26th October, 2024, and despite how it should have been colder on 21st December, 2022, when Asuna and I activated this town’s teleport gate, I could not recall it being so. In the first place, we came to this town by swimming through the river with just a swimming ring from where that staircase led. And yet, for it to be so chilly when it was still the latter half of October, it might have been due to Aincrad turning colder over these two years, the scenery supporting that thought—or that one sorrowful memory that still remained in my chest.

I turned and scanned through the plaza once more with our hands still linked. However, my hopes were dashed.

“There’s not even a single player stall, huh...”

I muttered and Asuna nodded along.

“And there were lines of stalls selling the materials for gondolas back then too, weren’t there?”

“If only we could move the gondolas to the floors above, that stubborn old shipwright would still be making a killing too, though...”

At my comment, Asuna looked towards the north-western block of the town. She must have been thinking about paying another visit to the workshop of that old shipwright, Romolo. But she soon shook her head lightly and looked into my face.

“If there aren’t any stalls, it looks we’ll have to get the drops on our own.”

“Aah... that’s true, let’s pay that fire-breathing bear a visit for the first time in a while.”

Exchanging nods, we began our walk towards the wharf on the western side of the plaza.

Asuna and I came all the way down to this 4th floor on a request from the grandmaster wood-crafter, Mahokl, to gather various materials. The list included eight «Legendary Bear Fats» which also served as materials for gondolas, but without any players to purchase them from, we would have to go for it on our own as Asuna mentioned.

Wharfs were built in all four cardinal directions from the square teleport gate plaza: the north and south were for shared gondolas with NPC gondoliers while the east and west were exclusively for

those owned by players. During the 4th floor's clearing, the east and west wharfs would have been mostly occupied by the large ships constructed by the two large guilds—come to think of it, the term, «clearing group», hadn't yet been established then—of that time, but all that were there now were numerous small boats wavering on the ripples.

Asuna and I came to a stop before a gondola for two, quietly moored on the northern end of the east wharf.

Its hull, painted ivory-white and forest-green, was still as beautiful as a gem despite the damage it had previously received from surface combat. Its name, "Tilnel", was marked upon its side, gleaming in the lambent light glancing off the water's surface. Our beloved boat that we had the old Romolo construct after frantically gathering its materials roughly two years ago, Tilnel.

We had it in the custody of the dark elves' fortress, «Yofel Castle», built on the southern side of the 4th floor's lake, but that exquisite castle was now an uninhabited ruin. My memories, from when we sailed aboard Tilnel with the castle's children on the lake, surfaced and provoked a terrible, squeezing ache in my chest.

“.....”

Standing by my side, Asuna suddenly turned around and buried her face into my shoulder. I softly drew closer the fencer whose shoulders slightly quivered as she gripped tightly upon the fabric of my undershirt with her two petite hands.

A hushed voice echoed close to my ears before long.

“...I'm sorry... I thought I would be fine... but it, still, hurts...”

“Aah... —I'm sorry, too, for not thinking about your feelings. Maybe we shouldn't have come here after all...”

I whispered back, and Asuna shook her head slightly, side to side, still sunken in my shoulder.

“No... I am somewhat glad, too, that this pain still remains with me... —Still... if only... if only we could, have another.....”

Asuna closed her mouth there, but my heart had received her words loud and clear.

Asuna and I had met on the first floor’s labyrinth, and though it was due to a series of coincidences after that, we did team up as a combination for a not-too-short period of time. What left the most vivid impression from the early days of the death game was the «Elf War Campaign Quest», spread throughout the lower floors, that we took on as a pair. Tilnel’s blemishes were suffered during those quests as well.

Back then, even if we held special feelings for each other, our obstinacy would not allow us to show that openly. As a combination that could be said to be on both good and bad terms, we often squabbled with me pulling various pranks on Asuna and her hurling various objects at me, but still, those days were lovely. However, irrevocable regret and melancholy accompanied the end of the Elf War quest—and that contributed to us walking our separate paths in the end: Asuna, towards that of the «Knights of the Blood», and I, back down that of an independent solo player.

—If only, if only we could have another chance at that campaign quest.

Asuna was likely about to say that and I thought the same too. However, if we were granted the authority to turn back time, we should return to the beginning of this death game and put our all into reducing the number of casualties among the players to zero... in the first place, we would be able to prevent this major incident from even happening. Even if it meant Asuna and I would have never met.

“.....If we return to the front lines, let’s put our all into clearing the game. I am sure that, too, is what Kizmel wishes for...”

Asuna nodded, strongly, at my words despite her soft sobs.

2

The gondola for two, Tilnel, glided through the waterway with that same agility from before. Exiting the town from the southern water gate, we went through the large river for some time before landing at the forest area where the fire-breathing bear, the named monster, «Magnatherium», lived.

Though less so than the 3rd floor, the forest of aged trees was splendid and gleamed a pale hue of gold in the afternoon light filtered through. Most of the trees were gnarly and broad-leaved, exhibiting a charm different from that of the 22nd floor's coniferous trees.

“Now then, the bear's...”

I turned about, taking a look around, while leisurely walking across the mossy ground. There were neither the bloodthirsty atmosphere from the Magnatherium scramble from back then nor the sign of any players aside from us. As long as we found the bear, it would be fine carrying out the hunt at our own pace.

—Or so I thought.

“Hey, Kirito-kun... did you hear someone speak...?”

Asuna, having regained her mood after sailing for the first time in a while, placed her hands behind her ears. That gesture, which seemed to possess no more than a psychological effect in reality, actually had a hearing bonus effect in SAO. I did so too, and focused my ears on the sounds around.

It was several seconds after that when an extremely soft sound, like the tail-end of a player calling out, provoked my hearing.

“—This way!”

Nodding along with Asuna, we ran towards the north-eastern side of the forest.

Numerous springs dotted the ground and we had to detour around them whenever we encountered any before, but a single jump now could get us over them. It took a mere thirty seconds, dashing through the cluster of trees like ninjas, landing on tree trunks at times.

An enormous silhouette could be seen before us, charging from the right towards the left. That was unmistakably our target, Magnatherium, even without hearing its “zugyarooon!!” roar that hardly sounded like a mammal.

However, that was not all we found.

Two players desperately ran on, practically a hairbreadth from the tip of the fire-breathing bear’s nose. Upon focusing my sight, the faintly red cursor appeared for the bear with green ones for the players. The HPs displayed were at ninety-percent for the bear and fifty-percent for each of them. I wouldn’t know their levels, but for them to lose that much against a fourth-floor monster, even if it was against the named Magnatherium, they must be around 10 to 15?

“They look like they’re in trouble, huh...”

Asuna replied my words with a short “They do”. Confirming her intentions as our eyes met, we accelerated.

To assure the fleeing pair that this was not a PK, I shouted out “We’re backing you up!!” before they noticed and ran into the charging Magnatherium’s path.

The bear roared at that same moment.

“Gyazgooaaahh!!”

It came to an abrupt stop using its four burly limbs and lifted its upper body all at once. The bear that measured over eight meters tall raised the horn protruding from its head up high and bared its gigantic jaw before wildly sucking in air like a vacuum cleaner. The red light shimmering in the depths of its throat quivered. The indicator for its fire breath.

To avoid this breath two years ago, we had to jump into the many springs in the forest. However, this time, I drew my beloved «Elucidator +45» from my back at last and stood straight with it brandished.

Flames burning crimson breathed out fiercely from the boar's throat. I rapidly spun my sword in that moment and activated the sword skill, «Spinning Shield». Though its activation was difficult, entering the motion only after dexterously using my five fingers and spinning the sword twice, like twirling, it was a useful skill capable of blocking flame and ice breaths (though unfortunately ineffective against lightning and poison).

Elucidator's blade, rapidly spinning within my hand, blew away the bear's flame breath as a shield gleaming white. I called out to my bride some distance away while keeping up the skill.

“Asuna, counting on you for the counter.”

“Okay, I've got you.”

Asuna drew her rapier, «Lambent Light +32», from her waist with a refreshing shing. Deftly stepping into the bear's side, she activated a four-hit «Quadruple Pain» the instant its breath attack ended.

The four thrusts, faster than the eye could follow, carved a red cross into the bear's flank. Its giant frame gleamed blue as it swelled out and I watched it explode into countless scattered particles as I slightly twisted my neck.

With Asuna's current attack power, it should be possible for a single basic, one-hit «Linear» to down the bear. Hence, why would she go for an overkill, using that four-hit skill—?

That doubt cleared away upon hearing the players who were fleeing from the bear.

“Th... thank you very much!”

After returning my sword into the sheath on my back as I turned around, I saw the ones standing there were a man and a woman, a combination like us. Both had the orthodox one-handed sword and shield, and the man was equipped with light metal armor while the woman was equipped with reinforced leather armor. They certainly were around level 15, judging from the grades of those. Though that was within the safety margin for fighting on the fourth floor, there were no absolutes in combat in SAO. All the more so with a named mob as an opponent.

“Hey there, we're sorry too, for deciding to cut in on our own.”

The pair started head-shaking exercises with complete synchronization at my reply.

“No, no, really, don't be, it really helped us out~~”

The female player replied this time round with a cute voice. Asuna walked to us from my back and the pair deeply bowed to her as well.

The male player sprung back up and let out an enthusiastic voice towards Asuna.

“But still, that was amazing! Bringing down that tough Magnatherium with a single four-hit sword skill!”

Yes, Asuna must have wanted the pair to think that «a four-hit attack was necessary». If she downed the bear with a single Linear, they might recognize us as from the clearing group and if rumors of

that reached the front lines, our break might just get canceled with a “You call bullying the weak monsters around the fourth floor resting?!” from someone like the prim and proper Heathcliff.

That said, it was clear finishing it off with a four-hit skill meant we weren’t at the proper level for this floor, so Asuna gave a modest reply.

“No, its HP was reduced by a little beforehand, so...”

“That really was just a little! Besides, that skill to block its breath was amazing too... so there are sword skills like that too, huh...”

The emotional male player looked to be around twenty years old from the appearance of his avatar. He had brown hair, tinged red and curled backwards, with a rather manly face. On the other hand, the female player had almost-white platinum gold hair in a billowy ponytail with somewhat soft facial features. She seemed younger than her partner too.

Deciding it was best to avoid dragging this talk about ourselves on any further, I threw out a question for the pair.

“And you are on the «Shipwright of Yore» quest?”

The pair replied with a “Yes!” in concert and I could only grin as I spoke.

“Must be tough dealing with that stubbornness of old Romolo.”

“Yes, it sure is~~ We had to go through so much before he would even accept our request~~”

The female player vigorously nodded and Asuna giggled. It appeared we had found out why they were battling with the fire-breathing bear for now, but that brought up a new doubt in itself.

“Err... judging from your equipment, the two of you aren’t crafters but fighters, aren’t you? If your aim is to level up, instead of clearing that bothersome quest... or rather, why not skip this troublesome floor? I personally think it’s more effective, in terms of both cor and experience points, if you ignored this place and farmed at the 5th floor’s underground burial grounds...”

When we first came to the 4th floor, we had no choice but to clear the labyrinth and defeat the floor boss before heading up to the 5th floor by the stairs. As such, we need our own gondola for moving throughout the floor, but with the teleport gate now unlocked, it’s possible, or rather, standard, for players to level up solely at the «best farming spots» if they were aiming to head up.

The pair exchanged looks at my question before the man displayed an embarrassed smile and answered.

“No, well, actually, we’re on the Elf War campaign...”

It seemed only I could hear Asuna softly catching her breath. The man continued on, his expression unflinching.

“We initially planned to stop after receiving the quest rewards on the 3rd floor. The walkthrough book did write that the 4th floor’s event quest was rather tough too.”

“But you see~ it really bothered us wondering how the story was going to go~”

The female player followed up while beaming.

“We’re on it from the dark elves’ side~ and we really, really wanted to take a look at the queen’s castle on the 9th floor~ So, we thought to do what we could~ And still, we fell flat on the very first step on the 4th floor~”

The woman laughed with a tehehe and the man opened his mouth once again.

“—We hunted down boars and worms around the borders of Starting City until just recently, earning enough to cover the cost of the inn and food. But after keeping that up for over a year, we got above level 10... and when the «Army» found out, they told us to enlist. We wanted none of that, so...”

“That’s why we left Starting City~ And so, we figured, why don’t we get stronger for real~? I guess you must be thinking, like~ why now~ being so strong already and us focusing so much on the elf quest is totally what some casual would do too~...”

Asuna yelled out the moment the female player giggled once more.

“That’s not true at all!”

Taking a step forward, she stared at the two swordsmen with an earnest look.

“Trying your best, aiming for some goal... I believe that is all that’s truly important in this world. It doesn’t matter when or why... I believe all of the players are doing their part against this game, be it someone who left the city wanting to grow stronger like the both of you, or someone who trained their Life skills... or even someone who simply lived on, day after day, in Starting City.”

The pair widened their eyes at Asuna’s words for a moment but eventually nodded gently as though understanding.

As six «Legendary Bear Fats» dropped from the Magnatherium Asuna defeated, we gave them the four needed for the ship building quest, conveyed warnings regarding the fallen elves they would encounter from now on as a side note, and parted with the two players at the forest’s entrance.

Asuna and I waited for the fire-breathing bear's respawn and defeated it again—finishing it off with a single «Vertical» from me this round—and returned to Rovia by gondola.

Anchoring Tilnel on the west wharf once again, we went up the stairs towards the teleport plaza. We took a look around just in case, but the pair were nowhere to be seen. They must be awaiting the gondola's completion in the old Romolo's workshop by now.

Asuna muttered as we walked towards the gate.

“Those two... I wonder if they saved that dark elven knight at the start...”

That must be impossible, I thought to myself. I had looked into it afterwards, but it was confirmed that even after reaching level 50 and becoming strong enough to defeat the enemy elite knight normally, both knights would die without fail at the opening quest for the campaign. All aside from that one irregularity Asuna and I encountered.

However, I gripped Asuna's hand while I answered.

“They might have, huh? Seeing as they're on the elf quest now of all times.”

“Nn... that's true.”

Looking at each other, we both laughed softly.

Our hands remained connected as I opened our inventory window with my spare hand and withdrew two plain, grey, hooded mantles. Passing one to Asuna, we both put them on. We pulled the hoods down deep and stepped into the teleport gate, flickering blue. Taking in a deep breath, we called out as one.

“Teleport, Algade!”

3

50th floor, main town, Algade.

The town I made my home until Asuna and I purchased the log house on the 22nd floor and began our life together. I still kept up the rent for the room I called my sleeping place, but I wouldn't be returning ever again—or so I hoped.

Algade was the largest city in Aincrad even now, nearly ten months after the 50th floor was cleared, and there was an absurd number of shops around, whether they were set up by players or NPCs. Naturally, it was not uncommon for even the top players to come shopping, too, hence the reason for hiding our faces with the hoods.

We walked through the squalid streets, strangely enough nostalgic despite being less than a week since I moved, for a bit and slipped into a certain player shop.

It could not be more chaotic inside the shop with its weapons, armor, materials, potions, and various other goods of various categories; and fortunately, while it was filled with numerous customers, there were none who turned their attention away from the goods. Approaching the counter further inside the shop, I quietly greeted the shop owner who had a window open and a difficult expression on.

“Yo, I’m here.”

The skinhead giant looked up at that, and his mouth bent along with his beard as he let out a groan.

“What do you mean, I’m here?! At least contact me an hour in advance!”

The giant’s name was Agil. The manager for this general store and a cunning businessman, as well as a two-handed axe veteran among

the clearing group. Asuna and I had known him ever since the floor boss clearing battle on the first floor.

Grinning from within the hood, I rapped his burly arm.

“Well, that’s just how much trust I have in your capabilities, see.”

“How am I supposed to fulfill an order that demanding on such short notice...?”

Looking at Agil complaining away, Asuna giggled from my side.

“We are sorry, Agil-san. Sorry for requesting something so difficult out of the blue.”

“No, well, it’s not like that matters. It’s my motto to stock up everything from potions to full plates and to offer them at a fair price.”

The effects of a beauty’s smile were immediate; the wrinkles on the shop owner’s brow vanished and he voiced out his shady slogan as he scrolled through a window. He tilted his head even while deftly getting together the items for a trade with me.

“Thirty solidite ingots, twenty acutite ingots, ten aged teak logs, eight greatrock dragon tendons... exactly what are these materials for? As far as I know, there’s no such recipe like this, though.”

—There should have been eight legendary bear fats added in there too, I thought to myself as I interrupted with a shrug of my shoulders.

Among the five material items requested by the wood-crafter, Mahokl, I had requested the four that were in frequent-enough circulation, though costly, from Agil. I hadn’t asked for the bear fats because I had predicted no player would be selling the material needed exclusively for the ship-building quest on the 4th floor in their shops now of all times, and I had no desire to expose the entire

recipe to any outsider. It wasn't like I didn't trust Agil, but at any rate, it was best to have some insurance, considering what would be made from these materials.

Checking the contents of the trade window from Agil with care, I confirmed the items' names and quantities before nodding.

"Okay, no problem here. How much are they?"

"It would go for several times the market rate if it was a one-time customer, but... well, eighteen thousand col will do."

This would be where our unscrupulous haggling war would start if this was our usual barter, but out of respect for Agil in gathering these rare materials within just two hours, I decided to yield to his price. Entering the digits into the window, we both pressed the OK button and the window disappeared with the successful trade sound effect.

"Thanks, Agil."

"Thank you, Agil-san."

Asuna and I expressed our gratitude in unison and the big man answered with a "Thanks!" before grinning.

"That's that, and now to the both of you, how's the newlywed life going..."

"Aah, oh, right, how's the 75th floor's clearing going?"

Forcing that question in and shutting down Agil's probe, I heard out his reply of "That would be about half done." before beating a retreat from the shop with a "Right, then, see you around!".

We went through the teleport gate once again, this time moving to Zumfut on the 3rd floor. Exiting onto the silent plaza, an utter

change from the hustle and bustle of Algade, we removed our hooded mantles at the same time.

“...Agil-san has become completely at home as a merchant, hasn’t he?”

“No kidding... I couldn’t even have imagined him buying his own shop back when I gave up the «Vendor’s Carpet» to him...”

We turned our sight towards the gigantic tree towers after some brief laughter.

“...Now then, it’s about time.”

[Material Edition 18] Sugary Days 8

TRANSLATION TAP EDITING ZEHAFFEN

October 26 2024

1

“Thirty solidite ingots, twenty acutite ingots... ten aged teak logs, along with eight greatrock dragon tendons, and eight legendary bear fats. Here are all of the materials you specified.”

Upon stacking up the materialized items one after another in an empty corner of the atelier, Mahokl, the wood crafter, jumped back in surprise with her petite frame and sighed.

“Whew~ To think you could gather it all in just half a day...”

Her swirly glasses fell to the tip of her nose as her surprisingly adorable eyes peeked out, but I chose to neglect that and simply shrugged my shoulders.

“That said, the legendary bear fats are the only ones we collected on our own, with the rest ordered from a merchant we know... —Ah, just to confirm, but there wasn’t some rule like «no buying them», was there?”

“There wasn’t, naturally. Establishing good relationships with capable merchants reflects a player’s ability, too, after all.”

Agil’s cocky look surfaced in my mind in that moment she said so, but I scrubbed that away and kept the conversation going.

“I see, that’s good to hear. Then, as promised, tell us what these materials are...”

I got that far before Asuna tugged on my coat from behind, interjecting from my left.

“Hold on, Kirito-kun, who and what manipulated your memories? What Mahokl-san offered for the material items wasn’t their use, but...”

“Yes, yes, here it is.”

Opening a window as she spoke, the wood craft materialized a huge table beside the nearby wall and rapped its thick surface. The repairs on my memories finally completed upon seeing that.

“Ah... aah, right. You were going to let us have ninety percent off that table, weren’t you?”

“And the rocking chair, made to order.”

I nodded in confirmation and Asuna took several small steps towards the table before sliding both hands over the intricate wood grain on its top with heart marks glowing in her eyes.

“...No matter how many times I see, this is such a lovely table... This was made from a single walnut log, wasn’t it?”

“Oh my, you’re well acquainted, Asuna-san.”

Pushing up her swirly glasses, Mahokl grinned.

“That’s correct, it’s one of Aincrad’s five precious types of wood, so to speak.”

“Five? So there are four others?”

Mahokl thrust out her right hand covered in that sturdy leather glove at my question and bent her fingers with each tree name she recited.

“Of course there are. Walnut, mahogany, teak, ebony, rosewood; those would be the so-called S-ranked timber. There are other

aromatic trees at S rank too, but those are exclusively for small articles, not furniture.”

“Oooh... there’s a lot to the world of woodcraft, too, huh?”

I took it in, impressed, and Asuna added on with a haughty look for some reason.

“Those materials are S rank, but that’s not all to it. You won’t find a log of this size unless it’s from some of the oldest trees among the walnuts which are already rare enough. ...Did you cut it yourself, Mahokl-san?”

“Nope, as you may expect, I don’t have the skill slots to afford that.”

“Aah, that’s true... to cut down large trees...”

I cut off Asuna’s words with a snap of my fingers.

“Oh, I know that. There’s that the power enhancement mod for cutting trees on the two-handed axe skill, right?”

“I see you’re knowledgeable as always when it comes to combat-related topics.”

Despite the exasperated face Asuna had on as she interjected, I filed it away as a compliment.

Despite its erratic performance as a weapon and lack of popularity as a main skill, the two-handed axe skill enjoyed a low-key following among players aiming to become both warriors and merchants. The reason lay in how it increased not just your proficiency in combat but in harvesting trees as well (its poor effectiveness aside), and how rare timber fetched quite a price.

“In that case, you mean... the board for this huge table was harvested by some master class axeman...?”

I rubbed the splendid, thick tabletop as I muttered and Mahokl spoke in a slightly modulated tone.

“Yes... it was. It was before I moved to this atelier that...”

However, the mysterious wood crafter shut her mouth there and then rapped the table.

“Well, it’s in the past. ...Now, let us get to business. Asuna-san, how would you like the rocking chair?”

With its minutiae decided upon by Asuna, from its color, shape, to even comfort, Mahokl showed her prowess and gave shape to it in an instant.

Upon paying by cash the total of eighty thousand cor—or nearly a hundred thousand, which would still be an absurd bargain, when also factoring in the eighteen thousand cor paid to Agil for the material items—for the completed rocking chair and the table, off by ninety percent, Asuna and I parted from the atelier after thanking her over and over again. We teleported from the third floor's main town, Zumfut, frequented by few players as always despite it approaching dinnertime, to the twenty-second floor's, Coral, populated by even fewer.

We purchased ingredients for dinner from the village's NPC shops and returned to our lakeside home, at which Asuna immediately cleared away the table we just bought yesterday and materialized the table crafted from a single rare log by Mahokl.

Though the superdreadnought-class table seemed somewhat too large, likely able to seat four along each length and one along each width, for us dining alone, Asuna seemed unbothered. Seeing her blissfully setting down chairs facing each other on both ends and arranging the candlesticks and placemats, I started wondering if she was from a family with tables of that class in the real world... though it did no good fretting over that now.

“Look, it fits the living room perfectly! It can seat plenty, let’s call some guests over and have a party next time!”

Asuna spoke while beaming, having finished her arrangements, and I could not hide a smile when I answered.

“That’s true. Guess we’ll have to call Mahokl over, then, since she made it.”

“And the axe user who harvested the log too. ...Now then, let’s have some food.”

Our meal turned out comfy thanks to the table’s flawless stability and pleasant warmth despite my initial apprehension over its size, and I assisted Asuna with the clean up before we headed out onto the porch.

The sun had set without our notice, and the lake before our eyes gleamed blue under the moonlight from the circumference. The wind on this late-autumn night was chilly on the skin and I could not help but shiver slightly, prompting Asuna to stick closer.

“...Come to think of it, where should we place the rocking chair we had made?”

I asked, with that popping into my mind, and the young bride spoke somewhat falteringly.

“Hmm... I thought this porch would be nice with the sun shining in the afternoon, but it would be pleasant in front of the fireplace at night too, wouldn’t it?”

“Haha, it would. Then how about we get another one made and have both?”

“Huh, would that be okay?”

“Ten thousand cor or so is just a bit of a hunt, after all.”

Asuna tilted her head slightly at my reply.

“Nn, honestly, I don’t think she would turn a profit if that chair went for ten thousand cor. Though not quite at the level of S-ranked timber, it is made from high-quality maple... she likely took part of its cost off along with the table as thanks for that errand quest.”

“I-I see... Then, I guess we’ll have to pick that quest up again.”

“Hey, Mahokl-san isn’t an NPC, you know?”

Sticking a finger onto my back, she laid her head on my shoulder.

“.....Still, I must say I don’t quite understand...”

I nodded in agreement to her murmur.

“Yeah, I know, right? What did Mahokl have us gather those materials for...?”

“Wouldn’t it be to build something?”

“I-I know that much. The issue lies in how that something is probably the ballista...”

“...Listen, in the first place, what exactly is the ballista? I know you did say it’s some stationary, gigantic crossbow, Kirito-kun.”

“Let’s see...”

I twirled my right hand, drawing lines in midair, and wondered where I should begin. However, a particularly cold wind brushed against my neck before I could speak and I let out a huge sneeze.

Giggling, Asuna tugged on my left arm as she spoke.

“Let’s talk more inside.”

Lighting a fire in the fireplace installed on the west wall of the living room and setting the precious rocking chair before it, Asuna indicated towards the chair with a “nn” just as I thought she was about to sit in it.

“Eh... you don’t mind if I take a seat first?”

“Nn.”

“O-Okay, I’ll go ahead...”

Reaching out towards the armrest, faintly lit by the fireplace, I cautiously sat down. As I put my weight down, it split with a snap—naturally, nothing of that sort happened and the cushioning leather seat gently enveloped me as the backrest quivered comfortably atop its exquisitely curved legs. In addition, I could smell a whiff of sweet maple syrup, perhaps due to the material used.

“Ooh... it does feel a bit big, but this coziness is just...”

I started on my thoughts, but Asuna interrupted with a “nn~~” purr as she got atop me. Squirming into place, she shifted my arms and legs before settling into the most comfy position for her and a “nnn~~~~” resonated from her throat once more.

“.....I see, so it fits just right when we both sit in it...”

Nodding with a “nn” at me, slowly digesting that thought, she then went “nn” in a questioning tone. Realizing that was a request for the topic from earlier, I cleared my throat before resuming the explanation.

“Ermm, ballistas were first used in Ancient Greece or Rome, they’re a siege weapon designed by enlarging the crossbow. There’s the term ballistic curve in English even now, and that’s what the term is derived from.”

“Huh... If it’s a bow, it fires arrows?”

I returned a partial nod to the question that put an end to her purrs.

“Well, basically. I think it’s closer to the size of a spear than an arrow, though... aside from that, they seemed to have shot rocks, metal balls, or firebombs too.”

“I see...”

Curling about atop me and looking up towards the ceiling, Asuna spoke in a somewhat solemn tone.

“—But don’t you think it would be a contradiction?”

“Huh? Of what?”

“That. —The «Forfeiture».”

“.....Aah!”

My upper body sprang up before my thinking could catch up and softly lifted Asuna ten centimeters before we fell back.

«Forfeiture» was a term referring to the phenomenon from ancient times that lifted Aincrad’s many floors from the earth and abolished magic. Barely any among the clearing group players would call it that as it appeared only near the end of the Elf War campaign quest, but Asuna and I had naturally heard of it directly from the elves.

Magic was technically not the only loss as a consequence of the Forfeiture. The production means and technologies for long-ranged projectiles—or bows in other words—were lost for eternity as well. As such, Aincrad lacked skills like Bowcraft or Archery. Or so I had believed to this day—

“...True, ballistas can be considered a sort of bow... Then the means of reproducing or using them should’ve been lost during the Forfeiture too. But Mahokl definitely said she found a skill composition for ballista creation and even ended up hiding her whole atelier for it...”

“Not to mention how she requested for us to gather those materials likely for a ballista. I doubt Mahokl-san was lying when those

materials were enough to discount a seven hundred thousand cor table down to seventy thousand.”

I nodded at what Asuna pointed out. Her every motion swept across me, tempting my two hands to act, but I urged my mind to remain on the topic instead.

“...Then let’s say for now that the ballista was unaffected by the «Forfeiture», and can be produced as well as utilized. Why would Mahokl have us gather its materials, then...? Judging from what she said at first, it did sound like she went into hiding because she didn’t want to make the ballista...”

Asuna kept her silence for some time even after I spoke.

She was probably giving it her all, thinking through it earnestly; she had the habit of brushing the ends of her right fingers against the tip of her slender chin at those times. Her glossy lips would tremble faintly each time and add to my wicked thoughts meter yet again.

However, Asuna fortunately opened her mouth before my restraints broke.

“.....This is nothing more than a hunch... but I feel that the person who harvested the log for that table is connected to Mahokl’s request this time... no, perhaps even to why she moved her atelier to Zumfut. To be comfortable with taking requests for harvesting and processing such rare lumber, she must have been a regular customer... or even more; they may have been some sort of duo...”

The huge table planted in the middle of the living room entered my eyes when I traced Asuna’s line of sight which turned towards the side as she spoke. Supposedly made from a single walnut log, the bark on its sides retained its protrusions, bringing to mind the great tree that once stood toweringly somewhere in Aincrad.

“...Well, that two-handed axe wielder must have had some skill to harvest one that massive... Not even the clearing group has that many master-class axemen.....”

My words unnaturally faded out there.

The close-up of a certain player’s face popped into my mind.

As though the image got transmitted from my mind, Asuna reverted to mewling out an “.....unn”. Exchanging glances as our faces almost met, we murmured out a phrase with one voice.

“”Don’t tell me...””

Losing the staring contest we had as we urged each other to go first, I shaped that confounding speculation into words.

“.....Don’t tell me Mahokl’s old partner is that rip-off axe merchant... it’s not him, is it.....?”

“An axe merchant would be one who deals in axes, Kirito-kun.”

“Then, let’s just call him a merchant axe... no, but still, seriously.....?”

“Nn~ come to think of it, Agil-san did seem bothered over what sort of recipe those ingots or dragon tendons were for when we ordered them... Even if he didn’t know they were for a ballista, he might have noticed something was up.”

“Hm~~~~mm...”

I moaned for a bit, sticking my hands behind my head. I plunked down an image of that skinhead giant beside one of that spiral glasses girl in my mind, but the sense of mismatch was palpable.

However, the same could be said about me, a stray beater, and Asuna, the clearing group’s idol. Putting the sense of mismatch

aside, I pondered where and what they could have had connected over. —That said.

“.....Actually, you know, I’m not sure why Agil got serious as a merchant...”

“Eh, wasn’t it that, Krito-kun? Back then, when you pushed the «Vendor’s Carpet» on Agil-san.”

“Aah, well, that may have started it all... but Agil remained mainly as an axe warrior for some time even after getting the carpet, and it felt like he opened the roadside stall as an effective way of disposing of items. —I ended up keeping my distance from Agil after all that happened afterward back then...”

My body stiffened up for a moment as painful memories sprang up through my own words, and as though fully aware of that, Asuna shifted her face from atop my chest towards my face.

The silence between us continued as our cheeks touched. My pain melted away against her cool, soft skin.

I took a deep breath before whispering.

“...Thanks, Asuna.”

“.....Nn.”

Showing a faint smile and touching our lips together for an instant, Asuna then slid herself back down. Curling my hand behind her back, I set the rocking chair into a slow swing as I resumed my thoughts.

“It does seem something major happened that made Agil go from a bona fide member of the clearing group, until the twentieth floor or so, to a proper merchant with a storefront on Algade’s main street. ...Maybe we’re thinking too much, linking it to Mahokl’s ballista recipe...”

“Nn, nnn~”

Asuna replied with her adorable purrs while on top of me.

“...Even though he showed interest in the list of materials we ordered, Agil-san didn’t know they were for a ballista, so the possibility that Mahokl-san actually made a ballista with him long ago, leading to some incident... can be eliminated, I believe.”

“True... In the first place, if the actual ballista had the range and firepower of a cannon, Agil’s not the type to hide it from the clearing group, right?”

“He wouldn’t. In that case..... hmm, this is as far as we can go on pure guesses.....”

Asuna let loose all of her strength along with a breath. I hugged her avatar, tangible and warm yet far from heavy, tight into my arms as I muttered.

“We can go straight up to Agil and ask...”

Asuna immediately shook her head within my arms.

“W-We can’t. If Mahokl-san is hiding out of her own volition, even if it’s to someone like Agil-san, we shouldn’t be exposing her name as easily as that.”

“R-Right.”

—That said, Argo the information dealer tracked down Mahokl’s atelier in a single night on our request, so anyone with the will would find her easily enough, be it Agil or whoever else.

In that case, sticking our heads in any further would only invite trouble, but tossing the consequences aside since we had already gotten a table and rocking chair for cheap out of it... was not such a

clear-cut decision to take. As one from the clearing group, I wanted to confirm if the ballista truly existed, and Mahoki's intention for those materials gathered did bother me.

“.....All we can do is to ask those who may already know of the situation, huh.”

“Eh, who...?”

I shot a grin towards the blinking Asuna.

“You'll know when we meet.”

Sunny, 27th October, 10 AM.

The man popping out from the teleport gate at Coral Village raised a bottle of sake, probably a present, upon catching sight of me.

“Yoo—oo, I’m here~”

“Yo. Sorry about calling you here out of the blue.”

“Don’t be, what’s something like that between us...?”

The visitor—Klein, a katana wielder who led the clearing guild «Fuurinkazan»—got that far before his words stopped dead upon seeing Asuna who stepped out from behind me.

“Good afternoon, Klein-san.”

“G... gooo.....”

Stiffening up all at once, he quickly slid to my side before slinging his arm around my neck and dragging me several meters away.

“O... oi, Kiritard, what the heck is this!? Why are you with that Asuna-san from that KoB while on your R&R break!?”

“Aah... erm, that’s, well...”

It was then, when I stumbled over my words, lost at how to get the situation across.

Stepping around, and in before us, was Asuna who spoke with a bright smile.

“My apologies for the late notice, Klein-san. Kirito-kun and I got married three days ago.”

“.....”

Klein froze up for a good five seconds.

“Wuuuuuuuuuttt!?”

The scream roared through the teleport gate plaza.

[Material Edition 19] Sugary Days 9

TRANSLATION TAP EDITING ZEHAFFEN

October 27 2024

1

“«Marriage», huh...? To think SAO had such a system... I’d forgotten after all those many battles... ya know...?”

The katana wielder muttered while staring off into the distance, and I scrutinized the ripostes I could pick from before speaking.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

“Small stuff, you say?!”

“I get it, I get it, I’ll explain properly the next time we go for drinks or whatever.”

I patted his back, covered in Japanese-style armor, and Klein winced as he nodded with a “no helping it, then”. Sitting across the table, Asuna let out a giggle at our exchange.

This was Aincrad’s 22nd floor, in a corner of the teleport plaza in the main town, Coral. The refreshing morning light shone upon the simply decorated open-air cafe. Aincrad’s NPC eateries generally allowed outside food and drinks, and the bottle of brandy Klein brought over as a gift adorned the table, but as we were in no mood for heavy liquor under this morning sun—even if we would not get drunk—we instead ordered the kuromoji tea this store seemed famous for.

When I first saw the name on the menu, I wondered if that meant it was black (*kuroi*) moji, and what exactly could moji refer to, but there was apparently a shrub by that name, according to Asuna. As expected of its supposed reputation as an ingredient for top-quality essential oils and material for toothpicks, the tea gave off a refreshing fragrance.

Its price was nothing to scoff at either, and I sipped it before opening my mouth once again.

“Come to think of it...”

Then realizing it would be unnatural diving straight into the main topic, I instead engaged in some gossip first.

“...We heard from Agil, but it looks like the 75th floor’s conquest is quite a tough one, huh?”

“Aah, yeahh...”

Gulping down the rather expensive tea, Klein nodded.

“We started clearing the 75th floor, erm... it’s been a week already? And it took all the way ’til yesterday before we finally broke through the last field boss. It’ll be tomorrow at least before we reach the labyrinth, and from the way things are going, it’ll be another week before the boss room.”

“I see...”

“Nah, we may not even get through the labyrinth with just a week. I mean, it looks like that one guy great at mapping just went off and took a break for his honeymoon~~”

Leaning back into my chair to dodge the deliberate side-glances he shot at me as he spoke, I put on a nonchalant face as I advanced the conversation.

“It’s not all that bad, the boss for the 75th floor will be pretty strong since it’s the quarter-point. Taking some time to level up in the labyrinth and digging up those rare items won’t be a waste.”

“Ooh, look at the amazing Unikie talking all relaxed.”

“...What’s that Unkie supposed to be.....?”

“Like I have to explain. It’s short for Unique Skiller. Christened by a great man: me.”

“Hey, don’t you dare spread that around!”

“Heh, too late! I’ll make you Unkie-sensei instead of Blackie-sensei by the 80th floor!”

“Seriously, don’t! In the first place, does the word skiller even exist?!”

Our conversation developed, just a little bereft of intelligence.

It was then that Asuna burst out into laughter in a rare, unguarded manner, reaching her limit after apparently having held it in until now.

“Ahaha..... geez, the two of you never change, do you?”

Klein and I shifted our hands behind our heads at once and curtly bowed.

“S-Sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize.”

“Nah, that was a conditional reflex from you flaring up at all of the clearing meetings...”

“It’s not like I wanted to, either.”

With her laughter dying down, Asuna slightly puffed out her cheeks before turning a somewhat sober expression towards Klein.

“...If reaching the labyrinth is taking over a week, the field bosses and normal monsters must have been strengthened as well?”

“Aah, well, there’s no mistaking that. Feels like a step up like the 25th and 50th floors, maybe even worse.”

“I... see...”

A faint shadow of gloom crept over Asuna’s face as she nodded. She must have felt guilty after supporting the clearing group for so long.

I quietly reached out under the table and touched Asuna’s right hand with my left. Klein, too, shook his head in exaggerated motions while speaking.

“No, really, you don’t hafta worry. His Excellency, the leader of your place, is leading the 75th floor’s conquest himself, so...”

Neither Asuna nor I could hold back our surprise upon hearing that.

The leader of Knights of the Blood, «Holy Sword» Heathcliff, had basically never participated in anything aside from floor boss clearing battles ever since KoB became known as the strongest guild, and him not showing up unless necessary was only par for the course.

Taking part in the field conquest from the very beginning ought to be to make up for the absence of the sub-leader, Asuna, but that hardly seemed to be all to it. No, that might be my prejudice talking after suffering a magnificent loss in a duel against him before a grand audience.

I took another sip of the kuromoji tea in my left hand, parted from Asuna’s hand, and then spoke.

“That’s sure a surprise... Then yesterday’s field boss battle too?”

“Of ‘cos.”

Klein nodded and raised the menu board on the table like a shield as he rattled on.

“No, seriously, I mean, I knew, but he’s rock-hard. He tanked the boss solo and not one time did he have to swap out for pots or even to call for a switch. And it didn’t feel like he was depending on his armor’s specs, ya know? He had godlike reflexes against those super-subtle pre-motions and held back every last one of those skills the boss attacked with.”

“.....Yeaah?”

Memories of the other day’s duel where my flurry of strikes was stopped, one after another, came back vividly as I listened to the katana wielder’s explanation, and my face winched into a bitter expression. Seeing that, Klein grinned while hiking up the intensity of his retelling of the leader’s valiant deeds, so I had to interject in a hurry.

“Nah, let’s keep it at that. Well, if that’s that, the great leader’ll do his magic in the floor boss battle too, so I guess extending our break should...”

“I knew you would say that.”

As Asuna was the one to interrupt this time, I turned towards her before the young wife prodded at my left shoulder with an admonishing look.

“We can’t, Kirito-kun. If a request for our help for the floor boss battle comes, we have to join in. Regardless of how we’re on a break or how we’ve left the guild, we are still part of the clearing group.”

“I-I get itt.”

My childish reply was greeted by Asuna’s brilliant smile and Klein draining his tea while making tremendous noise.

Not letting that pause get away, I cleared my throat before diverting the topic towards the main one.

“By the way... Klein, when did you first meet Agil again?”

“Nnh? What’s with that all of a sudden?

Filling up the katana wielder’s emptied cup with kuromoji tea once more as he showed a distrusting look, I dodged the question with a “no, well, just wondering”.

Though still curious as ever, Klein turned his eyes upwards and let out a short groan.

“Uh~nn, right... it was right after Fuurinkazan caught up to the front lines, so that’s pretty long ago. He was a great help with restocking consumables and trading off drops... the prices he bought and sold at were so extreme that I had to wonder how he was profiting back then, but I can’t help but think he’s just ripping us off lately...”

I was of the exact same mind, but both Klein and I knew that was because Agil was no mere merchant. He would pull off strategic trades with the higher levels in his main store on Algade, the 50th floor, while returning those profits to those players starting off or in the middle via his branch stores on the lower floors. That knowledge was why many with high levels continued business with Agil despite their verbal complaints. All the more so with him unaware that he had been exposed.

However, the issue laid with when Agil, that gung-ho axe warrior at the start of the death game, awakened to the path of merchantry... and whether there was a link to Mahokl, that mysterious grandmaster wood crafter.

“...Erm, Klein, you knew Agil better than me for some time, didn’t you? That’s why I’m asking, but any inkling why he went all-out into business?”

The «for some time» referred to July 2023, when the guild «Moonlit Black Cats» was destroyed, until Christmas that same year. Realizing that, Klein's brows twitched under his bandana as Asuna caught her breath softly at my side.

The brief silence was yet again shattered by the katana wielder's groan.

“Nn, nnn~Doesn't feel like there're any lightbulbs going off in particular or anything... Didn't he just gradually find business more fun while doubling as an axe warrior and merchant? Besides...”

His eyebrows started squirming there, and he turned an intrigued look at me.

“...Why are you asking me? Why not just go up to him and dig out the answer for something like this straight?”

“Nah, I mean, I know I should... but there are reasons...”

With Mahokl making the effort to hide herself, I could hardly throw her name out here, let alone launch a direct assault on Agil. That was exactly why I requested Klein's presence.

Despite showing no sign of accepting my answer, Klein gave only a soft snort before advancing the conversation.

“...There oughta be something that made him go for being a merchant, yeah. Look, axe warriors raise their logging skill too, so ain't their builds most suited for becoming merchants?

“Though that may be true, I do believe the opposite applies instead, normally.”

Klein and I turned to look upon Asuna's first words in a while.

Re-manifesting just partly the presence of her esteemed-sub-leader-ness, the young bride expressed her reasoned opinion in a fitting tone.

“I would understand if merchant players select the axe skill when they decide to pick up a weapon skill for self-defense. They can increase their proficiency without entering combat, and they can put up the logs they accumulate for sale. However, that in no way implies that players who were previously axe warriors would aim to become merchants, would it? Fighting normally would be much more efficient for increasing their level of proficiency.”

“Besides, it would be more profitable aiming for monster drops rather than collecting logs.”

Asuna curtly nodded at my words.

Emptying his second cup of kuromoji tea, Klein let out a dull “fnmm...” with his arms crossed, but vaguely retorted once again after some time passed.

“But still... I definitely do recall him putting his all into lumberjacking back then. Whenever the clearing activities ended in the afternoon, he would be off chopping after taking a break. That’s right, pretty sure he said that was for levelling up the skill and gathering funds for opening a store when I asked.”

“Agil... logging?”

I muttered as I exchanged looks with Asuna.

Halfway through 2023, Agil was still serving as the leader of that exceptionally muscular guild commonly known as «Bro Corps». If he were adventuring with them on the front lines in the afternoon and saving up funds for a store alone at night, it was not unthinkable for him to pick logging for cor, relatively safe among solo activities.

That said, it still felt out of place. Logging was fundamentally done while dedicated to some specific part of some forest. One would research the locations of rare trees, the timings for them to regenerate after being gathered, and chop on without breaks after determining the most efficient path. He would hardly be able to afford the funds for a shop otherwise. There was no need to collect «all sorts of logs» in «some random forest».

Agil would have never missed that with his lengthy history as an axe warrior, so there must be some reason for those actions beyond levelling his proficiency and gathering funds.

Asuna nodded slightly in agreement with me, and I spoke after turning to Klein.

“Thanks, Klein. You were a great help.”

“Huh? T-That’s it?! No, I mean, I do have to get back up soon or later, but... d-don’t leave me hanging! Just what are the two of you looking into?!”

While that reaction was only natural after being called to the 22nd floor, only to be asked about how he got closer to Agil, I dropped a hand onto my old friend’s shoulder and spoke with a smile.

“I’ll tell you what I can when it’s all over, okay?”

On the other hand, Asuna bowed with an understandably apologetic expression.

“I am very sorry, Klein-san, but to be honest, we hardly know what we are getting into ourselves. It just so happened that something on our minds cropped up...”

Not even Klein could remain stubborn in the face of an apology from the former «conquest demon», and he nodded with a truly complicated expression.

“W-Well, if you say so, Asuna-san... —That aside, once again, con... congratulations on your marriage.”

“Thank you very much.”

Asuna’s smile, like the blooming of splendid flowers, held might equivalent to that of unique skills and melted away the katana wielder’s expression in an instant.

“No, really, how do I put this, all the best.”

“We do plan on inviting everyone who had lent us help once we clear the 75th floor, so we do hope you will come as well then, Klein-san.”

“O-Of course I will! I’ll be there even if I have to rush over from the ends of the world!”

While listening to Klein’s nahahaha laughter, I could only shiver with an “Eh... a party? Who else are we calling over?”.

“...Listen, Krito-kun.”

Asuna whispered, barely audibly, while sitting alongside me on the rocking chair set before the log house’s fireplace.

Assailed by the sandman after lunch, I lifted my heavy eyelids before replying in a whisper as well.

“Nn...?”

“You see... I was wondering... if we should stop looking any further into it...”

Turning herself around a-hundred-and-twenty degrees from leaning against the right armrest, Asuna laid her face on me before continuing, her fingertips toying with a tuft of her chestnut hair.

“...If Agil-san’s nightly logging had anything to do with Mahokl-san... that would mean Agil-san kept it from even Klein-san despite how well they got along. There must have been some deep reason... so I was thinking we had no reason to uncover it now of all times...”

“Nn... that may be true... But...”

Nodding, I lowered back down my eyelids before speaking, feeling the warmth, softness, and palpable weight of the avatar in close contact.

“...Mahokl said she had to hide her entire store and herself on the 3rd floor because she found the ballista recipe. But she had us gather those materials, probably for the ballista, as the condition for making this rocking chair... That’s clearly a contradiction, and she may be mixed up in some sort of trouble. In the worst case, if Mahokl makes the ballista and tries something silly... if she truly ends up in any danger...”

“It would be our fault as the ones who had gathered the materials, wouldn’t it...?”

Asuna finished in a quiet voice, trailing off in a sigh.

All technologies related to bow weapons were lost through the «Forfeiture»—no production or combat skills for them existed due to that setting in SAO. Thus, it seemed only proper that the ballista, effectively the big boss of all bows, would be impossible to produce or use, but the game system and administrators for SAO were, in no way, flawless or infallible, and there were occurrences of infinite respawning of ore, quests with stories filled with holes, and numerous other legends passed down.

Hence the possibility that the ballista was overlooked by accident could not be discounted. Of course, the administrators would patch it immediately when they noticed, but Mahokl could get herself into a lot of trouble before that... the risk was definitely there.

“...Before gathering the requested materials, I did say, ‘If Mahokl does anything dangerous, we’ll just have to put a stop to it when we find out’, after all. I can’t allow those words to become a lie. I thought it would’ve been for the best to look into it before asking her directly, but that doesn’t seem possible... about all we can do now is to go back to Mahokl’s atelier in Zumfut and actually ask her. Whether she intends to create the ballista, and why.”

“True...”

Asuna lightly nodded her head, still atop my chest, yet switched to shaking it softly immediately after.

“...But in my experience, players capable of completing production skills tend to be rather stubborn. They hardly ever change their mind after deciding on anything... Let alone someone like Mahokl, who not only completed Woodcrafting but even advanced Sewing and Polearm Weapon Creation to master class as well.”

“...I see...”

I gently stroked the long hair flowing down Asuna’s back as I nodded. Though it appeared she had forgotten, she, too, had persevered until the completion of her Cooking skill. And that she, too, would obstinately accomplish anything she set her heart on.

“...True, Mahokl may not heed our words, having met us for the first time just yesterday. If only we knew who her partner in the past was, that axe warrior... —I would bet fifty cor that it’s Agil, but asking him straight up’s just...”

“Though I wouldn’t mind putting down seventy-five cor myself, we can hardly drop Mahokl-san’s name anywhere unless we know why is she secluding herself on the 3rd floor.”

“If only we had some evidence of Agil being the axe warrior in question...”

Muttering that, I collapsed backward onto the rocking chair. The exquisite length and arc of its legs easily supported our combined weight and it rocked gently like a see-saw. The huge table made from a single slab, set in the middle of the living room, entered my sight as the chair inclined back. When looking at its sides, which still remained as rough bark, I could practically see how splendid it must have once been as an imposing figure in the forest...

“.....Ah!”

I stopped the chair’s rocking with an abrupt, subdued shout. Asuna shot a questioning gaze over from atop my chest.

“No, well... Mahokl did say the raw wood for that table was gathered from here, the 22nd floor, didn’t she?”

“She did.”

“Alright...!”

I nodded and leapt to my feet from the rocking chair. And caught hold of Asuna, who was lying on my chest, with my two arms.

“Kyaa... h-hold on, what is it?!”

“I’ll explain soon!”

I dashed towards the pantry in the kitchen with Asuna tucked under my arm. Though this was a one-story log house, there was a ladder with roof access in the pantry. Coming to a stop before that, I lifted Asuna from my arms and made her hold onto the ladder.

“First, get on the roof!”

“Geez... fine, I get it.”

Sighing, Asuna began climbing the ladder. Restraining myself from staring at her fluttering skirt, I charged up myself only after hearing an “I’m out” from her.

I exited through the double-paned window onto the shingled roof, and despite that, Asuna was missing. I slowly edged across the roof, slanted at a rather precarious angle, while harboring skeptical doubts of her actually having fallen.

“Wahh!!”

The foot my weight laid upon slipped five centimeters due to that explosive shout from behind.

“Nwaaaahh!!”

My two arms spun about as I desperately attempted to regain my balance, but my torso continued leaning away from the roof little by little. Naturally, my health would likely suffer no damage with a fall from the second story with my level over 90 now, but my pride was a different issue.

“Fnnnnn!!”

Accelerating the rotational velocity of my arms as I grunted, I achieved victory in the arduous battle for my balance through the gyro effect—or whatever it was called—and panted hard before turning behind.

“N-Now you’ve done it!”

“Ahaha, as expected of your agility, to not fall from that!”

Molded into the embodiment of vengeance, I approached Asuna, guffawing while holding her stomach, at a deliberate pace.

“Agility isn’t all I have... how about I show you my strength too?!”

Bending down as I yelled, I pulled Asuna’s legs into a tight hug.

“Kyaaaaa?!”

Not heeding the young bride’s shriek and her incessant flaps at my head, I lifted her up vertically with a “Here we go！”, spun her about, and firmly sat her two pale and slender legs onto my shoulders. Her skirt fluttered onto my head.

Asuna’s screams carried on even after her posture stabilized.

“W-What, what are you doing?!”

“Why, I’m just giving you a ride on my shoulders.”

“I can see that! I’m asking you why!”

“That would be because it’s necessary.”

I replied firmly and dashed up the roof’s slope, standing still on the ridge at its top.

Though the log house had only one story, it was rather high on a hill from the lake shore, the base level for the 22nd floor, and one could enjoy a pretty good view at its height. All the more so for Asuna, sitting on my shoulders.

That was perhaps why Asuna had finally calmed down, and I directed a question towards her.

“Hey, you said the raw wood for that table was from some ancient walnut, didn’t you?”

“...I did, but?”

“That means it’s from a broadleaf tree, right?”

“...Sure, it is?”

“Then, those ought to be quite eye-catching on this floor basically filled with needleleaf trees. Look around the field from there and see if you can find any like that!”

“.....That’s all fine and dandy...”

Asuna’s legs strangled my neck after that reply.

“Gueh...”

“...But after trying something like this out of the blue, you are prepared to let me ride on your shoulders wherever I ask, aren’t you?”

“Wh... wherever?”

Grip.

“Un... understood.”

[Material Edition 23] Sugary Days 10

TRANSLATION GSIMENAS PROOFREADING JENGKAY

October 27 2024

1

Upon forcing her demands on me without letting me have a say in the matter, Asuna finally released her triangle choke. I was afraid to even think of where exactly she would be forcing me to give her a piggyback ride, but more importantly—

".....So, how is it? See any kurumi (*walnut*) trees?"

"Hmm....."

I felt Asuna rotating her body to the left and right above me. After a short while, I heard her reply in an awkward tone.

".....Though you claim that a broadleaf would be eye-catching here, this floor is nearly entirely covered in trees. Come to think of it..... even the biggest kurumi no ki would still be smaller than the touhi (*spruces*) that make up the main portion of trees here. While a spruce can reach up to fifty metres, a walnut can only do twenty at.....ah."

Asuna's tree trivia suddenly cut off in a whisper. Just as I was about to look up at her, she pinned down my head with her hands—

"Kirito-kun, turn about thirty degrees to the right and jump up!"

"W-whaa.....?"

"C'mon, hurry!"

As the guy who came up with Plan Piggyback, I had no choice but to abide by her will when she turned my head to the right as if it were a joystick. Upon carefully turning to the right on the middle of the roof, I braced my legs for a jump.

"A-alright, I'm gonna jump! One, two....."

With Asuna holding on to me using her legs, "Three!", I jumped up with all my strength. Being the indoors type, the real me probably wouldn't be able to make even thirty centimetres with my jump even with as slender a girl as Asuna on my shoulders, but in this world, numerical stats were everything. After I put my all into the jump, though I did hold back to some extent for safety reasons, my jump nevertheless put me a whole two metres or so away from the log house's roof.

The moment I reached the apex of my vertical jump, "Ah!", shouted Asuna again. Meanwhile, I focused entirely on landing as softly as possible and managed to reach satisfactory results with my effort, but Milady Princess showed no appreciation for my effort whatsoever as she pounded my head with light smacks.

"One more time! One more time!"

What are you, a child!, exercising my discretion to not put this thought of mine to words, I made my second jump. Followed by a third and a fourth one, at which point Asuna seemed to finally be satisfied as she brought her face to my brow and pointed to the floor's south-east.

"I think there's a tree like that over there!"

"Oh..... nice job finding it."

"A walnut is shorter than a spruce but its leaves turn yellow in this season since it's a deciduous tree. I saw a glimpse of yellow in-between the tree branches."

"Heeh..... I see."

In Aincrad, it depended on the individual floor whether the four seasons were observed, but Floor 22 was one of them. As such,

deciduous trees probably turned red-leaf and dropped their leaves, but I've honestly almost never cared about changes like that till now. The only time I seriously considered the differences between tree species in this world was when I had to make the distinction between fir trees and cryptomerias on Floor 35.

As I nodded, Asuna once again lightly struck my head.

"C'mon, let's go there already!"

"A.....alright."

Having moved to the edge of the roof, I peered down to the ground. Seeing as I had some landing practice just a few moments ago, I came to the conclusion that there wouldn't be a problem landing from this height either and so I jumped down resolutely. My landing was perfect again, yet Asuna wasn't fazed the slightest bit by this as she pointed to the south-east.

"Let's get rolling!"

"Yeah, yeah."

There was no longer any need to continue giving her a piggyback ride at this point... is what I realised only when we were already nearly fifty metres down a forest path.

Approximately twenty minutes of walking alongside Asuna, who had been strangely reluctant to come down for some reason despite all those screams when I first picked her up, later.

Just as I began to doubt whether we were truly going the right way since we had to go off-road midway through, something vividly-coloured entered my view.

Having reflexively reached out towards it with my right hand, I found an elliptical leaf dyed in deep yellow in my grasp. In Aincrad, fallen leaves were generally temporary objects, thus the leaf vanished in my hand right away, but having had a glimpse of it, Asuna said the following.

"That was a kurumi leaf you had just there."

"Heeh..... I'm surprised you can even tell the leaves apart."

"It wasn't all that big, but the garden at my home had a....."

Just as Asuna began saying that, a second yellow leaf fluttered past her and vanished upon falling to the ground. Exchanging a nod in silence, we made haste in the direction the leaves had come from.

Upon making our way barely ten-odd metres forward while avoiding the huge, dark-barked cryptomeroids—which were apparently touhi, according to Asuna, we suddenly found ourselves in a bright area. It was a circular clearing in the forest of conifers, at the center of which stood a majestic broadleaf tree with knotty branches expanding in all four directions.

It was only half the size of the surrounding touhi in height, but its trunk clearly surpassed them in thickness. Elliptical just like the leaves we saw moments ago, the tree's leaves had vivid colours; the way they gently floated about each time the wind blew made it look like it was raining gold.

Although the taller cryptomeroids would have blocked out the sunlight and thus exterminated all the small trees around them if this were a forest in the real world, the huge kurumi—black walnut in the virtual world looked as if it were the king of the forest, surrounded by subjects, the touhi. Asuna and I approached the tree in silence, stroking its rough and scraggy bark with our hands.

The Woodcrafter Mahokl had mentioned that the tree used to craft the single-plank walnut table we bought at a ninety percent discount

was felled on this here Floor 22, though there was no guarantee that it was specifically this very tree here in front of us, of course. In the real world, a tree once felled would have met its end there and then, but in Aincrad, generally any tree respawned infinitely no matter how big it was—though its size and rarity did affect how long this would take—so you had to either have a superhuman memory, or leave some kind of mark to be able to tell which tree you've felled before.

On the other hand, however, you'd probably have a very hard time finding another S-class old tree as grand as this one even on a floor as vast as Floor 22 with a radius of eight or so kilometres.

Back when we met Klein in Coral Village this morning, he mentioned that Agil the axeman-slash-shopkeeper had, for a period of time in the distant past, been collecting a variety of different trees on random floors. If he had done this for some specific goal, rather than just merely levelling his skills, there was a chance that he had felled this kurumi tree in the distant past as well. And assuming that he «had no need to fell a tree he had already felled before» —

".....So, Krito-kun, what's with this tree you wanted to find so badly that you even resorted to forcing me to take a piggyback ride for?"

'Says the girl who actually enjoyed herself quite a lot back there', deciding not to say that out loud, I took my gaze off the kurumi tree and looked around our surroundings.

"I'll explain right after this; for now, just help me find something for a bit."

"Huh? Well sure..... but what are we looking for?"

"I believe there should be something sticking out from the cryptomeria, I mean, touhi trunks nearby."

"What exactly do you mean by 'something'....."

Despite her expression indicating how she thought that I was being fishy, Asuna looked up at the conifers nearby as well. I held down her head with my right hand, slightly adjusting the angle she was looking at.

"I don't think it'd be all that high; it's probably going to be at around a height that a well-built player could reach by extending their hands to their limits."

"That's very specific."

Once again donning a distrustful expression, Asuna blinked thrice all of a sudden, before pointing behind me.

"Oh, Kirito-kun, over there!"

Turning around in a hurry, I found something with a silver shine stabbed into a single touhi trunk there. The height it was located was just as I had predicted: one where a nearly hundred and ninety centimetre-tall player would reach by extending their hands all out.

Upon dashing over to it, I found a single, thick nail about the size of my pinky when I looked up. Having caught up with me, Asuna said the following in surprise.

"Uwaa, that's one huge nail. Though, why's a thing like that sticking out of a tree, I wonder."

"It's probably a case of you-know-what..... some player wanted to put a curse on someone, so they took a huge straw figure way back when and stab, stab....."

"Hey..... s-stop with stories like that!"

Astral-type monsters being her grand weak spot, the Esteemed Vice Commander painfully pinched my right elbow. Promptly apologising, I amended my conjecture.

"Sorry, sorry, that's just a regular old mark."

"A mark....."

Moving a short distance away from Asuna as she tilted her head, I slightly kicked off the ground. The nail was sticking out from the trunk more than two metres away from the ground, but I easily reached it with my extended right hand. Pressing against the touhi trunk with my left hand, I used brute force to pull out the nail that I had been gripping.

When I landed after showing off two somersaults with my excess momentum, I showed the nail in my right hand to Asuna. It was one centimetre-thick and two centimetres-long, thus they were bigger than my frequently-used throwing picks.

"This is a mark that the woodcutter who felled this kurumi tree way back when left on a nearby tree so he wouldn't end up felling the same tree again."

"'Way back when', you say..... but aren't items supposed to decompose if you just leave them lying around on the field?"

I gave a nod when Asuna pointed this out.

"In principle, let's see, not unless you store it away in an «Eternal Storage Trinket» . But Aincrad's principles....."

"Usually have exceptions."

Taking over for me, Asuna looked up at the touhi tree, before turning her gaze to me again.

"I see..... the main point here is that it's not a weapon, but a carpentry nail, right? Could it be that if you drive in a nail into a standing tree, it will remain undecomposed forever..... or something?"

"Mostly correct. I'd just have to add that this is a nail meant for tree house creation specifically."

"Tree house.....? You can make those in Aincrad?"

"Yeah, though my experience with them is limited solely to laying eyes on them a few times in the distant past. You need a pretty high Carpentry skill proficiency to craft the materials for the tree house and there are some issues on the safety front to boot, so it didn't catch on."

"Safety front..... you mean like being attacked by tree-climbing monsters or something?"

Asuna looked to a nearby treetop while saying that. Of course, she didn't find any monsters there, but there were monkey- and insect-type tree-climbing monsters on other floors that would attack people from the trees if they were walking through the forest incautiously.

"Oh, that could pose a problem too, but the main issue was actually pranks from other players. The selling point of tree houses is that you can create them on some tree you find out in the field, but that doubles as a downside too....."

"Oh, I get it..... someone could just cut down the tree that the house was made on. If you were sleeping inside of it at that very moment, it could shake you up real good."

"It sure would. Besides, it's also possible that you'd become the target of thieves and P K ers, rather than just pranksters..... and so people were publicly warned to only make tree houses inside the premises of a player home if they really wanted one, but then again, if you could afford a house that came with a garden and garden shrubs in the first place....."

"You wouldn't go out of your way to make a cramped tree house, huh. It would be one thing if you had small children with you."

As she said that stuff, a vacant look appeared on her face, as if she were imagining something, thus I subconsciously hurried the conclusion along with a cough.

"W-well, that's how it is, which is why tree houses died out in a flash, though the player who used this thing as a mark found a different valid use for the nails themselves."

".....I see..... —So, what are you planning to do with this na....."

Having returned from daydream land, Asuna managed to get that far into her sentence, before opening her eyes wide.

"Oh..... you did say that you needed a Carpentry skill to make the materials for the tree house back there, right? Which is to say that they aren't sold on the market?"

"Yes."

"Implying that the nails..... are player-made?"

"Yes."

Once I nodded twice in a row, Asuna gave a satisfied smile, as if finally getting the full picture.

"In that case, I know where we're going next."

The general store in Algade that I visited a second time in a twenty-four hour period had a reasonable number of customers patronising it just like the previous day. However, for some reason, the regulars of the store preferred to silently examine the wares at the counter without chatting up the shopkeeper. Even when they decided to buy some items, the majority of the players just quickly finished up the transaction through the purchase window rather than directly trading with the shopkeeper, who was willing to haggle.

Hence, even today the giant shopkeeper had his back turned to his customers and was examining the items he had apparently just bought up at his work desk beyond the counter. However, he turned around to face us with his swivel chair just as Asuna and I walked over to him, as if having noticed our presence through our footsteps when we stepped on his black and shiny floorboards; guess it just goes to show you that he's a member of the Clearers.

"Sup."

As I greeted him, the shopkeeper turned his intense, suspicion-filled gaze towards me in silence.

"Hey hey, is that any way to greet your customers?"

When I let out a retort, the shopkeeper—the axetrader Agil finally deigned to put his stern jaws to work.

"Seein' yer face two days in a row is never a good sign. I beg of you, don'cha dare foist an even more annoyin' order on me than you did yesterday."

"Oh no, no, I've got a simple errand for you today. I just want you to appraise a single item."

Hearing that, Agil finally dropped his wariness.

"Oh, why din'cha just say so. An appraisal is no big deal. Glad ta have ya here too, Asuna, want some tea or something?"

In response to the shopkeeper's words, wildly different in attitude from the ones directed at me, Asuna said her thanks with a smile.

"Thanks Agil-san, but since it's still business hours for you, I'll pass. I'll bring some sweets next time, so I'll take you up on your offer then."

"Hoh, now you've got me eagerly waiting..... So, where's the goods?"

With Agil's attention pointed to me now, I quickly operated my window and turned the item in question into an object. Once it materialised with a faint sound effect, I slowly placed it onto the counter.

The instant he saw the gigantic iron nail, Agil knit his distinct eyebrows.

"The heck, this sure ain't a pick. A stake..... nah, that ain't it either; a shuriken..... also outta the question....."

His deep voice gradually slowed down, before cutting off entirely. With his mouth still slightly open, Agil slowly extended his right hand and picked up the large nail. He repeatedly squeezed the nail in his hand, as if checking on its texture. Before long, he tapped on the nail without a single word from me and began his appraisal.

The moment he glanced at the property window that opened up after a brief wait, Agil's eyes opened wide for a moment. Upon noticing this reaction of his, I was basically already convinced we had found our man, but I nevertheless kept my mouth shut as I awaited the axeman's words.

Having raised up his face after several seconds had passed, Agil gazed at me with a somewhat dazed expression, before saying the following.

"Guys..... where did ya get this?"

In the end, Asuna and I wound up having to go up the stairs to the store's second floor to be treated to some tea. Making good use of a moment when the foot traffic died down, Agil promptly closed his store and prompted us to go up the stairs.

Appearing in the living room on the second floor a few minutes later, the giant brought over a tray with three cups. After placing the cups with a nice aroma of coffee coming from them onto the table and lining up some small jars with milk and sugar, he set down in front of us.

There was one final item remaining on the tray. The big nail that brought us here.

While Asuna and I added some milk and sugar to our coffees, the shopkeeper took a sip of his coffee as is, before finally uttering something.

"The forest on Floor 22..... huh. It should've been left exposed ta the elements for over a year now after I had used it as a mark, yet it looks brand new....."

The instant we heard that, I subconsciously exchanged a glance with Asuna. Though, the only thing that we've proved so far was that Agil had once felled that giant walnut tree; his relationship with Mahokl had yet to be made clear. Avoiding the urge to bombard him with questions impatiently, I followed up on his topic as a lead-up.

"If it had been stabbed into the ground or a tree that was turned into logs, it would have probably decomposed long ago. Seems like the «Tree House Roof Nail» is programmed not to lose durability only when it's stabbed into a standing tree, after all....."

"Come ta think of it, I'm getting the feeling that I've heard that before."

Muttering this, Agil leaned against his chair's backrest, folding his arms behind his head. After a whole ten seconds of pointing his far-off gaze beyond the window in silence, he once again began speaking.

".....That's from back when I was still working as the leader of the «Two-Handed Builders» (1), huh....."

Since Agil's begun reminiscing about the past for a change, I mustn't interrupt his story—but despite these thoughts of mine, I butted in on reflex.

"Hey wait a sec, the heck is that?"

"The name of our guild.....what else."

"Wai..... whuuuut!? It wasn't the «Bro Squad» !?"

As I shouted that out, Agil and Asuna sent me appalled looks.

"Course it wasn't, how d'ya expect anyone but guys joining us with a guild name like that."

"I for one knew all about it, their official name I mean."

"But..... I mean....."

'That didn't stop you from only having bros for guild members anyway, did it!', holding back from saying that out loud, I urged him to continue.

"Oh nothing, sorry. Continue where you left off....."

Once I did, Agil took another sip of the coffee and did one big cough, before getting back on track.

".....Anyway, it's from back when I was still working as the leader of the Twohanders."

Seeing as even I understood that this was an abbreviation, I just nodded this time.

"How should I put this, back then I'd been harbouring some doubts about continuin' ta fight on the front lines as part of the Clearers..... since I wanted some time alone ta think over things, I'd been doing some lumberin' in some random forests at night. I'd felt my head clear up after swingin' my axe like crazy on some unmovin' targets."

I could sympathise with those feelings. Though I've never done any lumbering, I have felt as if I were meditating while doing some menial solo levelling and skill raising for long periods of time..... sometimes.

However, as if to prove that he was a true merchant at heart, Agil added the following with a big grin.

"Besides, by levellin' my axe skill with lumberin', I had plenty of logs left over that could fetch a hefty sum, ya see. Though I had been selling 'em off dirt cheap to some N P C at the closest town at first, the ranks of artisan players were growing bit by bit at the time, so I ended up selling them to a woodcrafter before long instead..... Then one day, said crafter came to me with some strange errand."

"Strange errand.....?"

When Asuna repeated those words, Agil raised one of his brows at her.

"Aye. 'I want you to gather up as many different and as high-rarity and unusual logs as you can'..... they said. Dough it was easy for me ta take up the job so casually, the job itself turned out to be a much

bigger pain in the ass than I had thought..... For starters, an amateur on trees like me ain't gonna recognise what counts as a rare tree, oh and you know how trees in Aincrad respawn after several hours or days after you fell them? If I ain't got some kinda mark to help me, I'd lose track of which trees I've felled before and which I haven't. So, when I brought it up to my client....."

"So they made you that nail for it, huh."

When I butted in this time, the axetrader nodded while once again returning his gaze to the big nail atop the tray.

"Uh-huh. I used it at the time without any knowledge of what the nail was used for, nor why it wouldn't decompose either..... so that's how it is, it was a material for tree houses, huh....."

"So..... were you able to fulfil the errand?"

"Though it did take quite a bit of time. The craftsman themselves accompanied me with my lumbering work to help distinguish rare trees. Come ta think of it, we found a big 'ol kurumi tree on Floor 22 as I recall..... it wasn't the tree the craftsman was lookin' for though, so they brought it over to a furniture store N P C in the main town and fashioned it into a huuuge table on the spot. It was quite a piece of work..... though the price tag for it was outta the world too. They consigned it to that very store; wonder if it's still on sale....."

Taking advantage of Agil looking up to the ceiling in nostalgia, Asuna and I quickly exchanged looks.

This basically confirmed it. The one who felled the tree that had been used to make the single-plank table now gracing the living room in our home was none other than the axetrader before us. Meaning that Agil had at a time had dealings with Woodcrafter Mahokl..... or depending on the circumstances, could have even been her partner.

I placed the skinheaded giant axewielder and the spiral glasses-wearing petite artisan side-by-side in my head. It was quite the mismatch, yet surprisingly nice match when you actually thought about it, though it was far too soon to do any guesswork on what kind of relationship the two of them had.

A month ago, Mahokl vacated the atelier she had been using and hid herself in the main town of Floor 3, Zumfut. She had mentioned that the reason for this move was that she had "discovered the composition recipe for a ballista", but when we gave Agil a list of materials to collect for us, he never realised that they were the materials for a ballista. Meaning that even Agil, whom she once had dealings with, had not been informed on why she had ended up hiding away.

As such thoughts swirled around in my head, Agil finished drinking his own coffee, before saying the following.

".....We found the tree that the craftsman had been looking for a week or so after that. It was an annoying errand, but I did get paid as agreed upon, and I even got a bonus made for me....."

"A bonus.....?"

When Asuna and I tilted our heads, Agil stood up in silence and tapped on the long chest in a corner of the room. After a rather long moment of scrolling through the home storage, he finally turned a single two-handed axe into an object.

Worn and emitting a dull gleam, the axe didn't have the specs to be useful on the current front line; however, I could tell at a glance that it used to be quite the masterpiece back in the day. I even faintly recalled seeing Agil using this axe in battles against floor bosses on the front lines for a time before.

".....They made you this axe with the «Polearm Weapon Creation» skill..... right?"

At Asuna's question, Agil gave a deep nod.

[Material Edition 24] Sugary Days 11

TRANSLATION GSIMENAS EDITING GSIMENAS PROOFREADING JENGKAY

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1

Polearms like two-handed axes, halberds, and spears are usually made from metal in their entirety. Although there are also versions with wood shafts, they can't compete with metal handles in durability.

However, albeit few in numbers, there actually are players who prefer wood shafts among long-handled weapon wielders; as they put it, their weapons apparently have a higher «critical hit rate» than those made entirely out of metal.

Numerical values for critical rates are not specified on a weapon's properties list in SAO... actually, the definition of what constitutes a critical hit itself is pretty vague, thus it can only be measured by the wielder's guts; though, seeing as the one-handed straight swords I use as my main arms are entirely made out of metal—there actually are swords with wooden grips, but the only real difference to them is how holding them feels—I'm not one to comment. The same probably applies to Asuna, who wields rapiers. In any case, research into anything related to critical hits is a big old «swamp» in this floating castle; it's not a world that anyone should tread into lightly.

The shaft of the two-handed axe that Agil's been gazing at emotionally was made out of wood with a black lustre. Although there were countless small scratches on both the worn handle and its head, the axe appeared to still be very much usable, as far as I could tell from the gleaming blade.

".....You've used that axe in boss battles for a time, right?"

At my question, Agil's shaved head moved downwards in a nod.

"Yeah, I've had my ass saved by this lil' guy more than once by now. Whenever I felt like I was a goner, I'd always manage ta pull off a crit with it, strangely enough."

"Heeeh."

This reaction came not from me, but rather from Asuna.

"Are all those talks about polearms with wooden handles having a higher critical rate really true?

"Nah, can't say fer sure....."

Despite him being the one to bring it up, the axe merchant's thickish lips curled up into a grin.

"I haven't collected any proper data ta support the claim, after all. As a merchant, I'd have ta answer that it's all probably just some silly mysticism. Though....."

At that point, Agil shut his mouth for a few moments and gently stroked his scratch-filled handle, before continuing his thought in an unusually sentimental tone.

".....As an axeman, on the other hand, I do believe that all weapons, regardless of their specs and the materials they're made out of..... heck, even the mass-produced ones that NPCs have in stock, respond to their owner's feelings and love."

"Indeed..... I believe in the same thing myself."

Now that Asuna nodded at his words with a smile, I had no choice but to express my agreement as well. Heck, if I were the kind of player who would disagree with their opinion, I probably would have never gone out of my way enhancing a sword that had dropped for me way back on Floor 50 to such an extent that it could still pull its weight on Floor 75 in the first place.

Of course, there would eventually come a day when I'd be forced to replace my current partners, the «Elucidator» and the «Dark Repulser», just like how I had to do it with all my other favourite swords so far. However, when that day does come, I'll probably just stash them away deep into my storage as my cherished possessions, rather than selling them off or melting them into ingots. Just like how Agil has kept the two-handed axe Mahokl had made for him stashed away for over a year now.

That thought of mine brought me back to the mystery at hand, so I began inconspicuously counting with my fingers on my lap as I continued with my thoughts.

Mahokl the Woodcrafter commissioning Agil to gather as many rare A- and S-class logs happened slightly over a year ago—meaning that it had to have taken place around September, 2023.

Meanwhile, Agil ought to have begun his business in full gear right after we cleared Floor 50, so it had to have happened in January, 2024.

Finally, Mahokl discovering the composition recipe for a ballista and then hiding away in Zumfut, the main town of Floor 3, happened one month ago, in September 2024—

Is there any link between those events? Also, why did Mahokl decide to try building a ballista now of all times?

This might not be a matter that Asuna and I should stick our noses into. However, we can't act blissfully ignorant if Mahokl is trying to do something dangerous, and the only one we could question about her circumstances is Agil, who apparently had some partnership with her a year ago.

Making use of the momentary pause in the conversation, Asuna gave a light nudge at my sides with her elbow from her seat beside me. She was probably prompting me to get to the point already, but

now that I knew the person we've been looking for is my old friend Agil, I hesitated on how to broach the topic.

Perhaps having noticed my unnatural silence after standing up and returning the wooden-handled two-handed axe back into his home storage, Agil took a sip of his black coffee, before picking up the piece of metal—the «Tree House Roof Nail» from the table.

".....So, why exactly did'ja bring this thing 'ere ta me fer appraisal? Sure, it's not the kind of item ya'd come across that often, though not like it's some super rare commodity that'd fetch ya a good price either, is it?..... Or perhaps ya already knew that I was the one who had used this nail as a landmark....."

"Ah, eh, ugh."

As I let out childish groans, Agil gave me a distrustful look. Even Asuna beside me let out a slight sigh. However, what if, perchance, Agil and Mahokl once had a relationship in love, and what if their love issues were also the cause that led to them seemingly no longer interacting with each other anymore..... can a boy who'd be going to his first year in high school at his age be blamed that just imagining those possibilities froze his tongue in place?

"Agil-san."

Perhaps having come to the conclusion that she could no longer rely on me to continue the conversation, Asuna straightened her posture, before calling out to the man.

"Remember those materials we requested you to procure some time ago?"

"Sure do."

Nodding, Agil glanced up to the ceiling.

"Let's see..... thirty Solidite Ingots, twenty Acutite Ingots, ten Ancient Teak Logs, and eight Greatrock Dragon tendons..... as I recall."

"I-I'm surprised you remember it all, even down to the quantity."

When I interjected reflexively at that, the axe merchant gave a smile at last.

"Ya ain't gonna get far as a merchant without havin' a memory like that..... I'm just kiddin'; I was just curious what those materials were for. I've done a lil' diggin' but couldn't find any recipe like that, so it's been buggin' me."

"As a matter of fact....."

After taking in a breath, Asuna finally uttered it.

".....That's the recipe for a ballista. We ourselves were hired to collect the materials by a certain person....."

"A barista.....?"

As Agil parroted her words back in a mutter, deep wrinkles appeared on his brow.

"And that, understandably, ain't referring ta employees that serve coffee..... but rather, some big ass bow, ain't that right?"

"Yeah, we're talking about a crossbow artillery."

Not sparing a glance at me as I explained the term in Japanese, Agil gazed down at his coffee cup still in his right hand.

"So yer saying..... the material round-up job came from Mahokl the Woodcrafter, huh."

".....!!"

Upon finally hearing that name coming from Agil's own mouth, Asuna and I reflexively exchanged glances.

When both of us returned to our original position at the same moment, we confirmed his guess with a nod. As Agil stared off absentmindedly, I double-checked with him in a whisper.

".....Agil, the commissioner for the rare wood and the creator of that wooden-handled axe you showed us just now... was Mahokl, right?"

This time, the axe merchant nodded in silence. Giving a slight cough, I went a step further.

"Ehm..... so, what kind of relationship do you have with Mahokl.....?"

".....Hmgh....."

With a deep groan, Agil entrusted his huge frame to the backrest of his chair. A sharp glare at me from beyond his finely-chiseled nose bridge was followed by a clearly forced cough.

"Fer starters, I'll have ya know, well, umm..... it was nowhere near the kind of relationship ya have with Asuna, ya hear."

"Hah.....?"

Unable to grasp what he was trying to imply with that statement, I looked to my side, where I found Asuna with an utterly blank expression on her face..... scratch that, she was getting slightly red in the cheeks. At that point, even I finally discerned what Agil was trying to say there, and nodded in response.

"O-oh, I see..... Actually, that caught me by surprise a little. I was so sure you had some very complicated relationship with her....."

"Course not. I'll have ya know, I've got a wife on the other side, ya hear."

"WHA!"

That shout came not from me, but Asuna instead. With her cup still in hand, she leaned forward and bombarded the guy with questions.

"Agil-san, you're married!? By 'the other side', you must be referring to the real world, huh. So, how did you and your wife mee....."

However, she ground to a halt so suddenly at that very moment that you could hear her mouth snapping shut; after pulling herself back to her original posture, she gave a deep bow with her head.

".....I'm so sorry about that, talking about the other side is considered a violation of basic manners, right."

"Oh, nah, there's nothin' ta apologise for here. I'm the one who brought it up, anyway."

Now Agil was the one shaking his head in a panic, waiting for Asuna to lift her head, before he added the following.

".....Though, let's save the talk about my wife for later. Right now we've gotta do somethin' about Mahokl..... seeing as she collected the materials for the recipe, the gal probably does intend to make one, a ballista I mean."

"We were worried about that ourselves, which is why we've been looking into things. At first, we found her whereabouts because we wanted to order some furniture..... but when we heard the story of why she moved her atelier, it all smelled rather fishy. I was thinking..... that perhaps she was being threatened into creating a ballista by someone....."

Hearing my guess, Agil opened his eyes wide for a moment, before giving a slight shake of his head.

"Nah, don't think that's the case 'ere."

".....H-how can you assert that so quickly?"

"Oh c'mon on now, ya know that Mahokl's....."

Just then, the axe merchant closed his mouth and scratched his nicely-shaved head with his left hand, before responding with a question of his own.

".....Ya guys, do ya seriously not know why the gal became a woodcrafter?"

"Huh.....?"

After I exchanged a glance with Asuna once again, we both shook our heads at the same time. Tilting her head in the same motion, Asuna spoke up as if reaching back into her memories.

"Ehm..... do artisan class players even have a «clear event that led to them choosing that path in life» ? My smith friend told me that she "just found herself doing it one day" or that she "felt a calling for the hammer", for example....."

That definitely sounds like something Lisbeth the Blacksmith would say, so I had to restrain myself from erupting into a strained laugh at that. Though, I do indeed get the feeling that the overwhelming majority of players who got into artisanship in this world belong to the «chose that path from the very beginning» type. After all, when you change your build midway through the game, the loss of even a single skill could lead to an unignorable decline in your capabilities; now, if you were to apply that logic to a full role switch from swordsman to artisan or vice versa, it would basically mean that you'd have to start over and plough your way back up from level 1. Although I did discard my Two-Handed Sword skill that I hadn't been using whatsoever for the sake of acquiring the Fishing skill

yesterday, it did still take me a very long time to pluck up the courage to do so even when I knew the action would have no effect on my battle capabilities.

Hence, I was convinced that Mahokl herself had to be a player who had chosen to pursue the life of a woodcrafter ever since she was first confined in this death game—putting it the other way around, I couldn't fathom anyone ever reaching such heights in skill proficiency unless they had been using those skills from the very first days of the game.

Having heard Asuna's words, Agil stroked his head once more, before letting out, "That so.....", as if groaning.

"Well, I do see yer point that players who go fer the life of an artisan with a clear impetus behind their choice are few and far between. Though, in that case, I can't exactly just blab out about Mahokl's circumstances willy-nilly to ya....."

""Whaa—h!""

'Oh come on now, you can't just leave us hanging like that when we've made it this far!', as this thought ran through our heads, Agil responded to our shout by raising one of his eyebrows.

"Ya know, I'm thinkin' the gal's probably takin' a likin' to ya. Try talking to 'er directly..... If ya show just how serious yer concern for 'er is, she can't possibly give ya the cold shoulder."

"A-at least give us a hint of some sort....."

In response to my tenacity, Agil spent three seconds thinking something over, before responding with a serious look.

"Yer hint is 《criticals》 ."

2

Once we left Agil's store, we found that the sunlight coming in from Aincrad's circumference had already dyed Algade's townscape in yellow. It was nearly evening time.

As I've been living in this town for quite a long time, there were quite a few stores that I had been frequenting. Of course, the majority of them were N P C shops, so the shopkeepers wouldn't spare a thought about me coming in for the first time in weeks, yet I did still feel like dropping by at one of them after all this time anyway.

As thoughts like that passed through my mind, I looked over to Asuna in profile as she walked beside me, whereby I noticed that she was sunk deep in thought about something. Was she thinking about Mahokl, or about something else instead. Either way, getting something delicious to chow down on was the best way to take your mind off things at times like these.

"Hey, how's about grabbing something to eat over there?"

When I called out to her, Asuna's eyes blinked several times beyond the hood hiding them from sight, before giving a smile.

"Good idea. Is there anything in particular that you want to eat?"

"Hmm..... well, since we've already made our way here....."

Muttering this, I was about to head into a narrow alley from the main street, but Asuna pulled on my coat to stop me.

"Hey now..... I sure hope you're not actually planning on going to the «Algade House» ."

"Oh, just what I'd expect from your insight."

"Ab-so-lutely not!"

Proclaiming thus in a staccato, Asuna was about to head full speed ahead towards the Teleport Gate Plaza, thus I was the one who had to grab her by the hem of her cape to stop her this time.

"W-why not..... admit it, you've taken quite a liking to it yourself, Asuna....."

"I have not!"

Her shout prompted multiple players walking down the street to turn towards us, thus we first stepped aside to the edge of the street, before continuing our conversation in a low voice.

"Well, although I'd be fine with going over there like once a month, every time I eat there I start feeling real hazy. I can't tell for sure whether the dishes there are ramen or soba, nor can I tell whether the master of the restaurant is a player or an NPC either..... I've already got a lot of things on my mind as is, so the last thing I want is to add even more concerns on top of all that!"

—Once a month is quite frequent, if you ask me.

That thought crossed my mind, but instead of voicing it out, I decided to try being a little stubborn.

"In that case..... we do have the option of going for some Algade Fry or Algade Boil rather than Algade Soba....."

"Aaab-soooo-luuuutely not!"

Now that she turned it up all the way up to staccatissimo in her proclamation, I couldn't exactly pester her any further.

'Some day, no, make that in the coming days, I'm gonna have to at least make it clear whether that shopkeeper is a player or an NPC!', making this vow in my heart, I softly raised up my hands in surrender.

"Very well. Righty ho, there's a cafe where you can chow down on a diverse selection of fruit cakes nearby, so how about we head there then?"

At that point, a sweet smile finally found its way on my young wife's face.

By the time we returned to Floor 22 from Floor 50, the floor was already in the process of being enveloped in purplish dusk.

Chasing the fading afterglow, we walked along the forest path, until we returned to our dear old—although it's only been three full days since we started living here—log house. Once we both said our 'I'm home's at the same time in the entranceway, went into the living room and tossed our coats and boots and whatnot aside into our storage, I finally felt at ease in both body and soul.

Having returned to her knight outfit that I was so familiar with upon taking off her hooded cape, "Uuuu ~ ~ n", even Asuna let out a sound as she had a good old stretch.

"Hah..... we've only just moved in, but it kinda already feels like we've been living here for years....."

As Asuna voiced the exact same thought I was having, I caught her by surprise by lifting her up from behind, before sitting down with great force onto the large rocking chair placed by the fireplace. Despite taking on the weight of two people at once, the chair made by the grand master woodcrafter Mahokl didn't even let out a creak.

Letting my body enjoy the pleasant rocking back and forth, I buried my face into Asuna's shoulder, taking in a deep breath.

".....It's only been three days, yet it feels like it's already been three days....."

When I muttered this, Asuna also nodded, snuggling up to me herself.

"Hm..... This is perhaps the first time that time went by so quickly for me since coming to this world."

"Well, we have been running around all over the place with Mahokl's stuff every day, after all."

That instant, Asuna puffed out her cheeks.

"While that is true, that isn't the sole reason for it. It's because every day I'm feeling like I don't want the day to end just yet."

'Oh, so you want more time for solving the mystery behind Mahokl's ballista then'..... even someone as socially inept as me could tell that this was not what she was actually implying there. In order to express my agreement with actions, I put more force into my arms around Asuna's body.

Just then, the slender figure inside my embrace turned thirty degrees or so to the left and her hazel eyes peered directly into mine. After spending a few brief moments gazing into each other in silence, I raised my right hand on top of Asuna's head, gently drawing it closer to me.

Without any cues, both of us closed our eyelids as one. As our lips came into contact, electric signals encoding warmth, tenderness, and many more sensations aside from those tactile ones went between our avatars back and forth in large quantities.

I wish these peaceful yet stimulating days continued forever. However, that was a wish that would never be fulfilled.

Four days ago, on the night we moved into our house on Floor 22, I made a promise with Asuna. That once we cleared Floor 100 and no

longer had any need to fight, we'd throw a grand wedding ceremony.

We'd invite Klein, Agil, Lisbeth, Silica, Argo, and all the Clearers there and have Heathcliff the KoB Commander give the speech. I'd mobilise all the knowledge and experience I've acquired to round up a load of S-class ingredients and have the grand master chef Asuna throw a feast with them. I'd commission Mahokl to create a huge table and plenty of chairs for the venue.

It'd surely turn out to be a lively and fun party. Yet, there's practically no chance for this vision of mine to become reality. After all, once the death game was cleared, all the surviving players would be logged out from Aincrad and return to the real world, as Kayaba Akihiko had proclaimed. This is the outcome that everyone is waiting eagerly for..... However, right now I can't say for sure whether I actually want that moment to come, or not.

All of a sudden, I felt a gentle and warm sensation on my right cheek.

When I moved my eyelids up, I found a transparent drop going down the smooth, white cheek before me. Dripping down, it popped on my face, generating a modest oscillation.

".....Asuna."

Upon my whisper, Asuna blurted out an "Ah.....", as if just noticing that she was crying, and blinked repeatedly multiple times. Yet the tears continued piling up and spilling out one after another with a silver glimmer.

I used my left hand to stop Asuna from trying to wipe them away with the cuff of her knight outfit and placed my lips on the corner of her eye. Although tears in this world did not have any flavour, the sorrow contained in those droplets stabbed me in the chest a little.

As I stroked her hair with my right hand, I wondered how many minutes we spent like this.

Before long, the tears finally stopped and Asuna entrusted the full weight of her body to me with a slight sigh. Close to my ear, I heard a faint whisper.

".....Sorry about that. I was just..... thinking about the outside a little."

Her 'outside' wasn't referring to the exterior of the log house, but rather outside Aincrad itself. I'm sure Asuna's been continuously thinking about the real world ever since she started asking Agil about his wife in his store this evening.

".....I was thinking about the same thing myself just now."

When I whispered back to her, I felt the body in my embrace twitching.

Even if our newlywed life in the log house were to end, or perhaps if we were to be logged out from this world, there were ways to maintain my bond with Asuna. All we had to do was to tell each other our real names and exchange our contact info..... that's all it'd take.

However, there was one jinx that no one ever dared to voice, yet one that everyone shared all this time.

That if you were to talk about your RL, you'd die—

Of course, it was all just a nasty superstition with nothing to back it up. Although that's what I personally believed in, once something becomes a taboo, it gets awfully hard to disregard it. We absolutely could not allow ourselves to die in this world, after all.

—'We're going to survive, clear the death game, and meet up in the real world once more, for sure.'

Wanting to convey the feelings I couldn't put to words at least in thought, I firmly embraced Asuna.

Since we ended up eating two servings of cake each in the evening, we settled for a light menu, consisting of bouillabaisse soup, salade niçoise, and crisply-baked baguette, for dinner. It was my first time hearing the name niçoise or whatever, but it was apparently a French salad consisting of tomatoes, potatoes, beans, olives, boiled eggs and other such ingredients. In its place of origin, they apparently put the potatoes and beans into the salad raw, but if you were to bite into a raw potato in Aincrad, you'd be met with a very forlorn taste, thus I did not want to test my luck a second time.

Once we neatly finished up our dishes, we went over the things we learnt today over sweet wine with cheese snacks.

Just a little over a year ago, Agil, the then-still leader of the «Bro Squad» guild..... I mean, the «Two-Handed Builders», had been going out alone at night for some tree chopping.

As Agil engaged in such activities, his business partner Mahokl commissioned his services to gather some rare logs.

And now Mahokl was trying to create a ballista not because she was threatened into doing so by someone, but because it apparently had some link to the reason why she became a woodcrafter—

".....But, you know, Mahokl-san definitely did say this: 'I was forced to go into hiding with my whole atelier because I discovered the composition recipe for a ballista.', didn't she?"

At Asuna's words, I gave a nod while chewing some blue cheese (a specialty of Floor 61, named as such not because it had some blue mold on it, but because it was entirely deep blue to an alarming level).

"Uh-huh..... since she said she was hiding, she had to be doing so from someone or something..... right? The only way I can possibly interpret this is that there was someone who wanted a ballista from her, and so she ran away from whoever that was."

"True. Also..... the hint we got from Agil, «criticals» , is also enigmatic....."

"You sure got that right..... The only possibly relevant thing I can think of is that rumour about weapons made out of wood having a higher crit rate. ——Come to think of it, wasn't there one in the KoB? A guy who was obsessed with wooden weapons, I mean."

"Oh, there is. He's a spearman, yet crosspears with wooden handles were the only thing he..... "

Just when Asuna was about to finish that thought... My ears caught a faint sound coming from outside the window.

The dry rustle was similar to tree leaves being moved by the wind, yet slightly different. Carrying a faint sense of weight that I couldn't express in words, was a footstep—someone had stepped on the grass in our yard.

[Material Edition 25] Sugary Days 12

RAWS TAKAZUKI TRANSLATION GSIMENAS EDITING GSIMENAS PROOFREADING JENGKAY

October 27 2024

Suddenly peering into Asuna's face at point-blank range, I placed a finger in-between our lips. As Asuna maintained her silence despite giving me a questioning look, I gave her a bare minimum explanation on what was going on as quietly as possible.

"There's someone in the yard."

".....!"

As Asuna instantly took on a serious expression and switched from her young wife mode into her swordswoman one, both of us slipped out of the rocking chair without a sound. It may just be some acquaintance of ours coming over for a visit(1), but then there'd be no reason to muffle their footsteps in that case, plus there should only be a very limited number of players, even including our friends and acquaintances, who are even aware that Asuna and I are living here.

Since the curtains are pulled over all the windows facing the yard on the southern side of the house, it's impossible to see the inside of the house from outside, but they also block our view of the outside as well in return. Of course, it is impossible to invade a locked player home from the perspective of the game's system; there's no way we could be harmed here even if an ill-intentioned player were to loiter around our yard, though I can't exactly enjoy our days off at ease anymore without at least figuring out who the loiterer is.

Crouching down to ensure we didn't let our shadows show up on the curtains, we moved over to the pantry to the north of the living room for starters. Using my menu window, I took out my beloved

«Elucidator +45» and Asuna's beloved «Lambent Light +32» from our shared storage, handing over the latter to her.

"Asuna, I'll go outside through that window over there, go around the back of the house, and check on the yard, while you go to the entranceway and....."

'Wait there' were the words that I failed to utter when a slender finger sealed my lips.

"I'm going too, of course. There's no guarantee that the trespasser is alone, is there?"

".....Well, you do have a point."

Seeing as I've been hanging out with her since Floor 1, even if there was a long break in our relationship midway through, I knew full well that it was pointless to argue with her on this at this point. Hoping to at least secure the right to go out first, I whispered, "Then I'll entrust my back to you", before heading to the window.

Though the bay window at the back of the pantry was just barely big enough for a person to pass through, considering my physique, I shouldn't get stuck in it. I tried taking a look outside beforehand, but the conifer tree forest behind the house was pitch dark; even if there were people hiding there, it would be difficult to spot them. Bracing myself for what was to come, I stood up, grabbed onto the window frame the moment I opened the window while being careful not to make any noise in the process, lifted myself up and smoothly jumped out the window toes-first. Two seconds later, Asuna landed on the lawn even more gracefully than I had.

Back-to-back, we spent a few moments observing our surroundings. No Colour Cursors appeared in our view, nor did we hear any unnatural sounds anymore. Turning around, we nodded to each other, before beginning to quietly move along the wall.

Actually, now that I give it more thought, «a very limited number» of players being aware of this log house is very much an understatement, seeing as Argo, the information dealer who just happened to have been present when we bought the house due to unavoidable circumstances, is the only one that fits the bill. Although we did have a chat with Klein, the leader of the «Fuurinkazan» guild, after calling him to the main town of Floor 22, we parted ways with him back in town; even a guy like him would never stoop to tailing us back home.

Which means... if we have some trespasser bearing ill will against us on our hands, the guy had to have bought info on this house from Argo..... I guess? And yet when we bought the log house at the end of the odd event that the three of us: me, Asuna, and Argo had got dragged into, I'm pretty sure she specifically said—'I'll refrain from selling this tidbit and instead keep it a secret for ya.'

Hoping that my conjecture was misguided, I continued moving silently along the log house's sidewall, hid behind some log ends that stuck out about fifty centimetres from the corner of the house, and took a peek at the situation in the front yard. It's already been nearly two minutes since I had heard something that sounded like a footprint, so a skilled trespasser would have long since hidden themselves away by now—or so I thought.

".....The heck is that supposed to be."

".....What is that supposed to be."

My mutter was matched by Asuna's in tandem when we pulled our heads back behind the log ends. Thinking that I must have been seeing things, I once again took a look at the yard, but I still found that same something..... no, make it that same someone there.

At the very center of the yard, consisting solely of a plain old lawn, as we haven't yet got around to customising it due to only having just recently bought the house, sat a single player cross-legged. With the starlight coming in from Aincrad's aperture and the flame-

scarlet light coming from the fireplace behind the curtains, I was able to make out the details of the person somehow. It was a man..... quite the large one at that; his armour consisted mainly of fabric, while his weapon was a polearm that was held upright on the ground by his left arm.

"What is that person doing in our yard? And what is that weapon?"

Asuna whispered once again, thus I explained as far as I myself understood.

"He's sleeping..... is out of the question, I guess..... While his weapon..... sure doesn't look like a spear, nor a halberd. Guess it's a quarterstaff then?"

"Now that's a weapon you don't see every day....."

At that comment, I nodded in approval.

The merits to long-handled weapons are: 1) their long reach; 2) their penetration power; 3) their ability to inflict debuffs. However, seeing as a quarterstaff doesn't have any metal spearhead, its penetration power is even lower than that of a dagger; you can't exactly call its reach long either, seeing as the weapon is generally held at its centre. It doesn't exactly have all that many Sword Skills that inflict debuffs either, compared to other long weapons.

Despite us waiting another two minutes, the large man holding the oddity that's regarded as an utter hobby weapon in the current Aincrad for the aforementioned reasons, did not budge one bit from his position at the centre of the yard.

".....Don't tell me... he can't actually be sleeping there, can he."

"I've started getting the same impression myself here....."

Looking up to me as she nodded, Asuna shivered a bit. Seeing as she was only wearing a shawl on top of her pyjamas, the late autumn

night wind must be hard on her. Although you don't catch a cold from the chilly weather in this world, past a certain point the player's HP will start decreasing, and they will start sneezing.

Getting the impression that this situation of two homeowners peeking from the shadows at a trespasser brazenly sitting in their yard was growing more and more ridiculous by the minute, I made up my mind and whispered the following.

"Let's go. I'm not getting the sense that he has any mates hiding in wait anyway."

"True."

Nodding, Asuna withdrew close to the wall, before opening her menu window and changing into her usual fully-decked outfit. I also switched over from my loungewear to my black, leather long coat, before gripping my sword once again. After exchanging a fleeting eye-contact with each other, we went around the log ends into the front yard. Just when I took a step forward towards the quarterstaff guy, creating a crunchy sound effect of the grass being stepped on...

The cross-legged trespasser suddenly opened his eyes wide. Once he stood up in a single moment using the staff in his left hand for support, he turned towards us. I myself reflexively got into a battle posture, sending my right hand for the handle of my beloved sword on my back.

However, both Asuna and I stopped our hands just before we managed to draw our blades. Because the large man standing about ten metres away from us suddenly gave a deep bow of his head in silence. After about three full seconds of maintaining his head bowed low, he lifted his head up, an energetic and deep voice ringing out from his mouth.

"Mai sincerest apologies fer intruding on thine graunds so late at nait."

.....This guy is very much bad news.

With that thought in mind, I skipped the greetings and went straight to the questions.

"Before you start apologising, I'd like you to explain who exactly are you and why did you hunker down in our yard."

With these words, I moved about three more metres closer, at which point I finally managed to get a clear look at the guy.

He really was big. Although he fell behind Agil when it came to height, he probably was still over a hundred and eighty centimetres-tall. His large frame was covered in a Japanese-style kimono and hakama, while his feet were placed inside zori-ish sandals. A long, white headband was wrapped above his roughly-built face. His weapons consisted solely of the quarterstaff held in his left hand.

The small eyes beneath his thick eyebrows fixed straight on me, as the man gave his name.

"Ai em known as Taikoku. I hev intruded on thine graunds bearing an entreaty fer da «Black Swordzman» ."

That instant, Asuna let out a prickly aura beside me. After all, the large man calling himself Taikoku came for a visit fully aware that this was my home. It doesn't seem like Argo had sold this man info on my new residence, yet if he deduced where I live by other means, the guy warrants more caution than his attire and conduct would imply.

".....How did you find out that this is the home of the «Black Swordsman» ?"

Having switched over into her Vice Commander mode, completely different from what she was like just a few minutes ago, this time Asuna was the one to pose a question. Taikoku's face twitched just

the slightest bit, before the guy answered her question following a short pause.

"I beg thy pard'n, but I shall bi taking da liberty of saving da anser tu dat question az a kard tu play dyuring our negotiations."

"A card to play during negotiations.....?"

"Krito-don, I wud like tu request a match wiz thee. If I wer tu lose, I shel share wiz thee anything thou wish to 'now, inkluding hau I managed tu track daun dis location. While if I wer tu win, dere iz something I wud like thou tu anser me."

Hearing the man's words, Asuna let out an odd sound deep in her throat for just a single moment. The phrase «Krito-don» probably tickled her funny bone. However, perhaps because the violent word 'match' offset the cringe, she instantly returned to her serious aura.

Giving a slight cough, I added another question myself.

"In that case, at least answer me this as a freebie. Is your Kagoshima dialect the real deal? Oh, and why didn't you just knock on the door?"

"Mai dialect iz..... fake, az unfortunate az it mei bi. Ai hev never hed za pleasure of viziting Kyushu, let alone Satsuma."(2)

"T-that so....."

"Nau az fer why I did not nok..... it iz bicuz I wish'd tu confirm whether dis truly iz da home of da Black Swordzman. If thou were tu respond tu mai aura end hed outside, dat wud confirm dat thou r da wan end ohnly Black Swordzman; if thou were tu fail tu du so, den it wud mean thou r just a fake."

Staring at Taikoku as he made this declaration with a straight face, I was forced to revise my impression of him from moments ago.

--This guy isn't just «very much bad news» , he's «straight up bad news» .

Even if I myself have about sixty percent conviction in the possible existence of a «hypersense» non-system skill, I never once expected to draw out people.....especially players located indoors with my «aura» . In the end, Aincrad here is a virtual world controlled by digital code, thus it has no place for any genuine occultic phenomena..... or at least it shouldn't.

".....Hmmh.....?"

The moment the word 'occultic' went through my mind, I went over Taikoku's entire frame, faintly illuminated by the light coming through the window, with my gaze once more.

The quarterstaff in his left hand was entirely made out of wood, with no metal parts to be found anywhere whatsoever. The kimono-style armour was also basically entirely made out of fabric, while the gauntlets and shin guards were probably made out of leather, likewise no metallic radiance to be found. I actually know of a group that was this tenacious with eliminating any and all metallic pieces of equipment from their gear.

".....Taikoku-san, you're a member of the Critlers..... the Critical Fundamelist, aren't you?"

At my question, the large man displayed something reminiscent of an expression for the first time. The tips of his broad lips slightly rose up, as the bottom of his quarterstaff struck the lawn---

"Ai em not fond of dat neim. Kal as da Way of the Critical Hits (*Kaishindou*)."

""K-Kaishindou.....?""

As we repeated the word in tandem, Taikoku thrust the tip of his quarterstaff, make that his rokushakubou, at us.

"I ask thee agen. Kiritto-don, duel me and if thou were tu lose, I want thou to anser me. Wat r da unlock kondishons fer da «Dual Bleidz» Unique Skill..... end where ken I find Mahokl-don, da u instructor of da Kaishindou."

[Material Edition 26] Sugary Days 13

RAWS CELEST TRANSLATION GSIMENAS EDITING CIRTOYT PROOFREADING JENGKAY

October 27 2024

1

The demand from the mysterious staff-wielder Taikoku, who appeared at our front yard out of the blue, was so staggering that I even forgot all about his fake Satsuma dialect for a moment.

It goes without saying that the brazenness with which he made his demand for me to reveal the unlock conditions for the «Dual Blades» skill that only I appear to possess in Aincrad at the current moment was staggering in its own right, but I found it unexpectedly hard to believe that Mahokl, the woodcrafter with swirlly glasses, is the leader of the «Kaishindou» ——that is to say, the Critical Fundamentalists.

The Critlers are a bunch of people who have yet to join the Clearers despite the fact that two years have passed since the death game began, instead opting to spend all their time polishing their skills with Criticals at some secret training ground somewhere in Aincrad; sugarcoating things: they are a stoic bunch, or just some egoistic experimenters if I were to be blunt. Their secretiveness is said to be even greater than that of the «Laughing Coffin» PK guild that we crushed in August this very year; even an info broker as skilled as Argo the «Rat» has not been able to find out the simplest of things about the group, such as even what the guild the Critlers have probably created for themselves by now is called.

Having spent just two seconds with both my eyes and mouth open wide, I once again checked out the Colour Cursor above the giant man calling himself Taikoku. His name was yet to be displayed on his green Cursor as he's only given his name verbally, but I couldn't find any Guild Tag, which should be displayed if the player is in a guild either.

".....So, you're not in any guild?"

"On za pas of honing one's Kritikal skils, wan needs not hev a guild."

So, he's saying that the Critlers never actually formed a guild, system-wise, huh. In that case, it's very much possible that the players I've had contact with on a daily basis were secretly members of the Critlers, I mean, the Kaishindou..... possibly. There was that KoB wooden-handled-spear-enthusiast that came up during our conversation just before I noticed Taikoku's presence, perhaps he's also—

"Hey now."

My incoherent thoughts were interrupted by Asuna's voice, quite sharper than usual.

"It's way too insolent of you to barge in on someone's Player Home all of a sudden at a time like this, incite a Duel, and then demand that we tell you not one, but two major pieces of intel if you were to win. I'll humour you and ask: you do have some intel of equal value that you'd be able to share if you were to lose, right? The 'how I found out that this is the home of «The Black Swordsman» ' thing you mentioned earlier is nowhere near equal value."

At her tough-nut negotiation skills that left me thinking, 'She's not the KoB Vice Commander for nothing', Taikoku's eyes under his super-thick eyebrows continued blinking repeatedly.

"Ugh..... though, thou kenot possibly expect us ta hev intel on a Unique Skill of our own."

'You're just looking for excuses to show off your dialectal grammar, aren't you!'

Holding myself back from actually making that jab at that moment, I lent an ear to the staff-wielder's slow speech.

"Whilst I em not certain if dis ken be konsiderd of equal value, I em willing ta forfit dis insted."

What Taikoku materialised out of the window he opened with these words was a single long sword. Both its scabbard and handle were coloured a plain brown; I couldn't sense all that much rarity in the sword based on its appearance, to be honest.

Taking his left hand away from his quarterstaff that continued standing on the ground—I wonder if the wooden staff doesn't fall down because of some inherent ability of the weapon, or because of its owner's skills—Taikoku drew the sword from its scabbard. The instant I witnessed that the sword's blade was of the same colour as its handle, I realised what was so peculiar to it.

"Is that.....a wooden sword, perhaps?"

"Yis sire."

Confirming my guess in an ever-increasingly-questionable Satsuma dialect, Taikoku held out the deep-brown sword up high. Reflecting the moonlight, its blade gave off a dim flash of light.

"Notwithstanding za fekt dat it iz a wooden word, dis here thing iz no mere blunt praktis sword. Its AKT value is 620; ez far ez I em aware, it grents za highest Critical bonus among al one-hended swords."

"O-oooh....."

An attack power value of 620 came up short compared to my beloved, over 700 Elucidator+45. However, it was quite a big number nonetheless, and I was curious about that Critical bonus whatsit too.

"....."

I turned my face to my side in silence. Asuna turned her gaze to me at the same moment, thus we spent the next few moments making eye-contact in silence. Having read the "oh, what am I going to do with you" look from her hazel eyes and having sent over a "s'ry and thx" response through our telepathy, I returned my gaze to Taikoku.

".....Alright. I aksept..... I mean, I accept your challenge."

"Thou hev mai thanks."

Having stolidly bowed his head in response, the staff-wielder looked around the area after storing the wooden sword back in its sheath, then walked over to a wooden table that had been left lying around on the lawn, atop of which he placed down the sword. Returning to us straight away, he gripped the still-standing quarterstaff with his big hand.

After opening his window once more, his finger suddenly stopped in its tracks—

"Iz a First-Strike rul fer za Duel tu thy laiking?"

"Sure. I wouldn't mind a Half-Finish match either though.

As I found myself getting carried away, Asuna gave a stern nudge at my right elbow, while Taikoku himself shook his head at the same moment.

"Nay, I would not recommend det option. After all, if I ver ta misjuje my eim, I might end up kiling thee, Kirito-don."

".....Heeh....."

As I stared at Taikoku's ever-serious expression, it only strengthened my first impression of him as an «amusing staff-wielder» .

Long, long ago—way back on Floor 3, I had been challenged to a Half-Finish Mode Duel. I hadn't given much thought to my enemy's intentions when I accepted that Duel, which nearly led to me being killed back then. My enemy's goal had been to reduce my H P to just slightly above half of its maximum value, whereupon he planned to land a Critical on me with a high-powered Sword Skill in order to blow away the rest of my H P in one go.

Compared to back then, my H P value was now several times higher, but player attribute values and weapon specs increase accordingly as well, so it's not like there's no longer any risk of a single hit leading to death in a Half-Finish Mode match. Seeing as he went out of his way to warn me about that possibility, I could probably presume that Taikoku almost certainly has no interest in a «Duel P K» unlike that axeman I encountered back then. Another thing was also clear: the guy had absolute confidence in his own skills.

"In that case, let's go for a First Strike."

Nodding at my words, Taikoku operated his window with motions so smooth that it seemed out of place considering his thick-glove-like hands, in order to send out a Duel request to me. Once I accepted the request after checking over its terms, a line of text, 【T a i k o k u】 , appeared over his Cursor.

"Sheesh..... just don't do anything rash, okay."

Having muttered this, Asuna stepped back to the porch of the house. Her firmly holding onto the scabbard of her rapier with her left hand was probably to allow her to intervene at a moment's notice if need be. After sending her a 'I'll be fine' message with my eyes, I drew out my beloved sword and threw its scabbard some distance away, before taking up an orthodox chuudan(3) stance.

During the thirty second countdown, I observed my opponent in order to predict the trajectory of his first strike, as usual. However,

the staff-wielder didn't budge the slightest bit from his daunting pose after sticking his quarterstaff into the lawn with his left hand.

Based on his current posture, he'd need to go through two separate actions regardless of whether he went on the defensive or the offensive: lift up his heavy wooden staff and then get into a proper stance. All I need to do is charge at his right hand side that doesn't have contact with his staff just as the Duel begins..... or so one might think based on the situation, but unlike Kuradeel, the two-handed-sword-wielder and veteran KoB member—— who actually turned out to have been a Laughing Coffin remnant in disguise, that I had fought about a week ago, this guy had a composed and firmly-rooted posture.

So, the crucial question here: is the blindspot on his right side actually bait to lure me in for a counter, or not. Seeing as my hesitation wouldn't go away even as the timer crossed the ten second line, perhaps it was caused by my relaxed sugary-sweet daily life with Asuna for three whole days..... wait, that's not the case. It's actually the result of the man named Taikoku emitting an aura far different from any player I've had a Duel against. If I had to put my finger on it, I'd say that the aura was just the slightest bit similar to that of Heathcliff, against whom I fought before a huge crowd the very next day after my Duel against Kuradeel. Perhaps my loss from that Duel was the driving force behind my hesitation.

At times like this, if you can't go for the best option, at least go for the better and clever one: start observing my opponent without making any moves just the same. Three seconds left, two, one.....

Zero.

Just as that number flashed by, I kicked off the ground with all my might. If Taikoku actually had a plan for countering my rush attack from that posture, then I very much wanted to see what it was. I'm quite well aware that it's not all that clever of a course of action to

take, but it's not like I managed to survive two years here through acts of intelligence.

Just like back in my battle against Kuradeel, the skill I chose to activate was the charging leap technique «Sonic Leap» . However, I passed over my sword from my right hand to my left one just as I stomped down and used left-handed mirror motions to aim for Taikoku's right arm.

Although an arm was, of course, not a critical point, the only thing my opponent had equipped on him was Japanese-style fabric armour. Even if he had some chains or something of the sort underneath that armour, my Elucidator+45 with plenty of points set to Heaviness should have no trouble going through some half-baked metal armour and deal enough damage to earn me a First Strike win.

".....Haah!"

Letting out a short shout, I was about to strike Taikoku at his upper right arm with my sword.

Just as I was on the brink of doing so, the staff-wielder once again took his left hand off his quarterstaff and folded his arms in a pose similar to a pullover and brought them into a position in front of his body.

"Dosukooi!!"

With a yell loud enough to make the trees in the yard shake, Taikoku unleashed a gray light effect from his entire body.

This motion was one that I've seen before and one that I could use on myself too. It was a high-grade technique from the Martial Arts skill tree, «Haganeri» . For a single second, it increased your Defence so high that your entire body would become harder than a set of full plate armour. However, the conditions that had to be met in order to trigger the skill were very strict: even if you were to take

up the «Relax Equipment Conditions» Mod from the skill, you still had to equip nothing more than fabric armour on your torso; moreover, you had to have both of your hands entirely free to be able to use the technique. This was the first time I saw someone letting go of a wooden staff after stabbing it into the ground, using the weapon's or Taikoku's own special abilities to fix it in place, in order to meet the latter condition.

—I see, so that's his game, huh.

During that split second, I instantly decided on a course of action to take in response. If I were to cancel my Sonic Leap here, I'd get socked with the guy's quarterstaff during the ensuing rigor penalty and that would bring the Duel to an end. I only had a single choice at my disposal—to have faith in myself and my beloved sword and ram the steel-turned Taikoku at full power.

Holding my breath, I swung my arm along the trajectory of my Sonic Leap, further increasing the speed of my spin. This was my Non-System Skill, «Power Burst» .

The Elucidator's blade practically engulfed into Taikoku's burly right shoulder as it hit.

Our light blue and gray effect lights collided, gushing out dazzlingly. A powerful feedback. Taikoku's large body, so firmly-rooted in place as if he were a tree that had taken root into the ground, lurched backwards violently.

The HP bar at the edge of my view went down by just a mere three percent. That's not nearly enough to qualify as a First Strike. However, my full-powered slash managed to cause a knockback effect; even if it was quite meagre, it did allow me to block him from carrying out a split-second counter-attack that he had probably been planning as a follow-up to his «Haganeri» .

I recovered from my skill delay after landing on the ground at just about the same moment as Taikoku managed to recover his posture and grab his quarterstaff.

Now we'd have to read each other's moves as we exchanged blows at point-blank range. The first to screw up here would lose.

"Tsk!!"

A thrust so sharp that it belied the heaviness of the wooden staff came flying right at my throat. If he'd been using some lightweight weapon, I could probably parry the blow, yet a quarterstaff might just knock my blade aside. Although I attempted to dodge the blow with a backward dash and a sway of my body instead, the tip of the staff reached out farther than I had anticipated and thus I felt a sting of heat at my Adam's apple despite bending my body backwards as much as I possibly could. No sooner than I managed to evade the blow somehow by the skin of my teeth, I switched over to a tactic that made use of both the shortcoming of two-handed staves, and the advantage that one-handed swords offered.

The flaw of any quarterstaff-type weapon is that they do not have a blade. Although Taikoku's quarterstaff had an octagonal cross-section, rather than an orthodox circular one, this difference had no bearing on the fact that you wouldn't suffer damage just by touching the weapon. Meanwhile, the advantage of one-handed swords was, of course, the fact that your off-hand would remain free. Normally, people would use it to equip a shield; however, those who kept that hand empty like me could either use it for Martial Arts or Blade Throwing skill techniques, or pull off something like this instead.

The moment the quarterstaff stopped at my throat, I grabbed its tip with my left hand and yanked it while sliding out of the way to the right. Having shifted his center of gravity forward at the end of his technique, Taikoku pitched forward without getting the chance to brace himself. Not wasting a single moment of this opening, I lunged with my Elucidator to slide along the surface of the quarterstaff towards my rival's right hand. This would either lead to

my immediate victory if I managed to deal a sufficient amount of damage to end the Duel, or I'd at least get quite the upper hand in our following clashes by causing Amputation damage to his right hand.

"Nuwah!"

With that shout, Taikoku suddenly took his right hand off the quarterstaff as if having suffered an electric shock. However, that countermeasure of his was well within my expectations. I took one step closer and switched over to targeting his left hand at the base of the staff instead. He can't possibly let go of the staff with that hand as we- ——

"Nuuun!"

As Taikoku raised his voice once again, I got the impression that his left arm peeking out from the sleeve of his kimono suddenly became more brawny. I guess the creak I just heard was the equivalent of the quarterstaff screaming out from the tremendous amount of grip power that had just been focused on it.

The sensation of the firm ground suddenly disappeared from my feet. Taikoku had just lifted me high into the sky along with his weapon with just his left hand. 'Ya've gotta be kidding me', came a shout in my mind as I hastily let go of the wooden staff; however, I had no way of moving aside or back while I was in mid-air.

Meanwhile, having returned to gripping his wooden staff with both hands after instantly pulling it back to himself, Taikoku roared out another war cry is his loudest volume yet.

"Cheeeest———!!"

His wooden staff took on a red gleam as it came plunging right at the center of my torso with a fierce thrust. It was a Sword Skill—albeit probably just a basic thrust technique; however, if I took a direct hit here, it was all but certain to bring the Duel to an end.

Both parrying and swaying out of the way were out of the question; a Sword Skill could only be intercepted with another Sword Skill, but I wasn't in a position to activate one when my body was in the.....

Wait, that option was still very much on hand, or more like on foot.

Fixing my gaze on the rapidly encroaching tip of the wooden staff, I bent my body backwards with all my strength. A sensation of my left leg being yanked by itself. As if flung through the power of an invisible rubber band that had been stretched to its limits, my left foot shot up overhead. This was the Martial Arts skill backward somersault kick, «Crescent Moon» .

Just before Taikoku's thrust could make contact with my chest, the tip of my boot smacked the lower half of the quarterstaff.

'Sukaaa—n!', came a satisfying sound effect as my kick flinged the quarterstaff upwards.

"Muuuh!"

Despite his deep groan, the staff-wielder didn't even try to resist the momentum of his wooden staff, allowing it to continue its upward swing high into the air. If he had attempted to forcefully pull his staff back like a good little boy, I ought to have bought myself enough time to get my sword into a proper stance after landing on my feet; I didn't quite expect his duelling instincts to be this good. At this rate, Taikoku would get the chance to trigger his next technique first.

Seeing the wooden staff take on a flame-like light effect at the bottom edge of my vision over his head, I made up my mind for my next course of action.

If the technique that Taikoku is about to unleash on me turns out to be a multi-hit one, I might find myself in a spot of trouble. Making

an educated guess that this wouldn't be the case based on his conduct and battle style so far, I quickly swung my right hand.

The moment I finished my somersault and landed onto the lawn with my feet, the wooden staff descended onto me with a roar. Meanwhile, I tightly squeezed my left, and my now-empty right hand, lowering my hips as I drew my hands to the front of my body.

"Dosse———i!!"

As I shouted out subconsciously, though I wasn't actually trying to imitate Taikoku with it, my body was enveloped in a dim silver radiance. It was the Martial Arts skill defensive technique, «Haganeri» .

In order to fulfil the conditions for triggering the skill, I had hurled my sword upwards while I was mid-air. What's more, my current equipment consisted of my loungewear: a cotton shirt and pants.

The quarterstaff heavily smacked the top of my now steel-hard head. Then came a prominent, dazzling flash, alongside a shockwave that seemed all but ready to tear my eardrums. So it's come to this—a True Critical!

As I gritted my teeth, my H P bar started whittling away at the upper-left corner of my view. Five percent..... seven percent..... if the damage from this blow crosses the ten percent line, it will be recognised as a powerful strike, thus ending the Duel in my loss.

As I observed the event in slow-motion, my H P bar continued going down bit-by-bit, stopping at what I assume to be the nine-point-five mark.

The moment my Haganeri was lifted, I extended my right hand over my head, catching my Elucidator as it fell down. Using that momentum, I swung my blade down at Taikoku's left shoulder as he

was stuck in place due to the post-skill rigor. 'Sashu!', came a sharp sound as a deep crimson damage effect gushed out. Even a regular ol' attack with a blade on the level of a legendary sword managed to swipe exactly ten percent of the giant man's H P . The name of the match's victor was displayed over our heads; however, Taikoku fell to his right knee without even bothering to look at the notification.

Once I picked up my scabbard from the lawn and put my sword away, Asuna ran up from the porch.

"Whoopee!"

With that innocent cheer, she held out her hands, thus we exchanged a high-five. If we didn't have eyes on us, this would be a perfect moment to lift her high into the sky with my hands and spin around with her like that, but I'll have to keep that urge in check for obvious reasons.

However, it seemed the high-five was more than enough stimulation for the stoic experimenter; standing up vacantly, Taikoku said the following in a grave tone while shaking his head to the sides.

"Purheps..... I hed bin resolved fer mai los even beofre aur battle hed begun....."

Once we sat down on opposite sides of the newly-purchased dining table after we invited the staff-wielder to our log house when he accepted his loss, Asuna brought out her prized tea. It wasn't made from the regular old black tea leaves that you could get in Aincrad, but rather ones that produced a drink quite similar to green tea in both colour, taste, and aroma; Taikoku seemed to be enjoying his drink when he took some sips of it, before letting out a deep sigh and saying the following.

".....Vat ken Ai sei, za autkom did not come az a surprise. I did hev quite a bit of confidence in mai dueling skils maiself, though I nevur imagined thou would jast unhand yer sord like dat....."

"You're the one who pulled it off first, after all. So, where does the special ability that keeps the staff standing upright even when you let go of it come from?"

"Det would bi mi."

After a smirk, he gave a short sight, before turning his eyes to the right side of the table. Lying on the table there was the entirely wooden one-handed sword that Taikoku had wagered on our match.

"As promis'd, Ai ofer it ta thee, Krito-don. Also, as fer hau I managed ta find dis haus..... Krito-don, hev thou taken up the Tracking skill?"

"Yeah, I have teiken..... taken it up....."

"Hauever, yer skil profishensy iz below 1000, if Ai em not mistaken?"

"Y-yeah."

At that point, Taikoku smirked as he said the following with a hint of pride.

"Ven wan completes both za Trehking skil end za Apreizel skil, zey shel hev za opportunity ta take up de «Komodity Trehking» M o d."

"Commodity Tracking.....?"

I cocked my head subconsciously upon hearing that unfamiliar name.

However, that's only natural; Tracking is a maniac skill that only solo players would take up, while Appraisal could basically be described as a merchant-exclusive skill. What's more, both of the skills are a huge pain in the ass to level up; I think I could probably count the number of people who have completed either of the two skills on my hands. My own Tracking skill proficiency is about 960, but I only have it that high up because I spent a whole load of time chasing after rare monsters based on their footprints back during my solo days; most people who continue playing in parties, where there's a not much chance that a wounded monster got the chance to escape, would reach their plateau at around 500. Now as for Appraisal, I've had the axesman-slash-merchant Agil around, so I never even felt like taking it up, though even Agil himself shouldn't have completed the skill yet.

".....So, you're saying that you've completed both the Tracking and the Appraisal skills?"

I asked with admiration from the bottom of my heart, but Taikoku was quick to shake his head to the sides.

"Nay, it iz not mi hu did it."

'Say wut', that revelation almost had me falling out of my chair, but I barely managed to hold my ground. As my thought processing ground to a halt, Asuna brought up a question in my stead.

"So that is to say that «Commodity Tracking» is the composite Model between the Tracking skill and the Appraisal skill, right? But then how did you use it to find this house.....oh."

Raising her voice a bit, she placed her left hand on the top of the glamorous dining table.

"Could it be.....because of this? You tracked down this table, which led to you arriving here.....?"

"Korekt."

With a deep nod, Taikoku straightened up his huge back on his chair.

".....Seeing ez we hev gohn dis far, Ai shel tel thee al about it. Abaut why I, nay, we r looking fer Mahokl-don....."

Thirty minutes later.

Having seen off Taikoku as he returned to Coral Village at the border between the log house and the front yard, we both found ourselves looking at each other.

Jumping forward nimbly with both feet, Asuna slipped her arms around my body and gave me a squeeze. Seeing as our heights weren't all that different from each other, we'd inevitably find ourselves bumping into each other with our foreheads when we're this close to each other.

"W.....where did all of this come from out of the blue?"

"Mm, I kinda had some things I was thinking about. Like, you sure have fun when you're fighting, Kirito-kun..... or that the Duel had me worried nevertheless....."

".....Is that so."

I then returned the hug on her slender body, peering into her hazel eyes at point-blank range.

"Sorry, I should have consulted with you before accepting the Duel. I kinda found myself under the spell of his initiative....."

"Hu-huh, he was quite the amazing person in many ways. Even in the real world, I've never heard anyone speaking in such a thick Kagoshima dayalekt."

"Neither hev Ai. Though, the guy himself admitted that it was fake."

After laughing for a bit in a low voice, we exchanged a short kiss, before separating from each other.

Upon hearing Taikoku's story, we've basically resolved almost all of the mysteries that had piled up over the course of three days. However, there was still one single thing that I didn't get.

If Mahokl hid herself after breaking away from the True Critical Pursuers group, named as the «Kaishindou», that she herself was spearheading, why was she attempting to construct a ballista that was directly responsible for her breaking away from her group?

This probably wasn't a matter that outsiders like me or Asuna should poke our noses into any further. I assume that Taikoku will be able to track down Mahokl's atelier in the main town of Floor 3 someday even if he didn't hear it from me; besides, it doesn't seem like it's going to lead to some perilous situation anyway.

Still, we were the ones who gathered up all the materials for the ballista that Mahokl is trying to construct—or perhaps she already has constructed one; besides, Taikoku did mention this. The reason why their chief Mahokl hid away wasn't just because she had found the recipe for a ballista, but also because—the people had begun talking about the appearance of the «Dual Blades» Unique Skill.

".....Shall we head out?"

At my question, Asuna blinked once, before giving a pleasant smile as she nodded.

"Sure, let's go."

[Material Edition 27] Sugary Days 14

RAWS TAKAZUKI TRANSLATION GSIMENAS EDITING CIRTOYT PROOFREADING JENGKAY

October 28 2024

Thirty minutes later.

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"W.....where did all of this come from out of the blue?"

"Mm, I kinda had some things I was thinking about. Like, you sure have fun when you're fighting, Kirito-kun..... yet I still couldn't bear to watch the Duel nevertheless....."

".....Is that so."

I then returned the hug on her slender body, peering into her hazel eyes at point-blank range.

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Having returned to our home through the front door like decent people this time, we both pitched in to get some tea ready, before heading to the large table in the living room and sitting down beside it. Having taken some of the aromatic milk tea into her mouth, Asuna let out a deep sigh, before muttering the following.

".....Who would have thought that your Dual Blades skill would be related to Mahokl-san running away, Kirito-kun....."

"Hmm.....That definitely is what Taikoku claimed, but....."

Responding with a groan, I reached out for the plate on the table with my hand. The cookies hand-made by Asuna were truly to my

liking: they were crunchy and easy-to-chew, their sweetness was kept in moderation, and they were rich in aroma from the butter, yet not even eating two of them in a row helped cheer me up.

".....I can't even begin to imagine how the Dual Blades skill ties into the case with Mahokl. Even Taikoku himself doesn't seem to have an answer for that..... The entire rationale behind his conclusion was just that Mahokl started acting weird after rumours about Dual Blades spread around, right.....?"

When I mentioned this in an inarticulate manner, Asuna took on a brooding expression herself.

Having lost the Duel against me, the staff-wielder Taikoku mentioned the following reasons why he.....or rather «they» were looking for Mahokl.

First and foremost was simply because they were worried. Although Asuna and I had without a shadow of a doubt believed that Mahokl the Woodcrafter was purely an artisan player, she was in fact the leader of the Critical Fundamentalists group, the «Kaishindou» as they called themselves, that's been around in Aincrad from time immemorial and her members were worried that she could have possibly got herself into danger, even if she vanished of her own accord. Although the «Laughing Coffin» PK group had been vanquished three months ago, there could be some remnants hiding out somewhere, similarly to Kuradeel, the two-handed-sword-wielder who had tried to kill me the other day; their head honcho P o H was unaccounted for either. The Critlers were merely a bunch of people researching the system and techniques behind True Critical Hits, rather than a battle-focused group, thus I could more or less understand the anxiety Taikoku felt about his leader's safety.

While the second reason was the recipe for a ballista that Mahokl had discovered before she went missing.

As Taikoku claimed, no matter how much he and the other executives tried to persuade, or perhaps beg, her into crafting an actual ballista, she stubbornly refused to do so. Apparently, Mahokl had claimed that 'the pursuit of Criticals has no need for projectile weapons', but Taikoku and the others apparently never found it in themselves to give up on the idea. After all, if the ballista did actually work as intended, it would become possible for them to engage in some highly-efficient levelling on some farming spot on the front lines, even if the Critlers lacked actual battle experience, which would allow them to greatly increase their own stats. It's all but certain that your A G I value was tied to the rate of triggering Criticals, thus I can't say I don't understand how they feel.

That is to say, Taikoku and the others are looking for Mahokl both out of a virtuous wish for the safety of their leader, and a greedy desire for the benefits of having a ballista. Seeing as Taikoku was that honest about their desires, he probably isn't a bad guy by any means, but we couldn't exactly tell him Mahokl's whereabouts after hearing all of that after all.

".....I wonder, why exactly did Taikoku-san demand not only the whereabouts of Mahokl-san, but the unlock conditions for the Dual Blades skill too."

At Asuna's words, I stopped my train of thought and looked up to her.

"Huh.....? Wasn't that because Mahokl started acting weird after info on the Dual Blades made the rounds? He probably thought that the Dual Blades skill was somehow tied to her disappearance."

"Though, couldn't he have just put off questioning why she had disappeared till after he got intel on Mahokl-san's whereabouts from us?"

"Hmmh, well, you do have a point there....."

Nodding, I tossed a third cookie into my mouth. After getting my fill of enjoying the harmony between it and the milk tea for a few moments, I made a proposal to my partner.

".....How's about we pay Zumfut another visit tomorrow.....?"

At that point, Asuna stared at my face intently, before blinking once and giving a smile.

"Yeah, let's do so."

"In that case, we've gotta hurry up and head to bed for the night."

Perhaps because I had gone into a serious battle for the first time in a long while now, the instant I made that statement, I felt my eyelids getting awfully heavy and let out a big yawn. Seeing as this world faithfully reproduced the tears that come after a yawn, by the time I stopped blinking to get rid of them, I noticed that Asuna herself had her hand beside her mouth before me, letting out a mild "Fuwa....." yawn. Seeing how truly lovely that action looked, I shook off my drowsiness and stood, before going around the table.

As Asuna tilted her head, as if nonverbally conveying a 'what's the matter?', I placed my arms on her back and beneath her legs, before lifting her up. "H-hey.....", cried out my esteemed young wife as I carried her to the bedroom, where I gently laid her down on the bed, before giving her a big old hug.

Despite her bewilderment at first, Asuna herself wrapped her arms around my head right away. Her slender, soft hand gently stroked through my hair.

Back when we had just moved into this log house---though it's only been but three days since then---I always found myself swept away by some hard-to-resist urges right after becoming this intimate with her, which led to certain brazen deeds, but strangely, all I felt right now was a deep peace of mind. As a certain emotion welled up from

deep, deep in my heart, I simply converted it into sounds right away.

"Asuna.....I love you."

At my words that, strangely considering they were coming from me, contained no pretense, Asuna stopped stroking my hair and likewise responded in a quiet voice.

"I love you too, Krito-kun."

".....I should have..... told you this back then much sooner, or so I think sometimes....."

As I muttered this with my face buried in Asuna's neck, Asuna's hands once again got back to work stroking my head.

"Are you regretting what you had left unsaid.....?"

When she questioned me about that in a whisper, I thought for a moment, before answering her.

"Not exactly regret, I guess. I do not think that the road we've walked along together..... or the time we spent together was a mistake per se. It's just that I sometimes simply wonder what would have happened had I confessed to you back when we had maintained our temporary duo on the lower floors."

"Hmmh....."

After she gave a sigh as if having put some thought to the idea, I felt Asuna smiling as she said the following.

".....I was quite the stubborn girl back then, so I'm not sure if I'd have given you an O K at the time, you know?"

"Wha.....really?"

"In that case, what would you yourself have done had I confessed to you then?"

"Well, I would have of course....."

After getting that much out of my mouth, I simulated my full-swing middle-school-second-grader mindset from back then, letting out a strained laugh involuntarily.

"Actually, I can't say for sure either, huh. I might have just run away or put up a brave front after falling into panic."

"See what I mean."

After giving Asuna another firm embrace as she gave off a big sis vibe for some reason, I pulled myself apart from her just a bit to stare at the lovely face right next to me.

".....Considering that, the fact that I'm doing this with you right now seems like a miracle, even if it took us two years, Asuna."

"Mm-hmm, I too....."

Asuna was about to say something as I sealed her lips with my own. Once the long, long kiss came to an end, her muscles relaxed and I took over stroking her head myself.

We must have spent about three minutes like this. By the time I noticed, my partner had already started letting out faint sleep breaths in my arms. Pulling up the blanket beside our feet up to the tip of our shoulders, I myself closed my eyes in peace.

28 October, nine in the morning.

After finishing an orthodox-but-satisfying menu of a salad-with-cheese, a thin slice of toast, bacon and eggs, and some coffee, Asuna and I left our log house.

Using the Teleport Gate in Coral Village that we reached after leisurely walking along a lake shore road, we teleported to Zumfut, the main town of Floor 3. We entered the south-eastern giant baobab building and walked up the stairs to the third floor. After walking along the circular road for a while, we came to a stop before a small door from my memories. However—

".....Wha....."

Cried out Asuna; beside her, I myself couldn't stop blinking.

The 【Mahokl's atelier】 sign that should have been hanging beside the door was nowhere to be found. Flustered, I gripped the door knob, but it vehemently refused to turn. Having peeked inside the atelier through the round window, Asuna instantly shook her head.

"It's all gone. All those materials and tools... every single one is gone....."

"For real.....?"

Suddenly coming up with an idea, I tapped on the door's surface with my index finger. The window that appeared following my action displayed the cost for purchasing the room. Meaning that it was no longer Mahokl's atelier even through the eyes of the game's system.

"For real?"

After muttering the same thing once more, I spent just three seconds exchanging a glance with Asuna.

It should have been around six in the evening yesterday when we delivered a bunch of materials that seemed to be the ingredients for a ballista to Mahokl's atelier and had a rocking chair crafted for us as a reward. It's only been slightly over fifteen hours since then, so what is the meaning of this? Although having doubts about it, I began by mentioning the worst possibility out there.

"Getting attacked by someone..... such as a remnant of LaughCof is kinda out of the question..... right?"

"I don't think that's what happened here. There's no way anyone could have cleaned out the shop this meticulously unless they owned the place.

".....You have a point. In which case, that means Mahokl hid herself away of her own volition sometime between last night and this morning, huh....."

As I continued staring at the door dumbfoundedly, Asuna said the following in a lowered voice.

".....There was something that had been bugging me a bit."

"What would that be.....?"

"Mahokl-san came to Floor 3 to hide herself from the members of the Kaishindou, remember. If so, don't you think that going out of her way to set up an atelier and even hang a sign outside defeats the purpose of coming here? Although there aren't that many players coming to Floor 3 this late into the game, that number hasn't gone down to zero entirely, and this is the main town. It's quite possible that info on this store could have been passed down to Taikoku-san and the others by people who just happened to come across it."

"I see..... you've got a point. In actual fact, Argo was very much aware of this store, after all....."

The instant the face of the info broker with three whiskers painted on her cheeks flashed through my mind, I gasped when I hit upon a certain possibility.

"Ah.....hold on now, could it be....."

"What's the matter?"

"It's nothing more than a guess of mine, but maybe, just maybe Mahokl herself was the one who told Argo about the location of her shop....."

"Huh.....?"

As Asuna took on a doubtful expression, I myself caught the 'keep it quiet' bug as I explained my idea.

"I believe even Taikoku and the others turned to Argo for help before going out of their way to come to me. The fastest way to find someone is to ask an info broker, after all..... yet, Argo didn't sell info on this shop to Taikoku. Couldn't it have been because she had been commissioned to do as such, perhaps?"

"So then why did Argo-san tell us the location of the store?"

"What if Mahokl had set it up so that Argo would only sell info on her store to people who met certain conditions? For example, players..... who haven't joined any guild, yet have quite a bit of capability in combat, or something like that?"

That instant, Asuna's eyes opened wide. However, her shock vanished right away, replaced by the sharp expression that reminded me of the «Demon of Clearing» from the old days.

".....If that's the case, Mahokl-san's been planning on constructing a ballista from the very start, huh. What's more, seeing as she is constructing one, her goal isn't to make a fancy decoration out of it,

but to actually put it to use..... Perhaps Mahokl-san didn't simply hide away, but instead went out to test the ballista in practice....."

"Huh..... w-where would that be.....?"

"I haven't figured out the answer to that question yet."

Seeing as she gave me an appalled look as she made that statement, I had to nod that I was getting ahead of myself.

"Hmmh, Aincrad is pretty expansive, after all..... —Though, seeing as a ballista has to be anchored in place to work, there shouldn't be all that many places where it could be of any use. It needs a place that would allow you to attack monsters unilaterally, without any risk of them closing in..... like, the top of a cliff or cloister, or a place overlooking a deep gorge....."

"Oh, and add a monster that doesn't move from its position or something of the sort."

"Whaaa? Now that's just asking for too much; where on earth would you find something *that* ideal-....."

Just as I went halfway through my sentence, I muttered out a silent "oh". A memory from nearly two years prior formed a small bubble as it floated up from my subconscious, until it surfaced into my mind with a burst.

".....There was one."

"There actually was a place like that."

As I exchanged a glance with Asuna, who had seemingly come to the same idea a moment faster than me, both of us nodded in sync.

Right afterwards, both of us spun around and began dashing towards the stairs.

There was in fact a monster that was literally rooted in place and thus couldn't move from its position. What's more, it was right here on Floor 3. There's no way that was a coincidence..... Mahokl had been planning on using her ballista on this very creature from the very beginning.

Having rushed out of the main town, we ignored the main road and plunged deep into the forest. Understandably, we aggroed insect-, beast-, and plant-type monsters one after another along the way, but we simply ignored them as we continued dashing. Although we had no choice but to fight the ones that we couldn't just avoid, Asuna and I were both over level 90, while Floor 3 was meant for players at around level 10. A single swing of my beloved Elucidator+45 in my right hand was far more than enough to make short work of them.

Having used the shortest route to cut across the «Forest of Wavering Mists» where maps don't function properly, we arrived at the mountain belt that divided the immense floor into southern and northern segments a mere fifteen minutes after we had departed from Zumfut. Back when we were clearing the floor, this trip would have taken an entire day, so it felt as if I was living in an entirely different age at this point, but right now wasn't the time to immerse myself in nostalgia.

A steep gorge opened up on the western side of the mountain belt; this was the sole passage leading to the northern segment of the floor. There was a small village right next to a lake, where you could gobble down some delicious fish dishes, but we didn't have the time for pit stops right now.

Once we came to a halt for a moment at the entrance to the gorge, Asuna exhaled a puff of breath before saying the following.

"Though I did predict as much, there really are no people around here, huh....."

"Well, the number of players who decide to venture out into the Outer Fields have gone down lately, not to mention that thanks to the fact that they can get their hands on some fairly strong equipment from the very start if they do decide to venture out, people apparently choose to start out from around Floor 7. That's probably exactly why Mahokl chose this floor specifically though....."

".....Let's make haste."

Nodding at Asuna's words, I stepped into the dim gorge.

The bat-type monsters that frequented this area weren't a match for us, we stayed on guard against P K e r s just in case as we spent the next few minutes trotting along the gorge. The other side started getting brighter..... and just when I had that thought, an unfamiliar sound reached my ears with an echo. 'Bun', came a whiz through the air, 'zukaan', came a clear crash. Speeding up, we went another twenty or so metres through the twists and turns of the gorge, when

A conical pit that almost looked like an artificial stadium appeared ahead of us.

It was probably about a hundred metres wide at its bottom. The sunlight coming in from the skies reached all the way to the ground. Unlike the barren bottom of the gorge, this spot alone was thriving in greenery, with small springs all over the place, making for what seemed like a tranquil scenery at a glance; however, a gigantic tree towering at the centre of the pit made picnics impossible here.

A squat and thick trunk with long and narrow branches. A creepy bluish-gray bark with barely any leaves around. To make matters worse, the dead centre of the trunk had a face consisting of three cavities. Needless to say, it was no ordinary tree, but rather a monster—— the first Field Boss of Floor 3, «T h e I n d o l e n t T r e e n t».

Although I had never heard of the English word 'indolent' before, according to our resident erudite Asuna-jou, it apparently meant "lazy" or "slothful". That naming probably came from the fact that the boss never budged the slightest bit from its position at the dead centre of the pit. You might think that's basically a given, seeing as it's a tree, but treant-type monsters in SAO pulled out their roots from the ground when they entered combat and did in fact move around quite nimbly. If you were looking for a specimen that didn't move at all, you probably wouldn't find anything other than this Indolent Treent here that fits the bill.

And Mahokl was probably aware of that fact as well.

At the entrance to the pit, I spotted a familiar short figure facing away from me, beside whom some sort of complicated wooden device was set up on the ground. Upon hiding in the shadow of a nearby rock and sneaking a look at the situation, I noticed that Mahokl was picking up horribly oversized arrows..... actually, those were probably short spears that she was picking up from the ground and then loading onto the centre of the device. As she pulled the ratchet-like lever peeking out from its rear back and forth, the bowstring that was fixed in place onto the bulky crossarm was wound up tight. Once she adjusted her sights and pulled the string dangling under the lever, another one of those 'Bun!' whizes that I had heard along the way rang out as the short spear was fired out, piercing the trunk of the treant in the pit.

"Mororooooo!!"

With that howl of fury, the Indolent Treent swung its long arms around, after which multiple purple spheres were shot out of its mouth in succession. The spheres caused mini explosions whenever they came down on the ground, though they never managed to reach Mahokl's position. That really was a perfect out-of-range attack—however, is this the epitome of what Mahokl strived to achieve? Is this really the goal for which she went out of her way to hide away from her companions, with whom she had devoted so

much time researching, without saying a thing to them and even risked sowing doubt and enmity.....?

After making eye contact with Asuna, I stepped out of the shade and walked up to Mahokl, specifically making my footsteps audible loud and clear.

Quickly turning around with her next arrow still in hand, the woodcrafter blinked repeatedly on the other side of her swirl glasses upon witnessing our faces, before giving a small smile.

".....So you really did find me, I see."

"We did have our fair share of trouble against that «Indolent Treent» there in the old days, after all."

When I responded as such, Mahokl began blinking once more.

"I see..... Krito-kun and Asuna-chan, you are part of the Clearers then, I see. Now it makes sense how you were able to collect the materials for this guy so astoundingly easily."

As the woodcrafter made this comment while stroking the mensa of the wooden device—of the ballista with her left hand, I spent the next few minutes at a loss on what words I should speak out next. There was no crime with what she was doing here per se and even though she was facing off against a Field Boss, a Floor 3 class one posed no danger to Mahokl, the head honcho of the Critlers. If I had to dig deep for issues here, it would be the fact that she would draw the attention of the big guilds among the Clearers, or «The Army», or even P K e r s if the existence of her ballista were to reach the public's ears, though that's exactly why she chose a spot that nobody was likely to ever visit this late into the game.

Making up for the fact that I was at a loss for words, Asuna enquired in a composed voice.

"Mahokl-san.....your goal isn't to defeat that boss, is it? Of course, neither is it to do some test firings with that ballista.....you have some other goal that we can't even conceive of, don't you.....?"

"Oh, what makes you think so, then?"

Mahokl responded with a question of her own while loading the spear in her right hand onto the mensa, prompting Asuna to explain her idea without any hesitation.

"The previous night, a companion of yours named Taikoku-san paid us a visit at our home. It seems he had applied «Commodity Tracking» to the table you were willing to sell to us."

"Oh my, so one of my own caused trouble for you, I see. He must have come on strong, right?"

"P-perhaps he was, somewhat..... When we heard all about you from Taikoku-san back then, I had a thought. Perhaps both the Woodcrafting skill that you completed, and this ballista were just a means to an end to you, Mahokl-san."

"A means, you say? What would the end be then?

"To reach the peak of True Criticals."

Despite hearing what Asuna pointed out, Mahokl did not give any answer right away. She wound up the bowstring with the ratchet handle, took aim, and pulled the string. The fired spear took on a slightly curved trajectory as it landed a hit on the Indolent Treent's roots, creating a remarkably intense flash and noise.

"That just now was my nine thousand four hundred and fifty first True Critical so far."

It took me about two seconds to comprehend the meaning behind the words that Mahokl muttered out. After exchanging a glance with Asuna, I asked again in a hoarse voice.

"Nine thousand.....y-you're keeping count? Of the number of Criticals you've had so far..... all of them?"

"That's right, I need it for data analysis, after all."

I found myself staring dumbfoundedly at Mahokl's profile as she loaded a new spear after giving such an answer as if it were no big deal.

Keeping track of the number on its own wasn't normal, but the big issue here was the number itself. Even if I were to spend an entire day farming at a single point, I'd probably still have to doubt my chances of getting a mere ten True Criticals pop for me, if we were to ignore Weak Point Criticals. Using basic maths, that would add up to three hundred per month, three thousand and six hundred per year..... of course, it's not like I spend every single day in combat, so my count for True Criticals even now, after two years in the game, is probably around five or six thousand, perhaps. Meanwhile, Mahokl has actually racked up nearly double that.

Even as such thoughts occupied my attention, the woodcrafter fired a new spear from her ballista, which sparked another flamboyant effect.

"Nine thousand four hundred and fifty two....."

As Mahokl muttered this, I couldn't stop myself from hitting her with a question.

"Is this..... is this what you wanted to do? Did you create the ballista solely for bumping your True Critical count?"

"Heavens no, there is no way I would do something like that.

".....Wha?"

As I once again lost my capability to form words at how outright she rejected that notion, Mahokl hit me back with an unexpected question.

"Kirito-kun and Asuna-chan, are you aware of the new Unique Skill that's become the talk of the town lately?"

"Wha.....w-well, yeah....."

After responding affirmatively to her question in an inarticulate manner, I finally realised something. Mahokl isn't aware of the fact that I myself am the owner of that very «New Unique Skill». Come to think of it, the newspaper published by the info broker never did go so far as to mention my player name, while even the article that details my Duel against Heathcliff only contains a photo of me down on my hands and knees, though solely of my back, thus likely only people whom I've known for a long time would be able to tell that that was me. Of course, you should be able to easily pin down my name if you were to ask Argo for it, though Mahokl apparently hadn't done so.

".....All this time, I had been under the impression that the Knight of the Blood leader's «Holy Sword» was S A O's one and only Unique Skill in existence. Yet, that wasn't the case..... which means that there are still some Unique Skills hidden in this world that can be unlocked through meeting some sort of conditions."

".....Could it be that one of these conditions is.....?"

As Asuna asked her in a whisper, Mahokl nodded in response.

"I cannot give you an elaborate rationale for this, but I am convinced that a new Unique Skill can be unlocked by achieving a ten thousand True Criticals against monsters milestone. Though, the problem is..... that the more you outrank the monster, the harder it becomes to get True Criticals against them."

"Wait, really.....?"

"Yes, really. Though, boss monsters are an exception to this rule. For the Kaishindou's training courses, we honed our True Critical techniques against Field Bosses on floors that have long-since been beaten. Nevertheless, getting twenty of them in a single day was already enough to be considered a great success..... yet, suppose you had a «weapon that can launch out-of-range attacks» against «a boss that does not move»"

"You could focus all of your attention on boosting your Critical count and never get tired because of it....."

"Indeed."

As Mahokl nodded at that, I started staring intently at her eyes, half-hidden behind her swirly glasses.

I never realised this while we were conversing with her in her atelier in Zumfut, but those eyes seemed to be swirling with an even greater madness and obsession than even Taikoku, the guy whom I Dueled the previous night. Although I was afraid of asking her directly about this, the reason why she had attempted to keep the formula for producing a ballista a secret even from her companions, like Taikoku, was probably because only a single person could earn the right to acquire a Unique Skill for themselves.....I assume.

'Okay, now those are definitely the eyes of the head honcho of the extremely egoistic group known as the Critlers', coming to grips with that idea, I turned my gaze towards the Indolent Treant as it continued swinging its arms around inside the pit.

The treant's HP bar was, surprisingly, not even halfway down. Mahokl was undoubtedly using the lowest rank short spears out there as her arrows to hold back on the damage she was dealing. Even when you beat them, Field Bosses can continue to repop indefinitely, while Mahokl can acquire as much timber for her spears as she could possibly ever need just outside the gorge, thus if she continued camping down here to fire her ballista at this rate, it

is probably possible for her to rack up those remaining five hundred and fifty True Criticals without even needing ten days for the job. And I had no reason, nor right to insist on stopping her.

"I see..... that answered a whole lot of questions. Sorry for getting in your way."

After giving a slight bow, I opened my storage and materialised a huge load of drinks and food I had been keeping in stock.

"Here, a refill. While I would like to continue keeping you company till you reach your ten thousand, I can't exactly sign up for that, you see..."

"Wha.....you sure I can have this?"

As Mahokl looked on in astonishment, I gave her a broad smirk.

"Sure. I'm not exactly in a position to make demands, but if you do succeed in learning a Critical-related Unique Skill, could you join the Clearers with that ballista of yours in return? I'm sure the bald-headed axeman would be more than delighted about it."

At that point, the petite woodcrafter opened her eyes wide in nostalgia for a moment, before groaning out a "Mn!!" and responding with a profound smile.

"I'll think about it."

"Well then, I'll throw in a freebie. If you're after acquiring a Unique Skill, you'd better take on the «Meditation» skill and level it to 500 proficiency."

"Huh.....? Why would I need to go out of my way for....."

Just as Mahokl was frowning in doubt, her eyes suddenly opened wide beyond her glasses.

"Ah..... Krito-kun, could it be that you're the one who....."

By the time Mahokl got to saying that, I had already turned back with my right hand waving to her. As I was briskly walking into the dark gorge, Asuna caught up to me and questioned me in a whisper.

By the time Mahokl got to saying that, I had already turned back with my right hand waving to her. As I was briskly walking into the dark gorge, Asuna caught up to me and questioned me in a whisper.

"Say, what's that about the Meditation skill? I never heard anything about that!"

"Oh, it's not like I have any solid proof for it yet, you see....."

"Geez, you're not weaseling your way out of this one! I have interest in Unique Skills myself, I'll have you know!"

Twisting and turning my body to escape from Asuna's physical attack, consisting of noogies with her fingers on my sides, as if we were back in the old days when we had formed a duo on the lower floors, I said the following.

"Alright, alright already. I'll explain when we get back home, okay."

"I'm going to hold you to your word!"

After one last noogie, Asuna stepped ahead of me and turned around, a radiant smile finding its way on her face.

"Alright, let's go buy something for lunch somewhere and go back home!"

"Oh, I'm personally getting a craving for some seafood from Floor 4 for the first time in a while."

The moment I answered thus, I heard the ballista shooting once again behind me. And then, the boss treant's bellowing. Although I

did feel a slight bit uneasy at the fact that the bellowing was so intense that you wouldn't think it was actually coming from a Floor 3 class foe, it was impossible for any incident to crop up as long as its attacks couldn't reach her.

"Hey uh, seeing as there's a village beside the lake out here, why don't....."

Just as I was midway through with my proposal, Asuna gave a light pull on my coat. When I came to a stop and looked at her beside me, the fencer was in the middle of brooding over something with a somewhat uneasy look on her.

".....What's the matter?"

"Ehm.....Say, Kirito-kun. Mahokl-san's ballista is officially regarded as a weapon by the system, right?"

"W-well, yeah. The arrows, I mean spears, are flying away straight, and they're even dealing damage too."

Despite my answer, Asuna's expression didn't improve.

"But then..... if we suppose that is the case, what Weapon Skill would be needed to use a ballista? SAO doesn't have any Bow skill, nor does it have a Ballista skill either, right. Is it even possible to use a weapon without a respective Weapon Skill for it?"

"....."

Unable to answer that question right away, I myself started brooding over the matter.

The action of «using a weapon without a respective Weapon Skill» by itself is not impossible per se. For example, a guy without a Spear skill such as myself equipping a halberd and swinging it around..... is *technically* possible, and I would even be able to deal damage if I

managed to land a hit on a monster. However, it would be a minuscule amount, not to mention that I wouldn't be able to activate Sword Skills with the weapon. If we were to consider throwable weapons instead, it'd be impossible to even have it fly straight.

And so, it's not against the system rules for Mahokl to be firing her ballista without an appropriate Weapon Skill per se—and yet it does seem strange that her spears have a perfect streak of hitting the treant, and then there's the fact that the attacks are resulting in proper damage. Generally speaking, weren't the spears supposed to fly who knows where, and weren't even those that did manage to land a hit by fluke supposed to barely leave a dent on the target's HP bar?

"What if....."

At my mutter, Asuna peered into my face.

"What if the ballista is a weapon that was designed early on in the development but was supposed to have been scrapped, just like the usual bows and arrows, due to a change of mind midway through..... in which case, there sure is the possibility of the system deciding to roll out a fix in real-time, just like it did with the infinite material spawn bug....."

"A fix..... so like, the ballista disappearing into thin air all of a sudden?"

"Nah, I can't really imagine that something so supernatural could take place, but..... if the fix were limited to just, for example, disposing of the merits of the weapon, it might actually be plausible....."

"Merits..... so you're saying that it would remove the possibility of attacking out-of-range at no ris-....."

Just as Asuna was midway through finishing her idea, it happened.

Deep inside the gorge, the Indolent Treent bellowed out once more. Its voice was fifty percent louder than it had been before and now carried a tinge of frenzy, causing Asuna and I to stiffen up with a jolt.

Exchanging looks, we nodded to each other, turned around at the same time, and dashed off. Running through tens of metres in a split second, we returned to the entrance of the huge pit.

Mahokl's short back and the huge ballista anchored in place were the first things to spring into my view. While beyond them, in the middle of the stadium-like pit, the Indolent Treent was swinging around its branches-for-arms like crazy while twisting its hulking trunk. 'While it wasn't exactly unheard of for boss monsters to go into a frenzied state, did this guy ever even have such a behaviour pattern?', just as I was about to rummage through my memories from Floor 3's clearing days...

Numerous cracks ran through the ground from where the treant's roots lay. The slight tremors even reached our feet outside of the pit itself, resulting in creaks coming from the ballista's frame. My bad feeling about what was to come suddenly shot up sky high as I attempted to call out to Mahokl, who had apparently yet to notice our presence, to stop her firing. However, just a moment sooner...

'Bogogogoh!', came an exaggerated tremor as the treant's roots were uprooted out of the ground. No, wait, they were actually pulled out..... of its own will.

It took but ten seconds or so for all of the thick roots growing radially outwards from the treant to come out of the ground. By this point, Mahokl had apparently taken note of the aberration with the boss monster herself, as she materialised a short spear that you could clearly tell was high-grade from just a quick look at it, rather than the usual cheap ones she had been using till now, and then loaded it onto the ballista. She probably intended to halt her Critical farming and instead bring her foe down. While I myself do believe she made the right call there, however—

"Mororororoooooh!!"

Unleashing a bellow that was in a whole different league compared to those that had come before, the Indolent Treant whipped the ground with tremendous force using its roots, and began moving at surprisingly breakneck speeds the very same moment. It was a behaviour pattern that utterly belied the «Indolent» in its proper name. Most likely, it was an action that had not been programmed in for the creature from the very start, but was rather added in by the SAO game system in real-time as a workaround for the out-of-range attacks coming from the ballista that shouldn't have even existed. In which case, it's possible that its behaviour patterns weren't the only thing changed here.

Once Mahokl pulled the ballista's string, the high-grade spear was fired out with a whiz. Having shot out straight, the spear landed a fine hit on the treant's trunk, yet its HP bar didn't decrease all that much. Nevertheless, Mahokl was about to load her next round, when I called out to her from behind.

"Its stats probably got amplified! You're better off picking up your ballista and pulling back for now!"

Just then, turning around for a mere moment, Mahokl responded with a panic-tinged voice.

"No dice, I need sixty seconds to both set it up and pick it back up again!"

"You wot....."

I instinctively exchanged a look with Asuna. Setting it up taking so long was one thing, but doesn't the fact that it takes a minute to pick it back up again make it practically impossible to retrieve the thing in any case where some crisis breaks out? We were probably a mere forty..... make that thirty seconds away from the Indolent Treant reaching the edge of the pi---

"Moroh!!"

Bellowing out once again, the tree spirit brandished its right branch up high. 'From every point of view imaginable, it just can't possibly reach us yet', despite such a thought coursing through half of my brain, I reflexively rushed out, grabbed Mahokl's torso and did a back jump that very same moment with all I had. Right afterwards, the branch swung downwards with a roar, its tips growing out mid-air as if the branches were made out of rubber, and smacked the ballista set up over thirty metres away from it.

With just that single strike, the crossarm and frame made out of highly-valuable teak were smashed to pieces, while the bowstring weaved together with dragon tendons came off its clasp and flew out into the air. Looking at the smashed-up loads of timber that flew into the air, Mahokl and Asuna both shouted out, "Argh!", at the same time.

While I myself did feel sad at the sight of what became of the ballista that we had spent so much effort on to gather its materials, we didn't have the time to lament its fate right about now. Letting go of Mahokl's body before the harassment warning could crop up, I pulled out my beloved sword from by back.

"Mororoh!"

As it swung down its left branch this time, the branch grew out mid-air to close in on us in a similar manner. Jumping in front of the two girls, I did manage to neutralise the blow, though a shock wave that was just short of triggering a Stun coursed through my entire body. That felt like a blow from a Floor 40, wait, make that Floor 50 class foe.

".....We could just run away if we felt like it....."

Turning around as I said that, I found Asuna shaking her head without a moment's delay.

"Though rather unlikely, if some player in the Floor 3 level range did come by here, they would be in trouble."

"You do have a point there..... Guess we have no choice but to bring it down then."

Though Asuna and I were over level 90, bringing down a Floor 50 class Field Boss on our own was by no means an easy job to pull off. After glancing at the stock-still Mahokl, I quickly operated my menu window. I then pulled out the «Dark Repulser» , my other beloved sword, crafted with great care by Lisbeth's Smith Shop, that had appeared on my back with my left hand. That instant, Mahokl's eyes went wide open.

Having pulled out her «Lambent Light» , a rapier that was likewise crafted by Lisbeth, Asuna said the following to Mahokl.

"Mahokl-san, we'll go bring that thing down, so wait for us here, please."

".....Oh, no."

Having recovered from her daze, the woodcrafter quickly shook her head, before bringing out her own window. 'She can't possibly be planning on setting up a new ballista, can she.....', or so I thought, but what actually materialised into her right hand was a single quarterstaff. Despite being only half the size of the two-handed staff that Taikoku, the guy I had fought the day before, had used against me, it was clearly far higher-ranked as a weapon than his staff. Although I had no solid evidence to support my assumptions, my instincts told me that it was likely made from carefully-chosen rare lumber that she had once commissioned Agil to gather for her.

"I shall fight too. I was the one responsible for amplifying that treant, after all."

Although I wavered for a moment, Mahokl herself was actually a combat-oriented player, rather than an artisanship-oriented one. What's more, she was the leader of the «Kaishindou», the group that devoted their entire existence to researching True Critical Hits. If a player like that offered their help in a fight, I couldn't exactly stop her.

".....Alright."

Once I quickly sent out an invite, Mahokl accepted it without any hesitation, which resulted in a third HP bar appearing in the upper-left corner of my view. Nodding to each other, we jumped into the pit from the gorge, dashing out ferociously towards the giant boss monster.

Sugary Days Epilogue

RAWS CELEST TRANSLATION GSIMENAS EDITING CIRTOYT PROOFREADING JENGKAY
October 28 2024

Seeing as Asuna, walking beside me, was in a strangely good mood, I timidly asked her the following.

"Ehm.....why are you all smiles right now?"

"Hm, that's a secret."

Despite giving such an answer, Asuna pounced on my left arm, entwining her own arm with it. Seeing as the road leading from the main town of Floor 22 to the lake was as always deserted, I returned the gesture by firmly clutching her hand myself. 'I wonder, will we ever be able to walk through the main street of the player crowd hub of Algade with our hands joined like this one day.....', as such thoughts passed through my mind, we continued leisurely walking along the road leading to our home, when...

".....I wonder if Mahokl-san will still be aiming for those ten thousand Criticals....."

Seeing as Asuna muttered this with a change of her facial expression, I groaned out a "Hmmh".

"She did say she wasn't going to construct any more ballistas, after all..... Though she does only need five hundred fifty of them out of ten thousand by now, so she might just finish up the rest with her staff."

"If she does manage to actually unlock a new Unique Skill, I wonder what could it be like..... Hey wait, that reminds me, Kirito-kun, you did say something about the Meditation skill back there; what was that all about? All it does is give a regeneration buff; it doesn't have anything to do with Unique Skills, correct?"

"That is a seeeeecret."

Just when I got my payback for her remark just moments ago, my sides were suddenly ground by her right elbow.

Having gained the ability of self-propulsion, the Indolent Treent (modded) actually proved to be quite the formidable foe. A particular pain in the ass was its new-found Defence capabilities that were probably granted to it in order to counter the ballista's penetration power; its bulky bark absorbed my slashes and Asuna's thrusts as if it were a cushion, so I had braced myself for a drawn-out battle to come—or so I had feared, but then an unexpected tip on how to beat the boss came from Mahokl, of all people.

Usually, this type of monster was a poor match for blunt attacks, yet True Criticals specifically were actually abnormally effective. And so I switched my Elucidator for the wooden sword I had received from Taikoku; as I focused on farming Criticals, we managed to mop up in twenty minutes or so.

Just as I received Mahokl's thanks, she extended an invitation for me to join the Kaishindou, but I politely declined; we parted ways upon returning to Zumfut, the main town of Floor 3, together. Seeing as she mentioned returning to her Kaishindou dojo somewhere in Aincrad, Taikoku will probably be relieved upon hearing the news as well. If we ever managed to meet her again after she became the third Unique Skill owner someday, as Asuna had hoped, we'll need to have a grandiose celebration for the occasion, I believe.

There was one thing bugging me though: when we got back to Zumfut, Asuna and Mahokl had vanished from my sight for a good fifteen minutes or so on their own. I was plagued with thoughts like, 'Where on earth could they have disappeared to and what exactly are they up to', or, 'Wait, don't tell me Asuna was invited to the Kaishindou too.....', but I was unable to read my esteemed young wife's innermost thoughts from her profile. Well, if it does come to that, becoming a Critler myself might not be so bad.

Eventually, the lakeshore road split into two; once we climbed up a small hill, our cosy log house came into view. Standing still and quietly in a forest that had turned crimson, our home sweet home looked so beautiful that you'd think it came from a fairy tale illustration.

Opening the plain-wooden gate, we passed through the front yard lawn and onto our porch—

At that moment, Asuna let go of my hand and jumped upon the wooden deck that looked out onto the living room. Once she opened her window, 'Ta-da!', she said as she materialised some kind of huge object.

—Don't tell me.

Don't tell me she brought a ballista.....? So she disappeared back in Zumfut to get a new ballista produced for her?

That guess of mine, however, was way off, of course.

What appeared there was a rocking chair, shining lustrously due to the autumn sunlight. Just then I finally recalled that Asuna did say that she wanted a second one to have one for both the living room and the wooden deck.

"So you had this made for you..... In that case, I should have ordered a fishing rod for myself. Though, why did you keep it a secret?"

Once I posed this question while walking up to her, Asuna responded somewhat awkwardly.

"Well, I was thinking that maybe we actually were buying up a bit too much furniture..... And you didn't seem all that interested in it, Kirito-kun."

"Why would you ever come to that conclusion."

Upon denying that notion with a straight face, I caught Asuna off-guard by lifting her up into my arms and then sitting down on the new rocking chair with great force. "We can do this on it, after all!", I shouted out as I began rocking us. Letting out a scream, Asuna clung to my neck.

Once the rocking eventually settled down, Asuna peered into my face with a pouty look.

"I swear, you always come up with the most childish of things."

"Well, I am a child, after all'..... what would you do if I said that, then?"

"Whaa?.....Oh, but you do indeed feel like one from time to time, Kirito-kun. Then, how about I start calling you Kii-bou, like Argo-san does, as well?"

"A-anything but that."

Saying thus in a panic, I sneakily sealed Asuna's lips in order to prove that I wasn't an elementary schooler, at the very least. Embracing her slender body tight, I prayed that our time like this would continue on for just a bit more..... even a single day longer.

[Material Edition 6] Algade Showdown

TRANSLATION PRYUN, BEGINNERXP, TAP

October 28 2024

On a certain evening, a few days after the newly married life of Asuna and I begun, in the log house inside the deep forests on Aincrad's 22nd floor.

While talking about places visited during the day or eaten dishes, on the sofa which was placed in front of the fireplace, Asuna suddenly said what she was thinking aloud.

“Hey, Kirito-kun. I think, maybe that person wasn’t an NPC but a player”

“Haa?”

Not understanding her sudden topic, my mouth was left slightly opened.

While sitting side by side on the sofa, her lips continued to sip from her tea cup.

“Well, that shop’s master, I naturally believed he was an NPC without a doubt. But today, somehow, while I was watching his face, I suddenly felt that that person is actually a player.”

The subject of our conversation was a restaurant. It was located deep within the back of the back and even further back of the lower part of the 50th floor’s main block town «Algade». If we were to go there without a map, not just arriving at the destination, coming back out would be difficult. Actually «restaurant» was not an appropriate word to describe it, «Food Shop» would be more suitable. Its name was «Algade House».

The building looked as if it would collapse if it was blown by a somewhat strong wind. There was a sign curtain hung at the sliding door entrance. The interior had a stone floor — or rather a bare

concrete floor, there were two 4-seat-tables and another four seats at the counter. All the furniture had a strong presence of cheapness, and it wasn't like they were specially ordered to make them cheap either.

In the menu, there were only 3 entries. «Algade Soba», «Algade Grilled» and «Algade Boiled», none of them had any motivation behind their naming. They were, in the menu order, a ramen which didn't look like a ramen, an okonomiyaki which didn't look like an okonomiyaki, and last one, I still don't have any idea what it is supposed to be.

The order was then cooked by the same shopkeeper. While Asuna was saying «that shop's master», My mind imagined the short master with a white smock and a white toque, whose round face of unknown age was hidden behind the long forelock, then I finally replied,

“.....P..Player?but that person didn't say anything”

“At least he did say ‘Welcome’ and ‘Thank you’.”

“Those are normal for NPC though actually if you target him with the cursor”

Saying up to this point, I noticed something.

There is a definite distinction between a player and an NPC: focusing the gaze on the target will bring up the «Color Cursor». Although both types would appear in green, for an NPC, under the HP bar will be a clearly displayed [NPC]. But this distinction method wouldn't work inside the shop, as it was classified as inside a building, due to the consideration of the system. It is probably impossible to eat quietly if the cursor kept appearing whenever someone is seen, so even if I focus my gaze on the store's master, the cursor wouldn't appear.

But, normally nobody cares about determining an NPC, because they are so obvious with just a glance. Unlike flesh and blood humans operating through the Nerve Gear, system controlled NPCs have unique characteristics. Being imprisoned inside SAO for two years, it was a no-brainer to know if other people are a player or an NPC without even thinking — while I thought about that, my brain re-checked the master of Algade House's gloomy standing pose. Then, my eyes opened wide in amazement.

“This is bad, somehow I can’t be sure.”

“Right?”

Asuna smiled happily for some reason.

Her smile, which hasn't changed since we first met, shot through my heart. whenever this happens, I always stretch my hand out dizzily to reach her. But this time, the face of the master that had been floating in my brain prevented my action.

I scratched my head to push that unpleasant image out of my mind. “No, but is it even possible that someone can't be identified whether they are a player or an NPC? I'm sure there must be a simple way to check it.”

“How about checking his reaction after being attacked? But once we use various reckless methods and he turns out to be a player, we won't be able to go back to that shop anymore. Well, at this point, I don't think I want to go back there anyway.”

“No, I'm bothered, really bothered.”

Asuna quickly shook her head and sighed.

“Kirito-kun, what on earth do you like about that shop? It's been half a year since you brought me there the first time, I really don't understand...”

“About that, I don’t know the reason myself. Unfriendly atmosphere, bad food... but occasionally I can’t resist the urge to try that mystery ramen again.”

“That was not ramen though. Well, why not just ask? Are you an NPC or a player, like that”

Already having considered Asuna’s idea several seconds ago, I shook my head.

“Nope, it won’t work. That shopkeeper’s unfriendliness is like ten Heathcliffs together. I’m absolutely certain the question will be ignored. Well, that place was also a good place too.

“R..Really? Just leave it as a mystery then. I’m sorry for starting the weird topic, Do you want more cookies?”

After saying that, Asuna stood up, but I quickly grabbed her left hand and pulled her back.

“No, I can’t leave it.”

“Eh?”

“Feeling anxious over and over like this will become unbearable. I can’t go back to the front lines until I know whether the shopkeeper is human or NPC.”

Upon hearing that, ‘Don’t say something like that!’ was clearly showed in Asuna’s expression, but she sat down again without saying it out.

“But, then what should we do? I don’t know any way to confirm it, and asking is also out of the question, right?”

“Nope, there is a way. In short, just seeing the cursor when that master is outside the shop is enough. For a player, he would surely

need to go out to buy food ingredients, while NPC also have specific behaviors like cleaning the outside of the shop too.”

“.....Y..You don’t mean.”

Asuna made a stiff face and tried to walk away from the sofa again, but I grabbed both her shoulders and said,

“OK, tomorrow let’s go camp there at six in the morning. There is an empty passage across the street, it won’t raise any suspicion if we observe from there.”

“It’s cold, surely, very cold.”

“Yes, we need cold resistant equipment! I’m sure we have enough for both of us in the storage, then the boxed lunch will be made using cold resistance boosting ingredients too. The preparation is now flawless, I’ll leave it to you Asuna!”

To my words that gushed out, Asuna made a very complex face then responded with ‘Oh~’. But enthusiasm seemed missing from her words for some reason.

Next day.

While it was still dark, wearing thick fur cloaks, we entered our observation position on the pedestrian bridge across from the Algade House’s eaves.

Six hours later.

We were forced to retreat after realizing our prospect bore no fruit.

“He didn’t come out at all, did he!”

At an open cafe along the main street, Asuna complained after quickly drinking hot milk and placing the empty cup back on the table.

“Even before that, the sign curtain was left out during the night, and there was no indication of the outside cleaning either. I’m very bothered!”

“Really sowwy about that.”

I first have to apologize on behalf of the shopkeeper. Algade House’s level of lethargy is much higher than anticipated. The shopkeeper never came out to purchase stocks nor clean outside. The only change we observed was the sign plate on the sliding door, which was changed from [Closed] to [Open] at ten. Of course, just that action on its own wasn’t enough to determine if he is a player or an NPC.

“Hmm, but the food ingredients should eventually run out..... Then he surely has to go out to restock”

After finishing my mumbling, Asuna replied with a sharp glance toward me,

“Then, do you really want to wait for that to happen? If you think about it, that shop doesn’t even have any customers, how many days will it take for the ingredients to run out? I won’t be surprised even if it takes several weeks! I’m not going to do that for sure!”

“S..Sorry ”

I apologized again, then thought desperately. Something—there must be a way. A way to confirm whether he is a player or not, without him taking a single step out of the shop. If we’re unable to check the person, how about the shop? Is there any way to determine if the shop is a player’s shop or an NPC’s shop? It would be clearly a player’s action if it stood out among the

elegant buildings on the street of Salemburg. But this is Algade, the most chaotic town in Aincrad, there were plenty of similar shady shop once we enter the back streets.

—It was no good. Continuing being in the clearing group for two years in this Aincrad, accepting the alias «Black Swordsman», but unable to distinguish whether that person was a player or an NPC. It was such a laughing matter.

A smile of self-ridicule floated to my face, then — An idea flashed out in my brain.

“That’s it!”

“What?”

In spite of Asuna’s skeptic glance toward me, I rattled on,

“If the ingredients won’t deplete, then we’ll deplete them ourselves! Listen, for NPC restaurants, the term out of stock doesn’t exist to begin with, the food just springs out from the kitchen. But a player’s shop is different, the shopkeeper has to purchase the stock or else food can’t be made. That means. ”

At this point Asuna suddenly rose from the table and tried to escape with a dash.

But my focus on increasing Agility stat displayed its results, her hand was grabbed before she made any distance.

“—We just have to eat it! Anything from that shop’s menu!”

“Don’t wanna! What if it’s an NPC restaurant? An infinite amount of food will just come out, won’t it?”

“That’s that, then we’ll know he’s an NPC right? Let’s go now! The problem is —— Which one to pick from the menu. «Algade Soba», «Algade Grilled», or «Algade Boiled». Asuna, what do you like?”

Sub-leader of the guild Knights of the Blood, the rapier user whose title was «The Flash» shot her gaze towards me which would be able to pierce a small hole in the middle of my forehead after hearing my question—

After a short while, she sat back on the chair and said,

“«Boiled» is absolutely out, «Grilled» that sometimes contained strange things is also out.”

“Then «Soba» it is. Yeah, it is suitable for this challenge too, because it’s also what we ate the first time we went there.”

“That’s right, but didn’t we invite the guild leader as well back then?”

When I seriously tried to recall it, Asuna immediately shook her head.

“It was a joke. Then, when are we going to do it?”

I grinned while standing up, and said,

“Isn’t it great, we haven’t eaten lunch here.”

Several minutes later.

Asuna and I were standing in front of the food shop, which will soon be the battlefield of our one-sided duel.

“Here we go.”

After confirming with the nod from my partner—— My left hand pushed aside the dirtied sign curtain, while my right hand forced open the sliding door.

“Welcome.”

The usual greeting voice from inside the counter was by none other than the shopkeeper. I sat at the counter instead of my usual table. As soon as Asuna sat down beside me, I made an order.

“Two Algade Soba.”

The shopkeeper prepared the bowls without replying, two mysterious balls of noodle were tossed into the large pot. From these actions, it was still not possible to confirm whether he was a player or not. After a while, the shopkeeper used the long chopsticks to move the eased up noodle to the bowls, hot water switching, which is required in the real world, seems unnecessary here. He placed a thinly sliced meat, a lump of boiled vegetable, and half a boiled egg, then poured the light colored soup into the bowl. Two bowls had lined up on the counter, a sound effect rang out when I pulled out the soba from my storage.

Both of us took the chopsticks and said ‘Itadakimasu’ at the same time. It was the start of the first round of the battle.

In regards to Aincrad cuisine, the taste was recreated from the presets of basic taste data, however, with the addition of seasoning, one can customize the taste even further. For example, the Brown Stew, which is Asuna’s pride, was made by slightly mixing the spices set into the taste of ready-made sauce. In other words, with the aid of a player’s hand, the flavour of the dish could be strengthened, and in most cases, enriched the taste.

But it would be quite a miraculous to say the «There is not even one taste» feeling from the Algade Soba was from the aid of the player hand. Even if the flavour of the soup had seasoning added, the strength of the taste was like it had been diluted to a different dimension, it was like a drawing which the background was firmly written but the subject didn’t exist.

Maybe what pulled me back to this shop was that missing flavour, for the moment one day that this dish will be «Completed», an

ephemeral expectation like that —But of course, I somehow knew that the moment would never come.

As I was deeply indulged in my thoughts, Asuna, whose face had an expression which could be read as ‘Why is this happening to me’ was beside me. We finished eating at the same time.

I returned empty bowls back to the counter, then said,

“Two Algade Soba, refill!”

There was a slight pause in the shopkeeper’s action, but it was probably just my imagination. The round face of the man in his thirties to forties under the long forelock bore no expression at all, the shopkeeper threw two balls of noodles into the large pot.

From that point on, the endless battle of me and Asuna against the master begun.

Of course, no matter what was eaten in Aincrad, there won’t be anything entering the stomach in the body of the real world. But the taste reproduction engine tricks the brain, which lead to an unavoidable feeling of ‘full’.”

To be honest, that feeling already came after the second bowl had emptied, but there was no path for me to retreat.

“Two Algade Soba, refill”

This full feeling was only a hallucination, the soba was merely digital data. Which meant there was nothing preventing me from eating these forever.

Having fooled myself like that, I finished the third bowl and proceeded to the fourth bowl. There was also Asuna, whom I could always rely on in the big battle, she was at exactly the same pace as me.

But immediately after she finished the soup from the fifth bowl,
“Kirito-kun, I’m sorry.”

her faint whisper echoed from the emptied bowl.

“I..can’t go any further, I’ll have to leave the rest to you The
truth..you must..find..it ”

Her chestnut color hair fluttered, then «The Flash» collapsed on the counter.

—ASUNAaaaaaaaaa—!!

Was what I wanted to scream, but doing that might allow the virtual stomach to reverse something back out, so I limited myself to a short ‘GJ’.

I lifted my face and glared at the shopkeeper,
“.....One Algade Soba refill”

I was also near my limit.

For Asuna’s sake, I can’t be defeated here. But while sipping from the sixth bowl of something which wasn’t ramen, I was unable to stop the fear which sprung out inside me.

Maybe he was really an NPC? After all we had done, the noodles and the soup still sprung out without any pause. Did I challenge him to a fight in which we had no chance of winning?

No, even if it’s the case, it wasn’t the time to fall yet. For Asuna.

Seventh bowl.

Eight bowl.

The HP bar of my stomach was now in deep red, but the expression of shopkeeper was still unchanged. I slurped the noodle one by one, while thinking of a way to reverse the flow of the current battle situation.

If it was a real ramen shop, there would be pepper, fish meals, or onions at the counter. It was possible to eat the latter half deliciously

by changing the flavour. But this shop had no such wonderful things. There was only one way, with «Algade Boiled» being an exception, it was possible to mix the other two orders together, but doing that would be the same as stopping oneself by stabbing. Why «Boiled»? I once accompanied Klein and we requested that, we both said ‘Give up’ just after two mouthfuls, it was menu of the legend.

—So is this the end?

Within my fading consciousness, I heard the reviving voice from a distant memory.

The face of Asuna, who was here eating Algade Soba with me at the beginning, said,

“Someday I want to make a soy sauce, otherwise this unpleasant feeling won’t ever disappear.”

“!”

My eyes fully opened, and my trembling hand moved to open our shared storage. Scrolling through the enormous item lists, finding the target item.

Once I grabbed what I was looking for, I tilted it over the bowl, a slightly dark liquid poured down and immediately caused the thin yellow color of the soup to change to brown. The drifting fragrance can’t be compared to anything else, the smell that is ingrained at the base of my memory was — soy sauce. It was the result of Asuna’s

long research, Aincrad's ultimate seasoning that no one but her could make.

Placing the small bottle down, I held the bowl and sipped large amounts of noodles and soup.

“This is it.”

I murmured with a hoarse voice. It was this taste. The one I was looking for, the completed form of Algade Soba. It had arrived here and now.

If eating this, then no matter how many bowls — No, maybe I can eat five more bowls, I still can fight!

—At that time.

The words I have never heard within this shop before echoed from overhead.

“.....Mister, that, taste it, can I?”

I raised my confused face, nodded and pushed the bowl to him. The mystery master grabbed it up and ate the mouthful of noodles and soup together. He looked up for a while after placing the bowl back on the counter—

Soon after that, two lines of tears flowed from behind his long forelock.

“.....This is it. This taste... real world's my shop's taste!”

—So you are a player after all!

—Then act more graciously! Swallowing what I wanted to scream, I asked,

“ Your shop, where is it located?”

“Hmm, It was at Ogikubo; I got sucked into SAO so it went out of business. But once the game is cleared and I go back to the other side, I’m going to open a ramen shop again. With this ramen, also «Grilled» and «Boiled» will make the appearance too, come by all means.”

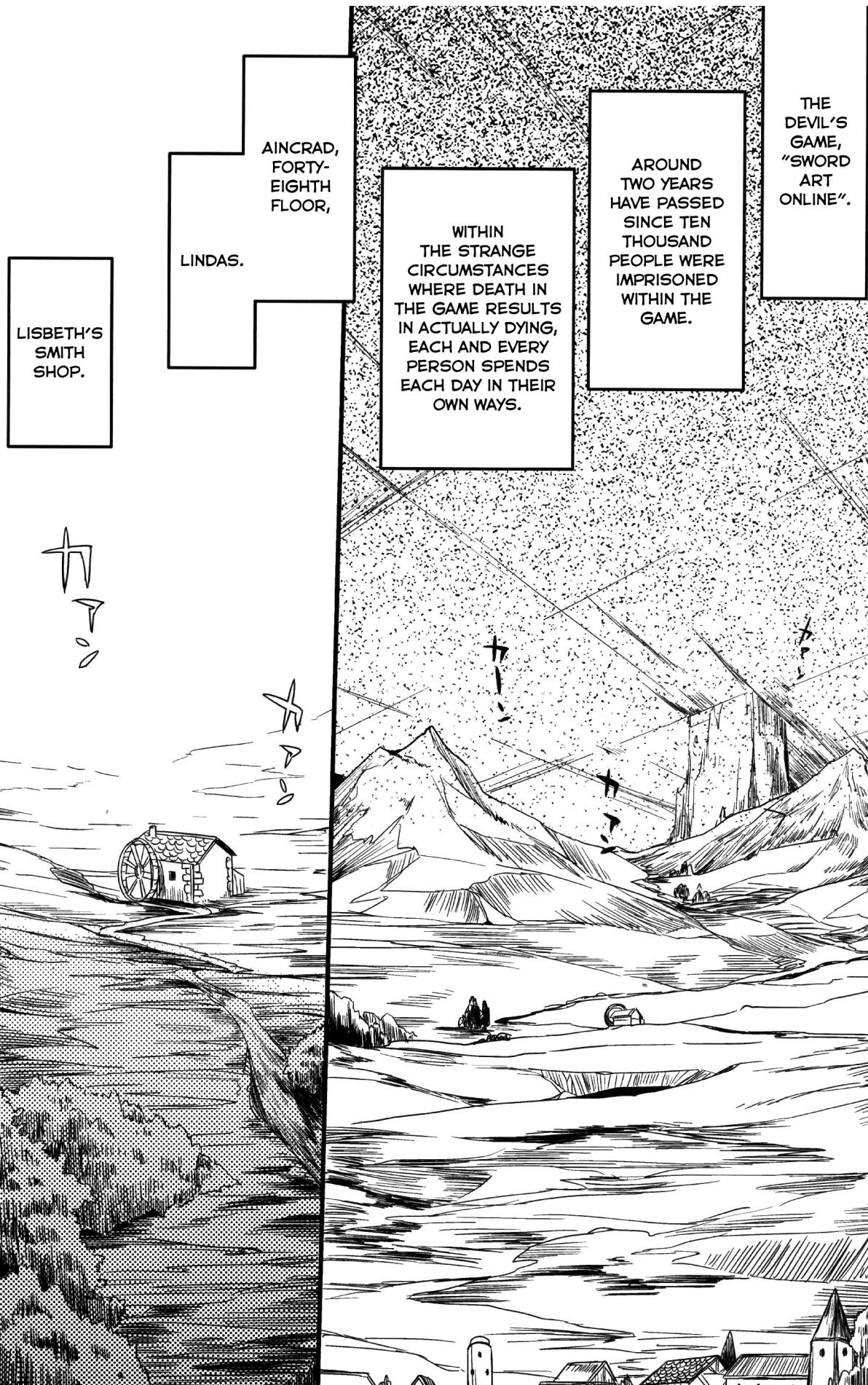
Tears still flowing down his face, where was that silent character earlier? While watching the shopkeeper who had gained momentum talking, I collapsed onto the counter.

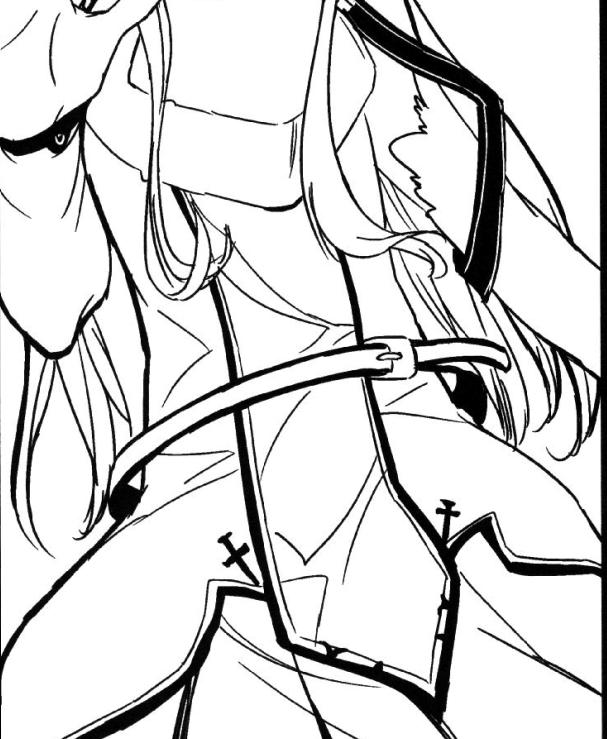
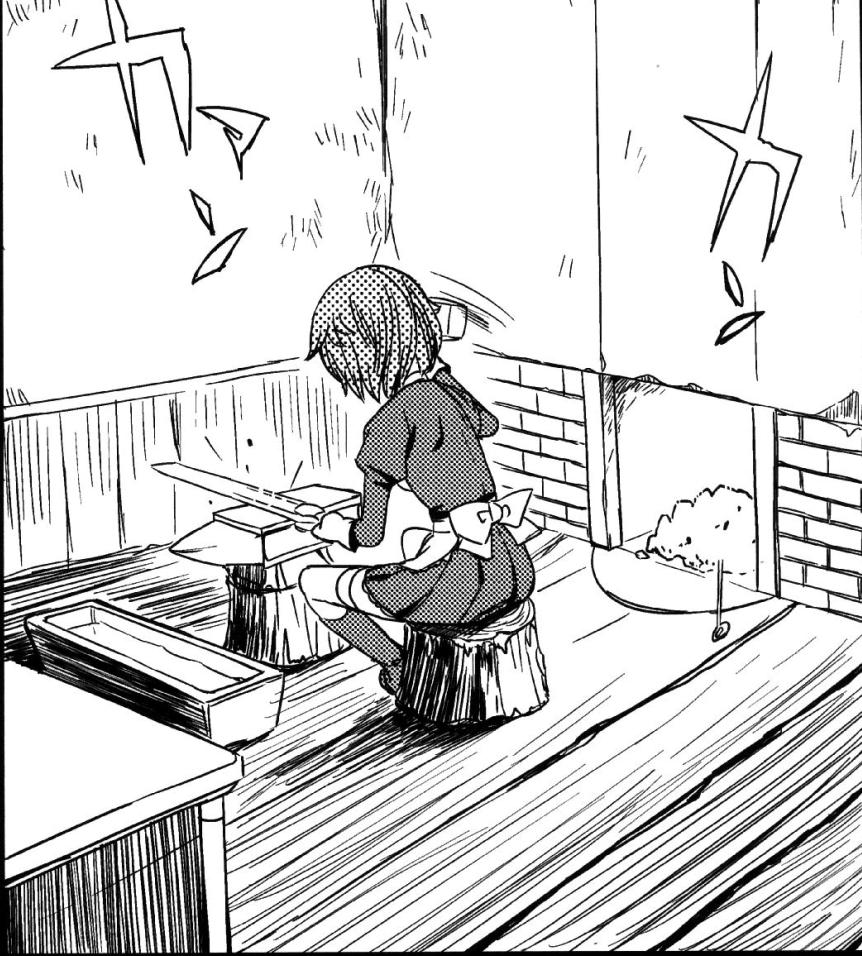
As my consciousness was fading, My last thought was,
—I won’t go, absolutely—

Extraordinary Ordinary days

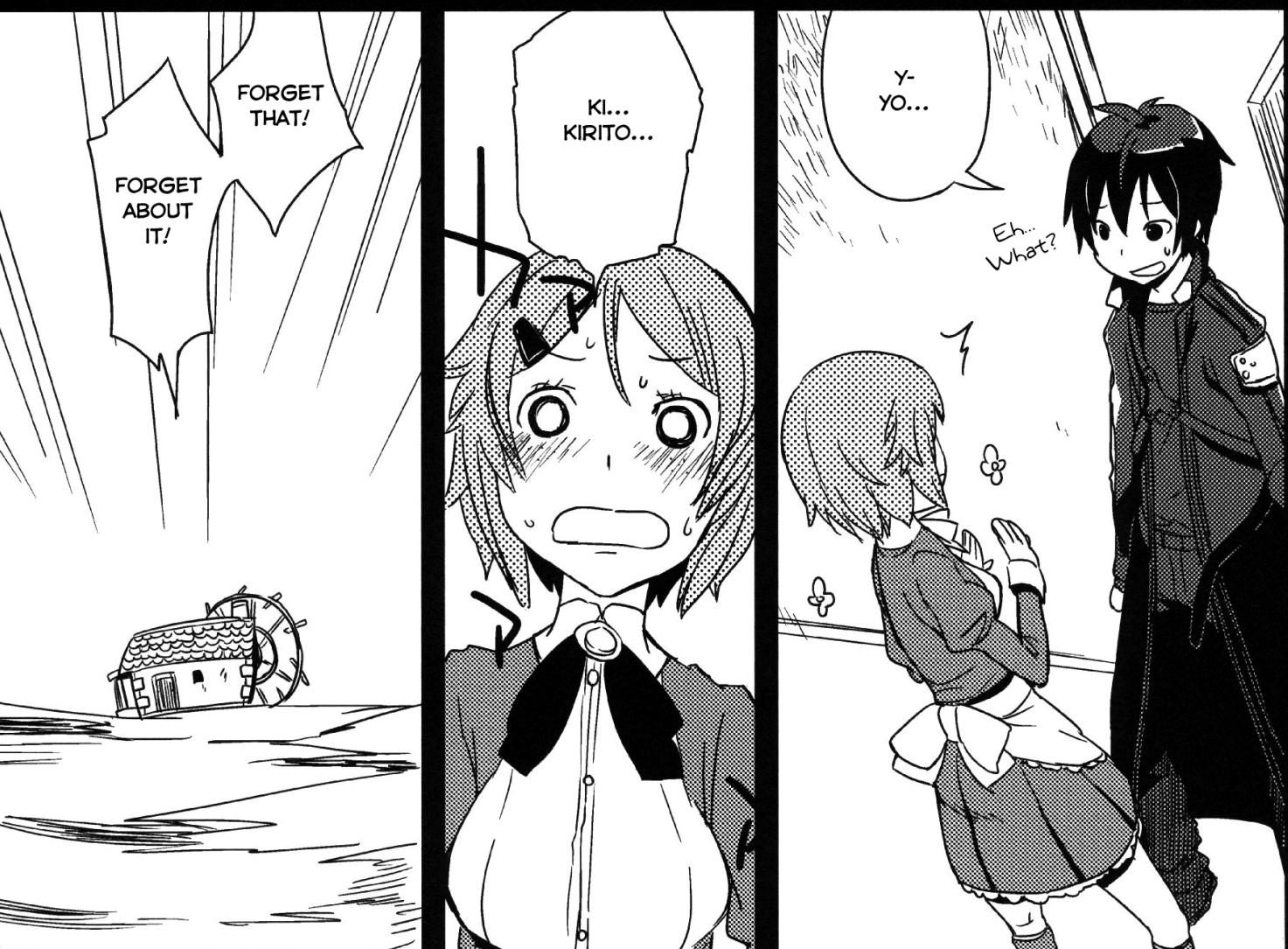
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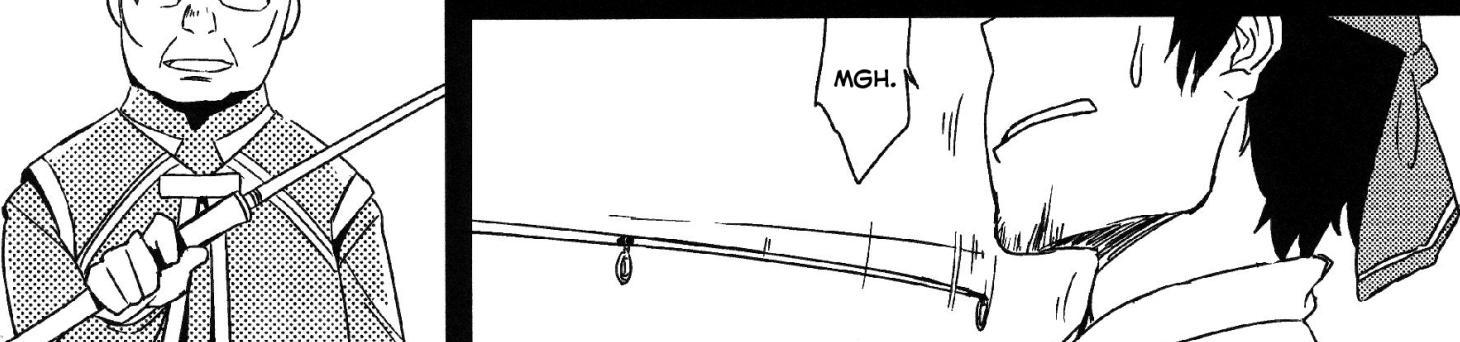
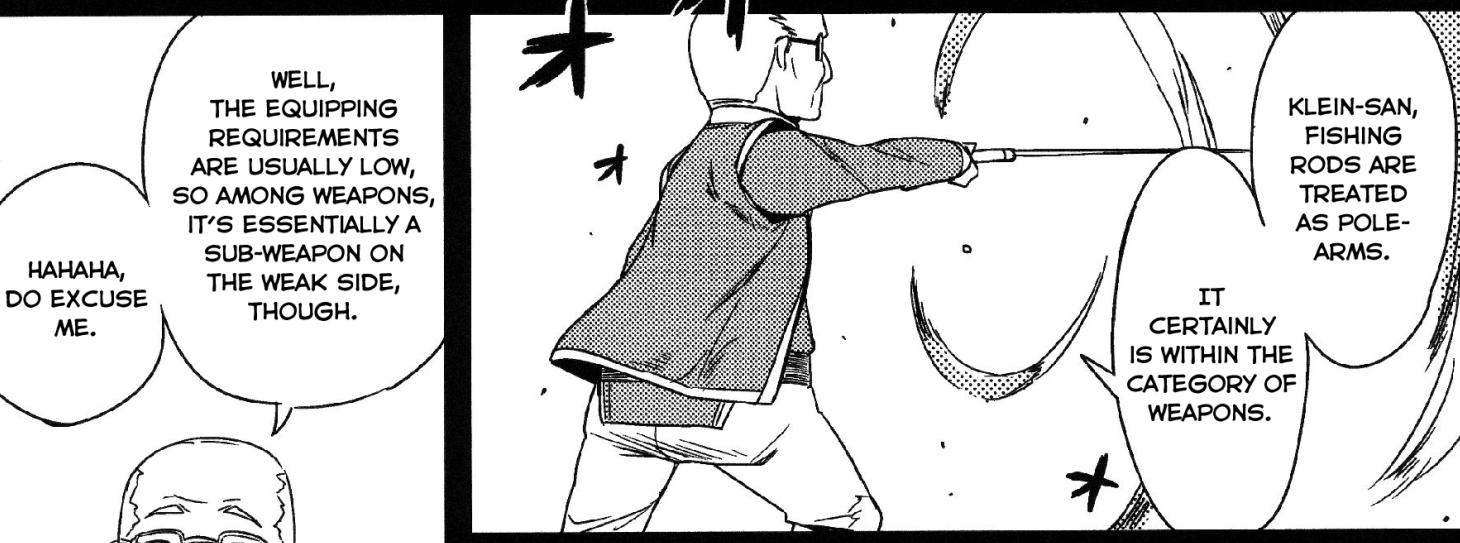
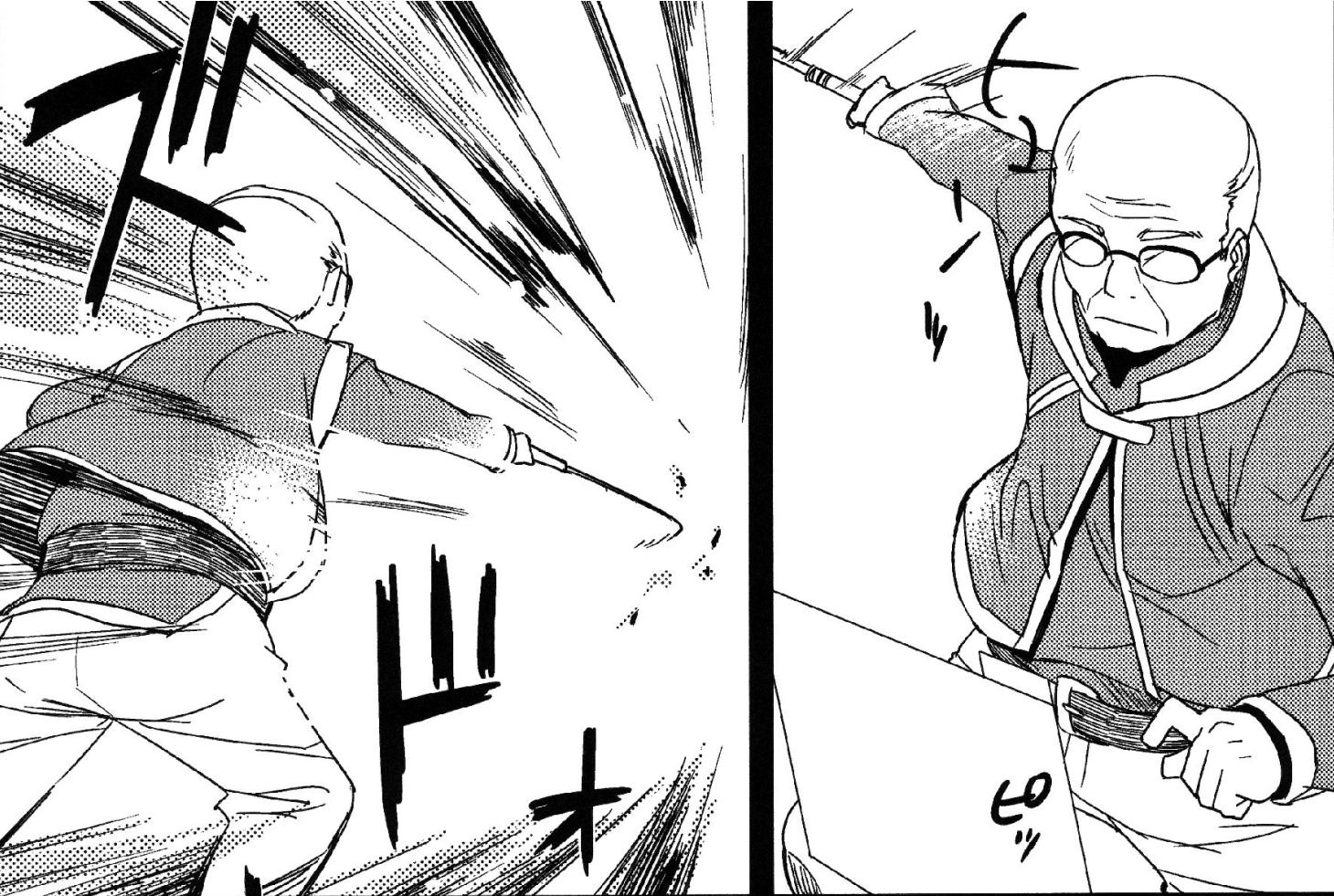


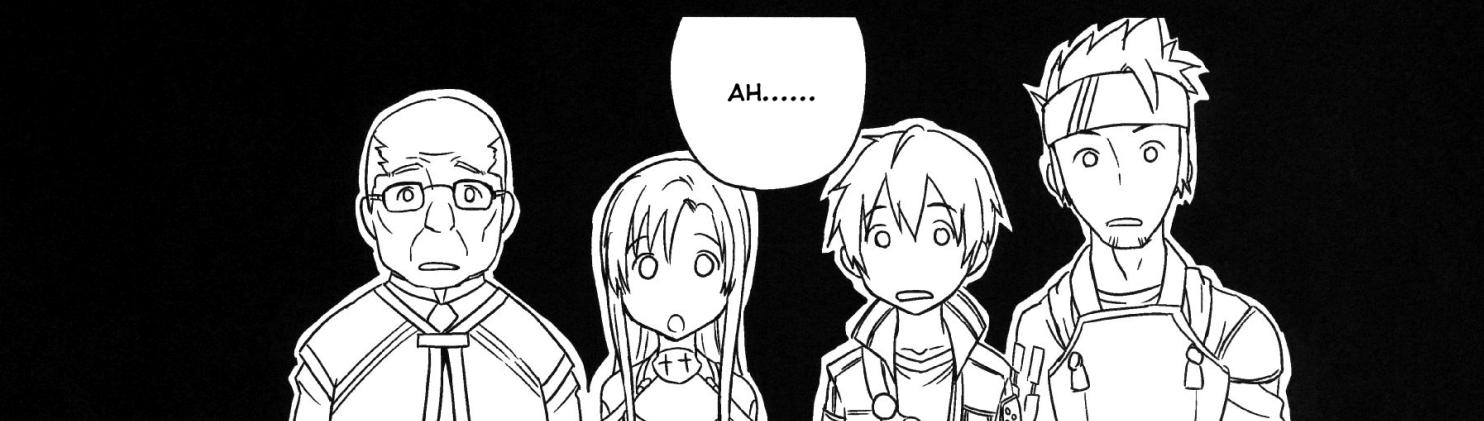
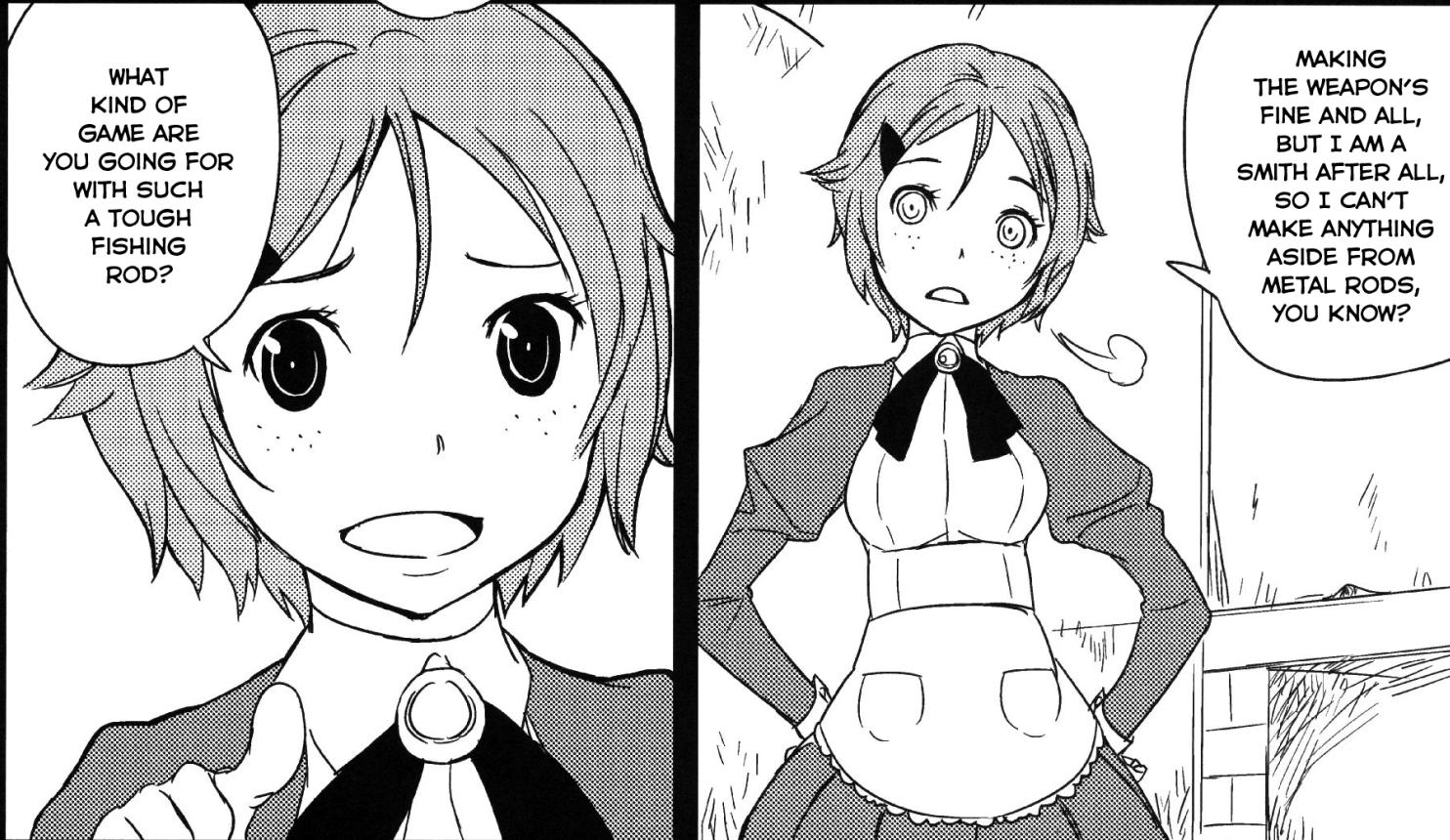






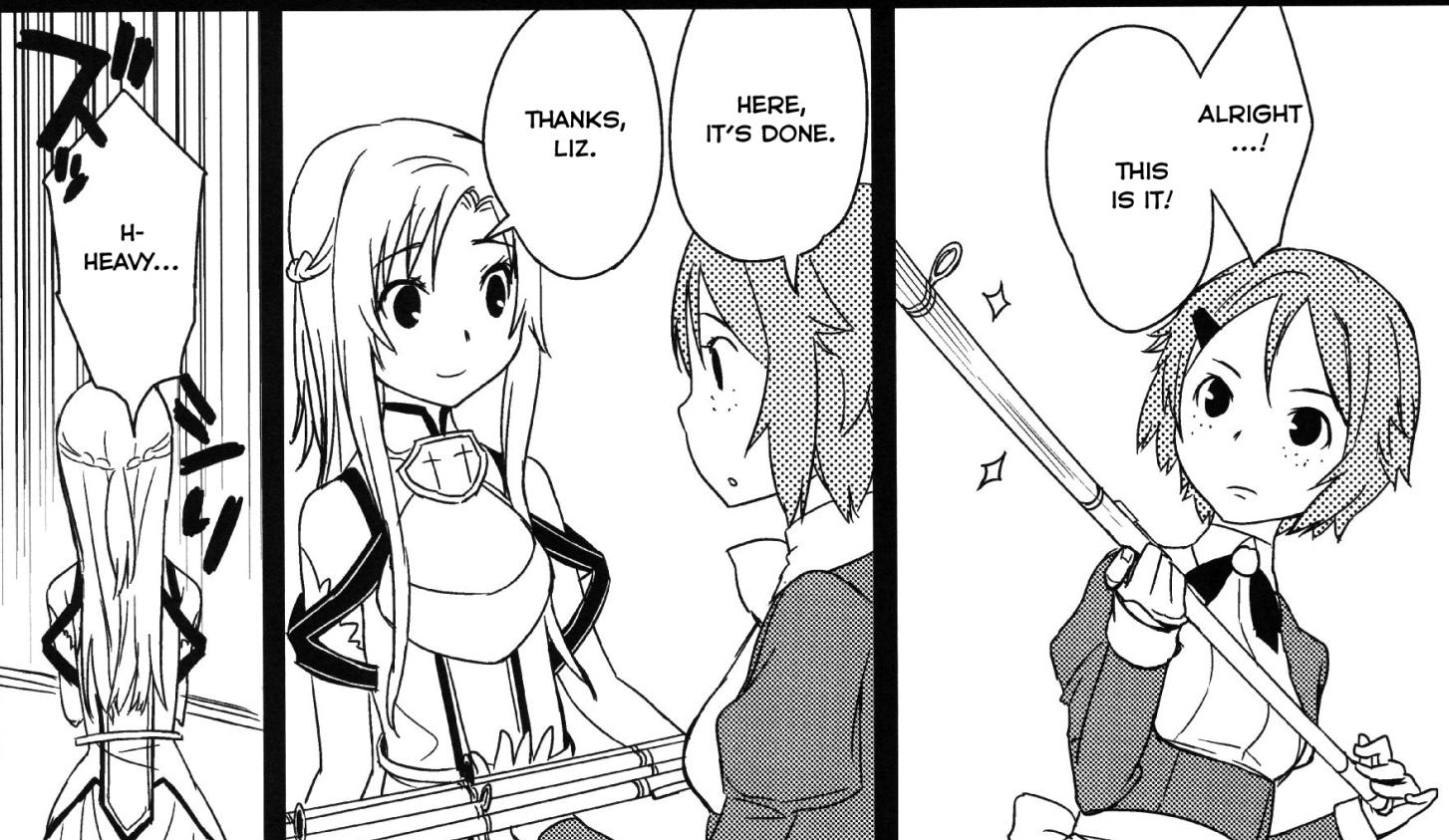


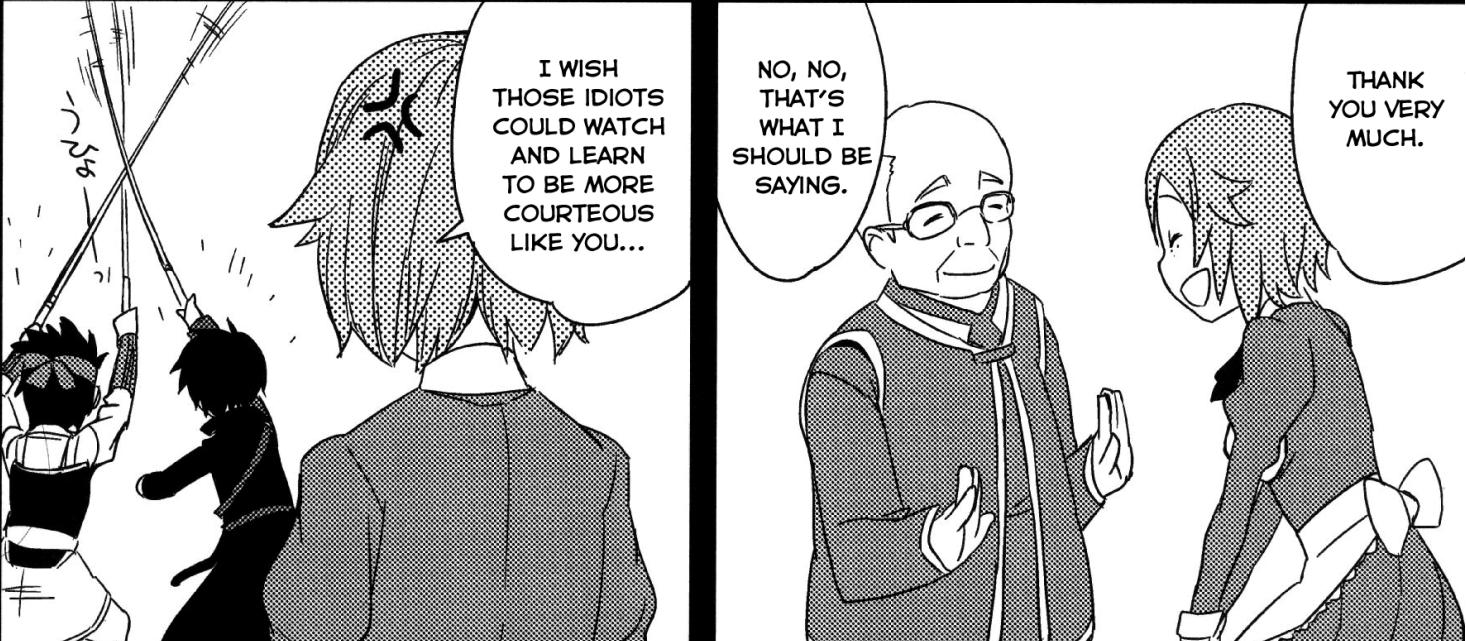
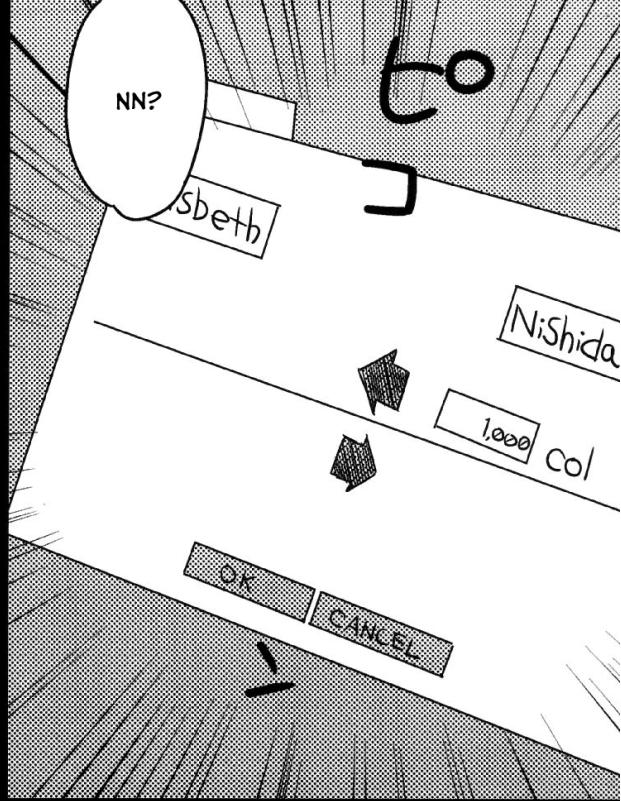




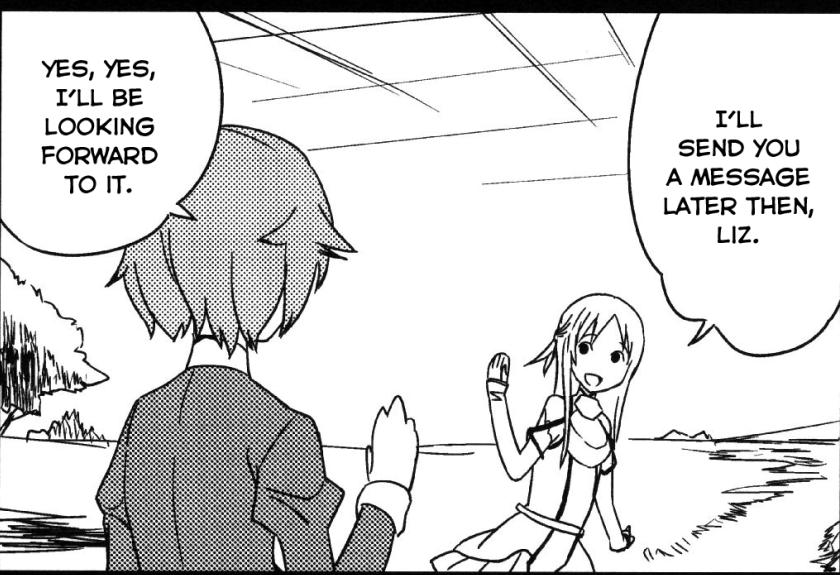
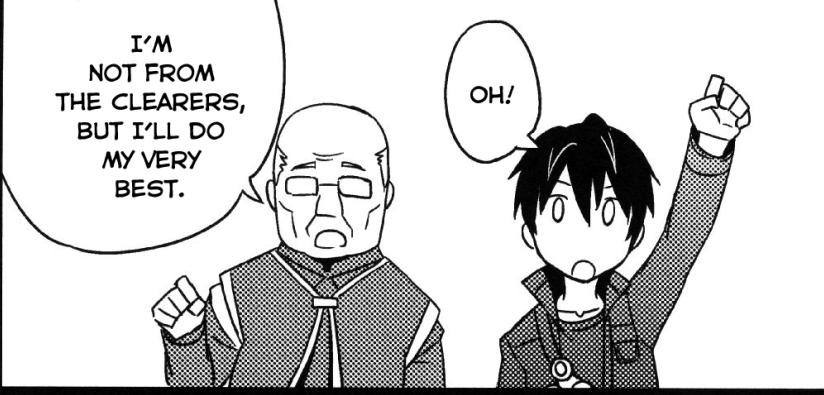


SUCCESS!
Ping CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG









[Silica Edition] The Final Promise

TRANSLATION TAP

November 7 2024

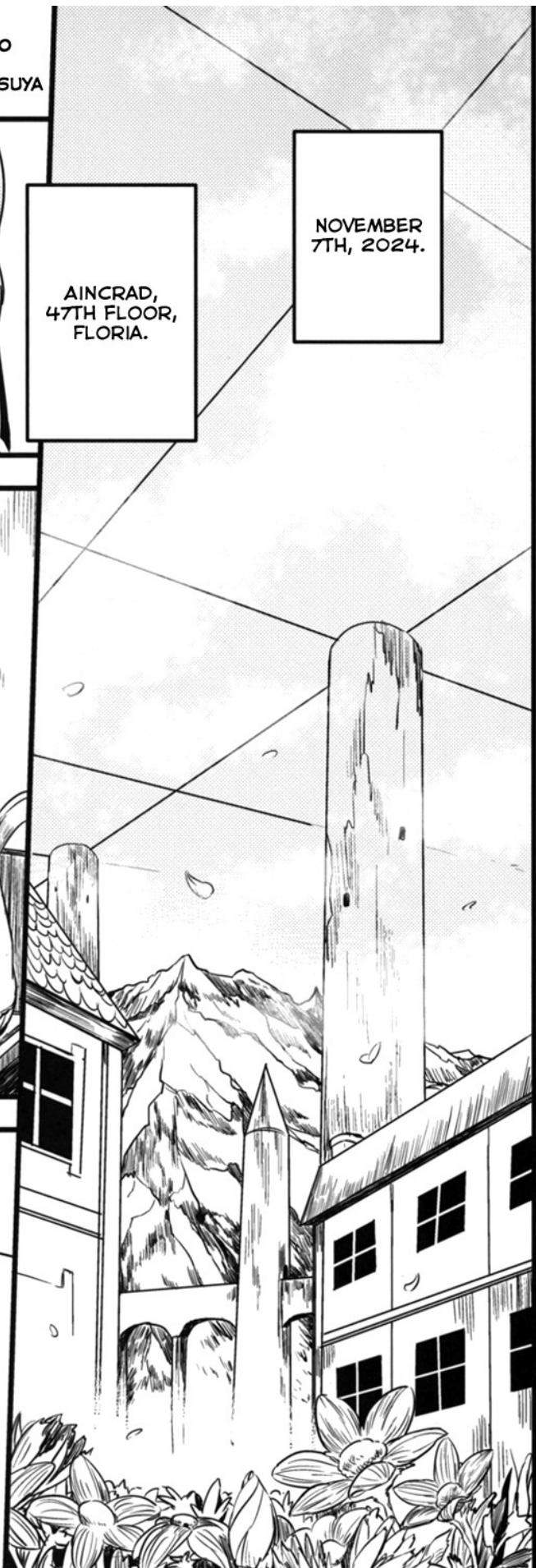
THE FINAL PROMISE

ORIGINAL WORK KUNORI FUMIO
ART WORK KURUSU TATSUYA

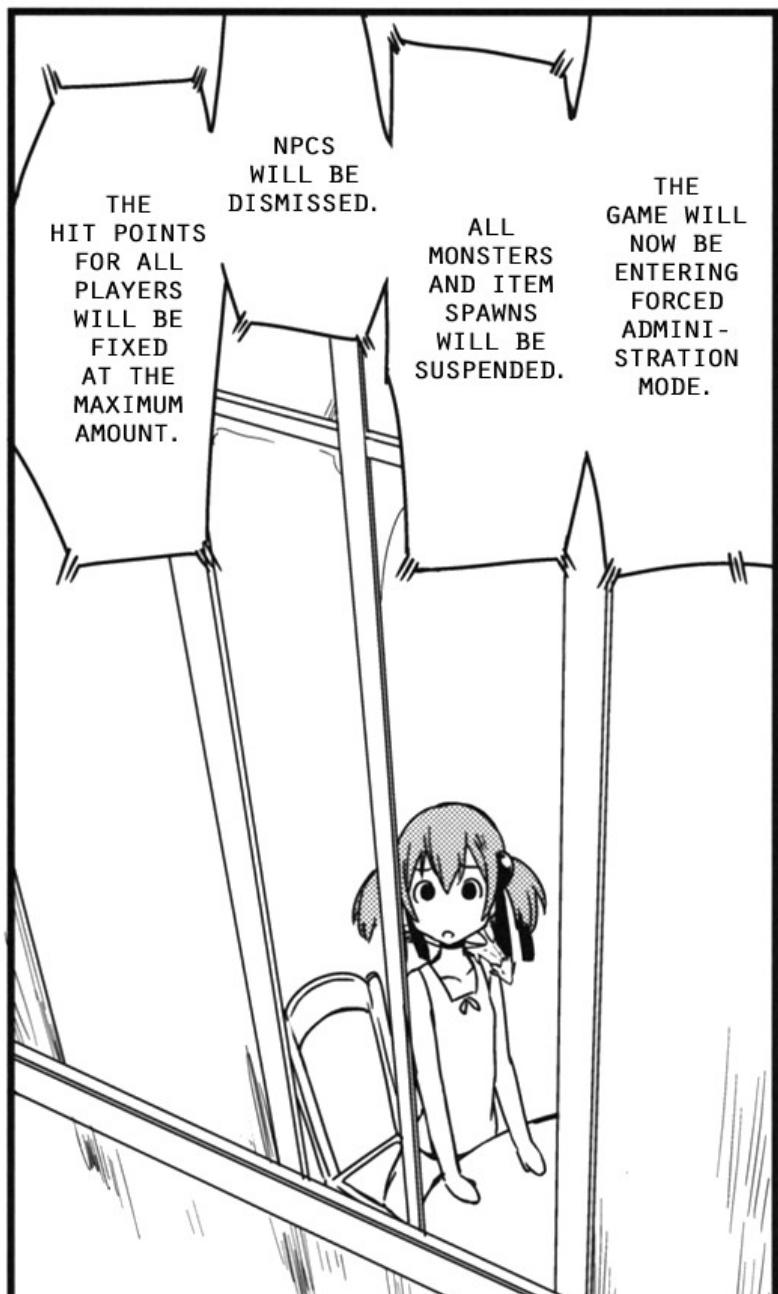
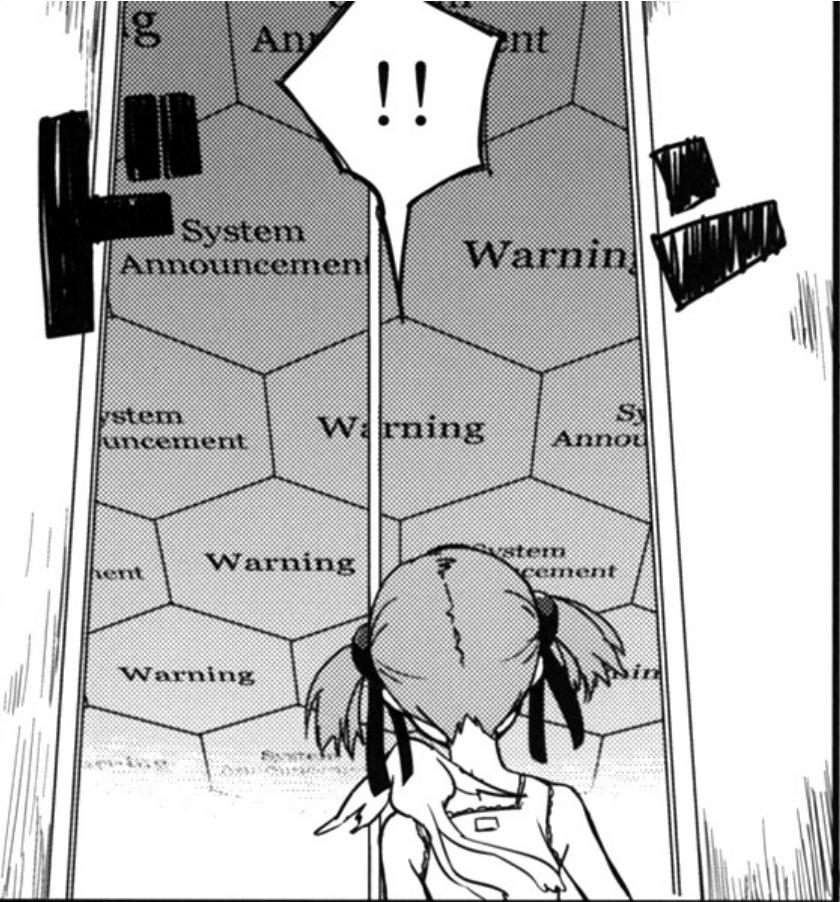


AINCRAD,
47TH FLOOR,
FLORIA.

NOVEMBER
7TH, 2024.







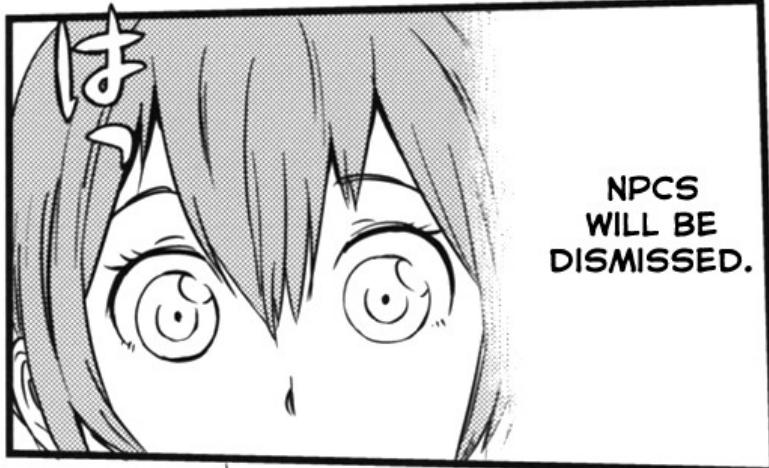


ALL PLAYERS WILL BE LOGGED OUT FROM THE GAME IN SEQUENCE. KINDLY WAIT AT YOUR CURRENT LOCATION.

THE FRONT LINES SHOULD BE ONLY AT THE SEVENTY-FIFTH FLOOR...

WHAT'S WITH THAT?

I WILL NOW REPEAT—

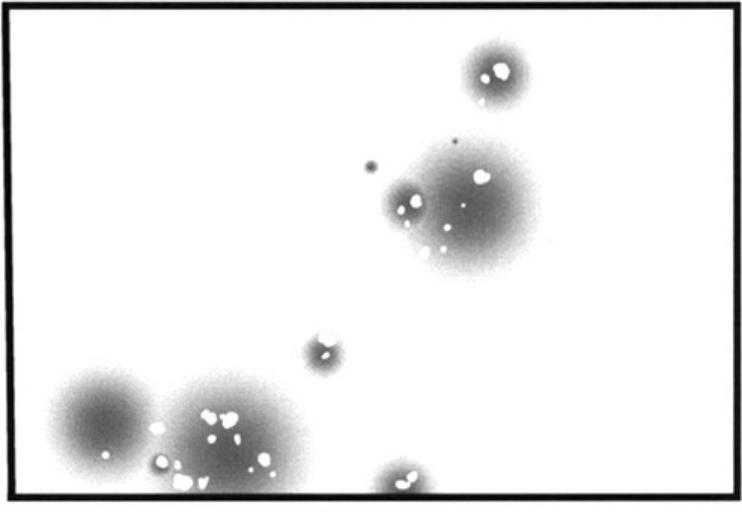


PINA!

PINA WAS TRYING TO TELL ME THAT.

THAT'S RIGHT, LOGGING OUT FROM THIS GAME WOULD MEAN THAT I HAVE TO LEAVE PINA...

AH...



WAAAAA

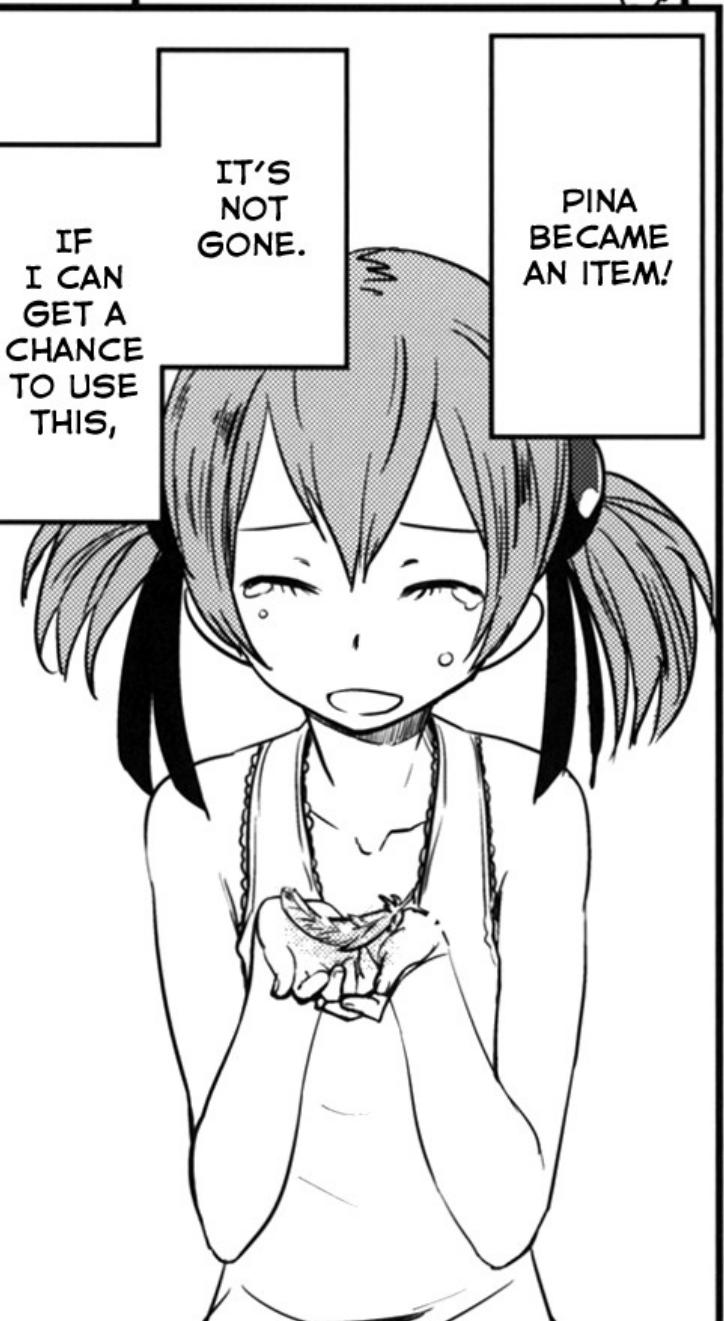
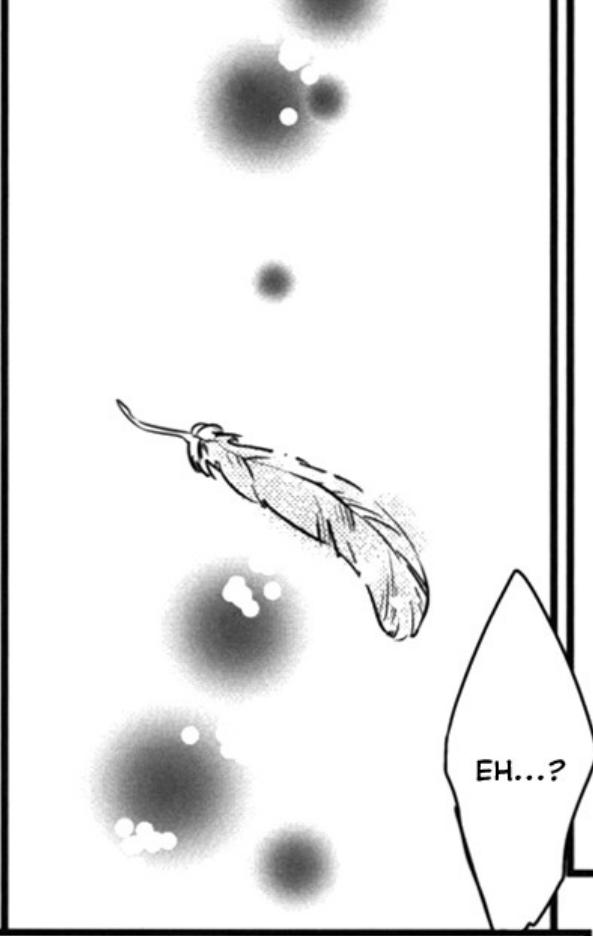
PINA?

PINA?

I DIDN'T
EVEN SAY
GOODBYE
YET...

NO...





SO THAT I CAN WELCOME YOU BACK WITH A SMILE.

AND GET STRONGER BEFORE THEN.

I'LL DEFINITELY GO FIND YOU.

I'LL BE ABLE TO MEET PINA AGAIN FOR SURE.



WILL YOU LISTEN TO MY STORIES ABOUT THE FRIEND I MET IN ANOTHER WORLD WITH THE SAME NAME AS YOU?

NYAA.

Afterword

WRITING KAZAKHSTANIPOTASSIUM

I'm pretty sure that if this book were to be released officially, it would become the longest SAO Light Novel ever released. It just goes to show how much content Kawahara has written that isn't in the mainstream novels; this book only covers events occurring in Aincrad, after all, and there are many more side stories set in other locations that have not been included here. In the 500 pages of this book, we have travelled from before even the SAO alpha test, right up to the very end of the game and the logging out of all players. I hope you enjoyed the journey! I definitely didn't. Collating side stories is a mind-numbingly boring business, and I am in no rush to create another compilation anytime soon! As of writing this afterword, I haven't even read through this compilation properly; other than a few skim-reads to ensure there weren't any glaring grammatical errors (which there probably still are), I've decided to properly read through this compilation only once I've finished it to an acceptable standard. Most likely, by the time you've read this book up to the afterword, I'll have read through it too, and no doubt have probably already released an updated version fixing grammatical errors on my [website](#) (make sure to check it for updates!)

I've written most of my thoughts already on the website and the foreword to this compilation, so I'll leave it here. Thanks for reading!

- kazakhstanipotassium, March 2025